Main Street Study Guide

Main Street by Sinclair Lewis

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Main Street, originally published in 1920, is the story of a sophisticated young woman who moves to a small town in the American Midwest in 1912 and struggles against the small-minded culture of the citizens who live there. The town, Gopher Prairie, is closely patterned on Sauk Centre, Min-nesota, which is where Sinclair Lewis grew up, although the book makes clear that it could be any of thousands of towns across the heartland. Carol Kennicott (née Milford), the protagonist of this novel, is a fascinating study in complexity: she loves her husband enough to live in Gopher Prairie with him, yet nearly enters several affairs in her longing for freedom; she hates the town for its gossip and its simplicity but wants nothing more than to make it better. The book touches on eternal American issues, such as women's rights, business among friends, and the spirit of anti-intellectualism that has always been at the center of small-town America, where sensitivity is often equated with self-absorption.

Main Street was an immediate, phenomenal success when it was published in 1920, making it the book of the century up to that point. It was the first in a string of novels written by Sinclair Lewis in the 1920s, including *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Elmer Gantry*, that established him as one of the preeminent authors of American literature. In these works, Lewis presents a response to a form of simplistic enthusiasm that tends to run through American culture, examining institutional religion, art, business, patriotism, and medicine with a skeptical eye. In 1930, he became the first American author to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Author Biography

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in 1885 in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, a small town on the Central Plains that provided the inspiration for *Main Street*'s Gopher Prairie. His father was a physician and, like Will Kennicott in the novel, was excessively concerned with appearances and proud of the rugged simplicity of his neighbors. Growing up, Lewis knew that he was considered odd by his fellow townspeople and that their narrow judgments did not prevail throughout the world at large. He attended Sauk Centre High School and in 1903 went to Yale, where he developed his writing, eventually becoming editor of the *Yale Literary Magazine* and publishing in the local New Haven newspaper. During extended breaks from college, he traveled the country, at one time working as a janitor in the New Jersey commune that was started by novelist Upton Sinclair.

Lewis graduated Yale with a bachelor's degree in 1908. He married Grace Livingston Hegger in 1914, and they had one son. The couple traveled while he worked various temporary jobs in the publishing industry and wrote a string of novels that were meant to be commercially successful, though not necessarily artistic.

Lewis's career changed in 1920, with the publication of *Main Street*. Not only was it his first book to gain widespread critical praise, but it was a phenomenal financial success as well, selling 295,000 copies in its first year. The book established him as a literary figure of the first magnitude, a position that he held for the rest of the decade but that slipped away from him thereafter. During the twenties, Lewis produced satirical novels that mirrored the hypocrisy of American life and are still recognized as standards of American literature. *Babbitt* (1922) showed a shallow-minded but enthusiastic salesman; *Arrowsmith* (1925) examined doctors and the medical community; and *Elmer Gantry* (1927) presented a revivalist preacher and con man. *Dodsworth* (1929) is a serious examination of the strains that success puts on marriage. (Lewis divorced his first wife in 1928 and married pioneering newspaperwoman Dorothy Thompson.)

His work received high praise, although it did not always please Lewis. He rejected the 1925 Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith* because he objected to the award's stated goal of recognizing the book that "best presents the wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standards of American manners and manhood." He did, however, accept the Nobel Prize for literature in 1930, the first American novelist ever awarded that recognition.

For the next twenty-one years, Lewis was a senior statesman of American literature, but he never produced any work that equaled the novels of the twenties. He wrote nine more novels, but only two—*It Can't Happen Here* and *Kingsblood Royal*—are worth the attention of modern readers. Personal hardships also clouded his later years, particularly his divorce from Dorothy Thompson in 1942 and the death of Wells, his son from his first marriage, in France during World War II.

Lewis died in Rome in 1951.

Plot Summary

Part I

Main Street concerns the struggle faced by a free-minded woman, Carol Kennicott, who has been raised to be artistic and inquisitive but is confined to life in a small town on the Minnesota plains. The book opens with Carol in college in Minneapolis, full of lofty aspirations that even her classmates find intimidating. After receiving her degree, she lives in Chicago for a year before taking a job in the public library in St. Paul. After three years, she meets Dr. Will Kennicott at a party at a friend's house.

As Dr. Kennicott courts her, he talks with pride about the town he lives in, Gopher Prairie, telling her about the colorful characters who live there and their simple, earnest, moral values. Arriving in town as Kennicott's bride, Carol is disappointed to find the citizens crass and humorless and the town ugly and unimaginative. She pushes her insecurity aside, hoping to fill the role of a dutiful wife. With Kennicott's urging, she makes plans to bring culture to the town.

Many of the citizens treat Carol with suspicion, but being married to a physician gains her entry into upper-class society. The other wives are shocked when she brings up subjects such as sex and labor unions. At parties, the doctor's friends are accustomed to telling the same jokes and performing the same "stunts," such as comic songs or ethnic stories. When it comes Carol's turn to throw a party, she decides on an exotic Chinese theme. Later, she hears that people thought she was showing off and being extravagant with her husband's money.

Carol attends the Jolly Seventeen, a bridge club, but is made to feel uncomfortable by sarcastic remarks. The women's study club, the Thanatopsis Club, invites her to be a member, but she is shocked to find that the meeting she attends about "English poetry" intends to cover *all* English poetry in one afternoon, indicating that the town women's interest in art is superficial at best. Her idea to revitalize city hall and turn it into a meeting center for the whole town becomes lost as various locals promote their own plans, the end result being nothing is done.

Carol does find some members of the town who think as she does. Going for a walk on a winter afternoon, she runs into Miles Bjornstam, a carpenter and handyman. He invites her into his shack and talks with her about his socialist ideas, recognizing in her a true spark of independence that everyone else in town appears to be missing. The town schoolteacher, Vida Sherwin, is a member in good standing with the women's clubs, but she can also appreciate the plans that Carol has for the place, counseling her toward patience and making her feel in her loneliness that she is not unreasonable, just a little impetuous.

Carol finds a lawyer, Guy Pollock, to be some sort of a kindred spirit. Pollock is an outcast like her, a reader and a gentle spirit. She makes up an excuse to visit him at his

office one afternoon, and throughout their conversation there is an excitement and awkwardness that makes her come away suspecting that she may be falling in love with him. In the argument that ensues between Carol and her husband, she sees the world through his perspective, and she realizes that it is Will she loves. When she runs into Guy after that, in public places, they are uncomfortable together, and nothing more is made of the affair that nearly started between them.

Part II

As life goes on in Gopher Prairie, Carol still finds herself dissatisfied. She is disappointed when she sees the angry Red Swede, Miles Bjornstam, soften his defiant stance as he falls in love with Carol's maid Bea and marries her, buying his own dairy farm and becoming a part of capitalist society. She organizes a small theater company with the help of Guy and Vida, but the citizens who expressed interest in participating only show up sporadically and want to put on a melodrama called *The Girl From Kankakee*, which Carol realizes, soon after the raising of the curtain, is "a bad play abominably acted."

Soon after that, Carol has a baby, Hugh. The narrative explains that Vida Sherwin came close to having an affair with Will Kennicott in 1911, a year before he met Carol, and that now, in 1914, Vida's jealousy of the Kennicott baby drives her to pursue and marry a shop clerk. After that, relations between Carol and Vida are strained, as Vida becomes even more solidly planted in Gopher Prairie society and her old disappointment over losing Kennicott eats away at her.

Maud Dyer, the wife of Kennicott's friend Dave Dyer, comes to visit Kennicott at his office. She talks about how mean and frugal her husband is and how lonely she has become, and then she invites Kennicott to come to see her at home that night, when Dave is out at work. He struggles against the impulse and then gives in to it, starting an affair.

Carol and her baby spend time with her former maid, now Bea Bjornstam, who also has a baby boy. The local women find this relationship improper, because of their class differences. When Bea and the baby become ill with typhoid fever, they cannot get a nurse to stay with them, so Carol becomes her former maid's nurse. The baby dies, and then Bea dies. Miles Bjornstam leaves town, cursing the callous heartlessness of Gopher Prairie.

A new young man, Erik Valborg, arrives in town. He is a tailor's apprentice, but he wears colorful, stylish clothes and reads and writes poetry. The locals give him the insulting name of "Elizabeth" and play tricks on him. When Carol meets him, though, she finds him sensitive and intelligent, even though some of his theories about art are vague. He wants to design women's clothes, and Carol encourages him to follow his dream. Their infatuation with each other comes to a head one night when Erik convinces her to go for a walk in the woods with him. While they are walking, Will Kennicott drives up and, without a word of jealousy, insists on driving them home. At home, he describes what

life would be like for Carol to be married to a young assistant tailor who might never be worth anything as an artist. The next day, Erik leaves town on a train, as Miles did.

Part III

Carol takes Hugh and goes to live in Washington D. C. for a few years. She gets a job in the government and shares an apartment with some single girls. While there, she is able to lead the urbane lifestyle that she always imagined: going to concerts, museums, and lectures. She is able to freely talk about progressive social movements, such as suffrage for women.

Kennicott does not try to restrict her freedom. He writes sometimes but does not come to see her until she has been in Washington more than a year. Then he is uncertain about whether they are still married. Carol slowly warms to him, however, and they take a trip together to South Carolina.

A discussion about her situation with "a generalissima of suffrage" convinces Carol to return to Gopher Prairie. When she does so, she is five months pregnant with her second baby, a daughter. Back in Gopher Prairie, she is less defensive of the small-mindedness and more willing to suffer the unthinking insults of ignorant citizens. She takes small positions with the women's group and allows the publicity-seeking mayor to take over and corrupt her idea for a Community Day celebration, all the while planning a better life for her children.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 Summary

Main Street is Sinclair Lewis' novel of American life as portrayed by the residents of the fictional town of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota in the early 1900's. The microcosm of life in this small town is held up for inspection and comparison to other towns all around the world for all the similarities in their functions and foibles.

As the story begins, Carol Milford is a college student at Blodgett College in 1910 Minneapolis. Carol is an intellectual girl with aesthetic sensibilities and dreams. She wants a life that includes more than marriage and children, even though there are many boys who would be interested in marrying her. Carol's vision includes upgrading a prairie town in the Midwest to have more style and culture like towns in the East.

Carol graduates college and moves to Chicago, where she lives a bohemian lifestyle complete with beer parties, bobbed hair and cigarettes. Carol does not really fit in with this crowd and moves to St. Paul after a year. Carol works in the St. Paul library for three years, where she endures the tedious work and deflects the attentions of many men.

Carol's future changes, one day, when she meets Dr. Will Kennicott at a friend's house. Kennicott is from Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, and occasionally comes to St. Paul, but prefers small town life. As Carol and Kennicott get acquainted, Kennicott speaks about the wonderful people in Gopher Prairie, and how the town needs someone like Carol to revitalize it.

Carol and Kennicott marry and return to Gopher Prairie by train. Some of the town's notable citizens come to welcome Carol. She moves into Kennicott's house, which had been kept by Kennicott's mother. She has has moved out, so that Carol can make the house her own.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 Analysis

Lewis uses the third person omniscient perspective to tell the story, which means that the reader observes the characters and plot line and can also tell some of the characters' own thoughts and emotions. For example, the narrator describes the cities and towns through which Carol's train passes and also shares Carol's thoughts along the way. We also learn of her initial disappointment in her new home, although she does not voice any of these thoughts.

Lewis establishes Carol as the protagonist of the story, and the plot line will extend according to her actions and motivations. Carol has been raised to be an intellectually curious young woman. Her energies attract the slightly older Dr. Kennicott, who is clearly more enamored with his hometown than is Carol, who is more worldly and

sophisticated. The author sets up this difference in the personalities as the foundation for conflict, as the novel progresses.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 Summary

The citizens of Gopher Prairie are anxious to welcome Carol, and Kennicott tells her of the party that hardware store owner, Sam Clark, and his wife will hold in Carol's honor. Carol is nervous and unpacks, as Kennicott leaves for his office to check on the status of his patients in his absence.

Carol walks down Main Street to get a feel for the town and finds it to be dreary and small. Carol rushes home in horror that she is sentenced to live in this ugly place but tries to take a different perspective and give herself more time to make her decision.

Later that evening, Kennicott escorts Carol to the Clark home, where Carol finds the small group of people to be as exciting as those attending a funeral. Carol was told that these people represent the smartest and most chic in Gopher Prairie, and her spirits are crestfallen in realizing that these are the best the town has to offer.

Carol's artistic temperament prompts her to stir up the conversation by introducing the topics of suffragists and profit sharing. The conversation swells momentarily but falls again to more mundane topics. The women of the town do not approve of Carol's interest in business and political issues, but are forced to tolerate her as the wife of one of the town's two doctors.

Carol regularly accompanies Kennicott on his bird hunting expeditions and is content with her married life. The Kennicotts have not secured any domestic help and take their meals at a local boardinghouse, where Carol gets to know some of the residents. Carol becomes more comfortable in Gopher Prairie and is able to shop at the stores on Main Street without the initial disgust she felt when seeing the town for the first time.

Carol finds a friend in one of the town librarians, Vida Sherwin, who advises Carol on life in Gopher Prairie for a young woman of intellect and style. Carol is pleased that Vida has taken the initiative to include her but reserves judgment and commitment to the organizations Vida has recommended.

After being married for a few months, Carol begins to make major renovations to her home, and has the town buzzing with talk of Carol's remodeling and decorating. Kennicott is concerned about Carol's expenditures for furnishings, which Carol has shipped from St. Paul, none of the local stores having the style and quality that Carol demands.

Carol and Kennicott host a party at which Carol serves exotic Chinese food and encourages the guests to participate in an elaborate game of Chinese theatrics. The guests politely join in but are happy when the evening ends, and they can retire to their homes of quiet complacency.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 Analysis

Lewis creates the characters of the story with complete authenticity for the region and the conservative nature of rural people. Lewis also captures the ethnicity of the Scandinavian people who heavily populate Minnesota, as represented heavily in the character of Miss Bea Sorenson, who becomes Carol and Kennicott's maid.

Bea has come from her farm home to Gopher Prairie, because her cousin, Tina, has found employment in town. She had hoped to be as fortunate. The dialogue of the two cousins is both lyrical and authentic.

"Vell, so you come to town," said Tina.

"Ya. Ay get a yob," said Bea.

"Vell... You got a fella now?"

"Ya. Yim Yacobson."

"Vell. I'm glat to see you. How much you vant a veek?"

"Sex dollar."

"There ain't nobody pay dat. Vait! Dr. Kennicott, I t'ink he marry a girl from de Cities. Maybe she pay dat. Vell. You go take a valk."

"Ya," said Bea.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 Summary

Winter formally arrives in Gopher Prairie, and the whole town is digging in for the season. Local handyman, Miles Bjornstam, services the furnaces of most of the town's homes, and the sight of storm windows being installed all over town is a common one.

Carol delights in organizing skating and sledding parties for the Gopher Prairie smart set, but the residents are not interested in more than one outing. Carol buries her disappointment in rabbit hunting trips with Kennicott but longs for some opportunity for mental stimulation.

Carol joins the Jolly Seventeen social group but does not fit in with the other women, who are content to gossip and do not appreciate Carol's progressive thinking and avant garde style. Vida shares with Carol some of the comments women in the Jolly Seventeen have made about Carol. She is devastated to learn that the women consider her arrogant and ostentatious. Carol maintains a low profile in town for several weeks for fear that people are talking about her, and she does not want to give them any opportunities for inappropriate comments.

Carol tries to share her concerns with Kennicott, but he is oblivious to town gossip and believes the positive comments that people make to him about his new wife. Kennicott does ask Carol to be careful about her patronage in town, so that she purchases from vendors who maintain him as a physician.

This revelation that Carol has not been as well received as she had thought has dampened Carol's hopes of reforming Gopher Prairie, so Kennicott takes her on a trip to Lac-qui-Meurt to visit his mother, who is a pleasure and fortifies Carol's self-esteem once more.

Carol and Kennicott return to Gopher Prairie. Carol finds her confidence vulnerable back in the town with all its gossip and finds herself enjoying the company of Bea, while she re-gains her composure enough to venture out onto Main Street, once again.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 Analysis

Carol Kennicott, the protagonist of the story, finds herself in conflict with most of the citizens of Gopher Prairie. Carol's background as an independent woman with artistic sensibilities threatens the placid demeanor of the town's residents, especially the women whom Carol tries to befriend. Carol's intentions to reform the town into one, which is not only culturally enriched but also aesthetically pleasing, go against the status quo of the town and soon positions Carol as a big city rebel.

Carol's marriage to Kennicott is not altogether what she had imagined either. At times, Carol finds her husband dull and brutish in comparison to her own sensibilities and interests. Carol's position as a doctor's wife both helps and hinders her. The residents are obliged to be courteous but also resent her position in the town's social structure.

Chapters 10, 11, and 12

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 Summary

Kennicott is out of town with a patient for a few days, and Carol is pleased to have the house to herself, so that she can think about the revisions she wants to make to Gopher Prairie. Carol begins to take long walks, which find her way out in the country, and finds little groups of gypsies too poor to live in town. One frosty afternoon in particular, Carol meets a handyman, Mile Bjornstam, who invites her to warm herself in his shanty before making the long walk back to town.

Bjornstam provides Carol with his socialist ideas about government and Gopher Prairie society, and Carol is intrigued to hear such radical thoughts from this unassuming man. Carol is inspired by Bjornstam's thinking and tries to generate interest in the town's residents to implement programs to help those who are more unfortunate, but she cannot get anyone to commit to any new programs.

Carol turns her energy to Kennicott and tries to instill a love of poetry in her husband as a first attempt in improving the town. Kennicott tries but cannot share Carol's interests in the literary arts, and the couple returns to their normal domestic routine.

At Vida's suggestion, Carol accepts an invitation to attend the weekly meeting of the Thanatopsis women's study club. Carol attempts to curb her normal enthusiasm for radical thought and unsolicited opinions and manages to survive the group meeting. Carol is encouraged by a point which she learns during the meeting, regarding the fact that Gopher Prairie is an incorporated city, a fact which launches Carol's next municipal vision.

Carol's new vision is that of an improved city hall, which includes a courtroom, library, theater, art center, lecture room, ballroom, farm bureau, gymnasium, and a rest center for farm wives. Unfortunately, Carol's visits to the city's leading citizens do not raise interest or funds for such an ambitious project. Carol's spirits are once again daunted.

Finally, spring arrives. Carol returns to her normal cheerful self, as she takes long, uninterrupted walks throughout the blooming countryside. Carol continues to revel in the outdoors as the summer progresses, and she and Kennicott spend time at their summer cottage at the lake. Carol finds herself among friends at the lake during these warm days. However, as fall approaches, and the residents return to the city, Carol feels ostracized once more, as Gopher Prairie begins to close up for the season.

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 Analysis

Lewis uses symbolism in his choice for the name of the women's study group, Thanatopsis, which is the name of William Cullen Bryant's poem about death. The word

thanatopsis means a view of death. This is certainly reflective of Carol's view of not only this dismal study group, but of her life in general in the stoic Gopher Prairie.

The author uses the literary technique of foreshadowing in the description of the dreary spring weather precipitating Carol's disappointment over lack of interest in her latest vision for the town. Lewis writes, "For two days there had been steady rain. Even in town the roads were a furrowed welter of mud, hideous to view and difficult to cross. Main Street was a black swamp from curb to curb; on residence streets, the grass parking beside the walks oozed gray water. It was prickly hot, yet the town was barren under the bleak sky."

Lewis also uses the symbolism of the seasons to mirror Carol's mood, as she begins to bloom in the spring, thrive in the summer months, and then wither in the autumn, as the residents of the town withdraw from her.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 Summary

Carol plans to visit friends, Mr. and Mrs. Perry, one evening. When they are not at home, she ends up visiting with attorney, Guy Pollock, whose residence is in the same building as the Perry's. Carol is taken by Guy's intensity and his apparent overwhelming loneliness. She feels drawn to him, in spite of their twenty-year age difference.

Guy tells Carol about how he came to Gopher Prairie, and his resulting boredom with the town, which he calls the Village Virus. Guy warns Carol about this virus which affects ambitious people who come to Gopher Prairie, but end up staying so long that they can no longer go back to the sophisticated life they once knew.

Guy also tells Carol about the dynamics of the town's professional people and their code of confidentiality and sometimes-questionable business ethics. Carol spends the evening talking to Guy, who has also invited the new town dentist and his wife, the Dillons, for coffee to avoid any unfounded rumors.

As Carol walks home, she wonders about Guy's attentions and finds herself dwelling on comments he has made. She wonders if she is falling in love with him. Carol arrives home rather late, much to Kennicott's dismay. They argue about some of the points Guy had raised earlier this evening about the behavior and ethics of the town's professionals.

Kennicott is annoyed that Carol is breaching the territory reserved for himself and the other professional men in town and retaliates by attacking her haughtiness, which is not diminishing in spite of her living here for over a year. Kennicott also shares with Carol his desire for economizing in the household, so that they may one day have the money to build a new house and have a baby.

Carol is drawn to her husband after he shares some of his thoughts. She spends time accompanying him on some of his medical calls, even assisting in some procedures. For a short while, Carol forgets her longing to be a reformer, is content to be the wife of a country doctor, and pushes away all thoughts of Guy Pollock.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 Analysis

Lewis' writing has brief episodes, where an individual character's thoughts are revealed as that character speaks with another person. For example, when Carol and Guy are talking in his office one evening, the character's real thoughts are indicated in parentheses to distinguish them from the actual dialogue.

Carol says, "Tell me, Mr. Pollock, what *is* the matter with Gopher Prairie?"

"Is anything the matter with it? Isn't there perhaps something the matter with you and

me? (May I join you in the honor having something the matter?)"

"(Yes, thanks.) No, I think it's the town.

"Because they enjoy skating more than biology?"

Carol finds a confidante in Guy and shares her feelings of being ostracized by the other townspeople with him. Lewis uses the literary technique of a metaphor to show how Carol feels when she says, "I'm not a hummingbird. I'm a hawk; a tiny leashed hawk, pecked to death by these large, flabby, wormy hens."

Lewis also uses a metaphor to succinctly describe Carol's view of her crumbling marriage, when she "suddenly saw the foot board of the bed as the footstone of the grave of love." Obviously, the bed is not a grave, but the description does describe Carol's perspective of the marriage bed she shares with Kennicott for whom her love is fading.

Chapters 16, 17, and 18

Chapters 16, 17, and 18 Summary

Carol's newfound pleasure in Kennicott is short-lived. She passes an unhappy Christmas, when her husband barely notices the effort she has made to create the perfect holiday. For the first time in a long time, Carol cries for the memory of her beloved father brought on by his love for this special time of year.

Kennicott's interests include only five things, which are medicine, land investments, Carol, driving and hunting. Carol tries to immerse herself in each as much as possible, in order to maintain a connection with her husband. Eventually, she retreats back into her own world of literature and the arts, which do not appeal to Kennicott in the slightest.

Even a night out at the movies ends in discord, because Carol and Kennicott cannot agree on which picture to see or the interpretation of what they do view together. Carol secretly steels herself against her crumbling marriage with the thought that she will go on, no matter what comes.

Carol maintains her friendship with the anarchistic handyman, Bjornstam, who strikes up a friendship with Bea during time spent cutting wood for the Kennicotts. Bjornstam has dinner with Bea several times in Carol's kitchen. Carol cannot help but feel some jealousy at the budding relationship between her two friends, when her own marriage is wavering.

After the holidays, Carol and Kennicott take a bobsled trip to their lake cottage with their regular group of friends, where the evening's entertainment includes vigorous games of charades. Carol is so excited by the new game that she suggests that the group form a dramatic club to present plays to the town. In the back of her mind, Carol hopes that the formation of the Gopher Prairie Dramatic Association will stave off the Village Virus for a little while longer.

Carol's high hopes for the drama company are quickly dashed, as the others in the group decline her suggestions of a Shakespeare or George Bernard Shaw production in favor of a lighthearted play called "The Girl from Kankakee." Carol assumes the duties of director, but the cast only halfheartedly immerses in the production. With the first scene on opening night, Carol knows that the production is a disaster.

Chapters 16, 17, and 18 Analysis

Lewis uses poignant symbolism to show Carol's muted spirit, when he writes, "Her violin lay on top of the upright piano. She picked it up. Since she had last touched it the dried strings had snapped, and upon it lay a gold and crimson cigar band." Lewis uses this technique to tell the reader how Carol's artistic sensibilities are drying up from lack of

use. The injury to her creative spirit is further assaulted by the cigar band carelessly tossed on top of the violin by Kennicott, signifying his disregard for her and her artistic interests.

Chapters 19, 20, and 21

Chapters 19, 20, and 21 Summary

A month after the disastrous first production of the Gopher Prairie Dramatic Association, Bea marries Bjornstam in a small wedding orchestrated by Carol. The other women in town cannot understand Carol letting Bea leave to marry, but Bea is soon replaced by a woman named, Oscarina, who is assimilated without incident into the Kennicott household.

Soon after the wedding, Kennicott tells Carol that he has done very well on a land deal, and that they can afford to have a baby. Carol takes the news without much enthusiasm. Seemingly, and without much effort on her part, she has a baby boy, which the Kennicotts name Hugh after Carol's father. Carol surprises herself in her devotion to Hugh, immerses herself in the best interests of her son, and begins to immediately make decisions about his choices for the best college education.

Not long after Hugh's birth, Carol is an attendant in Vida's wedding to Raymie Wutherspoon, the top-selling shoe salesman at the Bon Ton department store. Vida had never confided in Carol her own love for Kennicott during a brief affair the year before Kennicott met Carol. Vida had positioned herself in Kennicott's world by befriending Carol, when the young bride came to Gopher Prairie. She does not understand Carol's dissatisfaction with life, because she is married to the man Vida still loves. Vida's jealousy over Carol's perceived domestic bliss, now complete with a new baby, prompts Vida to force the issue of marriage with Raymie. Vida, who is in her late 30's, is focused on happiness in her little cottage, having lived in a rooming house for so many years.

Chapters 19, 20, and 21 Analysis

Lewis reveals some background information about Vida and Kennicott, which prompted Vida's early befriending of Carol. Vida had alternately pursued and then rebuffed Kennicott's attentions, thinking that she had time to secure a relationship with him. Vida is very surprised, when Kennicott marries a girl from the city. In order to stay connected to Kennicott in a small way, Vida makes friends with Carol and humors Carol's whims and progressive thinking, even though Vida secretly thinks Carol is impulsive and immature.

Lewis uses a metaphor to describe Vida's life at this point, when he writes, "Gray steel that seems unmoving because it spins so fast in the balanced fly-wheel, gray snow in an avenue of elms, gray dawn with the sun behind it - this was the gray of Vida Sherwin's life at thirty-six."

Vida understands that any chance for a life with Kennicott has vanished, because he and Carol have remained married. Therefore, Vida crafts a relationship with Raymie and

manipulates a marriage proposal from him, so that she will no longer have to live the lifestyle of a spinster in this small town.

Chapters 22, 23, and 24

Chapters 22, 23, and 24 Summary

Carol's discontent with her own life increases in scope in spite of her devotion to Hugh. The monotony of daily life begins to stifle her, and her only escape is the in the mountains of books she borrows from the local library. Carol surmises that small town life in America consists of only two traditions; "that the American village remains the one sure abode of friendship, honesty, and clean sweet marriageable girls..." and "that the significant features of all villages are whiskers, iron dogs upon lawns, gold bricks, checkers, jars of gilded cattails, and shrewd comic old men who are known as 'hicks' and who ejaculate 'Waal I swan.'"

Carol grows more despondent that there does not seem to be any escape from these traditions in her own life or in the lives of fictional characters. To Carol's way of thinking, Gopher Prairie is just a microcosm of all villages and cities all over the world, despite the size, language or culture.

Carol is no longer able to share her frustrations and grievances with Vida, who is now secure in her own married status in town. Vida chastises Carol for her impatience and irrational beliefs that Gopher Prairie needs severe reformation. Vida tells Carol that she gives up too quickly on important projects, when instant perfection is not granted. Vida continues by telling Carol that the town has agreed to build a new school and has deliberately left Carol out of the planning.

Carol concedes to some of Vida's criticisms and takes on a troop of Camp Fire Girls as a show of good faith and community spirit. Carol even plants flowers throughout the village to beautify the community but cannot squelch her desires for something more for her life. Not long after Carol and Vida's altercation, the United States enters into World War I. Many of the boys and young men of Gopher Prairie go off to battle, including Vida's new husband, Raymie. The community decides that Kennicott is necessary to the community, and he stays home in spite of his willingness to enlist in the army.

A couple months later, Gopher Prairie gets a visit from its most famous citizen, Percy Bresnahan, the president of the Velvet Motor Car Company, located in Boston. The local professional men are on hand to greet Percy's train upon his arrival and acquiesce to his every need in exchange for bragging rights about being his friend. Percy takes a particular interest in Carol and, on an afternoon ride one day; Percy declares that he finds Carol attractive and intelligent and would love to initiate an affair. Carol rebuffs Percy's advances, and he vows to continue his affections at another time.

Carol is both repulsed and flattered by Percy's attentions. She begins to reevaluate her marriage to Kennicott, which has sunk to a friendship level. Not only do Carol and Kennicott have little to discuss anymore, she is more than irritated by his slovenly appearance. The fighting between Carol and Kennicott escalates to the point that Carol

announces that she will now sleep in the guest room. Carol has used the excuse of the summer heat to sleep separately, but when she begins to redecorate the spare room, Kennicott realizes that Carol's need for a separate space appears to be of a permanent nature.

Kennicott attempts to appease Carol with plans to build a new house. However, when he negates all of her architectural suggestions, Carol drops the discussion of the house. Soon, Kennicott does, too.

Chapters 22, 23, and 24 Analysis

Lewis makes a professional gesture to his literary colleagues by mentioning the authors Carol reads during this period, George Bernard Shaw, H. L. Mencken, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser and others.

In this section, Lewis writes about his main theme, that the Main Street of Gopher Prairie is the same as the Main Street of any town anywhere else in the world. Although languages and cultures may differ, the same institutions and mores exist wherever there is a collection of people.

Lewis expands on this point by saying, "If Kennicott were snatched from Gopher Prairie and instantly conveyed to a town leagues away, he would not realize it. He would go down apparently the same Main Street (almost certainly it would be called Main Street); in the same drug store he would see the same young man serving the same ice cream soda to the same young woman with the same magazines and phonograph records under her arm. Not till he had climbed to his office and found another sign on the door, another Dr. Kennicott inside, would he understand that something curious had presumably happened."

Kennicott would be softly amused by this revelation, but Carol, in contrast, would be appalled at the sameness of finding Gopher Prairie everywhere. Lewis uses a metaphor to describe Carol's growing dissatisfaction with her life, when he writes, "During their first autumn she had smiled over his affection for his hunting coat, but now that the leather had come unstitched in dribbles of pale yellow thread, and tatters of canvas, smeared with dirt of the fields and grease from gun-cleaning, hung in a border of rags, she hated the thing. Wasn't her whole life like that hunting coat?"

Chapters 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31

Chapters 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31 Summary

Carol is not the only one suffering from discontent, as Kennicott longs for Carol to desire him again. Kennicott muses about the women who have insinuated their affections for him late one afternoon, when Maud Dyer, the wife of his friend Dave, enters his office. Maud's neurotic distress leads her to ask Kennicott to visit her at home that evening, because her husband will be working late. Kennicott declines the offer, not altogether sure that he will not go. Feeling guilty for entertaining Maud's offer, Kennicott is especially friendly with Carol that night. However, she rebuffs him, opting to retire early. Kennicott leaves the house on the pretense of visiting a sick patient and makes his way to the Dyer household.

Carol puts all her energy into Hugh, and mother and son take long walks every day to discover new things. Many times, the walks lead them to the home of Bea and Miles Bjornstam, where Hugh can play with their little boy, Olaf. Kennicott does not like the fact that Hugh plays with the son of their former housekeeper, but Carol likes the Bjornstams and will not be dissuaded from visiting them.

Carol has always enjoyed talking to Miles about his socialist views and is happy that he has found delight in Bea and Olaf. On one visit, Carol finds Bea and Olaf desperately ill in bed. Carol brings Kennicott, who diagnoses the mother and son with typhoid fever. Apparently, Miles has been getting water from a different well, and Bea and Olaf were struck with the disease.

While Miles works during the days, Carol nurses Bea and Olaf. Nonetheless, the efforts are for naught, as both mother and son die on the same day. Vida and some of the other women from town come to visit, but Miles sends them away. They had ostracized his wife while she was alive, and he will not have them at his home now. Carol is too distraught and exhausted to attend the funeral, and Miles leaves town soon after to start another farm in Alberta, far away from Gopher Prairie.

A few weeks later, Carol learns of a new young man who has come to town and works in Charlie Hicks' tailoring shop. The young man's name is Erik Valborg, and the boys in town call him "Elizabeth," because of his fine clothes and effeminate manners. Carol first sees Erik at church, thinks that he looks interesting, and determines to find a way to meet him.

Carol takes a pair of Kennicott's trousers into Hick's store to be pressed and meets Erik for the first time. The two converse briefly, and Carol suggests that he come to her home that evening to discuss the regeneration of her dramatic group with the new young schoolteacher, who has moved into the boarding house next door.

Before long, Carol and Erik begin to spend time together, walking or chatting at church picnics. The town is on alert for inappropriate behavior. Carol finds herself strangely attracted to Erik, although she tries to tell herself that she is just serving as his mentor toward a career in the arts. Carol tries to take a trip to Chicago to escape the pull she has toward Erik, but Kennicott advises that they should not travel until after the war. Early one morning, Erik surprises Carol at home after he sees Kennicott leaving town to see a patient. Erik tries to kiss Carol, but she sends him away at the same time that she sees her neighbor, Mrs. Westlake, walking past the house and peering into the windows.

Carol is mildly panicked about what Mrs. Westlake had seen. Soon, Vida visits Carol to warn her that the town is buzzing with gossip about Carol and Erik. Carol assures Vida that there is nothing to the rumors, and Vida reveals to Carol that she had once been in love with Kennicott and cannot bear to see him hurt by Carol's indiscretions.

Carol is moved by Vida's revelations and alternately thinks about ways to leave Kennicott and to nurture him. Lying in bed at night, Carol imagines how she would behave if Kennicott were injured or killed. She is overcome with soft emotions for her husband. One night, the thoughts prompt Carol to enter Kennicott's bedroom. He misinterprets her visit as an amorous one, but Carol returns to her own room. She's cooled at the sight of her obtuse husband, when she wants the sensitivities of Erik Valborg.

Chapters 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 31 Analysis

The Kennicotts do not attend church with any regularity. Carol admits to being agnostic, but they attend with Kennicott's aunt and uncle one Sunday, which allows Lewis to address two important issues at the time, Mormonism and Prohibition. The people in Gopher Prairie mirror the real residents of Minnesota in their Baptist and Catholic beliefs. Mormonism is viewed to be part of a socialist political movement and contrary to the stoic religious beliefs held by the majority of Americans.

The minister says, "... it's a shame and a disgrace that the Congress of these United States spends all its time talking about inconsequential financial matters that ought to be left to the Treasury Department, as I understand it, instead of arising in their might and passing a law that anyone admitting he is a Mormon shall simply be deported and as it were kicked out of this free country in which we haven't got any room for polygamy and the tyrannies of Satan." Lewis also mentions the Prohibition movement, which went into effect in 1920 in America to restrict the manufacture and sale of alcohol beverages. Prohibition stemmed from a Temperance Movement supported by religious factions opposing the distribution and use of alcohol.

Lewis uses the literary technique of irony when writing about the church picnic, where Carol and Erik are watched by the other residents who are looking for inappropriate behavior, such as talking too long or laughing together. All eyes are on Carol and Erik and take no notice of Vida sitting with Kennicott, all the while remembering her own love

for him. Lewis wants the reader to understand that not all improper behavior occurs visibly or in an outright manner. While the townspeople wait to pounce on Carol, they should be monitoring the pious Vida.

Chapters 32, 33, 34, and 35

Chapters 32, 33, 34, and 35 Summary

Carol's brush with exile comes only as close as the house next door, when Mrs. Bogart, who runs a boardinghouse, evicts Fern Mullins, the new schoolteacher, accusing Fern of inappropriate behavior involving alcohol and her teen-aged son, Cy. Mrs. Bogart is quick to tell the neighbors and the school board about Fern's indiscretions.

Carol is the only person in town who will listen to Fern's side of the story, which is radically different from Cy's version of lies. Fern is asked to resign her new teaching job, and Carol accompanies the girl to the train station in support.

A month passes, and Carol does not see Erik, until he arrives at her home one evening. Erik knows that Kennicott is with a patient in the country and asks Carol to go for a walk in the country. Carol teeters on her decision but ultimately goes, leaving Hugh with the housekeeper. As they walk along a lonely country road, Erik reveals his love for Carol. She cannot reply in kind, although she does have affection for his sensitivity.

Just as Carol is about to suggest that they head back to town, a car drives up, stops and the car door opens. Kennicott's voice orders Erik to get into the front seat, and Kennicott is very pleasant to the young man on the drive back to town. Erik gets out of the car, says goodbye to Carol, and walks off toward his rooming house.

Carol knows that she and Kennicott will undoubtedly fight over the situation, but remarkably, her husband is very calm and collected. Kennicott asks Carol to think hard about what her life would be like if she were to choose to run away with Erik, whom Kennicott believes will never amount to more than a tailor's apprentice. Carol's infatuation with the young man would no doubt die if she were forced to live a life of hard work with no housekeeping help or budget for new clothes.

Carol is embarrassed that Kennicott knows about her interests in Erik. He tells her that the whole town knows about it, and Kennicott has been waiting for Carol to come to her senses. Kennicott's tenderness moves Carol. He carries her to her bedroom, kisses her and retreats to his own room.

The next morning, Kennicott is more cheerful than he has been in quite awhile. That night, Kennicott brings a letter for Carol stating that Erik is leaving on tonight's train for Minneapolis, where he will head to either Chicago or New York to pursue his career.

A week later, Erik's father arrives at Carol's home berating her for spoiling his son with her wicked ways. Carol has a hard time keeping her anger in check, because she knows that Erik's father just wants him to return to the farm and live a life in unending labor. Kennicott arrives home soon after the man leaves and finds Carol in much distress determined to leave for a trip to California to escape the madness of the town and all the prying eyes.

A few weeks later, Carol and Kennicott embark on a trip to the West coast, where they tour for three and a half months. Carol misses Hugh, so they return to Gopher Prairie. Carol is not prepared for the ice storm, which greets them at the train station. Carol is thrilled to finally reach home and see Hugh, and Kennicott is happy to tinker with the furnace.

Within a few hours of arriving home, Carol's ennui returns, and she does not have the heart to tell Kennicott of her desperate unhappiness. Carol continues with her work with the Red Cross and tries to be content with returning to the sameness of her life. Vida's husband returns from the war, as one of the first veterans, and becomes a full owner of the Bon Ton store. This is a fact which tremendously pleases Vida.

Chapters 32, 33, 34, and 35 Analysis

One of Lewis' most important themes of the novel is that of maintaining status quo. More than anything, it is important to the residents of Gopher Prairie to keep everything the way it has always been. Anyone or anything which attempts to alter the town's dynamic is ultimately evicted. Miles Bjornstam left, because people could not accept his socialist views. Erik Volberg leaves because his artistic sensibilities alienate him from the others on Main Street. Fern Mullins is driven away, because she is young, energetic, and may be a threat to the town's idea of sexuality. The only reason Carol has maintained as long as she has is her stature from being married to Kennicott.

Ironically, Carol would like to leave, probably as much as some residents would like to see her go, but she is bound by her commitment to Kennicott. Lewis creates Carol's character full of restlessness which cannot be relieved by a trip to California, because the dissatisfaction lies within herself.

Perhaps Lewis is sharing the message that it is important for a person to understand himself and his needs before aligning with another in marriage or other partnership to avoid dissatisfaction, which is not caused by the other person, who will undoubtedly suffer the consequences.

Chapters 36, 37, 38, and 39

Chapters 36, 37, 38, and 39 Summary

Carol's dissatisfaction reaches a point of no foreseeable resolution. She leaves Kennicott and takes Hugh with her to Washington, D.C., where the two of them live for almost two years. Carol finds employment in the Bureau of War Risk Insurance a few weeks before the end of World War I. For the first month, Carol and Hugh live in a rooming house. Ultimately, Carol finds a flat, which she and Hugh share with two other women.

Carol eventually finds her job of filing and dictation to be tedious and unsatisfying. At least it is different from her life in Gopher Prairie, and she does have her weekends free to discover the city. The greatest pleasure for Carol is the freedom she enjoys to attend concerts and lectures and eat at different restaurants.

One night, while the credits for a movie are rolling at the film's end, Carol sees the name of Eric Valor flash over the picture of none other than Erik Valborg. Carol is both glad and sad to see him in such a small role.

A little over a year after she and Hugh had been in Washington, Kennicott arrives for a visit. Carol is both pleased to see him and irritated that the things that used to bother her about his demeanor are still present. The little family passes a pleasant visit, and Kennicott only mildly urges Carol to return to Gopher Prairie.

Carol shows Kennicott all the Washington sights. They pass the time as really good friends, with Kennicott staying at a hotel during his visit and not at Carol's apartment. One night at dinner, Kennicott brings up the topic of building a new house and concedes the architectural details to Carol, while he will be satisfied to reign over the plumbing and the garage.

Kennicott is so encouraged by Carol's pleasant mood that he suggests a trip to Charleston and Savannah, not for a second honeymoon, but for a second wooing. Carol takes a two-week leave from her job. She and Kennicott have a wonderful time, during which Carol asks Kennicott if she should return to Gopher Prairie. Kennicott will not make that decision for her. The trip ends with Kennicott returning to Minnesota, alone.

Eventually, Carol does return to Gopher Prairie, where she has another baby, a girl, whose Ivy League future Carol begins to plan immediately. Carol also encourages Kennicott to listen to Hugh, not just endure him, because children have so much to communicate, if adults will let them.

Carol re-joins her social groups and is assimilated back into the town. Carol admits to Kennicott that, "I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than

Europe! I do not admit that dishwashing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith." Kennicott agrees with his wife and tells her that it will soon be time to put up the storm windows again.

Chapters 36, 37, 38, and 39 Analysis

In the foreword to the novel, Lewis writes that the title of the book, *Main Street,* signifies the town of Gopher Prairie, but can refer to the Main Street in any town in America. Lewis contends that Main Street as a concept is the climax of civilization; that all events in history have led up to any event on any Main Street in America. Lewis feels that people should take comfort in the tradition and the reliability of Main Street, which is the only real constant other than faith.

Carol has gone out to find herself in a better life. However, she finds that the same issues she rejected in Gopher Prairie exist in Washington. Also, there is some invaluable security in the scrutiny she abhors at home, as opposed to the anonymity of living in the city. Carol leans into her life with her little family in the little town. Her story is, to some degree, the story of every woman, in every town in America.

Characters

Bea Bjornstam

See Bea Sorenson

Miles Bjornstam

Bjornstam is a socialist, an opponent of those who make money off the labor of others. Friends and enemies refer to him as "The Red Swede." Carol is attracted to him as a friend because he is one of the few people in Gopher Prairie who is not afraid to speak openly against the stringent social order. He works odd jobs and travels when he wants, until he marries Carol's maid, Bea. He then starts a dairy but does not get along with his customers or neighbors. When Bea is dying, he chases away a group of women who come visiting, calling them hypocrites. After the deaths of his wife and son, Bjornstam leaves for Alaska, cursing Gopher Prairie. Cruel, untrue rumors are spread about him.

James Blausser

Blausser is a land speculator who comes to Gopher Prairie and starts a campaign to increase civic pride in order to attract people to the town. He is an exciting speaker—Lewis describes him as "a born leader, divinely intended to be a congressman but deflected to the more lucrative honors of real estate." His "booster" campaign is so superficial in its unreal praise of the town that it disgusts Carol, especially when her husband compares it to her own desire to make the town better.

Cyrus Bogart

Cyrus, who goes by Cy, is a teenager who lives with his widowed mother near the Kennicott house. As a teenager, he commits small pranks on his neighbors, the Kennicotts, throwing tomatoes at their house and putting frightening pictures in the windows. Once, going into her garage, Carol overhears Cy talking to another boy, mocking the way she goes about her chores, as he has observed while peeping in her windows. Later, he goes out with Fern Mullins, the schoolteacher who is boarding at his house, and tries to get her drunk. When she won't cooperate, he gets drunk himself and tries to rape her; he later spreads rumors that cost Fern her job.

Mrs. Bogart

Mrs. Bogart is the old woman who runs the boardinghouse across the alley from the Kennicott's house. She is opinionated, nosy, and hypocritical. She often drops in to gossip, and her gossip is often laced with thinly veiled innuendoes about Carol's

behavior, insinuating that Carol is less moral than community standards require. In fact, Mrs. Bogart's son Cyrus is a bully and a hooligan. When Cy tries to rape Fern Mullins, Mrs. Bogart accuses Fern of corrupting him and chases her out into the street, shouting at her, ruining the woman's good name and job because she cannot see her son as the street punk that the rest of the town recognizes him to be.

Percy Bresnahan

The millionaire president of the Velvet Motor Company in Boston, Bresnahan is a native of Gopher Prairie. He is a legendary figure that the inhabitants of the town speak of with pride. When he comes to the town, he is friendly with everyone, but in secret he makes a pass at Carol, who is both repulsed by him and intrigued by his urbanity. When she later lives in Washington, she sees Bresnahan in a restaurant flirting with two girls, and the person she is with says he is well known around town as a slow-witted bore.

Cy

See Cyrus Bogart

Maud Dyer

Maud is the wife of Will Kennicott's friend Dave Dyer, who owns the drug store. She goes to see the doctor at his office one afternoon, complaining about the way her husband takes her for granted and is stingy with money. She convinces Kennicott to come to her house while her husband is at work and have an affair with her.

Elizabeth

See Erik Valborg

Carol Kennicott

Carol is the heroine of this novel. She is the daughter of a judge who encouraged his children to be curious and to read. The book opens when Carol is a student at Blodgett College in Minneapolis, where she forms a number of enthusiasms, including sociology. After graduating, she lives for a year in Chicago and then returns to work in the St. Paul Library until friends introduce her to Will Kennicott, who convinces her to marry him and live with him in Gopher Prairie. She finds the town dismal and unimaginative but sets about trying to change it. She suggests improvements to buildings on Main Street but is told that they would cost too much; she throws a Chinese themes party, but her guests just seem bewildered by the strangeness of it all; she tries to organize a theater company, but the locals are not interested in putting on a good show, and the newspaper heaps insincere praise on a mediocre production. She soon finds out that

the neighbors mock her strange ways. Her husband has the same mind-set as the neighbors and carefully chides her for wanting to be different. After meeting Guy Pollock, the lawyer, she sees him as a rare individualist and finds herself falling in love with him only later to decide that his contrariness is just as much a part of Gopher Prairie as others' conformity. She later finds herself falling for Erik Valborg, a younger man who looks up to her for advice on how to leave his tailoring job and become an artist. Kennicott finds them together and makes Carol see that an affair with Valborg would be disastrous and unsatisfying, although the town gossips talk about their relationship for years afterward.

Carol takes her son with her and leaves Gopher Prairie to live in Washington, D.C. There she secures a job with the government and lives with other independent women, soaking up the big-city culture and political freedom. When Kennicott comes to see her, he does not ask her to come home but instead is as nice to her as he can be, to help her make up her mind. In the end, Carol returns to Gopher Prairie pregnant with Will Kennicott's daughter. She has a new worldliness that makes her immune to the sly gossip of her peers or to the social stagnation that bogs down all of her new ideas about social improvement.

Doctor Will Kennicott

Will Kennicott is a country doctor who is proud of his little town but who is also in love with his wife who cannot get along with the town or its citizens. He is an unimaginative man of precise habits, who goes through a nightly ritual of checking the furnace before going to bed and whose idea of conversation at a party is to talk over the performance of his automobile. He convinces Carol to come with him to Gopher Prairie by showing her pictures of the town and the farm country surrounding it, hoping that she will fall as powerfully in love with country living as he is. During their marriage, he is sometimes amused and sometimes confused by the schemes that she comes up with to transform the town. Carol embarrasses him, but at the same time he believes that she is right for the town.

Dr. Kennicott is respected in Gopher Prairie, and he is dedicated and efficient as a surgeon. In one scene, Carol assists him as he amputates a farmer's arm on the man's kitchen table, and Will only tells her later that the anesthetic they used could easily have been ignited by the kerosene lamp they used and blown them all up. He is also dedicated to his marriage, and at a crucial point he takes Carol away from town to travel for several months on the West Coast. When Carol decides that she needs to move to Washington by herself, he respects her decision and does not even try to contact her for more than a year. When he goes out East to see her, he is shy and unassuming, disappointed when she tells him to stay at a hotel rather than stay with her. She becomes interested in him all over again and goes traveling with him, eventually becoming pregnant with his daughter. He says that he will not ask her to return to Gopher Prairie but that he will welcome her if she does return.

Carol Milford

See Carol Kennicott

Adolph Morgenroth

Morgenroth is a local farmer. Will Kennicott amputates Morgenroth's arm on the kitchen table of his farm, with Carol assisting for the first time.

Fern Mullins

Fern is a twenty-two-year-old woman who has just finished college and who is soon to start teaching in the high school. Carol is attracted to her because they have similar artistic interests. They plan to start a little theater together. Fern goes to a party with Cyrus Bogart, a twenty year old who is still in high school. He gets very drunk, and while she is trying to take him home in a borrowed carriage, he tries to rape her. The next morning, the widow Bogart, who runs the rooming house she lives in, throws Fern out for corrupting her son and convinces the members of the school board not to hire her. Fern goes back to Minneapolis, but her parents will not believe that she was innocent when the people of Gopher Prairie turned against her, and they throw her out; in addition, she finds herself blacklisted from teaching jobs because of the rumors of immorality.

Guy Pollock

Guy is the first person in Gopher Prairie with whom Carol feels an intellectual bond. He is a lawyer, somewhere around thirty-eight, she thinks. (He is actually forty-seven.) Guy is sensitive and intelligent and well read. Within a year of her marriage, she considers whether she is falling in love with Guy. One evening, when she stops in at his office, their conversation leads to the town's moral standards, and Guy tells Carol that even her husband is involved with the competitive game-playing. When she expresses her discouragement, Guy says he believes that she wants what he wants: "to go back to an age of tranquility and charming manners. You want to enthrone good taste again." His assessment of her is wrong enough to make her realize that she is not in love with him, that she only hoped to be, and that they are too different.

Raymie

See Raymond Wutherspoon

The Red Swede

See Miles Bjornstam

Vida Sherwin

Vida is the town schoolteacher. When Carol first arrives in Gopher Prairie, Vida is one of the few townspeople to make her feel comfortable. She is educated in the arts, and she is friendly to Carol, offering advice on how to deal with the established social groups. It is not until more than halfway through the novel that Lewis reveals the reason Vida feels so bound to Carol: she herself had an affair with Will Kennicott a year before he married Carol, an affair that was cut short because she panicked, afraid of sexuality. She marries Raymie but is distant and resentful toward Carol afterward.

Aunt Bessie Smail

Bessie Smail is Will Kennicott's aggressive, elderly aunt, who has lived on a farm all her life and who has little social sense. She blurts out opinions and criticisms of Carol in her presence, unaware that she is being offensive. Aunt Bessie and her husband, Uncle Whit, buy a store and move to Gopher Prairie, where they fit in comfortably with the other ill-bred citizens, making Carol feel even more trapped by public scrutiny.

Uncle Whittier Smail

Kennicott's uncle ran a creamery in North Dakota and sold it for a profit. After visiting the Kennicott's and making rude remarks about Carol, the Smails find a grocery store for sale in Gopher Prairie and buy it.

Stewart Snyder

Stewart is a classmate of Carol's in college. He hints that he is interested in her, that she would make a good wife for a lawyer, and that in fact he intends to become a lawyer, but she is too interested in artistic pursuits to notice his attention.

Bea Sorenson

Bea is the first maid that Carol hires in Gopher Prairie. The other wives disapprove of the good wage that Carol pays Bea and the way she treats her like a friend. Their friendship strengthens when Bea quits being a maid to marry Miles Bjornstam.

When Bea is dying of typhoid and cannot hire a maid, Carol stays with her day and night.

Mrs. Swiftwaite

Mrs. Swiftwaite is a dressmaker who acquires a reputation for promiscuity almost immediately after she comes to town. Men gather at her house and drink, joking about

what a fun woman she is. Carol is offended that Mrs. Bogart would suggest that Will might be seduced by Mrs. Swiftwaite, even while he is carrying on an affair with Mrs. Dyer.

Erik Valborg

Erik is a sensitive young man in his mid-twenties, the son of a gruff farmer. Erik comes into Carol's life when she has been married a few years and has a son. Erik has effeminate ways, dressing colorfully and talking flamboyantly. (At one point, Carol notes that he overuses the word "glorious.") Erik works at the tailor shop, but what he really wants to do is design women's clothes. The locals pick on him and tag him with the unflattering nickname Elizabeth. Having heard him mocked, Carol is fascinated with him when she finally meets him, and, after hearing him talk about art, she realizes that he is just like her and wonders if she is falling in love with him. Once when they take a walk in the woods at night, Will Kennicott approaches them in his car and insists on driving them home. Erik leaves town soon after professing his love for Carol in a letter. For years, she hears townspeople gossiping about her and Erik. While in Washington, Carol sees Erik acting in a movie under the name "Erik Valour," and she reflects on how ridiculous her fascination with him was.

Mrs. Westlake

Mrs. Westlake is the wife of the older doctor in town. Will tells Carol never to talk to her because she is such a ruthless gossip, but Mrs. Westlake befriends Carol at a time when the town makes her feel particularly lonely and vulnerable, and so Carol ends up talking with her about things that she and Will do and things that they like. Later, it turns out that Mrs. Westlake has spread Carol's secrets all over town.

Raymond Wutherspoon

Raymond "Raymie" Wutherspoon is a shop clerk with little ambition. When he marries Vida Sherwin, she pushes him to demand a higher position at the Bon Ton shop where he works, and so his employers make him a one-sixth partner. He returns from the First World War with the respected rank of major, but the town's respect for him quickly wears off as he resumes his position at the store.

Vida Wutherspoon

See Vida Sherwin

Themes

Prairie Life

To some extent, the attitudes that prevail in the book's fictional setting, Gopher Prairie, are a result of the town's geological circumstances. As Lewis makes clear, the towns scattered across the North American Great Plains plateau were set off in virtual isolation from the rest of the world before the twentieth century. At the time when the novel takes place, from 1912 to 1920, automobiles were unreliable, with thin, smooth tires that offered little traction in wet or snowy conditions and simple engines that gave out frequently even under normal conditions, jammed by common problems, such as "carbon buildup," that are not serious today. Telephone service was secure within a town, but the wires that stretched along country roads were weak and vulnerable to the elements, and long distance service was very costly. Living in isolation most of the time, with travel especially hampered during the winter, the citizens of prairie towns fed off each other's ideas, prejudices, and wisdom, without the benefit of fresh ideas from the other towns in their own state, much less from the great metropolitan centers or from other countries.

Identity

Most of Carol Milford Kennicott's struggles stem from her attempts to find a convincing and satisfactory identity for herself. It is clear that she thinks of herself as some sort of artist and that she is knowledgeable in various aspects of sciences, but she has a difficult time blending all of her theories together with her environment to provide an identity that she can be proud of. In college, she takes a particular interest in sociology, but she never pursues it formally as a profession. Dining at a boarding house, she is pressed to name her particular artistic interest, and, suffering under the pressure of the traveling salesmen's mockery, she blurts out, "archeology," a subject that had been on her mind at the time but certainly not a subject that identifies her interests throughout the novel. She tries to start a little theater company, but none of her fellow citizens takes his or her task very seriously, and so Carol gives up on it, discouraged. She attends the literature discussion group but finds it shallow. She encourages Erik Valborg to be a poet, even though she knows that he is not very good.

The one identity that Carol is unwilling to consider is the one that she fits into, judging from external standards: the identity of a Gopher Prairie society matron. She sees the other women in her social class as either lacking or suppressing the intelligence, curiosity, and personality that she believes a person should have.

Part of Carol's dilemma about recognizing her own identity stems from the fact that the housewife identity that she works so hard to resist is closely bound to the "wife" identity that comes naturally to her. Even though Carol often views Will Kennicott as a dull and weak-willed man, there are times, such as when she assists him in surgery at Adolph

Morgenroth's farm, when she greatly admires him. Her true identity is that of caregiver: she shows it in nursing Bea, in her desperate attempt to save Fern Mullins, in her desire to lead and teach Erik Valborg, and by the certainty she shows as a protector of her children. Living in other circumstances, where a family woman's identity would not presume mind-numbing conformity, Carol might have come to know herself much sooner than she does in this novel.

Status Quo

Status quo is a Latin term referring to the existing state of affairs. In *Main Street*, the status quo of Gopher Prairie is that men and women attend social gatherings with others of their class, tell the same jokes and stories that they always tell one another, and make the same empty, inoffensive observations. It is a situation with which all are content. Seeing this idea of "normality" as an outsider and knowing that the world holds much, much more, Carol sets out to challenge the status quo.

Changing the status quo can seldom come quickly because social patterns do not become the status quo quickly. People find comfort in the familiar, and so they are resistant to change. In the case of a town like Gopher Prairie, the resistance is even stronger when the citizens believe that the people trying to cause change are outsiders. With Carol, as with Erik Valborg, the citizens of Gopher Prairie prove to be bemused at attempts to change tradition because they feel no real threat to the status quo can come from art. They do, however, fear sexual corruption of their youth and the organization of the farmers whose work they exploit. Fern Mullins is run out of town because some people fear that she might make young people aware of sexuality while they are still in high school, changing the existing order. The organizer from the National Nonpartisan Defense League is thrown out of town before he has a chance to speak because people fear what he has to say and how his words will work to change the social order. They run him out on a rail, using the weak excuse that he would have supported America's enemy, Germany, if he had been allowed to talk. As Kennicott explains it, "Whenever it comes right down to a question of defending America and our constitutional rights, it's justifiable to set aside ordinary procedures." In other words, he supports violating the law in a case in which someone might be a threat to the status quo.

Sex and Sexuality

For its time, *Main Street* offered readers a fairly open discussion of sexuality. Although sexual activity is never overtly referred to, there are quite a few places where the idea of it is unavoidable. At one level, there are the instances in which sexuality is implied by referring to milder forms of it, such as when, at the end of Chapter 3, Carol and Will's courtship fades away from a discussion about having babies with a dreamy mix of romance and touching: "As his arms moved toward her," Lewis writes, "she answered all her doubts with, 'Sweet, so sweet.' " A parallel case is the romance that Will had with Vida Sherwin a year earlier. The novel describes it as a "love-affair," and Vida treats it

with the seriousness that would be used for a sexual relationship in modern writing, although the narrative mentions nothing more explicit than hand-holding and hugging.

The affair between Will and Maud Dyer is never described in detail, but it is safe to assume that it reaches a physical level, because Will tries to confess it to Carol when he goes to Washington: "I haven't always been absolutely, uh, absolutely, proper." The relationship between Carol and Erik is preempted by Will's sudden appearance, but it is likely that, leaving the prying eyes of the city and going into the woods at night, with the guilt that she felt about it before and after the fact, they were headed for a sexual liaison.

Style

Point of View

Most of *Main Street* is told from a third person, limited omniscient point of view. It is third person because the narrative voice is not that of one of the characters who appears in the book: the speaker never refers to himself or herself as "I" but, instead, always relates the actions of the characters in terms of what "he" or "she" did or said. It is an omniscient voice because it has access to human thoughts and is not just limited to describing objective reality as it could be observed by anyone. It is considered limited, however, in that for most of the novel, the narrative can only relate ideas and incidents that have been experienced by Carol: the range of information that the narration can tell readers is limited to things that Carol would know about. Usually, the narrative voice does not relate any information that is beyond Carol's experience.

There are exceptions to the norm, however. In some cases, the narrative voice shifts point of view and relates ideas that are in the heads of other characters, which no one else, including Carol, could directly experience. For instance, chapter 25 starts with Will Kennicott's thoughts. "Carrie's all right. She's finicky, but she'll get over it. But I wish she'd hurry up about it!" It is only after a few sentences that the source of these ideas is identified: "Dr. Will Kennicott was brooding in his office." Later in that same chapter, there is another point of view shift, as the narrative focuses on the way Hugh sees the world and eventually begins talking for him: "In his office Father had tools fascinating in their shininess and curious shapes, but they were sharp." These are obviously Hugh's thoughts because they refer to Will as "Father," although the narrative voice uses words, such as "fascinating," that would not be used by a three-year-old to describe what he sees.

Foil

A foil is a character whose function in a novel is to help readers understand the character of another by holding the opposite values. In this book, Aunt Bessie Smail functions as a foil for Carol because she sees the world from an entirely different perspective. Aunt Bessie supports old-fashioned values, conventional morality, subservience of women to their husbands, and anti-Semitism; she is opposed to farmers' cooperatives, divorce, and liquor. Bessie and her husband, Whittier, whose views are practically the same as hers, take a condescending view toward anyone who sees the world differently from the way they see it: "They were like the Sunday-afternoon mob staring at monkeys at the Zoo, poking fingers and making faces and giggling at the resentment of the more dignified race." Carol disagrees with the ideas of many in Gopher Prairie, but the attitude of the Smails, and the clear disdain that Sinclair Lewis has toward them, marks them as counterexamples. They exist in the book to show the opposite of the values that Lewis wants to promote.

Another example of a foil is Mrs. Bogart. Lewis makes no secret of the fact that she does not have the values that this book holds to be worthwhile, even from the very first time she is introduced:

Mrs. Bogart was not the acid type of Good Influence.
She was the soft, damp, fat, sighing, indigestive,
clinging, melancholy, depressingly hopeful kind.
There are in every large chicken-yard a number of
old and indignant hens who resemble Mrs. Bogart,
and when they are served at Sunday dinner, as fricasseed
chicken with thick dumplings, they keep up
the resemblance.

Mrs. Bogart and Aunt Bessie are not foils for Carol only because they have different values from hers; the point of the book is that most of the people with whom she associates have different values. They are her foils because they are so closely involved with her. Carol can choose to stay away from the Thanatopsis Club or the Jolly Seventeen, but Mrs. Bogart is a neighbor, and a prying, curious one at that. Aunt Bessie is brought into the story relatively late in the book to further interrupt Carol's privacy: as a relative of Will Kennicott's, Carol has to be involved with her whether she likes it or not.

Historical Context

The Rise of the Middle Class

The American middle class, a category that most citizens fall into today, developed during the period marked by the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the start of World War I in 1914. During that time, the development of industry and the westward expansion across the North American continent provided opportunities for wealth on scales previously unheard of. Key industries, such as steel, petroleum, banking, and railroads, were controlled by a few individuals who established monopolies, fixing prices and making deals with their suppliers to run competitors out of business. There were different levels of income, but most citizens were closer to poverty than wealth. This situation became nearly intolerable during the depression that hit the country in 1893 and lasted for four years. Much of the country suffered economic hardship: more than 15,000 business firms failed, and at least seventy-four railroads, which had constituted the nation's growth industry, filed for government protection. Without the social "safety nets" such as unemployment insurance and Medicaid, which are now available to help people with low income, there was much suffering and death.

One result of the 1893 depression was that the wealthy captains of industry came to be seen as villains who were bleeding the country dry. Such famous figures as John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil, Andrew Carnegie of United States Steel, and railroad magnate J. Pierpont Morgan were dubbed "robber barons," enemies of the working people. Politicians found it in their interest to enforce laws, such as the previously ignored Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, which served to limit the unbridled acquisition of those already holding most of the wealth.

Just as the political conditions became favorable to a more equal distribution of wealth, manufacturers were mass-producing consumer products that the growing middle class could spend their incomes on. Vacuum cleaners, telephones, and phonographs were the must-have items at the turn of the century. Catalog outlets, such as Sears, Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward, made the same merchandise available to every home in the land. Those who were at the bottom of the social ladder were pushed upward by poor immigrants entering the country in one of the greatest expansions the country has ever known: in the first decade of the twentieth century, nine million immigrants arrived. The influx of cheap immigrant labor gave people more time for leisure activities such as reading, and mass-market magazines, such as *McCall's* and *Cosmopolitan*, gave advertisers the opportunity to show off new styles and inventions. As the middle class spent more, more middle-class jobs in manufacturing and distribution developed.

Progressivism

As already mentioned, the early decades of the century were a time when citizens favored increased power for the government. This new attitude of governmental involvement manifested itself in many different forms. The most mainstream of them was the enforcement of antitrust laws: Theodore Roosevelt won the 1901 election by campaigning as a "trust-buster," and after eight years in office, William Howard Taft succeeded him by promoting similar policies. Politicians who worked at changing the political structure, giving the government more power and more involvement in the lives of the citizenry, were called "progressives."

But the Progressive Movement of the early twentieth century was not limited to mainstream politics. In fact, so many small movements are today lumped into the category of "progressive" that the word has lost much of its value as a description. In short, movements intended to change society for the betterment of the downtrodden and struggling have all, at one time or other, been called progressive. This would include the temperance movement against alcohol, the Socialist movement (of which Lewis was a member), farmers' alliances, industrial labor unions, opposition to child labor, support for mothers with dependent children, and the struggle against racism.

The Women's Movement

Many of the influential social movements in the beginning of the twentieth century were spearheaded by women. Prohibition of alcohol, for example, was an idea that had supporters since the founding of the country, but it was not until the Women's Christian Temperance Union was formed in 1873 that it gathered enough support to be passed as a law in 1920. Women were also instrumental in passing new laws to prohibit child labor. At the turn of the century, a movement toward settlement houses, for helping poor immigrants who would otherwise starve, spread across the country. These social establishments, including the most famous one, Jane Adam's Hull House in Chicago, were usually started and run by women, and their existence indicated a milestone for women who were able and willing to work and who could effect change in their communities.

The most obvious period during which women changed the political landscape was the epoch of the Suffrage Movement, which is mentioned favorably in the final chapters of the novel. It is one of the country's oldest political movements, dating back before the Civil War. Throughout the latter eighteenth century, the movement was active and vocal, splitting into two parties, the National Suffrage Association of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the American Woman Suffrage Union of Harriet Ward Beecher. These two groups, representing different degrees of militant thought, joined together as one in 1890 and began the arduous task of changing state laws in order to get women's right to vote put on ballots, in the process of passing a Constitutional amendment. The result did not come until 1920, when, after a surge of feminist activity

in the previous decade, the Nineteenth Amendment provided women with the right to vote.

Critical Overview

In 1930, Sinclair Lewis became the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, beating out such notable literary figures as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Langston Hughes, who were all published authors at the time. Within a few years, critics began to speculate that Lewis's great decade, which spanned from the publication of *Main Street* in 1920 until the time he received the Nobel, was at an end. He wrote until his death in 1951, but, with few exceptions, he never received the critical praise that he had in the twenties. Lewis's career is generally viewed in three parts, made up of his early novels, the novels of the 1920s (which are, in general, the only ones that any but a literary scholar would read today), and those that came after 1930.

Before *Main Street* was published, critics scarcely paid any attention to Lewis's work. Of the six novels that he published between 1914 and 1919, only one, *The Job*, gave much consideration to the social setting that surrounded it. Of the others, as Sheldon Norman Grebstein wrote in 1962:

> These books do contain flashes of satire, considerable authenticity of fact and detail, some realistic characters and situations, and even statements of indignation at social injustice—factors which all reveal Lewis's capacity for seriousness; but in the main they are the work of Lewis the romancer, cheerful, buoyant, reassuring.

Main Street marked the emergence of Lewis as a novelist, both in critical and in economic terms. Readers swarmed to it, and within months it became the best-selling novel of the twentieth century up to that point. Critics saw its flaws but also recognized that they were far outpaced by the significant advancement it represented in the country's quest to come to know itself. Still, the book's huge success and unorthodox method of storytelling made them hold back with some reservation about what they thought. With the publication of *Babbitt* two years later, a pattern began to form, confirming that *Main Street* was not just a fluke. As H. L. Mencken explained after reading *Babbitt*:

> The theory lately held in Greenwich Village that the merit and success of *Main Street* constituted a sort of double-headed accident . . . blows up with a frightful roar toward the middle of *Babbitt*. The plain truth is, indeed, that *Babbitt* is at least twice as good a novel as *Main Street* was—that it avoids all the most obvious faults of that celebrated work, and shows a number of virtues that are quite new.

In short, critics found that Lewis had more than just one great book in him.

As his career marched forward, *Arrowsmith* in 1925 and *Elmer Gantry* in 1927 continued to impress, although the decade did include some lesser efforts, such as *Mantrap* in 1926 and *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* in 1928. *Dodsworth*, published in 1929, has a mixed reputation: some critics categorize it as one of Lewis's great novels, whereas others consider it to be the first step in his decline.

It was not long after the Nobel Prize that critics began to suspect that Lewis's greatest days might already be over. A 1933 biographical sketch of the novelist by Carl Van Doren notes that many doubted his ability even then. "His decade, they have pointed out, is dead," Van Doren wrote. "The ten years which began with *Main Street* in 1920 ended in 1930 with the award of the Nobel Prize. Historians have filed him away with the classics, arguing about the shelf on which he belonged." Even though Van Doren's point was that such critics were shortsighted, the critics that he was trying to refute proved to be eerily prophetic. Lewis spent the rest of his career, like the time before the twenties, writing books that had occasional flashes of inspiration lost amid hundreds of pages of mediocre work.

By the 1940s, critics took for granted that Sinclair Lewis would always come out with new novels, finding little to get excited about with each one. When Edmund Wilson reviewed Lewis's novel *Cass Timberlane* in 1945, he acknowledged the author's persistence in a review entitled "Salute to an Old Landmark." "We have had Lewis around for so long," Wilson wrote, "so consistently being himself, that he has become a familiar object, like Henry Ford or the Statue of Liberty, about which, if one has been living in America, one does not think very much." Wilson noted that Lewis's style had improved since the time he read one of his novels, but he also pointed out that he, like most others, did not take the time to read Lewis's books when they came out: "I had not read him for years, and had heard little about him except routine complaints that he was repeating himself and going to pot." Four years later, John Woodburn summed up Lewis's career in an article for the *New Republic* titled "Lament for a Novelist" with the observation that the author's storytelling ability had swung wildly, from one extreme to the other, until it stopped swinging and stayed down, with one bad book after another:

> There was at least a pendulum movement and an element of surprise: if *Arrowsmith* was followed by *Mantrap*, *Dodsworth* came along to redeem *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*. Somewhere about 1934 or 1935, depending on how you felt about *It Can't Happen Here*, the pendulum got stuck on the down stroke. The last six novels . . . have been monotonously bad, a soggy mishmash of sentimentality and half-digested social consciousness, through which one looks in vain for the robust rancor, the boisterous humor and the broad but often lethal satire that won Lewis the 1930 Nobel Prize.

Critical assessment has stayed fairly stable since Lewis's death. The novels before 1920 are considered interesting for biographical purposes, to show the novelist in development. The main novels between 1920 and 1930 are considered classics of American literature. Only *It Can't Happen Here* and *Kingsblood Royal* are considered worth reading of his post-1920 work. *Main Street* is still considered his best novel.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an adjunct professor of English at College of Lake County and Oakton Community College in Illinois. In the following essay, Kelly examines why Lewis's use of repetition instead of traditional plot development has led some critics to label his novel an achievement in sociology but not fiction.

There can be little dispute of the fact that Sinclair Lewis's book *Main Street* has had a profound and lasting influence on what people think of when they think of the American small town. Since its publication, it has no longer been possible to think of the pleasures of the little community—the sense of oneness and the admirable determination that makes independence possible—without also thinking of its dark, smothering aspects at the same time. The book sold over a million copies in its time and keeps selling at a steady pace today, as readers examine truths about this culture that have stayed the same throughout nearly a century. This, despite the fact that urban sprawl, population boom, multiculturalism, and a shifting economy have nearly erased the industrial class that was on the rise when Lewis wrote. In spite of the book's obvious power, however, there are still literary purists who resist calling Sinclair Lewis a great novelist, categorizing him instead as a sociologist who could recognize trends in the culture and make up characters to represent various types but lacked the imagination to spin all of the different types into one complete story.

Criticism like this occurs as a result of the weaknesses in *Main Street*. Its characters seldom achieve any more depth of personality than the figures in advertising who exist to represent certain character types, and the book flings them into and out of situations so carelessly that readers are constantly reminded of the author's controlling hand. There is hardly any plot, just one instance in Carol Kennicott's life followed by another. All of these distinct elements are fine for unmasking hypocrisy and other hidden social trends, as a sociologist would do, but they do not make for great fiction. According to this school of thought, Lewis cannot be considered an unimportant writer, but he can't be considered a talented novelist either.

This roundabout way of accepting Lewis's impact while denying his skill in his chosen profession presumes that the more interwoven the plot of a novel is, the more successful it is. In fact, *Main Street* is successful precisely because it allows the story line to meander around, spinning its wheels in the mud of Gopher Prairie just as Carol Milford Kennicott spins her wheels, only occasionally catching on to the illusion that she is actually going somewhere. An intricate plot, with each scene leading to the next, advancing the story, and building to a climax that seems to be necessarily the only place this story could have gone, would not serve the point that Lewis was trying to make.

Instead of a "woven" plot, *Main Street* relies upon recurrences and similarities. Events do not cause each other so much as they echo one another. People in Carol's life resemble others, and things happen that seem just like things that have already been told about. This often is a sign of a weak novelist, who cannot keep inventing new

possibilities and is forced to recycle ideas that have already been explored. In this case, though, the pattern of repetition creates its own narrative form, and it is one that serves to make readers understand what it is like to be Carol. If the novel is about her search for identity, then it is only fitting that she and the readers should have to see things and then see other things that look like the first things before any sense of understanding is earned.

The most obvious case of events in Carol's life in Gopher Prairie repeating each other concerns her romantic intrigues with Guy Pollock and Erik Valborg. The similarities of the two cases are inescapable, which makes the differences that much more telling. They are both artistic outcasts, both cases in which her need for intellectual companionship nearly draws her over a line into infidelity. In many ways, her tension over Erik is a simple repeat of the internal struggle that she underwent several years and hundreds of pages earlier when, walking home after a heartfelt moment with Guy, she asked herself, "Am I to be trusted?" Not much seems to have been changed from one case to the next, until the reader adds an awareness of the relative circumstances. Guy is older and makes Carol feel young; Erik is younger and makes her feel old. Guy is a loner who shuts himself up in his office, hoping to be ignored by the town; Erik is an extrovert who draws attention to himself because he is able to laugh at negative public opinion. The trajectory from the first case to the second defines Carol's growth, her movement from uncertainty to defiance, even as the other events in her life seem to be dragging her down into defeat. The relationship between these two would not be so telling about who Carol is if they were not so eerily similar, even though, in making them so, Lewis supports some critics in their thesis that the main character fails to grow.

But, even though these opportunities for infidelity are the most attention-grabbing in Carol's story, they are not necessarily the most significant elements in the character profile laid out for readers in *Main Street*. There are other cases in which this style of repetition is just as obvious. Throughout the book, ideas, motifs, and characterizations come back in familiar forms, again and again, building to an overall impression of the inescapable sameness that engulfs Carol's life once she moves to Gopher Prairie.

Her character grows in ways that she is not even aware of, affected by the patterns of the world around her. The book traces Carol's hunt for identity, but only a few of the significant moments Lewis describes are part of an *active* search. The others are reminders. Beside her romantic affairs, there are at least four other identities that she tries on, and each identity takes on a life beyond the one that she thought she was adopting. She tries her hand at being a pillar of the community, an arbiter of artistic sensibilities, and a modern woman. If Lewis had allowed the failures of all of these endeavors to fall on Carol's head, he would have ended up with a much more hopeless story than he intended. It makes sense to blend her failures with the failures of others and to let readers draw their own connections.

When she first arrives in Gopher Prairie, for instance, Carol tries to petition the town leaders to build an important and ambitious civic center, but she meets with disappointment and frustration. The point is made strongly enough, but then it is made again when Vida Sherwin shames her into leading a Campfire Girl troop and yet again

when she arranges the fund for a visiting nurse for the poor families on the outskirts of town. After involving herself and extracting herself from countless town projects, the last example from this line comes at the end of the book when the "Community Day" of her dreams is intercepted by a local political hack, who corrupts her concept for his own glory. Carol's attempts to change the social life of Gopher Prairie meet with more and more success as she becomes less and less involved in them, a point that exists more in the circumstances around her than in her psyche. To follow a traditional plot thread of one defeat leading to the next attempt would miss this point.

Carol tries to make her mark on the town's artistic sensibilities. She attends a meeting of the "women's study group," the Thanatopsis Society, only to find that the Gopher Prairie women think they can adequately explore all of English poetry in one afternoon. Her shaky social standing prevents her from pointing out the flaw in this thinking. She takes the lead in forming a "Little Theater" group, hoping to be more influential, but the same forces that suppress her in the Thanatopsis Society drag the theater group down to mediocrity. Both examples are needed to show how strongly the town is resistant to change. Late in the story, the theater group that mirrored the Thanatopsis society is itself mirrored in a new theater group that is planned by Carol and her friends Fern Mullins and Erik Valborg. The inability to even get this new idea past the talking stage, due to the personal calamities that befall the participants, makes the earlier watered-down version look desirable. Carol's artistic endeavors may seem to go over and over the same material, but in fact they represent a downward spiral, making true artistry in that town seem impossible.

One more noteworthy identity that Carol tries to adopt is that of an independent, modern woman. This is almost impossible in Gopher Prairie, where people only know her as the wife Will Kennicott brought to town. At a party soon after her arrival, Carol tries to shake off the stereotypical "wife" personality by talking openly and frankly about forbidden subjects such as labor unions, experimental education, and daring her husband to strip to his underwear and jump into a cold lake on their honeymoon. Her attempt to shake up the social order is only moderately successful: she does not liberate her neighbors' minds, but she does make them look at her as someone who is different from them. Her youthful unwillingness to conform later shows up in Fern Mullins, who comes to town and ignores the standards of behavior expected of a schoolteacher. Unlike Carol's case, in which nonconformity led to discomfort among her neighbors, Fern's openness about moderate drinking and being in the presence of men leads to her losing her career before she has started her first job, and being run out of town. Again, this familiar occurrence, mirroring Carol's bid for freedom, has yet another echo later in the book when a speaker from the National Nonpartisan League is run out of town on a rail.

Main Street is filled with dozens of other instances that are replayed by ghostly shadows of themselves. Jim Blausser, the realestate developer and feel-good guru, has a function in the book almost identical to that performed by Percy Bresna-han. Aunt Bessie Smail is almost indistinguishable from Mrs. Bogart in her opinions. The trip to Red Squaw Lake, with the women left behind to cook while the men fish, is the basis for the hunting trip in the last chapter that has Carol shooting with the men. The trip to California, which Kennicott takes to soothe Carol's frustration, is later copied by the

short trip to South Carolina during which she presumably becomes pregnant. The two children of Carol and Will Kennicott provide a clear opportunity to view different attitudes, because they are from different times in the marriage and of different genders.

The novel does not follow any direct path in tracking Carol's growth but instead offers a series of instances and examples. Readers and critics might find this to indicate a weakness on the part of Sinclair Lewis, and they would probably be right: his other novels are also episodic. But the author's presumed weakness does not negate the fact that this technique works in this book. Life in Gopher Prairie is bleak and hopeless for Carol, and readers come to feel this best when they discover the enigmatic ways in which things relate to each other.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *Main Street*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Light examines the quixotic overtones in Lewis's Main Street*.*

Sinclair Lewis's attitude toward the activity of writing can be seen in his letters to his publisher reporting his progress with *Main Street*. The letters overflow with excitement, even though the making of an important novel was for him then, as always, a job as wearing as the most strenuous manual labor. "Whether it's good or not," he wrote, "of course I can't tell, but there is this fact usually indicative of some excellence: I'm enormously enjoying writing it . . . indeed I'm not thinking of much else." He *was* thinking of other matters, however; as a former writer of commercial fiction and as a former employee of a publisher's promotion department, he could not help but concern himself with sales. He gave some thought to marketing his short stories and to advertising his recent novel *Free Air*. He was involved in all the activities of his profession.

He sensed, according to these letters, what *Main Street* might mean to him: ". . . all my thoughts and planning are centered in *Main Street*—which may, perhaps, be the real beginning of my career as a writer." And later: "I believe that it will be the real beginning of my writing. No book and no number of short stories I've ever done have ever meant a quarter of what this does to me." In the spring of 1920 he wrote that the pace was exhausting, but his excitement was unabated: "Yesterday . . . was the first day I'd taken off in eleven days; even last Sunday I worked till 5:30 P.M. I'm revising with the most minute care and, I fancy, with success."

Then at the end of July he completed the book. He had managed to finish it, Lewis said, "only by working eight hours a day, seven days in most weeks, though a normal number of daily hours of creative writing is supposed to be about four. . . .[sic] I never worked so hard, and never shall work so hard, again . . . unless Comes the Revolution and I am driven from writing to real work, like bricklaying or soldiering or being a nursemaid." He thus concludes with characteristic irony, belittling enough and repeated often enough so that one may wonder what his reservations about writing were. He spoke of writing as "sweaty and nerve-jangling," and said that pure research in a laboratory would have pleased him more. To some extent such yearning is one of Lewis's poses. Yet a study of his books does show that he chose research in the laboratory as a metaphor for the life best lived, though he also commended the careers of the physician, the innkeeper, and the architect. For instance, "I never quite get over the feeling," Lewis told an interviewer in 1947, "that writing isn't much of a profession, compared with being a doctor, that it's not quite manly to be sitting there on the seat of your pants all the time." Professor Perry Miller remembered a conversation following an outburst of temper when Lewis discovered that his brother Claude would not attend one of the novelist's lectures during their tour of Europe. Miller writes that Lewis cried out: "It's been that way from the beginning.... I wanted to write, and I've worked like hell at it, and the whole of Sauk Centre and my family and America have never understood that it is work, that I haven't just been playing around, that this is every bit as serious a proposition as Claude's hospital. When you said that Claude did not want to hear my lecture . . . you set up all the resentments I have had ever since I can remember." Even after he returned to Sauk

Centre in 1916 as a successful young author of two novels and a number of stories that had appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the townspeople let him know they considered writing as only "nearly" as choice a trade as medicine, law, the ministry, or even manufacturing. Against these feelings, which he would have throughout his life, Lewis set to work—to hard work—composing *Main Street*.

In his studies of the influence of Cervantes on European and American literature, Professor Harry Levin mentions the resemblance Carol Kennicott bears to Emma Bovary, who is the archetype of the "female quixote." But neither Carol nor *Main Street* has been analyzed thoroughly as an expression of quixotism, though such an analysis can uncover sources of the novel's vitality and appeal. An approach through quixotism can bring us to a better understanding of Carol's ambitions, illusions, conflicts, persistence, and defeat. When seen as the story of a woman with a mind shaped by romantic notions, who challenges the community with her impractical idealism and suffers rebuffs and self-doubt, *Main Street* appears to have more purpose, unity, and psychological interest than many readers have been willing to concede to it.

The quixote's career begins in the library. Of Emma Bovary, Professor Levin writes: "From the drab milieu she has known as a farmer's daughter, her extracurricular reading conjures up the allurements of escape: steeds and guitars, balconies and fountains, medieval and Oriental vistas." We may say much the same thing about Carol, for she can conjure up a bower of roses, a château, a Chinese entertainment, an exotic Frenchman, a poet-lover. She brings to Gopher Prairie a romantic model of what a village should be and a fantasy of her role in life. However, as she settles into her plain and frigid Gopher Prairie home, so different from the one she has imagined, she cries, "How these stories lie!"

The opening chapters of *Main Street* give only fragmentary information about Carol's childhood, but they suggest an environment that encouraged romanticizing. She recalls that her father was "the tenderest man in the world." He created "Christmas fantasies" from "the sacred old rag doll at the tops of the tree," and he would transform the terrors of the night into a "hearth-mythology" of "beneficent and bright-eyed creatures." There were the "tam htab, who is woolly and blue and lives in the bathroom" and "the ferruginous oil stove, who purrs and knows stories." Her father let her read anything she wished, and she is said to have "absorbed" Balzac, Rabelais, Thoreau, and Max Müller at an early age. But what Carol saw in Thoreau, one suspects, was woodsy escapism and inaction, for at one point she recalls, "I used to sit there on the cliffs above Mankato for hours at a time, my chin in my hand, looking way down the valley, wanting to write poems."

At college she announces that she hopes to "conquer the world." Vaporous images from her further reading point to the reformist mission that she must undertake. "She wanted, just now, to have a cell in a settlement-house, like a nun without the bother of a black robe"; from the cell she will improve "a horde of grateful poor." The icon of her dormitory room is "a miniature of the Dancing Bacchante." Having glanced at a book on town improvement, she plans to convert a village to the greens and gardenwalls of France. Or she wishes to "turn a prairie town into Georgian houses and Japanese bungalows."

She declares, "I don't understand myself but I want—everything in the world! Maybe I can't sing or write, but I know I can be an influence in library work. Just suppose I encouraged some boy and he became a great artist!"

Meanwhile she is learning to transmute reality. For instance, as she climbs along the banks of the Mississippi, she sees the river as her fanciful mind dictates. She listens to the fables of the river "about the wide land of yellow waters and bleached buffalo bones to the West; the Southern levees and singing darkies and palm trees toward which it was forever mysteriously gliding; and she heard again the startled bells and thick pulling of high-stacked river steamers wrecked on sand-reefs sixty years ago. Along the decks she saw missionaries, gamblers in tall pot hats, and Dakota chiefs with scarlet blankets." She has created a tableau peopled with figures of her own imagining—dreams, Lewis says later, "governed by the fiction she had read, drawn from the pictures she had envied." To give another illustration of her fancy, at the commencement exercises at Blodgett College "she saw the palms as a jungle, the pink-shaded electric globes as an opaline haze, and the eyeglassed faculty as Olympians."

During a year in Chicago after graduation, these impulses are strengthened. Carol spends an evening at a bohemian studio party, where she hears talk of "Freud, Romain Rolland, syndicalism, the Confédération Générale du Travail, feminism vs. haremism, Chinese lyrics, nationalization of mines, Christian Science, and fishing in Ontario." Significantly, her first job is at the library in St. Paul where, while she works, she reads "scores of books." The subject list is especially suited to the development of her fancy: "volumes of anthropology . . ., Parisian imagistes, Hindu recipes for curry, voyages to the Solomon Isles, theosophy with modern American improvements." At dances, "in dread of life's slipping past, she turned into a bacchanal." Her sense of mission returns; she will transform and redesign a prairie town.

At this point, Dr. Will Kennicott enters her life. He woos her by exploiting her desire to find a purpose for herself, declaring that his village needs her. Dr. Kennicott provides a notable occasion for us to apprehend the way in which the vision of the quixote converts reality to illusion. As we noted earlier, he shows Carol some photographs, and, though they are streaked and vague, she perceives them as (in her need for adventure) she must. She sees his amateurish snapshots of lakes as "etchings" that delineate "snow in crevices of a boggy bank, the mound of a muskrat house, reeds in thin black lines." Intuiting Carol's nature, Kennicott uses one picture especially well. It shows a forest clearing and a log cabin. In front of the cabin is "a sagging woman with tight-drawn hair, and a baby bedraggled, smeary, glorious-eyed." Kennicott tempts Carol by saying, "Look at that scared baby! Needs some woman with hands like yours. Waiting for you!" Carol succumbs. Such photographs will return later in the novel, when Kennicott is courting Carol again after her flight from Gopher Prairie. At the middle when she visits the home of this baby in the snapshot, she would tell him of Prince Charming, but he doesn't understand.

After Carol and the doctor marry, they ride the train into Gopher Prairie, the town she will "conquer" and reform. She has her first view of the reality she must work with. When she sees their house and her room, the shock is great. She blames her reading. "She

glanced at the houses; tried not to see what she saw; gave way in: 'Why do these stories lie so? They always make the bride's homecoming a bower of roses. Complete trust in the noble spouse. Lies about marriage.... And this town—O my God! I can't go through with it. This junk-heap!' " She has read "too many books." She goes to the bedroom window "with a purely literary thought of village charm—hollyhocks and lanes and apple-cheeked cottagers." What she sees is "the side of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church—a plain clapboard wall of a sour liver color." *This* was "the terraced garden below her boudoir"—"How these stories lie!" Muttering, "I'm mildly insane," she goes out to see the village, the "empire" she is going to "conquer." She takes that memorable promenade which we have already noted. She finds a Main Street characterized by the reek of blood from the meat market, by yellow buildings, by a cat sleeping on the lettuce in the grocery window. But Carol is not broken by that view of the village. For a long time she survives and returns to the fray. Her resiliency originates in her transmuting imagination; she is like Don Quixote with bandaged head taking to the road once more. Her enthusiasm, at least at first and in one so young ("plastic" and "innocent," as Lewis says) is even engaging.

Her adventures test not only Carol's notions but also the beliefs and actions of society. In the face of the challenge that she brings, members of the community reveal themselves as corrupt and hypocritical—or at least foolish in their own way. For instance, when Carol attends her first party in Gopher Prairie, she carries to it the image of herself as "a smart young married woman in a drawing room, fencing with clever men." She expects good talk, and she believes that she can enter into conversation as an equal to the men. But they have been arguing all evening about the kind of dog an old-timer had owned years ago. When Carol confronts them with a question about labor relations, she draws from them remarks that are the hallmark of Lewis's satire. Jackson Elder asserts that he is for freedom and constitutional rights: "If any man don't like my shop, he can get up and git. Same way, if I don't like him, he gits. And that's all there is to it." He mumbles on about such "poppycock" as profit-sharing, welfare work, insurance, old-age pensions. It "enfeebles a workman's independence—and wastes a lot of honest profit."

By such a pattern of challenge and reaction throughout the novel, each satiric monologue achieves its organic place. At every thrust from Carol, a villager exposes his own foolishness or hypocrisy about education, economics, politics, religion. Each encounter provides Lewis with the opportunity to exhibit his virtuosity in creating the grotesque rantings of gossips, churchwomen, preachers, journalists, and boosters. Carol induces the community to expose itself. Her own response to these encounters remains unchanging, nonetheless. Even as she drags herself homeward from them, past a "hulking house," "a streaky yellow pool," a "morass," she tells herself that "her beautiful town" still exists—in her mind. She believes in the village she has imagined. What she is now seeking is a person to share it with.

Several secondary figures in *Main Street* reinforce Carol's quixotism. Guy Pollock, whom Lewis declared to have been the protagonist of the book in its earliest conception (though no draft of that version exists and Lewis's biographer doubts whether such a version ever got on paper)—Pollock too is maddened by reading. He "hints his love" for

Sir Thomas Browne, Thoreau, Agnes Reppelier, Arthur Symons, Claude Washburne, and Charles Flandrau, authors who can nourish the fancy. Carol visits Pollock at his rooms, where he reveals the content of his imagination. Here, he says, are his "office, town-house, and château in Picardy. But you can't see the château and town-house (next to the Duke of Sutherland's)." Of course Carol *can* see them, quite as well as he can. Carol and Pollock discuss the possibility of reforming the town, but Pollock is by now incapable of rebellion. Like Prufrock, he wishes only to be an attendant, "the confidant of the old French plays, the tiring-maid with the mirror and the loyal ears." Carol wonders whether Pollock might be her Prince Charming, but she later realizes that he was only a frame on which she hung "shining garments."

Toward her husband, Carol feels a genuinely painful conflict. Kennicott is a capable doctor, but his very competence is paradoxically a problem for Carol, who finds that capable people are often shallow and bigoted. At their best, without what Lewis would two years later call "babbittry," these figures are heroes, "doers," for whom "all this romance stuff is simply moonshine." Kennicott shows admirable courage and ability as a physician and surgeon in several crises. But even at such moments Carol must recreate him in romanticized and literary terms: she "saw the drama of his riding by night to the frightened household on the distant farm; pictured children standing at a window, waiting for him. He suddenly had in her eyes the heroism of a wireless operator on a ship in a collision; of an explorer, fever-clawed, deserted by his bearers, but going on—." She tells Pollock that he and she are "a pair of hypercritical loafers, . . . while [Will] quietly goes and does things." She restates the dichotomy: to deal with the farmers Kennicott "speaks a vulgar, common, incorrect German of life and death and birth and the soil," while she reads "the French and German of sentimental lovers and Christmas garlands." Such a division lies at the heart of the book, though Will calls Carol neurotic, and she labels him stupid. But Carol, the doctor, and the novel itself are considerably more complex than this formulation suggests, and Carol knows it upon reflection. This complexity is creditable in ways that have been forgotten by Lewis's detractors. Carol knows that Kennicott is not simply a quiet doer. He is noisy, opinionated, narrow, prejudiced, quarrelsome, and unfaithful, and the novel takes pains to display him as such. Carol's neurosis, meanwhile, is compounded of idealism, enthusiasm, doubt, disillusionment, and alienation.

In the midst of her despair, Carol inquires into books once more in an effort to understand herself and her village. Formerly, in reading popular stories and plays, Carol had found only two traditions about the American town. The first tradition, she reports, "is that the American village remains the one sure abode of friendship, honesty, and clean sweet marriageable girls . . . The other tradition is that the significant features of all villages are whiskers, iron dogs upon lawns, gold bricks, checkers, jars of gilded cat-tails, and shrewd comic old men who are known as 'hicks' and who ejaculate 'Waal I swan.' " Her experience of Gopher Prairie, however, tells her that the town thinks "in cheap motor cars, telephones, ready-made clothes, silos, alfalfa, kodaks, phonographs, leather-upholstered Morris chairs, bridge-prizes, oil-stocks, motion-pictures, land-deals, unread sets of Mark Twain, and a chaste version of national politics." With this small town, Carol—along with hundreds of thousands of young people like her—is not content. She believes that she has derived insight and other "convictions" from her

recent reading. She has "driven" her way through books of a somewhat different kind from those she read as a girl. These books were written by the "young American sociologists, young English realists, Russian horrorists; Anatole France, Rolland, Nexo, Wells, Shaw, Key, Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Henry Mencken, and all the other subversive philosophers and artists whom women were consulting everywhere."

One night she talks to her friend Vida Sherwin about the dullness, the rigidity, and the sterility of the village. Vida, a "realist," suggests measured steps toward reform. But Carol, for all her new reading and thought, replies that she wants "startling, exotic things": "Strindberg plays, and classic dancers—exquisite legs beneath tulle—and (I can see him so clearly!) a thick, black-bearded, cynical Frenchman who would sit about and drink and sing opera and tell bawdy stories and laugh at our proprieties and quote Rabelais and not be ashamed to kiss my hand!" This is a moment of considerable psychological importance. Whatever the booklist of "American sociologists, French realists, Russian horrorists" may have brought her, Carol's quixotic nature defeats her efforts at new understanding. Her transforming imagination turns Gopher Prairie back into fantasy land.

Romantic love, the motif that particularly directs the yearnings of the female quixote, enters *Main Street* about three-fourths of the way towards its end. When Erik Valborg appears in Gopher Prairie, he is less a substantial character than a projection of what Carol fancies him to be. Much of the confusion surrounding her platonic escapade with Erik occurs because she waivers between at least two images of him. At times she recognizes that he is a commonplace, uneducated, shallow young man; at other times she believes him to be a poet—a Keats or Shelley or (as Lewis plays with Carol's values) an Arthur Upson. Carol is insistent: "He's Keats—sensitive to silken things.... Keats, here! A bewildered spirit fallen on Main Street. And Main Street laughs." Thinking of him later, however, she asks herself, "Was he anything but a small-town youth bred on an illiberal farm and in cheap tailor shops?" Valborg himself, like Pollock, brings to his relationship with Carol his own quixotism. It is reported that he reads a great deal, but his taste tends toward "Suppressed Desires" and "The Black Mask." He recalls that, when he lived in Minneapolis, he used to "tramp clear around Lake Harriet, or hike out to the Gates house and imagine it was a château in Italy and I lived in it. I was a marquis and collected tapestries—that was after I was wounded in Padua."

Valborg continues to stimulate and confuse Carol's romantic imagination. While she is doing household tasks, she pictures "herself and a young artist—an Apollo nameless and evasive—building a house in the Berkshires or in Virginia; exuberantly buying a chair with his first check; reading poetry together." She wishes him to be a "playmate," not a lover. She is always dissatisfied, however. In moments of self-awareness, she calls her love affair "pitiful and tawdry.... A self-deceived little woman whispering in corners with a pretentious little man." Then she makes a sudden quixotic shift: "No, he is not. He is fine. Aspiring." She is in a turmoil of distraction. She wishes Erik were "a fighter, an artist with bearded surly lips." But "they're only in books." Her mind is spinning, but not toward suicide, like Emma's; Carol knows all too well that the tragedy of her life is "that I shall never know tragedy, never find anything but blustery

complications that turn out to be a farce." One moment she is convinced she loves Erik; the next she cannot love him because his wrists are too large, his nose is too snub. She knows that the poem he writes her ("Little and tender and merry and wise/ With eyes that meet my eyes") is bad. After Carol and Erik have wandered, talked, and daydreamed for some time, Kennicott confronts her. He is certain he knows what has poisoned her mind: "these fool stories about wives that don't know when they're well off." Her affair ends when Will chases Erik out of town.

About forty pages remain in the novel. Now the problem is whether Carol will retain her illusions or face whatever reality Gopher Prairie presents. She might somehow find a balance of dream and fact that would result in growth. In fact, Levin suggests that the quixotic experience need not end negatively, for it can lead to maturity. But when Carol breaks from Gopher Prairie and settles in Washington, she seems not much different from the person she was before, though she believes herself to be changing. For instance, the "Washington" she finds (or, one suspects, creates) is a city of "leafy parks, spacious avenues, twisty alleys," of "negro shanties turned into studios, with orange curtains and pots of mignonette," of marble houses and butlers and limousines, and "men who looked like fictional explorers and aviators." After a year, her husband comes to woo her back. His gesture is exactly the one he had made when he first courted her about ten years earlier, and her response is just what we expect and fear. "He tossed over to her thirty prints of Gopher Prairie and the country about. . . . She remembered that he had lured her with photographs in courtship days; she made a note of his sameness, his satisfaction with the tactics which had proved good before; but she forgot it in the familiar places." She has built no defense against this well intuited appeal to her illusions, though she thinks that she has developed what she calls "personal solidarity." Back in Gopher Prairie she wears her eyeglasses on the street (perhaps because she wishes to see more clearly now). The townsmen say of her that "she knows a good deal about books—or fiction anyway," and of her affair with Valborg that it was "just talking books and all that junk." She believes that, though she may not have "fought the good fight," she has kept faith with her ideals.

By seeing Carol Kennicott as a quixote, we come to realize that Lewis could criticize both his heroine and the village. He tried, in his flamboyant, crude, and often careless way, to anatomize a woman torn among illusions and realities. For Carol, Lewis drew upon an archetype, so that Carol touched familiar responses in readers in America, where quixotism has long existed but has not been fully recognized as an important aspect of the national character. In the sub-literature and popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, romance flourished. We have already noted the cults associated with the Orient, the medieval, the adventurous, the Kiplingesque, poesy, and vagabondia. These formed a state of mind which attracted and repelled several generations of writers. Mark Twain, who understood much of what made and moved America, portrayed quixotism in *Tom Sawyer*, *Huck Finn*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *A Connecticut Yankee*. A towering figure like Mark Twain gathers ideas from the past and opens up potentialities for future writers. His indications of the presence of quixotism in American life are significant; Lewis also sensed such a presence and the conflict that attends it.

Quixotism induces an ambivalent and confusing response, for it embodies both foolishness and idealism. The story of Carol Kennicott is a record of resultant ambiguities. Recognizing that the book is uneven and in some ways inconclusive, we can speculate that the quixotic elements in Lewis's nature disallowed the kind of transcendence that Cervantes and Flaubert achieved. Lewis came to *Main Street* after writing five apprentice novels, among them *The Trail of the Hawk* and *Free Air*, in which young Americans travel the roads in pursuit of adventure and golden ladies. Perhaps he called *Main Street* "the real beginning" of his career because he believed that he was freeing himself from the shackles of romance by satirizing a literary idea of the village that maddens its readers and that had misled him for too long. Carol was his vehicle and victim. Now he was joining a realistic movement that was already well under way without him.

At any rate, I think that we are better informed about *Main Street*—and better able to assess it—if we see it as an account of a quixotic figure—idealistic, disillusioned, of limited vision, yet a challenge to the community. Amidst the comedy, she is, if not tragic, at least worthy of our concern, because her idealism drives her into further suffering. She has been shown that her vision is faulty, weakly inspired, and mistaken, but she continues to see as her aspirations demand. She is more honest and more deceived than anyone around her, and thereby both more trapped and more alive.

Yet Carol continues to seem bewildered in a postscript to the novel, when, later, in an article called *"*Main Street's Been Paved*"* written for the *Nation* magazine during the presidential election of 1924, Lewis glanced again at his characters and the condition of their lives. His attitude toward Will Kennicott remained ambivalent. At first, he indicated high praise for the doctor, such praise as he consistently expressed toward the practical "doers" in America: ". . . for him I held, and hold, a Little Brother awe. He is merely a country practitioner, not vastly better than the average; yet he is one of these assured, deep-chested, easy men who are always to be found when you want them, and who are rather amused by persons like myself that go sniffing about, wondering what it all means." This statement seems an echo of Sauk Centre's disapproval of young Harry's "readin' and readin' " in contrast to its admiration for the practical physicians of the Lewis family. It reflects the doubts implanted by the provincial attitude that thought and writing—that art itself—are of no value. Who of the village inquisitors could understand that preparation for the writing career required dreaming and reading and scribbling, and that money and recognition would be slow to appear? One thinks of Lewis's return to Sauk Centre at about thirty-two as an established writer, of his pride in telling the townspeople that he was paid fifteen hundred dollars for a magazine serial which he turned out in two weeks' time; they were awed but not convinced.

Unfortunately, his heroine in *Main Street* falls into the category of small town failures (along with the other impractical dissenters of Gopher Prairie—Miles Bjornstam, Fern Mullins, and Guy Pollock). In "Main Street's Been Paved" Lewis shows us a very beaten "Carol." I have argued that at the end of the novel itself her change or growth was unconvincing. If one considers the *Nation* essay, one doubts even more all Lewis's pretense about her important Washington experience and her personal solidarity. She is hardly recognizable; she appears tired and timid and dumpy; she intends to vote, not for

liberal and humanitarian LaFollette, but for Coolidge. Guy Pollock reports that "the doctor has convinced her that to be denunciatory or even very enthusiastic isn't quite respectable." Apparently there was some miscalculation of Carol's "solidarity." But we are not to be left with a simple approval of Kennicott; Lewis, in spite of his awe, is nevertheless aware of Kennicott as a symbol of something dangerous. Lewis lets Guy Pollock, the village lawyer, have the last word. Pollock says, "We've been bullied too long by the Doc Kennicotts and by the beautiful big balloon tires that roll over the new pavement on Main Street—and over our souls." Lewis seems to have shifted to Pollock as spokesman, while meting out to Carol, who will vote for Coolidge, a kind of punishment for the inadequacy of the fanciful notions she, after all, was given by him.

Does *Main Street* pose a choice between Carol's way and Will's way? If he must choose between Carol's qualities as expressed in the novel itself (sensitivity, humanitarianism, curiosity, thoughtfulness, and desire for change and improvement—mixed, however, with impracticality, pretentiousness, artiness, and foolish dreaming) and Will's qualities (practicality, courage, and bluntness—mixed, similarly, with insensitivity, dullness, and scorn for art), which way would Lewis choose? Some critics feel an uncertainty in the novel because of the equivocation between these qualities. Others may feel that the strength of the novel lies in such complexities. Of herself and her husband, Carol theorizes: "There are two races of people, only two, and they live side by side. His calls mine 'neurotic'; mine calls his 'stupid.' We'll never understand each other, never." The tension of the book may be that there is an impossible choice between sensitivity/foolishness and practicality/dullness. But Lewis does shift back and forth in attitude—now praising, now mocking, now admiring, now satirizing. The people of the empire of the Middle West have posed a difficult problem. Lewis continued to ponder the question in subsequent novels until he achieved a resolution in *Dodsworth*. It is sufficient for the moment, though, that in *Main Street* he had taken auspicious steps forward in his attempt to define man, woman, and marriage, and in his continuing search to understand America. Here he had vividly portrayed the provincial locale, commenting upon it in satire which helped open the American mind to new perceptions. He had aroused sleeping consciences to an awareness of hypocrisies and social injustices. He had touched some deeper notes in his portrayal of the heroine—through her loneliness, her misdirected aspirations, and her difficult struggle to find an identity.

Source: Martin Light, "Chapter 6: *Main Street*," in *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, Purdue University Press, 1975, pp. 60-72.

Adaptations

Sinclair Lewis: Main Street Revisited is a 1998 videocassette from Thomas S. Klise Company. It includes photos of Lewis and his boyhood home and examines his most popular books, *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, looking at how the author's background formed both.

Sinclair Lewis: The Man from Main Street is a 1986 videocassette produced by WBGU of Bowling Green, Ohio, and distributed by Ohio Humanities Resource Center.

Books on Tape, Inc., produced an audiocassette version of *Main Street* (slightly edited) in 1987. It is packaged in two parts, each part includes seven cassettes.

An unabridged version of *Main Street*, read by Barbara Caruso, is available from Audio Books, Inc., and can be downloaded from Amazon. com's audio division, Audible.com.

A 1980 radio drama based on the novel *Main Street* was produced by Jabberwocky studios and made available on cassette.

Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation and Lewis biographer Mark Schorer collaborated on a 1975 videocassette called *Sinclair Lewis*, part of the series *The American Experience in Literature*.

In 1975, Minnesota Public Radio released a cassette version of a program by Roland Paul Dille, entitled *Sinclair Lewis*. It examines Lewis's writings on small towns, American culture, and American ethics. Dille was a professor of English and the president of Moorehead University.

Topics for Further Study

In the last chapters of the novel, Carol lives in Washington among suffragists. Research the women's suffrage movement between 1915 and 1920 and relate the movement's political goals to the lives that Lewis describes.

Just how isolated was Gopher Prairie? Find out the distance from Minneapolis to Sauk Centre, the town that Gopher Prairie is based on, and then research how long it would take a train to travel that distance in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Research women's fashions from the time when this novel takes place, finding examples of clothes that would have been common and ones that would have been considered artistic and ornate, such as Erik Valborg might have designed.

What was the gas that was used against American troops in World War I? What effect would it have had on someone like Raymie Wutherspoon, who still suffered from it when he came home from the war?

For travelling around the countryside, Dr. Will Kennicott alternates between using his Ford motor car and a horse-drawn carriage. Examine the mileage per hour and limitations of both.

Do you think that the story would have ended this way today, with divorce as common as it is? Why or why not?

Speak to a member of a local literary club, and find out what he or she thinks of the Thanatopsis Society's attempt to cover English literature in one afternoon. What would be a more realistic time frame?

The "Watch Gopher Prairie Grow" campaign that is initiated late in the novel seems to bring little result. Find out what slogan your town or city is using to boost civic pride, and report on its success.

Compare and Contrast

1920: The year that *Main Street* is published, the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution grants the vote to women.

Today: Voting rights are strictly enforced. Women are considered a powerful political bloc that politicians try to gain support from.

1920s: The first commercial radio broadcast signal is sent out of KDKA in East Pittsburgh, using a technology that will eventually allow people from coast to coast to share a common experience simultaneously.

Today: Many low-wattage local radio stations are available across the world via the Internet.

1920s: A town like Gopher Prairie could hire an advertising consultant to design a brochure that exaggerates the town's features, hoping to lure prospective businesses.

Today: Small towns are even more likely to hire media consultants to help polish their images.

1920: The national prohibition against alcohol, mentioned in the novel's final pages, goes into effect on January 16, in accordance with the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Prohibition lasts thirteen years.

Today: Many draw parallels between the government's inability to keep liquor out of the hands of the populace during Prohibition and the current influx of illegal drugs.

1920s: The United States has twenty million telephones, twice as many as it had two years earlier. A long-distance phone call from New York to Chicago takes twenty-three minutes to be channelled through.

Today: Phone calls travel near the speed of light through fast fiber optic lines.

1920s: For the first time, the census reports America's urban population to be larger than the rural population, 54 million to 51.1 million.

Today: The urban population has more than tripled the 1920 census figure at 187 million, while the rural population has barely grown, at 61.7 million.

What Do I Read Next?

The novel that Sinclair Lewis wrote after *Main Street* was *Babbitt*. Published in 1922, it is about a middle-aged salesman and his uncomfortable search for meaning in an increasingly impersonal world. A Bantam Books edition, published in 1998, is currently available, with an introduction by John Wickersham.

In chapter 14 of *Main Street*, Lewis says, "Her preparations for stalking out of the Doll's House were not yet visible." The reference is to Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play, *A Doll's House*, about a strong-willed wife who defies social custom when she finds that she can no longer be kept by a husband who loves her but does not respect her intelligence. Dover Press published a thrift edition of this play in 1992.

French writer Gustav Flaubert's Emma Bovary is often referred to as clearly being a model for Carol Kennicott—they both are women who find their spirits suppressed by their roles as wives of small-town doctors. The 1857 novel *Madame Bovary* is available in a Bantam Classics edition, published in 1982.

A generation before Lewis made his reputation for taking a naturalist approach to the American small town, Theodore Dreiser gained fame for applying the same techniques to urban life. His

novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) shows a young country girl who is ruined by the stifling coldness of the city, driven to a life of degradation and prostitution. Signet has a 2000 reissue edition with an introduction by Richard Lingeman.

In 1899, novelist Kate Chopin attracted a storm of controversy with her novel *The Awakening*, about a married woman's growing awareness of her own intelligence and sensitivity. It is currently available from Avon in a 1994 edition.

Willa Cather was a writer whose best works documented life on the prairie at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her novel *My Antonia* is about a Bohemian peasant girl who grows up on a Nebraska farm, in circumstances similar to those Lewis describes. It was first published in 1918 and is currently available in a 1995 edition from Houghton Mifflin.

One of Lewis's contemporaries was Sherwood Anderson, whose collection of short stories, *Winesburg, Ohio*, is a master work of American fiction. First published in 1919, it looks at the stifling effects of small-town life through the eyes of teenage boy, who recognizes his home-town as a place of "grotesques." Bantam published a new edition in 1995.

Further Study

Bucco, Martin, *"Main Street": The Revolt of Carol Kennicott*, Twayne, 1993.

One of the few book-length examinations of this novel, this study looks at its subject from a number of different angles. Most of the book is comprised of essays proposing different theoretical viewpoints.

Davies, Richard O., *Main Street Blues: The Decline of SmallTown America*, Ohio State University Press, 1998.

Davis only uses Lewis's novel as an inspiration and focuses most of his study on his own home town of Camden, Ohio. Still, the points that he makes about small towns in the twentieth century bring the novel's concerns into the present.

Light, Martin, *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, Purdue University Press, 1975.

This overview of Lewis's entire career looks at his struggle against prevailing ideas. The main theme of the book, comparing Lewis and his characters to Cervantes' Don Quixote, is well presented.

Lingeman, Richard, *Sinclair Lewis: America's Angry Man*, Random House, 2002.

This is the most recent biography of Lewis from an author whose previous works have included a biography of Theodore Dreiser and *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1620-Present*.

Parrington, Vernon, *Sinclair Lewis: Our Own Diogenes*, Haskell House Publishers, 1974.

Parrington's view of Lewis is entirely reverent and perhaps a little too tame to really capture the author's fervor.

Schorer, Mark, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, McGraw-Hill, 1961.

Schorer is one of the preeminent scholars on Lewis, and his book about him has stood as the authoritative biography for forty years.

Bibliography

Grebstein, Sheldon Norman, *Sinclair Lewis*, Twayne Publishers, 1962, p. 38.

Mencken, H. L., "Portrait of an American Citizen," in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1962, pp. 20-26.

Van Doren, Carl, *Sinclair Lewis: A Biographical Sketch*, Kennikat Press, 1933, p. I.

Wilson, Edmund, "Salute to an Old Landmark: Sinclair Lewis," in *New Yorker*, October 13, 1944, pp. 101-102, 104.

Woodburn, John, "Lament for a Novelist," in *New Republic*, May 16, 1949, pp. 16-17.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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