

**EXPLORING THORNTON WILDER'S *OUR TOWN*
SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS****Penelope Niven**

Penelope Niven is writing a biography of Thornton Wilder. She has written books about Carl Sandburg and Edward Steichen, and is co-author, with James Earl Jones, of *Voices and Silences*, a book about his life and career, which is being published in an expanded edition in April of 2002. She has been a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, and is Writer-in-Residence at Salem College in North Carolina.

An archeologist's eyes combine the view of the telescope and the view of the microscope. He reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small. It was something of this method that I brought to a New Hampshire village.

--Thornton Wilder, "A Preface for Our Town" [1938]¹

The following ideas, addressed to students, may stimulate discussion and writing during your study of *Our Town*.

1. Be the playwright, and write a monologue for the Stage Manager to deliver at the beginning of your own play about your own town, real or fictitious. If you like, use one of Thornton Wilder's lines as a beginning:

¹ The 1938 Preface was published in the *New York Times* February 13, 1938, and in Donald Gallup, editor, *American Characteristics and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 100-103.

“Well, I’d better show you how our town lies.”

OR

“So--another day’s begun.”

2. Give an actual scientific and anthropological description of your town, following the example of Professor Willard in Act One.
3. Give a political and social description of your town, as Mr. Webb does in Act One.
4. Describe the evidence of culture or love of beauty in your town, as Mr. Webb does in Act One.
5. Using clues and evidence given in the text of the play, write character portraits of three characters in the play. Explain why you have chosen these particular characters. Compare one of these characters to an actual character in your town.
6. Several of the characters in *Our Town* confide their dreams to each other. Explore the play for evidence of these dreams--what they are, what they mean to the character, whether the dreams come true, and what difference, if any, the dreams make in the character’s life.
7. Near the end of Act One, the Stage Manager discusses the items that have been chosen to go in the cornerstone of the new bank in Grover’s Corners in 1901. Choose at least five items to put in a cornerstone or time capsule in 2002--items that will represent the present, and help people understand our time a hundred or a thousand years from now. Explain your choices, sharing your opinions about what they mean to the present, and what they might say to the future. If you like, use Thornton Wilder’s line to begin your reflection:

“So--people a thousand years from now--this is the way we were.”

8. When Thornton Wilder was in high school, he began writing what he called “Three Minute Plays for Three Persons.” Some of them are reprinted in A. Tappan Wilder, editor, *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder, Volume II* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998).

“It’s a discouraging business to be an author at sixteen years of age,” Wilder wrote in a foreword to his book, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays*, published in 1928. He remembered that when he was in high school, he imagined publishing a book of his three-minute plays. He wrote out the table of contents for the book on the inside covers of his first year algebra text. All told, he wrote more than forty three-minute plays over the years. They each last three minutes, and involve three characters, and many of them tell complete, entertaining stories in that short space.

Try your hand at writing a “Three Minute Play for Three Persons.” Then cast your play so that it can be read aloud in class. Choose your own subject matter, or, if you prefer, use some of the following prompts suggested by Act Two of *Our Town*:

- a. A mother and father are discussing their son’s or daughter’s wedding with one other character.
- b. A young groom is discussing his wedding with two other characters.
- c. To the unhappiness of one character, two other characters fall in love.
- d. One character is trying to keep a secret from two other characters.
- e. Build your play around the Stage Manager’s line in Act Two: “There are a lot of things to be said about a wedding; there are a lot of thoughts that go on during a wedding.”
- f. Build your play around the Stage Manager’s line in Act Two: “They brought up two children apiece, washed, cleaned the house,--and *never a nervous breakdown.*”
- g. Build your play around George Gibbs’s line in Act Two: “Ma, I don’t want to grow old. Why’s everybody pushing me so?”
- h. Build your play around Emily Webb’s line in Act Two:

“Well, if you love me, help me. All I want is someone to love me.”

- i. Remember that you are completely free to choose your own subject.

9. Try writing a Three-Minute Play with one or two of your classmates. Collaborate on the plot, the setting and the dialogue. Then perform the play.
10. Use the Stage Manager’s speech at the beginning of Act Three as a model for your summary of the most important changes you have seen in your own lifetime.
11. Write a description of a real or imagined cemetery, using the Stage Manager’s description at the outset of Act Three as a model.
12. In Act Three, the Stage Manager says, “Now there are some things we all know, but we don’t take ’em out and look at ’em very often.” State your own philosophy about the things we all know.
13. Near the end of Act Three, Emily says, “We don’t have time to look at one another.” Write an interpretation of what she means, giving examples from your own observation or experience.
14. At the end of the play, Emily says, “They don’t understand, do they?” In a short essay or a short story or a poem, illustrate what she means.
15. Thornton Wilder plays with time throughout *Our Town*, shifting gears from present to past to future and back again. Construct a time-line for the play, and write about whether Wilder’s manipulation of time is dramatically effective or ineffective--and, in either case, why.
16. In his Preface to *Three Plays by Thornton Wilder*, Wilder made the following statements about *Our Town*, and about drama in general. In class discussion or in writing, offer your understanding of what Wilder is saying and your opinion about whether he is right or wrong, choosing examples from the text of *Our Town* to support your views.

- a. “*Our Town* is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village;

or as a speculation about the conditions of life after death (that element I merely took from Dante's *Purgatory*). It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life."

b. "The recurrent words in this play (few have notice it) are 'hundreds,' 'thousands,' and 'millions.'" Emily's joys and griefs, her algebra lessons and her birthday presents--what are they when we consider all the billions of girls who have lived, who are living, and who will live?"

c. "Each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner."

d. "Moliere said that for the theatre all he needed was a platform and a passion or two. The climax of this play needs only five square feet of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us."

e. "When you emphasize *place* in the theatre, you drag down and limit and harness time to it. You thrust the action back into past time, whereas it is precisely the glory of the stage that it is always 'now' there."

17. Plays are written to be heard. Working in groups, prepare selected scenes from the play for reading aloud in class.

18. Near the end of Act Two, the Stage Manager compresses life into a list followed by a sentence. Use this as a model to write your own compressed description of modern life:

"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."

19. Before he was ten years old, Thornton Wilder began to keep a journal. If you already keep a journal, continue to do so, and share with your classmates your strategy--how often you write in your journal; what kind of material you put in your journal; what purposes your journal serves; etc.

If you don't keep a journal, consider starting one.

20. Do some free-writing about your town as it is, and as you wish it could be.

21. Explore the possible symbolism of light and darkness in the play, considering such lines as the following:

In Act One:

“The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go,--doesn’t it?”

“I can’t work at all. The moonlight’s so *terrible*.”

In Act Three:

“There are the stars--doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky.”

22. *Our Town* is an American play, written by an American author, set in an American town, yet it has been produced around the world--in Poland, Germany, Russia, Japan, China, Korea and elsewhere. Why and how does this play “translate” into so many other languages and cultures?

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