

Culminating Writing Task Exemplar Student Response

Sound the alarm bells--American communities are in decline. With several prominent authors lamenting the era where neighbors were friends and communities were composed of engaged, civic-minded individuals, one cannot help but wish for a return to yesteryear. Plagued by the demands of the workplace and availability of media and online connections, Americans and their communities have become distracted and disconnected. However, Thornton Wilder's portrayal of Grover's Corner in the play *Our Town* raises an important question: Is this a fair portrayal, or does modern technology emphasize the gaps that already existed? Although *Our Town* is set decades before the decline of community bonds from the impact of television and social media, Grover's Corners fails to represent a true community due to the characters' superficial relationships with one another, the unequal access to opportunity, and Wilder's emphasis on lost opportunity.

In order for a community to thrive, individuals within that community must engage with one another in trusting, mutually beneficial relationships. As Putnam argues in *Bowling Alone*, the United States has seen a decline in social bonds and community due to factors including women entering the workforce and rapid increases in technology, including the introduction of television and the explosion of the Internet. According to Putnam, this has led American citizens to spend increasing amounts of time cocooned within their households, disconnected from the social relationships that once formed the fabric of American life. While the characters in *Our Town* do not have access to the technology or the modern-day demands cited in *Bowling Alone*, they interact with one another in superficial ways that do not allow them to form deep, intimate relationships with one another. For example, the mothers are constantly rushing their children to breakfast and school or making meals for their families, spending little time truly engaging in meaningful conversation with the most important individuals in their lives. Even when the stakes are raised, the families still struggle to engage in meaningful, intimate conversations with one another. On Emily's wedding day, her mother laments the fact that she was unable to share any information to help her understand the expectations that would be associated with her wedding night. This lack of communication between mother and daughter signals the same type of lack of true connectedness between individuals that Putnam cites in *Bowling Alone*. Without these strong connections, the community bonds that exist in Grover's Corners lack the substance and depth of a true community. Through the character interactions, Wilder fails to portray a true community that is rooted in trust between the members of that community.

While the relationships that Wilder portrays demonstrate a superficial level of connection, the individuals in the community lack equal access to opportunity, which also demonstrates a lack of true community. Within the text, Wilder conveys Grover's Corners to be a patriarchal society, where gender roles are clearly established and individuals act in the ways that are expected of them given their family, social class, and gender. Societal expectations dictate that men and women of their age marry, and then women tend to the family and the household while men engage in providing for the family economically through the work force. However, throughout the text, Wilder includes examples that demonstrate individuals questioning their lack of influence and opportunity within the society. For example, Mrs. Gibbs discusses her desire to sell a piece of furniture and use the money to travel to a foreign country, but seems resigned to the fact that this will not happen because of her husband's decision-making power. She states, "Oh, I'm sorry I mentioned it. Only it seems to me that once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don't talk in English and don't even want to." This demonstrates the way in which women in Grover's Corners lack opportunity to make key decisions within their families and within the community. While Mr.

Webb, the town's newspaper editor, states that women have "indirect influence" with voting given they can help persuade their husbands, it is clear that Grover's Corners does not respect the ideas of all individuals equally. The individual, and the ability of the individual to come to self-understanding and influence the world around them, is a key component of what Deresiewicz argues is lost given today's obsession with social media and constant connectedness. However, this same idea applies to *Our Town* given that the ideas of certain individuals are completely disregarded or discounted by a society that only values some over others. When a community only values and affirms the ideas of some of its citizens, it cannot be a true community.

In addition to the lack of equal opportunity that characters face in *Our Town*, Wilder also emphasizes lost opportunities the characters create for themselves. Within the text, Wilder focuses on the passage of time throughout all three acts; this can be seen through the stage manager's emphasis on time and his focus on the deaths of the members of the community. Throughout the text, the focus on the passage of time symbolizes the idea of lost opportunity, which is most emphasized through Emily's death. Upon dying, Emily is granted the opportunity to return to her twelfth birthday to be among the living. During her return, Emily is overcome with grief because of the way in which her mother and the family members never take time to truly look at one another and see one another while they have the opportunity. While sobbing, she states, "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.... I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed." Emily's words demonstrate a truth that mirrors the type of concerns that both Putnam and Deresiewicz raise in their texts--individuals have become so self-consumed with daily distractions that they fail to prioritize and nurture the relationships that sustain them and their communities. Although Emily and the citizens of Grover's Corners are not plagued with the modern distractions that technology exacerbates, they are distracted nonetheless and fail to appreciate the time that they have with one another and nurture their relationships to strengthen the bonds within families and across the community. Had Putnam or Deresiewicz examined Grover's Corners, they could draw a similar conclusion and portray this community as an example within their texts to demonstrate the way in which individuals have become disconnected from themselves and each other, leading to a community that does not prioritize building and nurturing bonds.

Through the superficial character relationships, lack of equal opportunity, and emphasis on time and lost experiences, Thornton Wilder portrays a community that is as distracted and disconnected as one that might be found today. While the increases in technology and social media continue to make it easier to disconnect from others or fail to connect in a meaningful way, Wilder's portrayal of Grover's Corners demonstrates that it is not technology or modernity that is responsible for the decline. Rather, like Deresiewicz argues within "The End of Solitude," individuals within those communities are responsible for allowing themselves to become distracted to the point of disconnection. Wilder's play, and the works of Putnam and Deresiewicz, share a similar warning to the individuals and communities of today--connect and engage deeply and meaningfully before it is too late.