

## 2h. *Our Town* as Memory

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Tennessee Williams, another American playwright, coined the term “memory play” in describing his play *The Glass Menagerie*. Written in 1944—six years after *Our Town* premiered—the play includes the following note from Williams:

The scene is memory and is therefore non-realistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart.

The interior is therefore rather dim and poetic. (Williams 11)

The narrator of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield, then adds on to this thought in his opening narration:

The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings. I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother Amanda, my sister Laura and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes. (Williams 14)

From first glance, *The Glass Menagerie* presents itself with a narrator figure directly addressing the audience by explaining the conventions of the play as well as information about some of the other characters involved in the play’s narrative. A striking resemblance to *Our Town*’s own opening moments with the Stage Manager is made here, which only

begs the question: did *Our Town* pave the way for the modern memory play? Or rather, is *Our Town* itself a proto memory play?

Memory plays traditionally feature A) a narrator who B) draws the events of the play from memory and C) also serves an active role in the play's narrative. Tom Wingfield, the narrator of *The Glass Menagerie*, explains the events of the play as he remembers while also participating in the play's plot with other characters, thus checking all three boxes fairly easily. The same can be applied to *Our Town* when focusing on the Stage Manager. Given his frequent use of direct address to the audience, the narrator safely identifies as the narrator of the play, driven by an interest to share this story with audiences. As such, I propose that the events of *Our Town* exist as a product of the Stage Manager's memory of Grover's Corners and the people who lived and died there; given his role as narrator as well as his interaction with other characters (sometimes as himself and other times as other characters like Mr. Morgan), it stands to reason that the Stage Manager plays a greater part in the play than just interjecting his thoughts to the audience.

In the case of *Our Town*, the Stage Manager's function as a vast repository of facts about the town and the play itself perhaps indicate his photographic memory, if not his uncanny passion and attachment to the town and its citizens. Many productions of *Our Town* depict the Stage Manager as an almost ambivalent figure whose sole purpose is to be a narrator, thus seemingly detaching him from any stakes or connection to the characters. I believe humanizing the Stage Manager makes for a much more engaging audience-narrator dynamic and to humanize the Stage Manager, one could frame the play

from his point of view. After all, he plays a handful of other characters in *Our Town*, not just himself. An obvious knowledge of these people's lives is within the Stage Manager, and deepening that depiction through the Stage Manager's memory opens more discussion about who the Stage Manager is or what he represents.

To answer that question, one must look at what *Our Town* communicates. Looming over these bright, brilliant depictions of life and love in the play is death. The play makes early mention of it in the Stage Manager's opening monologue, first by noting how both Dr. Gibbs and Mrs. Gibbs will die, whether those deaths appear on stage or not (Th. Wilder 8). Two short pages later, the Stage Manager offers a stark reminder of the spoils of life's violence include even those most full of life:

Want to tell you something about that boy Joe Crowell there. Joe was awful bright—graduated from high school here, head of his class. So he got a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech. Graduated head of his class there, too. It was all wrote up in the Boston paper at the time. Goin' to be a great engineer, Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France.—All that education for nothing. (Th. Wilder 10)

The fact that humans prove expendable to not only the circumstances of life but also to each other serves as the play's core message: look around. Take in life. Take it all in before you lose it or it is taken from you. The Stage Manager, a bystander to the characters' fates, can only watch and deliver words of wisdom to the audience. In effect, the Stage Manager represents the spirit of life and death, in all its good and all its bad; he can only wish that future generations in the audiences learn from the experiences, knowledge, and memories he imparts about Grover's Corners.

Other qualifying elements of memory plays include the use of non-realistic theatrical conventions and “dim lighting.” *Our Town*, as Thornton Wilder wrote it, already fulfills the first of these two additional elements on its own—through the inclusion of narration as well as character asides, the device of imaginary or invisible props, and the explicitly called for lack of scenery, *Our Town* breaks several stage traditions and grew notorious at its 1938 for this departure from the familiar dramas of the time.

As for dim lighting, that is up for a designer to establish with a director. If I had my way, the play would make use of lighting as a means of illusory and sensory veiling. An absence of light requires an audience to fill in the visual blanks from their own memory. An excess or abstraction of light over-stimulates the mind and makes one similarly disoriented, trying to remember what the scene or situation looked like normally—perhaps even realistically. Of course, realism is not the path we want to go. *Our Town* is a visceral departure from reality rooted in truth. It is more than reality.

To sum, the Stage Manager serves a central role in *Our Town* as the keeper of all those stories from Grover’s Corners. Audiences should want to and feel invited to experience the play and connect it to their own lives. It is as the Stage Manager implores: “Will you remember that, please?” (Th. Wilder 60).