

Discussion Questions for *Our Town*

by Thornton Wilder

THE PLAY

1. A number of us wondered as **Karen Schneiderman** does, “Why has this play been so enduring?” Or as **Sarah Barnett** says, “The play takes place during the years 1901–1913 and was first produced in 1938. Given all that has happened and changed since then, I’m wondering if, how, why, *Our Town*—its themes, characters, outlook, etc.—is still relevant today?”

THE STAGE MANAGER

2. Related to the above, **Karen Schneiderman** wonders if the play continues to be performed (a new revival opening in September) if it’s because the stage manager presents it as a slice of life with no moral judgment or sentimentality? Is this true of the stage manager? **Judy Catterton** comments, “The role of the stage manager is crucial. Would such a character work in a novel? Can you think of a novel where something similar was employed and worked?”
3. “Might the use of an omniscient narrator (such as that used in Ann Patchett’s *Bel Canto*) operate in a similar way to a stage manager?” **Maribeth Fischer** suggests. “Is it helpful to think of an omniscient narrator in this way?”

THE CHARACTERS

4. “The characters are drawn simply,” says **Judy Catterton**. “They are arguably seriously underdeveloped. And yet, they seem to evoke empathy with audiences. Why do you suppose that is? Is the secret transferable to a novel?” **Kim Burnett** wondered about this too—why we care about these characters when we don’t have access to the interiority we are used to seeing in novels.

LONG COMMENT ABOUT CHARACTERS

5. Connected to **Judy’s** “arguably seriously underdeveloped” comment, **Joanne Sinsheimer**, says: “Having read all the essays with the play and some others, I now am really mad at Thornton Wilder. I don’t see this play anymore as warm and fuzzy. I think he bamboozled us with a very cynical play. First, the women are simple-minded and basically slaves. Emily is the smartest kid in the class and her only concern as a teenager is whether she is pretty. The doctor treats his wife poorly. Note his displeasure that she is talking with the other women for too long after choir practice although he is sympathetic with the alcoholic male choir director.

And the men don't come off much better. George is too ignorant to see that studying agriculture in college might help him to modernize his uncle's farm to grow healthier crops and to increase the output.

And the apparent message of the play: *You don't appreciate what you have until it is gone*. What was there to appreciate? Small mindedness? A perfect little town with the new immigrants, Polish people, living segregated in their own area?

I think Wilder was looking down his snout when he created these small town, small-minded people. He got away with it by wrapping his play in a gauzy sweetness."

Reactions to this? Do you agree? Is this fair?

A PLAY vs. OTHER FORMS of WRITING. WHY COMPARE

6. Both **Judy Wood** and **Maribeth Fischer** wonder if it is possible (or even fair—that word again!) to compare writing techniques of novels, short stories, poems, etc. to what's needed to connect audiences to a play. Playwrights typically include minimal setting (beyond describing the basic scene, usually at the start of the scene): only the most necessary actions are included (as stage directions), and there is no internal thought or feeling.

THE THIRD ACT: WHAT WAS HE THINKING???

7. **Nort Beckerman**, who is new to book club (Welcome, Nort!) says, "In the first two acts, the author gives the reader an excellent view of a small New England town and life there" (do you agree? What are examples of this?). However, "Wilder had a wide-open space in the third act to show a completely different and real side to life in a small town, but he didn't. With the death of Emily and Ms. Gibbs, he started down that road but pulled up abruptly to be critical of living behavior. WHY?"

AUDIENCE

8. High schools may still be the entities most likely to stage *Our Town*. Maybe because the play seems safe and simple, without sex. The problem is most high school students are too young, that is, too unseasoned, to grasp the significance of the play. I wonder which audience might gain the most from this play. Who, by age group or some other configuration might be most likely to have their hearts opened by this play? (**Joanne Sinsheimer**)