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Thornton Wilder, Our Town (1938)

Birth: Madison, Wisconsin, April 17, 1897.

Death: New Haven, Connecticut, December 7, 1975.

Thornton Wilder wanted Our Town to place “the life of a village against the life of the stars” in his presentation of the fictional Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, and he succeeded in putting New Hampshire’s town life on the stage of national life when the play opened on February 4, 1938 (OT 156). The rather extravagant claim for the significance of this town is wittily voiced at the end of Act One when a young brother and sister talk at bedtime:

Rebecca:

I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

George:

What’s funny about that?

Rebecca:

But listen, it’s not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that’s what it said on the envelope.

George:

What do you know!

Rebecca:

And the postman brought it just the same. (OT 46)

Combining sampler verse, metaphysics, a boy’s wonder, and the pragmatic decision of a New England postman who knows where the Crofut Farm is, if not the mind of God, this scene reveals the magic of Wilder’s play. He recuperated a rather tired, worn-out region in the 1930s to argue for the significance of the Jane Crofuts of the world in the minds of Americans in New York and across the country. Why was New Hampshire the right place at the right time for this classic play? In the decades since Robert Frost had sought meanings in the “diminished thing” of New England, New Hampshire, like the rest of America, had been hard hit by agricultural and industrial depression. By the late 1930s, however, regionalist writers and painters, such as Norman

Rockwell, Paul Sample, and modernists like Marsden Hartley had turned to New England character and its iconic landscapes for the values of a founding American place that might yet strengthen the national will. As critic Joseph Conforti has noted, the image of the true New England had drifted north in the course of the early twentieth century, to places like Grover's Corners, and Yankee Magazine was founded in 1935 to express and preserve New England culture in an era of mass homogenization and New Deal politics. Wilder, however, avoided an aesthetic or political agenda, drawing instead on the rich repository of associations and memories that could draw audiences to consider the essential value of daily life in America. It's important to note that Wilder locates Grover's Corners at 70 degrees, 37 minutes longitude, in the Atlantic Ocean, to prevent too close an association with any real New Hampshire town.

Thornton Wilder was born in 1897 in Madison, Wisconsin, but his family had deep New England roots in Maine. He said, "I came from a very strict Calvinistic father" (CLC 82, 349). His boyhood schooling in China and his undergraduate education at Oberlin reinforced his sense of ultimate meanings in the workings of individual lives and psychology even as he rejected a narrow Protestantism. His interest in theater began in his high school years in Berkeley, California, and his writing developed at the American Academy in Rome, 1920-21, and while he taught French at Lawrenceville School. During these years and his travels in Europe, he developed an abiding interest in history, and his research on eighteenth-century Peru led to his first great success, The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927). His career turned decisively to the theater in the early 1930s in one-act plays that anticipated the themes and innovative techniques of Our Town. After teaching at the University of Chicago, 1930-36, Wilder embarked on work on Our Town and his other classic plays, The Skin of Our Teeth and The Matchmaker. Wilder returned to New England scenes and to the New England conscience in his last novel, Theophilus North (1973), set in part in 1920s Newport, Rhode Island. Wilder won the Pulitzer Prize for The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1928), Our Town (1938), and The Skin of Our Teeth (1943), and he won the National Book Award for The Eighth Day (1968). He received the first Edward MacDowell Medal in 1960 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963.

Our Town's 22 actors present daily life, love and marriage, and death in three acts over the years 1901 to 1913 in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. The action focuses on the Gibbs and Webb families, with the plot, such as it is, involving the childhood, romance, and marriage of George Gibbs and Emily Webb, and the death of Emily in childbirth in 1913. A Stage Manager sets the scene for each act, with the famously bare stage but for two trellises and step ladders, he interrupts and interacts with the characters, enters the action as druggist and minister, and he addresses the audience during and at the close of each act. The first act follows the daily life of the town, with Dr. Gibbs returning from a late-night delivery of twins, conversing with the paperboy as the milkman does his rounds. We learn about Editor Webb's newspaper, and we meet the families as they prepare for school, take meals, do homework, and end the day. We learn of Mrs. Gibbs's yearning for travel, the alcoholism of church organist Stimson, and the social structure of the town.

In Act Two, the marriage of George and Emily is the occasion for an excursion into the past to trace the development of their love, even as the dialog reveals the deep fears and aspirations for each about married life. This act, like the others, is guided by hymns traditionally popular in New England, which Wilder hoped would function like the Negro spirituals in Green Pastures to create pathos and dignity from common, even stereotypical events (OT 119). He wanted the wedding to be “A scene that must not be morbid though it plunges deep in the unconfessed structure of the mind” (OT 118).

Act Three takes place in the cemetery nine years later, as Emily joins the community’s dead who comment on their memories and the meanings of everyday life. Emily decides to return to her twelfth birthday to understand the value of life as she couldn’t then, but this creates a painful, even tragic realization of the human condition, both for her and for the audience. It is such a simple play in its actions and scenes, prompting a writer about the Boston tryout in 1938 to comment, “‘SPEECH-MAKING BY ‘CORPSES’ UNUSUAL FEATURE’” (OT 122).

The setting and inspiration for Our Town originated in Wilder’s walking tours of the Lake Sunapee area in 1923 and in his nine summer visits to the MacDowell Colony, starting in 1924, including long walks in Peterborough. He worked on the play in the Colony’s Veltin Studio in June of 1937. Peterborough’s milkman druggist, Fletcher Dole, and its druggist, Albert E. Campbell were models for characters. In Wilder’s words, “‘The play—well, you might say that it is kind of an attempt at complete immersion into everything about a New Hampshire village which, I hope, is gradually felt by the audience to be an allegorical representation of all life. . . . [Y]ou can’t help but be absorbed by the New Hampshire quality. How would I define that? Why it’s independence, understatement—a dry, humorous sense, and, within the walls of the home, a wonderful, congenial homeliness. Lacking in warmth? Not if you know the idiom. . . . I wanted to pile up a million details of daily living, with some sense of the whole in living and dying’” (OT 152).

The importance of daily rituals, such as delivering paper, milk, or babies, is embodied in the chat of the characters, as we see in the initial conversation between Dr. Gibbs and paperboy Joe Crowell, Jr. Gibbs asks, “Anything serious goin’ on in the world since Wednesday?” to which Joe responds, “Yessir. My schoolteacher, Miss Foster, ‘s getting married to a fella over in Concord.” Here is the “news” from the perspective of daily life in Grover’s Corners. Yet the Stage Manager interrupts this conversation with the perspective of time and world events: “Want to tell you something about that boy Joe Crowell there. Joe was awful bright—graduated from high school here, head of his class. So he got a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech. Graduated head of his class there, too. It was all wrote up in the Boston paper at the time. Goin’ to be a great engineer, Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France.—All that education for nothing” (OT 8-9).

This disruption of the play’s narrative time frame forces the audience in 1938 to wrestle with two frameworks of determining the significance of human life: the unconsciousness of the moment against the knowledge that history and memory bring. Wilder made much of the archeological perspective that shaped his work, recalling a dig in Rome in 1921 when he realized that it’s the scraps of daily life from which scientists

try to reconstruct the human aspects of life in the past. He notes that an archeologist metaphorically must use a telescope and microscope as “He reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small.” Thus Wilder uses an archeological method to create a New Hampshire village with layers of the past in town history, families, and individual lives. He names the “central theme of the play: What is the relation between the countless ‘unimportant’ details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history, and current religious ideas, on the other?” (OT 154).

In Our Town, the Stage Manager makes the perspectives of the telescope and microscope apparent through shifts of time, bird’s eye views of the town, and revelations about the future. Like an anthropologist, he steps in and out of the life of Grover’s Corners, in a sense reminding the audience of its relationship to the action on the stage as well as their own memories and past lives. He even brings a Professor Willard onstage to talk about Pleistocene granite, fossils found in Silas Peckham’s cow pasture, and anthropological data, such as “Early Amerindian stock,” “English brachiocephalic blue-eyed stock,” and “some Slav and Mediterranean” comprising the town’s 2,642 souls (OT 21-22). Such information seems strikingly irrelevant even as it measures the town in ways that place it in various historical and scientific scales. The epitome of this technique, resonant with New England wry ironies and universal aspirations, is the discussion of a cornerstone time capsule. It will contain a copy of the New York Times, Mr. Webb’s Sentinel, a Bible, the Constitution, a volume of Shakespeare, but when it comes to presenting the real life of the people, the Stage Manager proposes a copy of the play, a fictive work of the imagination, to preserve “a few simple facts about us—more that the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindberg flight. . . . So—people a thousand years from now—this is the way we were in the provinces north of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century.—This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying” (OT 33-34).

This is one of the ways Wilder treats the issue of the relevance of his work in an era defined by social realism, the Great Depression, Communism, Fascism, and approaching war. Wilder had been stung by criticism of his work by a Communist-oriented critic, Michael Gold, in 1930. Gold writes about Wilder’s work, “It is a museum, it is not a world,” because it avoids the “blood, horror, and hope of the world’s new empire,” the Americanness of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, or the modern streets of New York. In a pointed personal attack on Wilder’s professed goal to restore the spirit of religion to American life and art, Gold calls it “a pastel, pastiche, dilettante religion, without the true neurotic blood and fire, a daydream of homosexual figures in graceful gowns moving archaically among the lilies. It is Anglo-Catholicism, that last refuge of the American literary snob” (CLC 82, 341). Readers would have understood this as a covert attack on Wilder’s homosexuality, given the leading role of gay men and women in the Anglo-Catholic movement in New England.

This attack sparked a debate that was renewed in the 1960s, when New York Times theater critic Clive Barnes questioned its relevance, in light of a 1969 production by Harlem children (Goldstone 140). Wilder indirectly answered Gold’s attack in his contemporary novel, Heaven’s My Destination (1935), but the most decisive answer is in Our Town. The Belligerent Man in the audience asks, “Is there no one in town aware of

social justice and industrial inequality?” to which Mr. Webb replies, “Oh, yes, everybody is—somethin’ terrible. Seems like they spend most of their time talking about who’s rich and who’s poor” (OT 25). Like Frost’s narrator in “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” this scene ironically brackets off the concerns of social realism by focusing on a kind of New England realism that recognizes human nature will push some people forward and hold others back: “I guess we’re all hunting like everybody else for a way the diligent and sensible can rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome can sink to the bottom” (OT 25).

For Wilder, the social drama is not in the politics of the moment but in the deep yearnings of humans to overcome isolation and doubts and to find love and community. In the wedding scene, Emily says to George, “Well, if you love me, help me. All I want is someone to love me” to which he replies, “I will, Emily. Emily, I’ll try” (OT 81). The New England vernacular use of “try” as it reflects human agency conditioned by the recognition of contingencies and fate embodies Wilder’s faith. The best answer to Gold is the power of colloquial speech, that true well of American life and literature. No great American writer succeeds without grounding the work in American language, from Jonathan Edwards and Walt Whitman to Saul Bellow and Toni Morrison. Critics such as Malcolm Goldstein and Richard Goldstone have traced the deep influence of Gertrude Stein on Wilder use of colloquial language and on his reliance on description and repetition (Goldstein 98; Goldstone 127-28). Like Frost and Eugene O’Neill, Wilder saw in the common speech of New Englanders a vehicle for expression of themes as deep as those in Greek tragedy and the eloquence of the King James Bible. It is not simply dialect but a way of speaking that embodies the ethics of the region.

For example, consider the taut contrast in the emotional outpouring of Mrs. Soames and the wry, deflating, yet not cynical expression of the Stage Manager:

Mrs. Soames: “Don’t know when I’ve seen such a lovely wedding. But I always cry. Don’t know why it is, but I always cry. I just like to see young people happy, don’t you? Oh, I think it’s lovely.”

Stage Manager: “M. . . . marries N. . . . millions of them. The cottage, the go-cart, the Sunday-afternoon drives in the Ford, the first rheumatism, the grandchildren, the second rheumatism, the deathbed, the reading of the will,—Once in a thousand times it’s interesting.”

Mrs. Soames: “Aren’t they a lovely couple? Oh, I’ve never been to such a nice wedding. I’m sure they’ll be happy. I always say: happiness, that’s the great thing! The most important thing is to be happy” (OT 81-82).

This scene shows the gap between the bare facts and description of a life and its emotional content. The hinge of the matter is the use of that New England colloquialism, “interesting,” a word that reserves judgment while noting particularity. Mrs. Soames’s words may be trite, but nonetheless heartfelt and true. What’s significant here on stage is the use of colloquial chat, as if life’s rites of passage exist for the sake of such life-affirming chat, or as if the time-worn expressions do indeed contain the eternal meanings such rituals propose to be sacramental. In this way the ordinariness of village life is elevated, and, as we see in the third act, made the fit subject of tragedy.

It's just such common speech that elevates Emily's farewell to the world to the level of tragedy: "Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners . . . Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you" (OT 108). The Stage Manager suggests that saints and poets sometimes fully realize life as it is lived, but Emily momentarily despairs that human beings are "Just blind people." The suicide Simon Stimson takes this moment to vent his bitterness that being alive is nothing more than "ignorance and blindness," but other community members call Emily's attention back to the stars, even as George lies prostrate on her grave (OT 109-10). The Stage Manager comments about the stars, "Only this one is straining away, straining away all the time to make something of itself. The strain's so bad that every sixteen hours everybody lies down and gets a rest" (OT 111). In drawing the curtain between this scene and the audience, and bidding them get rest, the audience realizes that it sits in the same position as the denizens of the on-stage cemetery as spectators of life. The Stage Manager's laconic New England call to rest implies that metaphysical speculations may simply come down to words that little affect bare facts and make one tired. The audience is left like Emily in a state of recognition, with a choice to look down at the grave or up at the stars.

Emily's painful encounter with memory in reliving her birthday points to the use of memory as a theatrical technique, not only in the action on the stage, but also in drawing the audience into the play. The Stage Manager says, "There's an early-afternoon calm in our town: a buzzin' and a hummin' from the school buildings; only a few buggies on Main Street—the horses dozing at the hitching posts; you all remember what it's like" (OT 27). In the final act, the townspeople sitting in the cemetery mirror the audience, suggesting that the life of Our Town resides in the memories of the characters as much as it does in those of the spectators. Indeed, the play itself is performed in the minds of the audience as much as it is on stage. Wilder's art can be compared to the innovations of O'Neill in his own time or those later of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie. Critics Richard Goldstone and Malcolm Goldstein note Wilder's sources, including the expressionist theatre of Bertolt Brecht, Chinese theater, Japanese Noh drama, Shakespeare, and Greek tragedy. In these sources and from Wilder's earlier one-act plays, we find the bare stage, the stage manager figure, and the disruption of realism and narration, but the integrity of the play as a classic work of art and its continuing popularity transcend influence through the power of performance.

The continuing cultural force of Our Town can be seen in the roster of Stage Managers, from Frank Craven and Thornton Wilder himself in the original production, to Fred Gwynne, of The Munsters fame, Frank Sinatra in a musical version with the signature song, "Love and Marriage," and more recently Spalding Gray and Paul Newman. The malleability of this role, and the play itself, shows how it meets cultural needs for deep reassurance, ironic detachment, tragic distance, and comic relief. The cultural force also resides in its performance, almost in itself a rite of passage in high school productions, or in the vacation recreation of summer stock production. But more deeply, there is the staging of America's past, its myths, its hopes and dreams in this profoundly optimistic if tragic work, for it reaffirms the profoundly democratic and

humanistic principle that daily life and life passages of common individuals do mean something in the life of the stars. This is a New Hampshire kind of hedged optimism, a laconic affirmation, laced with, in Thornton Wilder's words, "that deep, New England stoic irony that's grasped the iron of life and shares it with the house" (OT 149).

The danger of such a powerful our town image for New Hampshire is the effect of dipping the region in the amber of mythology to create an increasingly unreal escape from contemporary life, when people from "Polish town" and others move across the tracks to make "our" town "their" town, too. This dynamic tension between iconic New England town image and contemporary reality is productive for later writers, who can invoke Wilder's scene to create counter-images in, for example, Grace Metalious's Peyton Place, in Stephen King's Salem's Lot and Pet Sematary, Susan Minot's Monkeys, Spaulding Gray's stories of suburban Barrington, Rhode Island, John Cheever's The Wapshot Chronicle, Donald Hall's powerful memory portraits in String Too Short To Be Saved, or the Vermont stories of E. Annie Proulx. Wilder himself saw the need for subverting the ideal even as he creates it. Wilder knew Freud's works and Freud personally (Freud even suggested that Wilder marry Freud's daughter Anna), and he shared Freud's sense that nostalgia had primal associations with the death wish fantasy of retreat from adult life (Goldstone 113). The Stage Manager, through frequent interruptions and the obvious artifice of opening and closing each act, forces the audience to recognize that the imagined New England past as well as their own memories of their lives are like stage plays. Memories and art are the stuff of personal, regional, and national myths. The point is to use memory with the imagination to transcend the limits of place and time, for, in Wilder's words, "Our true life is the imagination and in the memory" (OT 172).

A common New England prayer begins, "Look forward, not back." Wilder sought a connection to New England that was deeply local and extravagant to show how what might seem inconsequential about life holds connections to people in all places and times. This answers, then, the perennial question of whether a place like New Hampshire can represent America, but it also undercuts those who want their towns to perform like a real Grover's Corners. Life is simply more complicated than that.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways is Our Town like and unlike your town?
2. Do you find the characters believable? Why? Do they remind you of parts of yourself or of people you know?
3. Does Grover's Corners have to be a New Hampshire or a New England town, or would any rural area do just as well?
4. Is the end of the play depressing, tragic, or hopeful? Is Mr. Stimson right in any way in what he says about life?
5. In what ways is the play still relevant or irrelevant to our urbanized, globalized, and multicultural society? Do its village pieties avoid the pressing problems of our era? Is its

vision of people finding meaningful places in family and community too simplistic?

6. What do you make of Wilder's depictions of women's and men's emotional lives and values? For example, are you disturbed that Mrs. Gibbs never gets to travel?

7. If you were to be in a production of Our Town, whom would you like to be? And if you were to direct the play, whom would you like to cast from today's well-known actors in its roles? Why?

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