

## الهرب من الواقع المرير في رواية سنكلير لويس الشارع الرئيسي

### *Escaping Hard Reality in Sinclair Lewis' Main Street*

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#### الملخص

عرض سنكلير لويس، الذي يعد أول كاتب أمريكي حاز على جائزة نوبل للأدب، مشكلة السطحية والفراغ الفكري في المجتمع الأمريكي وناق لتحقيق عدالة مجتمعية وطالب بتغيير مفهوم الامتثال اللاواعي للأفكار التقليدية المتعلقة بالطبقة التي جعلت المفرد الأمريكي تائها وغير قادرٍ على إيجاد ذاته ضمن أسرته أو ضمن مجتمعه ككل وبالتالي مُرغمة إياه للهروب. تتحرى هذه الدراسة الأسباب التي تجعل كارول كينيكوت من رواية لويس الشارع الرئيسي، غير راضية عن حياتها، وتكشف الطرق المتعددة التي تحاول تجربتها هذه المرأة الطموحة من أجل أن تتأقلم في واقعها الصعب بعد زواجها وانتقالها للعيش في بلدة صغيرة في مينيسوتا تدعى غوفر بريري. تنتهي الدراسة بإيجاد حلول عملية مفيدة في مواجهة التجارب العصبية التي تواجه الفرد.

#### Abstract

The first American author who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1930, Sinclair Lewis viewed the hollowness in the twentieth-century American society. He yearned for social justice and alteration of the unacceptable conformity to the established patterns of class that left individuals lost, unable to fit themselves neither into their families nor in the whole society, consequently leading them to escape. This paper investigates the reasons why Carol Milford from Lewis's novel Main Street 1920, feels dissatisfied with her life. It exposes the different ways that she, the intelligent and ambitious young lady, tries in order to cope with her unsatisfying reality after marrying and moving to a small town in Minnesota. The study ends up with a conclusion

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that tries to find a justifiable healthy and constructive way of facing one's hard experiences.

### **1.1 American Society in the Twentieth Century**

After the huge experience of World War I, thriving production, new wealth, and "boosterism" of American small towns were the most important keywords of the time. The advantage of the new domineering position in the world resulted in a prosperous economy. However, this noticeable alteration came with an off-putting trace because of the accompanying materialism and fruition of class distinction. The 1920s were commonly known as the most shallow and materialistic years in the American history (Wershoven, 94). The new rich or the nouveaux riches (people who gain their wealth during their lifetime and not as an inheritance), and businessmen lead the expansion or the peak phase happened at the time. Business, stock market, and financial investment were the primary source for gaining. Craftsmanship was now less profitable and impractical for people who used to practice it and was the main source for their living, it is not "trendy" any more (Garner, 82).

Sinclair Lewis is well known of being critical of the American ways. His writings always carry a biting criticism on middle class materialism and the influence of narrow-minded people on others who are against committing to the established social patterns. He believes that their lack of vision and their "emphasis on profit" make them blind about the beauty of life and the importance of social indulgence (Fishback, 67). His novel *Main Street* is a very perceptive study in the American society. The American sociologist and literary critic Lewis Mumford deals with this particular novel as a historical document drawing on real experience of frustration and helplessness:

In *Main Street* an American had at last written of our life with something of the intellectual rigor and critical detachment that had seemed so cruel and unjustified [in Charles Dickens and Matthew Arnold]. Young people had grown up in this environment, suffocated, stultified, helpless, but unable to find any reason for their spiritual discomfort. Mr. Lewis released them.

Intellectuals who witnessed this period can easily touch the smugness and vainness of the society at the time, they often criticize it as unimaginatively

standardized, rebuking people who long for change, but they have not the insight and perceptiveness to make it crystal clear as Lewis successfully did in his text.

Carol, the novel's main character makes many attempts to engage the townspeople in uplifting the town of Gopher Prairie. She organizes a dramatic club, then joins a club of a group of married women called Jolly Seventeen, and fights to change the superficial programs of the literary club of Thanatopsis. Unluckily, her ideas are unwelcomed by the members of the clubs which thrust her into dark disappointment and consequently escaping.

### **1.2 Main Street as an Epithet of American Provincial Town**

The novel is dealt with as a panoramic sketch of small town life. The characters are always remembered because they are inspired by real American citizens, this made the comments and conversations well-known and proverbial because of frequent quoting. Lewis only put down the discontent he had felt at least for a decade, but the novelty of the story was in that it challenges the pattern that has been accepted in the American fiction for so long. The heroine's rebellion is one that lasts and continues after the closing of the novel, in opposition of the smug confidence and void life of the townspeople unlike other heroes who surrender after brief resistance for instance those of Booth Tarkington.

Carol Milford, a very gifted, bright, and open minded young lady from Minnesota. Her father was a judge, this may explain her constant desire to improve her hometown. This passion for change and willingness for embettering, at least her surrounding society, stays with Carol during her college years. In college, she becomes very fond of sociology, she even dreams of redesigning towns and small cities.

After graduation, she moves to a small town called Gopher Prairie and starts working as a librarian. At first she falls in love with the simplicity of the town life and broods of transforming it into a kind of rural Utopia. Impressed by his personality and wide relations, she gets married to Dr. Will Kennicott and moves to their new big house. In an attempt to allow the change into her life, Carol refurbishes her husband's house and gets his consent for making a huge party. Gradually, she gets to know the townspeople and is shocked by their ways of gossiping and lack of interest in cultural and social matters. She discovers their dull nature and dislike for change; they keep criticizing her behavior, dressing, and even her enthusiasm for change (Broadberry, 65).

Her neighbor Mrs. Bogart is a religious hypocrite, the judgmental kind of persons. When she first meets Carol, she inquires about whether they-Carol and her husband- go to church each Sunday or not. She rudely burst, in

Carol's face saying: "I hope you and your husband won't have any of the trouble, with sickness and quarreling and wasting money and all that so many of these young couples do have and—But I must be running along now, dearie" (Sinclair, 30). One of the persons she befriends is Miles Bjornstam, the town handyman who has made a favor for each one in Gopher Prairie but no one really likes him because he does not believe of what the townspeople believe. He is an atheist who is upset with the monotonous conservatism of the town, he keeps criticizing and judging people and the town conventions with fiery criticism. People even call him names and is known as "that damn lazy big-mouthed calamity-howler that ain't satisfied with the way we run things" (Ibid, 38). Eventually, Carol is disappointed in him because after marriage he quits his usual ways and tries to keep silent so that the townspeople treat his wife and kid respectfully.

Another character that Carol feels at ease with is Vida Sherwin. Vida is the only person who agrees with Carol that Gopher Prairie is dull and is indeed in need of upgrading and improvement. With regard to the folk she would warn Carol saying: "I wonder if you understand that in a secluded community like this every newcomer is on test? People cordial to her but watching her all the time" (Ibid). She is very energetic and courageous even more than Carol, which is why the latter feels as if she is her older sister. But this attitude becomes overbearing and annoying when Vida begins to judge Carol's behavior believing in the big-sister role by either laughing at her ideas or snatching them to pretend they are hers (Wershoven, 262).

### **1.3 Carol's Fight against Conformity**

It is not that Lewis is not familiar with the dullness, superficiality, and meanness that are shown clearly in the communities of other European countries including France and England, but he dared to write this biting criticism about the community of his own home in an attempt make people aware of the flaws it is suffering from, to sort out the imperfections and work together for a solution (Sharma, 30).

In the text, the greatest disappointment that Carol receives is her marriage. At first she thinks herself living a fairy tale. Being very ambitious, she wishes to make a remarkable change that people may talk about, an initiation the world would remember, but all these beautiful ideas crash once clashed with a futile reality (19). Her husband Dr. Will Kennicott is the first source of desperation; true he is intelligent, insightful, and competent but unexciting representing the exact foil to the lively, restless and imaginative wife. Will is shown to be interested in land deals and investment while what Carol really cares about is reform. He is very content and undisturbed by the monotonous

nature of his town, and sees the people who Carol sees as unimaginative and pretentious, friendly and affectionate. The literary critic H.L. Mencken comments on the character of Kennicott saying, "To Will Kennicott as to most other normal American males, life remains simple—do your work, care for your family, buy your Liberty Bonds, root for your home team, help to build up your lodge, venerate your flag" (qtd in Scharnhorst, 74).

Elin Arnestrand believe that the dissatisfaction of Carol represents the resentful and uneasy repulsion her creator feels towards his own small-town life during and after World War I in Stearns County, Minnesota. The other autobiographical aspect is the character of Dr. Will Kennicott, he is seen as a reflection of Lewis' stiff disciplinary father who also is a doctor (12).

Carol's inability to accommodate, refusal of assimilation in the town of Gopher Prairie, and difficulty to accept the life of the small-town as her husband accepts is what Betty Friedan labels as "the problem that has no name". A kind of frustration familiar to white middle-class women during 1950s, when the emancipation of the feminist ideals and widening of women's role in community is faced with snubbing attitude of refute. The idea is also tackled by the Nobel prize winner English novelist Doris Lessing. In Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing*, Mary Turner, a successful woman of career overhears offending remarks about her spinsterhood and thus thrusts herself into an unsuitable marriage to a failing farmer. The obligations assigned by marriage like the household tasks and social duties cause women an emotional emptiness towards marriage and fury against the fierceness of the absurd social conducts (Friedan, 65).

However, Carol sees how difficult it is to change the minds of the Gopher Prairie people. Mrs. Bogart makes it clear while scolding her "Let me tell you right now, Carol Kennicott, that you ain't always as respectful to—you ain't as reverent—you don't stick by the good old ways like they was laid down for us by God in the Bible" (32.1.16).

People in Gopher Prairie actually think in stereotypes, they glorify the ideals of their forefathers and impose them on the new comers. They also profess the liberalism they had, but continue to practice economic domination on the poor farmers. Women of Gopher Prairie live by gossip and culture is apathetic version of decayed and simple ideas.

#### **1.4 Carol's Different Ways of Escapism**

Feeling fed up, Carol determines to escape at least spiritually. The first idea that comes to her mind is to build a hall, a library, or a comfortable resting place for herself and the workers' wives, but no one shares her desire, they even laugh at her enthusiasm wondering why she would like to change things,

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they even refuse to join her group to help the poor! Then she attends the social club of the town "the Jolly Seventeen", the cornice of the middle class families which its membership is restricted to married women who are under twenty six "Though its membership partly coincided with that of the Thanatopsis study club, the Jolly Seventeen as a separate entity .... considered it middle-class and even highbrow" (Sinclair, 403). She tries hard to improve the unimaginative social and communicative programs, but her eager instinct for civilizing things is frequently rebuked.

In an attempt to get away from the all these disappointments, Carol goes back to one of her most likeable interests reading poetry and drama, and after attending a performance in the town's playhouse, the idea of producing her own play comes to her mind. With a group of friends, she works hard on the costumes and the decoration. When the day of performance comes, the play proves to be a complete disaster, for the curtains staggered while rising, actors stammer, the one responsible for the lightening forgets to turn them off, the audience giggled and "with that instant Carol realized that it was a bad play abominably acted" (Sinclair, 403).

What makes Carol despair of the intellectuality of the townspeople is her meeting with Miss Villets, the librarian of the town's library and is shocked at the latter's conviction that the core of the librarian work is to keep the books from tearing and dust. "Well, I'm sure you will agree with me in one thing: The chief task of a librarian is to get people to read" said Carol "You feel so? My feeling Mrs. Kennicott, and I am merely quoting the librarian of a very large college, is that the first duty of the CONSCIOUS librarian is to preserve the books" (Sinclair, 407) replied Miss Villets confidently. At this point Carol becomes completely desperate and starts to think of a real escape:

I've failed at everything: the Thanatopsis, parties, pioneers, city hall, Guy and Vida. But – It doesn't MATTER! I'm not trying to 'reform the town' now. I'm not trying to 'reform the town' now. I'm not trying to organize Browning clubs and sit in clean white kids yearning up at lecturers with ribbony eyeglasses. I am trying to save my soul (Sinclair, 357).

During the course of the novel, World War I breaks out and Kennicott decides to enlist, but the townspeople prevent him for they need him to cure the wounded. Carol befriends a Swedish farmer who comes to Gopher Prairie for work. After long walks and discussions about shared intellectual interests

Carol and Erik feel they are attracted to each other and they start a secret relationship. Kennicott, believing they are just good friends, does not mind. But Locals start to talk and rumors begin to spread, in the meantime Carol comprehends the fact that her marriage is deteriorating telling Erik that "It wasn't enough for Will that I admired him; I must change myself and grow like him. He takes advantage. No more. It's finished. I will go on." (357)

Although Erik leaves Gopher Prairie, Carol takes her son Hugh and travels to Washington D.C to live there. She stays working for two years, but is worn-out because of the big city and loneliness which is why she accepts Kennicott's love advances and the family goes back to their hometown, Gopher Prairie. Carol transforms from a rebellious self and an ambitious woman of career to a surrender, a woman who is bewitched by her own enemy Gopher Prairie to the extent of making her a lover of the town as we can see in the closing chapters of the novel:

"At last", she rejoiced, "I've come to a fairer attitude toward the town. I can love it, now."  
She was, perhaps, rather proud of herself for having acquired so much tolerance.

The novel's ending was criticized severely, it was considered as unfair and disappointing. It was surprising for readers, to see the protagonist who had been fighting through unequal battles, defeated by the husband she always scorned, and the town's stubbornness and ferocious resistance for change. The anxiety that Carol lived in order to actualize the dream went in vain, and the different ways of escaping that she tried proved insufficient and failing. Although she clung tightly and sacrificed different things, but fate seemed to be saying some hopes and desires are just not meant to be.

### **Conclusion**

Sinclair Lewis is famous of giving great importance to themes like racism, social injustice, and feminism. His best writings were published during and after the First-wave of feminism in the western countries, when feminist activists started clamoring for women's rights in the early twentieth century.

These issues of identity, conformity, and discontent that confront intelligent women, or women of career are Lewis' favorites. The dilemma of maladjustment of women in a narrow-minded society is focused in *Main Street*. The protagonist makes different choices in trying to deal with the limitations imposed upon her by social conventions. Lewis presents female figures that are strong and ready to take the risk of challenging a whole

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society, showing the reader how Carol Kennicott is a super woman in her desire to change, but unfortunately this eagerness clashes with the inexorable refusal of people to change.

Carol is considered of the rounded characters that change deeply during the course of the novel. She is seen at the beginning as the naïve dreamy helpless young lady who at no clear turning point transforms into the mature mother whose outcry for change is bitterly disregarded. Carol is a heroine resembling Hardy's Tess of *Tess the d'Urbervilles* and Eustacia Vye of *The Return of the Native*, but her story ends with a glimpse of hope or brightness in the life of the protagonist when she refers to her daughter as "a bomb to blow up smugness,"(Lewis, 450).

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