
CLASSICS

OF DEMOCRACY

Street without Horizons: *Main Street* Revisited

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It has been estimated that two million people read *Main Street* during the 1920s. As a result, Sinclair Lewis became a pariah in small towns all over America. One town near Sauk Centre, Minnesota, where he was born, banned *Main Street* from its public library. If Lewis could have put that in the novel, he would have.

When *Main Street* first appeared in 1920, "America found that a new image of itself had suddenly been thrust upon it," according to Mark Schorer, Lewis's biographer. The old image of the small town as a repository of virtue and homespun wisdom blurred and faded in the glare of Lewis's ferocious insights. His *Main Street* and its denizens were ugly, self-satisfied, repressive, and ignorant. The Midwestern small town was modern hell, "negation canonized as the one positive virtue . . . prohibition of happiness . . . slavery self-taught and self-defended . . . dullness made God."

But the provocation (and the truth) in Lewis's vision did not lie in its negativity. If *Main Street* was boring, squalid, and mean, it was also "the climax of civilization," a "bewildered empire" that fed a quarter of the world. Lewis's ambivalent attitude toward American civilization has often been noted. Like his protagonist Carol Kennicott, he could not seem to decide if he hated or loved *Main Street*, and so he vacillated between sentiments. Both the uneven tone and the vitality of his novel come from this double view. Carol herself is sensitive but pretentious, open but intolerant, critical but impotent.

In *Main Street* Lewis turned fiction into sociology, analyzing the class system of Gopher Prairie, its values and its social networks. *Main Street* precedes *Middletown* as a document of American life. Carol's story is a case history. Thousands of American women recognized themselves in her, and many wrote to Lewis to tell him so.

How did Lewis see *Main Street*, and how has small-town America changed in the sixty-odd years since the novel was published? What truths does it tell about our society? What does *Main Street* say about American democracy? ("No use running this democracy thing into the ground," Will Kennicott tells Carol to explain why he does not go hunting with the town barber.) Can we call Lewis's vision outmoded? Does Carol Kennicott still live in Gopher Prairie? Or has our society changed so much that we should evaluate *Main Street* as a historical curiosity, a chronicle of a world that has passed away?

Without a doubt, the physical setting of *Main Street* has changed drastically for the better. In old photographs it was a muddy mess in spring and fall, dusty in summer, snow- and ice-covered in winter. When Carol arrived in Gopher Prairie, she saw "a row of one-story shops covered with galvanized iron, or with clapboards painted red and bilious yellow. The buildings were as ill-assorted, as temporary-looking, as a mining camp street in the motion-pictures." She despaired at "Main Street with its two-story brick shops, its story-and-a-half wooden residences, its muddy expanse from concrete walk to walk, its huddle of Fords and lumber-wagons." On the street where she lived sat "meek cottages or large, comfortable, soundly uninteresting symbols of prosperity." Her overriding impression was of "unsparing unapologetic ugliness." Inside her house lurked "shadows of dead thoughts and haunting repressions." Perhaps ghosts still inhabit the 100-year-old house where I live in Iowa, but I don't feel them. With self-conscious sophistication we have learned to love old woodwork, clapboard, flowered wallpaper, heavy oak dressers, rambling front porches, and cyclone cellars. Indeed, we pay extra for some of the things that Carol abhorred.

Some resemblances between today's small town and the Gopher Prairie of 1915 signify decadence, not growth. Old towns in central Iowa with diminishing resources and shrinking populations echo Lewis's evocations of muddy squalor. These towns are dying; other communities down the road shine with prosperity, with the bleached and ominous orderliness of an Edward Hopper painting. Here is the American Dream made flesh: well-kept lawns, repainted Victorian houses, wide tree-lined streets, neighbors sitting on their porches or bicycling *en famille* in the evening. On the other side of the tracks, however, live the poor: descendants of Oakies who never got to Chicago, perhaps a few blacks, and now some Cambodians. "Swede Hollow" (as Gopher Prairie's slum was called) may have become "The Bottoms," an ethnic stew, but tensions remain between the poor and the solid citizens, and among the poor themselves. Economic democracy has not yet come to Main Street.

Relationships between town and country have altered as the numbers of farmers have decreased and their prosperity has increased. Retired farmers still move into town, as they did in Lewis's book, but working farmers' spouses, siblings, and children often work in town, protecting the family livelihood from the vagaries of agricultural commodities markets. Any farmer who still makes his living from the land has got to be pretty well-off (or have good credit, which amounts to the same thing) in order to survive. The long-term trend, not yet visible when Lewis wrote *Main Street*, has been for large corporate enterprises to take over and swallow small family farms. The merchants and other townspeople can no longer be called "parasites," as Carol claimed, for the farmers depend too much on them. The relationship is symbiotic: when the farmers fail, the towns suffer too, and vice versa. Both are apprehensive about the effects of corporate farming on local economies.

The big city functions simultaneously as a model of urbanity and as a harbringer of chaos for the small town. Although for many years young people fled to the cities and "resolutely stayed there," as Lewis observed, recently the populations of small towns have increased through immigration. As urban life becomes more stressful, dangerous, and unsatisfying, the small town is seen as the ultimate suburb, a simple idyllic place without crime or locked doors, with friendly sales clerks, helpful neighbors, good public facilities and personalized services. What it lacks in excitement the small town offers in security, predictability, and convenience. As Lewis said, Main Street is the climax of civilization, or our fantasy of what civilization could be.

But it remains isolated, physically and psychologically, from the great centers of activity and innovation. Despite the availability of nationwide air transportation, flying from one Midwestern city to another or to either coast is relatively difficult. Layovers are often long, connections inconvenient, ticket prices high. During recent airline fare wars, it cost more to fly from Des Moines

to Los Angeles than from New York to Los Angeles. Train service, once moderately priced and easily available, has disappeared or become luxuriously expensive. Airports are far away, distances between cities great, bus transportation inadequate or nonexistent. Bad weather often makes travel impossible. We feel cut off from the civilization of which Main Street is the supposed climax.

This breeds a sense of unreality, the rags and tatters of the isolationism that ruled U.S. politics for many years. What does the Third World or the Soviet Union have to do with us (except insofar as it affects the price of soy beans and corn)? Criticized in Iowa for paying "too much attention" to foreign affairs, both John Culver and Dick Clark lost their U.S. Senate seats in recent years. In 1914, Will Kennicott said of World War I: "Oh yes, it's a great old scrap, but it's none of our business. Folks out here are too busy growing corn to monkey with any fool war that those foreigners want to get themselves into." The simple-minded jingoism on the other side of the coin also afflicts us: "We've got to beat the Russians" is a favorite litany.

Inside this landscaped bell jar, pat answers and platitudes flourish; ignorance breeds paranoia. A friend recently sat in a small-town diner listening to farmers complain about "the niggers" in a place where no blacks live. Inhabitants of small towns find it difficult to believe that life in the faraway outside world is really as bad as the media say. Are black welfare mothers really having trouble feeding their children? Why do Haitian refugees commit suicide in detention camps? Suffering strangers become mere exemplars of virtue or vice in a socioeconomic morality play. Thus Ronald Reagan's "welfare-queen" anecdote found a receptive audience, and he expected that his scorn for the "guy in South Succotash" would, too. "In Gopher Prairie, the Sam Clarks boasted, 'You don't get any of this poverty that you find in cities—always plenty of work—no need for charity—man got to be blame shiftless if he don't get ahead.'"

"Getting ahead" is still what many small-town people mean when they talk about democracy. The myth of equal opportunity justifies systematic inequality. (Main Street merchants "often said, 'One man's as good as another—and a darn sight better.' This motto, however, they did not commend to farmer customers who had had crop failures.") The small-town class system replicates the national hierarchy. The local ruling class is small and accessible, but nonetheless distinguishable, an articulated part of the larger structure beyond the town. It has changed little since 1920, when Lewis described the Gopher Prairie aristocracy as "all persons engaged in a profession or earning more than 2500 dollars a year, or possessed of grandparents born in America." Ezra Stowbody, *Main Street's* banker, remembered when he, a doctor, a lawyer, and a Congregational pastor ruled the town, and he complained that Norwegians and Germans owned stores and that the town's social leaders were "common merchants." The actual composition of the elite is not so important as its existence, which proves that

upward mobility does happen while restricting entry into the upper reaches of the social hierarchy. An elite cannot exist if everyone can join it.

Along with status and its perquisites goes real political and economic power. The bank manager, who grants or denies loans to farmers and home buyers, is a regular member of the local aristocracy, as are the high school principal, the doctor, the factory manager, the lawyer, and the realtor, all of whom control access to money, status, and power in their turn. Social pressures on them are intense. In *Main Street* the lawyer Guy Pollock observes, "the penalty we tribal rulers pay is that our subjects watch us every minute. We can't get wholesomely drunk and relax. We have to be so correct about sex morals, and inconspicuous clothes, and doing our commercial trickery only in the traditional ways, that none of us can live up to it, and we become horribly hypocritical."

Aristocrats have little private life; their every action is public and symbolic, subject to discussion or censure. When Carol gave an elaborate party, the guests assumed that she was trying to make them think her husband was richer than he really was. In today's small town, the elite is expected to look after its own. An executive recently told me that his lodge brothers pressured him to buy his new car locally, although he could have saved substantially by purchasing it elsewhere. Service-givers are expected to shop at the stores of their clients. In a small society, everyone is conspicuous, but none more than those at the top.

Small-townners often deny the existence of a local class system; and because the environment is small and seemingly self-contained, it is easy to believe in a universal middle class. Carol had "the same confused desire which the million other women felt; the same determination to be class-conscious without discovering the class of which she was to be conscious." Only when she went to Washington to work did Carol discover the joys and strength of solidarity instead of individualistic materialism. Then she gained the detachment and compassion to return to Gopher Prairie. "With sympathy she remembered Kennicott's defense of its citizens as 'a lot of pretty good folks, working hard and trying to bring up their families the best they can.'" But still, she realized, "I've been making the town a myth . . . the perfect home town. . . . I've been forgetting that Main Street doesn't think it's in the least lonely and pitiful. It thinks it's God's Own Country."

The myth of democracy humanizes and softens the reality of inequality, protecting Main Street from the outside world. "With the world a possible volcano, the husbandmen were plowing at the base of the mountain." There is real Sisyphean poignancy in this vision. Lewis also points out, however, that when people in a small place think that their microcosm constitutes a complete reality, they come to believe that the rest of the world must be just like them. "Such a society functions admirably in the large production of cheap automobiles, dollar-watches, and safety razors. But it is not satisfied until the entire world also admits that the end and joyous purpose of living is to ride in flivvers, to make ad-

vertising pictures of dollar-watches, and in the twilight to sit talking not of love and courage but of the convenience of safety razors." The arrogance of imperialism starts and ends on Main Street. Compared to the sharecropper in India or Brazil, even the poorest American small-towner belongs to a democracy of patricians.

A social system is no mere chain of institutions; the glue holding it together is a mixture of attitudes, values, and individual acts. Lewis saw Main Street as an intolerant, narrow place. Whatever its inhabitants did not sanction was "heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider." Self-satisfaction, rigidity, repression, censoriousness, and hypocrisy characterized the dominant mentality. Criticism was taboo: "Maybe that guy's got the right dope, but what's the use of looking at the dark side of things all the time? New ideas are first-rate, but not all this criticism. Enough trouble in life without looking for it!" declares Will, who also says, "There's just three classes of people: folks that haven't got any ideas at all; and cranks that kick about everything; and Regular Guys, the fellows with sticktuitiveness, that boost and get the world's work done."

It could be argued that with improved communication through the mass media, it is no longer easy to preserve such complacency. But reading almost any newspaper in the United States shows its pervasiveness. If the Soviets have a poor grain harvest, the tone of the news reports is triumphantly condescending, as if our material success also proved our moral superiority. A feminist pointed out to Carol that the Midwest "is double Puritan—prairie Puritan on top of New England Puritan." The Protestant ethic lives, and in many ways it is a mean, small-minded ideal of divinely sanctioned inequality and cutthroat competition in the name of individual salvation.

At the same time, social pressures enforce conformity and fair play on Main Street. The tyranny of the majority that Tocqueville described long ago still exerts its power. For *Main Street's* Guy Pollock, democracy meant mediocrity, but his definition of democracy was a grinding down to the lowest common denominator, a process of systematic thwarting, "the historical Anglo-Saxon way of making life miserable." Thus Pollock called himself a "living dead man," and Lewis decried Main Street's "rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is . . . the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking." This repressiveness survives in small towns, where gossip places limits on individual nonconformity.

Political conservatism and antidemocratic ideologies flourish in this atmosphere. In Gopher Prairie, "you mention the word 'cooperative' to the merchants and they'll lynch you! The one thing they fear more than mail-order houses is

that farmers' cooperative movements may get started," Vita warned Carol. At Carol's party, a mill manager "thundered": "All this profitsharing and welfare work and insurance and old-age pension is simply poppycock. Enfeebles a workman's independence—and wastes a lot of honest profit." As of 1982, Iowa still had a right-to-work law that put such attitudes into practice.

Although it seems unlikely now that townspeople would drive away a free-thinking socialist (and small-time entrepreneur) like Miles Bjornstam, acceptable political discussion is still very conservative, and everyone knows the unwritten rules of public discourse. The local gods of free enterprise, religious observance, and moral probity must be propitiated.

Organized religion is a powerful social institution in small towns, more important than Lewis acknowledged in *Main Street*. All kinds of social activity take place in churches or under church auspices. Ministers are influential members of the community. Religious language is a weapon in local as well as national debates. In small towns all over America, the nuclear-freeze movement grew out of church sermons, courses, and workshops that called nuclear war a mortal sin. And the political clout of fundamentalist preachers and parishioners goes back to the Puritan theocracy of seventeenth-century New England. In some small towns, virtually all social life still revolves around organized religion; this is almost as true in Iowa as in Arkansas. If the majorities there want prayer in public schools or a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion, they find it difficult to understand why everyone else doesn't want these things, too. Democracy for Main Street is not necessarily democracy for New York City.

Likewise, many middle-class women in small towns find hard to grasp the idea that they are unequal to men. "I don't feel unequal," they say; nor, if they work, do they expect to make as much money as a male breadwinner. The sexual division of work persists in their minds as in their husbands', and it is ratified by strong religious beliefs that extend to gender roles as well. A state ERA was defeated in Iowa in 1980 after anti-ERA advertisements implied it would lead to homosexual marriages. Although polls before the election had given the amendment a 70 percent approval rating, in every county where the ads appeared, it lost. Clearly, strong feelings against homosexuality, a social and religious taboo, matter more to many Iowans than legal rights for women.

In communities where taboos constrain social life and personal experimentation, expression finds other, more acceptable outlets, especially in the arts. Local arts councils have coordinated their humble efforts with state and federal endowments. The community theater that Carol tried to run flourishes in many small towns. Though poorly funded, other activities, such as exhibits and artists' visits, do go on. Local elites, and particularly the wives of eminent men, dominate the local arts councils that organize such events. Audiences therefore tend to be small, self-selected, conservative, and unrepresentative of the community

as a whole. Neither the society nor the arts are democratic. The arts councils try to bring artists to the public schools, but few on-going programs support and reinforce their occasional visits. Football is far more important. Music comes from high school marching bands more often than orchestras, and poets must sometimes coach athletic teams as well as teach high school English.

This is not to say that Main Street is a cultural wasteland; surprising numbers of artists and craftspeople exhibit their work locally, traveling from county fairs to cattle congresses and flea markets. Local writers publish articles in regional magazines, but the content of their work rarely threatens established institutions and values. The world they portray is pleasant, respectable, orderly, and faded at the edges. In order to commit the outrage of *Main Street*, Lewis had to make a definitive break from the culture that had nurtured his unsatisfied spirit.

Main Street sixty years later is a spacious, clean street with houses at each end (the rich to the north, the poor to the south), and a business district in between that stretches for two or three blocks. Dating from the era of Carol Kennicott, the buildings above the shops have been renovated, but they are architecturally undistinguished. In some towns with strong ethnic heritages and foreign names, the fronts are brightly painted, with Scandinavian or Slavic trim. In other, declining towns, many stores are shut and deserted, their paint peeling, and the streets are empty. The grandiose old bank that Lewis described as "an Ionic temple of marble. Pure, exquisite, solitary," is now a hollow shell. In one small Iowa town, an antique dealer has moved into the abandoned bank. Inside the vault, whose heavy door stands open, he has put rusting farm implements and kitchen tools. Old black dresses and moldering furs that Carol might have worn hang in the former ladies' lounge.

Old trees make a continual canopy over the pavements at the prosperous residential end of Main Street. On summer evenings when a storm is approaching, the sky turns a queer jaundiced color above the neat old houses and the neighborhood becomes preternaturally quiet. Because of the trees, it is a street without horizons. To see the sunset one must drive to the edge of town, where the corn sprouts its greenest in midsummer after a late planting delayed by heavy rains. After the merciless winter, the summer sun is holy in its benevolence. This place lies isolated but somehow at the center of things. Here is fertility; the husbandman plows at the foot of the volcano. If only one could forget what lies beyond the rolling land: Main Street lies only 200 miles downwind from the SAC base in Omaha. After such reality, are fantasies of paradise enough?