



**The Value of Life in Thornton Wilder's Play Our  
Town**

**Instructor Suaad Hussien Ali  
Al-Iraqia University College of Arts**



**قيمة الحياة في مسرحية ثورنتن وايلدر مدينتنا**

**المدرس سعاد حسين علي**

**الجامعة العراقية/ كلية الاداب**



## المخلص:

### قيمة الحياة في مسرحية ثورنتن وايلدير مدينتنا

مسرحية مدينتنا هي من اكثر مسرحيات ثورنتن وايلدر شهرة واكثرها عرضا في ذلك الوقت حيث حصلت هذه المسرحية على جائزة بلتزار عام 1938 كمسرحية امريكية من الطراز الاول.

تدور احداث هذه المسرحية حول الحياة في مدينة امريكية صغيرة . اعترزم الكاتب ان يصور هذه المدينة عالميا بان يجعلها تمثل كل المدن في العالم. تبدء المسرحية بالولادة وتنتهي بالموت. لقد سمح الكاتب لأحدى الشخصيات في المسرحية في العودة للحياة بعد الموت لتخبر المشاهدين عن تجربتها.

لقد اختار الكاتب ان يقدم قصة عادية لأناس عاديين يعيشون حياة اعتيادية في مكان عادي حيث لا شيء استثنائي يحدث في حياتهم خلال هذه المسرحية , وفي ذلك اراد الكاتب ان يشرح ويبين قيمة الحياة من خلال احداث الحياة اليومية للإنسان.

اختار الكاتب ثلاث فترات زمنية في حياة الانسان ليتم تصويرها خلال ثلاثة فصول في المسرحية وقد اعطى الكاتب عنوانا مختلفا لكل فصل من هذه الفصول الثلاثة, فالفصل الاول كان بعنوان (الحياة اليومية) اما الفصل الثاني كان تحت عنوان (الزواج والحب) بينما اطلق الكاتب على الفصل الاخير (الموت).

يهدف البحث عرض وجهة نظر الكاتب عن قيمة الحياة من خلال هذه الفترات الثلاثة في حياة الانسان, وكيف استطاع الكاتب ان يوضح فكرته عن قيمة الحياة في كل فصل من فصول المسرحية الثلاثة, وكذلك يسلط البحث الضوء على كل الاهداف والرسائل التي يريد الكاتب ايصالها للجماهير.

تؤطر خاتمة البحث بخلاصة لأهم النتائج التي اظهرتها هذه الدراسة.

## Abstract

Our Town is Thornton Wilder's most renowned and most frequently performed play. The play won the Pulitzer Prize in 1938 and became an American classic. It is a drama about life in a small town in America, that Wilder intends to make it represent all towns in the world. The play begins with human birth and ends with death. Wilder allows one of the dead characters to return from death to tell the audience about her experience. Wilder chooses to tell the story of ordinary people, living in an ordinary place, when nothing extraordinary happens. He wants to demonstrate the idea of the value of life through ordinary events in human life, and show these daily activities as universal ones duo to their constant renewal. Wilder selects three periods of human life to present in three Acts; "Daily Life", "Love and Marriage" and "Death". This paper presents Wilder's point of view concerning the theme of the value of life through these three periods of human life. The paper also shows where, and to what degree, the theme of the value of life appears in each Act. The paper also explores the author's aims and messages.

**Keywords:** Our Town, the value of life, Thornton Wilder, American drama, Realism, Modern Theater

## 1. Introduction

Thornton Wilder is one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, his productive life as a novelist and a playwright was spanning more than fifty years. His works represent different aspects of the intellectual and artistic life. Wilder was associated with such American playwrights as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, as one of the "Big Four".<sup>1</sup>

Wilder's greatest and best-known work as a playwright is *Our Town*, that in which he gets his international reputation as one of America's major dramatists since it is his first play to win Pulitzer Prize. Wilder is a keen observer of life and innovator who uses various staging techniques to display universal themes and values linked with life, family and love.<sup>2</sup> *Our Town* uses life as a theme and setting, it makes use of life as a complete world. Life is a total entity as important as the characters themselves. In this play, Wilder aims to emphasize the true value of life.

The plot of the play deals with the story of common people who live in a common town, Wilder focuses on two families, those of Gibbs and Webb who represent "ordinary people who make the human race seem worth preserving and represent the universality of human existence."<sup>3</sup>

Act One which has been given a title of "Daily life", deals with the simple life of the families, their daily routine from the morning till the evening, in their fictional town Grover's Corner.

Act Two has been given a title of "Love and Marriage", deals with love and marriage between the children of the two families, George Gibbs and Emily Webb.

Act Three focuses on "Death", the death of Emily Webb who dies in childbirth after nine years of her marriage.

Wilder chooses these three periods of human life to present the play's three acts; "Daily life", "Love and Marriage" and "Death". Francis Fergusson states that: "It is primarily the narrative sequence from morning to night, from the cradle to the grave, through the marriage to the funeral which carries the play; and it is this sequence also which continually leads to the idea."<sup>4</sup> *Our Town* begins with human birth and ends with death and eternity.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Value of Life in *Our Town*

### 2.1. A. The Realization of the Value of Life through Ordinary Daily Events

Wilder brilliantly presents *Our Town* as a universal, realistic fact, that human life is very short, and his time on this planet leaves quickly, as Malcolm Cowley explains that "Falling in love, getting married, and dying; are not truly events, but rather examples of a universal pattern in human lives."<sup>6</sup> The play starts without a curtain or scenery. The audience sits in front of a bare stage, there is nothing on the stage except some chairs and tables. In his preface to his play *Our Town*, Wilder states that:

Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind-not in things, not in 'scenery'. 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.<sup>7</sup>

The Stage Manager tells the audience about the setting of the play which is a fictional town called Grover's Corner in New Hampshire. He gives all the coordinates of the town, he says:

The name of the town is Grover's Corners, New Hampshire-just across the Massachusetts line: Latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes. The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is 7 May 1901. The time is just before dawn. (Act.1,p.21)

The stage manager's speech underlines the fact that the town of Gibbs and Webb is just another spot in our universe, it does not have a particular importance, on the contrary, the writer wants to say that this town represents the whole universe with its all events that happen in the lives of all people.

Wilder wants to create an atmosphere of connection and equality among all mankind by giving general and similar pictures about the earthly world. He emphasizes the idea of the relationship between humans and the universe, the idea of universality appears in an address written on the envelope of Jane Crofut's letter; " Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corner; Sutton Country; New Hampshire; United States of America...Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere, the earth;

the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God." (Act.1,pp.48-49) The address shows the location of Grover's Corners in the universe, the town is shown as a microcosm of the broader human community and common human experience.

Wilder always builds his works on moral and religious ideas rather than interesting in psychological and social complexities, he makes his characters behave in a certain way that suggests the universality of all times and places.<sup>8</sup> The most important point that universalizes people's life is their connection with 'the Mind of God', the connection that encourages the individual to live his life by embracing love for all fellow beings because they are all similar as humans.

Wilder's ability to show the importance of ordinary events in people's life appears in Act One when he succeeds to display the warmth and value of life through small events of everyday ordinary routine like eating, drinking, sleeping, waking up and so on. Wilder states that his play is "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life."<sup>9</sup>

The stage manager begins to describe the town and its simple and virtuous people who live happily there, he talks about the activities of everyday life in Grover's Corner, he says that people wake up early in the morning with the first streak of light to enjoy the brightness of the day, prepare themselves actively to receive their new day. The housewives of the two families start to light the fireplace and make the breakfast. The children go to their school. The newspaper boy and the local milkman come to deliver the newspaper and milk to the families.

The audience pleasantly imagines the scene and live in a sense of nostalgia. Stephens describes *Our Town* as "gentle nostalgia or, to put it another way, sentimental romanticism".<sup>10</sup> The stage manager tells the audience that Mr Gibbs has just come from a case of birth, he says: "So-another day's begun. There's Doc Gibbs comin' down main street now, comin' back from that baby case....because a polish mother's just had twins". (Act.1,pp.23-24) Dr Gibbs is a well-known doctor devotes himself to help people in his town, while his neighbor Mr. Webb is an editor of the newspaper as "in those days our newspaper comes out twice a week- the Grover's Corners Sentinel". (Act.1,p.23)

Goldstein states that: " Their lives are in no way sensational or special; nothing has happened to them that might set them off either as heroes or as victims" .<sup>11</sup> But their jobs allow them to connect with people's lives and problems. The play goes on displaying the ordinary information and activities of their lives as their homes are full of love and respect. There is parental care, and harmonic husband-wife relationship, besides the sweet relationship among the siblings. The two families devote themselves to bring up their children in a good manner, planting in them the principles of morality. Mr Gibbs and Mrs Webb are kind and good mothers who represent all mothers, they keep working hard to help their families and make them happy. They talk to each other while doing their house chores. Mrs Gibbs tells her neighbour about her dreams that to have a travel along with her family to see Paris. She says: "Once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don't talk in English." (Act.1,p.32)

Whatever happens to people in Grover's Corners town is not special since it has happened from the beginning of life and will continue to happen in the future till the end of the world. The ordinary information about life represents a beautiful message for all people to cherish and appreciate their lives, pursue happiness through their dreams and their little and small events that give the sweet warmth to their lives. Wilder comments on his play he says: "*Our Town* is a little play with all the big subjects in it; and it's a big play with all the little things of life lovingly impressed into it" .<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2. The Realization of the Value of life through Love and Marriage

The stage manager tells the audience that three years have gone by. The events of the play has started in 1901, and now it is 1904. This is the time of marriage as the stage manager informs us that the title of the second act is "Love and Marriage".

Emily Webb falls in love with George Gibbs, Gorge finds the value of life through love, his understanding of love is very simple and clear, George expresses his love to Emily saying:

Listen, Emily, I 'm going to tell you why I'm not going to Agriculture school. I think that once you've found a person that you're very fond of...I mean a person who's fond of you, too, and likes you enough to be interested in your character....well, I

think that's just as important as college is, and even more so.  
That's what I think. (Act.2,p.66)

The beauty and happiness of life never depends on the successful accomplishments that one can achieve in his life, yet they lie in the simple pleasures of life. Wilder shows the value of life through the sweetness of love when George offers to leave his golden watch for the payment of ice-cream. George realizes the value of life through love, therefore, he highly appreciates these precious moments of love that give warmth to his life. The playwright explains love as a simple and pure emotion, he never portrays it to have the heat of lust, but the warmth of affection. The characters of George and Emily symbolize the fresh innocence of youth, they also symbolize the life of the town rather than individuals.<sup>13</sup>

The stage manager announces George and Emily as a husband and wife, as he plays the role of the minister, he says: " Y'see, some churches say that marriage is a sacrament. I don't quite know what that means, but I can guess. Like Mrs. Gibbs said a few minutes ago: people were made to live two-by-two".(Act.2,p.68) The people of Grover's Corners regard marriage as an institution that offers love, warmth and affection, as they still have the natural common sense and innate integrity. The people who attend the wedding are so happy and excited when they hear the song "Blessed Be The Tie That Binds".(2,p.71). Mrs. Soames expresses her feelings towards these newly wedding couples, she says: "Aren't they a lovely couple? Oh, I've never been to such a nice wedding. I'm sure they'll be happy, I always say: happiness, that's the great thing! The important thing is to be happy".(Act,2,p.73)

Wilder expresses his traditional philosophy on love and marriage. He shows the feeling of all people who never want to live the single life. Wilder's philosophy is traditional and universal. The stage manager says: " Almost everybody in the world gets married-you know what I mean? In our town there aren't hardly any exceptions. Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married". (Act.2,p.50)

Wilder believes in marriage as the cornerstone of any society that gives happiness, tranquillity and warmth which are all from the highest values of life. He recognizes that " a home is based not on physical location but on human relationship...everything he writes is permeated by a vivid feeling for family ties."<sup>14</sup>

### 2.3. The Realization of the Value of Life through Death

Act Three takes place in a cemetery, the stage manager tells the audience that nine years have passed in Grover's Corners. It is now the summer of 1913. The stage manager delivers a long speech about death and eternity, he also tells the audience about the characters who have passed away since the wedding. Some people on the stage who are attending Emily's funeral at the moment. Emily dies in childbirth after nine years of her marriage. Soon after the funeral ends, Emily emerges to join the dead, who is sitting on their chairs on the stage, she sits in an empty chair beside her mother-in law Mrs. Gibbs and many other dead. Emily tells her mother-in-law about her life with George and their farm. She also tells her about her feeling now and that she still feels like one of the living.

Emily misses her life so much, she yearns to live every moment of her daily life, she feels sorry for wasting her precious days of life. Emily asks whether if she can go back to life, she says: " But, mother Gibbs, one can go back; one can go back there again....into living. I feel it. I know it. Why just then for a moment I was thinking about....about the farm....and for a minute I was there, and my baby was on my lap as plain as day". (Act.3,p.82) Emily wants to return to life to see her family, she wants to live only one day of her life. Mrs. Gibbs and the other dead advise her to forget about her life and never interact with her family because that will bring her too much pain. Emily refuses to listen;

Emily (softly): But, mother Gibbs, how can I ever forget that life? It's all I know. It's all I had.

Mrs. Soames: Oh, Emily. It isn't wise. Really, it isn't.  
(Act.3,p.83)

Emily's death makes her realize the true significance, and great value of life, that almost all people never know or appreciate it. The idea of cherishing life emerges strongly when the passionate life is contrasted with a passionless, chill of death. The stage manager helps Emily to go back to her life, to live only one day of her past life, the stage manager tells her that she will not only live it, but she will watch herself living it. Emily chooses her twelfth birthday to relive again. She watches with joy as she can see her parents, she sees her mother who was so young and beautiful making breakfast in the kitchen, she is even being able to hear the voice of the



milkman speaking with neighbors. However, her joy rapidly changes to be an anguish, she realizes people's ignorance as they are unable to cherish the simple joys of life. Emily is deeply grieved by everything she failed to notice when she was alive. She expressed her feelings saying:

Emily (softly, more in wonder than in grief): I can't bear it. They're so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have

To get old? Mama, I'm here. I'm growing up. I love you all,

Everything-I can't look at everything hard enough.(Act.3,p.87)

John Brown affirms that;

The play is about that particular area of struggle which is our day-to-day existence.....anyone who hears only the milk bottles clink when morning has come has not heard what Wilder wants them to hear. These milk bottles are the spokesmen of the time, they are the symbols of bigness of little things .<sup>15</sup>

Emily realizes that the living people never have enough time to tell their beloved ones about their feelings while their life passes by swiftly and silently, she cannot stand to see the beauty of life she breaks down crying, and asks the stage manager to take her back to her grave;

Emily (in loud voice to the stage manager): I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.(Act.3,p.88)

The sadness and pain of this scene emerges not only from Emily's early death, but rather from the fact that most people are never able to appreciate their lives appropriately.

Emily "looks towards the stage manager and asks abruptly, through her tears) "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?

-every, every minute?" (Act.3,p.89)

The ignorance and blindness of people prevent them from understanding and appreciating life. Emily now understands because she is not alive anymore, she regrets her visiting to earth, and that she doesn't listen to the dead's advice, Simon Stimson, one of the dead comments on her behavior saying:

Simon Stimson(with mounting violence; bitinglly):Yes, now you know. Now you know! That's what it was to be alive.

To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those...of those about you.

To spend and waste time as though you had a million years.

To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another.

Now you know-that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness.(Act.3.p.89)

George appears, he breaks down crying, throwing himself on Emily's grave, the dead are annoyed by his crying. As Emily watches him, she asks Mrs. Gibbs,

Emily: They don't understand, do they?

Mrs. Gibbs: No, dear. They don't understand.(3,p.90)

The dead souls emphasize the idea of the transience of human life, disapproving the living for their ignorance and blindness. They even see George's crying upon Emily's grave a waste of human time. They believe that the living should enjoy the time they still have on earth. Wilder contemplates, whether human beings truly cherish the precious nature of a transient life, since human life flees swiftly, and that humans are powerless to defeat the advance of time.<sup>16</sup>

Wilder considers the theater as an accommodative medium which can perfectly serve his purpose to make ordinary life and actions seem extraordinary, such as the perspective of the dead corresponds with the audience's perspective. The remoteness of the dead souls finally makes them able to cherish the daily events in Grover's Corners, similarly, the audience's outsider perspective turns the daily events valuable. For instance; the family breakfast which seems without any value, but when the scene is dramatized on the stage ,it seems significant one.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Discussion

The play begins with human birth and ends with death, since Wilder uses life as a theme in this play, Wilder shows the beauty and the true value of life through everyday domestic life.

The Writer chooses three periods of human life to present in three acts "Daily Life", "Love and Marriage" and "Death". In each act, Wilder emphasizes the theme of the realization of the value of life.

In Act One, Wilder stresses the beauty and importance of daily life events and activities that seem insignificant details, because he wants to change the usual notion of what is important and what is not important. Thus, act one leads to a conclusion that one can find the true value of life through trivial pleasures of everyday life.

Wilder suggests the universality of human life through three aspects in act one, first one, is through the daily activities and events of human life, as human life has the same daily routine all over the universe. Secondly, he shows this universality of human life through human place in the universe, as he intends to make the town of Grover's Corners present all towns in the universe, when he points to this idea by an address on an envelope in act one to suggest the idea of universality. Therefore, *Our Town* could be anyone's hometown. Finally, this universality could be seen through human's connection with God that as we all exist in the 'Mind of God'. In this way, Wilder makes the theme of the value of life more general and connect with all mankind's lives.

In Act Two, Wilder shows the true value of life through love and marriage. He expresses love as a simple emotion and sweet affection that brings warmth to all human relations. In *Our Town*, love is an essential part of the characters' lives, as it represents the central pivot point in the family's relationships such as marital love, parental love, etc. George's love for Emily makes him satisfy by his high school certificate because he finds a person that he is 'very fond of'. So he decides to stay with his beloved since he sees the value of life through love.

Marriage in our town is shown as a big step, and a crucial second-last moment of a young people's life. Love and companionship are prized as giving meaning, and value to human life. The characters in the play

appreciate marriage as a part of human life that sets tranquility and reduces loneliness.

The theme of the realization of the value of life is powerfully portrayed through death, in act three, as life is viewed against death. Wilder demonstrates that people live their whole lives without cherishing and appreciating the small, insignificant events and moments of their lives. Emily grieves the fact that living people are unable to notice the value of each moment in their passing time. The play moves quickly from Emily's wedding to her death to show the fact of human life which is passing swiftly.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Our Town* is a three-act play written by American playwright Thornton Wilder. The play is first staged in 1938 and tells the story of the fictional American small town of Grover's Corners between 1901 and 1913. Although *Our Town* deals with a common subject matter, it has fantastic depth that makes the audience think deeply of the value of life. The play does not only portray regular life in a simple town, but also shows the significance of the time of human life. Wilder wants to show the idealization of the time and place when he focuses on the American small town in 1901 which was viewed as a rustic paradise filled with moral values and happiness that spring from the common sense and pure nature of its people. By creating such a setting, Wilder aims to produce a splendid world which is different from the world of the audience who live in 1938, away from the political and economic problems, also he could make their souls recognize the delightful aspects of life.

Wilder wants to convey a message to all human beings that to live their lives to the fullest and appreciate every moment since they never have another opportunity.

**End Note**

1 Robert W. Corrigan, " *Thornton Wilder and the Tragic Sense of Life*", Critical Essays on Thornton Wilder, ed., Martin Blank (New York: G.K. Hall& Co., 1996),p.77.

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3 " *Our Town, Thornton Wilder Society*", [Database on-line]; accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2019; available at: [www.twildersociety.org](http://www.twildersociety.org).

4 Francis Fergusson, " *Three Allegorists: Brecht, Wilder, and Eliot*", critical Essays on Thornton Wilder, ed., Martin Blank (New York: G.K. Hall& Co.,1996),p.65.

5 Bernard F. Dudore, *Thornton Wilder: American Dramatists 1918-1945* (London: Macmillian, 1984), p.134.

6 Malcolm Cowley, " *The Man who Abolished Time*". critical Essays on Thornton Wilder, ed., Martin Blank (New York: G.K. Hall& Co.,1996),p.35

7 Thornton Wilder, *Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker* (London: penguin books, 1966), p.12.

8 Martin Blank, *Critical Essays on Thornton Wilder* (New York: G.K.Hall &Co., 1996),p.2.

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16 "Spark Notes on Our Town", Spark Notes Editors. [Database on-line]; accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2019; available at:

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17 Ibid.

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