

Sinclair Lewis's Main Street: A Reverse Portrait to the American Myth

Key Word: American Myth

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Abstract

The American novelist, Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota on the seventh of February in 1885. He was the third son of a country physician, Edwin J. Lewis, and had two brothers, Fred (born in 1875) and Claude (born in 1878). His mother, Emma Kermott Lewis died in 1891. His father, a year later, remarried another woman named Isabel Warner whom he considered to be his own mother. His boyhood life was full of problems. He suffered from loneliness in his provincial small Midwestern town which he yearned to escape.

After preschool at Oberlin Academy, he entered Yale University in 1903. Yet he didn't get the bachelor's degree until 1908. He dropped out for a year during which he traveled to Panama and worked as a janitor at Upton Sinclair's social colony, Helicon Hall. After graduation from Yale, he began his writing career, working for newspapers and publishing houses and at times selling plots to Jack London. Yet the numerous stories and the five novels he published between 1910 and 1920 were dismissed by critics as insignificant. It was with the publication of *Main Street* in 1920 that he achieved real fame. It was his instrument of social change: he satirizes the devastating and stultifying picture of the middle-class American life in the 1920s of his hometown, Sauk Centre by creating a town called Gopher Prairie.

Lewis, like his father, married twice. His first marriage to Grace Livingstone Hegger, whom he met while working in New York City, on the fifteenth of April in 1914, failed. In 1928, he married another

woman, the journalist Dorothy Thompson and in 1930 their son, Michael was born. However, their marriage also failed twelve years later. After the breakup of his second marriage, he spent his life in Europe. He was often seen, after 1939, with the young actress, Macella Powers who eventually left him, marrying another man. In **1950**, he left Europe and died of advanced alcoholism in 1951 at the age of sixty seven.

The paper shows the reverse portrait of the American myth that Lewis, draws in his novel, *Main Street*. It explains the concept of the American myth briefly and makes clear how Lewis employs it in presenting a reverse picture by using his pungent criticism. It points to the environmental and psychological sides that urge Lewis to draw such a picture which his heroine, Carol Kennicott the reformer, tries hard to change but is met with failure. Her failure leads her to stay in the provincial Gopher Prairie and confirm to its life style.

Sinclair Lewis's Main Street : A Reverse Portrait to the American Myth

Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* was published in 1920, the year that originated a turbulent period of renovation and upheaval in the social, cultural, artistical, technological, and intellectual aspects of life in America. The 1920s, as a period, was known as "the Roaring Twenties."¹ Yet it was also a period of disillusionment and uncertainty because of the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 during which all aspects of optimism faded away. The publication of this novel "enflamed and roused the self-ennobled, small-town population"² to the point that his life was threatened by the people with whom he grew up in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, his hometown that he used as a model for Gopher Prairie in *Main Street*. For the Americans, such a novel is an "explosion"³ that paradoxes the romantic and optimistic view they hold towards the American life and characterized the pre-

war years. It shatters the sentimental American myth that depicts small-town America as "the imaginary repository"⁴ of all good virtues. Being one of the leaders, among Sherwood Anderson, Floyd Dell, and Edgar Lee Masters, of the literary movement that Carl Van Doran calls "Revolt from the Village,"⁵ Lewis reverses this image, setting the novel in Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, the town that encompasses all vices and defects such as hypocrisy, greed, lack of will, bigotry, poverty, ignorance, dullness, hollowness, interest in spreading rumors, scandals, and all sorts of ugliness. For Lewis, Gopher Prairie doesn't represent the Midwest only but America as a whole. He makes this clear in the prologue of his novel:

This is America - a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves. The town is, in our tale, called "Gopher Prairie, Minnesota" But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere.⁶

Lewis's insight into American culture, exemplified by most of his novels enables him to win the Nobel Prize in 1930. When receiving the prize, Lewis lamented that:

In America most of us are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification of everything American ... To be not only a best seller in America but to be really beloved a novelist must assert that all American men are tall, handsome, rich, honest ... that all country towns are filled with neighbors who do nothing from day to day save go about being kind to one another.⁷

Thus, for Lewis, small town America seems not to be, using Nic Reading's words, "the cradle of our national creation myth"⁸ but as "something more sinister and difficult to define."⁹ But, the

question is why Lewis holds such a sinister view about America and American people. To answer this question, one needs to probe into Lewis's personality and know something about his psyche as well as his environment which he hates "with a cordial and malignant hatred"¹⁰ Behind his hatred are many reasons. One of these reasons is that he is "a philistine,"¹¹ i.e. he is from another culture and is European in origin like his mouthpiece in *Main Street*, Carol Kennicott whose main purpose is to establish herself in her new world, Gopher Prairie and achieve individual freedom. Yet it is Lewis's individual freedom that brings him troubles. Like Carol, Lewis doesn't want to conform to the standards of his environment. Unlike his father and elder brother, Claude, Lewis doesn't become a physician. Instead, he becomes a writer. He doesn't follow their footsteps: he breaks the family's tradition and profession, medicine. Carrying "a life-long burden of guilt over not having been a physician,"¹² feeling that they haven't forgiven him, and failing to persuade them that writing is as important as practicing medicine, he, in 1947, wrote: "For sixty years, I have tried to impress my brother Claude. It has been my chief object and my chief failure."¹³

Lewis does not escape judgment and the sense of being an object of contempt both inside and outside home. Teased by the children of his birthplace, Sauk Centre, because of his ravaged face which is "covered with severe acne that would eventually turn into a serious skin problem,"¹⁴ and red hair for which he gets the nickname, 'Red' Lewis, he, at the age of thirteen ran away from home to enlist in the Spanish-American War. Isolated, scorned, and displaced, Lewis questions the American myth seriously. His duality, i.e. his love-hate relationship towards America is attributed to his experience in Sauk Centre. One of his famous quotations is this: "I love America, but I don't like it."¹⁶ Such a contradiction also marks his following speech about his Nobel Prize autobiography:

Main Street was my first novel to arouse the embattled peasantry and it had a success of a scandal. One of the most treasured American myths was that all American villagers were particularly noble and happy and here an American attacked the myth. Scandalous! Some

hundreds of thousands read the book with the same masochistic pleasure that one has in sucking an aching tooth.¹⁷

The fact that the American myth is a lie is discovered so late by the transplant Carol Kennicott, the zealous idealist and the reflection of Lewis's personality. Such a discovery comes as she herself, like Guy Pollock, Milles Bjornstam, and Erik Valborg, gets infected by the Village Virus, the title that Lewis planned, as he began his first draft of the novel in 1905, to give to *Main Street*. This title becomes indicative of Lewis's aversion to prairie villages. Defining it, Pollock tells Carol:

The Village Virus is the germ which –it's extraordinarily like the hook-worm-it infects ambitious people who stay too long in the province. You'll find it epidemic among lawyers and doctors and ministers and college-bred merchants__ all these people who have had a glimpse of the world that thinks and laughs, but have returned to their swamp.

(*MS*, Ch. XIII, P. 155-156)

In order to explain the Village Virus, Lewis introduces Carol Kennicott, the critical eye who comes from St. Paul where she works as a librarian to Gopher Prairie in the hope of improving it by means of talking about "General Culture." (*MS*, Ch. I, P.2) Before she goes to Gopher Prairie, the town of her husband, Dr. Will Kennicott, she draws her future plans as:

That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration. I suppose I'd better become a teacher then, but I won't be that kind of a teacher. I won't drone. Why should they have all the garden suburbs on Long Island? Nobody has done anything with the ugly towns here in the Northwest except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books. I'll make 'em

put in a village green, and darling cottages and a quaint Main Street!

(MS, Ch. I, P.5)

But none of Carol's dreams come into existence. As the couple reaches Gopher Prairie, Carol, upon hearing the word home, forgets everything for a moment. Questioning, Lewis tells the readers:

That one word- home –it terrified her. Had she really bound herself to live, inescapably in this town called Gopher Prairie? And this thick man beside her, who dared to define her future, he was a stranger! She turned in her seat, stared at him. Who was he? Why was he sitting with her? He wasn't of her kind! His neck was heavy; his speech was heavy; he was twelve or thirteen years older than she; and about him was none of the magic of shared adventures and eagerness.

(MS, Ch..III, P.26)

Carol starts her reform first with her husband, Dr. Will Kennicott who seems to be ignorant of poetry. She tries to make him love it, reading aloud some poems from the "volume of Yeats,"(MS, Ch. X, P. 120) and Tennyson's. Carol goes on with her imagination as she reads the volume of Yeats. Yet her imagination is interrupted and she is brought back to earth with a thump:

"Heh-cha-cha!" coughed Dr. Kennicott. She stopped. She remembered that was the sort of person who chewed tobacco. She glared, while he uneasily petitioned, "That great staff. Study it in college? I like poetry fine – James Whitcomb Riley and some of Longfellow – this 'Hiawatha.' Gosh, I wish I could appreciate that highbrow art staff. But I guess I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks."

(MS, Ch. X, P. 120)

Met with failure to make her husband, whom she resents for being affected by tobacco-spiting Sam Clark and his poker-playing friends, have a kind of artistic sensibility, Carol turns her attention to

Gopher Prairie. Perhaps, Lewis choses this town intentionally as the word gopher means "a large rodent to be found in the western states"¹⁸ of America, and "is an affront to Carol's demure aestheticism."¹⁹ In order to affect the town women who are only interested in gossiping, sewing, cooking, and other works that housewives do, Carol joins the Jolly Seventeen, a woman club where she desires to persuade women that the job of a librarian is not just preserving books but to get people to read them, and to help the poor by rising the wage of the town's house maids. She also becomes a member in another woman club called the Thanatopsis Club in the hope of awakening town people's interest in literature (fiction, drama, and poetry) and social reform: re-educating the ignorant people, rebuilding Main Street and changing its architecture, and doing charity works.

Carol is supposed to help her husband in his profession and be a housewife, doing homely works and rearing children. Objecting the social norms of the town, Carol or Lady Bountiful as Lewis calls her says:

Is that what I want, something to mother, a man or a baby or a town? I will have a baby. Some day. But to have him isolated here all his receptive years

(*MS*, Ch. X, P. 112)

She continues:

Am I really this settled thing called a 'married woman' ? I feel so unmarried tonight. So free. To think that there was once a Mrs. Kennicott who let herself worry over a town called Gopher Prairie when there was a whole world outside it.

(*Ibid.*)

Yet, the town resists any kind of change and is enabled by Carol and other persons without strong will to "establish the strength of the enemy."²⁰ Being a new comer and a philistine, Carol is looked at with suspicion. She is criticized by the town people because she doesn't confirm to the rules of Gopher Prairie. This is clear as Vida Sherwin, an English and French teacher tells her "Perhaps they resent some things in you. I want you to try and be impersonal. They'd paw

over anybody who came in new. Didn't you, with new comers in college?" (*MS*, Ch. VIII, P. 94) Not listened and listening to, Carol becomes more the subject of the town people's gossip and scrutiny as she starts accompanying and conversing with socially misfit men as Pollock, the forty-seven year old lawyer whose interest in art is killed by the Village Virus, Bjornstam, a book-worm handyman of forty-five or -six who is given the name 'The Red Swede' by town people and is shunned due to being a foreigner and one of the lower classes, and Valborg, a Swede farm boy who turns to be a tailor and is poked fun of by the town people calling him Elizabeth due to his feminine look and love of books. Discovering the uselessness of believing in the American myth, Carol gives Valborg the following advice:

It's good to clear field. But it's not for you. It's one of our favorite American myths that broad plains necessarily make broad minds, and high mountains make high purpose. I thought that myself, when I first came to the Prairie. 'Big___ new.' Oh, I don't want to deny the Prairie future. It will be magnificent. But equally I'm hanged if I want to be bullied by it, go to war on behalf of Main Street, be bullied and bullied by the faith that the future is already here in the present, and that all of us must stay and worship wheat-stacks and insist that this is 'God's Country' ... Go! Before it's too late, as it has been for__ for some of us. Young man, go East and grow up with the revolution!

(*MS*, Ch. XXIX, P. 343)

Valborg takes Carol's advice and flees from the town. Unlike Carol who returns to Gopher Prairie after her travel to Washington D.C, Valborg finds his way to Hollywood and fulfills his dream to be an actor. Had Carol not been equipped with "the transforming power of the imagination,"²¹ she would not have been able to ignore the ugly reality of Gopher Prairie. The novel's ending also reflects Lewis's duality. Full of sorrow, Carol says:

But I have won in this: I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspiration, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dish-washing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.

(MS, Ch. XXXIX, P. 451)

Though she succumbs to the Village Virus at the end, Carol remains optimistic. She, referring to her daughter as "a bomb to blow up smugness," (MS, Ch. XXXIX, P.450) hopes that she would continue her mother's fight.

Conclusion

Reading Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Main Street*, one infers that Lewis's intention behind writing it is to relieve himself from the physical and psychological problems he suffers from in his hometown, Sauk Centre. Among them and most important is his feeling that he is an outcast both inside and outside home. Lewis writes the novel, believing that literature is the source and medium of pleasure to writers and readers. Yet, the picture he draws to his readers shows a pleasure-pain blending. In other words, he tries to say that it is not surprising to get pain while reading Carol's story, the story that reverses, Lewis thinks, the American myth.

To read the novel, one would expect that Carol would lead an ideal happy life as she dreams to. However, near the end of the novel, the reader would come soon to believe that such an expectation is too far to reach. Carol proves that she is the weaker in the face of her enemy, Gopher Prairie, the town she revolts against and attempts to change. Thus, with no solution presented to Gopher Prairie by Carol, the reader would feel the pain Lewis himself senses towards his people and his town. To lessen the feeling of pain, Lewis refers to Carol's daughter in one figurative sentence at the end of the novel. She, one concludes, is the light and the only solution that Lewis presents indirectly so as to regain the pleasure he and his readers lose at first.

Notes

¹Anonymous, "Roaring Twenties", nd. ,17/1/2008<<
http://en. [wikipedia.org/wiki/Roaring-Twenties](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roaring-Twenties)>>.

²Lauren Bove, "Searching for Truth: The Birthday of Sinclair Lewis", nd. , 3/7/2013<<September Holiday< ...< www. Life123.com >>

³Mark Schorer, "Introduction" in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. , Mark Schorer (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. ,Prentice-Hall, 1962)p.2.

⁴Christopher J. Boehm, "From myth to Meth: Viewing the American Small Town Through the Lens of Psychoanalytical Fantasy" 2012, 3/7/2013<< viewcontent. cgi? article=1681&context...

⁵Joseph Wood Krutch, "Sinclair Lewis" in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.148.

⁶Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company,1920) ,p.1. All subsequent references to the novel are taken from this text.

⁷Kristin, "Main Street", 2008, 3/7/2013<<Kristinbooksblog-blogsport.com/.../main-street-by Sinclair –Lewis...

⁸Steven Thomma, "Small-town America-the myth and the reality" , nd., 3/7/2013<<www.mcclatchydc.com/.../small-town-america-the-myth>>

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰T. K. Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis" in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.77.

¹¹Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis* (Minneapolis: University of MinnesotaPress,1963)p.41.

¹²Sheldon Norman Grebstein, *Sinclair Lewis* (New York: Twayne publishers, Inc.,1962)p.21.

¹³Sinclair Lewis, cited in Sheldon Grebstein's "Sinclair Lewis's Minnesota Boyhood", 1954, 3/7/2013<<collection/.../V34i03p0...>>

¹⁴Michael E. Connaughton and Suellen Rundquist, *The American Village in Global Setting* (15Angerton Garden, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing , 2007) at www.c-s-p.org/flyers/978147183132-sample.pdf.

¹⁵Grebstein,p.21.

¹⁶Sinclair Lewis, cited in Sheldon Grebstein's "Sinclair Lewis's Minnesota Boyhood".

¹⁷Geoffrey Moore, "Sinclair Lewis: A Lost Romantic" in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.161.

¹⁸Anonymous, "Sinclair Lewis", 2002, 6/11/2007<<
http://arlando >> correia.com/020502.html

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Robert Cantwell, "Sinclair Lewis" in *A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 117.

²¹Ann Massa, *American Literature in Context (1900-1930)*(London: Methuen, 1982) , p.113

الملخص

الصورة المماكسة للأسطورة الاميركية مجسدة في الشارع

الرئيسي للروائي سنكلير لوس

الكلمة المفتاح: الاسطورة الاميركية

المدرس

أسيل هاتف جسام

الجامعة المستنصرية

كلية الاداب مركز اللغات الاجنبية

ولد الروائي الاميركي، سنكلير لوس في سوك سنتر، مينيسوتا في السابع من شهر شباط عام ١٨٨٥. إنه الابن الثالث لطبيب قروي يُدعى إدون ج لوس وله أخوان، فرد (ولد عام ١٨٧٥)، و كلود (ولد عام ١٨٧٨). توفيت والدته ، أمّا كيرموت لوس عام ١٨٩١. فتزوج أبوه امرأة أخرى تدعى إزبل وارنر بعد عام واعتبرها لوس والدته الحقيقية. كانت فترة صباه مليئة بالمشاكل. عانى لوس من الشعور بالوحدة في قريته الواقعة في النصف الغربي لأميركا والتي تاق الى الهروب منها.

دخل لوس جامعة ييل في عام ١٩٠٣ بعد اكماله الدراسة الثانوية في أكاديمية اوبرلين وقد حصل على درجة البكالوريوس عام ١٩٠٨. ترك لوس الجامعة لمدة سنة. قضى حياته خلال تلك السنة في السفر الى بناما والعمل بمثابة حاجب للمؤسسة الاجتماعية التابعة لإبتون سنكلير، هليكون هول. بدأ لوس، بعد تخرجه، الكتابة والعمل في دور النشر و أحياناً ببيع حبات القصص لجاك لندن. لم تكن قصصه العديدة و رواياته الخمس التي كتبها بين العامين ١٩١٠ و ١٩٢٠ ذات أهمية في نظر النقاد. حقق لوس الشهرة الحقيقية عند نشره لروايته الشارع الرئيسي عام ١٩٢٠. اعتبر لوس هذه الرواية وسيلة في حدوث التغيير

الاجتماعي إذ انتقد من خلال القرية جوفر برايري صورة الدمار الساخرة للطبقة الأميركية المتوسطة في مدينته الام، سوك سنتر في العشرينيات.

تزوج لوس مرتين. كان زواجه الاول من كريس ليفنكستون هيكر، و التي التقى بها اثناء العمل في نيويورك سيتي في الخامس من شهر نيسان لعام ١٩١٤ ، فاشلاً. تزوج لوس للمرة الثانية من الصحفية دوروثي ثمبسون و انجبت ابنه مايكل لوس عام ١٩٣٠. إلا ان زواجه الثاني لم يستمر و انتهى بعد اثنتي عشرة سنة. قضى لوس حياته بعد انفصاله عن زوجته الثانية في اوروبا. شوهد لوس ، بعد عام ١٩٣٩، مع الممثلة الشابة ماكسيلا باورز التي تركته لاحقاً وتزوجت من رجلٍ آخر. غادر لوس اوروبا عام ١٩٥٠ وتوفى نتيجة تناوله المفرط للكحول في روما عام ١٩٥١ بعمر السابعة والستين.

يوضح البحث الصورة المعاكسة للأسطورة الأميركية التي رسمها لوس في روايته الشارع الرئيسي . يتناول البحث بشكل موجز مفهوم الأسطورة الأميركية ويبين كيف قام الروائي بتوظيف هذا المفهوم في عرض صورة معاكسة من خلال أسلوبه النقدي اللاذع. يشير البحث الى الجوانب النفسية والبيئية التي دفعت الروائي الى رسم هذه الصورة التي حاولت بطله روايته كارول كنيكوت المصلحة تغييرها جاهدةً إلا انها فشلت مما قادها الى البقاء في القرية جوفر برايري والتكيف مع اسلوب العيش فيها.

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