

**The Use of Drama As A Portrayal of Reality:
Thornton Wilder's "Our Town"**

Ansam Reyadh Al-Maarooof
Lecturer-English Department-College of Education
Tikrit University

Abstract

This Paper handles one of the most popular plays in American modern theatre, *Our Town*, written by the great American playwright, Thornton Wilder. The paper examines why does Wilder's play continue to be so popular. Throughout the examination, the paper concludes the answer to be that there are certain missions or themes derived from the play that are of great concern to many people whatever their culture or society is. These themes according to the paper perhaps the reason behind this increasing concern of *Our Town*. In disclosing these themes the paper highlights certain points regarding the style and the techniques Wilder uses throughout the play.

Thornton Wilder, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright and novelist, writes well-designed and inventive dramatic chants to human survival about "ordinary" human beings living in an enigmatic but benevolent universe. His great plays, *Our Town* and *Skin of Our Teeth*, are distinguished as experiments in theatrical techniques and by what is considered particularly American charm and humour.¹

Wilder is thought of, together with O'Neill, Miller, and Williams, as one of the American "Big Four," and yet his reputation is based on only three full-length plays. For some he is the great American satirist because of his satirical style of writing; for others

he is a soft-hearted sentimentalist because of his way of dealing with the human feelings; and for still others he is only a religious dramatist. Furthermore.... Brecht, Ionesco, Duerrenmatt, and Frisch have all acknowledged their debt to this great and over-enthusiastic experimenter.²

Furthermore, Wilder was an American playwright, novelist, essayist, and screenwriter. He tries to find, and to explore the universe in particular in his writing: his conventional characters and conventional themes are but signs of his assurance that realism in the theatre cannot effectively expose the human condition. The form and content of his novels and plays also reveal his negative response of contemporary styles of literary look. His fiction and his drama have thus been the subject of critical disagreement for their lack of fashionable theme or exhibition. Wilder was three times the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize: for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1927, and for his plays *Our Town* in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1943.³

Our Town may be the most frequently staged American play of the twentieth century. It is repetitively in production at provincial, community, and college theatres, was filmed with most of the original Broadway cast, and has been televised more than once. This increased desire for staging a play should have a reason, thus what is the reason behind this desire? Answering this question is the motif and the objective of writing this paper. Tracing the childhood, courtship, marriage, and death of Emily Webb and George Gibbs, *Our Town* finds universal meaning in the ordinary lives lived in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire.

When *Our Town* was first performed in 1938, Thornton Wilder was better known as the Pulitzer prize-winning (1927) author of a novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Discontented with most of what he was seeing on the American stage, Wilder decided

to pioneer a different approach to theatre. He explains his suggestion in the preface to *Three Plays by Thornton Wilder* (Bantam, 1958):

Toward the end of the twenties I began to lose pleasure in going to the theatre. I ceased to believe the stories I saw presented there. I felt that something had gone wrong with it [the theatre] in my time and that it was fulfilling only a small part of its potentialities.⁴

Our Town deals with a widow and her two daughters, one who finds fulfillment in a science project. Life in the town of Grover's Corners in New Hampshire . It was considered innovative for its time because of the experimental techniques Wilder presents throughout it, such as the unconventional usage of the stage manager, bringing the dead altogether on the stage, as well as talking about characters who never appear on the stage as being on it as well as the absence of scenery and the time shift.^{5*}

The play surveys the lives of people living in a small, characteristically American town. It was first produced in 1938 and received the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. Since its first appearance, Wilder's *Our Town* has been embraced as an American classic. The play is simple enough to be studied by middle school students, yet rich enough in meaning to deserve continual productions on Broadway and in community theatres throughout the nation.⁶ So, what is the reason for its prolonged existence? It is perhaps as C. W. E. Bigsby says that Wilder:

“has experienced virtually all the aspects of the American theatre. His plays are widely performed, no least, perhaps, because they

reflect something of his Midwestern values, because of that blend of theatricality, nostalgia and a poetic sensibility that made *Our Town* such an enduring success is equally a mark of his drama.”⁷

The play represents Americana, the small town life of the early 1900s, and a world most of us have never experienced. The fictional village of Grover's Corners contains old-fashioned activities of yesteryear: a doctor walking through town, making house calls, a milk man, travelling along side his horse, happy in his work, folks talking to one another instead of watching television, and no one locking his door at night which shows clearly the safe atmosphere in America at the time of writing the play.

The Stage Manager (the show's narrator) is the director's right-hand man prior to performance to keep track of rehearsal schedules, scripts, [props](#), and actors during the rehearsal process. Once the run of the show has begun, the Stage Manager is in control of everything that happens [backstage](#) or [onstage](#), also Known As: the SM, during the play, explains that he is putting a copy of *Our Town* in a time capsule.⁸

But of course, Wilder's drama is its own time capsule, allowing audiences to glimpse turn-of-the-century New England, during the time period of the play, 1901 to 1913, America saw many industrial advances. One that features outstandingly in the play itself is the introduction in 1908 of Henry Ford's Model T automobile. The Stage Manager, in his opening speech in Act Three, mentions that "farmers are coming to town in Fords." The horse and buggy days are gone, even for the fictional town of Grover's Corners.⁹ Yet, as nostalgic as *Our Town* appears, the playwright throughout the play also delivers many powerful themes which can be regarded as

life messages, appropriate to any generation. This thematic study is concerned with examining these themes throughout the play.

The play is divided into three aspects of the human experience which are reflected right the way through the play's acts: ACT I is devoted for daily life, ACT II implies the theme of love and marriage, and ACT III handles death and loss.

The Stage Manager- who is completely aware of his relationship with the audience that leaves him free to break the [fourth wall](#) and address them directly- serving as the play's narrator, introduces the audience to Grover's Corners, a small town in New Hampshire. The year is 1901. In the early morning only a few folks are about. The paperboy delivers papers. The milkman strolls by. Dr. Gibbs has just returned from delivering twins.¹⁰

Taking in consideration the fact that there are very few props in *Our Town* and most of the objects are pantomimed, gives the Stage Manager outstanding importance for he arranges a few real chairs and tables. Two families enter and begin pantomiming breakfast.¹¹

Wilder was dissatisfied with the theatre of his time: "I felt that something had gone wrong....I began to feel that the theatre was not only inadequate, it was evasive."¹² His answer was to have the characters mime the objects with which they intermingle. Their surroundings are created only with chairs, tables, and ladders. (e.g., The scene in which Emily helps George with his evening homework, conversing through upstairs windows, is performed with the two actors standing atop separate ladders to represent their neighboring houses.) "Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind, not in things, not in 'scenery.'" said Wilder in his 1957 "Preface" to *Three Plays*.¹³ The play presents The Gibbs Family which consists of Dr. Gibbs who is a hardworking, soft-spoken, disciplined, Mrs. Gibbs, the doctor's wife who believes her husband

is overworked and should take a vacation, George, their son, energetic, friendly, and sincere. Rebecca, George's little sister, and the last member of the family.

The second family presented in the play is The Webb Family, which has Mr. Webb who runs the town's newspaper. Mrs. Webb, his wife is strict but loving to her children, Emily Webb, their Bright, hopeful and idealistic daughter, and Wally Webb, Her younger brother.

At some stage in the morning and the rest of the day, the townspeople of Grover's Corner eat breakfast, work in town, do household chores, garden, gossip, go to school, attend choir practice, and admire the moonlight and this is of course reflects the simplicity of the townspeople's life. Here are some of Act One's more gripping moments which show the simplicity of the townspeople's life, e.g.

Dr. Gibbs calmly rebukes his son for forgetting to chop up firewood. When George has tears in his eyes, he hands him a handkerchief and the matter is simply resolved.

Emily Webb and George Gibbs sit at their windows, according to the stage directions, they are perched on ladders. They talk about algebra and the moonlight. Their words are mundane, perhaps, but their fondness for each other is obvious. All the events are intentionally narrated in an ordinary way to show the usual sequences of a simple life, American people were living at that time.

Rebecca tells her brother a funny story about a letter Jane Crofut received from a minister. It was addressed:

Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God. (Our Town, Act I, P.46)*

Stage Manager role is very important throughout the play, he exists both within the narrative of Grover's Corners and outside of it, commenting on the action and reporting future events. He is the intermediary between the audience and the vignettes of life in Grover's Corners, directing the characters in how they tell their story and fleshing out the details. He also occasionally steps into individual roles, as Mr. Morgan and the minister and several others. The Stage Manager is kindly and sincere, earnest in his love for Grover's Corners and honest in his appreciation of its ordinariness.¹⁴ Thus, the playwright ends Act One with the Stage Manager tells the audience: *"That's the end of the First Act, friends. You can go and smoke now, those that smoke."*(47)

Another example is Simon Stimson, the church organist who leads the church choir while intoxicated. He staggers home drunk and deeply troubled. The constable and Mr. Webb try to give him a hand, but Stimson wanders away. Webb wonders how the man's unhappy situation will end, but decided there is nothing to be done about it.

During this act, Act I, the Stage Manager invites questions from members of the audience (who are actually part of the cast). One rather disturbed man asks, "Is there no one in town aware of social injustice and industrial inequality?" Mr. Webb, the town's newspaper editor, responds:

Mr. Webb: Oh, yes, everybody is,-- something terrible. Seems like they spend most of their time talking about who's rich and who's poor.

Man: (forcefully) Then why don't they do something about it?

Mr. Webb: (Tolerantly) Well, I diligent and sensible can rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome sink to the bottom. But it ain't easy to find. Meantime, we do all we

can to take care of those who can't help themselves. (Act I, P. 25)

Here, Wilder demonstrates how we are concerned with the well being of our fellow man. However, the rescue of others is often out of our hands.

Living proof regarding this— Simon Stimson, the church organist and town drunk. The audiences never learn the cause of his troubles. Supporting characters often mention that he has had a “pack of troubles.” They discuss Simon Stimson’s dilemma, saying, they don’t know how that’s going to end. The townspeople have sympathy for Stimson, but they are unable to save him from his self-imposed suffering. At the end of the play, Stimson hangs himself, the playwright’s way of teaching the audiences and the readers that some inconsistencies do not end with a happy resolution. Hence, the first theme the play tries to convey is: **Try To Help Others, But Be aware With The Fact That Some Things Can’t Be Helped.**

At the beginning of Act II, The Stage Manager explains that three years have passed. It is the wedding day of George and Emily. The Webb and Gibbs parents lament how their children have grown so rapidly. George and Mr. Webb, his soon-to-be father-in-law, uncomfortably speaks about the ineffectiveness of wedded suggestion.

Before the wedding commences, the Stage Manager wonders how it all began, both this explicit romance of George and Emily, as well as the origins of marriage in general. He takes the audience back in time a bit, to when George and Emily’s romantic relationship began. In this flashback, George is the captain of the baseball team. Emily has just been elected as the student body treasurer and secretary. After school, he offers to carry her books home. She accepts but suddenly reveals how she does not like the

change in his character. She claims that George has become overconfident.

This seems to be an artificial comment, however, because George immediately apologizes. He is very beholden to have such a straightforward friend as Emily. He takes her to the soda shop, where the Stage Manager pretends to be the storeowner. There, the boy and girl disclose their fondness to one another.

The Stage Manager goes back to the wedding ceremony. Both the young bride and groom are frightened about getting married and growing up. Mrs. Gibbs snaps her son out of his jitters. Mr. Webb calms his daughter's fears. Here, The Stage Manager plays the role of the minister. In his sermon he says of the countless that have gotten married, "Once in a thousand times it's interesting." And more:

Stage Manager: (To audience) I've married two hundred couples in my day. Do I believe in it? I don't know. I suppose I do. M marries N. Millions of them. The cottage, the go-cart, the Sunday afternoon drives in the Ford—the first rheumatism—the grandchildren—the second rheumatism—the deathbed—the reading of the will—Once in a thousand times it's interesting.(Act II, P. 80)

Yet for the characters involved in the wedding, it is more than interesting! George Webb, the young groom, is anxious as he prepares to walk to the altar. He believes that marriage means that his youth will be lost. For a moment, he doesn't want to go through with the wedding because he doesn't want to grow old. His bride to be, Emily Webb, has even worse wedding jitters. The scene also depicts the bride's anxiety as she speaks to her father:

Emily: I never felt so alone in my whole life. And
George, over there – I hate him – I wish I were dead.
Papa! Papa!(83)

For a moment, she begs her father to steal her away so that she can always be “Daddy’s Little Girl.” However, once George and Emily gaze at each other, they calm one another’s fears, and together they are prepared to enter adulthood. Many romantic comedies portray love as a fun-filled rollercoaster ride. Wilder views love as a profound emotion that pushes us towards maturity. At this stage of the play occurs the second theme that is: **Love renovates People.**

Wilder takes some good-natured taunts at the repetitiveness of most marriages in this act, because talks of weddings, relationships, and the perplexing institution of marriage dominate Act II. These talks are of course the best space for the playwright to express his viewpoint.

The final act takes place in a cemetery in 1913. It is set upon a hill overlooking Grover’s Corner. About a dozen people sit in several rows of chairs. They have patient and serious faces. The Stage Manager tells us that these are the dead citizens of the town. Among the recent arrivals are: Mrs. Gibbs who died of pneumonia while visiting her daughter. Wally Webb who died young. His appendix burst during a Boy Scout trip. And Simon Stimson who was facing troubles the audiences never understand, he hang himself.

At this stage of the play the playwright presents a different way and style of presenting the characters. A funeral procession approaches. The dead characters comment dispassionately about the new arrival, ie. Emily Webb who died while giving birth to her second child.

The spirit of Emily walks away from the living and joins the dead, sitting next to Mrs. Gibbs. Emily is pleased to see her. She talks about the farm. The living distracts her as they grieve. She wonders how long the sensation of feeling alive will last; she is anxious to feel like the others do.

Mrs. Gibbs tells her to wait, that it is best to be quiet and patient. The dead seem to be looking to the future, waiting for something. They are no longer emotionally connected to the troubles of the living.

In this respect, Emily's intellect that one can return to the world of the living, that one can revisit and re-experience the past. With the help of the Stage Manager, and against the advice of Mrs. Gibbs, Emily returns to her 12th birthday. However, everything is too beautiful, too emotionally intense. She chooses to go back to the numbing comfort of the grave. The world, she says, is too wonderful for anyone to truly realize it.

Some of the dead, such as Stimson, express bitterness to the ignorance of the living. However, Mrs. Gibbs and the others believe that life was both painful and wonderful. They take comfort and companionship in the starlight above them.

In the last moments of the play, George returns to weep at Emily's grave.

Emily: Mother Gibbs?

Mrs. Gibbs: Yes, Emily?

Emily: They don't understand, do they?

Mrs. Gibbs: No, dear. They don't understand. (Act III, p. 102)

It is during Act III, when Emily Webb is laid to rest, Wilder reminds the audiences that life is temporary. The Stage Manager says that there is "something eternal," and that something is related

to human beings. However, even in death the characters change as their spirits slowly let go of their memories and identities.

Carpe Diem (Seize the Day!) is the third theme gained from *Our Town*. Wilder's fanatical request in the play is to appreciate every moment of every day, for life is a momentary thing. With troubles hastily increasing in Europe and war becoming a threatening reality, people were submersed with the negative aspects of life, thus the playwright tries to portray that stage in the life of Americans as well as presenting them a sense of happiness with the attainable life. In the play, Emily Webb's funeral takes place and her spirit joins the other residents of the graveyard. As Emily sits next to the late Mrs. Gibbs, she looks sadly at the living humans nearby, including her grieving husband.

Emily and the other spirits can go back and relive moments from their lives. However, it is an emotionally painful process because the past, present, and future are realized all at once. When Emily comes flooding back her 12th birthday, everything feels too powerfully attractive and disheartening. She returns to the grave where she and the others rest and watch the stars, waiting for something important. The narrator explains:

Stage Manager: Y' know the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long. Gradually, gradually, they let go hold of the earth—and the ambitions they had—and the pleasures they had—and the things they suffered—and the people they loved. They get weaned away from the earth {...} They're waitin' for something they feel is coming. Something important and great. Aren't they waitin' for that eternal part of them to come out -- clear?(94)

Although the play reveals an afterlife, but as the play brings to a close, Wilder advocates us to seize each day and appreciate the wonder of each passing moment by a comment comes on Emily 's tongue as she comments upon how the Living do not understand how astonishing yet momentary life is. The play's plea is to escape from the negative side of life and celebrate the ordinary; it reaffirmed faith in the unchanging moral values of small town living. It was obviously the relief that audiences needed in the midst of a pessimistic and changing world. Through his play, Wilder tries to teach the audience to seize the moment and enjoy living. There are no guarantees about a certain life duration, as evidenced by the premature deaths of Emily Webb and her brother, Wally; tomorrow may be too late. Wilder calls the drama, *Our Town* and portrays ordinary people and events, in order to help the people in the audience and the readers of the play recognize the theme and relate it to their own lives.

The Stage Manager then reflects upon how, throughout the universe, it may be that only the inhabitants of earth are straining away. He tells the audience to get a good night's rest. The play ends.

Nothing is everlasting throughout the life is the fourth theme the audiences and the readers are reminded of. At the beginning of each act, the stage manager reveals the subtle changes that take place over time. The population of Grover's Corner grows. Cars become ordinary; horses are used less and less. The teenager characters in Act I are married during Act II. Everything Changes step by step in the play.

A huge amount of literature is about travelling around and adventure, about discovering new worlds and extraordinary societies. *Our Town* is one of the only works of canonical literature that adopts the opposed extreme: no one goes anywhere in the play,

no one has an adventure. The lesson that the readers are in need to gain knowledge of is be content with the conventional rhythms of life rather than go searching for something strange and exciting. Undeniably, there is a stratum of anti-exploration running through the text, reinforcing the old small-town motto that if you can't find your heart's longing in your own country, then it's almost certainly not worth looking for anyway. Characters who know the high-quality that they have in Grover's Corners have a tendency to encourage their ignorance of outside societies. For instance, Dr. Gibbs repudiates travelling because seeing Europe might make him dissatisfied with Grover's Corners; and George doesn't go away to college because he might lose concern in the people at home. Hence the fifth theme the play advocates is that **Each One Should Reside In His Country Because There's No Place Like Home.**

But these themes are not the only themes derived from this great play, because there always be someone to write about its themes and missions as it is a universal play that deserves more and more study.

Concerning its structure, *Our Town* is an unusual play in structure. It intentionally contains very [little](#) action, in order to support the theme; nothing electrifying or thrilling happens in any of the three acts, just as nothing exciting happens in Grover's Corners. Moreover, the play ignores most dramatic conventions.

Talking about the time and place, the play also ignores the unity of time and place. It is clear that between the first and second acts, three years pass. Then between the second and third acts, another nine years pass. In addition, the omniscient Stage Manager has repeated flashbacks to the past and flash-forwards to the future, further opposing a unity of time. The play also has many scenes. Although the whole play takes place in or around Grover's Corners, each act has a different and distinct key setting.

In *Our Town* Act one was the beginning of a day and the childhood of George and Emily. In Act I, most of the action takes place in the homes of the Webb's and the Gibbs; often the activity in both homes is seen on stage at once, in order to give emphasis to the sameness of things in this small town. Coming to the second act, which was in the middle of the day years later where George and Emily get married. the setting is largely at the church, where Emily and George are married. The last act is the end of the day when Emily is dead and goes back for her twelfth birthday. is set in the cemetery outside of town and in the home of Emily during her revisit to her twelfth birthday.

Expectedly, these acts are entitled by the chief concern of each. Act I is called "Daily Routine," Act II is "Love and Marriage", and the final act is called "Death". In spite of the lack of unity provided by time and location in the play, The Stage Manager and Emily are seen throughout the drama to be regarded as unifiers for time and place.

Notes

1. Carolyn Riley. ed. *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 13-16, rev. Gale Group, Inc., 1976.P. 543.
2. Carolyn Riley. ed. "*Wilder, Thornton*" (Vol. 5): Wilder, Thornton 1897-." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 5. Gale Group, Inc., 1976.
3. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Ed. "Our Town, Thornton Wilder: Introduction." In *Drama Criticism*. Ed. Vol. 24. Gale Group, Inc., 2005.P.344.
4. Dedria, Bryfonski. Ed. "Wilder, Thornton (Vol. 10): Introduction." *Contemporary Literary Criticism...* Vol. 10. Gale Group, Inc., 1979.

5. W. Meitcke, *Thornton Wilder's Our Town*. New York: Barron's Educational Series, inc.1985, p. 1. See also Farah Yeganeh's *Literary Schools: A Reader*. Tehran: Rahnama Press, 2006. P. 228.
6. Ibid, p. 4.
7. C. W. E. Bigsby. *Contemporary American Playwrights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1999, P.374.
- (*) Thornton Wilder. *Our Town*. Lonon: Longmans, Green and co Ltd 48, 1964.(All the subsequent references are to this edition.
8. Kelly, Thomas (1991). *The Back Stage Guide to Stage Management*. [Back Stage Books](#). pp. 308.
9. "Our Town" from Book Rags and Gale's For Students Series. ©2005-2006 Thomson Gale, a part of the Thomson Corporation.
10. "Our Town" in [http//:Our Town - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.mht](http://Our Town - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.mht)
11. "Russians Ban Plays by Wilder", *The New York Times*, Dec.17, 1947, p. 6.
12. Lumley, Frederick (1967). *New Trends in 20th Century Drama: A Survey since Ibsen and Shaw*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 333.
13. Thornton wilder, "Preface" to Three Plays. New York: Bantam, 1957. See also W. Meitcke. Murrary Bromberg, *Thornton Wilder' our Town*.USA. : Barron's Educational Series, 1985. P. 83.
14. the definition and the role of the stage manager can be found also in <http://our town\GradeSaver Our Town - Study Guide - Character List.htm>.
See also the electronic version of Encarta Encyclopedia. 2005.

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ملخص البحث

يتناول هذا البحث واحدة من أكثر المسرحيات الأمريكية المعاصرة تداولاً على المسرح منذ أول عرض مسرحي لها ولحد يومنا هذا وهي مسرحية "مدينتنا" للكاتب المسرحي الأمريكي الكبير ثورنتون وايلدر. يهتم البحث في تحليل النص المسرحي وهو يجيب على السؤال حول الأسباب التي أدت إلى الاستمرار في عرض وقراءة هذه المسرحية بالرغم من مرور أكثر من نصف قرن على أول عرض مسرحي لها. ويخلص البحث إلى إن مجموعة المواضيع التي تناولها المسرحية والتي تعني كل الناس على اختلافاتهم الثقافية والاجتماعية ربما تكون هي السبب وراء ذلك الاستمرار حيث إن هذه المواضيع أكسبت المسرحية صفة العالمية بدلاً من المحلية.