

## ANALYSIS

*Main Street* (1920)

Sinclair Lewis

(1885-1951)

“My dear Mr. Sinclair Lewis-- I am writing to tell you how glad I am that you wrote *Main Street*. Hope it will be read in every town in America. As a matter of fact I suppose it will find most of its readers in the cities. You've sure done a job. Very Truly yours,”

Sherwood Anderson  
Letter to Lewis (1 December 1920)

“[*Main Street* produces] a sense of unity and depth by reflecting Main Street in the consciousness of a woman who suffered from it because she had points of comparison, and was detached enough to situate it in the universe.”

Edith Wharton  
Letter to Lewis (1922)

“In *Main Street* he set out to tell a true story about the American village, whether anybody would read it or not, and he was surprised by the tremendous acclamation. He had not reasoned that it was time to take a new attitude toward the village or calculated that it would be prudent. He only put down, dramatically, the discontents that had been stirring in him for at least fifteen years. But there was something seismographic in his nerves, and he had recorded a ground swell of popular thinking and feeling. His occasional explicit comments on dull villages were quoted till they reverberated. Many readers thought there were more such comments than there were. The novelty was less in the arguments of the book than in the story. That violated a pattern which had been long accepted in American fiction. The heroes of Booth Tarkington, for instance, after a brief rebellion of one kind or other, came to their senses and agreed with their wiser elders. But Carol Kennicott, rebelling against the unnecessary ugliness of Gopher Prairie and its smug stodginess, and in the end having to yield to it, yet appears as a heroine. Her discontent has been not folly but a virtue. The village is the villain.

The characters of the story, even Carol, are not remembered as Gopher Prairie is. The most famous incident is Carol's first walk along Main Street, with its detailed description of what she saw. The book is a comic pageant, a panoramic caricature of a small provincial town. Almost every American town has a Main Street as a matter of course. Lewis made the name a symbol and an epithet. Main Street became a synonym for narrow provincialism. People spoke of Main Street minds or customs without needing to explain further what they meant. He could have fixed the epithet so deeply in the national consciousness only by giving it the sharp point of unmistakable ideas. But he reinforced his ideas by innumerable instances. The novel is full of persons, and they are shown in a continuous variety of incidents to illustrate Gopher Prairie's virtues and vices. The vices seemed in 1920 to outweigh the virtues overwhelmingly, because they were shown in a proportion new to American country novels. In time the vices and virtues came to seem more justly balanced. Much praise was at first given to the brilliant accuracy of the dialogue. In time it became clear that the dialogue was partly creation: the American vernacular enlivened by Lewis's own characteristic idiom and cadences.”

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1921-68) 305-06

“Carol Milford, a girl of quick intelligence but no particular talent, after graduation from college meets and marries Will Kennicott, a sober, kindly, unimaginative physician of Gopher Prairie, Minn., who tells her that the town needs her abilities. She finds the village to be a smug, intolerant, unimaginatively standardized place, where the people will not accept her efforts to create more sightly homes, organize a dramatic association, and otherwise improve the village life. A few characters stand above the apathy and

provinciality of the rest: Vida Sherwin, the repressed and acidulous schoolteacher; Guy Pollock, the learned lawyer who has been entrapped by the 'village virus'; and Miles Bjornstam, a laughing, iconoclastic Swedish vagabond. Carol draws away from her husband, falls in love with Erik Valborg, a kindred spirit, and finally goes to Washington to make her own life. When Kennicott comes for her, two years later, she returns with him, for, though she feels no love, she respects him, and being incapable of creating her own life appears not unhappy to return to the familiar, petty Gopher Prairie."

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

"*Main Street*...begins like a novel by one of the women of the period, with a talented girl caught in a cramping environment, the small and ugly town of Gopher Prairie. Yet this is to be no story of a saint or a stoic or a creative artist. Carol Kennicott is a product of genteel education, and brings with her to Gopher Prairie a thin culture, vague in its objectives, and trivial in its requirements which seldom go beyond a pretty room to sit in and good talk. She proposes, nevertheless, to reform the town, socially, aesthetically, politically, and is broken, like the butterfly she is, because her intellectual and aesthetic frippery, sterile even in herself, cannot possibly function among men and women whose vulgar grossness (and kind hearts) require a new set of values, not new manners, in order to make a culture of their own. There is no reality in Carol, not even an emotional reality, though it is questionable whether Lewis in 1920 understood how artificial were her standards. She is cold, even in her sexual relations, and the best she can do toward adjustment to life is to escape for a year or so to Washington where she can talk, if not practice, intellectual improvement, and then to come back with enough tolerance to settle down as just another Gopher Prairie woman.

The town is the real subject and the triumph of *Main Street*—not Carol, who is, after all, an example of Lewis' somewhat naïve admiration in 1920 for the 'intelligentsia.' Lewis must have been well aware that a thousand communities in France and England were duller, meaner, less literate than this home of the second generation of westward-moving frontiersmen, where there was at least the belief that here civilization was on its way up. But his fierce idealism for America, and perhaps some defects in wisdom and perspective, make *Main Street* not only a picture but also a crusade against the cheapness of American ambitions.

His men think in stereotypes. They profess the liberalism of their forefathers (as also in *Babbitt*), but practice economic domination of the poor farmers who are too dumb to live by their wits. Their conversation seldom gets beyond the twelve-year age level. The women live by gossip, and culture is a tepid circulating of stale and harmless ideas. Yet Lewis likes them as much as he hates their current values. Dr. Kennicott loves his furnace better than the Parthenon, but he does represent science heroically at work upon one of its frontiers. And if this friendly little society is almost elemental in the pleasures which it really enjoys, at least Main Street life has more gusto than the proposed activities of Carol's 'city beautiful.' Lewis is a distressed and disgusted idealist, not a cynic. His anger is worth while.

As a novel of character *Main Street* does not reach the highest rank, and as satire its edge is dulled because the author keeps changing sides. The book stirred America from coast to coast, not by its philosophy, but by the inescapable truth and remarkable intimacy of his picture of American behavior. Lewis could not get his heart into Carol. He was too much a part of Main Street himself to think that she knew the answers. The significant American there was not the second-rate intellectual, but the back-slapping, boosting good fellow who had so much energy and good will, and only a secondhand morality and third-rate objectives toward which to steer his life. Lewis needed a man for his hero, and idealist like himself even if stunted and warped by a bad education and a set of false values. George F. Babbitt was his first great character, because Babbitt was as human as his author. He was a far more deadly instrument of satire than the somewhat sociological figures of *Main Street*."

Henry Seidel Canby  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-83) 1224-25

“Lewis planned *Main Street* as a noncommercial book; it might, he hoped, sell five or six thousand copies. The idea long antedated the war, but originally the central character was not Carol Kennicott, who marries the doctor of Gopher Prairie and becomes a frustrated apostle of sweetness and light to benighted Middle Westerners, but a small town lawyer.... Carol is not always right nor her opponents always wrong. No young woman so unsure in her arms, so naïve and flighty in temperament, so ignorant concerning the nature of the forces opposed to her could have won the fight upon which this girl embarks. But in the main she holds her creator’s sympathy and that of the reader also.

Gopher Prairie merchants oppose the co-ops because they know that a successful cooperative movement would seriously reduce their profits, and the Gopher Prairie librarian feels that her first duty is not to see that the books are used but carefully to preserve them. The woman’s club covers all the English poets in one session and goes on to ‘English Fiction and Essays’ next week, and when the local pastor preaches on ‘America, Face Your Problems,’ he considers only Mormonism and Prohibition. Church members themselves have no real faith in Christian doctrine, and the village aesthete prefers the movies to standard literature because their purity is more carefully guarded through censorship.”

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:  
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*  
(Holt 1952) 356-57

“*Main Street* is a study of life in a rural midwestern town, and especially the efforts of the city-bred heroine to stimulate it into some semblance of intellectual activity. Carol Milford, a college graduate, plans to become a librarian and live an intellectual life among books and interesting personalities. But when she meets the young Dr. Will Kennicott she falls in love with him and agrees to go with him to Gopher Prairie, Minnesota as his bride. What follows is a succession of frustrations. Carol at first attempts to serve as a missionary of culture to the lethargic townsfolk. She organizes a little theatre, which falls flat; she investigates the local literary club, but flees from it in horror when the members dispose of the English poets in a single meeting and then go on to ‘English Fiction and Essays.’ The local minister is a bigoted nincompoop, and Erik Valborg, the town intellectual and promising material for an extra-marital romance, turns out to be vapid and cowardly. Carol gradually finds she is acquiring the enmity of the enter town; she is hated for her imagined air of superiority and resented for attacking the complacent and traditional pace of local society.

At length Carol abandons both town and husband to go to Washington; the war boom is on, and she secures a position as a clerk. But in Washington she is lonely; she begins to understand Gopher Prairie for the first time, and realizes there is a great deal of small town in her own personality. In the end she returns to Gopher Prairie, determined this time to approach small-town life with a more tolerant mood and to attempt to adjust herself to its peculiarities. *Main Street* is in more than one sense an American *Madame Bovary*; in both novels the heroine is a frustrated young woman who is morally and intellectually superior to her physician husband, and in both cases the scene is laid in a small town whose stock types are paraded past the reader one by one. The more important sources of *Main Street*, however, lay in Lewis’s own life. It has been remarked that Carol is in many ways a feminine transposition of Lewis himself, and that the story is a sort of allegory of his relation to American society.”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 115-16

“*Main Street* (1920) was Sinclair Lewis’s first great success in the novel. He had published five novels before that one. The best of these was *The Job* (1917). In that novel he told the story of a village girl who comes to the big city, wrapped in her romantic illusions about it, finds that they are indeed illusions, and then meets the big city on its own terms, and succeeds. *The Job* was an interesting novel about career women before they were a commonplace in fiction, and it was for that reason Lewis’s first controversial book. Its general subject—a young woman struggling for a place in the ruthless world of business—was in itself still controversial, but more than that were certain ancillary interests with which *The Job* is also concerned: women’s rights, divorce, birth control, socialism, realistic and radical fiction. It has been argued that the movement of population from the farms and the small towns to the cities at the end of the

last century and the beginning of this was largely a women's movement, part of the whole effort at emancipation from domestic drudgery into self-realization and independence....

And all this we may look at as the proper background of *Main Street*, where he simply inverted his formula of *The Job*: A relatively sophisticated girl comes to a village, and instead of trying to meet the village on its terms (her cook does that), she challenges and tries to fight those terms, and is defeated (and so, for that matter, is the cook). Putting these two novels together, side by side, one must conclude that Sinclair Lewis thought that the cruel city could be made to yield while the cruel village...would not for a minute concede one inch of its bleak and rigid tyranny.... Carol... 'was a woman with a working brain and no work'... Carol, forced to put her working brain aside, tries to find herself as an identity in domestic happiness alone, can only be frustrated, and nearly loses her identity entirely, together with the kind of happiness for which she had hoped.

Today, when the emancipation of women, for better or worse, is an accomplished fact, and when the sociological fate of the small town has largely been settled, we can, perhaps, read *Main Street* only as one reads an historical novel. The story opens in about 1906, with Carol Milford still a student in Blodgett College, but in quick summary it passes over her graduation and her year of study in Chicago and her three years as a librarian in St. Paul, and the story proper begins in about 1912, when she married Dr. Will Kennicott and moves to Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. It ends in 1920 when, after her attempt to escape, she subsides into Gopher Prairie.

These dates, whether one stretches them from 1906 to 1920, or compresses them into the span from 1912 to 1920, in themselves mark off an era in American cultural history. It is the era, the manners of a closing stage of culture and (in the distant cities) the transition into another stage, that this novel memorializes, rather than an individual tragedy or comedy. It was a critical fashion at the time that *Main Street* was published to call it the American *Madame Bovary*, and Sinclair Lewis the American Flaubert. The comparison cannot be sustained today. *Madame Bovary* is more than a study of provincial manners in a certain time and place in France; that much is only the setting for a highly dramatic presentation of human catastrophe. But *Main Street* cannot be lifted out of its historic setting, which is, in effect, the whole of it....

When Carol moved from St. Paul, it was not on the wave of progress to New York, where she could have cultivated her interests, but on an ebb-flow into a backwash of American history, the dying American small town, Gopher Prairie, where her interests could only be crushed.... The village in the United States had become an economic and hence a cultural cipher, set in the rigidities of its own past, while the medium-sized and the great cities became the center of American economic life and the determining forces in American cultural evolution. In 1915, as Carl Van Doren observed, American literature took note of this historic shift when Edgar Lee Masters, in his 'revolt from the village,' published his *Spoon River Anthology*.

When Carol came to Gopher Prairie, it was only fifty years old, bearing still the rough scars of its origin, such a short time before, as a crossing of frontier trails. Its growth, up to a certain point, had been rapid, and she finds that the villagers expect it to grow still, to become a city, even while they suffer from a kind of communal inferiority complex when they think about the cities. Carol, too, has hopes for it, and attempts to make real there ambitions she had acquired in the city: civic and social improvement, an experimental theater, exciting discussions of advanced ideas, the appreciation of fine poetry—the poetry of Yeats; but in every attempt she is rebuffed. And at last, like thousands of other young Americans, in precisely those years (and the novel itself comments on this shift in the population), she flees from the village to the city, where she is determined to find her career and herself. Abandoning her husband and trying to live an independent life with her young child, she is too late, and the village pulls her back...

Between the time of her first attempts to improve Gopher Prairie and the date of her submission to it, a world war had been fought and ended. With the advance of the war, the older American progressivist hopes had faded and by the time that it was over, much in American life seemed to many Americans themselves chaucerianistic, hypocritical, unbearably provincial. For five years, the 'revolt from the village' had been finding more and more voices in American literature, and in 1920, with the spread of a new attitude of post-war cynicism in American life, this particular dissatisfaction had reached its peak. With the

failure of Carol Kennicott, Sinclair Lewis, his novel perfectly timed for the American audience, seized upon his first great triumph. It could hardly have been otherwise—this extraordinary phenomenon in American publishing and cultural history....

*Main Street* had certain other publishing advantages than its timing over its predecessors in the 'revolt from the village.' Most of the novels of 'revolt' that came before it—books by writers like Sherwood Anderson, Zona Gale, Floyd Dell—were solemn about their subject when they were not lugubrious. Sinclair Lewis chose to write, in large part, satirically, and so even his vicious characters become figures in a kind of comedy. His satire is, of course, not evenly distributed. Carol, who seems naïve to us today when she does not seem downright silly, is spared all satire except for an occasional kindly prick. Will Kennicott is not satirized, nor is Guy Pollock nor Miles Bjornstam nor Fern Mullins and a number of others. The satire does not begin until Carol is looking into the window of Ludelmeyer's grocery store, and from then on it is directed only at the most complacent denizens of Gopher Prairie. Taken together, these provide a formidable collective picture of the trap into which Carol has fallen at the same time that they lighten the pathos of her dilemma.

Satire, which is essentially an art of over-simplification since it concentrates on a few if not only on a single characteristic, is inevitably in danger of overlooking the complexity of human nature. Thus, for example, the characterization of Juanita Haydock is as simple as a cartoon, and her husband, Harry, is not more than a shadow in a cartoon. Yet Lewis's gift extended to much more subtle satiric portraits. There is, for example, Vida Sherwin, the school teacher who had been in love with Kennicott before he knew Carol... The Lewis satire takes on a deeper psychological Realism than it has sometimes been credited with.... It was another kind of Realism, however, that most compelled Lewis's early readers, and that was the Realism of the scene, the persuasiveness of the physical details together with that of the midwestern vernacular that he so lovingly reported. Some early readers complained that the book was too unselective for art, but it was the very volume of packed detail that H. L. Mencken, for example, chose to praise in his review of the novel. It was, of course, the detail that Sinclair Lewis could bring out of the hoard of his experience as a boy and young man in Sauk Centre, Minnesota....

It is no individual but the entire environment that is Clara's antagonist.... The image of the American village that Lewis created through such details remains pretty much the image of the village that most of us still hold today, more than forty years later, and this in spite of the fact that today the novel, as a novel, reads in large part like a period piece. That scene he populated with a whole gallery of persons who are enduring memorials to familiar American types: the village atheist (Miles Bjornstam), the cruelly sanctimonious widow (Mrs. Bogart), the local 'queer' (Erik Valborg), the town bully (Cy Bogart), the defeated liberal (Guy Pollock), and many another. In the midst of these he poses his two central characters, and they, too, are familiar American types—the complacent husband of common sense and the discontented wife with romantic dreams.

Or, as Carol herself puts it, '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; and it's madness for us to debate—to lie together in a hot bed in a creepy room—enemies, yoked.' At one point, away from Gopher Prairie, Carol decides to settle for 'the nobility of good sense,' best represented by her husband, and in the end, she is forced to settle for it, although she cannot then and never will learn to believe in its 'nobility.'... At the end, having learned very little, she continues to see people only as she was in the first place prepared to see them.

Sinclair Lewis does not chide her. Generally speaking, he views the material of his novel as she views it, and all his life, a good half of his nature was given to the same kind of romantic reverie that motivates Carol. But the other half of his nature was Will Kennicott's—downright, realistic, sensible, crude. The two together make the author, and just as in his life these two parts of himself struggled against each other, so at the end of his novel, the husband and wife are still 'enemies, yoked.'... One or the other of them must have the last word. Forced to choose, he gives it to Doctor Will.... Neither noble nor ignoble, good sense rules at last, and in no way whatever has life in Gopher Prairie become 'more conscious.' This, the author seems to say in the end, is not only as things must be but even as things should be. This is reality."

Mark Schorer  
Afterword, *Main Street*  
(1920; New American Library/Signet 1961) 433-39

“This was the book which established Lewis as a genuinely serious writer. Its aim was to capture the American small town (here called Gopher Prairie, Minn.)...its pretensions, its fake gentility, its commercial values, its groping and often hypocritical search for ‘culture.’ Carol Kennicott’s endeavor to make Gopher Prairie culture-conscious is the theme; Lewis later said that Carol was really himself. The book is at once a satire and an affectionate portrait. Gopher Prairie is surely a fictional development of Lewis’s own home town, Sauk Centre, Minn.; the naivete of the book’s characters, as they pursue the goal of ‘culture,’ was in part Lewis’s own sense of awe in the presence of intellectual things.

The satire is sharp and telling, yet the reader is aware of a kind of grand simplicity in the narration of the story, at least in comparison with the modern masters of European and much other American fiction. Above all the novel is accurate: many critics have pointed out that more can be learned about the American small town of the 1920’s from *Main Street* than from all the studies of the sociologists combined.... It has been reprinted often and is without doubt one of the most influential novels ever published in America. It aroused much controversy in the 1920’s.... Of all the books written during the post-World War I literary revolt, *Main Street* was the most successful in producing an American self-awareness.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“*Main Street* may or may not be Sinclair Lewis’ best novel (many readers would rank it below *Babbitt*), but it is one of those symptomatic books that literary historians find so convenient as milestones or turning points. It belongs to the special category of book—there is no name for it—which is at once a valid literary work and an explosive cultural event. Greater novelists than Lewis have had to wait decades or longer for a responsive audience, but the publication of *Main Street* in October 1920 (I say this on the authority of Prof. Mark Schorer, Lewis’ most searching biographer), turned out to be ‘the most sensational event in twentieth-century American publishing history....

It may seem odd, in retrospect, that a novel without any strikingly original characters, without suspense, without any remarkable stylistic merits, should have aroused such a clamor. The plot is ambling and unspectacular. It is merely the story of a romantic half-educated Middle-Western girl, tinged with vague longings, who marries a small-town doctor, rebels against the monotony and drabness of her life, and grudgingly—after a brief flurry of nonconformity—accommodates herself to her husband and her destiny. And yet the day-to-day experiences of Lewis’ heroine, Carol Kennicott, devoid of tragedy and often trivial, proved absorbing to hundreds of thousands of readers who vicariously shared them.

Some readers, it must be said, were shocked and angered. Lewis, they felt, had indulged in cheap fun at the expense of the American institutions and at men and women who had made the nation great. He had depicted the small town, that microcosm of Eden, without love or understanding. Sherwood Anderson, for one, never forgave Lewis for reducing American small towns to hot dusty places peopled by boasters and liars, ‘never tender about anything or anybody, never human.’ But there were others who rejoiced in his iconoclasm. They saw him as the articulator of their own case against what was mean and dispiriting in North American life....

The schoolhouse is ugly and overcrowded. Cement garages have supplanted the smithy; the corner grocery is a depressing vision of overripe bananas and lettuce warmed by a sleeping cat. There is still gossip, of course, but it is of a savage and defiling variety. The fathers are artificially jovial; the mothers are not gentle; the young people are mostly loutish. Gopher Prairie, in short, is ‘slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dullness made God.” So Carol Kennicott saw it; yet it would be a mistake to leave it at that. Lewis’ portrait of the small town is not unrelievedly dismal nor are all of its inhabitants drooling Yahoos. Some have private heroisms. He had modeled Gopher Prairie on Sauk Center, Minnesota, where he was born and where he spent a not very enjoyable adolescence; his home town was not without the kind

of brave beauty Carol conceded to Gopher Prairie. In moments of nostalgia, Lewis would recall the friendliness of Sauk Center, the swimming and the fishing, the ten-mile tramp with a shotgun in October... 'It was a good time, a good place, a good preparation for life.'

...Lewis repeatedly named Thoreau as the pervasive influence on all of his work—a paradoxical admission considering Lewis' unwillingness or inability to lead the simple life. But the burden of Lewis' message to his fellow Americans was indeed Thoreauvian. Mark Schorer has rightly said that the basis of his plots was 'the individual impulse to freedom and the social impulse to restrict it.' *Main Street*, at bottom, is a variation on a theme of *Walden*. The best way to illustrate this Thoreauvian link is to consider more closely Lewis' heroine, Carol Kennicott, that controversial figure maligned and betrayed by her creator. Many of the admirers of the novel—Mencken, to name only one—refused to take her seriously. She was a romantic ninny, after all, dreaming of medieval castles, bearded Frenchmen, nymphs and satyrs, jeweled elephants. Her vision of a remodeled Gopher Prairie as a New England village nestling in a Swinburnian landscape was as pathetic as it was ridiculous. And yet Lewis allows this same woman, whose artistic and literary notions were not so vastly superior to those of the bluestockings in the Gopher Prairie Thanatopsis Club, to preach his satirical sermon to his sheeplike contemporaries and to assail the institutions that enslaved them.

Apparently, in 1920 Lewis was as unabashed a romantic as Carol (in fact he never stopped hankering for a bookish fairyland inhabited by amorous sylphs) and he held his heroine in much higher esteem than did his more sophisticated and cynical friends. Even in the earlier versions of the novel, where she appeared as a character named Fern, Lewis had expressed a faith in her 'lucidity of mind' if not in the effectiveness of her efforts, and there is little to indicate that he disagreed with her indictment of the 'brisk, spectacled, motor-driving businessman' of Main Street. To be sure, then and later, he never entirely approved of her nor did he minimize her deficiencies, but he certainly shared her distaste for Gopher Prairie's complacency and hypocrisy, and he encouraged her attempts to stave off what Lewis calls...the 'village virus.'

The principal sufferer of that disease is the lawyer, Guy Pollock, a dim and appealing figure who in the early draft of the novel was probably intended to play a larger role than he does in the final version. As he explains it to Carol, the village virus is an infection to which ambitious people in small towns are peculiarly susceptible. Gradually, imperceptibly, it saps them of their hope and energy, narcotizes rebelliousness, reduces the victim to the same dead level of the lifeless majority residing in 'a respectable form of hell.' Carol finally discontinues her one-woman revolt (it is hard to say whether or not she actually contracts the disease), but she protests, with Lewis' approval, until the end.... She lacked the stability and perseverance of Dr. Will Kennicott, but her crusade was Lewis' as well, and it was Carol who conveyed his subversive ideas, not her husband.

Dr. Will is a good physician and surgeon, but he is quite at home with the 100 percent boosters.... Carol...cannot swallow this nonsense, and although she loves her husband, she will not sacrifice her individuality to become like him, as he unconsciously desires her to. In one of her frank moments, she says she is a crank not because she is trying to 'reform' the town but in order to save her own soul; and here is the real thesis of *Main Street*. The Carol who speaks in this vein is the daughter of Emerson and Thoreau and to the American sister of Emma Bovary.

Then why does Lewis turn against her and later side with her bumbling husband? Why did he write an article in 1924...the point of which is to debunk his former alter ego?... Carol has lost her old spunk. She is cowed and dominated by her powerful confident husband about whom Lewis now speaks in much warmer terms than he did in 1920. The cruel resurrection of Carol suggests a reversal of the author's attitude until we remember that Lewis had never agreed to her *comprehensive* indictment of Gopher Prairie. The Dr. Kennicott part of him exhibited a sneaking fondness for the 'boobs' and 'slobs' that the Carol Kennicott part of him refused to tolerate....

By 1924 and increasingly afterward, Lewis, the apologist or celebrator of the middle class, is more assertive than the Lewis who assails it. He prefers the company of the doctor to that of his querulous wife with whom he had never openly identified himself. He had even composed a misleading publisher's blurb for *Main Street*: an 'eager girl' living the 'fish-bowl' existence of a doctor's wife in a small town finally

learns 'the great secret of life in being content with a real world in which it's never possible to create an ideal setting.' This rather silly description, which Dr. Will might have written, belies the novel, but it helps to correct the mistaken view of Lewis as a consistently angry critic of American materialism. America had not produced the kind of civilization that satisfied the Carol Kennicott in him, but then neither had Europe. Like Dr. Will, like Babbitt, he respected the men responsible for reliable automobiles and tiled bathrooms, as a glance at any of his novels will show. Among his portraits of business and professional men, Babbitt is presented sardonically but without rancor, Dodsworth almost reverently, Cass Timberlane romantically.

A number of critics for whom 'middle-class' was almost a term of abuse...contrasted the sharpness and pungency of *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Elmer Gantry* with the increasingly mellow novels that ducked, they thought, the real issues of the day. Lewis, one of them complained, 'drew a revolutionary picture of American middle-class life without coming to revolutionary conclusions about it'... *Main Street* is a work of historical importance...because it helped Americans to understand themselves... Lewis was at once a part of his society and detached from it.... He was too much a part of his nation, too deeply involved with its hopes, too impatient with its failures, to treat it simply in a tender or simply in a clinical way. Yet somehow, he managed to make his prosaic materials appear fabulous...and in a few books to translate his commonplace boobs into archetypes."

Daniel Aaron  
"Sinclair Lewis: *Main Street*"  
*The American Novel: From James Fenimore Cooper to William Faulkner*  
(Basic Books 1965) 166-74, 177  
ed. Wallace Stegner

Michael Hollister (2015)