

A mundane story to a  
life-changing  
experience: the act-  
by-act insights of our  
town...



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Do human beings take life for granted? Pondering this question, it is fair to say that as a society, we've been steadily moving towards convenience, towards getting through everything as fast as we possibly can. With this desire for speed, we seem to be forgetting the value of life and appreciating it. We live in a world where everything is driven by efficiency, and human interaction is slowly becoming rarer. While this may seem like a very melodramatic description of our world, it's truly not that far-fetched. The idea of "taking it slow" and the idea of all aspects of life having meaning are explored in the play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. *Our Town* is a play which tells the story of a generic American town, Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, which seems mundane at first, but then starts to show that meaning can be imbued into anything in life, even the insignificant parts of it. The first act of the play focuses on business-as-usual 1901 American life, which can be extremely dull, to say the least. A romance sparks between George Gibbs and Emily Webb in this act and is further developed in Act II. This part of the play, "Love and Marriage", is all about George and Emily's wedding, arguably a very significant event in their life. Then, the play's last act deals with the inevitability of the end, death, and how humans really only realize the gift of life once it's gone, once they've rushed through it. This idea is portrayed through Emily, who dies in childbirth and realizes that humans don't ever realize life while they're living it. By intentionally offering both the microscopic and macroscopic perspectives, unorthodox theatrical elements, exploration and manipulation of time and space, investigating life after death, and challenging our notions about what is meaningful throughout the play, Wilder urges us to appreciate our lives more while

acknowledging the seemingly insignificant parts of it without losing sight of our long-term goals.

In Act I of his play, Wilder uses unorthodox theatrical elements such as a lack of a fourth wall, a stage manager who is part of the play, and the absence of props to draw us into the play and make us feel we are part of it. Right off the bat, this play starts off in a puzzlingly unusual way. “ No curtains. No scenery. The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light” (3). Much to the audience’s surprise, the Stage Manager begins speaking directly to them. Wilder does this in an effort to make the audience feel like they’re not just spectating but participating, and this goes a long way to make the play that much more relatable and impactful. This is taken even further when the Stage Manager begins describing their town, or more accurately, Our Town. The description of the town seems so vague but so specific at the same time, with striking similarities to almost every other American town, even today. For example, during his short tour of the town, he describes, “ Up here is Main Street. Way back there is the railway station [...] Public School’s over yonder. The High School is still farther over” (6). While this seems like a report of one town, including directional references and relative locations, it draws parallels to almost every small American town. This powerful technique of pulling the reader or observer into the play makes them much more susceptible to new ways of thinking. In addition to this, Wilder also chooses to forego the use of props almost entirely. While initially, this may seem like an unusual decision that would compromise the understandability of the play, it is executed in a manner which leaves just enough to convey meaning. With a majority of the set being reduced to just actors, tables, and

chairs, it rids the scene of distractions and allows the audience to fully take in the deep meaning of the events and nothing else. As a whole, these unconventional theatrical elements are put in place to draw the reader in, maximize the impact of the rest of the play.

After an unusual but effective start to the play, Wilder begins referencing space and time and rushing through time to get the reader thinking about a macroscopic view of their life and the universe as a whole. This is begun with the Stage Manager casually talking about events which take place many years in the future. The Stage Manager declares, “ Doc Gibbs died in 1930. The new hospital’s named after him”, even though the setting of the play is 1901 Grover’s Corners. He then goes on to describe other deaths, events, and ends with the statement, “ In our town we like to know the facts about everybody” (7). Wilder does this intentionally in a sort of nonchalant manner to make the Stage Manager distinct from the other characters. Wilder is establishing a means of exploring the myriad of things he will cover, a method of conveying meaning that conversation between ‘ normal’ characters could never effectively accomplish. In other words, the Stage Manager is being established as a gateway between the world of the living, and that of the dead. The Stage Manager seems all-knowing and omnipotent while also having a character’s role in the play, making his philosophical speeches all the more meaningful. The speech about the future may have ended with that specific phrase because the facts about people are “ little things”, or in other words insignificant, but the people of Grover’s Corners don’t overlook or ignore them. Moving along from the Stage Manager’s omnipotence, Wilder also makes references to space and time in this act

when Professor Willard states how Grover's Corners has "A shelf of Devonian basalt crosses it with vestiges of Mesozoic shale, and some sandstone outcroppings; but that's all more recent: two hundred, three hundred million years old" (21). At first, this may seem like an absurd thing to say, because of our naturally skewed view of time revolving around humans. However, with those rocks being on a 4 billion-year-old planet in a 13 billion-year-old universe, it doesn't seem so off. Wilder does this to give the reader some very humbling perspective on the universe. In a way, it makes us as humans feel insignificant on a universal scale. Although that may be the case, the intent of that part of the play was not to make us feel insignificant, but rather to give us a macroscopic perspective on what human existence really is.

Amid this existential crisis the reader may be experiencing, they can take comfort in Wilder's generic and relatable characters, whom he uses to further make the reader or audience feel like they are a part of the play. At the end of Act I, the Webbs and the Gibbsses are quite literally some of the most generic characters a story could have. The day begins with the children rushing to get ready for school, there is quarreling between siblings, chatter between parents, and flirting and romance budding between two friends. Closer to the end of the act, there is even a conversation between Emily and her father which goes like this, "I just can't sleep yet, Papa. The moonlight's so won-derful And the smell of Mrs. Gibbs' heliotrope. Can you smell it?" (44). This conversation seems to have absolutely nothing to contribute to the story and seems as generic as can be. Well, maybe it seems like shallow writing, but it's actually the opposite. Wilder does this deliberately so that

the characters in the play remain undeveloped, allowing us to do so, maybe even getting the reader in the mindset of imagining themselves as the character themselves. This way, further events in the story have a significantly larger impact on changing the way the reader views and appreciates life. This is the same idea as making the town relatable enough to be *Our Town*, but with characters, the technique leaves a lot of potential to become a driving force in really getting the reader thinking.

At the very beginning of Act II, Wilder uses the fast-forwarding of time and the emphasis on cycles to get us to recognize the brevity of life. The Stage Manager's opening remarks to this act state, "Three years have gone by. Yes, the sun's come up over a thousand times. Summers and winters have cracked the mountains a little bit more and the rains have brought down some of the dirt" (47). This profound opening to the act "Love and Marriage" symbolizes two distinct ideas: the brevity of life, and the idea of everything following a cyclical path, including life. Starting with the idea that life is brief, the act of fast-forwarding time itself shows how human beings try and rush through life, or at least not take the time out of their days to appreciate the gift they've been given. Three years fast-forwarded shows three years of just the same things happening over and over, people not caring at all, and the cycle just repeating. The Stage Manager talks about the number of times the sun's come up, or the cycle of the seasons, and this, again, is a macroscopic perspective of the world. As opposed to the microscopic perspective, which would be the daily lives of our characters, this planetary perspective gives us even more reason to ponder our importance, meaning, and significance in this world. Wilder mentions how mountains have been moved by the

powerful but slow force of nature, while in *Our Town*, “ millions of gallons of water went by the mill; and here and there a new home was set up under a roof” (46). The river, also a part of nature, has powered the mill with over a million gallons of water, but humans have only managed to put up a few walls. If nothing else, this perspective will certainly change how we look at life, and probably even cause us to lead an overall better, happier life, considering the microscopic details, and appreciating it.

Further along in Act II, Wilder uses examples of daily life in *Grover’s Corners* and more unusual theatrical elements to effectively further the idea that we sometimes let life become a series of cycles that fly by. The Stage Manager reports, “ Here comes Howie Newsome delivering the milk. And there’s Si Crowell delivering the papers like his brother before him” (48). First off, there is a distinct cyclical nature in the two events here, Howie Newsome’s daily milk delivery, and the larger cycle of Si Crowell taking his brother’s place as the town’s paper boy. The first example fits in with the idea of how people can, at times, be oblivious to the fact that they’re simply sitting around, waiting for something big, while life is passing them by. The way this connects to Howie Newsome’s routine is not that he is inherently living this way, but in the sense that many people can make their whole lives a routine, almost like a job. Wilder is trying to show us that that is not the way to live and that we need to make the most of every day. The second example is a wider view of the way we lead our lives, and, in a more positive light, shows how things change, while really staying the same. How things may seem to evolve but really haven’t changed at all. In addition to the allusion to cycles, Wilder uses the technique of not using props to focus on what is important.

In this scene, and most others, Wilder forgoes the uses of props and set pieces to bring the viewer's attention to the important events going on, and the commentary about our lives.

Finally, it is time for George and Emily's wedding, the perfect example of the microscopic and microscopic lenses, the big things and the little things. Of course, to George and Emily, this event is one of the most important days in their lives. However, for Mrs. Soames, it is (or should be) just another wedding ceremony. However, to Mrs. Soames, it is the greatest day ever, "Don't know when I've seen such a lovely wedding. But I always cry. Don't know why it is, but I always cry. I just like to see young people happy, don't you? Oh, I think it's lovely" (77). Mrs. Soames taking this wedding so seriously is another paramount example of a micro vs macro perspective. On the macro perspective, the event is not all too important to most of the guests there. However, with a microscopic perspective, everyone sees everything differently, so it is entirely possible for one thing to be boring to one and exciting to another.

Continuing on to Act III, undoubtedly the most important and the most meaning-filled act, in which Wilder uses many techniques to wrap up the conveying of his message about the way we must live our lives. Time has been moved forward 9 years suddenly. The use of unorthodox theatrical elements is especially important here as not only can the dead people talk, but they sit emotionless in rows of chairs. Wilder may have meant for the 'dead people' to eerily be a reflection of us watching or reading the play.

Wilder probably drew this connection between the dead characters and the reader to really make his point about "not knowing what you've got until it's  
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gone”. The perspective shift also comes into play here. Another facet of the thesis further strengthened in Act III is the two perspectives. All along, we’ve been in the perspective of the living, interacting with and thinking about other living people. However, now that Emily has passed away, a brand new, invaluable new perspective has become available. Emily now sees people for what they are, and sees through the metaphorical masks. She describes living people as “ sort of shut up in little boxes” (96). With all that has taken place over the course of the story, she is absolutely right, and Wilder puts this at the end of the play for a specific reason. Wilder ensured a sad irony in that Emily only discovers the truth about life after it’s far too late to change anything. This serves as a warning to us to make the most of what we have, and not take life for granted, because you never know when it’s all going to be over, and you don’t want to have any regrets. The rushing of time heavily mentioned in this monologue further the idea that people rush through their lives, having fallen into the same old dull routine. The monologue solidifies this idea by confirming, “ You’d be surprised though — on the whole, things don’t change much around here” (86). Along with the statement, the Stage Manager also talks specifically about how events around town have only been more farmers moving to the town and as always, more people dying. All of this is done by Wilder in an effort to show us how, unless we do something, our lives will not be much different.

Following this monologue, Wilder uses a conversation between Sam Craig and Joe Stoddard to highlight the difference between the living and the dead, and show how the living only truly miss and long for the dead once they are gone. Over the course of this conversation, the two speak very formally with

each other, and share almost no real emotion. For example, when Joe states, “ Very sad, our journey today, Samuel”, Sam simply replies “ Yes” (89). The lack of genuineness and emotion is abundantly clear in this scene. Wilder is showing us how ‘ the living’ do not share their feelings with one another, and always seem to be in a hurry to get things over with, like this situation here. Not only does this conversation show the previous ideas, it also depicts how people face sorrow due to attachment only after the dead have left them, and inevitably forget them as life goes on. When Sam comes to Mrs. Gibbs’ grave, he confesses, “ Why, this is my Aunt Julia... I’d forgotten that she’d... of course, of course” (90). This realization shows that the cycle of Sam’s life has moved on, but his attachment to his Aunt Julia remains. A sad warning to us readers that people must pay attention to and love each other while we are still together, not suffer afterward.

While the two are finishing up their conversation, Emily is brought into the world of the dead, and Wilder uses this significant event to introduce the deceased characters, and make their differences and wisdom clear. Even prior to Emily’s arrival, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Soames are speaking about how Emily died. When Mrs. Gibbs mentions the cause of death to be childbirth, Mrs. Soames replies, “ Childbirth – Almost with a laugh” (93). Here, the irony of Emily’s death while giving life is explored. Wilder intentionally puts this into the story to be a sad reminder that life can be out of our control sometimes, and things can happen that are impossible to predict or prepare for. Especially in Emily’s case, when one life was given, another was taken. This is yet another reminder we get from Wilder that we need to make the most of the time we have. Then, when Emily is initially brought into the

alternate reality of the dead, she immediately feels out of place among them. Her attitude in no way matches the rest of the people present there, and her enthusiasm is met with just the opposite, dull answers. Her enthusiasm to go back to the world of the living. At first, Emily does not understand why everyone is advising against the journey back. Then, the Stage Manager, in his wisdom, tells Emily, “ You not only live it; but watch yourself living it. [...] And as you watch it, you see the thing that they — down there — never know. You see the future. You see what’s going to happen” (99). The reason, the Stage Manager explains, why this is always so painful, is because Emily will be overflowing with regret when she sees how her past self is ignoring all the important little moments in life. Knowing the end makes seeing ‘ the good ‘ ol days’ wasted all the more painful.

Further into Act III, Wilder uses a “ revisiting”, or return to the world of the living to show us that we need to be more critical of the quality of our lives, or else we might look back on it and regret decisions. Emily, in her naive desire to revisit the world of the living, unaware of the pain it will cause, refuses to listen to anybody’s advice. She doesn’t know that knowing the future, knowing what’s going to happen afterward, and seeing how impersonal people are with each other, she doesn’t know how much that’s going to hurt. As readers, this sad truth is long before she jumps back into the world of the living. An important detail here is that all of the others urge Emily to pick the most unimportant day, telling her that it will be “ important enough” (100). Emily still does not fully grasp the idea that all things have value, but does recognize the way people lead their lives – in boxes. Wilder incorporated this small detail to remind readers that little things, seemingly

insignificant, can mean everything once they're gone, so cherish them while they're still here. After she "goes in", she is overcome with wonder and excitement. Sadly, that doesn't last long before the grief takes over... Emily realizes how people never even so much as looked at each other back then. She remembered an illusion, not the reality. The way she remembered it was the best way possible, and going back and seeing it again shattered that into a million pieces. She ignored all the warnings and found out the painful way why it's best not to return to the world of the living. The most powerful message of the play is delivered to the reader here in this scene, when Emily comes to her big realization. We must appreciate life, every minute of it.

After the revisiting and through her tears, Emily exits, and asks the stage manager to take her back; Wilder uses this event to highlight the little things in life specifically. Before exiting, Emily says she would like to say goodbye to all of the things she will miss in the afterlife. She goes back one last time and says, "Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners . . . Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you" (108). This is the moment during which Emily realizes the importance of the 'little things', as shown by the fact that she lists things with increasing specificity. She starts with the big picture, saying farewell to the world, and ending on a very personal note, coffee, hot baths, and waking up.

At the end of Act III and the end of the revisiting, Wilder uses explicit evidence to give us more warning to learn from Emily's mistakes.

Immediately after Emily returns from her journey back to the world of the  
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dead, she is absolutely distraught at how it went. When asked whether or not she was happy, Emily responded, “ No I should have listened to you. That’s all human beings are! Just blind people” (109). Emily coming to this realization that humans act almost like blind people when they’re in the real world goes to warn and teach the reader to be critical of the times in their own lives when that might have been accurate. At some point in the reader’s life, they might be guilty of having “[moved] about in a cloud of ignorance; to [have gone] up and down trampling on the feelings of those ... of those about [them]” (109). So, in the end, Wilder uses this regret on Emily’s part to reach out to the reader and form a connection to a point where they were guilty of being cold or impersonal to someone who cared about them, and in turn, help them improve the quality of their life overall.

Finally, at the end of Act III, Wilder uses a closing reference to space and time, and hinting at the cyclical nature that life tends to follow to give us perspective on our own existence. The Stage Manager begins describing the scene one last time, “ Most everybody’s asleep in Grover’s Corners. [...] Yes, it’s clearing up. There are the stars doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky” (103). With this final reference to the stars, Wilder tries to get the reader thinking with a wider view of their life, as the universal view on things certainly does open up a person’s field of view. The stars have also been mentioned previously in the play as symbols of enlightenment which always seem to “ glow the brightest right before they go”. The reference to the star by Mrs. Gibbs could also hold significance in the way of giving us some perspective on where we stand on a universal scale. While stars may be just a dot in the night sky for us, they are actually millions of times more massive

than our own planet. This shows how reality is truly in only in the eyes of the observer, and little, insignificant things can actually be massive and important... as long as they are looked at with the right mindset. Then, Wilder wraps up the entire play with the phrase, “ Hm. . . . Eleven o’clock in Grover’s Corners. You get a good rest, too. Good night” (112). This phrase holds an immense amount of importance, as it conveys the message that this whole book has followed a cycle, and in turn, so does our life. But in this cycle, we must constantly be grateful for the “ little things”, and not forget to appreciate things once in a while.

After turning our view of our lives and the world completely upside-down, Wilder ends the play in the most fitting way, by bringing it back full circle. This play started early in the morning, with the Stage Manager’s monologue beginning with a ‘ good morning’. Now, after three acts have passed, it is time to wrap up, say “ good night”, and leave the reader pondering their views on life. Throughout the play, and especially in Act III, Wilder does an exceptional job and changing people’s views and takes on life. Through unusual theatrical elements, multiple perspectives, relatable setting and characters, exploration and manipulation of time, and a final revisiting, Wilder challenges our ideas on what is important and urges us to appreciate our lives more and acknowledge the seemingly insignificant things without losing sight of our long-term goals.