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Sample

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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Our Town

by Thornton Wilder

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify and discuss the following four major themes in this play:
 - A. Because we get caught up in the routine of daily life, humans fail to see the beauty of life.
 - B. It is important to nature that humankind is not alone; therefore, nature contrives to push people together in love, marriage, and raising a family.
 - C. All people, past and present, share a common humanity. While in a cosmic view humanity may seem insignificant, there is a grandeur and nobility to man's living and striving.
 - D. There is something eternal about life.
2. discuss how and why the set in this play is a departure from the traditional box set.
3. explain how Wilder's characters are universal figures; that is, they are individuals but they also serve to represent human nature in general.
4. comment on the language used in this play and evaluate its appropriateness.
5. identify the following motifs and discuss their significance.
 - A. references to time and the various ways the passage of time is indicated.
 - B. references to religion and church.
6. identify the elements in this play that make it an emotional experience for most viewers.
7. define allegory and state to what extent, and why, this play may be read as an allegory.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. State how this play is similar to a straight, realistic play performed in a box set and how it differs from that kind of play.
2. An allegory is a story in which characters, actions, or settings represent abstract ideas or moral qualities. As such, the story has a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning. Some critics see *Our Town* as an allegory. Assuming it is, state its literal meaning, identify what the symbols are and what they represent, and what its symbolic level of meaning is.
3. Most of the people in this play are simple, country folks and speak like that. But the Stage Manager is obviously not a simple, country person. Why does the author have him speak like one?
4. The Stage Manager has been compared to the chorus in a Greek tragedy. What are the points of comparison between the Stage Manager and a Greek chorus?
5. Time figures prominently in this play. Note some of those references to time and its passage, and state a reason for this prominence.
6. There are also many references to church and religion in this play. Note some of those references and state a reason for their role in this play.
7. Using each of the following as a thesis statement, prove that each of these four is a major theme in this play by citing specific comments and actions from the play.
 - A. Because we get caught up in the routine of daily life, humans fail to see the beauty of life.
 - B. It is important to nature that man is not alone; therefore, she contrives to push people together in love, marriage, and raising a family.
 - C. All men, past and present, share a common humanity. While in a cosmic view humanity may seem insignificant, there is a grandeur and nobility to man's living and striving.
 - D. There is something eternal about life.
8. Throughout this play Wilder poses many juxtapositions. For example, life is said to be awful and wonderful; and war is presented as both noble and foolish. State the dual view the author presents of the significance of human life, marriage, and daily life.
9. Here are some views on life the author seems to hold. What is your opinion of each?
 - A. Most people are so busy that they fail to see or appreciate the simple beauty in life, and they fail to consciously live each minute of it.
 - B. In life, love between people is a real entity (not something foisted on us by advertising) and is one of the most important aspects of life.
 - C. There is a common humanity among all humans that binds them together.
 - D. There is something eternal about life.

Our Town

Act I

VOCABULARY

anthropological—relating to the study of humankind
burdock—bristly, weedy plant with purplish flowers
careen—to move rapidly and erratically
diligent—hard-working
heliotrope—plant with aromatic purple flowers
highboy—tall chest of drawers with high legs
legacy—money or property given to someone through a will
proscenium—front area of the stage, located between the curtain and the orchestra
savant—educated or learned person
tenor—male singer

1. What sounds and sights indicate the start of a new day?

2. The set is obviously not the traditional set, and the narrator is not your average person. What remarkable qualities does the narrator possess?

3. Cite some of the things the narrator tells us are going to happen after 1901.

Act II

VOCABULARY

affront—to insult or offend
alacrity—cheerful enthusiasm
barren—empty; lacking
catcall—scoffing shout or cry
contrive—to scheme or plan
crestfallen—dejected; disappointed and sad
cynicism—state of thinking negatively; pessimism
exasperation—frustration; irritation
farce—a mockery
gangling—tall, thin and clumsy
meditative—engaged in deep contemplation
musingly—pondering or considering
pantomime—to express something through gesture and expression, without words
rheumatism—disease of the muscles, joints or bones causing pain
spry—active and nimble
tableau—a silent, motionless scene resembling a picture
unobtrusive—not easily noticed; inconspicuous

1. As Act II opens, what does the Stage Manager tell us has taken place in the last three years regarding nature?

2. The Stage Manager also tells us that the first act is “Daily Life” and the second act is “Love and Marriage.” What do you suppose he is going to call the third act? Why?

3. In an allusion to an Edgar Lee Masters’ poem, “Lucinda Matlock,” the Stage Manager says, “You’ve got to love life to have life, and you’ve got to have life to love life.” What does he mean?

Act III

VOCABULARY

anguish—extreme emotional pain

bereaved—those who mourn the loss of a loved one

epitaph—words on a tombstone in memory of the dead

genealogist—one who studies ancestry

livery—place for the care and keeping of horses

lugubriousness—sadness to an extreme degree

procession—a group of people or things moving forward together in a formal manner

1. It is nine years later, and the act opens at the cemetery. Who are among the dead?

2. Whose funeral do you suppose is taking place today?

3. According to the Stage Manager, how long do the souls of the dead stay on Earth?

4. What is the Stage Manager referring to when he speaks of “something eternal”?

5. In what way do Sam Craig and Joe Stoddard replace the minor characters who appear at the opening of Acts I and II?
