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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Thornton Wilder's

## **Our Town**

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## **General Introduction to the Work**

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### **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

## Feminist Theory Applied to *Our Town*



### Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application to literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.

## Activity One

### Examining Wilder's Treatment of the Trajectory of Women's Lives and Roles in *Our Town*, as Seen Through the Prism of Emily's Experience

1. Copy and distribute Notes on the Feminist Approach.
2. Divide the class into an even number of pairs or small groups.
3. Assign each (or allow each to choose) either Act I or II
4. Have each group peruse its act, paying particular attention to Emily's thoughts about her future and answer the following questions:
  - How old do we presume Emily to be in Act I?
  - How old do we presume Emily to be in Act II?
  - What are Emily's intentions for her future in Act I? Are these intentions specified, or does the reader need to infer them?
  - Is there any ambivalence or ambiguity in Emily's intentions?
  - What are Emily's intentions for her future in Act II? Are these intentions specified, or does the reader need to infer them?
  - Is there any ambivalence or ambiguity in Emily's intentions?
5. Reconvene the class and have each group report back to the class.
6. In full-class discussion, consider the following questions:
  - How would you characterize the main change in Emily's intentions for her future between Acts I and II?
  - Do you think the changes reflect the power of patriarchal society to shape young women's lives? If so, how? If not, why not?



## Marxist Theory Applied to *Our Town*

### Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in a society controlled that society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated them, not in the hands of the few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

#### Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies

## Activity One

### Examining the Economic and Social Structure of Grover's Corners

1. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
2. Assign each, or allow each to choose, one of the following three questions:

(1) When the Belligerent Man asks Editor Webb in Act I whether anyone is aware of “social injustice and industrial inequality” in town and why they don’t do something about it, the editor says, “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. But it ain’t easy to find. Meanwhile, we do all we can to help those that can’t help themselves and those that can we leave alone.”

- Why do you think Thornton Wilder inserted the character of the Belligerent Man in this play?
- How satisfactory is Editor Webb’s answer?
- What social/economic philosophy is expressed by the Belligerent Man’s question?
- What social/economic philosophy is expressed by Editor Webb’s response?
- What evidence of *any* social/economic philosophy operating is there in the play?
- By calling the questioner the “Belligerent Man,” what might Wilder saying about those who question authority in a capitalist society?
- Which other character might also be called “belligerent”? Why?

(2) The Stage Manager makes three telling points about the Cartwrights in Act I:

- “First automobile’s going to come along in about five years—belonged to Banker Cartwright, our richest citizen...lives in the big white house up on the hill”
- “We’ve got a factory in our town too—hear it? Makes blankets. Cartwrights own it and it brung ’em a fortune”

## Activity One

### Examining Archetypal Characters in the Play

1. Copy and distribute the *Notes on the Archetypal/Mythological Approach*.
2. Divide the class into five groups (or a number of groups divisible by five).
3. Assign each group one of the following possible archetypal characters:
  - Simon Stimson as OUTCAST/LONER
  - George as HERO
  - Emily as SPIRIT or INTELLECT
  - Stage Manager as SAGE
  - George and Emily as ADAM AND EVE
4. Have each group examine the play's portrayal of their character(s), keeping in mind the character's archetypal significance and the way the archetype their character represents figures in the overall mythological impact of the play.

Each group should consider whether its character(s) serve primarily as an archetype—that is, an exemplar of his or her type—or primarily as a distinctive human being with unique and individual personality traits.

5. Then have each group report back to the class as a whole.
6. Assuming the archetypal connotation of the characters, what is the mythological significance of the play?