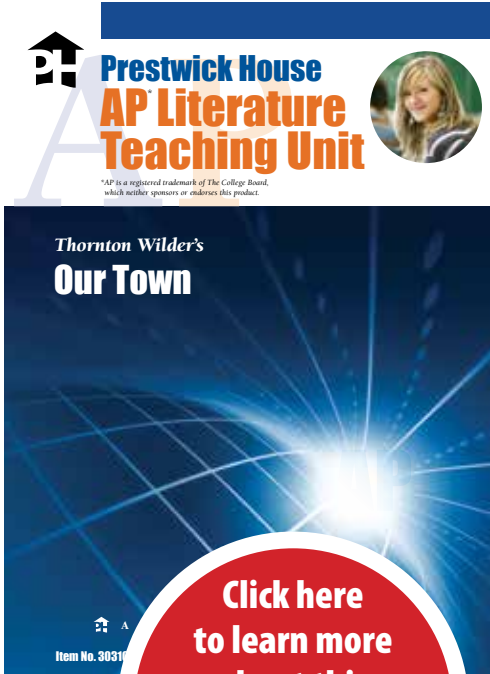




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Teaching Unit

Our Town

by Thornton Wilder

written by Diana Drew



Prestwick House

Item No. 303105

Our Town

Objectives

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

1. recognize the theatrical technique of “breaking the fourth wall.”
2. analyze the Stage Manager as akin to an omniscient narrator in a novel or the Greek chorus in ancient Greek drama.
3. identify and analyze the use of irony in *Our Town*.
4. analyze the use of archetypes and allegory in *Our Town*.
5. recognize the theatrical elements and devices that made *Our Town* such a groundbreaking work when it was first staged in 1938.
6. recognize how the three-act structure in the play (Daily Life, Love and Marriage, Death) reflects the structure of most people’s lives, and how this structure dovetails with Wilder’s theme in *Our Town*.
7. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of *Our Town* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.

Background Notes

TIME LINE OF THE PLAY

- Act I (Daily Life)—1901
- Act II (Love and Marriage)—1904
- Act III (Death)—1913
- Written in 1937; first produced in 1938
- Playwright Thornton Wilder: born April 17, 1897; died December 7, 1975

EARLY DRAMA

The word *drama* is derived from the Greek and literally means “to do, act.” The earliest form of drama began in ancient Greece. At a festival honoring the god Dionysus, the earliest playwrights would present tragedies to an audience of nearly fourteen thousand people. Most Greek tragedies dealt with themes that involved the mental and physical anguish of characters, the squandering of life and prosperity (often as a result of the main character’s hubris, or overbearing pride), and the tremendous strains of family bonds. The gods often intervened in the daily lives of mortals, yet humans were considered to be in control of their own fates. Athenians wanted to see the suffering of their own people, but preferred to be historically and symbolically removed from the time and place of that suffering. Therefore, many playwrights made use of archetypes in representing the themes of tragedy.

The earliest Greek dramas were performed by one or two actors, who would be elaborately masked and costumed and who would perform the entire action of the play. As the form began to expand, so did the number of actors. Greek tragedies typically include a Chorus that speaks in unison as an individual group and generally presents commentary and judgments on the action and characters of the play. However, this group is not detached from the world of the play; Choruses often represent citizens or servants that interact within the time and place of the onstage action. When the Chorus interacts with the characters, it is usually during scenes of great importance or emotion within the play.

OUR TOWN

Our Town was a radically different drama for its time. By 1937, technology allowed for larger, more elaborate sets and scenic effects; many playwrights included intricate, three-dimensional sets to create realistic representations of their settings. Hyper-realists attempted to precisely re-create and present reality within the confines of the stage through the use of multifaceted characters and complicated sets. Wilder, who experimented with dramatic form throughout his career, borrowed classical concepts from Greek drama, such as the bare stage and the Chorus (represented by the Stage Manager). His characters have individual names and identities, but they lack depth, thus allowing Wilder to present his larger theme by presenting his characters and their conflicts as archetypes. He creates an imaginary town, with a precise location, that

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. At the end of Act I, how does the address on Jane Crofut's letter advance the themes of *Our Town*?
2. The character of the Stage Manager harks back to the Chorus in ancient Greek tragedies. Explain how the Stage Manager's comments infuse meaning into the mundane lives of the characters in *Our Town*.
3. The three-act structure, or arc, of the play mirrors the arc of most people's lives. Explain how this structure resonates with theatergoers and contributes to the universality of *Our Town*.
4. How do Mr. Webb's comments about marriage—when he is talking to George in Act II, on the morning of George's wedding—reveal Wilder's ironic view of life and his view of marriage as part of the human life cycle?
5. In describing the placement of the cemetery at the opening of Act III, the Stage Manager points out that there is "lots of sky, lots of clouds,—often lots of sun and moon and stars." How does this emphasize the playwright's theme in *Our Town*?
6. Thornton Wilder's worldview, as expressed in *Our Town*, is rather bittersweet. Consider, for example, the characters whose lives are cut short, those whose dreams go unfulfilled, whose disappointments and disillusionments lead to depression and suicide. Discuss these characters' experiences in the context of Emily's speech at the end of the play in which she declares, "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you"?
7. How does Thornton Wilder connect the relatively brief timespan of the play with the distant past? With the distant future?
8. How does the playwright connect the specific town, Grover's Corners, with the physical world and Universe?
9. What purpose do the time and physical connections serve?

Our Town

Act I

1. What is normally the job of a stage manager? What is the significance of Wilder's changing the stage manager's role? In what ways is the Stage Manager in *Our Town* more literally a "stage manager"?

2. From the opening of the play, it is obvious that no attempt is being made at representing reality. What is achieved by having an almost bare stage instead of an elaborate set and by allowing the audience to witness the process of "setting the stage"?

3. In what ways is the Stage Manager akin to an omniscient narrator in a novel? What effect does this have on the audience's experience of the play?

4. The Stage Manager knows the outcome of the story from the very beginning and gives the audience information about the future. How does this information affect the suspense of the play? How does this relate to the idea of metadrama?

5. What does Bessie's reluctance to change her route reveal about the daily routine of the residents of Grover's Corners?

Act II

1. What is the significance of the Stage Manager's description of the worn-away mountains, the births and deaths, the young getting older, and the thousand days?

2. The Stage Manager says that after High School Commencement is the time that most of the young people in Grover's Corners get married. "Soon as they've passed their last examinations in solid geometry and Cicero's Orations, looks like they suddenly feel themselves fit to be married." What is the intent of this statement?

3. How does the beginning of Act II compare to that of Act I? What is the significance of this similarity?

4. The Stage Manager says, "You've got to love life to have life, and you've got to have life to love life... It's what they call a vicious circle." How does this relate to the ideas presented within the play?

5. What is the point of Constable Warren's story about Hank Todd, the baseball player-turned-parson?

Act III

1. How are the dead described in the beginning of Act III?

2. What signs does the Stage Manager give to signify the passage of time?

3. How would you characterize the Stage Manager's tone as he talks about the people who visit the cemetery? What does he believe this illustrates about humanity?

4. The Stage Manager says that "*something* is eternal... about every human being." To what is he referring?

5. How is the beginning of Act III different from the beginnings of Acts I and II? What is the effect of this difference?

6. What does Mrs. Soames mean when she declares that life was "awful" and "wonderful"?
