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Main Street by Sinclair Lewis



With an Introduction by Morris Dickstein

MAIN STREET

BY
SINCLAIR LEWIS

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by
Morris Dickstein

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MAIN STREET

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SINCLAIR LEWIS (1885–1951) won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1930, the first American novelist to be so honored. He was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, the son of a country doctor. After an extremely unhappy childhood, he entered Yale but left before graduation to work in Upton Sinclair's socialist colony at Helicon Hall in Englewood, New Jersey. Unable to make a living as a freelance writer, he returned to Yale and graduated in 1908. In 1914 he published his first novel, *Our Mr. Wrenn: The Romantic Adventures of a Gentle Man*. But it was not until his sixth novel, *Main Street* (1920), that he won recognition as an important American novelist, the first to challenge the myth of the happy, quintessentially American small town. His major works are *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), which won a Pulitzer Prize that Lewis refused to accept, *Elmer Gantry* (1927), *Dodsworth* (1929), and *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), which he also wrote as a play in 1936. Married and divorced twice, the second time to pioneering newspaper-woman Dorothy Thompson, Lewis was a prolific writer, publishing dozens of books and innumerable articles throughout his career. He died alone in Rome on January 10, 1951, and his ashes were returned to Sauk Centre, the "Main Street" he'd rejected so many decades before but which in death took him back as its own.

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Introduction

by Morris Dickstein

During the 1920s, at the height of his fame and literary power, Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951) was more than a bestselling author. He was a troublemaker, a disturber of the peace whose novels were hotly discussed as social criticism more than literature. Fiercely satiric works like *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), and *Elmer Gantry* (1927) were an important part of this raucous decade's self-examination. Americans recognized themselves in his books, which were at once iconoclastic and hugely entertaining, but they outraged some readers for their mocking portraits of ordinary citizens as comic types. The scandal culminated in 1930 when Lewis became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for literature. His famous acceptance speech, later published as "The American Fear of Literature," was an attack on gentility and self-congratulation and a rallying cry for a younger generation of American writers who were restless, disillusioned, and hungry for recognition.

Many people still recall the 1920s as a period of complacency and "normalcy," a withdrawal from the traumatic bloodletting of the Great War and the fears inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution. During the war Germans were demonized as vicious rapists while anti-

war publications like *The Masses* were suppressed; civil liberties were threatened when universities fired pacifist professors and radicals were put on trial for sedition. After the war there was a surge of intolerance directed against anarchists, socialists, labor organizers, and immigrants.

Initiated by A. Mitchell Palmer, Woodrow Wilson's attorney general, this "Red Scare" resulted in wholesale arrests and deportations. The governor of Massachusetts (and future president), Calvin Coolidge, gained national fame in 1919 by calling out troops to quell the Boston police strike. Prohibition went into effect in January. Shortly after *Main Street* was published in October 1920, Warren G. Harding was elected president of the United States, which put the final nail in the coffin of Wilsonian idealism and internationalism. The nation was in retreat: puritan, conservative, small-town America was back in the saddle.

Or so it must have seemed. But 1920 was also the year when the census showed for the first time that more Americans lived in cities than in rural communities. America's politics in the twenties would be deeply conservative, even isolationist, but its social fabric was changing inexorably, as Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd would show in *Middletown* in 1929 and Frederick Lewis Allen would chart amusingly in *Only Yesterday*, his popular social history of 1931. Not only was America growing more urban, but its way of life was shifting under the pressure of new technology, from the spread of electricity, telephones, and labor-saving home appliances to automobiles, radio, and motion pictures.

Advances in technology also galvanized changes in values. Alarmed ministers preached against closed automobiles as "brothels on wheels," while movies and radio fueled a new hedonism with news and fantasy about different lives in distant places. Celebrity cults grew up around film stars like Valentino, national heroes like Lindbergh, and athletes like Babe Ruth. Sports and leisure became big business in an expanding culture of consumption, pumped up by aggressive new techniques of

advertising and public relations. Borrowing heavily from the jazz idiom of black artists, music and dancing became the liveliest expression of a much-debated youth rebellion. Behind Harding's return to "normalcy," the corruption of his cronies, the booming stock market, and the gnomic utterance of his successor, "Silent Cal" Coolidge ("the business of government is business"), America was being transformed by a quiet revolution of manners, values, and social hopes.

Few individuals did more to prepare the ground for this upheaval than the cultural critics of the first decades of the century, including Socialists like Jack London and Upton Sinclair, maverick academics such as John Dewey and Thorstein Veblen, realistic novelists like Theodore Dreiser, iconoclastic journalists like H. L. Mencken, and young radicals like Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne. In the half century since the Civil War, America had undergone a period of enormous (and largely unregulated) economic growth. The critics, influenced by the ideas of Nietzsche, Marx, Shaw, Ibsen, and H. G. Wells, attacked American society for its disparities of wealth and poverty, its soulless materialism and conformity, and the more subtle poverty of its genteel cultural life. They saw a country formally committed to personal freedom and Christian morality but actually living by the Darwinian values of a market mentality, a society that muffled individual expression and inhibited its own best instincts.

No novelist lent more ammunition to these criticisms or broadcast them more widely than Sinclair Lewis. He was born in 1885 in Sauk Centre, a raw Minnesota prairie town of some 3,000 people, still only a generation away from pioneer settlements and Indian encampments. (The first white child was born there less than twenty-five years before.) Lewis was the youngest of three sons of a prosperous local doctor, E. J. Lewis, a distant, unbending, and puritanical man; his mother died of tuberculosis when he was six. The boy was something of a misfit—ugly, awkward, bookish, and unpopular. He remained a loner as a student at Yale, where (according to

one of his teachers, William Lyon Phelps) he "was regarded with amiable tolerance, as a freak . . . a complete and consistent individualist, going his own way, and talking only about things which interested him."

As an outsider who grew up feeling unhappy and unloved, who was never able to please the father he both revered and resented, Lewis was peculiarly susceptible to radical ideas. Thorstein Veblen, who had grown up in a Minnesota farm family a generation earlier, observed the same tendency in intellectual Jews, who were alienated from their own tradition without fully accepting any other: "One who goes away from home will come to see many unfamiliar things, and to take note of them; but it does not follow that he will swear by all the strange gods whom he meets along the road." This self-portrait of the intellectual as a homeless skeptic has an eerie resonance for the life of Sinclair Lewis, since *Main Street* is so focused on leaving home, the need to break away. Lewis himself remained a vagabond with few firm roots for the remainder of his life, yet asked that his ashes be buried beside his father's in Sauk Centre.

It would be difficult to imagine American literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without the displaced midwesterners, from Twain and Howells to Willa Cather, from Sherwood Anderson to Hemingway and Fitzgerald, who came east to make their fortunes yet remained caught up in the world that produced and outraged them. In a famous article in 1921, the critic Carl Van Doren described this as "the revolt from the village," citing the influence of the biting narrative poems in Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). The most famous example before *Main Street* was Sherwood Anderson's linked collection of stories, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), built around grotesque characters trapped in a small town—an ordinary annex of hell—isolated from each other, stranded in their own timidity, failing to live their lives. At the center of the book is a version of Anderson himself, a young man who learns all their stories and becomes the one who will escape to tell them.

At first *Winesburg, Ohio* didn't attract many readers, but its brooding poetic style, its warped and deformed characters and ringing theme of personal liberation, found an echo in many young writers, including Hemingway and Faulkner, who began their careers under Anderson's tutelage. In five apprentice novels published between 1914 and 1919, Sinclair Lewis built up a solid reputation as a realist who developed his own version of the need to escape the confines of provincial life. Even before he graduated from Yale, Lewis had been drawn to the bohemian world of prewar socialism, spending time as a janitor at Upton Sinclair's utopian community, Helicon Hall, and later at a California artists' colony in Carmel, where he came to know and work for Jack London.

Lewis held publishing jobs in New York from 1910 to 1915, but the moderate success of his first two novels enabled him to devote full time to his writing, which included a good deal of hackwork he churned out for magazines. As an undergraduate, Lewis's literary output consisted mainly of Tennysonian romantic verse, but he had been incubating the idea for a novel based on Sauk Centre since 1905. By 1918 he was determined to write an honest, realistic book about small-town America, but his romantic and sentimental streak, now balanced by sharp sarcasm, also helped shape *Main Street*. Carol Kennicott, the heroine, is a naive young idealist whose ardent desire to change the world, to make some kind of difference, mirrors the reforming spirit of the young critics of the period from 1900 to 1920. She leaves her life as a librarian in St. Paul to marry a country doctor and return with him to Gopher Prairie, but the ugliness of the town and the intrusive philistinism of its people soon fill her with dread and disappointment. The town, like every other small town in America, is "an oligarchy of respectability." She feels caught in "a swamp of prejudices and fears." Worse is the sense of surveillance, of living constantly under judging eyes, "being dragged naked down Main Street." She hates being observed and talked about but also fears being cast out. "She wanted to hide in the generous indifference of cities," says Lewis.

Other writers had painted grim pictures of America's seemingly idyllic towns, including Hamlin Garland in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) and Harold Frederic in *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), pioneering works of American realism that helped inspire Lewis to write frankly from his own experience. Just as Flaubert said "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," Lewis put much of himself into Carol Kennicott. Her bluff husband, the reliable but unimaginative Dr. Will, whose favorite pastimes are hunting, motoring, and real estate deals, who adores Carol without really understanding her, is largely a portrait of his own father. But Lewis's marriage in 1914 to New York-born Grace Livingstone Hegger, whose cultural pretensions bordered on snobbery, also enabled him to see Sauk Centre and his family through the eyes of an outsider, an easterner for whom the town would feel like an oppressive backwater.

Carol's disillusionment in her first walk along Main Street, her grating encounters with its leading citizens, color her whole life in Gopher Prairie. Never fully accepted, always feeling closely scrutinized, she spends the rest of the novel vacillating between her longing to escape and her despairing need to accommodate to things as they are. Along the way she tries repeatedly to bring Culture to the town, reading Yeats to her bored but patient husband and organizing fashionable parties, energetic outings, and amateur theatricals, each effort only driving home the futility of trying to change such a hide-bound, self-satisfied world.

Like the small handful of other rebels and outsiders in Gopher Prairie (and like the discontented George F. Babbitt in Lewis's next novel), Carol is ultimately defeated by the town, brought to heel by social pressure, inertia, and her deeply ingrained wish to get along. But this is not what gives the novel its distinctive quality. Sinclair Lewis is a great satirist, one of the best America has produced, but *Main Street* is a more personal book, a love-hate letter to the world he came from. As satire, *Babbitt* is wilder and more outrageous than *Main Street*. Its hero, far from being an outside observer, is himself the incar-

nation of the shoddy business world around him, with its booster mentality, its Rotarian atmosphere of 100 per cent Americanism, its built-in social controls, its joshing colloquial style of intolerance and intimidation. No one in *Babbitt* is quite human, and the hero's belated middle-aged crisis is a short-lived rebellion easily put down. *Babbitt* is a brilliantly effective cartoon that looks back toward Dickens and forward to Nathanael West at their most slashingly entertaining.

The townspeople in *Main Street* are also social stereotypes, and Gopher Prairie is as much the epitome of small-town America as Babbitt is of the go-getting American booster. Grounded in the oral traditions of western humor, Lewis's satire always aims at the type. But *Main Street* depends less on comic exaggeration, much more on the ebb and flow of the heroine's feelings, which reflect the writer's own very American dream of self-improvement, uplift, and personal freedom. Edith Wharton, the great social novelist to whom *Babbitt* was dedicated, told Lewis in a 1922 letter that she preferred *Main Street*, despite the wonderful exuberance and energy of the later book:

I don't think *Babbitt* as good a novel, in the all-round sense, as *Main Street*, because in the latter you produce a sense of unity & of depth by reflecting Main Street in the consciousness of a woman who suffered from it because she had points of comparison, & was detached enough to situate it in the universe—whereas Babbitt is in and of Zenith up to his chin & over.

What Wharton admires here is more like a Wharton novel than a Lewis satire: the focus on a single consciousness, an entrapped woman keenly aware of her situation without being able to break out. Lewis wasn't really a novelist in Wharton's "all-round sense." But *Main Street* is a hybrid, a stinging satirical novel crossed with a novel of personal discontent, longing, and indecision. The Main Street side of the novel delighted H. L.

Mencken and ignited controversy by exposing the American town as stifling, mean-spirited, and conformist. But *Main Street* was also a novel about a stultifying marriage, a mismatch between Main Street values and neglected human needs—a feminist novel to which many women responded strongly. “She was a woman with a working brain and no work,” Carol discovers soon after she settles into Gopher Prairie.

“I think perhaps we want a more conscious life,” says Carol, too-consciously echoing contemporary feminism. “We’re tired of drudging and sleeping and dying.” This was Wharton territory: an ill-assorted couple, thwarted aspirations, the theme of the un-lived life, which Harry James, D. H. Lawrence, and Sherwood Anderson had also explored. When the trustees of Columbia University chose Wharton’s *Age of Innocence* for the Pulitzer Prize after the judges recommended *Main Street*, they were fleeing controversy yet honoring a work on exactly the same theme, dealing with an unsatisfying marriage and the fear and social intimidation that hold it together. Both books studied marriage almost anthropologically, baring the peculiar mores of inbred tribes and closed worlds, but at least Wharton’s novel was set safely in the 1870s.

As the Pulitzer judges recognized, the two strands of *Main Street* were a potent combination. Lewis’s unsympathetic but insightful biographer, Mark Schorer, describes its appearance as “the most sensational event in twentieth-century American publishing history.” Within a year it had sold 295,000 copies. It brought a critical view of American culture to a wide readership in a scabrously amusing form. “No reader was indifferent to *Main Street*,” writes Schorer. “If it was not the most important revelation of American life ever made, it was the most infamous libel upon it. . . . America in general found that a new image of itself had suddenly been thrust upon it.” This darker image of America was not confined to the kind of town Lewis grew up in, since America’s rural communities were already giving way as he wrote his book. Lewis’s inspiration was not simply to make “Main Street” a metaphor for small-town America,

but to make Gopher Prairie and the Kennicott marriage stand for everything rigid and dehumanizing about American life—the social intolerance, the crude architecture, the ugly public spaces, the disrespect for learning and art, the standardization imposed by modernity and the machine, the deep gulf between the sexes, and especially the sense of uselessness of middle-class women.

Lewis's ideas were not new. Veblen, Mencken, and Van Wyck Brooks had been saying similar things for years. Shaw and Wells had been their prophets. But Lewis turned their corrosive perceptions and his own maladjustment into a folksy, concrete, ambivalent portrait of the American heartland. In *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915), Brooks had described a split between an unworldly idealism that went back to the Puritans and Transcendentalists and a bustling practical energy that joined the homespun Benjamin Franklin to the prodigious moneymaking and industrial growth since the Civil War. Ingeniously, Sinclair Lewis built this conflict into the Kennicott marriage and Carol's tensions with the good burghers of Gopher Prairie. The novel contrasts Carol's slightly ridiculous longing for beauty and uplift—which was mocked by Mencken, who said that "her superior culture is, after all, chiefly bogus"—with Will's down-to-earth practicality and the townspeople's iron resistance to Carol's elevating plans for them. Except for Will, they are small, limited, and mean; Carol is ambitious, dreamy, and confused.

Lewis develops this contrast between practical wisdom and cultured idealism far too broadly. In one of his doctrinaire asides, he shows us American technology taking over the world—American industry, American kitchens and bathrooms, American standardization and uniformity. Against this mechanical uniformity he vaguely invokes the treasures of European art and culture. As Carol becomes a housewife in Gopher Prairie, her world shrinks; the can opener in her kitchen becomes "more pertinent to her than all the cathedrals in Europe." Lewis can't resist using his characters to pillory ignorance or preach the occasional sermon.

The characters themselves are sketched in the same black-and-white shades. At one extreme are the know-nothing Smails, Will's predatory kinsmen, who descend on Gopher Prairie halfway through the novel; also the widow Bogart, the Kennicotts' busybody neighbor, sanctimonious in her "simpering viciousness," and her brutish son, Cy. On the other side are the village rebels, some of them frustrated artists, who are invariably ground down: Guy Pollock, the bachelor lawyer who loves poetry and is a prime victim of the "Village Virus," a deathlike inability to live elsewhere; Carol's Swedish maid Bea and her husband, Miles, the village atheist and radical, whom the good ladies of the town cruelly ostracize; the tailor's assistant, Erik Valborg, dandyish, slightly effeminate, culture-loving; and finally Fern, a vivacious young schoolteacher whose reputation, if not her virtue, is ruined by Cy Bogart. Lewis's mastery of speech and social detail never fails him—it gives this novel its tremendous power as a document of American life—but he conceives these people as animated caricatures without the finer gradations that would ever enable them to surprise us. Like many satirists, Lewis was a great observer, a superb mimic. But only Carol has an inner life that matters, a sensibility in which the author truly invests himself.

Main Street is defined less by Lewis's satire than by Carol's complicated longings and disappointments, her constantly shifting attitudes toward the town and her husband. If *Babbitt* succeeds as a comic tour de force, a barbed, illustrated social polemic, then *Main Street*, for all its superb documentation, is a more inward, ruminative book. Lewis gives us a three-dimensional character at the center of a two-dimensional landscape, a novel whose very dissonance of form conveys a menacing sense of enclosure and anxiety. A similar technique would later be used by writers as varied as Nathanael West (*Miss Lonelyhearts*, *Day of the Locust*), Mary McCarthy (*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*), Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*), and Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49*), dark satirists whose heroes undergo an ordeal of the spirit among fools and knaves.

The more repugnant characters in Lewis's novel, the Smalls and the Bogarts, do little but mock Carol, thwart her, and monitor her little deviations from the town's orthodoxies. The rebels, on the other hand, serve to echo her discontent and provide cautionary lessons of what might happen if her heresies persist, or if she were not protected by her husband's social position. Even Vida Sherwin, who first appears as a soul mate, becomes little more than a crude Freudian case study in sexual repression. Only Will gives promise of being someone to match Carol's complexity, but in the end he's less a character than a vehicle for Sinclair Lewis's own conflicts. At one moment he is simply a know-nothing—limited, obtuse, insensitive—a mouthpiece for reactionary clichés; at other times almost heroic: a humane, quietly conscientious doctor, unassuming in his professionalism, a forbearing husband, remarkably patient with his wife's emotional confusion, sexual withdrawal, and even physical separation when she goes off with their son to Washington to do war work.

Lewis identifies with Carol yet also, from the first paragraph of the book, when she is still a college student, derides her lofty cultural aspirations, which he sometimes shared. But her contradictory feelings about Will bring in something Lewis could not control: his own ambivalence toward Sauk Centre and his father. This forms the keystone of the book and contributes to Will's incoherence as a character. Nothing in the novel is more warmly imagined and beautifully written than the fifteenth chapter, in which Carol briefly feels the heroism of her husband's daily routine and marvels at his steadfast behavior in an emergency. What Carol experiences as admiration and love, Lewis himself must once have known as a child is awe of his father's masculine strength. But his father's inaccessibility and rejection, along with the disapproval of the town, turned Lewis into a privileged misfit, like Carol. Lewis himself was Sauk Centre, the provincial rube who had gone to Yale, who had married a lady. Soon Will's character shrinks again. Lewis's shifting feelings shape the novel; the often