

Thornton Wilder's



A Playgoer's Guide

"If *Our Town* is a period piece, a reflection of another age, what is it about Thornton Wilder's play that endures? And why is it so very timely today?" -- Donald H. Wolfe, *The New York Times*

A Fictional Community

Our Town is a play by Thornton Wilder that is set in the fictional community of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. It was inspired by his friend Gertrude Stein's novel *The Making of Americans*, and many elements of Stein's deconstructive style can be found throughout the work. It is a story of character development that details the interactions between citizens of a town through their everyday lives (particularly the lives of George Gibbs, a doctor's son, and Emily Webb, the daughter of a newspaper editor).



A very different aspect of *Our Town* is that the fourth wall is broken. The character known as the Stage Manager narrates the story and interacts with the audience. Wilder himself played the Stage Manager on Broadway for two weeks and later in summer stock productions. *Our Town* opened on February 4, 1938 in New York City. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1938. It was adapted into a film in 1940 and a television musical starring Frank Sinatra in 1955. In 2002 a production of the play by the Westport Country Playhouse, starring Paul Newman as the Stage Manager, transferred to Broadway for a record-breaking run, and then was broadcast by PBS as a offering from Masterpiece Theatre.

A Naked Stage

The central values of the play are quite traditional. They are Christian morality, community, the family and appreciation of everyday pleasures. Yet, Wilder's methods of presenting these values on the stage are anything but traditional. *Our Town* is generally performed with little or no scenery, set, or props, often with many of the characters miming the objects they interact with and their surroundings. Often the only props used are those that are more difficult to mime including chairs and tables. This was certainly a risk at a time when theater productions were known for their lavish costumes and scenery. However, these "experimental techniques" allow the audience to focus on the characters themselves rather than on their location and how they relate to objects that surround them.

The Male Behind the Tale

Thornton Wilder was born on April 17, 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin. His parents were rich and conservative. Thornton spent much of his childhood in China, where his father was appointed America's Consulate General. In Hong Kong, he attended Chinese missionary schools and received a good education.

Wilder began writing stories and plays while a student at the Thatcher School in Ojai, California, and continued at Berkeley High, where he was teased by classmates as over-intellectual. According to a classmate, "We left him alone, just left him alone. And he would retire to the library, his hideaway, learning to distance himself from humiliation and indifference." Of the experience, Wilder himself later wrote: "It is a discouraging business to be an author at sixteen years of age. Such an author is all aspiration and no fulfillment. He is drunk on an imaginary kinship with the writers he most admires, and yet his poor overblotted notebooks show nothing to prove to others, or to himself, that the claim is justified. . . . An artist is one who knows how life should be lived at its best and is always aware of how badly he is doing it. An artist is one who knows he is failing in living and feeds his remorse by making something fair, and a layman is one who suspects he is failing in living but is consoled by his successes in golf, or in love, or in business."



THORNTON WILDER
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After serving in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War I, Wilder attended Oberlin College before earning his B.A. at Yale University in 1920. Six years later, his first novel *The Cabala* was published. That same year he earned his M.A. in French from Princeton University. After graduating from Princeton, Wilder's literary career began in earnest. He published *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1927; it became a landmark American novel and brought Wilder popular success. It also won him his first Pulitzer Prize. Wilder then turned his full attention to drama, for which he is now best remembered. He produced *Our Town* in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1942. He won another Pulitzer Prize for the two of them.

Wilder died in his sleep, December 7, 1975 in Hamden, Connecticut, where he had been living with his sister Isabel for many years. Although he never discussed his homosexuality publicly or in his writings, his close friend Samuel M. Steward is considered to have been his lover.

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