



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Bridge of San Luis Rey and Our Town

by Thornton Wilder



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“It seems to me that my books are about: what is the worst thing that the world can do to you, and what are the last resources one has to oppose it.”

Preface

To know a book, you have only to read it closely. But to know a writer, one book is almost never enough. This is certainly true of Thornton Wilder. At first glance, his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and his play *Our Town* may appear to have little in common. One is about the search for meaning after a fatal bridge collapse in Peru, the other about life in a small New Hampshire town. Only after contemplating these timeless stories side by side do we begin to discover the signature they share: an appreciation for life’s preciousness in the shadow of eternity.

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you’re a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

By Tappan Wilder

Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) and his stage drama *Our Town* (1938) have enjoyed enormous success since the moment they first appeared. Both won Pulitzer Prizes, and neither has ever been out of print.

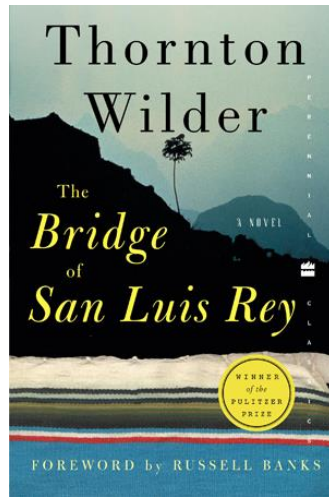
Because they have been widely read or performed abroad, this novel and play are not only

American classics but classics of world literature as well. They are so well known, in fact, that we easily take them for granted. Whether you are rediscovering Wilder's work or entering his world for the first time, you are joining thousands of his readers in exploring the fundamental meaning of human existence.

At first glance, these two stories may appear to be worlds apart. *Our Town* is set between 1901 and 1913 in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, a community that has produced nobody very "important." Wilder wrote that his subject was "the trivial details of human life in reference to a vast perspective of time, of social history and of religious ideas." He was, he told us in an early preface to the play, presenting "the life of a village against the life of the stars."

As Emily and others reflect on the meaning of their lives in their town, we may see our own experiences more clearly, wherever we live.

There is nothing ordinary about the backdrop of Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, or the characters in his story. The novel is set in Lima, Peru, in the golden age of the eighteenth-century Spanish colonial empire. Among the exotic cast of characters are the greatest actress of the age, a drunken Marquesa who can't stop writing letters, an obsessed Harlequin named Uncle Pio, identical twins with a private language, and a legendary ship captain. Nor does the novel lack drama, starting with the very first sentence: "On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below."



As different as these two works are in form and setting, they pose the same enduring questions that Wilder explored throughout his writing career—often employing death as the window to life. He could well have written of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* as he wrote of *Our Town*: "It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life."

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

On a summer day in 1714, a bridge collapses in Peru, plunging five unsuspecting travelers to their deaths. Brother Juniper, a witness to the tragedy, dedicates himself to discovering why those five perished. Juniper's work is judged heretical by the Inquisition and he and his findings are burned at the stake, but a secret copy survives. The narrator of *The Bridge* delves deeper into the lives of the victims: "Some say...that to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God."

Thornton Wilder's second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) had diverse inspirations. The book's philosophical underpinnings are rooted in Wilder's conversations with his father, a devoted churchman, and in a passage in the gospel of Luke that reads, "...those eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwell in Jerusalem?" Wilder often said that it is not the responsibility of a writer to answer a question but rather "to pose the question correctly and clearly." Wilder later said, "*The Bridge* asked the question whether the intention that lies behind love was sufficient to justify the desperation of living."

The action of the story has its origins in Wilder's extensive reading of French literature, including the letters of Marquise de Sévigné and a short comic play by Prosper Mérimée, *Le Carrosse du Saint-Sacrement*, about a notorious affair between the Viceroy of Peru and a famous actress called La Perichole.

Wilder began the novel in July 1926 during a residency at the MacDowell Colony, a writer's retreat in New Hampshire, and just a year later the book was heralded by critics as a "masterpiece" and a "triumph." The public agreed. The book sold out almost immediately. By the time it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1928, it had already been through seventeen printings and had sold nearly 300,000 copies.

The success of *The Bridge* allowed Wilder to resign his position at the Lawrenceville School to write and lecture full time. He used his royalties to build a home in Hamden, Connecticut, known as “The House *The Bridge* Built,” where he lived with his parents and sister Isabel.

Today, *The Bridge* remains a perennial favorite. Wilder’s novel continues to hold meaning for people the world over. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, British Prime Minister Tony Blair read from *The Bridge’s* closing lines at a memorial service for British victims of the World Trade Center attack: “There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

Major Characters: *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

Brother Juniper, a “little red-haired Franciscan from Northern Italy,” has come to Peru to convert Indians when he witnesses the collapse of the bridge. He believes that by examining the “secret lives of those five persons” he can prove that their deaths were not by chance, but part of God’s plan.

Doña María, Marquesa de Montemayor, is the laughingstock of Lima. Silly and often drunk, she pines for the love of her daughter, Doña Clara, who has married and moved to Spain. Her desperation finds expression in beautiful letters that show a deep sensitivity, a vivid intelligence, and a heart breaking for the smallest kindness.

Pepita is an orphan brought up by “that strange genius of Lima,” Abbess Madre María del Pilar, before being sent to live in the Marquesa’s palace. While Pepita pities the Marquesa, she clings to “her sense of duty and her loyalty to her ‘mother in the lord,’ Mother María del Pilar.”

Camila Perichole is the greatest actress in Lima. Renowned for her beauty in her youth, she gains the favor of the court and the devotion of Uncle Pio. When her beauty is decimated by smallpox, she becomes reclusive. Although she refuses Uncle Pio’s help for herself, she entrusts to him her only son, Jaime, the bridge’s fifth victim.

Uncle Pio’s love of literature and culture is embodied in Camila Perichole, whom he trains as an actress. When his influence becomes overbearing, she rejects him. Years later, he still comes to her aid.

Esteban, another orphan raised by the Abbess, attempts suicide after the death of his twin brother, Manuel. He is setting out for a new life on the high seas when the bridge collapses and he falls to his death.

Our Town

The fame and wealth that Thornton Wilder received from his fiction—especially *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*—allowed him to return his attention to his first love, theater.

During his years of writing novels, he experimented with one-acts such as *The Long Christmas Dinner*, *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, and *Pullman Car Hiawatha*—all plays that embody some of the themes and techniques in *Our Town*. His full-length play *The Trumpet Shall Sound* was produced off-Broadway in 1926, and by the 1930s, he had turned his attention to play translations such as *Lucrece* (1932) and adaptations such as *A Doll’s House* (1937).

On January 22, 1938, the first performance of *Our Town* took place at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. The first New York performance occurred less than two weeks later, a now-famous production at the Henry Miller Theatre directed by Jed Harris. Now, more than seventy years later, it is said that a production of *Our Town* is performed somewhere in the world every night.

What is so special about *Our Town*, a play often heralded as the great American drama, and which made Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, an internationally famous address?

“Our Town” is Anytown, U.S.A., but it is not in any way a historical reflection of small-town life. The townspeople know many pleasures: seeing the sun rise over the mountain, noticing the birds, watching for the change of seasons. Wilder himself said that the play “is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire village; or as a speculation about conditions of life after death...It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life.”

The audience encounters these events through the point of view of the Stage Manager—a character in the play who functions as the narrator and a sympathetic director. While he sometimes talks directly to the actors, he maintains his distance. Most of his lines are delivered as an address to the audience. He freely says they are watching a play written so “people a thousand years from now” will know that “this is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying.”

The opening stage directions are clear and radical, especially for 1938: “No curtain. No scenery.” The costumes are simple; the lighting instructions, complex. The three acts mostly follow two characters, Emily Webb and George Gibbs, who go to school together in Act I, marry in Act II, and experience tragedy in Act III.

Our Town marked the beginning of Wilder's success in the dramatic arts. He would go on to win his second Pulitzer Prize in drama for *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), write the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), and write *The Matchmaker* (1955)—which would later bring him even more renown when it became the musical *Hello, Dolly!* (1964). But perhaps the sometimes overlooked complexity of *Our Town* keeps audiences mesmerized year after year. In Emily's final epiphany—wisdom she has learned through suffering—we seem to hear Thornton Wilder's voice speak to us: "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you."

Major Characters: Our Town

The Stage Manager is the play's narrator, who both directs the play and addresses the audience. Always descriptive, sometimes didactic, often funny, he begins the play on May 7, 1901, and ends it twelve years later in the summer of 1913.

The Webb Family

Mr. Webb is the publisher and editor of the town newspaper, the Grover's Corners *Sentinel*.

Mrs. Webb's dour demeanor contrasts with her beautiful garden of sunflowers and her maternal devotion.

Emily, the brightest girl in Grover's Corners, dreams of living an extraordinary life. In Act II, she marries George Gibbs after realizing that his opinion means more to her than anyone else's.

Wally, the Webb's youngest child, dies after his appendix bursts while on a Boy scout camping trip.

The Gibbs Family

Dr. Gibbs is the town doctor. He will die in 1930; the new hospital will be named after him.

Mrs. Gibbs, Dr. Gibbs's wife, dies from pneumonia during a visit to Ohio.

Even as a teenager, **George Gibbs** wants to be a farmer and marry Emily.

Rebecca Gibbs, George's older sister, marries and leaves Grover's Corners for Ohio.

Other Townspeople

When the play begins, **Joe Crowell** is the town's 11-year-old newsboy. He later gets a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Simon Stimson, the organist at church who secretly drinks too much, "has seen a pack of trouble."

About the Author

Thornton Wilder (1897-1975)

Thornton Niven Wilder is the only writer to have won Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1928) and drama (*Our Town* in 1938 and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1943).

Born in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1897, Wilder was the son of Amos Parker Wilder and Isabella Niven Wilder. Amos Wilder was a man of intellect and ambition. Having earned a PhD from Yale University in political economy, Amos became a well-known public speaker and the owner and editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Amos consul general in Hong Kong, and again in 1909 in Shanghai. While Amos directed his children's education, Isabella encouraged them to pursue their interests in literature and music. This environment of international education and an appreciation for the arts nurtured all the Wilder children. Wilder's older brother, Amos Niven, was a biblical scholar, poet, and literary critic; his sister Charlotte a professor and poet; Isabel a successful novelist with training in drama from Yale; and Janet a zoologist and environmentalist.

Isabella Wilder and the children lived in China briefly before settling in Berkeley, California. Thornton attended college at Oberlin College and Yale, after which he studied archaeology at the American Academy in Rome. Before returning to the United States, Wilder spent time in Paris, where he received a telegram from his father: "HAVE JOB FOR YOU TEACHING NEXT YEAR [...] LEARN FRENCH." Wilder already knew some French, and improved his skills so he could take a teaching position at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey.

Wilder volunteered to serve in both World Wars. During the first, he served as an enlisted man in the Army's Coast Artillery Corps section, stationed in Newport, Rhode Island. In World War II, he advanced to the rank of lieutenant colonel after three years of active duty in North Africa and Italy. His military honors include the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star.

Education was one of Wilder's deepest passions. During his time at Lawrenceville, he earned a master's in French



Thornton Wilder in the role of George Antrobus in *The Skin of Our Teeth* (Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

literature from Princeton University. Even after the success of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* made a day job unnecessary, he continued to teach when interesting opportunities arose. During the 1930s he taught courses in classics and composition at the University of Chicago, and served as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University in 1951-52.

An Interview with Thornton Wilder

For more than fifty years, the Paris Review has published interviews with great writers from around the world. The following is excerpted from an interview with Thornton Wilder that appeared in the winter 1956 issue.

Paris Review: Do you feel that you were born in a place and at a time, and to a family all of which combined favorably to shape you for what you were to do?

Thornton Wilder: Comparisons of one's lot with others' teaches us nothing and enfeebles the will. [...] Everyone is born with an array of handicaps—even Mozart, even Sophocles—and acquires new ones. In a famous passage, Shakespeare ruefully complains that he was not endowed with another writer's "scope"! We are all equally distant from the sun, but we all have a share in it.

PR: Would you say the same tendencies that produced the novelist produced the dramatist?

TW: I think so, but in stating them I find myself involved in a paradox. A dramatist is one who believes that the pure event, an action involving human beings, is more arresting than any comment that can be made upon it. On the stage it is always now: the personages are standing on that razor edge, between the past and the future, which is the essential character of conscious being; the words are rising to their lips in immediate spontaneity. A novel is what took place; no self-effacement on the part of the narrator can hide the fact that we hear his voice recounting, recalling events that are past and over, and which he has selected—from uncountable others—to lay before us from his presiding intelligence. [...] The theater is supremely fitted to say: "Behold! These things are." Yet most dramatists employ it to say: "This moral truth can be learned from beholding this action."

PR: Is your implication, then, that drama should be art for art's sake?

TW: Experience for experience's sake—rather than for moral improvement's sake. When we say that Vermeer's *Girl Making Lace* is a work of art for art's sake, we are not saying anything contemptuous about it. I regard the theater as the

greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being. This supremacy of the theater derives from the fact that it is always now on the stage.

PR: Someone has said [. . .] that a writer deals with only one or two ideas throughout his work. Would you say your work reflects those one or two ideas?

TW: Yes, I think so. I have become aware of it myself only recently. Those ideas seem to have prompted my work before I realized it. Now, at my age, I am amused by the circumstance that what is now conscious with me was for a long time latent. One of those ideas is this: an unrelenting preoccupation with the surprise of the gulf between each tiny occasion of the daily life and the vast stretches of time and place in which every individual plays his role. By that I mean the absurdity of any single person's claim to the importance of his saying, "I love!" "I suffer!" when one thinks of the background of the billions who have lived and died, who are living and dying, and presumably will live and die. [. . .]

This preoccupation came out in my work before I realized it. Even *Our Town*, which I now see is filled with it, was not so consciously directed by me at the time. At first glance, the play appears to be practically a genre study of a village in New Hampshire. On second glance, it appears to be a meditation about the difficulty of, as the play says, "realizing life while you live it."

PR: Mr. Wilder, why do you write?

TW: I think I write in order to discover on my shelf a new book that I would enjoy reading, or to see a new play that would engross me.

PR: Is there some final statement you would wish to make about the novel?

TW: [...] Gertrude Stein once said laughingly that writing is merely "telling what you know." Well, that telling is as difficult an exercise in technique as it is in honesty, but it should emerge as immediately, as spontaneously, as undeliberately as possible.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Thornton Wilder

1890s–1900s

- 1897: Thornton Wilder is born April 17.
- 1901: Theodore Roosevelt takes office as U.S. President.
- 1906: Roosevelt appoints Amos Wilder consul general in Hong Kong. The family lives in China, before moving to Berkeley, California.

1910s

- World War I erupts in Europe in 1914; America enters in 1917.
- 1918: Wilder joins the Army.
- Armistice signed November 11, 1918, ending World War I. Wilder is discharged and returns to Yale, graduates in 1920.

1920s

- 1926: Wilder publishes his first novel, *The Cabala*, and his play *The Trumpet Shall Sound* is produced in New York.
- 1927: *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is published to immediate acclaim.
- 1929: Stock market crashes, triggering the Great Depression.

1930s

- During the worst years of the Depression, nearly 25% of the labor force is unemployed.
- Wilder's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* opens in 1937, followed two months later by *Our Town*, 1938.
- 1939: Germany invades Poland, beginning World War II in Europe.

1940s

- 1942: *The Skin of Our Teeth* opens on Broadway; Wilder writes the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*.
- 1942-1945: Wilder serves with Army Air Force Intelligence in North Africa and Italy.
- 1945: World War II ends after claiming more than fifty million lives worldwide.

1950s

- 1950: Senator Joseph McCarthy brandishes a list of alleged communists in the State Department.
- 1952: Wilder is awarded the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1955: *The Matchmaker* opens on Broadway starring Ruth Gordon.

1960s

- 1964: *Hello, Dolly!*—adapted from Wilder's play *The Matchmaker*—opens on Broadway starring Carol Channing.
- 1964: The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution officially embroils the U.S. in Vietnam.
- 1968: Wilder's novel *The Eighth Day* wins the National Book Award.

1970s

- 1975: Wilder dies of a heart attack at his home in Hamden, Connecticut, on December 7.

Other Works/Adaptations

Selected Works by Thornton Wilder

- *The Cabala*, 1926 (novel)
- *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, 1927 (novel)
- *The Woman of Andros*, 1930 (novel)
- *Heaven's My Destination*, 1935 (novel)
- *Our Town*, 1938 (play)
- *The Skin of Our Teeth*, 1942 (play)
- *The Ides of March*, 1948 (novel)
- *The Alcestiad*, 1955 (play)
- *The Matchmaker*, 1955 (play)
- *The Eighth Day*, 1967 (novel)
- *Theophilus North*, 1973 (novel)

Wilder Anthologies

- Wilder, Thornton. *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder*. 2 vols. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997-98.
- Wilder, Thornton. *Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*. Ed. J. D. McClatchy. New York: Library of America, 2007.

Our Town On Screen

Of all the filmed versions of *Our Town*, only the first, from 1940—and least faithful—boasted Wilder himself as a hired screenwriter. The picture's modest virtues include most of the original Broadway cast, plus Aaron Copland's enduring score.

Hal Holbrook (1977), Spalding Gray (1989), and Paul Newman (2003) have all played the Stage Manager in respectable television adaptations. More daring is *OT: Our Town* (2002), an acclaimed documentary about an underfunded California high school's production of the play.

Wilder's cinematic reputation surely rests on his screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's favorite among his own films, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). Several critics consider it almost a parody of *Our Town*—as if a homicidal uncle were suddenly to visit Emily in Grover's Corners—and all lament that Wilder never again wrote for the screen.

The Bridge at the Movies

The films of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* are far from faithful, but they all testify to Wilder's popularity and narrative gifts. Partly silent, the 1929 version won an Oscar for art direction. A 1944 adaptation was nominated for its music, and carried the amusing tagline "And they called her The Perichole!" More recently, 2004 brought an all star production featuring Gabriel Byrne, Kathy Bates, and Robert De Niro.

None of these attempts holds a candle to the novel. A more lasting testament to *The Bridge's* influence lurks in such ensemble films as *Crash* and *Magnolia*, or even in disaster movies like *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Towering Inferno*. Consciously or otherwise, any film where disparate strangers face mortality together shares an arc with *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

Discussion Questions

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

1. Was Brother Juniper's quest to prove God's plan noble or foolish? Was the collapse of the bridge an accident, or was there intention? What is the narrator's conclusion?
2. How does the framing of the novel—a story examining an event 200 years prior—affect your reading? What does the passage of time add to our understanding of the characters? Why might Wilder choose not to tell the story from Brother Juniper's point of view?
3. Wilder had not been to Peru when he wrote *The Bridge*. How does his choice of detail and language heighten the sense of atmosphere and the believability of the characters?
4. Why might Wilder have written *The Bridge* as a novel rather than a play? What aspects of the story are more appropriate to fiction than to drama?
5. In what ways is *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* a fable? Does it teach a lesson? If so, what are we supposed to learn from the book?
6. Does *The Bridge* have a hero? A villain? If so, what characteristics define these roles? Which characters were "good" and which were "bad" by Brother Juniper's standards?
7. Wilder's Lima is populated by orphans, brothers, uncles, mothers, and matrons. How do these relationships conform to or deviate from your idea of family?
8. Why does Doña Clara reject the Marquesa? Why does the Perichole reject Uncle Pio? Are they justified in their rejections? How might they feel after the deaths of the Marquesa and Uncle Pio?
9. *The Bridge* is known for its aphoristic writing. What are some passages that stick in your mind? What makes them so memorable? What does this kind of writing add to the overall tone of the novel?
10. In many ways, *The Bridge* is about love. What different forms of love can be found in the novel?

Our Town

1. How is Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, like or unlike the town where you grew up?
2. In Act I, the Stage Manager mentions that a new bank is being built in Grover's Corners, and things will be put in the cornerstone for people to "dig up a thousand years from now." What objects do they put in it? What would you put in a time capsule?
3. In Act I, Emily's successful speech at school on the Louisiana Purchase encourages her dreams of greatness, and she tells her mother that she "wants to make speeches all [her] life." How is that goal realized? How is it not?
4. In Act II, the Stage Manager focuses on love and marriage. Why does he choose to show one particular conversation between Emily and George? What does it reveal about their relationship? What might this suggest about love?
5. Discuss the portrayal of marriage in *Our Town*. Compare the marriages between Mr. and Mrs. Webb and Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs. What does Mrs. Webb mean when she says that sending girls into marriage is "cruel"?
6. If you were in charge of the play's lighting, how would you direct Emily's return to Grover's Corners in Act III—as a realistic scene, or as a dream?
7. Simon Stimson opines in Act III, "That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance . . . To spend and waste time as though you had a million years." Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. How would you answer Emily's question: "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?"
9. If you could revisit one "ordinary day" from your past, which would it be?
10. *Our Town* accelerates time, looking back and forward at major events while also describing what happens in mundane, daily life. What might Wilder be suggesting by this?

Additional Resources

Works about Wilder

- Niven, Penelope. *Thornton Wilder: A Life*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.
- Wilder, Thornton, Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer, eds. *The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

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- [The Thornton Wilder Society](http://www.thorntonwildersociety.org/)
Dedicated to preserving and expanding the legacy of Thornton Wilder, the society offers events, a newsletter, educational resources, and a comprehensive website.
<http://www.thorntonwildersociety.org/>
- [PBS *Masterpiece Theater: Our Town*](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/ourtown/)
The online companion to PBS's 2003 production of *Our Town* starring Paul Newman, this website presents essays, interviews, teaching materials, and a bibliography for additional resources on Thornton Wilder and *Our Town*.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/ourtown/>

Credits

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