



## The Village and the Stars

Curriculum Unit 86.01.01  
by Bill Coden

### Family!

You're a part of it. You contribute to it. You're shaped by it. What do you know about "it"?

These issues and this question will be at the core of my unit. As a theme for reading and writing, "family" is indeed rich. Teacher and students have expertise to bring to the subject. The theme facilitates crossing literary genres in the search for worthwhile titles for inclusion in the unit. These crossovers can help students realize the richness and variety of family life—as a daily reality as well as a school subject.

In addition to this appreciation, the unit will concentrate on reading critically and analytically, responding actively and imaginatively to the literature: engaging in discussion; writing.

The titles in the unit incorporate opportunities to discuss these elements of family life:

- the function of the family in society;
- the importance of a family to an individual;
- the working-through of the developmental tasks of adolescence.

I've taught a unit on The Family in Literature to my eighth grade students for the past two years. Until now, the unit has existed primarily in my head as an amorphous body of work. It has been too loosely woven: the theme has been given short shrift. Now, the writing and research I have done for this seminar have prompted me to rethink the unit thoroughly, for it is too important a theme—covered at a critical point in students' lives—to be covered superficially. The plays, novels, short stories, and poems my students and I will read and discuss deal with self-discovery, an important strand in our seminar work: new knowledge of who we are, where we came from, what matters to us, and why.

*Our Town* by Thornton Wilder provides the richest reading in the unit. It blends comic and tragic elements while dealing with issues we will encounter later in other works and in our discussions. I will begin the unit with this play because it does help bring the pieces together, to give a clearer definition of “family”, to raise once again issues of concern to adolescents: parental relations, love, death, the future. This play quite literally embodies life in miniature. Because *Our Town* represents what I want the entire unit to be about, I will focus my research and writing on this play. I will write about *Our Town* as the embodiment of its author’s views on, among other things, time, culture, and the theatre, and the family.

The individual acts of the play and the simple human activities give us the schedule and rhythm of life in “our town.” Act One presents the Gibbs and Webb families living self-contained, parallel lives side by side. We view and identify with a time of bustling activity: getting ready to face a new day, doing chores, catching up on family news, confronting problems, rehearsing hymns, doing homework, falling in love. Act One closes with a shift from the particular to the universal, in which the characters and the audience become aware of the beauty and comfort of Nature, as well as the boundlessness of the Universe.

Students encounter issues which concern them as family members and as adolescents. In general, the issues mentioned are only touched on; it is incumbent upon the teacher to expand them. Among the issues raised in Act I are: the importance of education; the development of a sense of responsibility to one’s family; parent-child disagreements; concern with physical appearance and the concomitant changes adolescents undergo; the establishment of rules and the observation of traditions in a family; the aspirations of parents and children; the ties that bind one to home and family; the pleasures family life can offer. The Stage Manager underscores and occasionally expands the points raised.

Act Two links the Gibbs and Webb families by the wedding of their older children to each other. A lasting bond has been created. The difficulty parents face in “letting go” of their children suffuses this act. Students often feel parents (and teachers) treat them as babies and usually respond with humor to this strand of the family theme. George and Emily’s first “serious” conversation is beautifully portrayed; it points out the difficulties of giving voice to feelings. The conversation also marks the coming-of-age for the two characters. Modeling oneself after one’s parents, or living one’s life in opposition to their advice, is also touched on. Again, the importance of the family and its traditions are paramount.

Act Three presents the time beyond death. Emily is present at her own burial and speaks with the deceased. Emily is uneasy: she is not yet at peace, as are the souls she is with. Having revisited a moment in her life, Emily returns feeling that absorption in everyday cares blinds people to true living.

“Blessed Be the Tie That Binds,” a hymn which is sung in all three acts, is most poignant and telling here. The importance of really looking at and connecting with people—family, lovers, friends—is again underscored. *All* humanity is bound by the past, the present, and the future. Human beings, much like the star we live on, are straining to move from what we are to what we can become.

## II

---

Is *Our Town* relevant to us and to our students? I believe it is. Those who see only the surface—daily life in a small town in New Hampshire at the turn of the century—will disagree. Once we see the larger issues and realize the wealth of material presented to us, agreement must follow.

Much in the tradition of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, *Our Town* celebrates the commonplace, the ordinary, the daily life. The concern with the questions of youth, marriage, and death are *our* questions, as well as those of George and Emily. The audience is deeply involved in the play—for it is Life. We make our own inner connections with the drama. As Goldstone avers, *Our Town* is a play about belonging—to a family, to a community, and to a nation. <sup>1</sup>

Wilder likened his vision to that of an archaeologist: the view of the telescope combined with the view of the microscope. *Our Town*, he states, asks a question which is the central theme of the play: What is the relation between the countless unimportant details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history, and current religious ideas, on the other?

He wished to depict, and to have us take part in, the life of a village against the life of the stars. <sup>2</sup> In searching for the best form to express the universality, Wilder decided that drama was ideal. Drama, he thought, typified raising individualized action—what we see happening before us—into the realm of the universal. Drama is always “now,” possessing heighten vitality. <sup>3</sup>

But for a time, Wilder was dissatisfied with the theatre. He stopped believing in what he was seeing. The words did not ring true; he characterized them as “soothing.” He thought theatre as merely a diversion began in the nineteenth century with the rise of the middle classes, desirous of a theatre which would not disturb them. The distance they desired was fostered by the use of the box set, which Wilder likened to a museum showcase. The stage became littered with props, concrete objects which narrowed the action to one time and place. Attempts to be “real” all but destroyed Wilder’s belief in the theatre. <sup>4</sup>

In an effort to capture reality rather than verisimilitude in the theatre, Wilder began writing one-act plays. What is said and felt is what is important; props are minimal. “The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden” focuses on a family taking an automobile trip; it was Wilder’s first attempt to write about modern America and clearly prefigures *Our Town*. <sup>5</sup> “The Long Christmas Dinner” moves through and across time, tracing ninety years in the history of a family in twenty minutes. Again the focus is on relationships, on what is said, rather than on how “real” things look. In these two one-act plays, one sees the beginnings of what is fully developed in *Our Town* :

a paring down to essentials;  
a ranging through and across time;  
an insistence on the universality of the human condition.

In *Our Town*, we find the same sort of focus. Believing that the imagination of the audience must come into

use if the audience is to recognize its own situation in the play, Wilder eliminated the things which distract. Dispensing with box sets, Wilder replaced elaborate props with a few token articles. Through the use of pantomime, he suggested activities such as lighting the stove and shelling peas. The elimination of distractions forces an involvement with the drama, doing away with drama's distance.

The use of the Stage Manager also serves to negate illusion. On occasion, the Stage Manager reflects upon his role in the proceedings, bringing ordinary people who believe they are leading individual lives into relation with general values. The questions raised concern basic *human*—rather than individual—conditions. He introduces, takes part in, and concludes the play, interacting with the audience and the characters, thus destroying the usual separation between the stage and the audience. His excursions into sociology and pedantry (the exact geographical location of Grover's Corners) can be viewed as a gentle satire on the "realism" Wilder detested. The Stage Manager also serves as an announcer; however, his words reveal a knowledge of the future fates of characters in the play.

Wilder thought that drama was an art which rests upon the work of many collaborators: the dramatist, the director, the actors, and the audience. The wise dramatist takes advantage of the collaboration, being sure that the strength of the play is in narration. The dramatist must be an instinctual storyteller, one who couples ideas with illustrations.

The idea of a collaborative effort is valuable, I think, in a classroom, with its "Stage Manager" and "actors," the teacher and the students.

### III

---

In addition to *Our Town*, we will read and discuss the titles below. Emphasis will be on the family issues presented in individual works, and on the commonalities in all our readings. Other titles include:

*The Human Comedy* by William Saroyan. This episodic, far-ranging story of a family and a community during wartime makes allusions to *The Odyssey*. The family, despite separation and death, continues and endures. Students seem to have the most difficulty with episodes which are seen through the eyes of Homer, the youngest child in the Macauley family. It is as if his sense of wonder at the world were alien to them.

*Lord of the Flies* extends the concept of the family further. Family now is taken to mean the law-giving, civilizing agency. After experiencing initial difficulty with the "English-ness" of the novel, students respond to the story: the separation from adult authority, the battle of good and evil, and the rescue of a group of boys corresponding in age to my students. Independence, the development of rituals, as well as questions of fairness, intrigue eighth graders.

*The Member of the Wedding* has a teenaged protagonist who feels she belongs to no one and nothing. Frankie is dealing with a changing body, mercurial shifts in moods, changing world views, emerging sexuality, the need to leave, and the desire to belong. Her family situation—a dead mother, an all-but-absent father, a housekeeper who is a mother-figure/fountain of wisdom, a young cousin—provides much of the impetus for Frankie's actions and confusion. The desire to belong, to be loved, is the strongest link between this novel and *Our Town*.

*The Diary of Anne Frank* has assumed a cult status with eighth graders. Many of the same themes appear in

*The Member of the Wedding* . The sense of family is much stronger in *The Diary* , however, as it is in *Our Town* . Forced to live in close quarters by a terrifying necessity, two families find that everything is intensified: love, courage, the desire for learning, friction between parent and child.

With *The Diary* , I'm reminded of an important point: I try to give students a sense—sometimes brief, sometimes detailed—of what was going on in the world during the time portrayed in our reading. We may read selections from popular histories or view and discuss documentaries. A sense of history—“the why”—is sadly lacking among the students.

The plays in the unit have met with success. *A Thousand Clowns* , a comedy about an unconventional family unit, generally delights students. It is quick, lively, and sophisticated. Nonconformity, a theme central to the play, is of great interest to eighth graders who are looking for ways to find and express themselves. The issue of the “fitness” to be a parent is also central to the play.

*I Remember Mama* is a traditional play about a conventional nuclear family. Students usually give an adequate reading to this gentle play. Not much happens during the course of the play: a lack of action, which can be deadly, is counterbalanced by the view of a family straining to survive and realize its potential.

A black Chicago family struggles with seemingly insurmountable problems in *A Raisin in the Sun* . Confronted with moral and financial dilemmas, the family insists on surviving and realizing its potential. Thematically similar to *I Remember Mama* , this play is decidedly more dramatic and well-written.

The overall year-long unit will also include short stories and poems centering on the family. Short stories will include:

“Raymond’s Run” by Toni Cade Bambara. This story details the development of a sense of responsibility for a handicapped sibling. How the main character realizes her potential while helping her brother realize his is beautifully depicted.

“All Around the Mulberry Tree” by Kristin Hunter. A family from the south adjusts to life in a northern housing project, frequently running into trouble with the authorities. They refuse, however, to submit to dehumanizing elements and continue to grow, literally and figuratively.

Poems will include works by twentieth-century British poets. I will use poetry’s direct appeal to the particular and the universal throughout the course of the unit. The poems by British poets briefly discussed below will be used with *Our Town* . Comments are drawn from my lecture notes in “Twentieth Century British Literature, Drama, and Culture” at the University of London summer school.

W. B. Yeats spanned two eras; he was writing at the end of the Victorian era and well into the Modern age. Yeats’ theme of making, unmaking, and remaking is evidenced by his concern with reshaping and making myth and reworking poetic forms.

“The Cold Heaven” and “Among Schoolchildren” are memory poems. Yeats saw imagination as inseparable from memory. Both poems extol the surprise and stimulation of involuntary memory. “The Cold Heaven” illustrates Yeats’ view that at death we live our lives backward again (the “dreaming back”) and so live it all again, enduring against pain. He counterpoints the heat and passion of youth with the coldness of old age.

The idea for “Among Schoolchildren” came into being after an inspection visit Yeats made to a convent school. The poem moves from the poet’s musings on the children in the classroom out into the universe: the past, the

present, and the future; the baby, the child, and the “old scarecrow.” For my purposes, the poem will center on students’ dreams and hopes and will be used to show the multiplicity of ideas, events, influences which goes into the formation of our “selves.” The poem concludes with an image of complete integration; the dancer swept by music *is* the dance.

Thomas Hardy, a Victorian novelist and Modern poet, was under the guidance of a rural Muse. Hardy turned from novels to poetry, seeking greater freedom of expression. In general, Hardy’s poems were dramatic, anecdotal narratives which tended to universalize experience. “Time” is the continuing theme in his poetry. I feel his poems will be accessible to students, for there is very little “literary” language.

“The Self-Unseeing” suggests that many of us go through life in a state of somnambulism, not seeing the people and objects around us. All too often, we realize too late how happy we were. Like the two Yeats poems, “The Self-Unseeing” was triggered by an involuntary memory—in this case, recalling a doorway. The people referred to might be lovers; they might be mother and child.”

“Regret Not Me” ranges back and forth through time. A spirit speaks of the peace found in death, ruefully and ironically regretting a somewhat haphazard path through life. Regret, however, is overshadowed by the joy the memories occasion.

“The Boy’s Dream” asks a question: What desires influence our dreams? The boy yearns for a symbol of beauty rather than for the strength his lameness denies him.

Dylan Thomas drew on the strong oral and visionary religious traditions of his native Wales. Firmly rooted in the Modern Age, Thomas was indebted to the past for inspiration.

In “Fern Hill,” an adult remembers a carefree childhood existence: a happy home life, freedom, and adventure. As with Hardy, the memories are tinged with a slight ruefulness. Though they can be confusing, Thomas’ word constructions and puns are illustrative of the sheer joy and power which can be found in words.

Thomas wrote “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” for his dying father. Wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men have their different regrets. The regrets should lead to rage at—rather than quiet acceptance of—death. A dying person can be viewed as an inspiring source of strength.

Because literature concerning the family abounds, I envision numerous additions to the reading in the unit.

The family is a vital theme, one important to us and our students. To explore some of the problems, to see ourselves as members contributing to the richness and variety of family life—indeed to Life itself—is crucial to the development of our students.

## LESSON PLANS

---

I’ve given a possible lesson plan for each act in *Our Town* . Please understand that they don’t detail *all* we will do. The family and universal themes mentioned earlier in the paper will be discussed when appropriate; writing themes will be derived from small- and large-group discussions.

ACT ONE: Part of our discussion will center on education and aspirations. Questions will include:

Why does the Stage Manager feel Joe Crowell's education was "wasted"? Do you agree? Why? Why not?

What were George's expectations, hopes for the future? Are his hopes in agreement or conflict with his parents' hopes for him?

What are your hopes for the future? How can school help you attain these hopes?

Are your expectations in agreement or conflict with your parents' hopes for you?

After reading "Among Schoolchildren", we will discuss:

early school memories (which can also serve as bases for writing assignments);

hopes and aspirations in greater detail;

the importance of education as one of the shapes of our "selves".

A student-generated questionnaire determining parental expectations of what school should do for and offer to students will be administered and discussed.

ACT TWO: Discussion will center on parents' reactions to children growing up and moving away. Questions will include:

In what ways are Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb shown to be "protective" parents?

In what ways are Dr. Gibbs and Mr. Webb shown to be bemused by marriage?

How do Emily and George react to their parents' attitudes?

How will Emily and George strengthen family ties?

The Stage Manager's query, "How do such things begin?", will be addressed by reading and discussing "The Self-Unseeing" by Thomas Hardy. We will focus on happy times—the little things, often taken for granted, which please us.

Possible writing assignment: react/respond to a view currently held by your parents about *you*. State the view . . . support it or refute it!

ACT THREE: We will read and discuss Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" and Hardy's "Regret Not Me." Thomas' poem advocates rage as death approaches, since each life must have some regrets. Hardy's poem cautions against regretting *death*, having lived a joyful life.

Students will be asked to recall a family member/friend who has died. They will try to evoke that person either in a poem or a “character/sketch.” Personal memory is stressed—rather than what the student has been told about a relative or friend.

## Notes

---

1. Richard H. Goldstone, *Thornton Wilder : An Intimate Portrait* (New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), p. 140.
2. Thornton Wilder, *American Characteristics and Other Essays* (New York, Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 100-03.
3. *Ibid .*, p. 125.
4. *Ibid .*, pp. 104-08.
5. Goldstone, *Thornton Wilder : An Intimate Portrait* , pp. 86-87.

## Student Reading List

---

\*Bambara, Toni. “Raymond’s Run.”

Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl* . New York: Modern Library, 1958.

\*Gardner, Herb. *A Thousand Clowns* .

Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies* . New York: Putnam, 1964.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun* . New York: NAL, 1961.

\*Hunter, Kristin. “All Around the Mulberry Tree.”

McCullers, Carson. *The Member of the Wedding* . New York: Bantam, 1969.

Saroyan, William. *The Human Comedy* . New York: Dell Pub. Co.

\*Van Druten, John. *I Remember Mama* .

Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town* . New York: Avon Books, 1975.



\*Items are widely anthologized.

## Bibliography for Teachers

---

Goldstone, Richard H. *Thornton Wilder : An Intimate Portrait* . New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1975.

Papajewski, Helmut. *Thornton Wilder* . New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965.

Wilder, Thornton. *American Characteristics and Other Essays* . New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979.

——— . *The Journals of Thornton Wilder* , ed. Donald Gallup. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>