



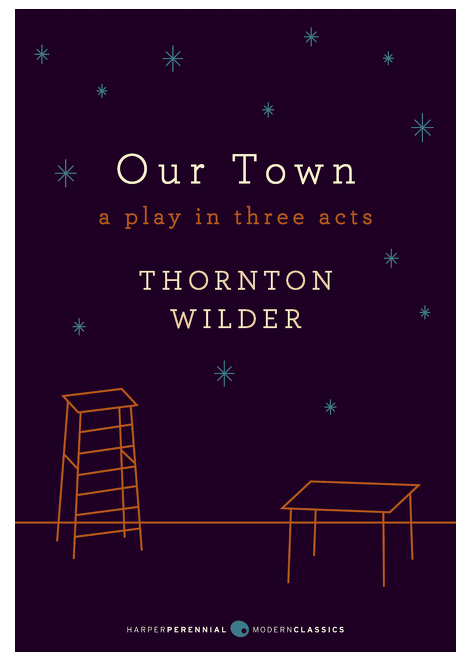
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

# Reader Resources

## *Our Town*

by Thornton Wilder

Three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thornton Wilder began his storied career as a novelist before branching out to short stories, screenplays, and dramatic works. At first glance, his play *Our Town* appears to be a simple, innocuous portrait of life in the small New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners. But as time passes in the three acts—an ordinary day, a wedding, a death—the play builds to a soaring exploration of human existence: its boundless trials, joys, questions, certainties. This play “is one of the great democratic products of American literature. It gives you the sense that the same profound and horrible truths hold true whether you're a sophisticate in Paris or a farmer in Grover's Corners” (acclaimed writer Tom Perrotta in *The Atlantic*).



### What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

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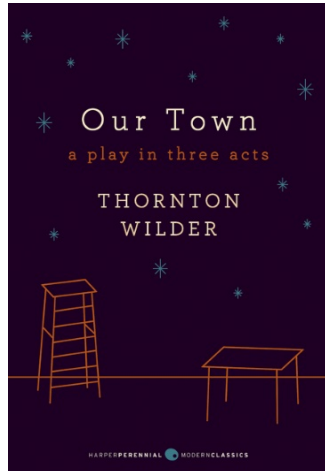
# About the Book

"The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go,— doesn't it." — the Stage Manager in *Our Town* (p. 4)

Thornton Wilder's stage drama *Our Town* (1938) takes place between 1901 and 1913 in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, a community that has not produced anyone very "remarkable" (p. 6). The townspeople know many pleasures: seeing the sun rise over the mountain, noticing the birds, watching for the change of seasons. Wilder wanted the play to show "the life of a village against the life of the stars," he said in an early preface to the book, and to explore "the trivial details of human life in reference to a vast perspective of time, of social history and of religious ideas."

The audience encounters Grover's Corners through the point of view of the Stage Manager—a character in the play who functions as the narrator and a sympathetic director. While he sometimes talks directly to the actors, he maintains his distance; most of his lines are delivered as an address to the audience. He tells the audience that the play will show "people a thousand years from now" that "this is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying." The three acts mostly follow two characters, Emily Webb and George Gibbs, who go to school together in Act I, marry in Act II, and experience tragedy in Act III. The play's opening stage directions are clear and radical, especially for 1938: "No curtain. No scenery." The costumes are simple; the lighting instructions, complex.

On January 22, 1938, the first performance of *Our Town* took place at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. The first New York performance occurred soon thereafter—a now-famous production at the Henry Miller Theatre directed by Jed Harris. Widely produced abroad, this Pulitzer Prize-winning play is not only an American classic but a classic of world literature. In Emily's final epiphany—



wisdom she has learned through suffering—we seem to hear Thornton Wilder's voice speak to us: "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you."

## Major Characters

**The Stage Manager** is the play's narrator, who both directs the play and addresses the audience. Always descriptive, sometimes didactic, often funny, he begins the play on May 7, 1901, and ends it twelve years later in the summer of 1913.

### The Webb Family

**Mr. Webb** is the publisher and editor of the town newspaper, the Grover's Corners Sentinel.

**Mrs. Webb's** dour demeanor contrasts with her beautiful garden of sunflowers and her maternal devotion

**Emily**, the brightest girl in Grover's Corners, dreams of living an extraordinary life. In Act II, she marries George Gibbs after realizing that his opinion means more to her than anyone else's.

**Wally**, the Webb's youngest child, dies after his appendix bursts while on a Boy scout camping trip.

### The Gibbs Family

**Dr. Gibbs** is the town doctor. He will die in 1930; the new hospital will be named after him.

**Mrs. Gibbs**, Dr. Gibbs's wife, dies from pneumonia during a visit to Ohio.

Even as a teenager, **George Gibbs** wants to be a farmer and marry Emily.

**Rebecca Gibbs**, George's older sister, marries and leaves Grover's Corners for Ohio.

### Other Townspeople

When the play begins, **Joe Crowell** is the town's 11-year-old newsboy. He later gets a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

**Simon Stimson**, the organist at church who secretly drinks too much, "has seen a pack of trouble."

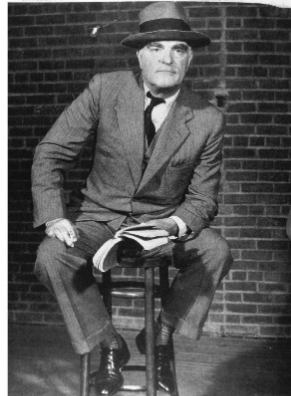
# About the Author

## Thornton Wilder (1897-1975)

"It is an attempt to find value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life."

— Wilder on *Our Town*

Thornton Niven Wilder is the only writer to have won Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1928) and drama (*Our Town* in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1943).



Thornton Wilder, author of *Our Town*  
HarperCollins  
Photo Credit: © College of Wooster

Born in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1897, Wilder was the son of Amos Parker Wilder and Isabella Niven Wilder. Amos Wilder was a man of intellect and ambition. Having earned a PhD from Yale University in political economy, Amos became a well-known public speaker and the owner and editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Amos consul general in Hong Kong, and again in 1909 in Shanghai. While Amos directed his children's education, Isabella encouraged them to pursue their interests in literature and music. This environment of international education and an appreciation for the arts nurtured all the Wilder children. Wilder's older brother, Amos Niven, was a biblical scholar, poet, and literary critic; his sister Charlotte a professor and poet; Isabel a successful novelist with

training in drama from Yale; and Janet a zoologist and environmentalist.

Isabella Wilder and the children lived in China briefly before settling in Berkeley, California. Thornton attended college at Oberlin College and Yale, after which he studied archaeology at the American Academy in Rome. Before returning to the United States, Wilder spent time in Paris, where he received a telegram from his father: "HAVE JOB FOR YOU TEACHING NEXT YEAR [...] LEARN FRENCH." Wilder already knew some French, and improved his skills so he could take a teaching position at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey.

Wilder volunteered to serve in both World Wars. During the first, he served as an enlisted man in the Army's Coast Artillery Corps section, stationed in Newport, Rhode Island. In World War II, he advanced to the rank of lieutenant colonel after three years of active duty in North Africa and Italy. His military honors include the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star.

Education was one of Wilder's deepest passions. During his time at Lawrenceville, he earned a master's degree in French literature from Princeton University. Even after the success of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* made a day job unnecessary, he continued to teach when interesting opportunities arose. During the 1930s, he taught courses in classics and composition at the University of Chicago and served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University in 1951-52.

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe Grover's Corners, New Hampshire? How is it like or unlike the place where you grew up?
2. In Act I, Emily's successful speech at school on the Louisiana Purchase encourages her dreams of greatness, and she tells her mother that she "wants to make speeches all [her] life" (p. 31). How is that goal realized? How is it not?
3. In Act I, the Stage Manager mentions that a new bank is being built in Grover's Corners, and that certain items will be "put in the cornerstone for people to dig up... a thousand years from now" (p. 33). What items do they put in the cornerstone, and what do you think these items will reveal to future generations about the people of Grover's Corners? If you were to build a time capsule, what would you include and why?
4. The Stage Manager introduces Act II as "Love and Marriage" (p. 48). Why does he choose to draw attention to one particular conversation between Emily and George? What does the scene reveal about Emily and George's relationship, and what do you think it suggests about love?
5. Discuss the portrayal of marriage in *Our Town*, comparing the marriages of Mr. and Mrs. Webb and Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs. What do you think Mrs. Webb

means when she says that sending girls into marriage is “cruel” (p. 76)?

6. If you were in charge of the play’s lighting, how would you direct Emily’s return to Grover’s Corners in Act III—as a realistic scene, or as a dream?
7. Simon Stimson opines in Act III, “That’s what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance... To spend and waste time as though you had a million years” (p. 109). Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. What understanding has Emily come to when she asks the Stage Manager, “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?” Did this scene resonate with any experiences you’ve had in your own life?
9. *Our Town* accelerates time, looking back and forward at major events while also describing mundane, daily life. Did the play make you think of the arc of your

own life—or your daily routines—in a new or different way? If so, how?

10. If you could revisit one “ordinary day” from your past, which would it be?
11. *Our Town* breaks the “fourth wall” of conventional theater, blurring the lines between actor and audience. Can you think of any particularly memorable examples of this? Why do you think Wilder chose to include these moments in the play? Did they affect your perception of the story and its themes?
12. Why do you think Wilder chose to tell this story in the form of a play? Do you think your experience of the narrative would have been different had you encountered it as a novel? As a collection of short stories?



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.

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