

# Exploring *Our Town*

Length:	30 minutes
School:	Hilltown Cooperative Charter School
Location:	Haydenville, Mass.
Grades:	7, 8
Teachers:	Jane Percival, 7th- and 8th-Grade Language Arts Lisa Holderness, 7th- and 8th-Grade Social Studies Joy Kinigstein, Visual Art Milton Hanzel, Resident Musician
Description:	Students delve deeply into Thornton Wilder’s <i>Our Town</i> .

## About This Program

Hilltown is a very small school in a very small town. Students are accustomed to speaking up, and the atmosphere is that of a caring, respectful, and creative community. The teaching team has chosen to use Thornton Wilder’s classic play *Our Town*—set in a small New England town like Haydenville—as the basis for end-of-year explorations in language arts, social studies, visual art, and music.

We see students in language arts class reading the play aloud, and relating what they read to what they already know about the play’s setting. In a later class, the language arts teacher guides students in improvisational pantomime exercises that help them explore how characters in the play might move and react. In social studies, students formulate research questions and study what life was like at the time of the play, using a variety of resources to find answers. The visual art teacher introduces students to mask-making, an art form particularly intriguing for adolescents, who are often experimenting with their own image. The students apply plaster to each other’s faces, and later turn the resulting masks into characters from the play. The resident musician plays music from Aaron Copland’s score for the film version of *Our Town*, leading to a thoughtful discussion about the feelings evoked by the music. Students then rehearse hymns appropriate for the Wilder play, trying to better understand the life and times of its characters.

At the end of the program, we sit in on one of the teachers’ wide-ranging “integration meetings” and hear them discuss the strengths and challenges of the unit.

## **Arts and Non-Arts Standards Addressed in This Program**

Standards listed refer to the McREL Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks, a synthesis of national standards in each of the disciplines, found at [www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org).

### **Music**

Standard 7: Understands the relationship between music and history and culture

### **Theatre**

Standard 2: Uses acting skills

### **Visual Arts**

Standard 1: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts

### **Language Arts**

Standard 6: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts

### **Behavioral Studies**

Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior

# Viewing Suggestions

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## Who Should Watch This Program

*Teachers*—“Exploring *Our Town*” will be of value to any teacher interested in the deep, contextual study of a piece of literature or drama.

*Administrators and professional development providers*—This program can be especially useful in encouraging cross-faculty planning.

## Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions.

- How do you go about selecting pieces of literature, art, dance, music, or theatre as elements of a unit of study? What makes a work a strong candidate?
- Would you rather work with a historical play or a historical novel in your curriculum? What are benefits or drawbacks to each?
- How might studying a play lend itself to an interdisciplinary unit of study? What purposes might be served by integrating the study of a historical play into your curriculum?

## Watch the Program

As you watch, note how the themes in *Our Town* surface in each discipline. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching, learning, and collaboration you see in this unit. Consider these questions as you watch:

- How does each art form deepen students’ understanding of the historical context of the play?
- How does the unit help students relate to the time period and setting of the play? In what ways are students making connections between the play and their own lives?
- How do the culture and resources of this particular school help support the type of instruction shown?
- How did the collaboration between teachers make this unit possible?

## Reflect on the Program

- How did the key teacher connect with so many other arts and non-arts subject areas? Could you accomplish this? Why or why not?
- What parts of the teaching stood out for you as especially strong?
- For whatever reason, which parts are not compatible with your own teaching approach?

# Additional Resources

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Consult some of these resources for more information.

## Books

Carey, G., & Snodgrass, M.E. *Our Town (Cliffs Notes)*. Lincoln, Neb: Cliffs Notes, 1965. ISBN: 0822009676

de Koster, K. *Readings on Thornton Wilder*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1998. ISBN: 1565108140

Kennicott, Philip. "The Uncommon Decency Behind Thornton Wilder's Books." In *The Greenfield Recorder*, 20 February 2003, p.8.

Siebold, T. *Readings on Our Town*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000. ISBN: 0737701897

Southeast Center for Education in the Arts. *Our Town—A Discipline-Based Theatre Unit of Study*.

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. 1997. Available online from <http://www.sceaonline.com/restheatre.asp>

Wilder, Thornton *Our Town, A Play in Three Acts*. Includes an afterword by Tappan Wilder. New York: Perennial Classics (HarperCollins), 2003 (first published 1938). ISBN: 0060512636

## Video

Lesser, Sol (Producer), Wood, Sam (Director), & Wilder, Thornton (Writer). (1940). *Our Town* [Motion Picture]. United States: Focus Films Entertainment (DVD release), 2002. ASIN: 6305838208

Jaffe, Saul (Executive Producer), & Schaefer, George (Director). (1977). *Our Town* [Television Broadcast]. United States: National Broadcasting Company. ASIN: 6300180328

Woodward, Joanne (Executive Producer), & Naughton, James (Director). (2003). *Our Town* [Television Broadcast]. United States: Public Broadcasting Service. ASIN: B00015YVR2

Barclay, Richard (Producer), & Deubel, Robert (Director). (1972). *Norman Rockwell's World: An American Dream* [Motion Picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures. ASIN: 6302996023

## Web Sites

**The Thornton Wilder Society:** A detailed chronology of Thornton Wilder's life as well as an *Our Town* study guide for teachers and students  
[www.thorntonwildersociety.org](http://www.thorntonwildersociety.org)

**Spark Notes:** A wealth of resources such as information about the authors in their historical era, plot overviews, character analysis, themes, summaries, and study questions  
[www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com)

**ExxonMobil Masterpiece Theatre—Our Town:** Information about the 2003 production with Paul Newman, including interviews, discussion questions, activities and investigations, writing and other exercises  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/ourtown/>