

# Our Town



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THORNTON WILDER

The son of a newspaper editor, Thornton Wilder began writing plays at an early age. He attended Oberlin College before transferring to Yale University, where he graduated in 1920. After graduating, Wilder taught at a school in New Jersey while continuing to write. In 1927, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. He later won the Pulitzer Prize in drama twice, for his plays *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). After serving in World War II, he held various teaching positions, including at Harvard. He continued to write and moved in social circles with various major figures in American literature of his time, such as Ernest Hemingway and Willa Cather. Wilder died in 1975, one of the most decorated twentieth-century American writers. His plays, especially *Our Town*, are often performed to this day.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play is firmly set in the beginning of the twentieth century. The play does not involve any major historical events, though the stage manager alludes to World War I when he describes the tragically early death of Joe Crowell in France.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

None

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*
- **When Written:** 1930s
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1938
- **Literary Period:** The play blends realism with modernism.
- **Genre:** Drama (the play does not fit any specific theater genre like comedy or tragedy)
- **Setting:** Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, between 1899 and 1913
- **Climax:** In act three, the deceased Emily relives her twelfth birthday but finds it too painful and realizes that it is foolish to try to relive the past.
- **Antagonist:** There is no real antagonist in the play. All the characters live ordinary lives, struggling only against the normal passage of time that affects everyone.
- **Point of View:** Dramatic play

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Not in Our Town.** In 1946, the USSR banned a production of *Our Town* in East Berlin, because the play was deemed too depressing.

**Stage Manager.** Thornton Wilder himself played the stage manager in some productions of the play on Broadway.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The stage manager arranges some tables and chairs on stage while the audience enters the theater, and then addresses the audience. He tells them that they are about to see a play called "Our Town" about the town of Grover's Corners. He introduces the audience to Dr. Gibbs and Mrs. Gibbs, as well as their neighbor, Mr. Webb, who edits the local newspaper, *The Grover's Corners Sentinel*. The stage manager reveals that Dr. Gibbs died in 1930, and his wife died much earlier. It is early in the morning, and Dr. Gibbs is returning home after helping with the birth of a pair of twins. Mrs. Gibbs begins to make breakfast while in the Webb household Mrs. Webb does the same. Dr. Gibbs runs into Joe Crowell, a young boy who delivers the newspaper. The stage manager informs the audience that Joe graduated at the top of his class from high school and earned a scholarship to MIT. He had a promising career as an engineer, but joined the army in World War I and died in France. Howie Newsome, the local milkman, delivers milk to the Gibbs and Webbs. The two families' children come down to breakfast: George and Rebecca Gibbs, and Emily and Wally Webb. The kids run off to school, and Mrs. Gibbs talks to Mrs. Webb. She tells Mrs. Webb that someone offered her \$350 for an old piece of furniture in her home. She says she would consider selling it if she knew that Dr. Gibbs would spend the money on a vacation, and tells Mrs. Webb that she's always wanted to see Paris. Dr. Gibbs, however, has no interest in traveling beyond visiting Civil War battle sites every two years.

The stage manager interrupts the women's conversation and announces that he wants to give the audience more information about Grover's Corners. He invites Professor Willard, a professor from the local state university, onto the stage to tell the audience about the town. He then invites Mr. Webb forward to give the "political and social report" on Grover's Corners. Mr. Webb fields questions from three members of the audience, one of whom asks him if there is much culture in the town. Mr. Webb answers that there is not much. The stage manager says it is time to return to the play and announces that it is now the early afternoon. George and Emily return home from school and George asks her to help

him with his homework (Emily is very intelligent and does well in school). The stage manager addresses the audience again to tell them about a new development in town. A new bank building is being built and the townspeople are burying various items in a **time capsule** with the cornerstone of the building. The townspeople are including copies of the New York Times and **Grover's Corners Sentinel**, as well as of the Bible, the U.S. Constitution, and the works of Shakespeare. The stage manager decides to include a copy of *Our Town*, as well.

It is now evening and a church choir is practicing singing "**Blessed Be the Tie That Binds**" for a wedding. At the Gibbs home, Dr. Gibbs speaks with George about doing the chores around the house and asks him what his ambitions are for after high school. George wants to go work on his uncle's farm and eventually take it over from him. Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Soames return from choir practice and gossip about the alcoholic choir director, Simon Stimson. The women go their separate ways and Mrs. Gibbs returns home. She tries to talk to her husband about him taking a significant break from work at some point, but Dr. Gibbs refuses. They both lament how Grover's Corners is becoming "citified" because people are starting to lock their doors at night. Upstairs in the Gibbs' house, Rebecca tells George about a letter her friend received that had the address, "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God." The stage manager announces the end of act one.

The stage manager announces at the beginning of act two that three years have passed. Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb make breakfast in their respective kitchens, and Howie Newsome delivers milk, as before. Joe Cromwell's younger brother Si now delivers the **town newspaper**. It is gradually revealed that Emily and George are getting married. In their kitchen, Dr. Gibbs and Mrs. Gibbs recall their own wedding and how nervous they both were. George goes over to the Webb home, but Mrs. Webb tells him he cannot see Emily on their wedding morning. She goes upstairs to keep Emily from coming down, and Mr. Webb and George talk. Mr. Webb shares some marriage advice from his father, about making sure that the husband is the boss in the relationship and orders around the wife. But Mr. Webb says he has done the exact opposite and has had a happy marriage.

The stage manager interrupts the play to flashback to when George and Emily's romantic relationship started. It is the end of George's junior year in high school, and after school one day George and Emily are talking. Emily confesses to George that she is not pleased with how he has been acting recently and says that girls at school think he is conceited. George thanks Emily for being honest with him and the two have ice cream sodas at the local drugstore. George discusses his plans for the future, and after admitting that he has feelings for Emily (and

learning that she feels similarly), he decides not to go to agricultural college, but rather to stay in Grover's Corners with Emily.

The stage manager returns to the wedding day, where he performs the ceremony as the minister. Both Emily and George are nervous about the wedding and panic at the last minute, both anxious about leaving behind their childhoods and growing up. The two realize their love for each other, though, and are happily married by the stage manager, who then announces that the second act is over.

As the third act begins, the stage manager announces that nine years have passed since act two. Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimson, Mrs. Soames, and Wally Webb are standing in the cemetery, all deceased. Joe Stoddard, the town undertaker, talks with Sam Craig, who grew up in Grover's Corners and has returned for the funeral of his cousin, who turns out to be Emily Webb, who died in childbirth. George, Dr. Gibbs, and Mr. and Mrs. Webb gather for the funeral, at which "**Blessed Be the Tie That Binds**" is sung. Emily enters and joins the other deceased characters. She asks if she can go back and relive her past life. Mrs. Gibbs tells her she can, but she and the stage manager try to dissuade her from doing so, because it is so painful.

Disregarding their warnings, Emily decides to relive the day of her twelfth birthday, and the stage manager takes her back to that day. She is amazed to see the town as it used to be and to see her parents look so young. But, she is also pained by knowing what will happen in the future (including the premature death of Wally). Ultimately, the pain is too much and Emily asks to be taken back to the cemetery. There, she and the other deceased souls agree that the living don't "realize life while they live it" and don't value their everyday lives as much as they should. George walks into the cemetery and kneels before Emily's grave, grieving. The stage manager tells the audience that most of the citizens of Grover's Corners are now going to sleep and they should get some rest, too, as the stars do "their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky." He draws a curtain across the stage, ending the play.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Stage Manager** – The stage manager begins and concludes the play, and coordinates it throughout all three acts. He is both part of the world of Grover's Corners and outside of it: he describes himself as a resident of the town and acts as various townspeople such as Mr. Morgan and the minister at Emily and George's wedding, but he is also conscious of *Our Town* as a play. This odd combination of perspectives is especially notable when he decides to include a copy of *Our Town* in the town's **time capsule**, as he refers to the very play in which he himself is a character. The stage manager is the main device through

which Thornton Wilder breaks the fourth wall in the play, as he often speaks directly to the audience. From his perspective outside the world of Grover's Corners, the stage manager can also communicate with deceased characters in Act Three, and he is the one who takes Emily back in time to relive her twelfth birthday.

**Dr. Gibbs** – The father of George and Rebecca, husband of Mrs. Gibbs, and head of the Gibbs household. He is a kind and loving husband and father, though he prevents Mrs. Gibbs from even considering traveling to Europe, because he does not want to become discontented with Grover's Corners. We first see Dr. Gibbs in the beginning of the play as he returns from assisting with the birth of a pair of twins and last see him bringing flowers to his wife's grave, connecting him to the cycles of life and death that the play explores.

**Joe Crowell** – Joe delivers the **Grover's Corners Sentinel** to townspeople's doors. He appears in Act One and in Emily's flashback in Act Three. The stage manager informs the audience that Joe graduated at the top of his class and earned a scholarship to MIT, but his promising future as an engineer was cut short when he died in World War I.

**Mrs. Gibbs** – Mrs. Gibbs is a loving wife and mother, who works tirelessly to raise her two children, keep the house clean, prepare meals, do laundry, and carry out other household tasks. She seems happy in her life, but there are hints that she desires something more out of life. She tells Mrs. Webb that she dreams of going to Paris and traveling somewhere where people don't speak English, but she never gets to go on this kind of trip. Nonetheless, Mrs. Gibbs lives a happy life in Grover's Corners with her family and community. At the end of the play, when she is dead, she helps Emily adjust to her new existence after death.

**Mrs. Webb** – The mother of Emily and Wally, Mrs. Webb is in many ways similar to Mrs. Gibbs—a similarity underscored by the way they prepare breakfast simultaneously in their two homes in acts one and two. She sings in the church choir with Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Soames. At Emily's wedding, she briefly worries that she is sending Emily off into adulthood without having taught her enough about married, adult life.

**George Gibbs** – George is one of the main characters of the play. We see him as a young man, a (still young) groom, and a grieving husband who has lost his wife Emily. George is kind and well-meaning, and is very talented at baseball. He works on his uncle's farm after graduating high school, deciding not to go to agricultural school in order to stay in Grover's Corners with Emily. When he marries Emily, he is nervous about growing up and wishes that he could remain a "fella" forever with his baseball teammates. However, he gets over these fears and marries Emily happily. He last appears in the play grieving at Emily's grave in the cemetery, at the end of the play.

**Emily Webb** – Emily is an intelligent, innocent young girl. She

helps George with his homework in Act One and is upfront and honest with him about his conceited behavior in Act Two, which confirms for George how much he values her as a friend. Like George, she panics at their wedding, wanting to remain her father's girl instead of growing up. When she passes away in Act Three, she attempts (as a still-existing soul) to relive her past life. However, she finds it too painful to go back knowing all that she now knows and ultimately returns to the present, letting go of her past life as Mrs. Gibbs encourages her to do. From her journey back in time, Emily gains a newfound appreciation for all the minute, everyday moments of life that living people don't value highly enough.

**Mrs. Soames** – Mrs. Soames sings in the church choir with Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs. She attends the wedding of George and Emily and remarks on how lovely the wedding ceremony is. In Act Three, she stands with the other deceased characters, and, upon hearing of Emily's death, still remembers how nice the wedding was.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Howie Newsome** – Howie is the town milkman, who delivers milk to people's doors. He appears in all three acts of the play, and his repeated routine emphasizes the continuity of life in Grover's Corners over time.

**Rebecca Gibbs** – Rebecca Gibbs is George's younger sister.

**Wally Webb** – Wally is Emily's younger brother. He has a minor role in the play and, in Act Three, we learn that he died at a young age of a burst appendix.

**Professor Willard** – The stage manager invites Professor Willard, from the state university, onto the stage in Act One to give the audience more information about Grover's Corners.

**Mr. Webb** – Mr. Webb is the father of Emily and Wally, and the husband of Mrs. Webb. He works in town as the editor of the **Grover's Corners Sentinel**, the local newspaper.

**Woman in the balcony, man in the auditorium, and lady in the box** – These three members of the audience ask Mr. Webb questions about Grover's Corners in Act One.

**Simon Stimson** – The director of the church choir, and a drunk, Simon is cause for gossip and concern among the townspeople of Grover's Corners. He reappears in Act Three after he dies (from suicide), along with other deceased characters.

**Constable Warren** – A policeman of Grover's Corners, who appears occasionally and helps characterize Grover's Corners as a small, relatively uneventful town.

**Si Crowell** – Joe Crowell's younger brother, Si delivers the **newspaper** in Act Two. He demonstrates the interplay of change and continuity in Grover's Corners. A young boy delivers the paper, as always, but the specific boy who carries out the routine changes.

**Baseball Players** – The baseball players appear during George and Emily's wedding to tease George. They symbolize the innocent existence of childhood that George leaves behind when he marries Emily.

**Sam Craig** – Mrs. Gibbs' nephew, who grew up in Grover's Corners but then left. He returns to town in Act Three for Emily's funeral.

**Joe Stoddard** – The town undertaker, who prepares for Emily's funeral in Act Three.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### THE THEATER

One of the most striking features of *Our Town* is the way in which the play repeatedly breaks the so-called “fourth wall”, the imaginary division between the world of the stage and the audience that nearly all drama respects. This happens mostly through the character of the stage manager, but also through scenes in which characters like Professor Willard speak directly to the audience. The play also includes a scene in act one in which actors playing audience members participate in the play, entering into dialogue with the stage manager on-stage. In addition to all this, the play makes no attempt to create a realistic backdrop on the stage. The actors generally pantomime (pretend that they are interacting with things on-stage we cannot see) and there are hardly any props on the stage. The upper levels of the Webbs’ and Gibbs’ houses are represented simply by two ladders, which George and Emily climb up when they “go upstairs”. As these details of staging demonstrate, the play is not interested in pretending to be real. The fourth wall, props, and elaborate stage sets are all ways of encouraging the audience to pretend that what they are watching is real, and not an artistic representation of reality. By contrast, Wilder’s play emphasizes itself as artificial theater, laying bare the fact that theater is always an illusion, no matter how realistic.

This constant reminder that we are experiencing a fictional story rather than the true lives of the characters on the stage has several effects. First, the town of Grover’s Corners becomes less specific and more abstract. It can thus be seen somewhat symbolically or allegorically; it could represent any town, or all towns. Second, these features have an alienating effect on the audience. Unlike with other plays, we do not feel immersed in Grover’s Corners, but constantly feel as though we are outside the world of the play, looking in at lives that have

already happened and are now just being recalled, re-presented. The position of the audience in Wilder’s play is eerily similar to that of Emily after she dies and goes back to relive a moment from her youth. Like her, the audience knows what will happen to most of the characters on-stage (thanks to the stage manager), which lends both a kind of sorrow and significance to the everyday activities we observe in the play. Finally, Wilder’s innovations blur the boundaries between the play and the real world. The stage manager refers to the town as if he is a resident, but he knows that the play is just a play. In act one, Mr. Webb speaks directly to the audience at one point, as if he knows he is in a play, but elsewhere he is fully immersed in the world of Grover’s Corners. When are these characters being those characters and when are they just actors? We cannot neatly distinguish the world of the play from the real world. Even the entrance of audience members into the theater is included in Wilder’s script, in the stage directions that begin the play. Is the audience actually part of the play? Is *Our Town* really ours, as well? Paradoxically, by exposing the illusions and artificiality of theater, Wilder brings theater closer to real life.



### COMMUNITY

*Our Town* revolves around the community of the classic American small town of Grover’s Corners. The town is characterized by its small size, closeness, and familiarity. Everyone there knows each other (which is occasionally cause for town gossip) and goes to the same schools and churches. The town is filled with features of early twentieth century Americana, from the ice cream sodas George and Emily order at the local drugstore to the importance of baseball to the town’s youth. The title of the play emphasizes the importance of community: the town belongs to all those who live there and share it. And those who live in Grover’s Corners rarely leave. The same families have been living in the town and burying their dead in the same cemetery for years, and most of the high school students there will eventually settle down in their home town. Even the dead don’t leave Grover’s Corners, as we see in act three with the deceased characters lingering around the town cemetery.

Wilder’s play is in many ways an ode to these kinds of classic American small towns—a dying breed in the twentieth century—as he lovingly documents their quirks and features, like the local milkman (Howie Newsome) bringing milk to everyone’s door. However, the play’s stance toward such a local community can be seen as slightly more ambiguous. The small-town atmosphere of Grover’s Corners can also be suffocating. There is something troubling about the spirits of the dead simply lingering around the town, whose magnetic pull keeps George from exploring his talents in baseball or even going to agricultural college. Emily is extremely gifted and talented in school, but she never pursues any further education, opting to settle down with George at a young age. People seem content

to stay in Grover's Corners, but this lack of ambition can also be seen as a negative thing. Mrs. Gibbs, for example, dreams of seeing Paris one day, and speaks of the value of traveling and seeing some of the world: "once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don't talk in English and don't even want to," she tells Dr. Webb in act one. Thus, while Wilder paints a loving portrait of small-town America, he also subtly points to some of its limitations. The play's stance toward Grover's Corners and its citizens is split between a nostalgia for simpler times and a knowing pretension toward the community's isolated, occasionally naïve members.

### THE EVERYDAY AND THE ORDINARY



In act one, Wilder chooses to tell the story of a perfectly ordinary day, when nothing particularly exciting or extraordinary happens. While acts two and three represent significant occasions (a wedding and a funeral), they are important events in the lives of ordinary people. The play could just have easily have been written about other inhabitants of Grover's Corners, or about the people of some other small town. In act one, Dr. Gibbs asks the paperboy Joe Crowell if there is anything important in the newspaper, and the biggest news that Crowell can relay is that a schoolteacher is getting married. Nothing particularly newsworthy happens in Grover's Corners and even the characters themselves recognize the unremarkable nature of their town. In act one, Mr. Webb tells the audience that it is a "very ordinary town, if you ask me. Little better behaved than most. Probably a lot duller." And when George is considering going off the agricultural college and asks Emily to write him, she doubts whether letters from Grover's Corners would be very interesting.

And yet, Wilder's play insists on the importance of the everyday, the typical, and the average. George tells Emily, "The day wouldn't come when I wouldn't want to know everything that's happening here." By even writing a play entirely about everyday occurrences, Wilder makes a statement that these ordinary things are valuable and worth preserving in art and literature. One reason for this is supplied by the stage manager. While thinking about the town's time capsule, he notes that we know nothing of the everyday lives of people from the distant past. Epochal events and great leaders of history do nothing to suggest the particular, unique experiences of everyday individuals.

*Our Town*, by contrast, preserves such information. And when the deceased Emily revisits her childhood in act three, the other deceased characters encourage her to pick an ordinary day. As the cemetery in act three demonstrates, we all die. What gives an individual's life significance in the grand scheme of things is in the little details of a life, the specific, everyday things that make one life different from another and make our individual experiences unique. There may be nothing exciting in

the town newspaper of Grover's Corners, but Wilder ultimately suggests that the most important things in life aren't necessarily the things that end up on the front page.

### MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

The town of Grover's Corners is built on the smaller community of the family. The family unit is the building block of the town, where the same family names can be found on tombstones in the town cemetery going back many years. The first act of *Our Town* focuses mostly on two homes, those of the Gibbs and the Webbs, where the central family structure can be seen, with husband, wife, and children. Marriage is the essential union of two people that creates this family unit.

The second act of the play is centered around the creation of a new family through the marriage of George and Emily. Mr. Webb stresses to George that he is a firm believer in the importance of marriage, and Mrs. Gibbs insists that "people are meant to go through life two by two." However, characters in the play also regard the institution of marriage more negatively at times. Both Emily and George panic as their wedding draws near, and Emily tells her father that she does not want to get married. This is partly because marriage means growing up and leaving the comfortable family structure she is used to. While George and Emily come around to marrying each other, some doubts about marriage linger in the play. Mrs. Webb says at one point that "there's something downright cruel about sending our girls into marriage this way," and Mrs. Gibbs calls wedding ceremonies "perfectly awful things," and "farces."

Moreover, marriages in *Our Town* tend to place wives in somewhat submissive roles. While Dr. Gibbs and Mr. Webb are loving husbands, they tend to exert some kind of control over their wives or at least have the final word in their marriages. We see this especially when Dr. Gibbs continually squashes any discussion his wife wants to have about traveling outside of Grover's Corners or his taking a vacation from work. Nonetheless, as the ultimately happy union between George and Emily suggests, Wilder presents marriage as a beneficial institution, the fundamental building block of both the family and the town community, even if there are tragic or imperfect undertones in the play's marriages.

### TIME, CHANGE, AND CONTINUITY

The play's three acts focus on three different moments in time: one day during Emily and George's childhood, their wedding, and Emily's funeral. In addition, there is a long flash-back in act two and Emily revisits a moment from her childhood in act three. Moreover, the stage manager repeatedly tells the audience information about characters' futures, revealing the tragic death of Joe Crowell, for example, while he is still a young boy

on-stage. By jumping around in time, Wilder's play is able to examine the passage of time from a variety of angles, more than if it simply followed characters' lives in a strictly linear, chronological fashion. The stage manager's thoughts on the town's time capsule also offer an opportunity to think about time, as the stage manager imagines how the future will remember his own time. Much of the play reveals the sadness of the quick passing of time, which means growing up, leaving behind the innocence of childhood, getting older, approaching death, and dying, all more quickly than the characters ever expect. Even while Joe Crowell is still a young paperboy, we learn of his eventual death at war. Emily is a young woman in act one with a promising future, but she is leaving her childhood behind in act two to marry George, and she is already dead by the time act three begins.

The inevitable passage of time affects not only individual people, but also the town at large. As automobiles threaten to replace buggies, Mr. Morgan (played by the stage manager) laments the changes coming to Grover's Corners: "I tell you, you've got to look both ways before you cross Main Street these days. Gets worse every year." Similarly, in act one Mrs. Gibbs notices that people are beginning to lock their doors at night in Grover's Corners and Dr. Gibbs regrets that "they're all getting citified." The passage of time, with its technological advances and the growth of small towns into larger cities, threatens to change and drastically alter the small town that the play's characters value so much.

However, as much as things change, in many ways they also stay the same. In each act, the same milkman, Howie Newsome, makes his way around the town. The same routines and events continually repeat in the town. Children go to the school, a paperboy delivers the newspaper, citizens get married, and citizens pass away. Emily's death during child-birth encapsulates this cyclical aspect of time. Her life comes to an end just as another begins. While individuals grow up too fast and pass away, the human cycles of life and death remain constant. This may be one reason why Wilder's play takes such an interest in everyday, little matters. From a broad perspective, as time inevitably progresses along, important things—births, marriages, deaths—remain unaltered. But the little things are where people are unique, where one can see how one birth or one wedding is different from all the others. This is why the stage manager thinks *Our Town* is worth preserving for posterity in the town's time capsule. In its exploration of the mundane specificities of individual lives, it allows us to reflect on how much the world changes and how much it stays the same.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE GROVER'S CORNERS SENTINEL

The Sentinel is the local newspaper of Grover's Corners, edited by Mr. Webb. Joe and Si Cromwell

deliver it to people's doors in all three acts, and the townspeople decide to include a copy in the time capsule buried under the new bank building. A newspaper is supposed to report on important (literally "newsworthy") events. The Sentinel is thus associated with the major events that one normally thinks are most important in life. However, somewhat comically, there is not much to report on in Grover's Corners. In Act One, Dr. Gibbs asks if there is any major news in the paper and Joe Crowell tells him that his schoolteacher is getting married. In Act Three, Mr. Webb wants to write a story about a man being rescued from freezing to death, even though Constable Warren tells him it was really not a major event. The newspaper can thus be seen, on one hand, as symbolizing the fact that there is nothing particularly newsworthy about Grover's Corners, an ordinary and rather dull town. At the same time, the play stresses the importance of everyday, ordinary things, and so the fact that the town newspaper captures these things can be taken as a sign of their actual critical importance.



## "BLESSED BE THE TIE THAT BINDS"

This hymn shows up several times throughout *Our Town*. The church choir practices it in Act One,

while a choir sings it at George and Emily's wedding in Act Two. The song is also performed at Emily's funeral in Act Three, and she comments to Mrs. Gibbs that it was her favorite hymn. As the hymn's title suggests, it symbolizes the importance of a community that is connected together through various ties. *Our Town* is an examination of the tight-knit community of Grover's Corners, which is itself made up of the close communities of individual families. The hymn celebrates these connections—such as marriage—that build strong families and a strong town community.



## THE TIME CAPSULE

However, the song can also have a darker significance. It is perhaps ironic in Act Two, as it is

sung just as Emily is panicking and saying that she does not want to be bound to George in marriage. In this context, the song is almost menacing, as Emily has little choice but to be connected to George. And in the cemetery of Act Three, the real tie that binds all of us together seems to be our inevitable mortality, as we all die and end up in a cemetery just like the deceased characters. Still, the hymn is, overall, an affirmation of the family and community groups in the play bound together by various ties of family, friendship, and love.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Perennial edition of *Our Town* published in 2003.

### Act 1 Quotes

“ This play is called “Our Town.” It was written by Thornton Wilder; produced and directed by A. ... In it you will see Miss C. ...; Miss D. ...; Miss E. ...; and Mr. F. ...; Mr. G. ...; Mr. H. ...; and many others.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 3

#### Explanation and Analysis

With these opening lines, the Stage Manager immediately knocks down the "fourth wall" by addressing the audience directly: although we come to see that he is also embedded in the world of Grover's Corners as a character, here, he is introducing the play *Our Town* as a piece of fictional art, as something created rather than plainly real, and he references here not the characters in the play but the names of the director and actors who are performing it. (Although the actual director and actors in the play are not, of course, named "A." or "Miss D.", etc., thus adding an even a further playful layer to the idea of theater and what is and isn't "real.")

Furthermore, the ellipses that follow the names of each of the actor's names in this introduction suggest a sense of universality regarding the story that is to come: one gets the sense that *any* names can be inserted here; as much as the events of *Our Town* are unique experiences of the characters involved, they are also, on some level, shared human experiences.

The Stage Manager is, in fact, inviting us to identify with and insert ourselves into this narrative. It is, after all, our narrative. This explains perhaps why the play so often breaks the fourth wall -- there is no need for the fourth wall in a play that is asserting that the experiences relayed in fiction and art are no different than that of reality.

“ There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 5

#### Explanation and Analysis

Not only does the set-up of the play's stage arrangements happen explicitly in front of audience members—in another act of breaking down the fourth wall—but the setup itself is purposefully minimal. With only a few furnishings to represent the Gibbs' and Webb's respective houses on an otherwise bare set, the actors must rely largely on pantomime.

In these lines, the Stage Manager acknowledges this minimalism in a way that suggests that any scenery whatsoever is nonessential, and the inclusion of these pieces is done as a favor to audiences who mistakenly "think they have to have scenery." On the one hand, the lack of scenery adds a layer of hyper-reality to the play. The bare stage creates intimacy between the audience and art, giving viewers the sense that there is nothing that defines our lives as distinct from lives unfolding on the stage. In other words, truth doesn't need a backdrop of extensive props and setting. Rather, it stands alone.

However, in addition and in contrast to this hyper-reality, the lack of scenery also reassures the viewers that what they're seeing is, on some level, still fictional. This is particularly true in the actors' pantomiming: we are, after all, watching them pretend the contents of Grover's Corners are tangible and real. The blurred sense of fiction and reality is a common thread throughout the play.

“ Nice town, y'know what I mean? Nobody very remarkable ever come out of it, s'far as we know.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 6

#### Explanation and Analysis

The Stage Manager's assessment of Grover's Corners as a "nice town" populated with unremarkable people adds to the play's emphasis on the everyday and the ordinary. The fact that Grover's Corners has not produced any notable or extraordinary people does not function here as a critique of the community, and instead suggests that this is a town that values the little things, so to speak, a place that doesn't need

anything overtly sensational to be a pleasant place to live. On another level, the embracing of the town's apparent ordinariness also hints at the cyclical nature of life here. In the Stage Manager's assertion that the place has not given rise to any remarkable people "so far as we know" is the sense that the town produces the same kind of people over and over again. There is a set norm, one traditional type of people, and no one outside of that. While it is positive that the town values the ordinary (after all, so much of life falls into the ordinary category) their stagnation and contentedness also highlights the negative elements of tradition and tightly-knit community.

“ In our town we like to know the facts about everybody.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

In the insular community that is Grover's Corners, the Stage Manager's statement works to reinforce the intimacy between the people who live here. As in any small town, curiosity over the lives of others reigns strong, and privacy is nearly impossible.

And yet, despite all the neighborly curiosity, Grover's Corners is not to be misunderstood as gossipy—far from it. The people here, the stage manager insists, are keen on the truth, desiring to know only “the facts about everybody.”

In a community where legacy and history are held in high esteem, this desire for facts and truth is unsurprising, and gives the characters a sense of legitimacy and reliability when they relay memories about the town and its past.

“ 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.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker), Joe Crowell

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 9

### Explanation and Analysis

From the Stage Manager's brief account, it is evident that the late Joe Crowell was both an anomaly and a hero to Grover's Corners. In a town of ordinariness, sameness, and tradition, Joe's intelligence distinguished him from the rest—he was, in short, remarkable, in the way that almost no other residents are perceived.

Despite Joe's bright future as an engineer, the Stage Manager's blunt explanation of his untimely death during the war suggests that, although glamorous at face value, being remarkable and distinguishing oneself from the pack is ultimately a futile pursuit.

We all arrive at the same end—death—and because we are all eventually equalized this way, our lifelong efforts to stand out or achieve something different from the norm (for example, all of Joe's efforts to become educated) are all “for nothing.” To feel fulfilled, it may as well be more valuable for us to be ordinary, and moreover, content with our ordinariness, than to grasp beyond.

“ Only it seems to me that once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don't talk in English and don't even want to.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Gibbs (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Gibbs' bucket-list desire to travel abroad at least once in a lifetime (her preference is to go to Paris) betrays a worldliness we don't see in the other members of the Grover's Corners community. Her conviction that a complete life should include the experience of being a foreigner somewhere is in deep contrast to the routine and rootedness we otherwise witness in Grover's Corners, whose residents largely live their whole lives in one place.

At the same time, as the audience we have hindsight knowledge of Mrs. Gibbs's passing, of the fact that she never actually gets to Paris or anywhere else far outside Grover's Corners, and so her wanderlust takes on a darker tone. There is the sense that she doesn't, and can't, know how

limited her time is. And this idea also suggests a more general fact: none of us can know how limited our time is either, and many of our dreams will go unfulfilled.

Y'know—Babylon once had two million people in it, and all we know about 'em is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts... and contracts for the sale of slaves. Yet every night all those families sat down to supper, and the father came home from his work, and the smoke went up the chimney,—same as here. And even in Greece and Rome, all we know about the *real* life of the people is what we can piece together out of the joking poems and the comedies they wrote for the theatre back then.

So I'm going to have a copy of this play put in the cornerstone and the people a thousand years from now'll know a few simple facts about us.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 33

### Explanation and Analysis

In one of the play's most direct instances of breaking down the fourth wall, the Stage Manager declares he will put a copy of *Our Town* itself into the time capsule Grover's Corners is making, which is also set to contain newspapers and a copy of the Bible, among other things.

The time capsule is the product of the town's strong desire for continuity and preservation -- for its present to live on into the future -- and the Stage Manager justifies the choice to represent Grover's Corners with commonplace artifacts by critiquing the ancient civilizations of Babylon, Greece, and Rome: while all three of these ancient cities are unparalleled in fame and importance, our knowledge of how most of their population lived is scant and based entirely on inferences made from sources on other subjects. By including everyday artifacts, the Stage Manager insists upon the importance of the everyday and of the people who live everyday lives (as opposed to the idea that only the lives of the rich, famous, or powerful are worth preserving).

However, his acknowledgement that the lives of the people he is documenting are in fact, elements of a play -- the play of *Our Town*-- blurs the line between fiction and reality. On the one hand, we might question if there's truth to what is

being left behind for future generations if that "truth" is in a made-up play. On the other hand, the Stage Manager seems to be asserting that Art and Theater do contain deep truths, perhaps the deepest truths, in the way they can capture and present real feelings, real emotions, and real lives, even if those things are embodied in fictional characters.

They're all getting citified, that's the trouble with them.

**Related Characters:** Dr. Gibbs (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 42

### Explanation and Analysis

As the people of Grover's Corners adjust their lifestyles to changing times and technology, a cynical Doc Gibbs disapproves of his neighbors modernization, which he here refers to as "getting citified."

Doc Gibbs values the traditional, familiar aspects of his community and its lifestyle, and his dismissal of progress and modernization demonstrates the negative side of tradition: stubbornness and resistance to change, both good and bad.

In addition to keeping with the traditional and the familiar, Doc Gibbs' assertion also betrays a genuine sense of fear. If the town urbanizes and effectively reinvents itself, it is possible that there will be less continuity and connection between the town's history -- the old way of life -- and its modernizing future. The trouble Doc Gibbs is mentioning is not only the looming threat that life as he knows it will become outdated, but that "old-fashioned" people, himself included, will also fade into the obsolete.

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.

What's funny about that?

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.

**Related Characters:** Rebecca Gibbs, George Gibbs

(speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 46

### Explanation and Analysis

The peculiar nature of the letter George and Rebecca are discussing lies within the extensiveness of its address. Like a Russian nesting doll, it lists each community-- from Crofut Farm to the USA, to the Universe and finally, unto the Mind of God-- as parts of something continuously larger.

This chain of communities within communities, in which places as small as a farm give way to the largeness of hemispheres and solar systems, reiterates the importance of the ordinary and the everyday. Although a town as plain as Grover's Corners may seem infinitesimal in the grand scheme of the world and universe at large, in fact, it is this plainness which, bit by bit, *builds* the world at large.

Thus, the residents of Grover's Corners are justified in their value for the ordinary. The ordinary is essential-- too often taken for granted, it is the building block of all we consider extraordinary.

¶¶ Almost everybody in the world gets married,—you know what I mean? In our town there aren't hardly any exceptions. Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 48

### Explanation and Analysis

The importance of marriage features strongly in Grover's Corners. Just as "almost everybody" in the broader world gets married, almost everybody in Grover's Corners does too. Marriage is the rule to which there are "hardly any exceptions."

Conformity to marriage is one of the many examples of the significance of tradition within the community. On the one hand, the image of climbing into graves in married pairs may seem like sheep-like and negative in its conformity, but in fact, it also represents the genuine desire for companionship present in us all. No one wants to go through life alone, and the image of everyone climbing into their graves together insists upon the old adage that no one

wants to die alone, either.

¶¶ The First Act was called the Daily Life. This act is called Love and Marriage. There's another act coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that's about.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 48

### Explanation and Analysis

At the top of the Act II, the Stage Manager once again dissolves the fourth wall in a moment of bleak transparency with the audience: his outline of the play—from Daily Life, to Love and Marriage, to his dark, rhetorical hint that Death is slated to follow—effectively gives away the plot of the play and, arguably, peels back some of the narrative suspense.

Though the direct communication between the Stage Manager and audience highlights the fact that the play is fiction, his summary of the acts also intimates at reality. After all, our own lives might easily be summarized along the same, inevitable phases the Stage Manager is outlining here. In this sense, retaining narrative suspense or giving away the plot are moot points. Our own lives, despite being as finitely plotted as the characters of Grover's Corners, are no less moving, devastating, or even surprising for all their innate predictability.

¶¶ Here comes Howie Newsome delivering the milk. And there's Si Cromwell delivering the papers like his brother before him.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker), Howie Newsome, Si Crowell

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 49

### Explanation and Analysis

The Stage Manager's narration of routine milk and newspaper deliveries color, at the surface, the nature of everyday life in Grover's Corners. The faces and respective services of Howie and Si add to the sense of comforting predictability within the town; like every community, they

are the staples so commonplace to us that we take them for granted.

Beneath the surface, however, the Stage Manager's observations also serve to convey the unbroken cycle of tradition in a town like Grover's Corners. Just as Howie and Si are always associated with the services they provide, the entire community is stagnant in their roles, status, and traditions. This is particularly true of his assessment of Si Cromwell, who delivers papers "like his brother before him." The sense of repetition -- one Cromwell newsboy followed by another -- might be easy and predictable, but it's also edged with a suffocating lack of change and mobility posed by such a long-established system.

“ And how do you think I felt!—Frank, weddings are perfectly awful things. Farces,—that's what they are!

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Gibbs (speaker), Dr. Gibbs

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 53

### Explanation and Analysis

As George prepares to marry Emily, Mrs. Gibbs' angry and emotional denouncement of weddings, which she expresses outright to her own husband, is a poignant moment of rebellion against the very tradition she herself is apart of—marriage.

Mrs. Gibbs' message is mixed: though she encourages George to go through with his marriage in spite of his doubts, though she says people are meant to go through life together in pairs as a means of avoiding loneliness, she also declares here that weddings are "perfectly awful" and "farces."

In particular, Mrs. Gibbs' statement that marriage is a farce calls into question which of her many messages she truly believes in. We are left wondering whether her statement about marriage as a counter to loneliness is at all sincere, or whether she actually finds the institution unfulfilling and superficial.

“ Yes... people are meant to go through life two by two. 'Tain't natural to be lonesome.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Gibbs (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 54

### Explanation and Analysis

On the morning of her son's wedding to Emily, Mrs. Gibbs, in one of her numerous and rather conflicting views on marriage, endorses the institution here as a critical, even sanctified part of life. Besides being a tradition, marriage is a means of protection against loneliness. According to Mrs. Gibbs, going through life alone verges on the unnatural.

Nevertheless, the truth of Mrs. Gibbs' statement is questionable when considering the dissatisfaction she expresses over marriage and weddings within the very same act. Coming from someone who has been married as long as she has, we are led to wonder whether marriage is at all effective in healing loneliness, or whether it is more of a placebo that the townspeople indulge in for the promise of a quick-fix. After all, the marriages we see in the play—the Stimers, the Webbs, the Gibbs, and Emily and George, whose life together is cut short by Emily's untimely death—are not free of dissatisfaction or loneliness.

“ Don't you misunderstand me, my boy. Marriage is a wonderful thing,—wonderful thing. And don't you forget that, George.

**Related Characters:** Mr. Webb (speaker), George Gibbs

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

At the surface, Mr. Webb's endorsement of the institution of marriage to his future son-in-law follows suit with the traditional values and teachings of Grover's Corners.

Yet, beneath the surface of the endorsement, the words seem more like an act of persuasion than they are purely reassuring to George. After explaining the bleaker truths of what marriage includes, Mr. Webb wants George not to misunderstand the fact that it is nonetheless wonderful.

Whether this is in earnest, or whether Mr. Webb is trying to reassure *himself* of marriage's wonders after so many years of being married, is unclear, but also unimportant in the scheme of tradition—marriage is the way of life in Grover's Corners. Wonderful or not, there is no alternative.

George, I was thinking the other night of some advice my father gave me when I got married. Charles, he said, Charles, start out early showing who's boss, he said. Best thing to do is give an order, even if it don't make sense; just so she'll learn to obey. [...]

Well, Mr. Webb... I don't think I could...

So I took the opposite of my father's advice and I've been happy ever since.

**Related Characters:** Mr. Webb, George Gibbs (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 60

### Explanation and Analysis

After they get over the initial superstition of a groom not seeing his father-in-law before the wedding, Mr. Webb is giving George not only uplifting advice about marriage, but also advice about the occasional benefits of breaking from tradition.

When Mr. Webb introduces his initial advice with the tag "some advice my father gave me," we get the sense that what is going to be said next is an important legacy and tradition, as it is now being passed on to the third generation.

However, when we come to hear this traditional advice, which promotes gender inequality and female subjugation in marriage, both the audience and George, who expresses his uncertainty over Mr. Webb's words, quickly see that the traditional advice is obsolete and damaging.

Mr. Webb, who reassures George he took the opposite of his father's misogynistic advice, clearly also understands this. *His* advice to George, therefore, is not only how to properly treat a woman, but also the suggestion that it's okay to break from traditions that aren't worth keeping. Even in the town of Grover's Corners, there does exist some room for growth and change.

And now they're bringing in these auto-mo-biles, the best thing to do is to just stay home. Why, I can remember when a dog could go to sleep all day in the middle of Main Street and nothing come along to disturb him.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 68

### Explanation and Analysis

With his observation about the community turning more and more to "auto-mo-biles", the Stage Manager is once again cynical about the gradual urbanization of Grover's Corners. He suggests that the increase of cars make Grover's Corners a less desirable place to live.

Contrary to the notion that cars and transportation help connect people to each other, the Stage Manager disagrees. The cars and technology are, to him, nothing beyond disruptive (as with the example of the dog who used to peacefully be able to sleep on Main Street) and thus encourage people to stay at home—weakening community rather than building it.

While cars do, without doubt, change the lifestyle of Grover's Corners' residents, these changes go hand-in-hand with the changing times. That the Stage Manager looks down upon modernization is an example of the more negative and stubborn effects of being traditional. There must also be a level of adaptability, of openness to change, to both move forward and simultaneously honor the old way.

It certainly seems like being away three years you'd get out of touch with things. Maybe letters from Grover's Corners wouldn't be so interesting after a while. Grover's Corners isn't a very important place when you think of all—New Hampshire; but I think it's a very nice town.

The day wouldn't come when I wouldn't want to know everything that's happening here. I know that's true, Emily.

**Related Characters:** Emily Webb, George Gibbs (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 69

### Explanation and Analysis

Upon George bringing up the possibility of his attending the State Agriculture College and asking Emily to write him letters while he's at school in New Hampshire, Emily expresses her concern that the time he will be away from Grover's Corners will make letters from her obsolete anyways. Because the lifestyle here is both ordinary and insular, Emily fears that in three years away, George will broaden his horizons and worldliness and effectively lose

interest in life in Grover's Corners.

Even Emily, for all her loyalty and rootedness to the town, concedes that when "you think of it all"—*all* being the wider world—Grover's Corners "isn't a very important place."

George's response—he will always want to hear about Grover's Corners—indicates he hasn't lost sight of the importance of the town, and that he isn't taking for granted its quiet ordinariness (although that's not to say that this feeling will last when he moves away). In the grand scheme of things, it is easy to lose sight of how important even the smallest of towns are, and yet, part of what the play aims to convey audiences is that nothing is unimportant.

And, like you say, being gone all that time... in other places and meeting other people... Gosh, if anything like that can happen I don't want to go away. I guess new people aren't any better than old ones. I'll bet they almost never are. Emily... I feel that you're as good a friend as I've got. I don't need to go and meet the people in other towns.

**Related Characters:** George Gibbs (speaker), Emily Webb

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 70

### Explanation and Analysis

After Emily confronts George for his recent negative character changes and the growing distance in their friendship, he confides in her the fact that, despite all the places his career might take him, she and her longstanding friendship are enough for him: he doesn't need to see more of the world. In her—and in Grover's Corners—he has all he needs.

On one level, this sentiment may seem naive or narrow-minded on George's part. After all, to feel as only a teenager that you've already seen everything you need to see is to limit yourself, to dismiss everything the world at large might offer you.

And yet, there is also a startling maturity to George's words. Rather than spend his life searching for better people and places, he stubbornly values what he has, what is ordinary. In contrast to those who, constantly unfulfilled, spend—and ultimately waste—their lives looking for "the next best thing," he has already found it at home. By his teenage years, he has already learned what not to take for granted.

Oh, I've got to say it: you know, there's something downright cruel about sending our girls out into marriage this way.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Webb (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

Emily's doubts over her impending marriage to George Gibbs—the sadness of leaving her childhood behind, her abrupt departure from the Webb home and all its familiar comforts—crack Mrs. Webb's composed exterior and she expresses regret over the town's marital traditions. The institution of marriage is a cornerstone in Grover's Corners' traditional community, and the wife's role as mother and caretaker is integral to this system.

However, this moment reveals tradition's costs, as well. Although Mrs. Webb has in her life conformed to the town's standards for wifehood and womanhood, always taking a backseat to Mr. Webb, the bitter sentiment she betrays here shows her deep dissatisfaction over tradition and gender roles, suggesting that, amidst the constant push to uphold the town's values and traditions, individual dreams and lives, particularly those of women, get sacrificed. The play doesn't necessarily suggest a solution to this dilemma—that the preservation of an "ideal" traditional community has costs to women that might at first seem invisible—but it does identify that the issue is real and worthy of recognition (and in doing so suggests that social change can also have benefits, while admitting that such changes will also have costs, however unforeseen).

Ma, I don't want to grow old. Why's everybody pushing me so?

**Related Characters:** George Gibbs (speaker), Mrs. Gibbs

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 77

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, a soon-to-be-married George mirrors his bride-to-be's reluctance towards their impending wedding. Aside from the significance of marriage as a town tradition, and as one of life's milestones, it represents in many ways maturation and sacrifice. Though still young, George's

youthful chapter is closing in on him quickly.

And yet, it is somewhat inconsequential whether or not George does not want to grow old. Time is out of his control in the same way it is out of everyone's, and the changes it brings—in George's case, the transition from a young, schoolboy type into a married family man—must therefore be embraced rather than resisted. Though George's mother, in whom he is confiding in these lines, has her own reservations about marriage, she and the others whom George thinks are pushing him are also more experienced. They know, as George perhaps does not, that time and change is unavoidable, even in Grover's Corners.

And George over there, looking so ...! I hate him. I wish I were dead. Papa! Papa!

Emily! Emily! Now don't get upset...

But, Papa,—I don't want to get married....

Sh—sh—Emily. Everything's all right.

Why can't I stay for a while just as I am?

**Related Characters:** Emily Webb, Mr. Webb (speaker), George Gibbs

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 79

### Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Emily and her father about her doubts about marrying George is a saddening example of the stubbornness of tradition in Grover's Corners.

Although doubts are arguably part of the marriage process, Emily's strong reluctance feels ostensibly deeper than nervousness. However, because marriage is the traditional way of Grover's Corners, Mr. Webb hushes his daughter's sentiments and reassures her that "Everything's all right." In this instance, maintaining order and tradition almost feels more critical than what Emily's true feelings are.

In addition to the stubbornness of tradition, Emily's question to her father, "Why can't I stay for a while just as I am?" is one of the few moments in the play that someone does not take the moments in his or her life for granted. Here, Emily wants to linger in the moment of her life before marriage, this moment of freedom and youth. And with the later knowledge of her death, her self-awareness in this

quote takes a dark, ominous tone.

## Act 3 Quotes

This time nine years have gone by, friends—summer 1913. Gradual changes in Grover's Corners. Horses are getting rarer. Farmers coming into town in Fords. Everybody locks their house doors at night. Ain't been any burglars in town yet, but everybody's heard about 'em. You'd be surprised, though—on the whole, things don't change much around here.

**Related Characters:** Stage Manager (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 85

### Explanation and Analysis

In his preface to the final act of the play, the Stage Manager makes note of gradual but notable changes that have occurred in Grover's Corners. We can tell from observations like more automobiles—even among farmers—and fewer old-fashioned means of transportation, like horses, that this reflects the increasing urbanization of the small town.

The other gradual and yet significant change can be seen with the town's changing behavior with security. As opposed to the previous feel of Grover's Corners as a town of no privacy, where everyone knows about everything about everyone, the locked doors betray a lack of openness, and the fear motivating this change—an unconfirmed fear of burglars—suggests that residents trust each other less these days, perhaps because they know less about one another.

Though the Stage Manager concludes reflecting on how much has ultimately stayed the same in Grover's Corners, he understates the two seeds of change that are in fact, potentially drastic: urbanization and privacy.

No!—At least, choose an unimportant day. Choose the least important day in your life. It will be important enough.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Gibbs (speaker), Emily Webb

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

After a recently deceased Emily insists she must go back and revisit her life, the more experienced dead try, and fail, to dissuade her. However, Mrs. Gibbs, mother-in-law to Emily, at least persuades her to revisit an ordinary day as opposed to a significant one, such as, for instance, her wedding day.

Emily's initial insistence on a momentous occasion and Mrs. Gibbs' advice is a comment on our tendency to take for granted the marvels of the everyday. By going back to the everyday and the ordinary, she is finally able to understand how precious the mundane reality of life truly is, something she—and by extension, we—could never truly appreciate in life.

Do human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?

**Related Characters:** Emily Webb (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 108

### Explanation and Analysis

Upon Emily's emotional revisit to her twelfth birthday in Grover's Corners she comes to realize, in the hindsight of death, how deeply she and people in general take life for granted.

From the seemingly small detail of her mother cooking breakfast to seeing little brother Wally still alive, the scene of life moves a newly deceased Emily to tears. Though she, now aware of how fleeting life is, now wants to linger on every moment, twelve-year-old Emily and her surrounding family go about their day quickly and thoughtlessly. It is this taking for granted of every moment that separates the dead from the living, and it is here that Emily fully understands the other deceased and their warnings to not look back.

As we watch Emily watching the events of her own life, we get a sense of pause, an understanding of the rapid-fire nature of time (a lesson made especially potent by the fact that Emily essentially joins us, the audience, for this viewing of the past). The moments in life that seem insignificant or like they drag on forever are in fact, finite, and as such, they must be valued and cherished.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### ACT 1

As the audience enters the theater, the stage manager places some tables and chairs on an otherwise empty stage, as well as a bench. He addresses the audience, telling them that they are about to see a play called "Our Town" and names the director and actors of the particular production. He identifies the setting of the play as Grover's Corners, New Hampshire on May 7, 1901.

The stage manager shows the audience the layout of the city on the stage—almost none of which is actually marked by props of any kind—including its several churches, town hall and post office (combined in one building), schools, grocery store, and drugstore. He points out Dr. Gibbs' house and Mrs. Gibbs' garden, as well as the house of Mr. Webb, the editor of Grover's Corners' local **newspaper**. He says that the town is nice, but unremarkable.

The morning is just beginning, and Dr. Gibbs is returning to his house after helping a mother in the Polish neighborhood of town give birth to twins. Mrs. Gibbs walks into her kitchen and begins preparing breakfast. The stage manager tells the audience that Dr. Gibbs died in 1930, long after Mrs. Gibbs had died while visiting her daughter in Ohio. Her body was brought back to Grover's Corners, where it is buried in a cemetery alongside many of her family members.

Mrs. Webb also begins to make breakfast in her own home. Outside, Joe Crowell walks down Main Street, delivering newspapers. Joe speaks with Dr. Gibbs, who asks if there is anything important in the **newspaper**. Joe replies that his schoolteacher is getting married. They talk about the weather before Joe leave to continue his newspaper route.

The stage manager tells the audience that Joe graduated high school at the top of his class and got a scholarship to MIT. He had plans to be a great engineer, but he died while fighting in the army during World War I.

From the beginning, the play breaks the "fourth wall" as the stage manager speaks to the audience directly. He is both a character within the play and outside the world of the play, as he sets up the chairs and tables on-stage, and is conscious of the fact that he is acting in a specific production of a written play.



The stage manager introduces the audience to the "unremarkable" small-town community so central to the play. The play is interested in Grover's Corners precisely because it is so ordinary. The lack of props or backdrops for the town emphasizes the fact that the play is not real.



The stage manager's revelation of the Gibbs' deaths introduces an element of loss into this otherwise peaceful scene. This heightens the play's sense of the inevitable passage of time: even as we see these characters for the first time, we know they are already gone. The fact that Mrs. Gibbs' remains are brought back to Grover's Corners demonstrates the importance of the community to her. Even in death, she doesn't leave the town.



The biggest news that Joe has is that his teacher is getting married. This humorously drives home the point that not many extraordinary or newsworthy things happen in Grover's Corners.



As with the Gibbs' deaths, the stage manager's jumping ahead in time to tell us about Joe's death lends a sadness to the sight of the young, innocent Joe on stage, whose time will soon be up.



The milkman Howie Newsome enters (with an invisible horse and cart), delivering milk to various houses. He talks to Dr. Gibbs and then delivers some milk to Mrs. Gibbs. Mrs. Gibbs calls for her kids to get up and come to breakfast, as does Mrs. Webb in her own house. Mrs. Gibbs gives Dr. Gibbs some coffee and food and encourages him to try to get some sleep, after being up all night with the birth of the twins.

In their separate houses, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb continue to call for their children to come to breakfast. Mrs. Gibbs tells Dr. Gibbs that their son George has not been helping with chores around the house lately. Mrs. Gibbs calls after her children again, who still have not come downstairs for breakfast. They finally enter: George (sixteen) and Rebecca (eleven). In the Webb household, Emily (sixteen) and Wally (eleven) come down to breakfast.

At breakfast in the two households, Mrs. Webb tells her children not to eat too quickly, while Mrs. Gibbs tells George she'll speak to Dr. Gibbs about possibly raising his allowance. The kids finish breakfast and rush off to school. Mrs. Gibbs goes outside to feed her chickens and sees Mrs. Webb.

Mrs. Gibbs tells Mrs. Webb that a secondhand furniture dealer from Boston came to her house and offered her \$350 for her mother's old dresser. She says that she would think about selling it if she knew that Dr. Gibbs would spend the money on a real vacation. She tells Mrs. Webb that she's always wanted to see Paris.

Dr. Gibbs, however, has said that he doesn't want to travel in Europe, because "it might make him discontented with Grover's Corners." Every two years he travels to Civil War battlefields and thinks "that's enough treat for anybody." Mrs. Webb encourages Mrs. Gibbs to keep dropping hints about Paris. Mrs. Gibbs comments that she thinks, "once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don't talk in English."

The stage manager interrupts the women's conversation and announces that he wants to give more information about Grover's Corners. He invites Professor Willard, from the state university, to address the audience. Professor Willard gives some geological information about the land where the town is located, as well as the town's population: 2642.

*The local milkman (much like the paperboy Joe) is a hallmark of small-town Americana. He knows all his customers personally in the tight-knit community of Grover's Corners. Even as the stage manager explains the coming deaths of Joe and Mrs. Gibbs, the play also includes this birth of the twins. Like the deaths, the births are treated as unremarkable.*



*As the audience simultaneously sees the nearly identical breakfast scenes in the two households, the play shows its interest in representing the workings of the family unit, which functions similarly (and happily) in both the Webbs' and Gibbs' homes.*



*Again, we see two traditional families at work, with the mothers feeding, caring for, and worrying about their children. The breakfast scene is a perfectly ordinary event; similar mornings could have happened on any number of days in the characters' lives, or in other character's lives.*



*This is the first hint of a character's dissatisfaction with the ordinary, comfortable small-town existence of Grover's Corners. Mrs. Gibbs' desire to travel reveals how limited (and limiting) small-town communities can be.*



*Mrs. Gibbs' desire to travel abroad is never realized; she never explores outside her small-town life. That Dr. Gibbs can decide whether or not they will take a trip suggests that there is some inequality in their otherwise happy marriage.*



*Just as the audience is starting to immerse themselves in the world of the play and willingly believe in the theater's illusionary representation of a "real" day, the stage manager interrupts to emphasize that this is merely a staged play. Like the stage manager, Professor Willard is somehow a character in the play's world who also realizes that he is in a play with an audience.*



The stage manager then invites Mr. Webb onto the stage to give the “political and social report” on the town (since he is editor of the local **newspaper**). Mrs. Webb tells him that Mr. Webb will be there in a minute, as he just cut his hand in the kitchen. Mr. Webb does soon enter, and tells the audience about the demographics of the town, saying that it is a “very ordinary town.”

The stage manager asks if anyone in the audience has any questions. A woman in the balcony of the theater, a man in the back of the auditorium, and a lady in a box in the theater ask questions. The woman asks if there is much drinking in the town (there is not), while the man asks whether people in the town are aware of “social injustice and industrial inequality.” Mr. Webb tells him that they are, but aren’t sure what to do about it. The lady asks if there is any culture in the town, and Mr. Webb replies that there is not much.

The stage manager says that they will now return to the play. It is early afternoon, kids have just gotten out of school, and Mr. Webb is mowing his lawn. George and Emily come back to their homes from school. George compliments Emily on an impressive speech she made in class. He tells her that his room’s window has a view directly onto her room and suggests they can “work out a kinda telegraph from [Emily’s] window to [his].” He asks if Emily could help him with his homework some time and she agrees to give him hints, but not the answers.

George goes off to the baseball field, leaving Emily to speak with Mrs. Webb. Emily asks Mrs. Webb if she is good-looking and Mrs. Webb says she is “pretty enough for all normal purposes,” but dismisses the question as silly. The stage manager interrupts their conversation, telling them that he wants to offer the audience some more information about the town.

The stage manager explains some recent developments in Grover’s Corners. A new bank is being built and they’ve decided to bury some objects in a **time capsule** in the building’s cornerstone to preserve for posterity. They are including a copy of the New York Times, the local **newspaper**, Shakespeare’s plays, the Bible, and the U.S. Constitution. The stage manager reflects that we know practically nothing about the ordinary lives of ancient civilizations and decides to include a copy of *Our Town* with the other items, so that “people a thousand years from now’ll know a few simple facts about us.”

Now Mr. and Mrs. Webb also step outside the play, but are somehow still their characters. The border between the fictional world of the play and the real world is becoming unclear. Mr. Webb concludes, like the stage manager earlier, that Grover’s Corners is a typical, ordinary town.



Not only do characters speak to the audience in *Our Town*, but audience members also speak to characters on the stage. Paradoxically, this emphasizes the fact that the Grover’s Corners depicted on-stage is not a real town, while also blurring the distinction between the play’s fictional world and the real world of the audience. Mr. Webb’s answers further characterize the town as ordinary and unexciting.



The stage manager’s interruptions allow the play to jump forward and backward in time, a feature the play will exploit more later in the play to examine the effects of time on Grover’s Corners and its residents. Emily and George are innocent and somewhat naïve. George’s plan to communicate with Emily through their windows is another detail suggesting an old small-town community.



Emily is beginning to think about herself and others in romantic terms, but Mrs. Webb does not wish to discuss any such matters with her young daughter. This is an example of the ways that people fail to communicate with each other, or to fully grasp or even try to grasp the importance of what is being communicated. The stage manager’s interruption again exposes the fact that we are watching a fictional play.



The stage manager’s thoughts on the importance of the ordinary form one of the central messages of the play, which carefully documents mundane, ordinary events and people. The play suggests, just as the stage manager does, that “a few simple facts” can do more to convey what life is actually like than knowledge of major historical events or headlines can. The time capsule itself shows citizens thinking about the passage of time, realizing that their lives will one day be long-gone relics of history.



As the stage manager finishes his speech, a choir partially off-stage has begun to sing a song called "**Blessed Be the Tie That Binds.**" This is the local church choir, directed by Simon Stimson. Meanwhile, Emily and George are "upstairs" in their respective rooms (symbolized on-stage by their being up in two ladders). From window to window, George asks Emily for some help on his homework.

Simon Stimson tells the choir that they will be singing at an upcoming wedding and will use the same music they did for the last wedding they sang at. Dr. Gibbs calls George downstairs and asks him what he wants to do once he graduates from high school. George tells him he plans to work on his uncle's farm.

Dr. Gibbs asks if George will be willing to do all the chores and work around the farm, since he has not been doing chores at home. He tells him that Mrs. Gibbs had to chop wood because he hadn't done it, even though she already spends so much of her time cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. He scolds George for treating Mrs. Gibbs "like she's some hired girl we keep around the house." Nonetheless, he tells George he has agreed to raise his allowance by twenty-five cents per week. George apologizes and thanks him.

George goes back upstairs as Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Soames come on-stage, returning from choir practice. Mrs. Soames gossips with them about Simon Stimson, who is an alcoholic (and was drunk at their practice this evening). Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb encourage her to mind her own business and not notice Stimson's drunkenness. They go their separate ways and Mrs. Gibbs arrives outside her house.

Dr. Gibbs is upset that Mrs. Gibbs is arriving home so late (though she tells him it isn't any later than usual) and comments on her stopping "to gossip with a lot of hens." She tells him not to be grouchy and explains that she and the other wives were talking about Simon Stimson, who has not been doing well recently. Dr. Gibbs laments Stimson's alcoholism but says "there's nothing we can do but just leave it alone."

The hymn's title hints at the importance of the binding connections that hold the community of Grover's Corners together, such as the ties between neighbors like Emily and George or between members of the church choir who practice together,



Here the hymn and the idea of the "ties that bind" are associated with marriages, the joining together of two people. That the choir uses the same music for all its weddings shows the continuity of the town. A wedding in Grover's Corners might look and sound the same as one from years earlier, or later. George has no ambitions to leave the community of Grover's Corners after graduating.



While Dr. Gibbs scolds George for treating his mother like hired help, the specter of this idea of the mother and wife as a servant looms behind the traditional family structure that *Our Town* presents. Dr. Gibbs, after all, also expects his wife to keep the house clean and running and never fulfills her desire to travel abroad. Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb are happy with their lives, but as we see them continually working tirelessly around their homes, it is worth considering whether their traditional roles as wives are oppressive.



In a small-town community like Grover's Corners, gossip is common, as everyone knows each other, and often knows their faults, like Stimson's drinking problem. At the same time, they overlook the issue, which might be seen as kindness but could also be seen as avoiding issues of significance.



Dr. Gibbs' scolding of Mrs. Gibbs again hints at some inequality in their marriage, as he likes to have some control over when she is away from the house. His attitude toward Stimson is a feature of the small town community in which everyone knows each other yet tries to mind their own business.



Mrs. Gibbs says that she is worried about her husband and wants him to make plans to take a break from work. Dr. Gibbs refuses to talk about this and goes inside.

Again, Dr. Gibbs seems to have exclusive control over whether they will take a long vacation. He perhaps doesn't realize that he is keeping his wife from realizing a long-standing dream of travel beyond the confines of small-town America. It is significant that in a play that stresses the importance of everyday domestic life, Dr. Gibbs focuses on work rather than family.



Once they are inside, Mrs. Gibbs mentions that people in Grover's Corners have begun to lock their doors at night. Dr. Gibbs says that those people are, unfortunately, "getting citified." Upstairs, George and Rebecca are talking in his room. The stage manager tells the audience that it is 9:30 PM and most of the lights in town are out. Constable Warren, a policeman, and Mr. Webb meet as they walk along Main Street. Simon Stimson walks by, drunk. Constable Warren worries about Stimson, before walking off.

The Gibbs' quaint worries about "citification" both characterize the small-town life they cherish and show that this lifestyle is passing away, as time moves on and the town grows and becomes more modern. The local policeman walking down main street and the majority of citizens going to sleep by 9:30pm are more features of this small-town life that is slowly disappearing in 20th century America. So is the cop who knows the town drunk well enough to worry about him rather than arrest him.



Mr. Webb notices that someone is up on the second floor of his house and asks who's there. It is Emily, who says she can't sleep, because the moonlight is so bright. Mr. Webb asks if anything is troubling her and she says no. He walks into his house, whistling "**Blessed Be the Tie That Binds.**"

The repeated motif of the hymn again stresses the connectedness of Grover's Corners as a tight-knit community. Emily's lack of serious troubles shows that the first act has followed its characters on an ordinary, basically trouble-free day. At the same time, the moon with its phases is a symbol of both change and continuity, and the fact that it is keeping Emily up suggests how her own life will be affected by both change and continuity.



Upstairs in the Gibbs home, Rebecca tells George about a letter her friend received with the address, "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God." The stage manager announces that the first act of the play is now over.

The address on the letter situates the tiny town of Grover's Corners within the entirety of the universe, emphasizing that the town is a tiny, apparently insignificant part of the whole world. But to the people who live within the community (and to the play), this insignificant town is of real importance. The address also could be applied to nearly anyone, which therefore emphasizes both individual smallness but also commonality. The stage manager's announcement of the end of the act again deflates the illusion of realism in the play.



## ACT 2

The stage manager announces that three years have passed since act one. He says that the first act was called “the Daily Life” and this act will be “Love and Marriage.” It is the morning of July 7, just after the local high school graduation. Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb enter their respective kitchens to make breakfast. The stage manager emphasizes that in their lives these women cooked three meals per day every day, raised children, washed clothes, and cleaned their houses.

Howie Newsome comes along Main Street, delivering milk as in act one. He runs into Si Crowell, Joe’s younger brother who now delivers the **newspaper** in Grover’s Corners. Si says it’s too bad that the town’s best baseball player, George Gibbs, is giving up baseball to get married. Constable Warren enters and talks with Si about the recent rain the town’s been having, before he and Si leave.

Howie delivers some milk to Mrs. Gibbs and offers his best wishes for George’s wedding. He delivers milk to the Webb household and tells Mrs. Webb that George and Emily will be very happy together, then leaves. Dr. Gibbs comes down to breakfast in his house and Mrs. Gibbs tells him that she is worried about George getting married so young and feels like crying.

Dr. Gibbs recalls Mrs. Gibbs’ and his wedding, saying that he was scared and nervous. Mrs. Gibbs says she was too and tells him that “weddings are perfectly awful things,” and “farces.” The two talk more about how strange it feels for George to be marrying already, but Mrs. Gibbs comments that “people are meant to go through life two by two.”

George comes downstairs and tells his parents that he is heading over to the Webb household. He walks over to the Webb home, but Mrs. Webb tells him that he cannot see Emily as it is bad luck to see one’s bride on one’s wedding day. Mrs. Webb goes upstairs to make sure Emily doesn’t come down and tells George to have a cup of coffee with Mr. Webb.

After a long, awkward silence, George and Mr. Webb talk about the wedding. George says he wishes they didn’t have to have a big ceremony, and Mr. Webb tells him that “every man that’s ever lived has felt that way about it.” But he says that he thinks marriage is “a wonderful thing.”

*The play jumps forward in time in order to heighten the sense of things rapidly changing and life passing and children growing up too fast. The title of the act shows how important marriage is to the community, as it joins people together to form families. The breakfast scene, in its similarities to act one, shows the routine quality of the families’ everyday lives.*



Howie Newsome’s milk delivery is a reassuring sign of continuity, of things staying the same in Grover’s Corners. Si is an example of how things change in some ways, but remain the same in other ways over time. The morning begins with the milkman and a paperboy, as usual, but the paperboy has changed and is now Si instead of his brother Joe.



*The quick transition from George and Emily’s childhood in act one to their marriage in act two underscores the quick passage of time, as does Mrs. Gibbs’ crying at George getting married so young and growing up so soon. But Mrs. Gibbs’ tears can also be taken as recognition of the ways that marriage is also limiting, how it cuts off opportunities even as it creates new ones.*



*The Gibbs raise some hesitations about marriage, especially wedding ceremonies—which often give the impression that married life will be all easy and full of only joy—but ultimately still value the institution, as Mrs. Gibbs’ comment makes clear. Both parents are amazed at how quickly George is growing up.*



Mrs. Webb’s superstition about the groom not seeing the bride on the wedding day demonstrates the small-town, traditional community of Grover’s Corners.



As with Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs, George and Mr. Webb’s hesitancy about marriage has to do with the big wedding ceremony, not marriage itself, which Mr. Webb whole-heartedly believes in.



Mr. Webb shares some advice that his own father gave him before his wedding: "Start out early showing who's boss, he said. Best thing to do is to give an order, even if it don't make sense; just so she'll learn to obey." He tells George that he did exactly the opposite of what his father told him and has had a happy marriage.

Mrs. Webb returns and tells George to leave so Emily can come eat breakfast. The stage manager then interrupts and tells the audience that he wants to show them how George and Emily's relationship began. He sets the scene for a flashback to when George has just been elected class president at the end of his junior year, while Emily has been elected secretary and treasurer. Emily and George enter, walking down main street after school.

Emily and George talk, and George offers to carry Emily's books. He asks her why she has been treating him strangely recently. Emily tells him that she has been disappointed by his behavior recently, because he's become conceited, as "all the girls" at school agree. George thanks her for taking the time to alert him to a flaw in his character. Emily apologizes for telling him this, but he appreciates it and offers to buy her an ice cream soda.

Emily and George enter the local drugstore, where the stage manager plays Mr. Morgan, the owner of the store. He notices that Emily looks upset and asks what happened. George says that she was almost run over by a wagon on Main Street. Mr. Morgan bemoans the growth of the town, saying, "you've got to look both ways before you cross Main Street these days," and worrying about the introduction of automobiles to the roads.

George and Emily have ice cream sodas. George tells her that he is thankful to have a friend like her, and asks her to write him letters if he decides to go to State Agricultural College after high school. Emily doubts whether letters from Grover's Corners would be very interesting, but George assures her he would always want to know everything going on in the town.

George says that he has heard from some farmers that agricultural school is a waste of time, and he is debating going to work for his uncle right away and skipping agricultural college. He says that he doesn't want to leave Grover's Corners and doesn't want to meet any new people.

Mr. Webb offers his father's advice jokingly, but husbands in the traditional families of Grover's Corners do tend to boss their wives around to some degree, as with the Gibbs family. The traditional marriage that is so fundamental to the town's community may be somewhat oppressive for wives.



The stage manager again disrupts the realism of the play, this time to jump backwards in time. Because of the play's time-shifting, the audience watches this scene already knowing what will happen with George and Emily, and thus views their beginning romance with a tinge of nostalgia.



Emily and George exemplify growing up in a small-town community, where neighbors like George and Emily have close relationships and one's reputation throughout the community (in this case in the school community) is important.



Adopting the role of Mr. Morgan, the stage manager continues to have an odd role both within and outside the fictional world of Grover's Corners. The arrival of automobiles signals changing times for the small town.



Emily doubts whether news from the uneventful Grover's Corners would be interesting, but George assures her that he values the everyday occurrences of the town. Like George, the play insists on the importance of everyday moments.



George is comfortable and happy in Grover's Corners, but his refusal to leave (or is it a fear of leaving?) can also be seen as having a limited perspective on life.



George tells Emily that he is glad that she spoke to him about his conceitedness and admits that he has been thinking about Emily for quite some time and has been trying to walk her home from school. He says that he has decided not to go to agricultural college, because he has found someone he is very fond of in Grover's Corners, which is more important than schooling.

George offers to walk Emily home, but embarrassingly doesn't have any money on him to pay for the ice cream sodas. The stage manager (still "Mr. Morgan") trusts George to go get money from home and bring it back. George and Emily walk home. The stage manager stops acting as Mr. Morgan and announces that they are now ready to show George and Emily's wedding. Stagehands remove the chairs and tables from the stage and arrange a minimalist set suggesting a church interior.

The stage manager says that he will play the minister at the wedding. He speaks about the importance of marriage, agreeing with Mrs. Gibbs that "people were made to live two-by-two." The wedding ceremony begins and Mrs. Webb speaks to the audience, saying she doesn't know why she is upset, but that "there's something downright cruel about sending our girls out into marriage," at a young age with no knowledge of married life.

As George walks toward the altar, a group of baseball players from his team whistles and teases him, calling him "old geezer." Mrs. Gibbs notices that George looks troubled up at the altar and goes to talk to him. He tells her that he doesn't want to grow old but she comforts him and tells him he's a man now. Then she begins to cry, and George comforts her, telling her that he and Emily will come to dinner every Thursday.

Emily enters, but is frightened. The choir begins to sing "**Blessed Be the Tie That Binds**." Mr. Webb tries to comfort Emily, who says that she hates George and wishes she were dead. She asks why she can't "stay for a while just as I am," and wants to remain her father's girl. Mr. Webb reassures Emily and calls George over.

George decides not to broaden his horizons by experiencing life outside of Grover's Corners. The audience's temporal perspective (knowing that George and Emily will marry) makes this scene gently ironic, as we know they both care for each other romantically before they do.



Mr. Morgan's trusting George to go get money from home is another example of small-town life. The stage hands arranging things on stage during the play continues the play's project of blurring the lines between the real world of the theater (with stage hands and a stage manager) and the fictional world of the play.



While aware of the fact that all the citizens of Grover's Corners are acting in a play, the stage manager again plays a role within the fictional town. The play continues to be slightly ambivalent about marriage: the stage manager agrees with Mrs. Gibbs about its importance, but Mrs. Webb feels some remorse at having Emily marry so young and without having a true perspective about what being married entails. Of course, Mrs. Gibbs could have discussed this with her daughter, but never did.



The baseball players represent the innocent, carefree childhood that George must inevitably leave behind as he grows up. Mrs. Gibbs comforts him but is herself upset at George growing up. The passage of time affects everyone in the play, young or old.



Emily is also unnerved by the idea of growing up, so much so that she says she doesn't want to marry George and even hates him. The hymn takes on an almost menacing tone here, as Emily will inevitably be bound to George by the tie of marriage, even if she would rather remain a child.



Mr. Webb asks George if he will take care of his daughter. George tells Emily he loves her and promises to do his best to take care of her. Emily says all she wants is somebody to love her. The wedding ceremony takes place and Mrs. Soames, who is attending, exclaims that it is the loveliest wedding she's ever seen.

The stage manager says that he's performed hundreds of marriages, and that "once in a thousand times it's interesting." Newly married, George and Emily leave looking happy. The stage manager announces that the second act is finished.

Despite all of the reticence about George and Emily growing up and getting married, the play is ultimately optimistic about marriage. Emily and George's union is, at its core, about their mutual love for each other.



The stage manager's comment emphasizes the ordinariness of most weddings. But, the play seems to suggest that ordinary events are the ones most worth cherishing. The stage manager's announcement that the second act is over again emphasizes the play as a fictional piece of theater.



## ACT 3

During the intermission between acts, stagehands set up rows of chairs to represent graves in a cemetery. Mrs. Gibbs, Simon Stimson, Mrs. Soames, and Wally Webb, all dead, go on-stage before the act begins. The stage manager finally begins the act, announcing that nine years have gone by since act two.

The stage manager describes some of the changes coming to Grover's Corners. Cars are replacing horses on the roads, and everyone locks their doors at night. Still, the stage manager says that "on the whole, things don't change much around here."

The stage manager talks about the cemetery and points out the older gravestones from the 17th century, as well as the graves of Grover's Corners citizens who died fighting in the Civil War. Among more recent deaths, the stage manager points out the graves of Simon Stimson, Mrs. Soames, and Wally Webb (who died young of a burst appendix). The stage manager reflects on death, saying that there's something eternal about every human, and that deceased people linger on the earth for some time after death, becoming indifferent to earthly matters as they lose their individual identities.

Joe Stoddard, the town undertaker, enters and runs into Sam Craig, who grew up in Grover's Corners and has returned to attend his cousin's funeral. The two agree how sad it is when someone dies young (we do not yet know whose funeral it is) and Sam looks at various graves.

Again, the play flashes forward in time, emphasizing both the passage of time and the play's status as an artificial work of literature that can move around freely in time.



Like its individual citizens, Grover's Corners inevitably undergoes changes as time moves on. However, as the stage manager says, it remains essentially the same town.



The graves suggest the continuity of life in Grover's Corners, as citizens have been buried here in the same way for centuries. The stage manager's comments about the gravestones of Stimson and Mrs. Soames and the fact that the dead linger on suddenly makes it clear to the audience that the Stimson and Soame's onstage are actually dead. Wally's death shows how death can strike at any time, even the young.



Unlike George, Sam has left Grover's Corners after growing up. However, he is brought back to the small town by his family ties. By centering the play here around Sam, Thornton can also avoid revealing who has died.



The dead Mrs. Gibbs points out Sam, her nephew, to Simon Stimson. Sam sees Simon's grave and recalls his habit of drinking. Joe informs him that Simon took his own life.

Simon's tragic death shows the potential darker side of small-town communities. The overlooking of Stimson's drunkenness seemed a kindness. But suddenly, now, it seems as if perhaps an intervention might have been more kind.



Sam asks what caused the death of his cousin and Joe says she died in childbirth. The funeral procession arrives, including George, Dr. Gibbs, and Mr. and Mrs. Webb. Mrs. Soames asks who died, and Mrs. Gibbs answers that it was Emily.

As it is finally revealed that Emily has died, the full force of the play's temporal jump is felt: we last saw Emily on her wedding day. Now she is already dead.



Mrs. Soames recalls Emily and George's wedding and how intelligent Emily was in school. A group at the funeral sings "**Blessed Be the Tie That Binds:**" As the casket is put into the ground, Emily enters and joins the deceased characters. She says that it feels like thousands of years have passed since she was living. She comments that her father must have remembered that "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds" was her favorite hymn. She tells Mrs. Gibbs about her home with George.

As the hymn appears again, it emphasizes the connectedness of the townspeople brought together for Emily's funeral. In addition, it further suggests that the tie that most deeply connects all humans is that of mortality, the fact that death awaits every person. Emily's sense of time now that she has died is dramatically different from how the living experience time.



Emily comments that "live people don't understand," and Mrs. Gibbs agrees. Emily describes living people as "shut up in little boxes." The funeral ends and the mourners disperse. Dr. Gibbs brings some flowers to his wife's grave, then leaves.

After dying, Emily has gained a broader perspective on life and time. She can now see how each person is lost inside him or herself, how people's focus on themselves and their narrow focus on what is happening now limits their ability to connect to each other or appreciate the connections they have. Her perspective, whereby she knows much more than the living people of Grover's Corners can, is eerily similar to the position of the audience.



Emily asks if she can go back and relive her life. Mrs. Gibbs says she can, but advises her not to. The stage manager tells her that it is painful because if she relives her life, she will watch herself living it, knowing the future and all that will happen to everyone. Mrs. Gibbs tells her that dead people are supposed to forget their lives on earth and move on.

Emily's response to the pain of the passage of time is to try to go back and relive earlier moments. But this only causes more pain, as Mrs. Gibbs warns her and as she herself will learn.



But Emily is determined to relive some of her earlier life. Mrs. Gibbs tells her to at least choose an ordinary, unimportant day. Emily chooses her twelfth birthday and goes back to February 1899. She is astonished to see Grover's Corners as she remembers it from her childhood. She sees Howie Newsome, Constable Warren, and Joe Crowell talking and remarks that Constable Warren has since died.

Howie Newsome, Constable Warren, and Joe Crowell are all features of Grover's Corners as it used to be. As the town inevitably changes over time, Emily is excited to revisit the town she knew as a child.



Emily sees her mother, Mrs. Webb, and is amazed at how young she looks. Mr. Webb walks up Main Street, returning home from a trip to New York. Mr. Webb talks to Constable Warren, who describes how he saved a Polish man from freezing out in the snow. Mr. Webb exclaims that he must write about it in the **newspaper**, but Warren tells him it wasn't a big deal.

Mr. Webb arrives home and talks with Mrs. Webb about the cold weather they've been having. Mrs. Webb reminds him that it is Emily's birthday. Meanwhile, Emily says that she "can't bear it" and is amazed at how young her parents are, though she knows they have actually grown old. She enters her family's house.

Emily talks with her mother but is finding reliving her life to be more and more difficult. Mrs. Webb makes Emily breakfast and shows her a present George brought her earlier that morning. Emily tries to tell her mother all about the future, how she married George and had a child, how Wally died. Mrs. Webb doesn't appear to register any of this, though.

Emily tells the stage manager that she can't go on reliving her life, because "it goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another." She begins to cry and asks the stage manager to take her back to the cemetery. She asks him, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?" and he answers no.

Emily returns to the other deceased characters and tells them she should have taken their advice about not going back in time, calling human beings "just blind people." Simon Stimson agrees and tells her that now she knows being alive means living in "ignorance and blindness," though Mrs. Gibbs responds that "that ain't the whole truth."

Mr. Webb is excited to have a news story to write about in this uneventful town, though even Constable Warren doesn't think the event to be particularly newsworthy.



*It is beginning to become painful for Emily to relive even a rather ordinary day, because even seeing her young-looking parents, she knows that they will inevitably grow old and die. Emily knows how short their lives are and how they are taking that time for granted.*



*From our temporal perspective, we know that George's gift may actually be a sign of his budding affections for Emily. Emily can't bear seeing her mother unaware of Wally's premature death, because if she knew she could spend that time with Wally so much more intensely, could pay so much more attention. Emily, who is dead, can't bear how the living act without any urgency, as if they won't ever die, when of course they will, and soon.*



*Part of what makes Emily's visit back in time so painful is that she is aware of how quickly time flies, and feels that the living don't appreciate their lives enough, don't "realize life while they live it."*



*From the perspective of the dead, the living are blind and ignorant, not realizing how important their everyday lives are and how quickly time passes. Mrs. Gibbs, though, tempers this pessimism, suggesting that there may be more to life than ignorance and blindness—there is love and community..*



An anonymous man among the dead starts speaking about his son, a sailor, who used to say that it took millions of years for the light from stars to reach earth, which the anonymous dead man found incredible. Meanwhile, George walks into the cemetery and kneels before Emily's grave in grief, much to the disapproval of some of the dead. Emily comments that the living don't understand, and Mrs. Gibbs agrees.

*The fact about the stars places the individual lives of Grover's Corners residents in the context of the entire universe's time. This would seem to suggest that our lives are insignificant, but the dead characters see the fleetingness of our lives as making every instant all the more significant, all the more worthy of value and appreciation. George's grief at his wife's death speaks to his love for her. Yet Emily's comment reiterates that the living don't cherish their ordinary, everyday lives as much as they should. That the time for George to express his love is not so much now—when his wife is dead—as it was when she was alive, since it was always clear that one day she would die.*



The stage manager slowly draws a curtain across the stage as he gives a final speech. He says most people are going to sleep now in Grover's Corners, and the stars are visible in the sky "doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky." He tells the audience good night, tells them to get some good rest, and the play ends.

*The stage manager continues his dual role both within the fictional town and partly outside it, aware of the play as a theatrical production. Amid all the changes that have happened, the play ends with an assurance of both continuity and change: people are sleeping in Grover's Corners as they always do, while the stars are the same in the sky, moving through their paths as time passes as love blooms again and again and as people continue to fall into death.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Fredericksen, Erik. "Our Town." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Nov 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Fredericksen, Erik. "Our Town." LitCharts LLC, November 25, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/our-town>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Our Town* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town*. Perennial. 2003.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town*. New York: Perennial. 2003.