

## Our Town – Discussion Questions

Please answer question 1, and then choose 3 more questions to answer from numbers 2-6. Incorporate a total of four quotations from the play into your answers.

**1. Emily's Epiphany** – After returning briefly to the world of the living, Emily says that “Live people don't understand,” that “They're sort of shut up in little boxes” (96), and that they “don't have time to look at one another.... So all that was going on and we never noticed” (108). She then declares, “That's all human beings are! Just blind people.” (109).

**What exactly does Emily mean? According to the play, what exactly do living people fail to recognize or understand, which Emily only realizes after she returns to re-live her life? What exactly did Emily miss or fail to see when she was alive?**

**Choose three more questions to answer from the questions below:**

### **2. Awakening from Ignorance & Blindness vs. Remaining Unconscious & Oblivious?**

SIMON STIMSON:

*With mounting violence; bitinglly.*

Yes, now you know. Now you know! That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those ... of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another. Now you know that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness.

MRS. GIBBS:

*Spiritedly.*

Simon Stimson, that ain't the whole truth and you know it.

During the scene when Emily returns to her twelfth birthday, we learn that Constable Warren has just saved the life of a drunk man who lay down in the snow and fell asleep: “Got drunk and lay out in the snowdrifts. Thought he was in bed when I shook'm.... Darn near froze to death he was” (102, 104). Consider this detail as part of a central motif that informs the play—that human beings can be figuratively “asleep,” “unconscious,” or oblivious to reality on one hand; and that, on the other hand, human beings can be “awakened” and made aware or conscious of what they previously did not recognize.

- A. Besides Emily, who else in the play is “awakened” or made conscious of some aspect of reality that they have been otherwise blind to or unaware of? Do they “wake up” on their own, or does someone else wake them up?**
- B. In contrast to those who “awaken,” in what ways does the play reveal that there is indeed some truth to Simon Stimson's assessment of “what it was to be alive (109)? Specifically, which characters in the play figuratively remain “asleep,” “unconscious,” or oblivious to reality, and are not awakened or made conscious? Why don't these people “wake up”?**

### **3. Who is the protagonist of *Our Town*? Why do you think so?**

### **4. Which notable characters have died in Act 3, and why might each specific death bear particular significance?**

OVER→

**5. The Motif of Seeing Things Twice** – One pattern or motif that unfolds in *Our Town* is the pattern of seeing things twice, which includes *missing the full significance* of things on the first viewing, but *recognizing the full significance* of things on second viewing.

**When you look back at Acts 1 & 2 and view these acts in light of what happens in Act 3, which specific details from Acts 1 or 2 (such as scenes, interactions, images, lines, etc.) now strike you as particularly significant? Why? What do these details contribute to the play that is easy to miss at first glance?**

**6. The Hero** – During the wedding, the Stage Manager (acting in the role of the minister) says,

The real hero of this scene isn't on the stage at all, and you know who that is. It's like what one of those European fellas said: every child born into the world is nature's attempt to make a perfect human being. Well, we've seen nature pushing and contriving for some time now. We all know that nature's interested in quantity; but I think she's interested in quality, too, that's why I'm in the ministry (75).

**What does the Stage Manager seem to mean here? Who exactly is “the real hero” of the marriage scene, and why do you think Thornton Wilder chooses not to name this hero at all? Moreover, how might the identity of this “real hero” be relevant to the rest of the play and its impact?**