

Thornton Wilder

Our Town

Summary

Our Town is introduced and narrated by the Stage Manager, who welcomes the audience to the fictional town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, early on a May morning in 1901. In the opening scene, the stage is largely empty, except for some tables and chairs that represent the homes of the Gibbs and Webb families, the setting of most of the action in Act I. The set remains sparse throughout the rest of the play.

After the Stage Manager's introduction, the activities of a typical day begin. Howie Newsome, the milkman, and Joe Crowell, Jr., the paperboy, make their delivery rounds. Dr. Gibbs returns from delivering a set of twins at one of the homes in town. Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb make breakfast, send their children off to school, and meet in their gardens to gossip. The two women also discuss their modest ambitions, and Mrs. Gibbs reveals that she longs to visit Paris.

Throughout the play, the characters pantomime their activities and chores. When Howie makes his milk deliveries, for example, no horse appears on stage despite the fact that he frequently addresses his horse as "Bessie". Howie does not actually hold anything in his hands, but he pantomimes carrying bottles of milk, and the sound of clinking milk bottles comes from offstage. This deliberate abandonment of props goes hand in hand with the minimal set.

The Stage Manager interrupts the action. He calls Professor Willard and then Mr. Webb out onto the stage to tell the audience some basic facts about Grover's Corners. Mr. Webb not only reports to the audience, but also takes questions from some "audience members" who are actually characters in the play seated in the audience.

Act II takes place three years later, on George and Emily's wedding day. George tries to visit his fiancée, but he is shooed away by Mr. and Mrs. Webb goes upstairs to make sure Emily does not come downstairs. George is left alone with Mr. Webb. The young man and his future father-in-law awkwardly discuss marriage and how to be a virtuous husband.

The Stage Manager interjects and introduces a flashback to the previous year. George and Emily are on their way home from school. George has just been elected class president and Emily has just been elected secretary and treasurer. George has also become something of a local baseball star. Emily tells George that his popularity has made him "conceited and stuck-up". George, though hurt, thanks Emily for her honesty, but Emily becomes mortified by her own words and asks George to forget them. The two stop at Mr. Morgan's drugstore for ice-cream sodas and, over the course of their drink, admit their mutual affection. George decides to scrap his plan of attending agriculture school in favor of staying in Grover's Corners with Emily.

Act III takes place nine years later, in a cemetery on a hilltop overlooking the town. Emily has died in childbirth and is about to be buried. The funeral party occupies the back of the stage. The most prominent characters in this act, the dead souls who already inhabit the cemetery, sit in chairs at the front of the stage. Among the dead are Mrs. Gibbs, Mrs. Soames, Wally Webb, and Simon Stimson. As the funeral takes place, the dead speak, serving as detached witnesses. Death has rendered them largely indifferent to earthly events. Emily joins the dead, but she misses her previous life and decides to go back and relive part of it. The other souls disapprove and advise Emily to stay in the cemetery.

With the aid of the Stage Manager, Emily steps into the past, revisiting the morning of her twelfth birthday. She watches the scene as an observer, noting her parents' youth and beauty. Emily now has a nostalgic appreciation for everyday life that her parents and the other living characters do not share. She becomes agonized by the beauty and transience of everyday life and demands to be taken back to the cemetery. As Emily settles in among the dead souls, George lays prostrate by her tomb. "They don't understand", she says of the living. The stars come out over Grover's Corners, and the play ends.¹

¹ "Our Town, Thornton Wilder: Plot Overview", **Sparknotes**, www.sparknotes.com/lit/ourtown/summary.html