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Our Town
Thornton Wilder



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Our Town
Thornton Wilder



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Pre-reading

1. Thornton Wilder once wrote, “The response we make when we ‘believe’ a work of the imagination is that of saying: ‘This is the way things are. I have always known it without being fully aware that I knew it. Now in the presence of this play or novel or poem (or picture or piece of music) I know that I know it.’”

Write a paragraph or two about your reaction and thoughts to what Wilder wrote. Do you agree or disagree?

2. Thornton Wilder is definitely one of America’s greatest playwrights. Some even go so far as to say he was “the *first* American playwright.”

Research Thornton Wilder and write a brief biography on his life. The biography should also include a paragraph in which you give your opinion of whether he was the “first” American playwright or just one of the greatest.

3. Dramas have been a major part of history and still are a major part of today’s society (although more in the form of screenplays than actual theater). People are drawn to the stories and lives presented in drama. Thornton Wilder wrote in the preface to *Our Town*, “The theater longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves.”

Thinking of all plays, do you agree with this statement? Is it the symbolic meanings that draw people to drama? Does it really matter who the characters are or exactly what they are doing, or do major themes keep playing over and over in dramas throughout time? Write your feelings in an essay with examples to support your thoughts.

Our Town

Act I

5. One of the best known aspects of *Our Town* is the minimal stage decorations. The use of very few stage decorations allows the audience to picture themselves and their memories into the play while they are watching. It creates an opportunity for everyone to use their imagination.

According to the first stage directions, how does the stage strike you? How does your own compare to the one that is described? Do you think it is a good or bad thing to use a minimalist stage?

6. To start the play, the stage manager is describing the town and the people of the town. He briefly states where things are in relation to each other to help the audience visualize the town. When he begins describing the people of the town, he still doesn't say much until he mentions Mrs. Gibbs. The more in-depth description of Mrs. Gibbs creates a connection with her.

How might someone describe you? Write two short sentences that someone might say about you. Would someone feel like they knew you after reading this description? Now, write a longer description of yourself that you might use for a work-related or personal web page.

7. An important part of understanding a play (or any writing for that matter) is the ability to relate to the storyline in some way. The audience may relate with a character, a situation, a location, or even a feeling. Since *Our Town* is about a small town, most people would assume that those who are also from small towns would be better able to relate, and, therefore, understand the play better. However, that might not be the case.

Create two columns in which you compare and contrast Grover's Corners to your town. Can you find similarities that aren't completely obvious? Do these similarities help you relate to the characters, situations, etc., better? Write a brief paragraph explaining how you think these similarities will benefit you as you read *Our Town*.

Our Town

11. Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs talk about wanting to go to Paris. They long to visit somewhere exotic and different from their own little town. Mrs. Gibbs thinks it is important for everyone to visit another country some time in their life.

Why do you think she feels that way? What are some reasons you can think of that would benefit a person from seeing a foreign country? Make a list of pros and cons for visiting another country.

Now that you have considered the benefits and disadvantages of visiting a foreign country, if you could visit any country in the world, where would you go? Why?

12. Grover's Corners is the typical small town in America. As is common in most small towns, many of the people who grow up in Grover's Corners stay after graduation or return after completing their education or military service. When people grow up in small towns, they either can't wait to leave or have what is known as "small town pride"—they want their kids to experience life just as they did.

Do you plan on settling in your own town? Why or why not?

13. The Stage Manager incorporates the audience into the play when he asks if anyone has any questions for Editor Webb. A woman asks a question and then a belligerent man in the back of the auditorium becomes part of the play. He asks, "Is there no one in town aware of social injustice and industrial inequality?"

Explain what you think he means by this question. Do you agree or disagree?

Our Town

28. When people need advice, they can go to any number of different people to ask—a friend, parent, teacher, pastor, professional counselor, or even a stranger on the street. Often, we receive unsolicited advice from all the above. Mr. Webb and George are talking about marriage the morning of the wedding. When the conversation seems to be leading towards George asking for Mr. Webb’s advice, Mr. Webb tells him a story about a time when his father gave him bad advice. He continued to say that he had learned “never to ask advice on personal matters.”

Who do you go to when you seek advice? Is it always a good thing to seek the advice of others? As George, write a letter to an advice column asking about marriage. Then, as the advice columnist, write a response back to George.

29. Life is short; time flies by. It may seem at times that you will live for a very long time and you have all the time in the world to accomplish what you want to do, but the truth of the matter is that time is finite and it goes by so quickly that we barely have time to stop and breathe. After watching the morning preparations for George and Emily’s wedding, the Stage Manager says, “You know how it is; you’re twenty-one or twenty-two and you make some decisions; then whissh! You’re seventy: you’ve been a lawyer for fifty years, and that white-haired lady at your side has eaten over fifty thousand meals with you.”

Have you ever thought about what you want to do and/or accomplish by the time you are seventy? Do you want to get married, have kids, write a book, etc? Create a list of at least 25 things you would like to do and/or accomplish before you retire (approximately age seventy).