Is *Our Town* everybody's town?

The play's universal themes rest on a Christian eschatological vision.

by Thomas G. Long in the May 19, 2021 issue

Frank Craven, Martha Scott, and John Craven (from left) in the 1938 Broadway production of Our Town. (Photo by Vandamm Studio / World Wide Photo via Creative Commons license)

In February 1938, two new plays opened on Broadway just a day apart. Both were about human mortality, both were set in small-town America, and both involved main characters who died and spoke truth from beyond the grave. Both plays had long Broadway runs, by 1930s standards, and were quickly turned into popular Hollywood movies with star-studded casts.

The first, Paul Osborn's *On Borrowed Time*, is today largely forgotten, mostly vanished from the dramatic repertoire, the film version merely one of thousands of titles on Turner Classic Movies. The second, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, stands as one of the most cherished of all modern plays. It has been revived numerous times on and off Broadway and is frequently performed by community and school theaters

around the world. Thirty years after its Broadway debut, *Our Town* was the highest-grossing play for the leading licensing house for scripts. Edward Albee called it “a masterpiece . . . probably the finest American play written so far.”

In *Another Day’s Begun*, Howard Sherman seeks to discover the secret of *Our Town* ’s enduring impact. How did a play with such a provincial setting (an apparently all-White Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, population 2,642), the sparest possible staging (Wilder’s opening stage direction states: “No curtain. No scenery. The audience arriving, sees an empty stage in half light”), and only the barest of plots become a theatrical icon worldwide?

Sherman points to the play’s capacity to transcend the parochial and embrace universal human experience. Like Jesus’ parabolic mustard bush, *Our Town* affords many sheltering branches to an impressive diversity of audiences. It was performed in Japanese internment camps during World War II and was the first American play produced in Berlin after the war. In 1968, a Los Angeles production populated Grover’s Corners with cast members who were African American, Apache, Russian, Mexican, and Chinese.

This trend continues into the 21st century. After three short chapters on the origins and early reception of *Our Town*, Sherman’s book consists of a series of oral histories based on interviews with more than a dozen casts of recent revivals of the play.

When Miami New Drama performed *Our Town* in 2017, the company alternated languages from scene to scene—English, Spanish, and Creole, the city’s three major languages. The multicultural audiences all found themselves reflected in the action, Sherman reports. Creole families responded, “You got exactly how a Creole family is. You nailed it,” and Hispanic families would say, “Oh, that’s exactly a Latin family. They’re all talking on top of one another!”

As part of the 2019 Pride Plays festival in New York, which marked the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, a Greenwich Village theater group presented *Our Town* with a cast of transgender, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and gender-fluid actors. Although it’s set in the confinements of a tiny New England town, Wilder’s play, noted one director Sherman interviewed, has “a universal scope which knows no boundaries; it transcends time and space and place.”

Sherman is less sure-footed, though, in recognizing that the power of *Our Town* lies not only in its cultural porosity and adaptability but also in its theological vision. The play, says playwright John Guare, involves the sweeping "of the commonplace into the realm of the eternal." Sherman knows something is at work under the surface of the play, but he cannot quite name it. Because he expects religious plays to be overtly creedal, and *Our Town* is not, the most he can say is that it is "secular theology . . . devoid of religious precepts."

Our Town is in fact a deeply moving meditation on Christian eschatology. The play's first two acts involve mundane, perhaps even tedious glimpses into quotidian life in Grover's Corners. The milkman and the paperboy tend to their usual deliveries. Next-door neighbors the Gibbses and the Webbs begin an ordinary day, eating breakfast and dispatching the children to school. That evening, the choir at the Congregational church rehearses "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." Gradually, we observe the conventional and somewhat predictable courtship and eventual marriage of George Gibbs and Emily Webb, literally the boy and girl next door. The hum, even the humdrum, of everyday life.

Norah Lopez Holden played the part of Emily Webb in a 2017 revival of the play in Manchester, England. She told Sherman that when she read the first two acts for the first time, she was puzzled by their drabness. They seemed, she said, "a little bit twee. . . . Just kind of cheesy, I guess."

The universal themes of the play rest on a Christian eschatological vision.

Even as the first two acts threaten to dull by their ordinariness, there are hints of unseen realities, intimations that something else is operating in the latticework of everyday life. Almost all of the props are imaginary, requiring the audience to fill in the details, to see the unseen. And there is the stage manager, who serves as a dramatic character not only in the play but between the play and the audience. He speaks directly to the audience, providing commentary on the town and the action in the scenes. In *Our Town*, Wilder fractured the theater's fourth wall—between the actors and the playgoers—drawing the audience into the action on stage.

The third and final act, though, overwhelms audiences, sweeping over them with sudden insight and often reducing them to tears. The act begins with the funeral of Emily, who we learn has died in childbirth. It involves not only a change of setting, to the hilltop cemetery overlooking the town, but also a change of temporal and

metaphysical planes as we enter the realm of the town's dead. As her funeral procession arrives, the now dead Emily steps out from among the mourners and is greeted by the other dead in the cemetery.

Dramatically, act 3 is inspired by canto 8 of Dante's *Purgatorio*, in which the newly deceased, about to be weaned from their earthly existence as they travel toward Paradise, still perceive that "the veil between heaven and earth is . . . so thin that it is surely easy to see through it." Sure enough, Emily—her memories of life and family still fresh—senses that she can cross back into the world of the living and be a part of her life once more. Despite the warnings of the other dead in the cemetery not to return, Emily chooses to relive the day of her 12th birthday.

She soon learns the heartbreaking truth about why the other dead in the cemetery tried to dissuade her from returning. With the eyes of one who has passed through the waters of death, she now sees everything about her life and family, once so ordinary, as luminescent and fleeting treasures. "Mama, I'm here. I'm grown up. I love you all, everything. I can't look at everything hard enough," she exclaims in wonder. But she realizes that she is the only one who perceives the preciousness woven into everyday life. She sees that people are blind to the miracles taking place right before them, a blindness she once shared.

"Oh, Mama," Emily pleads, "just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. . . . Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another."

"Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you," Emily cries as she leaves to return to her grave. She then looks at the stage manager and tearfully asks, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? every, every minute?"

"No," he answers. "The saints and poets, maybe they do some."

Sherman tells the story of a Chicago theater troupe, The Hypocrites, which revived *Our Town* in 2008. On the final night of previews, just as Emily's farewell speech had been spoken, director David Cromer was unsettled to hear the small audience laughing loudly in the darkness of the auditorium. A disaster, Cromer thought. He wondered what had gone wrong to provoke laughter in the play's most solemn moment. When the house lights came up for the curtain call, though, Cromer

discovered that what he had heard wasn't laughter at all, but deep, visceral, uncontrolled sobbing.

When *Our Town* is performed well, the third act almost always catches the breath of the audience and provokes a cathartic response. But what is the source of that power?

One answer is corrupt social conservatism and suffocating nostalgia. That was the verdict of the Marxist Depression-era social critic Michael Gold, who had nothing but sputtering contempt for Wilder and his bourgeois, Grover's Corners-sized world. Wilder, in Gold's view, was the evangelist of a "genteel Christ" who spewed out pro-capitalist sweetmeats, sentimental distractions from hard social realities. In Wilder's tiny landscape, Gold said, "nobody works in a Ford plant, and nobody starves looking for work." If a reader were to prick Wilder's prose, Gold scoffed, "it [would] bleed violet ink and *aperitif*."

Other critics are more positive, but they share Sherman's obliviousness to the play's theological character. To be fair, Wilder himself, eager not to come across as dogmatic and moralistic (what he called "didacticism"), was often coy about the Christian influences and intentions of his work. But the famed theater critic Brooks Atkinson, although no theologian, recognized that "in the deepest sense of the word *Our Town* is a religious play." In the play, Atkinson wrote, "there go all of us, not 'but for the grace of God,' but 'by the grace of God.'"

Yet much contemporary criticism of the play seems determined to find the message and power elsewhere. In an article for *Educational Theatre Journal*, drama critic Robert W. Corrigan argued that Wilder was not a religious playwright but a humanist, one with a dark and ultimately tragic view of life. His characters are always on the edge of collapse, Corrigan wrote, and Wilder simply shrugs, "Life is what you make of it," a view "very close to Sartre's 'Man is condemned to be free.'"

The distinguished literary scholar Francis Fergusson, in a view so wildly off mark that it seems almost a willful misreading, regarded Wilder as a Platonist quite uninterested in the actualities of real life. Fergusson described Wilder's plays as designed to teach Platonic philosophy and dedicated to "the Great Ideas," which transcend history and actual people. Any random slice of life could illustrate these ideas, Fergusson says, "but history and individual lives lack all real being; they are only shadows on the cave wall."

Hardly anything could be clearer in *Our Town* than the conviction that the fragments of everyday life are constitutive, not simply illustrative. Far from being shadows on a cave wall, the ordinary events of life are the substance of humanity. Wilder himself said that *Our Town* seeks to discover, amid the seemingly trivial, "what is significant about any one person's making a breakfast, engaging in a domestic quarrel, in a 'love scene,' in dying."

As Mahira Kakkar, who in 2008 played the role of Emily, recently said about the play, "Small things—you don't realize how it's the small things that make up a life, that make a life beautiful. We're often running in pursuit of the big things that we think will make our life meaningful. But it's all the small stuff that adds up."

At the heart of *Our Town* is a profound Christian eschatology, a theological perspective that playwright A. R. Gurney says pervaded all of Wilder's mature work. In *Our Town*, this eschatology is brought to focus on human mortality. Death runs like a ribbon through Grover's Corners. In the very first minutes of the play, the stage manager, speaking from the vantage point of the future, matter-of-factly informs us of the coming deaths of the first three characters we have met. As the play proceeds, we are told of a number of other, usually premature, deaths. When the stage manager introduces a local university professor to supply some historical details about Grover's Corners, he advises him to be brief, saying, "Unfortunately our time is limited." By the third act, which begins in the cemetery, we realize what he meant.

All of this death, so much of it unexpected and untimely, does not lead to unrelieved tragedy. To the contrary, Wilder sees the fleeting nature of life as one of the factors that render human life precious. Like sacramental bread and wine, human lives and relationships are earthly and perishable but also bearers of the sacred, the eternal.

So much the pity, then, that when *Our Town* was made into a Hollywood film in 1940, the third act was damaged. In the movie, Emily only dreams that she has died. She delivers her final speeches in a fever from her sickbed, then recovers and returns to her life in Grover's Corners. This makes the film happier, more sentimental, something akin, Sherman observes, to the sunny "there's no place like home" outlook of *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption," said T. W. Adorno. In *Our Town*, the light of redemption shines on the fragility of human life,

revealing hidden holiness. One significant way this happens is through the singing of the Congregational church choir, which Wilder employs as a kind of hometown Greek chorus. They sing three hymns, all with eschatological themes: “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds,” “Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid,” and “Love Divine All Loves Excelling.” The first is of particular importance. It is sung on three occasions in the play: at choir practice on the first day, at Emily and George’s wedding, and at Emily’s funeral. “I always liked that hymn,” one of the dead in the cemetery says. “I was hopin’ they’d sing a hymn.”

The third act usually provokes a cathartic response. What is the source of that power?

The hymn affirms the resonance between heaven and earth, between fleeting mortality and eternity, which is the central truth of *Our Town*. As the ordinary people of Grover’s Corners share their mutual woes and bear their mutual burdens, the choir reminds us that “the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.” As Eugene Peterson rendered the incarnational claim of John’s Gospel, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood”—and that blessed neighborhood is Grover’s Corners.

Or, it could be. *Our Town* conveys both the beautiful truth of the sacredness of human lives and the unsettling fact that most human beings are blind to it.

Lincoln Konkle, in *Thornton Wilder and the Puritan Narrative Tradition,* persuasively argues that Our Town is a theatrical recasting of a classic American homiletical genre: the Puritan jeremiad. The stage manager, he says, functions as “a minister preaching the gospel,” and the scenes in the play are his sermon illustrations. Jeremiads consisted of both prophetic laments and calls to renewal. In *Our Town*, Wilder laments that the treasure in the field is right beneath our feet and still hidden, that the pearl of great price is to be found at the breakfast table yet we miss it.

When the stage manager says that only saints and poets realize the preciousness of life as they live it, Wilder is not giving into despair. He is calling us to the altar, calling us to be saints and to see like poets. It is a sermon so pointed, so skillfully crafted, so truthful that it moves the congregation to tears. It is a sermon so perfectly pitched to an age that seeks, and does not find, hope in the engines of human progress alone that it continues to move us.

Omar “Sweets” Williams, an inmate who played a major role when *Our Town* was performed at Sing Sing, responded to that altar call. He told Sherman in an interview:

> I live in Grover’s Corners. When the play ended, it wasn’t a white or black town. It’s everybody’s town. I always take some of that with me everywhere I go, and give more to people. I try to be patient. I try to be kind, for the most part, because that’s the right way to be. *Our Town* teaches you that way. If you model your life after *Our Town*, you won’t go wrong.

Thornton Wilder died in December 1975. Biographer Penelope Niven notes that at the graveside, his brother, the Rev. Amos Wilder, said of him, “He realized life while he lived it—and brought incomparable visions to all experiences and relationships.” At the memorial service a month later in Yale’s Battell Chapel, the congregation sang “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds.”

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