
Towards a Universal Community: The Writing of the Everyday Life in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*

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Received: 05/09/2025

Accepted: 14/12/2025

Published: 13/01/2026

Volume: 7 Issue: 1

How to cite this paper: Chenyan, X. (2026). Towards a Universal Community: The Writing of the Everyday Life in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 7(1), 17-21

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v7i1.420>

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Abstract

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* displays the essence of daily life in a plain, delicate and anti-didactic writing style. Taking the daily triviality of the two ordinary families in Grover's Corners as its basic narrative framework, Wilder realizes the everyday universality through objective and authentic depiction of everyday fragments in this traditional American town. Namely, Grover's Corners is presented as a microcosm of each typical ordinary town where both the environment and characters exemplify the ordinary to emphasize the essence of daily existence itself. Accordingly, this thesis is devoted to focusing on the writing of the everyday life in terms of the setting arrangement, characterization and narrative strategies from the perspective of Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, thereby dissecting the essence of everyday life as well as its influence on individuals' identity construction. When the duality, universality and constructiveness of daily life are represented through the depictions of the anti-utopian town's environment, stereotypical townspeople and hybrid narratives, the fact that the American fail to get a genuine knowledge of the everyday life is also emerging. Gulped in the economic depression, the American citizens were consumed by everyday trivialities, failing to recognize the inherent beauty and sublimity within the everyday life. Consequently, the exploration of the nature and truth of the daily life as well as its hidden beauty and nobility became the driving force behind *Our Town*, aiming to restore courage and confidence to Americans dwelt in the shadow of the Great Depression in 1930s. Additionally, by critically specifying Wilder's writing of everyday life, this thesis maps the multiple essence of the everyday life and townspeople's constructed identity under the genuine knowledge of daily life, in turn underscoring Wilder's nostalgia for traditional American values and a deeper community spirit embedded within his depiction of everyday life.

Keywords: Great Depression, Everyday Life, Identity, Community

1. Introduction

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) stands as a landmark of American drama, renowned for its radical simplicity and profound engagement with the universal rhythms of human existence. By structuring the play around three fundamental acts—Daily Life, Love and Marriage, and Death—set in the fictional small town of Grover's Corners, Wilder deliberately eschews theatrical spectacle to focus on the mundane, often overlooked textures of ordinary life. This very commitment to the quotidian, however, has led to a complex critical reception, where the play's apparent simplicity has sometimes been misconstrued as a lack of depth, obscuring its sophisticated philosophical and narrative architecture. Burbank (1978) summarizes Michael Gold's

critique that Wilder wrote for a “small sophisticated class” while ignoring social injustice (p. 8). Such critique, however, fails to recognize that Wilder’s social engagement operates precisely through his minute focus on the everyday. By employing allegory, he elevates the particularities of small-town life to a universal plane, redirecting attention to fundamental human conditions and prompting a collective self-awareness rooted in, rather than divorced from, ordinary experience.

It is this critical focus on the everyday as a site of social and philosophical meaning that this paper seeks to theorize and expand. Actually, in modern literature, there is a notable exploration of everyday life, yet this treatment often falls short of imbuing it with the artistic reverence it deserves. This approach, instead of deep appreciation, sometimes results in trivialization (Shuai, 2011, p. 76). In contrast, Wilder corrects the tendency toward trivialization by employing deliberate artistic strategies—such as minimalist staging, typified characters, and allegorical narrative—precisely to uncover and elevate the profound significance latent within the mundane. Through these means, Wilder endeavors “to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life” (Wilder, 2003, p. xv), affirming that daily life “is not hopeless, but a world full of great potential and hope” (Liu, 2006, p. 41).

Accordingly, we propose a sustained reading of *Our Town* through the lens of Henri Lefebvre’s critique of everyday life. Lefebvre conceptualizes the quotidien not as a neutral backdrop but as a dialectical space—the primary site where social structures and ideologies are reproduced, yet also where latent potential for critique, transformation and the reimagining of community resides. Through this framework, this study argues that Wilder’s play performs a dual operation. First, it meticulously documents the repetitive, often alienating rhythms of small-town existence. Second, and simultaneously, through its unique narrative and dramatic form, it defamiliarizes this very everydayness. This defamiliarization is the core of its critical project: it estranges the habitual, reveals the hidden depths and contradictions within the ordinary, and, in doing so, excavates the very potential for connection and meaning that Lefebvre identifies. Thus, the play not only critiques but also constructively re-envision the everyday, laying an imaginative foundation for a universal sense of community. The analysis will proceed in three interconnected parts, examining the setting, the characters, and the narrative strategy as the key vectors through which this critical and constructive project is achieved.

2. The Anti-Utopian Setting: Grover’s Corners as a Dialectical Totality

In *Our Town*, Grover’s Corners is meticulously constructed not as a unique or nostalgically idealized locale, but as a universal type—a deliberate “microcosm of the human family” (Wilder, 2003, p. xvii). Its geographical specificity, given as “latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes” (Wilder, 2003, p. 4), serves paradoxically to underscore its anonymity and representational function. This move from the particular to the archetypal is the first step in Wilder’s critical project, inviting the audience to see their own social world reflected on stage. While critics often read Grover’s Corners as nostalgic tribute to the “good old days”, longing “the virtues of a simple, unhurried, unthreatened life in the isolated small towns of America” (Cardullo, 1998, p. 4), a utopian studies lens complicates this assumption. Grover’s Corners functions not as a pastoral utopia but as what Krishan Kumar terms an anti-utopia—a form that feeds parasitically on utopian ideals to expose the contradictions and complexities of real social existence (Kumar, 1987, p. 100). Wilder’s town embodies this perfectly: it maintains the serene form of the harmonious, self-sufficient American town while being systematically laced with unresolved tensions, presenting a dialectical totality where beauty and banality, community and alienation, coexist.

This anti-utopian dialectic manifests at both the collective and domestic levels. At the collective level, the town espouses a bedrock ideology of meritocratic order—the belief that “the diligent and sensible can rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome can sink to the bottom” (Wilder, 2003, p. 27)—yet its social fabric includes alcoholism, idleness, entrenched class divisions, and traditional gender hierarchies. Its resistance to industrial modernity preserves agrarian tranquility but also fosters parochialism and cultural stagnation. The arrival of change, symbolized by the first factory and the spreading habit of locking doors, is met not with conscious engagement but with passive, unreflective absorption. These are not dramatic conflicts but “tender contradictions,” woven into the everyday fabric. They reflect Lefebvre’s insight that everyday life is the primary terrain where social structures are both imposed and lived out, often in a state of naturalized, unexamined equilibrium. The town’s peace, therefore, is not that of utopian fulfillment but of habituation, a concept central to Lefebvre’s critique, wherein the rhythms and relations of daily life become so ingrained that their contingent and often oppressive nature is rendered invisible, perceived simply as “the way things are”.

This dialectic is microscopically enacted within the domestic sphere, the realm of “homely matters”. Wilder’s narrative lingers not on grand events but on the repetitive rituals of the Webb and Gibbs households: preparing breakfast, calling children to school, stringing beans, exchanging gossip. He deliberately under-dramatizes “carnival” moments like weddings and funerals. George and Emily’s wedding in Act II is stripped of theatrical romance; its emotional weight derives solely from the accumulated mundane interactions that preceded it. This technique suggests that meaning is not opposed to routine but is born from its accumulation, aligning with Wilder’s stated aim “to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life” and with Lefebvre’s call to rehabilitate the everyday’s “positive content” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 87). This artistic choice constitutes a formal rebuttal to narratives that seek meaning only in the exceptional or the catastrophic, instead positing the quotidian as the foundational site of human experience and value.

Yet, the play simultaneously exposes the other pole of this dialectic: the characters’ unconsciousness of this value. Immersed in what can be termed a “cozy blandness”, they are habituated to the routine. Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb speak of dreams while their hands are occupied with peas; the daily labor of care becomes so automatic that its details are forgotten.

The true pathos, from a Lefebvrian perspective, lies not in the forgetting but in the lack of awareness that these moments are worthy of remembrance. This state exemplifies what Lefebvre describes as the “mystified” consciousness of everyday life, where individuals participate in the creation of their own world yet experience it as a given, external reality. Thus, Grover’s Corners, as an anti-utopian setting, stages the central paradox of everyday life: it is simultaneously the ground of profound human connection and the primary mechanism for lulling critical consciousness into a comfortable stupor. This constructed totality provides the essential, dialectical backdrop against which the drama of individual awareness and communal possibility unfolds—a backdrop that is neither purely idyllic nor purely dystopian, but realistically, critically whole and “permeated with values, with myths” (Lefebvre, 1988, p. 87).

3. Portrayal of the Ordinary Townspeople: Typification, Agency and the Mediation of Consciousness

This section argues that Wilder’s characterization stages a fundamental tension between the typified, habituated existence of the townspeople and what this analysis terms initiative consciousness—an active, reflexive, and historically attuned mode of perception capable of piercing the veil of daily routine to apprehend the extraordinary within the ordinary. This consciousness, largely dormant in the community, finds its sole, full embodiment in the transcendent figure of the Stage Manager.

Wilder’s approach to characterization is rigorously subordinated to his exploration of universality and the conditions of everyday awareness. The inhabitants of Grover’s Corners are crafted not as psychologically nuanced individuals but as social and existential types. As Donald Haberman observes, Emily and George function primarily as “a young girl and a young boy” (Haberman, 1969, p. 76); the adults embody archetypal roles—the doctor, the editor, the mother, the constable. This deliberate typification, achieved through generalized dialogue and the avoidance of idiosyncratic detail, erases idiosyncrasy to amplify commonality, insisting that these stage figures are, in essence, “just us”. From a Lefebvrian standpoint, this artistic strategy performs a critical mirroring: it reflects the attenuation of individual agency within the standardized, cyclical rhythms of modern daily life. The townspeople are largely defined by, and submissive to, their social scripts and the temporal patterns of the town—the morning routine, the progression from school to marriage to parenthood. Their collective, unthinking adoption of new norms—like the viral spread of door-locking following Mrs. Fairchild’s example—epitomizes this passive integration into a social flow, highlighting a deficit in critical, self-directed action. They do not choose or critique their habits; they inherit and replicate them.

This consequence of this lost agency is a pervasive blindness to the essence of their own existence. Surrounded by the profound—the relentless passage of time, the cycle of life and death, the fragile web of human bonds—the characters perceive only the immediate and the practical. Their conversations revolve around weather, gossip and domestic logistics, rarely touching upon metaphysical questions. This constitutes the play’s central tragic insight, given its most poignant voice by Emily in Act III when, from beyond death, she returns to relive her twelfth birthday and is shattered by its unappreciated sensory and emotional fullness: “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?” (Wilder, 2003, p. 108). The implied answer is a devastating negative, diagnosing a pervasive lack of the very initiative consciousness defined above. This lack is not a personal failing but a structural feature of everyday life as lived within an unexamined, anti-utopian totality, where habit obscures value.

The singular figure who embodies and mediates this “initiative consciousness” in its fullest form is the Stage Manager. He exists outside and above the typified system of the other characters, functioning as a multifaceted narrative, philosophical, and ontological device. He is, sequentially and sometimes simultaneously: the omniscient narrator who controls theatrical time and space; the town historian and sociologist delivering demographic data; the philosophical commentator offering sermons on love and continuity; and, on occasion, a minor character within the diegesis. His role, as Mick Short notes, includes “a mechanism for guiding audience’s reaction” absent from conventional dramatic structures (Short, 1996, p. 172). Crucially, he sees and articulates the value the townspeople miss. In the wedding scene, he connects the personal ritual to transhistorical continuity, noting how millions of ancestors are part of the occasion, framing it as a moment that pushes the human world into development. He is the vessel for Wilder’s allegorical injections of collective memory, linking the town’s present to the Mayflower and the sweep of Western civilization, thus providing the depth of historical time that the characters’ daily lives lack.

His most significant intervention occurs in Act III with Emily. Here, he transcends his narrative function to become a moral and metaphysical guide. When the dead Emily, restless and unfulfilled, begs to return to the past, he warns her of the pain it will bring, yet ultimately accedes to her wish. In this pivotal exchange, he administers the play’s crucial, painful lesson: that a full, realized awareness of life often depends on retrospection, on the distance that allows for seeing the whole. The Stage Manager thus represents the possibility of a non-alienated perspective—one capable of recalling the past, foreseeing the future, and thereby fully contextualizing and valuing the present. He is the embodied “mediation of consciousness” that the townspeople lack, the externalized faculty of reflection that the play offers as a potential salvation from the blindness of the everyday.

Yet, Wilder does not portray the townspeople as utterly devoid of potential, which would render the play purely pessimistic. Fleeting glimpses of stifled curiosity and longing pierce the “cozy blandness”. Mrs. Gibbs’s sustained, quietly desperate dream of seeing Paris, a place “where they don’t talk in English and don’t even want to” (Wilder, 2003, p. 21) and young Rebecca’s awe as she wonders if the moon is shining on South America and Canada, reveal a latent yearning for a world beyond the

immediate geographical and mental confines of the town. These are sparks of the very “initiative consciousness” that remains dormant, unactivated by their environment. They suggest that the potential for awakening is innate but is systematically suppressed, not by malice, but by the unreflective, self-perpetuating structure of everyday life itself. The dramatic tension, therefore, lies not only in the stark contrast between the typified, passive townspeople and the omniscient, active Stage Manager but also within the townspeople themselves, in the fragile, often unspoken conflict between their habituated passivity and their flickering, unrealized potential for reflective engagement with their own existence. The Stage Manager stands as both the measure of their lack and the symbolic answer to it.

4. Defamiliarization as Method: The Hybrid Narrative of Imitation and Allegory

To achieve his critical aim—making the invisible, habituated texture of everyday life both visible and felt as an object of contemplation—Wilder cannot rely on conventional theatrical realism, which risks merely reproducing the familiarity he seeks to interrogate. Instead, he devises a sophisticated hybrid narrative strategy, a deliberate fusion of imitative and allegorical modes. This strategy is designed to defamiliarize the everyday, employing what Russian Formalists would call *ostranenie*, an artistic technique of making the familiar strange to disrupt habitual perception and provoke renewed attention. Through this method, Wilder jars the audience into a new, more active perception of the ordinary, while simultaneously weaving a subtle discourse on memory, history and the possibility of community.

The imitative narrative is rooted in a hyper-attention to the authentic surface and temporal structure of daily life, achieved through several key, interlocking techniques. Here, “imitative” refers to a mode of representation that meticulously replicates the surface textures, rhythms, and speech patterns of ordinary existence, aiming to create an immersive illusion of the everyday. First, the stage is radically minimalist, devoid of realist scenery. As Wilder asserts in the stage directions, the drama resides “in the mind, not in ‘scenery’” (Wilder, 2003, p. xiv). This stripping away of visual realism forces attention onto language, gesture and the audience’s imagination, preventing the comfort of scenic illusion. Second, the dialogue consists overwhelmingly of “plain speech”—the fragmented, repetitive, associative and seemingly trivial exchanges that constitute real social interaction: mothers calling children, neighbors gossiping about the new doctor’s drinking, teenagers awkwardly expressing affection. There are no grand soliloquies or rhetorically polished speeches.

Third, and most importantly, the narrative structure systematically under-dramatizes and decenters major life events. The wedding in Act II lacks ceremonial pomp and is intercut with the nervous reminiscences of the parents; Emily’s funeral in Act III is not a scene of communal mourning but a calm, detached, philosophical discussion among the dead, seated in rows as if in a classroom. This deliberate “weakening of the climax” as scholar Yu Kuangfu (2001) observes, fundamentally shifts the play’s structure “toward narrative rather than drama” (p.73). The cumulative effect of these techniques is an immersive, non-teleological representation of daily time’s slow, cyclical flow. It makes the routine not just a setting but the primary subject, rendering it palpably, almost painfully, present for scrutiny. This meticulous imitation does not celebrate the mundane; it establishes it as the object of analysis. In doing so, Wilder targets what Gardiner describes as the “multifaceted and yielding” (Gardiner, 2000, p.6) nature of daily life—a quality that is both its richness and the source of its habitual opacity.

Pure imitation, nevertheless, could simply replicate the alienation and numbness it depicts, offering diagnosis without perspective. The allegorical narrative, primarily channeled through the intrusions and commentary of the Stage Manager, provides the essential critical counterpoint, depth and framework for meaning. In this context, “allegorical” denotes a mode of storytelling that uses specific, concrete events and characters to signify abstract, universal, or metaphysical ideas, thereby layering the immediate narrative with broader philosophical or historical resonance. His interjections repeatedly and deliberately break the realistic frame of the domestic scenes. His extended recitation of Western cultural history in Act I (from the Mayflower to Napoleon) and his sardonic anecdotes in Act III about modern townspeople hiring Boston genealogists to find a connection to the Mayflower are not mere digressions but deliberate allegorical grafts.

They serve a dual, dialectical function. First, they universalize the particular, performing a conceptual zoom-out. They elevate the specific, small-scale routines of Grover’s Corners to the status of universal human patterns, connecting the Gibbs family to the grand, millennia-long narrative of human civilization and struggle. This rescues the everyday from mere parochialism. Second, they introduce a layer of ironic historical critique. The genealogist anecdote subtly satirizes a confused, rootless modernity that has lost organic connection to its past and must commodify its search for identity. The allegory thus works in two directions: it expands the significance of the small-town everyday into the cosmic, while simultaneously using the depth of the past to comment critically on the thinness and amnesia of the unreflective present.

The critical power and originality of *Our Town* lie precisely in the sustained hybridity of this narrative mode. The imitative surface—the plain speech, the minimalist staging—grounds the allegory, preventing it from drifting into abstract, disembodied didacticism. It ensures the allegory is about this life, these people. Conversely, the allegorical layer gives philosophical, historical and ethical depth to the imitation, preventing it from collapsing into mere boring reproduction or sentimental local color. Together, they perform a precise Lefebvrian operation: they take the “everydayness” that is normally invisible—because it is too close, too habitual, too much the medium of life itself—and through formal juxtaposition, make it a perceivable object for conscious reflection. The audience is positioned in a privileged, Brechtian “third perspective”—a critical vantage point akin to Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), watching characters fail to see their own lives, and in that constructed perceptual gap, is prompted to recognize the obscured significance and beauty of their own days. The play’s form itself becomes a pedagogy of attention.

Furthermore, this defamiliarization process is intrinsically linked to the play's ultimate communal vision. The shared memories invoked by the Stage Manager, the collective rituals presented without sentimental manipulation, and the very typicality of the characters all work in concert to evoke a powerful sense of common fate and shared experience. As Li Weiping (2023) argues in a different literary context, such shared symbolic structures and historical consciousness "strengthen people's sense of community and capacity of empathy" (p. 12).

Wilder's hybrid narrative, therefore, is not merely descriptive or critical; it is ultimately performative and constructive. It uses the act of defamiliarizing the everyday as a theatrical ritual to make a universal community imaginable. This envisioned community is founded not on traditional pillars of nation, race or ideology, but on a more fundamental, achievable recognition: the shared, awakened appreciation of the ordinary, transient and precious texture of common life, and the shared human condition of struggling to see it while we live it. By engaging in this communal act of seeing, Wilder, as he himself noted, responds to the imperative that "the group-mind imposes upon him the necessity of treating material understandable by the larger number" (Wilder, 2007, p. 699), yet transcends it to create a work that is both universally accessible and profoundly transformative. In *Our Town*, Grover's Corners thus transcends the tangible realm of geography, becoming less a specific place and more of a conceptual "home", a microcosm of traditional American towns, and by extension, a universal site where the value of everyday life is preserved, examined and ultimately celebrated.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* accomplishes far more than a nostalgic evocation of small-town America; it stages a profound, dialectical inquiry into the nature of everyday life and its role in shaping individual and collective identity. Through the anti-utopian setting of Grover's Corners, Wilder constructs a microcosm that simultaneously embodies the comforting rhythms of habitual existence and exposes the latent tensions and contradictions within them. The typified townspeople, while largely unconscious of the depth of their own lived experience, nevertheless reveal flickers of a suppressed "initiative consciousness": a potential for reflective engagement that remains stifled by the very everyday structures that sustain them. Crucially, Wilder's hybrid narrative strategy, blending imitative detail with allegorical commentary, performs a sustained act of defamiliarization. This method not only renders the invisible textures of daily life visible and worthy of contemplation but also positions the audience as active participants in a shared process of recognition and reflection.

Ultimately, the play transcends its specific historical moment—the Great Depression—to propose a universal model of community grounded not in ideological unity but in a collective, awakened appreciation of the ordinary. By employing Lefebvre's critical framework, this analysis has demonstrated how Wilder's dramaturgy both critiques the alienating tendencies of everyday life and imaginatively reconstructs it as a site of potential connection, meaning and resilience. *Our Town* thus endures not merely as a period piece but as a continuing invitation to see and truly live the extraordinary within the ordinary, and in doing so, to reimagine the possibility of a genuine human community.

Acknowledgment

This research is supported by the Chinese National Social Science Fund Major Project "Chronicle and Study on 21st Century English Literature" (23&ZD304).

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