

In his "Foreword," Donald Margulies calls *Our Town* a radical play largely because it is so minimalistic, consisting of "a bare stage, spare language, archetypal characters." As you read, notice the "radical" techniques that Thornton Wilder uses to portray the people and lives of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire.

Consider this question as you read *Our Town*: What does Wilder want us to recognize and understand about these people and about their lives?

As you read the play, flag details that relate to these ideas:

- **EVERY DETAIL MATTERS** – Given the quotation above, consider the idea that every word and detail the author has included in this play carries great significance. What are the intriguing and potentially significant details you notice, and why might these details be important and worthy of our thoughtful attention?
- **CHARACTER TRAITS & ARCHETYPES** – Donald Margulies says that *Our Town* uses "archetypal characters," which means that the play's characters represent universal patterns of human nature and relationships. In Act 1, we are introduced to members of the two families central to this play—the Gibbs family and the Webb family. Consider what we learn about Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Gibbs, Mr. Webb, Dr. Gibbs, Emily Webb, and George Gibbs in Act 1. Which important traits does the play reveal about each of these characters and about the relationships among these people? Moreover, do you notice any meaningful patterns among these characters and relationships; in particular, do any of the characters or relationships reflect universal aspects of human nature?
- **MORTALITY & DRAMATIC IRONY** – Dramatic irony is a technique in which the audience *knows* key information that one or more characters *do not* know. Recall that Act I is set on May 7, 1901. When we are introduced to Dr. Gibbs, Mrs. Gibbs, and Joe Crowell, Jr. at the beginning of Act I, notice what we also learn about the future of each of them. How is this information an example of dramatic irony? Moreover, what effects does this knowledge create for you as you continue to read the play and watch these characters interact with others?

ACT ONE

1. Consider the stage directions for Act I. How do you think these directions will impact the audience's experience of the play?
2. What is the traditional role of a stage manager? Why do you think Wilder uses the character of the Stage Manager as his narrator? How do the Stage Manager's actions reflect the traditional role of a stage manager during the production of a play? In contrast, how do the Stage Manager's actions differ from the traditional understanding of what a stage manager does? What does Wilder's choice of a narrator suggest about the verisimilitude of the play?
3. What landmarks does the Stage Manager point out? What does his selection of landmarks suggest about the values of the inhabitants of Grover's Corners?
4. Based on Joe Crowell Jr.'s comments about his schoolteacher's upcoming marriage, what can you infer about the way marriage impacted a woman's career in the early 20th century (8-9)?
5. Explain how Wilder develops the motifs of birth and death in Act I. Include specific quotations to support your answer.
6. What sort of lives do Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb seem to want for their children? What values do they want their children to develop? Do you think they are good parents? Cite specific textual evidence to explain your answer.

7. What do Rebecca, George, and Emily appear to want for their own lives? Support your answers with quotations from the text.
8. What does Mrs. Gibbs talk to Mrs. Webb about? What does Mrs. Gibbs want her husband to do? What advice does Mrs. Webb give her? What does this conversation suggest about the roles of husbands and wives in the early 20th century?
9. Why do you think Wilder has the Stage Manager interrupt Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs to introduce Professor Willard's brief history of Grover's Corners? What is the focus of Willard's lecture? How does it relate to the previous scene?
10. What does the Stage Manager ask Mr. Webb to speak about? Why do you think he invites questions from the audience? In what ways do these audience members serve as dramatic foils? What points do you think Wilder is trying to make?
11. Examine the first scene between George and Emily (28-31). How does Wilder develop their relationship? Do they seem compatible? Explain your answer, citing specific details from the text.
12. What do you think Emily means when she tells her mother, "you never tell the truth about anything" (31)?
13. What purpose does the Stage Manager say he hopes that the play will serve? What does this statement suggest about Wilder's purpose in writing *Our Town*?
14. Describe the relationship between George and his father, Dr. Gibbs.
15. Near the end of Act I, multiple people gossip about Simon Stimson, and Doc Gibbs echoes two other characters when he says about Stimson, "I don't know how that'll end; but there's nothing we can do but just leave it alone" (41). What key details do we find out about Simon Stimson's problems, and how do the people of Grover's Corners view him and treat him? Moreover, do you agree with Dr. Gibbs that "there's "nothing [anyone] can do" to help Stimson, or do you think Thornton Wilder wants us to question Dr. Gibbs' view?
16. Summarize the conversation between George and Rebecca at the end of Act One. Why do you think Wilder chooses to end the first act with these lines? How are these lines thematically significant?

ACT TWO

1. How much time passes between the end of Act I and the beginning of Act II? How do the Stage Manager's comments on page 47 suggest the theme of the cycle of life?
2. What do you think the Stage Manager is suggesting when he tells the audience, "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" (48)? How does this foreshadowing impact the audience's reaction to the second act?
3. What does the Stage Manager say is a "vicious circle" (49)?
4. What do Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs remember about their own wedding day? Why do you think Mrs. Gibbs calls weddings "farces"?
5. Why does George go to the Webb's house? How do Mr. and Mrs. Webb respond to him?
6. Summarize the marriage advice that Mr. Webb gives George. Does Wilder want us to think it is good advice, or does Wilder want us to view this advice with irony?
7. Why does the Stage Manager say he wants to interrupt the action of the play to insert a flashback? What do you think he means when he says, "I don't have to tell you how important that is" about the fact that Emily was just elected Secretary and Treasurer of the Junior Class and George was just elected President. Why would this fact be important?

8. What criticism does Emily have of George, and how does he respond to her criticism? In what ways does Emily “wake up” George in this scene?
9. What does George ask Emily to do as a favor to him? What does she say in return? Why do you think George decides that he won’t go to college?
10. What do you think the Stage Manager means when he says, “this is a good wedding” (75)?
11. What do you think the Stage Manager means when he says, “The real hero of this scene isn’t on stage at all, and you know who that is” (75)? Who is “the real hero” of the play? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
12. Consider Mrs. Webb’s comments on page 76. What do you think she hopes that Emily’s girl friends have told her a thing or two about? What do you think she means when she speaks in hyperbole and says, “The whole world’s wrong, that’s what’s the matter”?
13. What purpose does the small chorus of baseball players serve? What does the Stage Manager mean by the comment, “There used to be an awful lot of that kind of thing at weddings in the old days (77)?
14. Why does George have second thoughts about getting married? Why does Emily have second thoughts? Are they worried about the same things or different things? Who or what reassures them?
15. Examine the use of juxtaposition in the last moments of Act II. In what way does Mrs. Soames serve as a dramatic foil for the other characters in this final scene?

ACT THREE

1. What is the setting of this scene? What stage direction about the way they should speak does Wilder give the actors playing the dead townspeople? What mood is Wilder trying to establish with these directions?
2. How much time passes between the first act and the third act? According to the Stage Manager, how has Grover’s Corners changed during that time?
3. What type of behavior does the Stage Manager describe as “layers and layers of nonsense” (87)? Why do you think he considers this behavior “nonsense”? Do you agree with him?
4. Which characters have died in the past three years? Are you surprised by any of the deaths? Explain your answer.
5. What does it mean to get “weaned away from the earth” (88)?
6. Paraphrase the Stage Manager’s comments about death. According to him, what happens to people after they die?
7. Who is Sam Craig and why is he visiting Grover’s Corners? What do his comments about the dead suggest about the platitude “the dead live on in our memory”?
8. Explain how Wilder slowly suggests and then reveals that Emily has died. Why would he choose to reveal her death in this way?
9. How did Simon Stimson die? What is unusual about his epitaph? What message do you think Stimson was trying to send by selecting it?
10. What memory causes Mrs. Soames to remark, “My, wasn’t life awful—and wonderful” (93)?
11. Why do you think Wilder specifies that Emily should be smiling when she joins the rest of the dead?

12. What is significant about the amount of money in the legacy that Mrs. Gibbs left George and Emily, and how did they spend the money? Since Mrs. Gibbs gave them this money, what can we infer that Mrs. Gibbs never got to do before she died?
13. What does Emily mean when she says that living people are “sort of shut up in little boxes” (96)?
14. What does Emily decide that she wants to do? Why do the dead warn her not to do it?
15. What does Emily realize when she relives a day from her life?
16. How does the Stage Manager respond to Emily’s question: “Do human beings ever realize life while they live it” (108)? What does the Stage Manager mean?
17. Why do you think Wilder chooses to end his play with comments about the stars? Moreover, how does the conversation of the dead affect the way you respond to George’s entrance and display of grief?
18. What symbolic gesture does the Stage Manager make at the end of the play? What does his gesture suggest?