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Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*

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In honor of

Marilynne Robinson

CONTENTS

Preface 6

This Is America — Sinclair Lewis 8

The Sauk-Centric Sources of Lewis's Alleged Ambivalence in *Main Street* — George Killough 9

The Struggle against Inertia: Form and Voice in *Main Street* — Robert L. McLaughlin 22

Reading Sinclair Lewis's Romantic and Mimetic Impulses in *Main Street* through Formal Systems and Aristotle's Potential and Actual Infinities — Cory M. Hudson 36

The Village Virus Exposed: Minnesota's Reactions to Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* — Ralph Goldstein 50

Stopping by Friendship Village on the Way to Gopher Prairie: Reading Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* through the Friendship Village Stories of Zona Gale — Sally E. Parry 60

Recent Midwestern Fiction and Poetry 74

SSML Conference Information 75

Errata 76

PREFACE

Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel, *Main Street*, was the most popular novel of its time. Readers felt that they were experiencing the sights, sounds, and inhabitants of a small town in turn-of-the-entury America. For some, it called to mind the towns they grew up in and why they moved away—or wished they had. For big city dwellers, it confirmed biases against small towns as being synonymous with small-mindedness. The novel angered some, especially those from small towns, who believed that Lewis was attacking the American ideal of the village. But they all bought the book and read it, and many wrote to the author about it.

The genesis for *Main Street* began around 1905 when Harry Sinclair Lewis, who was then a student at Yale University, started thinking seriously about what he called the "village virus," a way of thinking and behaving that caused small-town people to be complacent, behave in similar unimaginative ways, and look with suspicion on those who came from out of town and did not share their beliefs. In 1916 Lewis brought his new wife, Grace Hegger Lewis, to Sauk Centre, Minnesota, his hometown, to meet his father and stepmother. The reaction of the people of Sauk Centre to his New York wife and her reaction to them inspired Carol Milford Kennicott, a young librarian from St. Paul, who marries small-town doctor Will Kennicott and moves to Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, where she struggles with her place in the community.

In this special issue of *Midwestern Miscellany,* we provide five different approaches to *Main Street*. George Killough's "The Sauk-Centric Sources of Lewis's Alleged Ambivalence in *Main Street*" discusses Lewis's childhood and adolescence in Sauk Centre, using his diary as a primary resource, and providing a corrective to Mark Schorer's ill-humored presentation of Lewis's boyhood. Although Lewis probably read more than any boy in town, he was not a loner, but had friends and engaged in social activities, enjoying much about his life in Sauk Centre, some of which is evident in the novel. Robert L. McLaughlin's "The Struggle against Inertia: Form and Voice in *Main Street*" examines the formal and stylistic techniques of the novel, contrasting the cyclical nature of the events of this farming community with Carol's desire to move past the official discourse of the town. Cory M. Hudson's "Potentialities Become Actualities: Reading Sinclair Lewis's Romantic and Mimetic Impulses in *Main Street* through Formal Systems and Aristotle's Potential and Actual

Infinities" discusses how the novel lies at the intersection of romantic idealism and strict mimeticism and uses mathematical concepts to explore formal systems of thought about American life, including those that provide boundaries that Carol cannot transcend, although she hopes her daughter will.

Ralph Goldstein's "The Village Virus Exposed: Minnesota's Reactions to Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*" looks at critical reactions to the novel, especially in Minnesota newspapers, where there were lots of complaints about how Lewis represented the Minnesota small town. Ironically Lewis's work was later celebrated by the same community that had excoriated him. Sally E. Parry's "Stopping by Friendship Village on the Way to Gopher Prairie: Reading Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* through the Friendship Village Stories of Zona Gale" compares Lewis's Gopher Prairie to the Friendship Village stories of his contemporary, Zona Gale, finding a number of parallels in the concerns of the community, despite the different rhetorical approaches.

Main Street was recommended for the Pulitzer Prize by the Pulitzer Prize Committee in 1921, but the Trustees of Columbia University awarded it to Edith Wharton for *The Age of Innocence* instead. Lewis finally won the Pulitzer Prize in 1926 for *Arrowsmith*. However, Lewis touched on a cultural moment that got the whole nation talking, and he relished it. Not only was *Main Street* the best-selling novel of 1920, but it made Lewis a household name and allowed him to become a full-time novelist. It made a financial success of the fledging publishing firm of Harcourt, Brace & Howe, a company that would go on to publish Lewis's novels throughout the 1920s, including *Babbitt, Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry,* and *Dodsworth*. And it set the stage for an incredibly productive decade that ended with Lewis becoming the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Main Street still has much to show us about how the conformity of thought and action can lead to a stultification of society. Even though Carol Kennicott's quest to make changes may at times seem quixotic, she maintains a sense of optimism that some change is possible. And how Sinclair Lewis has been reclaimed by his hometown is a good example. A Sinclair Lewis Foundation maintains the home that Lewis grew up in and holds an annual writers' conference, the Sauk Centre high school teams are now called the Main Streeters, and there is an annual summer festival, Sinclair Lewis Days, which occasionally includes conferences focused on the writing of their hometown son.

Illinois State University

THIS IS AMERICA

Sinclair Lewis

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. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.

Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark's annual hardware turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God's Country. In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor strictly moral.

Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith. Would he not betray himself an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths?

THE SAUK-CENTRIC SOURCES OF LEWIS'S ALLEGED AMBIVALENCE IN *MAIN STREET*

GEORGE KILLOUGH

Among the charges leveled against Sinclair Lewis as an author is the claim that he was ambivalent. Although some critics have made this point in a neutral way, others have seen ambivalence as a flaw. In regard to the 1920 novel, *Main Street*, the complaint goes so far as to suggest that the author has not made up his mind about whether or not he likes small towns. This ambivalence has been attributed in part to his experience growing up in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, an experience regularly described as difficult and unpleasant.

The complaint about uncertainty in *Main Street* goes too far. There is little, if any, doubt in the novel about which characteristics of Gopher Prairie are bad and which are good. The bad points are devastating for protagonist Carol Kennicott, but a few good points do help her decide, after making a temporary escape, to return there to live. If Lewis knew the town's bad features from having lived in Sauk Centre, his knowledge of its good features very likely also came his experiences there. Abundant evidence exists, actually, of positive qualities in Lewis's youthful surroundings, which scholars have not yet fully investigated. In order not to dilute the satire on Main Streets everywhere, he did not include every positive feature, but he did include some. A look at the ones for which there is strong evidence of influence during his youth may help us understand why he made the novel's vision complex instead of producing an unrelieved, simple-minded indictment.

The claim about ambivalence as a flaw has been a major complaint against Lewis's work overall. Critics taking this position tend to think Lewis's strength is satire, which loses its bite when mixed with hints of appreciation—a problem they find in *Main Street*. In regard to this novel Miriam and Leo Gurko argue that, though the satire of "the soullessness of provincial life" is clear, the focus blurs with the revelation of strong qualities in Will Kennicott, who represents the village, and weak qualities in Carol, the outsider-observer. According to this line of thinking, her acceptance of Gopher Prairie at the end of the story, when she imagines it having the potential for wonder, confuses the message (289-90). The Gurkos continue, "To describe Gopher Prairie as beautiful and filled with mystery and greatness is to negate everything that was said before" (290). Biographer Mark Schorer embraces a similar position, declaring that "the affirmations of the novel at the end evaporate in vagueness" (295). Schorer notoriously finds Lewis's character and whole literary output fraught with contradictions that blighted the writing and made the essential person nearly unknowable (see esp. 810). Another critic, Daniel R. Brown, argues that *Main Street* and *Babbitt* "lack directness and cohesion because of the author's ambivalent emotions toward his protagonists" (64).

Other Lewis scholars have noted conflicts in his thinking without suggesting that these conflicts injure *Main Street*. Critical views range from acknowledging the ambivalence in a neutral way without taking a position on the novel's effectiveness (Parry 17-20), to finding an idea or a quality that transcends the ambivalence and makes the novel succeed (Love 564-67, 574-77; Light 183; Grebstein, *Sinclair Lewis* 19-36, 69-70), to arguing that ambivalence is in one way or another at the heart of the novel's strength (Cohen 15-19).

The persistence of the word "ambivalence," with its negative connotation, is something of a puzzle.[1] In normal parlance, the ability to see good points in the middle of overwhelming bad ones, or strengths in the middle of weaknesses, is termed open-mindedness or thoughtfulness, not uncertainty. *Main Street* clearly exposes the vices of small-town life—the intolerance, anti-intellectualism, conformism, dullness—which are not nullified or relieved by the town's virtues, among which are the "dignity and greatness" in the surrounding land (chap. 5, I, 74) and the strengths of the town's best representative, husband Will Kennicott, who shows love for Carol, heroic steadiness as a physician, and reliable practicality.[2] The good points here do not allow Carol or us to forget the bad points. Readers cannot fail to notice the cruel intolerance shown by citizens in the neighboring village of Wakamin near the end of the novel who seize a Nonpartisan League organizer and ride him out of town on a rail (chap. 36, I, 438-39). The narrow-mindedness in small-town thinking here remains clear. There is no uncertainty. And it is sad to see that Dr. Kennicott himself, most noble citizen of Gopher Prairie, briefly signals approval.

Nor does Carol's return to Gopher Prairie in the end, after experimenting with urban life in Washington, DC, cloud the picture of misery that has already been drawn of village life. She does not repent of her rebellion, and she continues to dream big. That she can even now imagine "the seeds of mystery and greatness" in the streets of Gopher Prairie is testimony to an extraordinary hope, affirmed against all odds (chap. 38, VIII, 463). This is not ambivalence in her or the author but faith. They both have the ability to acknowledge what is good in Gopher Prairie. They also know the town's devastating flaws are so deeply rooted that any improvement will be slow and unlikely, but they still take a stand in favor of hope.

The question of how the author acquired his sense of the good qualities of Gopher Prairie needs more attention. When biographers discuss Lewis's youth in Sauk Centre, they tend to focus mainly on his developing character more than on the town. The familiar story is of an unusual, lonely boy trying and failing to gain approval and sometimes rubbing people the wrong way. This is the story told not only in the unkind account of Mark Schorer but also in the relatively kind accounts of Grebstein and Lingeman (Schorer 3-43; Grebstein,"Sinclair Lewis' Minnesota Boyhood" 85-89, *Sinclair Lewis* 19-24; Lingeman 3-15).[3] The emphasis is on the nature of young Harry Lewis, not the nature of his surroundings. Even the unpleasant features of village life receive little direct attention in the discussion of Harry's boyhood, except insofar as his unease may derive partly from village intolerance or the pressure to conform. Some later attention to Lewis's growing sense of Sauk Centre life can be found in the discussion of his summer vacation there in 1905, when boredom causes him to conceive of the "village virus," and also in the discussion of the two or three months in 1916 when he and first wife Grace visit his parents and he sees the town through her urban female eyes. However, both Schorer and Lingeman, the only two writers of full-scale biographies, cover these episodes mainly for what they reveal about Lewis's increasingly negative perception (Schorer 99-102, 234-35; Lingeman 23-24, 84-87). The positive features of the Sauk Centre area that impressed the young Lewis receive incomplete treatment.[4]

Among these positive features was the general appearance, not only of Sauk Centre but of other villages in Stearns County, which, as Lewis was well aware, looked more pleasant than Carol Kennicott thinks as she and Will leave the Mississippi River and approach Gopher Prairie on the train in 1912. She is appalled at the tiny hamlet of Schoenstrom with its 150 inhabitants, its shops of one story only, and its buildings generally "ill assorted" and "temporary-looking" (chap. 3, II, 38). She thinks the "only habitable structures" are the Catholic church and rectory (chap. 3, II, 39). As she approaches Gopher Prairie, she sees a place of similar aspect with "tinny church-steeples" and "no dignity in it nor any hope of greatness" (chap. 3, III, 42).

The actual villages a traveler would have passed through from the Mississippi River to Sauk Centre on the Great Northern railroad in 1912 all had a startling new structure signaling dignity and hope of greatness in a conspicuous way. The German settlers of Stearns County built extraordinary churches in the final years of the nineteenth century; not just "habitable" structures with "tinny" steeples but massive temples large enough to seat a thousand with spires over a hundred feet high. Had Carol been riding on a real train, the first feature she would have noticed in each of the three towns before Sauk Centre would have been an enormous church—in Albany, the brick Church of the Seven Dolors; in Freeport, the yellow brick Church of the Sacred Heart; and in Melrose, the brick Church of St. Boniface, which had twin 130-foot high onion-dome towers.[5] Lewis, as a teenager, had been impressed with the German-Catholic churches and went out of his way to visit several times the ones in Melrose and Meire Grove, a hamlet to the southeast, the spire there being over 150 feet high and visible, according to his teenage diary, from Sauk Centre, eight miles away.[6]

Among Lewis's reasons to leave these magnificent buildings out of the novel may have been his goal of capturing "Main Streets everywhere," as the headnote says, and not just the Stearns County version with its transplanted culture from medieval Catholic Europe. He may also have wanted the architectural landscape to look as it did during his childhood before the churches were built instead of the way it looked in 1912.[7] However, he definitely knew and admired the churches, which almost certainly affected his deeper vision (Killough 109-17). If the German immigrants could express their traditional culture in such a beautiful, material way, why could not America express the New World in a way equally fulfilling and beautiful?

Given the awe this Protestant boy once had, climbing up in the towers in Melrose and Meire Grove, gazing with delight at the stained glass windows, even attending Mass, it is not so surprising that he could have Carol Kennicott imagine “seeds of mystery and greatness” in Gopher Prairie.[8]

Another factor in Lewis's boyhood experience allowing for hope was the sense of belonging that Sauk Centre gave him. Gopher Prairie gives this sense to Carol Kennicott, and it was without question a factor in Lewis's life, too, despite assertions to the contrary. Just in attending high school, the young Lewis gained one of the best experiences his town had to offer, not just the education but also the social connections. His graduating class had only nine students, too small a group for anyone to be easily excluded, especially someone with the intelligence and irrepressible energy of Harry Lewis.[9] He took part in the activities of his class—for example, served as president of the Delphian Literary Society (elected in his junior year—“Diary” 11 Nov. 1900), participated in debates and speech contests (“Diary” 19 Feb. 1901, 22 April 1901, 31 May 1901, 11 Oct. 1901), yelled himself hoarse at sporting events (“Diary” 15 Mar. 1902), and accepted the lead male role (by popular demand) in the senior class play (“Diary” 14, 16 April 1902). Although he did not enjoy every party (“Diary” 12 Feb. 1901), he went to some where he had a good time (e.g. “Diary” 23 Mar. 1901, 11 April 1901).

His activities in May of 1901, the spring of his junior year, show how engaged he was with classmates and friends (“Diary”). Here they are in brief:

Thur., 2 May	called on Della Johnson to discuss the German play.
Fri., 3 May	ran a relay in Field Day events, called on a girl, probably Bertha Rich.
Sun., 5 May	called on Della Johnson.
Mon., 6 May	called on Anna Hendryx to discuss German work.
Thur., 16 May	visited with Bertha Rich a couple hours on her front porch.
Fri., 17 May	acted in the German play, which he thought went well.
Sun., 19 May	called on Della Johnson who played the piano for him.

Thur., [23] May	after an exam, had fun trading notes in Latin with Myra Hendryx.
Fri., [24] May	called on Della Johnson.
Sat., [25] May	with Irving Fisher, rode bicycle to Melrose to see church, attend service.
Wed., 29 May	went bicycle-riding with Bertha Rich.
Fri., 31 May	gave speech with 5 others in a junior contest in a hall they decorated.[10]

Young Harry Lewis was clearly not a loner. He even made a pleasant connection here with the girl of his dreams, Myra Hendryx, who normally remained inaccessible. Since Della Johnson, whom he thought almost as pretty, gave him considerable attention, not to mention Bertha Rich as well, his social life seems rather successful. An active social life, in fact, lay behind the well-known spat with his father back in March. He had visited his German teacher, Mr. Gunderson, on Thursday evening, March 14, and on the way home stopped in to see Jim Irsfield, the star athlete, staying until eleven o'clock. His father scolded him for being late. The very next night he stayed too late at Della Johnson's house and did not get home again until eleven o'clock. This time his father knocked him down. He was not hurt, however, and after flirting with the idea of running away, he had fun the next day throwing snow balls with Grace Johnson ("Diary" 14-16 Mar. 1901).

The point is that the high school community embraced him. He belonged. He had friends. He had fun. Although the details for May 1901 emphasize girls, he spent more time with boys. With several different boys he hunted, bicycled, or discussed serious issues. Leaving home for Oberlin in September 1902 to gain preparation for Yale entrance exams, he had hours to wait in the Twin Cities for the next train, so he took a walk to see people, and then, back on board, he was surprised to find three Sauk Centre boys, now students at the university, tapping on his window to bid him farewell—Jim Irsfield, Jim Hendryx, and Laurel Kells. Greatly pleased, he rushed out to the platform to shake their hands ("Diary" 18 Sept. 1902).

The diary shows no disaffection for Sauk Centre during his high school years, just a desire to know the world beyond. A reader might never guess that this young writer would grow up to write *Main Street*. Not until the summer of 1905, after Lewis had completed two years at Yale, had served as a part-time newspaper reporter in New Haven, and had worked his way on a cattle boat to England (summer 1904) did he begin to show disapproval of his home town. This feeling occurs in only a few entries; by then, he was accustomed to more excitement. Back when he was in high school, the entries reveal a deep regard for Sauk Centre, which had given him a sense of belonging. In one telling moment at home when feeling more emotional than usual, he heard church bells and wrote: "I have heard them for 17 years and love them. When I hear them in winter I seem to be lying in the hammock under the trees, and listning to them When I hear them as I do now, in a still evening they make me feel that the world and its riches are not worth a tithe of home and its surroundings" ("Diary" vol. I, 64, 9 April 1902).

In addition to the sense of belonging, a big attraction of home was the glorious outdoors, something that delights Carol Kennicott in the novel (e.g., chap. 12, I, 162-65). Sauk Centre lies at the foot of Sauk Lake, which extends several miles to the north. Close by are Fairy Lake, to the northwest, and Cedar Lake, to the east. The surroundings include woods and excellent farmland. The young Lewis roamed freely in this beautiful country, covering miles at a time, usually on his bicycle but sometimes on foot. He and one friend or another, most often Irving Fisher, frequently rode the three and a half or four miles to Fairy Lake, where they would swim or fish or carry on a serious discussion. For example, on Monday, 26 August 1901, he went to Fairy Lake with Will White at noon; the same week on Friday, 30 August, he and Fisher bicycled to Fairy Lake, rented a boat, caught eight black bass, and went swimming ("Diary"). On 4 July 1902, he and Fisher walked to Fairy Lake and honored the occasion by taking turns reading the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and eight chapters of Genesis. During the strolls to and from, they debated the question, Does matter exist? ("Diary" vol. I, 79, 4 July 1902).

Sometimes Lewis camped. For example, on Tuesday, 22 July 1902, he and Wintrope Benner rowed seven miles up Sauk Lake, made camp, and stayed until Friday, 25 July, living mostly on fish they caught, plus bread and butter, an occasional potato, maple syrup, and Postum ("Diary"). He also hunted for small game, usually with others but sometimes by himself. On Saturday, 26 October 1901, for example, he went out with his father and got three squirrels ("Diary" vol. I, 53). A month before, on Saturday, 28 September, he had gone out with just his gun and dog, walked east of town as far as Cedar Lake, and came home without getting anything. However, like Carol Kennicott, he reveled in the scenery: "I saw a magnificantly beautiful patch of woods, the foliage ranging from very dark green, through light green, dark red, light red, scarlet, and yellow not to speak of maroon and . . . how many more" ("Diary" vol. I, 50). The diary is rife with accounts of his outdoor excursions. He had abundant experience on which to draw when portraying Carol Kennicott's joy in the land around Gopher Prairie.

Yet a further positive feature of home was his father, Dr. E. J. Lewis, prototype for Dr. Will Kennicott, as Lewis the author acknowledged to Charles Breasted in 1926. Although Will has flaws, he also has a remarkable kindness, steadiness, courage, and practical intelligence, and Lewis deliberately intended him as a tribute to his father (Breasted 8). Dr. E. J. had flaws, too. The diary does not make him look good on the night of 15 March 1901, when he confronted his late-arriving son and knocked him down. However, other references in the diary reveal a man with good points like those of Will Kennicott. Dr. E. J. showed fatherly interest in young Harry, inviting him along on the occasional medical call (e.g., "Diary" 13 Oct. 1901) and taking him hunting (e.g., "Diary" 26 Oct. 1901). When the boy's focus wandered too far afield, the father kept him on track. The boy was impulsive and mercurial, often changing his dream of what to do next—whether to try to graduate from high school in just three years ("Diary" 24 Nov. 1900), or go to Harvard (e.g., "Diary" 17 Nov. 1900) or Oxford or Cambridge ("Diary" 30 Sept. 1901) or the University of Wisconsin ("Diary" 18 Jan. 1902), or to drop chemistry ("Diary" 14 Nov. 1900), or to ride his bicycle to the Atlantic coast after his junior year in high school and take ship for Germany ("Diary" 5 May 1901). The ideas appearing in the diary were not all revealed to the father, but the father knew the son well enough to push him toward prudent, focused decisions, keeping him in the chemistry class, for example, and finding an Ivy League college that would work out.

Actually, the fact that Lewis went to Yale shows considerable commitment from Dr. E. J., who thought the University of Minnesota would be good enough and persuaded Harry to agree ("Diary" 8 Feb. 1902). Sensing, however, his son's special talents and need for challenge, the doctor sought to find out whether Yale was feasible and discovered it was, although it would incur the extra expense of a year of post-high school preparation to enable Harry to pass the entrance exams ("Diary" 1, 18 Mar. 1902, 16-18 May 1902, 19 July 1902). That Dr. E. J. was willing to bear this cost shows that he had a greater understanding and a greater love for his son than he usually gets credit for. Harry, who had a very high regard for his father (e.g., "Diary" 2 Feb. 1902), reciprocated the next year at Oberlin Academy when he discovered that the third term would not provide much more useful preparation than he could gain on his own and therefore volunteered to come home early ("Diary" 9, 16-17, 22, 25 Feb. 1903). So Harry skipped Oberlin Academy's spring term in 1903, went home, studied hard on his own with some help in Greek from the Episcopal pastor, Mr. Garland (e.g., "Diary" 15 April 1903), and in the summer passed the entrance exams for Yale ("Diary" 7 July 1903).

The father remained solicitous of his son's well-being, writing to him regularly at Oberlin (e.g., "Diary" 6, 10, 17, 26, 31 Jan. 1903) and at Yale (e.g., "Diary" 14 Oct. 1903, 15, 26 Dec. 1903). In the spring of Harry's freshman year, father and stepmother even visited Yale, in conjunction with a trip to the American Medical Association meeting in Atlantic City, and spent several days there ("Diary" 10-17 June 1904). Later that summer, Harry took work on a cattle boat bound for England, where he arrived with little money and nowhere to stay—still just nineteen years old and temporarily homeless on the other side of the Atlantic. Almost certainly hoping to keep Harry in safer circumstances, Dr. E. J. had him come home to Sauk Centre the next summer, 1905, without even requiring him to find a job. In August, Harry chafed about the boredom but wrote in his diary, "Poor father - he says 'I thought you would like this vacation for your writing'" ("Diary" vol. iv, 188, 6 Aug. 1905). Clearly the patriarch here was trying to do his best for an impulsive, risk-taking son.

Years later, in 1931, when Lewis was asked to contribute to the fiftieth-anniversary issue of his high school yearbook, the *O-Sa-Ge*, he wrote "The Long Arm of the Small Town," a glowing tribute, suggesting that Sauk Centre would always be in his heart. He said that he could have grown up "in no place in the world where I would have had more friendliness" (272). He said rich boys in New England "are not having one-tenth the fun which I had as a kid, swimming and fishing in Sauk Lake" or going to Fairy Lake or "tramping ten miles on end, with a shotgun, in October" (272). The teenage diary certainly confirms these claims and shows why he could finish this essay on

Sauk Centre on a resoundingly positive note: "It was a good time, a good place, and a good preparation for life" (272).

All together, the diary and this testimonial from 1931 show Harry Lewis's engagement with high school friends, his extensive exploration of the beautiful country around Sauk Centre, and the care he received from his practical-minded, loving father. These were all attractions in his small-town experience that he could not deny in *Main Street* without falsifying what he knew. That Carol Kennicott should in the end feel a sense of belonging in Gopher Prairie and take delight in the surrounding land and that Dr. Will Kennicott should seem a loving and caring man fit Harry Lewis's experience completely. Along with the architectural artistry of German-Catholic culture in Stearns County, this experience gave him hope, so he allowed his protagonist to have hope, too. This is not a matter of ambivalence, just a recognition that, despite overwhelming flaws in small-town life, the long future has possibilities.

College of St. Scholastica

NOTES

[1] Of commentators cited so far, the following have used the term "ambivalence" in connection with *Main Street*: Brown (64), Cohen (13), Grebstein, *Sinclair Lewis* (69), the Gurkos (289), Light (183), Love (558), and Parry (17).

[2] Since the novel in its many reprints has different pagination, citations will be not only by page but also by chapter and section to *Main Street*.

[3] As an example of Schorer's exaggeration, he pictures the boy inhabiting the horrid emptiness of himself: "In him we have the doubly pathetic sight of a youth who is driven into an inner world even more bleak and barren than the exterior world that expelled him" (4). The idea of the lonely, rejected boy is often repeated—to some extent in Kraft (145-51), for example, and fully in Sutton (126). Without using the word "lonely" in the pages cited, Lingeman conveys the sense by describing young Harry as a boy who, because of various shocks, has withdrawn into the world of his imagination and his reading. One writer who goes against the usual tendency is James Lundquist, who says that Lewis "certainly was not devastated by anything that happened to him as a gangling, unathletic, and plain-looking youth," nor should his voracious reading be taken as evidence of a lonely retreat "from a hostile environment" but instead as simply a love of reading (*Sinclair Lewis* 6-7). Lundquist later put a different emphasis on Lewis's boyhood experience, mentioning his long-term "ambivalent" relationship with Sauk Centre, which was "a place of loneliness" for him in his earliest years before his mother died when he was just six ("The Sauk Centre" 223, 224). Influenced by Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip*, this later study by Lundquist emphasizes the "bizarre brutality" and "hideousness" that can be found in newspaper reports of the 1890s, including those in the *Sauk Centre Herald*—accidental poisoning or burning of children, people being crushed in railroad accidents, drownings, a person vomiting up a lizard, and suicide (222, 223, *passim*). Given the difference even in our own time between the way life is often lived and the way it is reflected in the press, Lundquist's first account of a young Lewis mostly unscarred by his surroundings seems more accurate than the second picture of a boy being

traumatized by events mentioned in the newspaper, except of course for the one overwhelming catastrophe of the death of his mother when he was six.

[4] An example of a positive feature that both Schorer and Lingeman left out of their discussion of the young couple's visit to Sauk Centre in 1916 is Grace Hegger Lewis's rapturous reaction to the beauty of the land, observed on long walks. In her memoir she wrote, "The immensity of this land expanded my spirit, and when the sun set the vast sky became an inland sea of turquoise flecked with golden isles" (96).

[5] The churches and the German-Catholic influence on Lewis are discussed in Killough.

[6] Lewis kept a diary sporadically from ages fifteen to twenty-three, some of it in code. A copy of a typed transcript, with coded parts decoded, prepared by Mark Schorer, resides with it at the Beinecke Library at Yale. The present author has examined both the diary and the transcript. All quotations and some other references are taken from microfilm of the transcript with citations to "Diary" and locations shown by volume, page, and date. Original spelling and punctuation are preserved. Since the closing of libraries during the pandemic has made microfilm readers inaccessible, the present study relies also on an electronic transcription of Schorer's transcript, keyed in at the behest of David Simpkins before he passed away, from a photocopy Richard Lingeman acquired from the Beinecke. The electronic copy has a few errors, has lost some of the original pagination, and appears to have lost material from November and much of December 1901. References to the Simpkins transcription will be to "Diary" and date only. References that include volume number and page depend on photocopies made from the microfilm before the pandemic. The diary mentions six excursions to Melrose or Meire Grove during which Lewis gave special attention to the churches: "Diary" vol. I, 43, [25] May 1901; 46, 30 July 1901; 63, 4 April 1902; 86, 13 Aug. 1902; vol. II, 209-10, 31 July 1903; 228, 18 Aug. 1903.

[7] William T. Morgan, in an analysis of the history of local architecture, found that "photographs of early Sauk Centre reveal that the townscape depicted in *Main Street* is closer in time to Lewis's childhood than it is to the period when Carol lived in Gopher Prairie" (145). Lewis very likely remembered seeing Albany, Freeport, and Melrose without their grand churches, which were completed not long before he graduated from high school in 1902—they were dedicated in 1900, 1899, and 1899, respectively. (Mitchell, vol. I, 218, 224, 231). The 1899 Freeport church burned in 1904 but was replaced by an equally grand building in 1910. The Church of St. Boniface in Melrose merged with another Catholic congregation in 1958 to become St. Mary's Catholic Church (Paschke 23-24). The building suffered a fire in 2016, destroying much of the interior, and the congregation has built a new church.

[8] Other observers besides the teenage Lewis have noticed the appealing look of German-Catholic buildings in Stearns County. Architectural historian Fred W. Peterson in 1998 published a book that celebrates Meire Grove, much of it built at the same time Lewis was growing up in Sauk Centre. Although Peterson does not mention *Main Street*, he must have been aware of how ironic it was to describe Meire Grove as an ideal rural community when the next town to the north has served for decades in the popular imagination as a symbol of what is wrong with small towns. Meire Grove was a tiny village with a population of only 163 in 1910, in contrast with Sauk Centre's population of 2,154 (United States 982), but it was the center of an extensive, tightly knit German-Catholic farming community that worshipped at the Church of St. John the Baptist, which was large enough to accommodate its membership of around 1,000 (Peterson 48, 55). The building (the only church there) was of brick veneer, constructed in 1885, some of the bricks having been made at the Imdieke family brickyard in Meire Grove (49, 57). This high-steepled building, which later burned in 1923 (55), is the one that impressed the young Lewis. Peterson also praises the brick houses in the parish for their beauty, noting a similarity with houses in northwestern Germany, where some families had originated, and a design blending practicality, durability, and deep-rooted piety (137, 141). If only Carol Kennicott had seen the farmsteads in Meire Grove instead of the shacks in Schoenstrom, she might have been happier.

[9] Sauk Centre native Laura Thomason Kells told Dorothy Thompson that Harry Lewis's senior class numbered only nine (Thompson 47-48). This is confirmed by a diary entry for 2 June 1902, in which Lewis conveys the class prophecy for each of the nine.

[10] The diary leaves ambiguity about the girl visited on 3 May and shows confusion about which days of the week fell on 23, 24, and 25 May. Also, the diary clearly shows Lewis's friendly relations with Sauk Centre girls when he was a junior in high school. Schorer acknowledges that they later showed interest in Harry in the summer of 1905, when he rowed them up the lake in the moonlight, but the suggestion is that they did not care for him in high school, before he had added the sheen of two years at Yale to his image (99). The activities chronicled for May of 1901 show otherwise. Lingeman avoids this question by giving only thirty pages to Lewis's childhood all the way through graduation at Yale, in contrast to Schorer's 136 pages.

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THE STRUGGLE AGAINST INERTIA: FORM AND VOICE IN *MAIN STREET*

ROBERT L. MCLAUGHLIN

Sinclair Lewis's technical skills as a writer are too frequently underestimated if not completely dismissed.[1] Because Lewis is usually categorized with the realists and naturalists of the early twentieth century, his novels can seem, by comparison, less narratively driven, more anecdotally structured, less stylistically taut, more self-aware, and less psychologically complex than readers expect. Even his strengths—a satirical eye for American foibles and hypocrisies and a sharp ear for the ways Americans speak—are sometimes discounted. Mark Schorer, in his blitzkrieg of a biography, criticizes Lewis for not offering solutions to the problems he attacks and finds fault with his ear for dialogue (295, 285n). Although Lewis certainly wouldn't have considered himself a modernist and indeed distanced himself from the modernist experiments of his contemporaries,[2] we can perhaps better appreciate the complexity of his formal and stylistic technique if we consider his structural looseness and flamboyant narration not as flaws but as the very means by which he engages his reader and develops his meanings. Here I examine the interwoven workings of narrative form and voice in *Main Street* and argue that they are carefully employed to build his critique of small-town America and make his protagonist's dilemmas both intellectually and viscerally present to the reader.

Just past the midway point of *Main Street*, Lewis's narrator juxtaposes two passages that bring together the novel's structural and thematic tension. One, the sixth section of chapter 19, focalized through Carol Kennicott, the novel's central character whose dissatisfaction with her adopted home, Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, has been growing for the previous 200 pages, is a paean to trains: "At the lake cottage she missed the passing of the trains. She realized that in town she had depended upon them for assurance that there remained a world beyond" (234). There follows a history of the railroad in Gopher Prairie and an account of the romance it conjures even for the most hard-headed of rural Minnesotans. The passage concludes,

> In town, she listened from bed to the express whistling in the cut a mile north. Uuuuuuu!—faint, nervous, distrait, horn of the free night riders journeying to the tall towns where were laughter and banners and the sound of bells—Uuuuu! Uuuuu!—the world going by—Uuuuuuu!—fainter, more wistful, gone.
>
> Down here [the lake cottage] there were no trains. The stillness was very great. The prairie encircled the lake, lay around her, raw, dusty, thick. Only the train could cut it. Some day she would take a train; and that would be a great taking. (236)

The train here functions, of course, as a symbol of the wider world from which Carol feels cut off and to which she longs to journey, but it also reminds us of the fundamentals of conventional narrative structure. Like trains, narratives tend to be forward moving, taking us from a point of origin to an anticipated destination, an endpoint that serves as the purpose of the journey and from which we can retrospectively understand the meaning of the journey and grasp how the journey has changed us, helped us to grow. In longing for a trip by train, Carol expresses a desire for a forward-moving narrative, one that will provide the chance for progress, growth, and meaning, one that is denied her in Gopher Prairie. Her vows to "go on" (200, 203, 204) and her desire to "escape" (240) are expressions of her need to enter into a forward-moving, meaning-providing narrative.

This need is countered in the other of the juxtaposed passages, section 5 of chapter 19, wherein Carol, spending her summer at the lakeside cottage, imagines other places she might be and other stories she might be in. These imaginings, however, lead her to a despairing conclusion:

> A thousand dreams governed by the fiction she had read, drawn from the pictures she had envied, absorbed her drowsy lake afternoons, but always in the midst of them Kennicott came out from town, drew on khaki trousers which were plastered with dry fish-scales, asked "Enjoying yourself?" and did not listen to her answer.

> And nothing was changed, and there was no reason to believe that there ever would be change. (234)

The "always" in this quotation is significant. It implies that this is a daily event: every day Kennicott arrives from town, puts on the same clothes, and makes the same one-sided conversation. This kind of ritualistic repetition is central to life in Gopher Prairie and to the structure of the novel.

Readers of *Main Street* must pay careful attention to note the specific movement from year to year (if it weren't for World War I, it would be very difficult to connect the action to actual years), but they are always aware of the passing of the seasons, the bitter cold and monumental storms of winter, the wildflowers of springtime, the terrific heat and annoying bugs of summer, the mud of autumn. As the seasons cycle and repeat, so, too, do the activities associated with them: moving to the lakeside cottages in the summer, Will's continually fussing with the furnace and fretting over the storm windows in winter. That the citizens of Gopher Prairie are highly conscious of the seasons isn't surprising given the town's status as a farming community, but in adopting the cycle as the structure for the novel, Lewis is doing more than acknowledging the importance of agriculture. He is demonstrating the way in which the community has adopted the cycle as the very basis of its life.

As Carol soon learns, repetition governs existence in Gopher Prairie. For meals, Will "wanted only his round of favorite dishes: steak, roast beef, boiled pig's-feet, oatmeal, baked apples" (291). Every party features the same people performing the same stunts—Dave Dyer imitating the Norwegian catching the hen, Ella Stowbody reciting "An Old Sweetheart of Mine"—and the same conversations about automobiles, real estate, farming, and fishing. The Jolly Seventeen meets weekly for bridge, monthly for dinner with the husbands, and semiannually to host a community dance. Each bridge afternoon offers "hot buttered rolls, coffee poured from an enamelware pot, stuffed olives, potato salad, and angel's-food cake . . . Doughnuts were in some houses well thought of as a substitute for the hot buttered rolls. But there was in all the town no heretic save Carol who omitted angel's-food" (88). The Thanatopsis Club similarly meets regularly to exchange superficial papers on prearranged topics and eat peppermints. As she walks around town, Carol is greeted by the same friendly jokes, but jokes that have been drained of their humor through repetition: "a citizen of Gopher Prairie does not have jests—he has a jest" (288).

One of the ways to think about the structure of a conventional narrative is that it begins by setting up a basic situation—what life is like in a particular location, what a particular family is like, what a particular character is like—and then introducing a sudden change in the situation: a stranger comes to town, or daughter announces she's engaged, or Scrooge is visited by Marley's ghost. This sudden change initiates the conflict and precipitates the action that will propel the narrative. *Main Street* encourages us to expect this kind of structure. In the novel's early pages, while Will is wooing Carol, he pleads, "Come to Gopher Prairie. Show us. Make the town—well—make it artistic. It's mighty pretty, but I'll admit we aren't any too darn artistic. Probably the lumberyard isn't as scrumptious as all these Greek temples. But go to it! Make us change!" (17). This behest prepares us to think that Carol will be the stranger who comes to town, her attempts to change the town will initiate the conflict, and over the course of the resulting narrative, the town and/or Carol will undergo a transformation, for good or ill, out of which meaning will arise.

However, that isn't quite what happens. The novel, as we have seen, establishes the basic situation, that Gopher Prairie is governed by cyclical repetition, but Carol doesn't provide the interruption of routine that initiates change. She tries, but she fails repeatedly. She expects her housewarming party to open the imaginations of Gopher Prairie's hosts and hostesses, but the next party returns to the same stunts and conversation. Her plan to build an elaborate new city hall founders on the fear of higher taxes. Her proposal to the Thanatopsis Club to relieve poverty is rejected on the grounds that the members already provide plenty of charity and, besides, "There isn't any real poverty here" (142). When Carol wants to consider the theater club's production of *The Girl from Kankakee* a beginning on which to build, the other members think it better to rest on their laurels and take a break. She sees her appointment to the library board as a chance to broaden the institution's reach and to modernize its holdings, but the other members "used [the library], they passed resolutions about it, and they left it as dead as Moses" (232). Her desperate campaign to save Fern Mullins's job can't overcome the joy the town takes in snickering gossip. Even her flirtation with Erik Valborg withers when faced with Gopher Prairie's conformity and respectability. Each chance the novel has to initiate a forward-moving narrative fails as Carol and the novel itself fall victim to "the humdrum inevitable tragedy of struggle against inertia" (450).

This tragedy is anticipated in the novel's opening paragraph:

> On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas encamped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky. She saw no Indians now; she saw flourmills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Nor was she thinking of squaws and portages, and the Yankee fur-traders whose shadows were all about her. She was meditating upon walnut fudge, the plays of Brieux, the reasons why heels run over, and the fact that the chemistry instructor had stared at the new coiffure which concealed her ears. (1)

The novel immediately connects Carol, even before we know her name, to the forward movement of history. She's presented as a figure connecting the days of the Indians with the modern world: "The days of pioneering, of lassies in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings, are deader now than Camelot; and a rebellious girl is the spirit of the bewildered empire called the American Middlewest" (1). If in that opening paragraph her thoughts suggest that Carol is unfocused or flighty, it is less a criticism than a tribute to her dynamism. The narrator goes on to tell us, "Whatever she might become she would never be static" (2). Sadly, the novel's very structure—anecdotes set against the cyclical repetition of the seasons, the months, the meetings, the parties, the conversation, the gossip—denies Carol this prophecy. Each failed attempt at reform leaves Carol "recaptured by Main Street" (216), where "there was nothing changed, and nothing new" (233). And because Carol's would-be initiatives continually fail to move the plot forward, to knock the novel out of its cyclical inertia, the reader, too, is trapped and thus made to feel Carol's frustration as one aborted plan after another leaves us with characters and situations that change only incrementally, if at all.

The tension in the narrative structure between Carol's desire for a forward-moving narrative and Gopher Prairie's cyclical inertia is replicated in the effects of the novel's use of narrative voice. I have argued elsewhere that analysis influenced by the narrative theory of Mikhail Bakhtin can be useful in helping us to understand the complexity of Lewis's novels. Put simply, Bakhtin argues that any language is made up of multiple subsets of voices or discourses: the various discourses of everyday speech, the jargon of professional discourses, the discourses of different disciplines, and so on. Each of these discourses is the expression of an implied ideological worldview. A novel, in Bakhtin's definition, is a genre in which various discourses are brought together and put into dialogue; not just the representations of characters' discourses but also those of journalism, political rhetoric, diaries, recipes, travel journals, whatever narrators might pull out of their hats. Put another way, for Bakhtin, the novel is a stylized representation of a variety and range of discourses placed into a dialogic relationship. When these discourses are set into dialogue, so, too, are their implied ideological worldviews, and it is out of this contest of worldviews that the novel's possibilities for meaning are developed.[3]

As noted earlier, Lewis had an excellent ear for the ways Americans talk. As James M. Hutchisson explains, he was able "to reproduce the cadences and idiom of American speech with almost phonographic exactness" (5).[4] His extemporaneous imitations of various American types were familiar (perhaps notorious) to his friends and drinking buddies.[5] That ear worked with the narrative technique he probably learned from his early reading of Charles Dickens[6] (with whom he shared his birthday) to produce a style in which his narrator not only imitates American speech and its associated discourses but also makes that speech and discourse one of the things his novels are about, discourse as an object of study, which, through objective reproduction, stylized exaggeration, and out-and-out parody, can be manipulated into revealing the nature of the American character. An important example of Lewis's technique can be found at the very beginning of *Main Street* in a little prologue:

> 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. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.
>
> Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says

> to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider. (n.p.)

The passage begins with a bold but plausible claim, stated objectively. The objective or neutral tone continues until the end of the second paragraph where the narrator moves from using states' names to a regional voice for "Up York State" and "the Carolina hills." The intentions are unclear: is he adopting a regional voice out of affection, as a way of signaling his allegiance with the concept of Main Street and, by extension, America that he has been developing so far? The third paragraph also begins with a bold claim, one the reader is less likely to find plausible. As the paragraph proceeds, the narrative voice becomes more and more exaggerated, ending in a parody of pronouncements of religious doctrine. We see now that the narrator's allegiance is a satirical one: he is adopting the attitude toward Main Street shared by its denizens so as to mock and criticize it. In this short opening passage Lewis establishes both his narrative technique—how his narrator will operate—and his narrator's attitude toward his subject matter.

This attitude is developed through the narrator's presentation of a variety of voices in Gopher Prairie and the tension that is established between two groups of them. The more complex group contains the discourses associated with the town's reformers, cranks, and malcontents. The discourse of reform is represented in the speech of Vida Sherwin, a former sweetheart of Will's and, at best, an ambiguous friend to Carol. Vida wants to make Gopher Prairie a better place, but this desire comes from her love of the town. As she describes it to Carol, "It's the spirit that gives me hope. It's sound. Wholesome. But afraid" (64). She calls herself conservative: "So much to conserve. All this treasure of American ideals. Sturdiness and democracy and opportunity . . . I have only one good quality—overwhelming belief in the brains and hearts of our nation, our state, our town. It's so strong that sometimes I do have a tiny effect on the haughty ten-thousandaires. I shake 'em up and make 'em believe in ideals—yes, in themselves" (65-66). To effect such change, however, Vida believes, one has to move incrementally and that "you have to work from the inside, with what we have, rather than from the outside, with foreign ideas" (138). The narrator, merging with Vida's voice, concludes, "She believed that details could excitingly be altered, but that things-in-general were comely and kind and immutable. . . [The] reformer believes that all the essential constructing has already been done" (254).

A different kind of discourse is presented through the sad, ineffectual lawyer Guy Pollock. He has lived for a time in the world outside of Gopher Prairie—"I went to symphonies twice a week. I saw Irving and Terry and Duse and Bernhardt, from the top gallery" (156)—so, unlike Vida, he's not under the impression that the town represents any kind of ideal, but, also unlike her, he's surrendered any impulse to attempt to change it. Of the town, he explains to Carol, "we've cleared the fields, and become soft, so we make ourselves unhappy artificially, at great expense and exertion: Methodists disliking Episcopalians, the man with the Hudson laughing at the man with the flivver. The worst is the commercial hatred—the grocer feeling that any man who doesn't deal with him is robbing him" (158). As for Guy himself, his inertia is a symptom of what he calls the Village Virus: "it infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces. 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" (155-56). Because of his experiences outside Gopher Prairie, Guy feels he is too good for the town, but because he has lingered too long in the town, he's no longer good enough for the world of the cities.

More radical, if no more effective, is the discourse of Miles Bjornstam, the so-called Red Swede, a socialist who refuses to recognize the superiority of the merchant and moneyed classes of Gopher Prairie but instead calls them on their hypocrisies and self-interestedness. He explains to Carol how he's different from the others: "You see, I'm not interested in these dinky reforms. Miss Sherwin's trying to repair the holes in this barnacle-covered ship of a town by keeping busy bailing out the water. And Pollock tries to repair it by reading poetry to the crew! Me, I want to yank it up on the ways, and fire the poor bum of a shoemaker that built it so it sails crooked, and have it rebuilt right, from the keel up" (116). He later tells Carol that he can't support her city-hall project: "You want to do something for the town. I don't! I want the town to do something for itself. We don't want old [real-estate speculator Luke] Dawson's money—not if it's a gift, with a string. We'll take it away from him, because it belongs to us" (141). Miles is the most obstreperous of Gopher Prairie's cranks, but he is not alone. Many of the area's farmers see the ways the town's bankers and merchants collude to take advantage of them, and they try to take control of their own economic destiny.

As the novel's protagonist and as the most sympathetic malcontent, Carol serves as a mouthpiece for a range of discourses. We have already seen how Carol's attitude toward her world is shaped by her romanticized understanding of history and the literature she has read. Her impressive if undisciplined range of reading was made possible by her free-thinking father from whom she inherited "a willingness to be different" (7) and whose influence continues to shape her expectations for the world. In Gopher Prairie Carol's discourses range from that of a child clamoring for more sledding parties to a naughty vamp, asking the guests at her housewarming party "to help me have a bad influence" (74), to an aesthetic idealist, trying to make others "understand the 'fun' of making a beautiful thing, the pride and satisfaction of it, and the holiness!" (224). Carol also channels the voices of other Gopher Prairie misfits. For example, when she dreams of building a new city hall, she sounds like Vida Sherwin as she tries to forge an alliance with Miss Villets, the librarian, through flattery and appealing to her sense of being underappreciated, even if she does stumble a bit: "You're the one person that does—that does—oh, you do so much" (130). Earlier, at the first Gopher Prairie party she attends, Carol livens up the conversation with socialist discourse like Miles Bjornstam's, discomfiting the bankers and businessmen by asking about "labor trouble," "union labor," and "profit sharing" (49-50). The next day, she shocks Will's sense of value and privilege when, adopting the discourse of the farmers, she says, "I wonder if these farmers aren't bigger than we are? So simple and hard-working. The town lives on them. We townies are parasites, and yet we feel superior to them" (57). And as we saw earlier, with each failed reform, with each recapturing of Carol by the town, she despairs that she will become like Pollock, dissatisfied but defeated, another victim of the Village Virus.

Periodically throughout the novel, as Carol tries to come to terms with Gopher Prairie and her place in it, her typically flighty narrative focalization and changeable narrative voice merge with the broader narrative voice of the prologue to offer sustained meditations on the small town in America. This hybrid discourse, a maneuver wherein two or more discourses reside in the same utterance, stabilizes Carol's flightiness with the narrator's more confident assertions and makes clear the narrator's (and, by extension, Carol's) attitude toward Gopher Prairie while simultaneously making Carol more sympathetic to the reader than Vida, Guy, or Miles. These passages, heavily directed by the narrator, help Carol and the reader understand what their attitude toward Gopher Prairie should be. Wondering why young people leave small towns for the cities, Carol, through the narrator, concludes that the reason "is an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment . . . the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dullness made God" (265). If Carol's consciousness is the tool the novel uses to receive information about and reaction to Gopher Prairie, then her voice becomes the vehicle by which the range of critical commentaries about the town is made.

The second set of discourses about Gopher Prairie is spoken by the vast majority of the town's citizens, the ones who fit in to the community, who love its values, and who dismiss the cranks' complaints as so much noise. Interestingly, although there are many more of these citizens, many more speakers, the range of their discourse is much narrower. In fact, it doesn't really matter who is speaking—Will or Ezra Stowbody or Mrs. Bogart or any of a host of others—because they tend to speak with one voice and share the same set of beliefs about Gopher Prairie. They believe in the exceptionalism of Gopher Prairie (". . . I never saw a town that had such up-and-coming people as Gopher Prairie" [13-14]). They believe that money marks the value of all things ("All this profit-sharing and welfare work and insurance and old-age pension is simply poppycock. Enfeebles a workman's independence—and wastes a lot of honest profit" [50]). They believe in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon Americans to other hyphenated Americans, like Swedish-Americans and German-Americans, the superiority of town-dwellers to farmers, and the superiority of those with more money to those with less ("I don't know what the country's coming to, with these Scandahoofian clodhoppers demanding every cent you can save, and so ignorant and impertinent, and on my word, demanding bath-tubs and everything—as if they weren't mighty good and lucky at home if they got a bath in the wash-tub" [89-90]). They believe in conformity and are suspicious of individualism ("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 stick-tuitiveness, that boost and get the world's work done" [199]). They believe in gossip as a vehicle for upholding their own righteousness while revealing the moral failings of everybody else ("But I don't waste any sympathy on that man of hers. Everybody says he drank too much, and treated his family awful, and that's how they got sick" [322]). All the speakers quoted here uphold the beliefs cited and also work together to enforce a specific distribution of economic, social, and political power in Gopher Prairie.

Bakhtin argues that language exists in the tension between what he calls centripetal and centrifugal forces.[7] Centripetal forces strive for a center, for unity, for homogeneity, for totality. Centrifugal forces strive to fly outward, for diversity, for heterogeneity, for chaos. Centripetal forces tend to be associated with officially approved discourses at any given social moment, discourses that that claim all authority and deny the truth-value of any dissenting voices. Centrifugal forces tend to be associated with subversive discourses, discourses that challenge the totalizing claims of the official discourses and seek to open up rather than close off the possibilities for meaning in language.

These ideas help us to understand, I think, how Lewis's complex use of narrative voice complements the narrative structure. The various voices associated with the good citizens of Gopher Prairie work together to create a single discourse representing a single belief system, the officially sanctioned discourse and worldview of the town. This discourse and this worldview are the requirements for membership in the Gopher Prairie community. If you have them, you're "one of us"; if not, you're a crank and a perpetual outsider. This method of inclusion and exclusion explains why a newcomer like Honest Jim Blausser is so enthusiastically welcomed into the community so quickly: "He was the guest of honor at the Commercial Club Banquet at the Minniemashie House, an occasion for . . . oratorical references to Pep, Punch, Go, Vigor, Enterprise, Red Blood, He-Men, Fair Women, God's Country, James J. Hill, the Blue Sky, the Green Fields, the Bountiful Harvest, Increasing Population, Fair Return on Investments, Alien Agitators Who Threaten the Security of Our Institutions, the Hearthstone the Foundation of the State, Senator

Knute Nelson, One Hundred Per Cent Americanism, and Pointing with Pride" (414). In short, he's welcomed into the club because he speaks their language. We see the centripetal pull toward unity, homogeneity, and totality.

In contrast, Carol is, as we have seen, the source for a variety of discourses and their various, sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory, worldviews. What some readers and she herself calls her flightiness is more helpfully understood as Lewis's attempt to represent the diversity, the anarchism, and the perpetual outward yearning of centripetal forces. Carol is in continual opposition—questioning, subverting, wondering why things can't be different. She admits, "if I could put through all those reforms at once, I'd still want startling, exotic things. Life is comfortable and clean enough here already. And so secure. What it needs is to be less secure, more eager" (270). Thus Carol's narrative attempts to break the cycle of inertia in Gopher Prairie, to be the disruption that will generate new narrative possibilities, are reiterated in her attempts to subvert and diversify the official discourse of the town. And like the former narrative attempts, these narrational attempts fail, too. If we envision centripetal forces as a whirlpool, sucking everything to its center, Carol, despite her resolve to go on, her desire to escape, is drawn back into the life of the town and is subject to its discourse.

Carol's last great attempt to escape comes when she leaves Will and moves to Washington, DC. After living there a year and a half with a government job and a new set of friends, Carol feels no great liberation and no sense that she has generated a new narrative or enlivened a monotonous discourse. Her life there is different, but it isn't an escape. So it is not surprising that when Will visits her in his campaign to bring her home, he begins, as he began his original courtship, by showing her photographs of Gopher Prairie. Nor is it surprising, given the novel's structure of narrative repetition, that Carol is again persuaded and is drawn back into the whirlpool.

Main Street, then, never really breaks into a forward-moving narrative. Carol remains a perpetual stranger in town but never achieves the status of a stranger who upsets the social routine and creates change. This conclusion is made clear in the final scene between Carol and Will. In it, she admits that she is "beaten," but she pins her hopes on her baby daughter: "Do you see that object on the pillow? Do you know what it is? It's a bomb to blow up smugness. If you Torries were wise, you wouldn't arrest anarchists; you'd arrest all these children while they're asleep in their cribs" (450). She imagines the baby blasting open the cycle of inertia and generating new narratives, perhaps about "an industrial union of the whole world" or "aeroplanes going to Mars" (450). Lewis, however, gives the last word to Will, "Have to be thinking about putting up the storm-windows pretty soon" (451), reasserting the dominance of the cycle.

This analysis demonstrates, I hope, that Lewis's novelistic technique in *Main Street* is far from anecdotal, sloppy, or loose and baggy. Rather, his narrative structure skillfully denies Carol the narrative directions she longs for and forces the reader to share her frustration as one narrative after another sputters and fails to start. His narrative voices situate Carol and the reader in the tension between the tyranny of official discourse and the ambiguous freedom of open-ended discourse. Thus Lewis asks the reader to understand Carol's plight and his critique of small-town America intellectually but also makes it possible for the reader to feel the plight and live the critique. Many authors in the first part of the twentieth century addressed the virtues and vanities of the small town, but only Lewis constructed a novel that engaged and challenged the received certainties of its time and has continued to speak to, laugh with, irk, and enrage readers ever since.

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NOTES

[1] A study of negative critical judgments of Lewis's works inevitably begins with Schorer's devastating biography, but see also Bloom, Fisher, Grebstein, Kazin, and Milne. For a survey of Lewis's posthumous literary reputation, see Lingeman 551-54.

[2] For Lewis on the modernists, especially James Joyce, see Lewis, "The American Fear of Literature" 17; Lingeman 232-33; Schorer 274, 410, and 424; Smith 298.

[3] See Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," especially 260-75 and 301-31.

[4] See also Hutchisson 62, Martin, and Mayer.

[5] See, for example, Schorer, 306.

[6] On Lewis's reading of Dickens, see Schorer 15, 16, 25, and 61.

[7] See Bakhtin, 270-72.

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READING SINCLAIR LEWIS'S ROMANTIC AND MIMETIC IMPULSES IN *MAIN STREET* THROUGH FORMAL SYSTEMS AND ARISTOTLE'S POTENTIAL AND ACTUAL INFINITIES

CORY M. HUDSON

Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* lies at the intersection of romantic idealism and strict mimeticism. Lewis's Carol Kennicott, a young college graduate from a small liberal arts school, initially feels as if she has an infinite number of possibilities for living laid out before her: "Her imagination carved and colored the new plan," and she's primed herself to transform the world (7). However, after marrying a country doctor, Will Kennicott, and moving to a small American village, the unshaped freedom that Carol believed was laid out before her abruptly converges into the narrowly defined role as "a humble wife who followed the busy doctor out to the carriage, and her ambition was not to play Rachmaninoff better, nor to build town halls, but to chuckle at babies" (189). In the novel, Lewis consequently critiques a glorified mythos surrounding life in a small American town as well as defined social roles and ideologies within those towns. Carol arrives at the small Midwestern village of Gopher Prairie from the city of Minneapolis with the belief that she will reform the town, "make it artistic" and "cure the town of whatever ails it," as her husband Will says (17, 18). However, once she's living in Gopher Prairie, Carol cannot actualize any of her dreams to reform the town artistically or socially, for the rigidly defined reality of Gopher Prairie cannot contain the infinite vastness of Carol's fancy. Carol's artistic, dreamy, and unbounded inner world cannot exist externally in the well-defined and patterned external world of Gopher Prairie that surrounds her. As a result, the citizens of Gopher Prairie view Carol's attempt to alter or modify their ordered system of life as a threat that seeks to instill disorder and chaos within their village. Consequently, Lewis produces a tension between the reality of the American village and Carol's imagination; we can think about this tension between the real and the ideal via such mathematical concepts as actual infinity, potential infinity, and formal systems as well as Bakhtin's carnivalesque.

Critics and scholars often describe Lewis's prose styling as a hybrid between romantic fantasy and naturalistic realism. In *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, for example, Martin Light discusses the dueling romantic and mimetic influences within Lewis's prose fiction.[1] Light argues that Lewis, to a certain degree, possesses a "quixotic imagination" (4). He defines the "quixote" in his text as the "kind of romanticist who schools himself on sentimental novels, who sees himself as riding forth to conquer, and who finds a world that is more the projection of his illusions than the result of a sense of reality" (2). This quixotic quality of Lewis's prose, illusory or imaginative transformations of the real, accounts for his often discussed satiric and ironic treatments of character types and/or society in many of his major novels, for the illusory worlds of his characters (e.g., Martin Arrowsmith's dedication to pure science over profitable medicine in *Arrowsmith*; George F. Babbitt's rebellion against the commercial and material Zenith world in *Babbitt*; or Carol's efforts to bring poetry, theater, and intellectual discussions to Gopher Prairie) conflict with and illumine the hypocrisies within the harsh realities of their external worlds. However, as Light states, Lewis "was often suspicious of [fancy]," a term, Light says, that Lewis used to describe the inner worlds of his characters, and "was aware of a conflict between his impulse toward romance and his impulse toward realism" (6). In his fiction, Lewis counterbalances illusory or imaginative reformulations of reality with strict mimeticism.

Despite how they intensely yearn for lives of adventure and fancy free from what is deemed conventional, Lewis's characters are still beholden to an intensely mimetic or true-to-life representation of American life compiled from figures, settings, and events that readers easily recognize, identify with, and relate to through real-life experience.[2] However, the America that Lewis chooses to represent mimetically in such novels as *Main Street* isn't a glorified version, like the one Lewis mocked in his Nobel Prize address, "The American Fear of Literature":

> 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, and powerful at golf; that all country towns are filled with neighbors who do nothing from day to day save go about being kind to one another; that although American girls may be wild, they change always into perfect wives and mothers; and that, geographically America is composed solely of New York, which is inhabited entirely by millionaires; of the West, which keeps unchanged all the boisterous heroism of 1870; and of the South, where every one lives on a plantation perpetually glossy with moonlight and scented with magnolias. (6)

Rather, Lewis represents what he describes as a Dreiseresque America with "men and women [who] are often sinful and tragic and despairing, instead of being forever sunny and full of song and virtue," where "life [is] not to be neatly arranged in the study of a scholar but as a terrifying magnificent and often quite horrible thing akin to the tornado, the earthquake, the devasting fire" (Lewis, "The American Fear of Literature" 8). The America that Lewis mimetically represents in his fiction is one dominated by commerce and industry and piddling bourgeois ideologies.

Although these dueling romantic and mimetic impulses appear in much of Lewis's fiction, the grim external worlds in his novels, though challenged and distorted by the characters' inner illusory worlds, remain stubbornly constant and untransformed throughout the course of his novels. For example, at the end of *Arrowsmith,* Martin finds his mentor, Max Gottlieb, pensioned, discovers that he's out of place at the McGurk Institute, and retreats to Vermont; George Babbitt gives up his futile and empty rebellion against Zenith and assumes a placid conformity by novel's end. Even Carol—who, after returning to Gopher Prairie from working in Washington, DC, upholds her sentimentality and rebelliousness by refusing to "admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be . . . or more generous than Europe" and reaffirming how she has "kept the faith" through all of her time within Gopher Prairie—finds herself conforming to her inescapable role as the doctor's wife as she "patted his pillows, turned down his sheets," all while her husband dismisses her and ends *Main Street* with his own mental meanderings about the weather, the storm-windows on the house, and "whether the girl put that screwdriver back" (451).

Though Lewis's characters tend to be young or middle-aged idealists who reject convention in favor of adventure or as a means to escape the Sisyphean nature of American life, James M. Hutchisson points out in *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis* that such characters as Arrowsmith, Babbitt, and Carol Kennicott ultimately cannot escape from or alter the ambit of their external worlds. Lewis's characters, Hutchisson states, "either [retreat] to the safety of routine, partly satisfied that they have found their true selves, or [opt] for an unconventional, peripatetic life" by the novels' ends (14). Lewis's characters often must succumb to the patterned conventionalities of their external worlds (e.g., Babbitt and Carol) or flutteringly gad about them (e.g., Arrowsmith). As Carol admits to her sometimes friend and most times rival Vida Sherwin, "You must live up to the popular code if you believe in it; but if you don't believe in it, then you *must* live up to it!" (374). Throughout *Main Street*, Carol struggles to live up to the popular code in Gopher Prairie because her own quixotic imagination is often contrary to the reality of the external world that surrounds her, and we can think of Carol's impulse toward the romantic and her impulse toward the real in terms of the differences between actual infinity and potential infinity.

The concept of infinity traces back to ancient Greece, where the word for it was *apeiron,* which literally translates into English as "unbounded." The *apeiron* didn't have a positive connotation for many ancient Greek thinkers. They'd use the *apeiron* to refer to the chaos and disorder that preceded the ordered world. For the ancient Greeks, the physical world functioned like a formal system, a collection of axioms—assumed to be true statements—that produce theorems—new true statements—through rules of inference.[3] Up until the 1930s, mathematicians believed that such formal systems as geometry or number theory were consistent or paradox-free and that they were finitely describable or complete.[4] The ancient Greeks applied such properties as consistency and completeness to the observable world. The world, accordingly, is consistent and finitely describable. And just as the *apeiron* creates paradoxes within the formal system of mathematics by producing incommensurability and recursion, it also threatens the orderly pattern of the physical world. In order to maintain the orderliness of their world, the ancient Greeks sought to banish the *apeiron* from their thinking.

In *Physics,* Aristotle simultaneously accounts for and banishes the *apeiron,* arguing that nothing in the universe is actually infinite.

Things are only potentially infinite. The number line, for example, is potentially infinite, for though there isn't a largest natural number on it, the number line doesn't actually exist within the universe. It's conceptual and nonexistent in a physical sense. If the *apeiron* doesn't exist as a real phenomenon within the universe, it can't create paradoxes within formal systems of mathematics and metaphysics, which remain consistent and finitely describable.

The difference between actual and potential infinities is a useful dichotomy for thinking about the romantic and mimetic impulses in *Main Street* that characterize Carol's quixotic imaginings and the realities of her life in Gopher Prairie. Traditionally, we often think of infinity in terms of quantity, but it's worth noting that the ancient Greeks' *apeiron* is formed of the alpha privative (*a*-), *without,* and the word *peira,* meaning a *trial,* etymologically suggesting *without trial*. Considering that the ancient Greeks used the *aperion* to refer to unwanted chaos and disorder, to banish *apeiron* from formal systems is to banish indeterminacy from a consistent and complete formal system in favor of some *a priori* finitude. And just as the ancient Greeks sought to preserve their formal systems from devolving into chaos as a result of the *apeiron,* so the people of Gopher Prairie likewise seek to defend the orderliness of their lives in an American village from any progressive idealism that they believe threatens their social order.

The ancient Greeks' attitudes toward *aperion* and *aperion's* relationship to *agon* can inform how we think about Carol's inability to change Gopher Prairie and why there's tension between Lewis's impulse toward quixotic imaginations and his impulse toward mimeticism. I argue that Lewis, more than likely unintentionally, treats Carol's yearning for the idealistic, the progressive, and the unconventional as an unwanted test or trial, chaos or disorder, within the fixed, orderly, and patterned system of the mythos about the American village, and in Gopher Prairie, Carol's neighbors seek to maintain the order underpinning the mythos of the American village by suppressing Carol's attempts to introduce *apeiron* into their lives. And whereas the root word *peira* reminds us that *agon* is at the core of *apeiron,* reminding us that *agon* is the very necessary foundation of order, Carol's failed attempts to reform the town remind us that trials and tribulations are the irreducible grounds of the divisions that constitute logical deliberation and philosophy. Carol tests the orderliness of life in a small American village, and in *Main Street*, Lewis narrativizes how Carol's hopes for change are unwanted points of crisis for those living in Gopher Prairie.

After their marriage, Carol and Will move to Gopher Prairie, and they arrive at this small American village by train. Despite the landscape's initial description as "a martial immensity, vigorous, a little harsh, unsoftened by kindly gardens," this American "expanse" quickly narrows into a defined and determined space (25). As the newlyweds near their destination by train, Will "startled [Carol] by chuckling, 'D' you realize the town after the next is Gopher Prairie? Home!'" (26). Lewis implies that the *startling* aspect of Will's colloquially spoken statement is the declaration that the two of them are *home,* for "That one word—home—it terrified [Carol]" (26). It prompts Carol to ask herself if she had "really bound herself to live, inescapably, in this town called Gopher Prairie?" with "this thick man beside her, who dared to define her future" (26). Lewis's word choices during this earlier moment of the text are telling and foreshadow how the town will oppress Carol's fancy. Carol has "*bound* herself to live, *inescapably*," in Gopher Prairie within the confines of a specified role that her husband Will, and her neighbors, will "*define*" for her future (26, italics added for emphasis). Home—Gopher Prairie—signifies for Carol a life of predetermined obligations that are out of her control. Once she steps off of the train, Carol is no longer at the beginning of her life facing unshaped freedom as she was upon graduating from college. Rather, upon arriving at Gopher Prairie, she finds herself at "the end—the end of the world" (27).

Benignly enough, one of Carol's first experiences of the boundedness of Gopher Prairie occurs with a couple of parties, a welcome party for her that her neighbors host and a Japanese-themed soirée that Carol hosts for her neighbors. Soon after she moves to Gopher Prairie, Will's circle of friends—the town's elite, those "persons engaged in a profession, or earning more than twenty-five hundred dollars a year, or possessed of grandparents born in America"—throw Carol a welcome party (74), and it takes place at Sam Clark's home, at the home of the "Squarest people on earth" (31). When Carol arrives at Sam's "recently built house" that "had a clean sweep of clapboards, a solid squareness, a small tower, and a large screened porch," she faces her new neighbors who have arranged themselves within "the hallway and the living-room, sitting in a vast prim circle as though they were attending a funeral" as they "tittered politely, but . . . did not move from the social security of their circle" (40-41).

Returning to the ancient Greeks' aversion for the *apeiron*, Rudy Rucker notes in *Infinity and the Mind* "that Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle all held that the space of our universe is bounded and finite, having the form of a vast sphere" (16), and the guests' arrangement within a circle at Carol's welcome party recalls such an idea. A circle, though endless, is not infinite; it has a defined border. Rucker offers an example of a fly walking around the edge of a glass to differentiate between the two ideas. A fly can circle around and around a glass's rim endlessly without ever hitting a barrier, but the fly, nonetheless, will end up retracing its steps (Rucker 16). The redundancy of the fly's movement around the glass outweighs any continuous progress that the fly may make. Coupled with Lewis's reintroduction of describing Carol's arrival in Gopher Prairie as an endpoint, a "funeral," the welcome party signifies a closing off of Carol's fancy.

It's at this party that the "alien Carol" gets her first exposure to the redundant order through which the people of Gopher Prairie live out their lives (51). At this party, Will encourages Carol "to see people as other folks see them as they are," meaning to see them as the other people in Gopher Prairie see them (42). However, Carol encounters xenophobia through Luke Dawson's statement about his dislike for "some of these retired farmers who come here to spend their last days—especially the Germans" (43); school superintendent George Mott's out-of-date educational methods that emphasize "manual training" (44); Ezra Stowbody's troglodytic contempt for "the social changes of [the last] thirty years" that threaten to unseat "the fine arts—medicine, law, religion, and finance—. . . as aristocratic" and diminish the roles of Gopher Prairie's true "arbiters": "Dr. Westlake, lawyer Julius Flickerbaugh, Congregationalist pastor Merriman Peedy and himself," i.e., Ezra, the president of the Ionic Bank (48). Carol also bears witness to the routine "stunts" that the party's guests always perform at these get-togethers (47). Dave Dyer tells his joke about the Norwegian catching a hen, Ella Stowbody recites "Old Sweetheart of Mine," and "four other stunts: one Jewish, one Irish, one juvenile, and Nat Hicks's parody of Mark Antony's funeral oration" (47). "During the winter," Lewis's narrator states, "Carol was to hear Dave Dyer's hen-catching impersonation seven times, 'An Old Sweetheart of Mine' nine times, the Jewish story and the funeral oration twice; but now she . . . was as disappointed as the others when the stunts were finished, and the party instantly sank back into coma" (47).

Despite her attempts to liven the party by telling a salacious story about revealing her "perfectly nice ankles to the Presbyterian glare of all the Ioway schoolma'ams" during a trip to Colorado and attempting to talk to the men at the party about literature and such progressive movements as labor unions (45), Carol "discovered that conversation did not exist in Gopher Prairie. Even at this affair, which brought out the young smart set, the hunting squire set, the respectable intellectual set, and the solid financial set, they sat up with gaiety as with a corpse" (46). Will even castigates Carol for trying to broach such topics at the party as they walk home, telling her that she "ought to be more careful about shocking folks. Talking about gold stockings, and about showing your ankles to schoolteachers and all! . . . Don't get onto legs and all that immoral stuff. Pretty conservative crowd" (52-53). The official town paper, the *Gopher Prairie Weekly Dauntless*, describes the party as one "of the most charming affairs of the season . . . when many of our most prominent citizens gathered to greet the lovely new bride of our popular local physician, Dr. Will Kennicott," and glorifies how games "and stunts were the order of the day, with merry talk and conversation" (61). The routine behavior and conservative ideals become the order of life as "Gopher Prairie welcomes [Carol] to our midst and prophesies for her many happy years in the energetic city of the twin lakes and the future" (61).

Despite her husband's warnings to tone it down for the conservative crowd, Carol invites those who attended her welcome party at the Clarks' house to a Japanese-themed soirée at the Kennicotts' home, and this get-together functions as one of Carol's first attempts to disrupt the orderly system of Gopher Prairie and redefine "the order of the day" (61). Lewis's narrator notes "that if she was ever to effect any of the 'reforms' which she had pictured," Carol "must have a starting-place," and she begins to fashion the Kennicott home into a beacon of change (61). She begins by altering the structure of Will's family home after carpenters:

> had torn out the partition between front parlor and back parlor, thrown it into a long room on which she lavished yellow and deep blue; a Japanese obi with an intricacy of gold thread on stiff ultramarine tissue, which she hung as a panel against the maize wall; a

> couch with pillows of sapphire velvet and gold bands; chairs which, in Gopher Prairie, seemed flippant. She hid the sacred family phonograph in the dining-room, and replaced its stand with a square cabinet on which was a squat blue jar between yellow candles. (68)

She guts out “the shrine of a Gopher Prairie home” in order “to make the house her own” (68). This remodeling of the house makes Will, who “usually considered himself the master of the house,” feel as if he is “an intruder, a blunderer,” in his own home (73). And she uses the house’s new aesthetic as the theme for her party that will “make ’em lively, if nothing else . . . make ’em stop regarding parties as committee-meetings” (73).

This role reversal reminds one of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque as described in *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin’s carnivalesque stems from the carnivals of the Renaissance that sought to subvert the church’s hierarchy. In the days leading up to Lent, the commoners of Renaissance Europe would parade through their local marketplaces celebrating and indulging in the grotesque. During these carnivals, you’d see more or less what you’d expect to see at a large festival, like Bonnaroo or Mardi Gras; there was a lot of dancing, gambling, and fornicating going on. Additionally, there were actors who formed a mock clergy, and they moved around the marketplace on carts that were loaded down with fecal matter that the mock clergy passed off as incense and sprinkled on the heads of those people surrounding the carts. Anointing people with shit is uncouth and uncivilized by today’s standards. However, for those people at the Renaissance carnivals, it was just simple role-playing, which took a variety of different forms: peasants impersonating royalty, women dressing up and acting as men, fools pretending to be scholars. And the role-playing at these carnivals was a vital form of subversion against oppression, hierarchy, and the monotonous role-playing that the commoners all found themselves performing in their day-to-day lives. With everyone adopting the masks of their own choosing, they became liberated. Distinctions of caste and status ceased to exist.

As noted, during the lead up to Carol’s party, Will’s role as head of the household reverses to that of a maid as he finds himself being bossed around by Carol, who “wailed” at Will to fix “the furnace so you won’t have to touch it after supper. And for heaven’s sake take that horrible old door-mat off the porch. And put on your nice brown and white shirt . . . *Please* hurry!” (73). Carol herself assumes the role of "an amateur leading woman" (74). And once her guests arrive, she is determined to make sure that her party doesn't assume "the decorum of a prayer-meeting" and has her guests play a series of parlor games (75).

The first game that they play is "an idiotic game which [Carol] learned in Chicago" (76). The premise of Carol's game is that everyone has to take off their shoes and throw them in the middle of the living room's floor. Two of them, Carol and Juanita Haydock, act as the shepherds, and everyone else pretends to be wolves. When the game begins, the lights in the room are turned off, and "the wolves crawl in from the hall and in the darkness they try to get the shoes away from the shepherds—who are permitted to do anything except bite and use blackjacks. The wolves chuck the captured shoes out into the hall" (77). Surprisingly, Carol gets the stodgy banker, Ezra Stowbody; the wealthy moneylender and landowner, Luke Dawson; the school's superintendent, George Edwin Mott; and the rest of Gopher Prairie's ruling class to kick off their shoes, get on their hands and knees, and wrestle over shoes in the dark. While playing the game, "[r]eality had vanished" (77), and it is replaced with a scene of pandemonium:

> [I]n the middle of the floor Kennicott was wrestling with Harry Haydock—their collars torn off, their hair in their eyes; and the owlish Mr. Julius Flickerbaugh was retreating from Juanita Haydock, and gulping with unaccustomed laughter. Guy Pollock's discreet brown scarf hung down his back. Young Rita Simons's net blouse had lost two buttons and betrayed more of her delicious plump shoulder than was regarded as pure in Gopher Prairie. Whether by shock, disgust, joy of combat, or physical activity, all the party were freed from their years of social decorum. (78)

Carol seeds chaos and disorder into the ordered routine of Gopher Prairie and forces her guests to abandon their usual social roles. Far from the funereal decorum of past parties in Gopher Prairie, with their prearranged and redundant stunts, the village's doctors, finance managers, and lawyers role-play as beasts tearing off each other's collars and scarves, giggling with unaccustomed laughter, and flashing at each other indecorous amounts of their own flesh. Previous distinctions of caste and status are rejected.

For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque attests to duality. There's the authorized, official, or normal everyday life, which is subordinated to a strict hierarchic order. This life is set in tension with the grotesque, a carnivalistic life that is free and unbounded, filled with mirthful laughter, sacrilege, and humiliations. Though both of these ways of life are legitimate, they're separated. Carol's party introduces ambivalence in the relativity of structure and order in Gopher Prairie and exposes the uncertainty of authoritative and hierarchic positions by having her guests shed their decorum and playact as wild animals. However, the exoticism or fancy of Carol's quixotic imagination is fleeting and cannot change the structure of the real Gopher Prairie that surrounds her. Though the *Weekly Dauntless* heralds Carol's housewarming as "a delightful time," the "week after, the Chet Dashaways gave a party. The circle of mourners kept its place all evening, and Dave Dyer did the 'stunt' of the Norwegian and the hen" (80).

Unable to effect change with respect to how the people of Gopher Prairie interact with one another at parties, Carol, unsurprisingly, is unable to effect any form of change on larger social issues: "Her formulations were not pat solutions but visions of a tragic futility" (264). As Babbitt does at the end of his narrative, Carol accedes to a life of dispassionate conformity in Gopher Prairie. And she seems to double back on her passionate avowal to Vida that she, and rebels like her, are "tired of drudging and sleeping and dying. We're tired of seeing just a few people able to be individualists. We're tired of always deferring hope till the next generation. . . We want our Utopia *now* . . ." (201-02). In a way, Carol does double back on this proclamation, for she places her trust and confidence in the next generation to enact such change. When Will asks Carol in the final moments of *Main Street* if she "ever get[s] tired of fretting and stewing and experimenting," Carol "led him to the nursery door, pointed at the fuzzy brown head of her daughter. 'Do you see that object on the pillow? Do you know what it is? It's a bomb to blow up smugness. If you Tories were wise, you wouldn't arrest anarchists; you'd arrest all these children while they're asleep in their cribs. Think what that baby will see and meddle with before she dies in the year 2000!'" (450). Though her fate is to be trapped within the boundaries of possibilities in Gopher Prairie, Carol imagines that *her daughter,* as Lewis's narrator specifies, is a ticking time bomb that will throw Gopher Prairie's order into chaos.

What Lewis couldn't have anticipated happening after he published *Main Street* in 1920 is Kurt Gödel's refutation of the consistency and completeness of formal systems. As mentioned in endnote 4, Gödel's essay, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions," introduces his two Incompleteness Theorems and responds to Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*, a three-volume set published between 1910 and 1913 that sought to establish a consistent and complete formal system for number theory.[5] Without getting into the mathematical specifics, Rucker states, "Gödel proved a strange theorem: *mathematics is open-ended*. There can never be a final, best system of mathematics. Every axiom-system for mathematics will eventually run into certain simple problems that it cannot solve at all" (157-58). Basically, *Principia Mathematica* serves as a truth machine for mathematics; you can feed into it any statement about mathematics, and it will determine whether or not that statement is true or false. Gödel created a recursive statement that he could feed into *Principia Mathematica* that is analogous to Epimenides's liar paradox.[6] He develops the following mathematical statement: "Following the set of formal instructions that guide it, *Principia Mathematica* won't say that this statement is true." Gödel's statement jams up the formal system of *Principia Mathematica* since: (1) if it says that Gödel's statement is true, *Principia Mathematica* validates an inconsistent statement within its formal structure, and (2) if it says that Gödel's statement is false, *Principia Mathematica* validates a false statement within that structure. The implication of Gödel's theorem is that "Truth is undefinable" (Rucker 150). There is no final statement, for there exist true statements outside of the formal system that it cannot prove to be true or false.

Carol's daughter is her yet undiscovered liberating paradox within the formal system of Gopher Prairie, and she has the ability to transcend the boundaries that surround Carol. Just before she returns to Gopher Prairie from Washington, Carol "was talking at dinner to a generalissima of suffrage" (440), and the suffragist leader tells Carol that to be effective in instilling change is a "[m]atter of endurance" (441). She tells Carol that there's "one attack" against pre-established systems of living that is "the only kind that accomplishes much anywhere: you can keep on looking at one thing after another in your home and church and bank, and ask why it is, and who first laid down the law that it had to be that way . . . Easy, pleasant, lucrative homework for wives: asking people to define their jobs. That's the most dangerous doctrine I know!" (441). Just as Gödel challenges the formality of the mathematicians who preceded him and forces those who came after him to concede that set, formal systems of thought are neither consistent nor complete, Carol hopes that her daughter will do likewise with respect to formal systems of thought about American life. Ultimately, quixotic imaginings aren't just potential but actual phenomena. Cantor once said that "in truth the potentially infinite has only a borrowed reality, insofar as a potentially infinite concept always points towards a logically prior actually infinite concept whose existence it depends on" (qtd. in Rucker 3). Carol's quixotic imaginings, though they can't actually exist within the defined system of Gopher Prairie, presuppose actual truths. Though the quixotic is only potential within *Main Street*, outside of the formal system of the novel, it is mimetic.

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NOTES

[1] Light refers to the latter half of this distinction as realism or realist as opposed to mimeticism or mimetic. However, I will use mimetic to describe Lewis's style due to the fact that he was a bit trepidatious about being labeled as a realist writer; that is, Lewis didn't agree with the literary aesthetics and/or ideologies associated with the American realist movement. Though he could appreciate how such authors as William Dean Howells or Henry James adhered to mimetic or true-to-life representations of the world that we all more or less share in prose fiction, Lewis was more of a naturalist (e.g., Jack London or Frank Norris) with regards to how he believed America and Americans should be represented in prose fiction.

[2] In *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis* James M. Hutchisson how Lewis's father, Edwin J. Lewis, and his older brother, Claude, partly serve as the basis for Will Kennicott (11). Hutchisson additionally discusses how Lewis began to view his small hometown of Sauk Centre through the eyes of Grace Heggar, his first wife, a well-educated and progressive woman and inspiration for Carol Kennicott (11). In addition to finding the consciousnesses for Will and Carol in those around him, Lewis also based Gopher Prairie on Sauk Centre, with "Rowe's Hardware Store [becoming] Sam Clarke's Hardware Store; the Bryant Library in Sauk Centre [becoming] the village library in Gopher Prairie" (17).

[3] Euclidean geometry, for example, is a type of formal system. At its foundation, there are Euclid's five axioms, e.g., two points determine a line segment. From those assumed to be true statements, geometrists can deduce and prove new theorems from previously established axioms and previously proven theorems. So, from Euclid's first postulate that two points determine a line segment, geometrists can develop the Betweenness Theorem that states: if point C is between points A and B, then $AC + CB = AB$.

[4] In 1931 Kurt Gödel, an Austrian mathematician, published his landmark essay, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions in *Principia Mathematica* and Related Systems." Gödel introduced his incompleteness theorems in this paper, explaining how a formal system, if consistent, can never be complete and how the consistency of axioms can never be proven within their own system.

[5] Throughout the nineteenth century, many mathematicians began investigating such *evil* and *dangerous* concepts as infinity, quaternions, and non-Euclidean geometries, which threatened the logical consistency of mathematical systems up to that point in time. *Principia*

Mathematica sought to establish the consistency and completeness of number theory. For an overview of the history of mathematics surrounding *Principia Mathematica* and Gödel's essay, see Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman's *Gödel's Proof*. For an easily digestible explanation of how Gödel developed his Incompleteness Theorems, see the chapter from Rudy Rucker's *Infinity and the Mind* titled "Robots and Souls."

[6] The Liar Paradox stems from Epimenides's statement: "I am a liar." His statement creates a paradox, for it is true if, and only if, it is not true. The vicious infinite regress of Epimenides's statement renders it meaningless.

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THE VILLAGE VIRUS EXPOSED: MINNESOTA'S REACTIONS TO SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *MAIN STREET*

RALPH GOLDSTEIN

"'The village virus'—I shall have to write a book of how it getteth into the veins of a good man & true."
Sinclair Lewis diary, 12 September 1905

It took him fifteen years, but he got it done. Born in 1885, he was the oddball son of a country doctor who once questioned if the boy was good for anything at all (Lingeman 7). As a student at Yale, alienated from most peers, he picked at the virus when he wrote for the *Yale Monthly Magazine* "A Theory of Values," his short story of thwarted aspirations in a small Minnesota town. To Liverpool and Panama, to Upton Sinclair's utopian community in New Jersey and the bohemian enclave of Carmel, California, to newspaper jobs in San Francisco and Waterloo, Iowa, the itch to expose the virus remained embedded in Sinclair Lewis. It gnawed at him in New York, where he fell in love with and married *Vogue* staffer Grace Hegger in 1914, bringing her to visit his folks two years later in rural Sauk Centre, Minnesota, where the contrast between cosmopolitan and provincial stood in sharp relief and where he could imagine through his bride's eyes what his future heroine Carol Milford Kennicott might experience in his fictional Gopher Prairie.

After his early work enjoyed modest critical success, Lewis needed more time to bring the virus to light. Lewis led Grace and infant son Wells through a string of short-term rentals in Manhattan, the Twin Cities and Mankato, Minnesota, Washington, DC, and back to New York, where he finished the text of what was first titled "The Village Virus" but later became known as *Main Street*. In her memoir Grace describes the creative process:

> *Main Street* was with us day and night. We talked about it constantly when we were alone . . . he often phoned me from his workroom to tell me some adroit situation which had just come to him or to discuss the right word to use when the *Thesaurus* failed him. He brought home a dozen pages at a time for me to read, never taking his eyes off me as I went through them, and demanding to know what in the pages had caused each change in my expression as I read, what had brought a smile or a laugh, what had made me cry. (G. Lewis 145)

Publisher Alfred Harcourt was impressed with the manuscript, estimating that the book might sell 40,000 copies, more than Lewis had expected. Together with Grace, Lewis drafted an announcement for Harcourt, Brace and Howe's 1920 fall fiction list, targeting what they assumed would be a predominately urban audience:

> Most of us have known Main Street, and most of us have left it—gladly—for a metropolis. We have praised the dear old swimming hole, and gone back for visits—and returned to the city with speed. But in Main Street the situation is the opposite. An eager girl goes from a city, where she has been happily inconspicuous, to live the fish-bowl existence of a doctor's wife in a small town where her every movement is commented upon, and every lightly spoken word remembered, every timid suggestion for the beautifying of Main Street ridiculed: and only in the end does she learn the great secret of life in being content with a real world in which it is never possible to create an ideal setting. (G. Lewis 147)

The public response was infectious. Sales of *Main Street* in the eight months following its publication eclipsed nearly five-fold Harcourt's earlier estimate, and over the next two years went over two million. Writer Malcolm Cowley, who would lecture in Sauk Centre years after Lewis's death, observed that when a novel breaks outside the circle of urban bookstores, "it is being purchased by families in the remoter villages, families which acquire no more than ten books in a generation. In the year 1921, if you visited the parlor of almost any boarding house, you would see a copy of *Main Street* standing between the Bible and *Ben Hur*."

Eastern critics advanced the rush to read the novel, viewing it as a departure from previous traditions. Heywood Broun, who a year earlier had panned the New York production of Lewis's play, *Hobohemia,* enthused in the *New York Tribune* over *Main Street* three days prior to its publication. Not only "good enough to stand beside

Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* and Willa Sibert Cather's *My Antonia* . . . in some respects it is a better book . . . a picture of the life of an entire community [in which Lewis] hears even better than he sees . . . unerringly right in reproducing talk . . . [and] right to a degree that is much deeper than photographic exactness." Broun lauds Lewis's shrewdness for allowing his characters to satirize themselves—a matron giving a talk on Robert Burns's poetry, a mill owner decrying union labor, and one of the oldest residents of Gopher Prairie praising the Republican Party as "the agent of the Lord" and insisting that all socialists be hanged. Commending the book as Broun did for its characters who are "not only genuinely human but also authentically American" (138), influential editor and author H. L. Mencken found Carol "attacking Philistinism with Philistine weapons" (139), part of the novel's "packed and brilliant detail . . . an attempt not to solve the American cultural problem, but simply to depict with great care a group of typical Americans . . . represent[ing] their speech vividly and accurately" (139).

Effusing over rural authenticity from their New York and Baltimore redoubts, these critics extolled Lewis's photographic accuracy, giving literature, for the moment, a boost against its storytelling rival, motion pictures. But praise was not universal. To better understand what piqued Minnesota's curiosity while provoking its umbrage requires a closer look at Carol Milford Kennicott.

She is the daughter of a retired judge who moved Carol and her sister from Mankato, the city whose "garden-sheltered streets and aisles of elms is white and green New England reborn," to Minneapolis after their mother died (S. Lewis, *Main Street* 6). An orphan when her father passed away two years later, Carol develops an independent streak that she sharpens at nearby Blodgett College, the church-affiliated school where she seeks "to be different from brisk efficient book-ignoring people" (7). After graduation, Carol is "not unhappy and . . . not exhilarated" about her job at the St. Paul Library (10). Her ennui ends when she meets at a friend's Sunday evening supper a visiting doctor from rural Gopher Prairie, Will Kennicott, who was university educated in the Twin Cities but prefers small-town life. They continue seeing each other and, on a walk along the river, looking back at St. Paul's hills, "an imperial sweep from the dome of the cathedral to the dome of the state capitol" (16), Kennicott proposes: "Come to Gopher Prairie. Show us. Make the town—well—make it artistic. It's mighty pretty, but I'll admit we aren't any too darn artistic. Probably the lumber-yard isn't as scrumptious as all these Greek temples. But go to it! Make us change!" (17).

Married to Will and settled in the prairie town, Carol's hopes for reforming it seem daunting. Not an avid bridge player or churchgoer, seen by some as frivolous and condescending, resented for her references to faraway places and for saying "American" rather than "Ammurrican," her first days are uneasy (95). Hearing Carol's ideas for refurbishing the city hall and library, for town-sponsored dances and lectures, for a public women's restroom, aged pioneer Mrs. Champ Perry, who remembers when Gopher Prairie was little more than a few log cabins and a stockade, finds the renovations unnecessary; she thinks that church sermons suffice for lectures and if young people "must neglect the Lord's injunction that young girls ought to be modest, then I guess they manage pretty well at the K. P. Hall and the Oddfellows'" (136). Carol's efforts fizzle, and she becomes afraid of catching "the village virus," described to her by former New Yorker Guy Pollock as that which "infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces . . . lawyers and doctors and ministers and college-bred merchants . . . who have had a glimpse of the world that thinks and laughs, but have returned to their swamp" (156). Her mood darkens, viewing her neighbors as a "savorless people, gulping tasteless food . . . listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things . . . and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world" (265). The birth of her son, Hugh, a romantic entanglement with a younger man, trips with her husband to the Twin Cities and to California: all fail to relieve her anxiety. After a separation from Will, with a second child on the way, she's ready to compromise and takes consolation from what she imagines her daughter "will see and meddle with before she dies in the year 2000" (450).

Minnesota pushed back. "It is hard," W. J. McNally averred in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, "to escape the conclusion that Mr. Lewis is simply insensible to the beauties and poetries bequeathed us by the gods." Even the bleaker towns in southern Minnesota have some beauty in them, McNally argued, and found Lewis's handling of the Twin Cities similarly faulty. A purported realist, Lewis cannot "rival the historian in the meticulous accuracy of his pictures," McNally maintained, as Minneapolitans would not likely find a Chinese restaurant with "a brassy automatic piano," could not possibly view St. Marks and the Procathedral by looking across Loring Park, would not suffer a ride on Hennepin or Marquette Avenue in "a stinking trolley," and to facilitate anybody walking "from St. Paul down the river to Mendota" the Mississippi would have to reverse its course. But McNally conceded the book's strengths, notably its depiction of Carol's conflict with her community, and he ultimately saw the book more as an effective indictment of bourgeois values than a savaging of the small town (McNally 61). This final summation might have pleased Lewis, as he noted in his diary fifteen years before, desiring as soon as possible on summer break to return to New Haven from Sauk Centre, worried that he "should go mad . . . from this dull, too-familiar bourgeois life" (SL Diary, 3 Aug. 1905).

Ambivalence like McNally's is seen in what at first appears to be a fan letter to Lewis from St. Paul native and aspiring writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, calling *Main Street* "the best American novel. The amount of sheer data in it is amazing! As a writer and a Minnesotan let me swell the chorus after a third reading" (467). Why would it require Fitzgerald three readings before singing praise? And was "sheer data" ever a stylistic quality Fitzgerald employed? A month earlier, Fitzgerald was not so enamored of *Main Street*, as he wrote to editor Burton Rascoe a snarky assessment of contemporary writers: "I still think [Floyd Dell's] *Moon-Calf* is punk, [Sherwood Anderson's] *Poor White* is fair, and *Main Street* is rotten" (73).

Faithful in its reporting of the novel's popularity, the *Star Tribune* noted in April that the Minneapolis library's waiting list to borrow the novel had swollen to 171 ("'Main Street' Breaks All Records"). But that didn't stop the paper from complaining on the same day about "the present cult of the disagreeable . . . a literary fad. Advertising the unpleasant, hunting for it with a microscope" ("Fiction with a Grouch"). Still smarting from Lewis's "stinking trolley" remark, the paper's unsigned editorialist used it as an example of "the modern tendency to describe things which are not at all bad as really terrible and horrible." Days later the *Star Tribune* offered what it called "a somewhat different but nonetheless pertinent view of 'Main Street'" ("Scandalizing the Small Town") drawn from the *Continent,* a religious weekly paper published in Chicago, describing Lewis's method as "select[ing] every item that is sordid, mean, unlovely, insolent, malicious, sensual, degrading, morally anarchistic, irreverent and faithless—adding as much as can be conveniently picked up of what is dull, tedious, tiresome and stupid . . . [to] work up a tale bringing every one of these elements by turn into unpleasant prominence.

Perhaps taking inspiration from the *Continent*'s string of adjectives, the *Sunday Star Tribune* prefaced an editorial in early June praising Sauk Centre's newest community project by sarcastically contrasting the fictional, "you know: the sordid, blank, bald, crude, hot, dusty, unrefined, uncultured, unappreciative village of the best seller today," with the reality reported by the *Sauk Centre Herald*: turning over a portion of its property for a tourist park, free for all to use, the Sauk Centre Country Club's charitable act refuted "any insinuation that this city represents the idea embodied in Carol Kennicott" ("Gopher Prairie's Answer to Carol Kennicott").

One hundred and fifty volunteers responded to the call to clear, level, and grade the land, sink a well, and put in a pump. Townswomen prepared lunch where "there probably never has been gathered at one sitting more two-handed eaters than devoured the food." Even if Carol doesn't go back and look at the town "from the other side of the street" and encourage her creator to write an appendix, "Sauk Centre folk feel confirmed in at least one belief—that they can give the lie to Carol." Later in June the *Star Tribune* provided an antidote to *Main Street*'s poison with its flattering review of Wichita native Victor Murdock's novel, *Just Folks* wherein Lewis and other detractors of the Middle West have finally "got their comeuppance." Here, "human drama, the fineness, appealing foolishness, poignant suffering, the sincerity that is somewhere in human values underneath culture . . . succeed in getting put between these pages, where they were ignored in 'Main Street.'" ("Gopher Prairie Has Friend").

Getting ready for the school year, the library board of Alexandria, Minnesota, about twenty-five miles from Sauk Centre, put in a copy of *Main Street*, "but after the book was read by the board of censors it was taken from the shelves" ("Library Censors Bar"). As the fall semester proceeded, educators from around the state gathered at the Minnesota Teachers Association convention to hear keynote speaker Dr. Richard Burton urge them to "rise up in their wrath and refuse to be fooled by a semblance of good writing into approving a book that is mean and disagreeable and untrue" ("'Main Street' Is Criticised"). The *Bemidji Pioneer* picked up the chant, praising the city's Musical Art club for showing its spirit: "The club is doing things; there are other clubs that are doing things, and all worthwhile—and all is going to prove the Lewis indictment that rural America lacks culture and appreciation for the finer things of life, is not true" ("'Main Street'—And Bemidji").

Lewis was largely unfazed by the criticism. Driving a beige Cadillac to Sauk Centre to visit his father, who was still in medical practice but in declining health, Lewis noticed the clippings in the office and concluded in a letter to Harcourt, "The town far from resenting M. St. seems proud of it" (*From Main Street to Stockholm* 104). Alfred Harcourt wrote him that royalties and the sale of movie rights "ought to keep you on easy street for some time" (*From Main Street to Stockholm* 124). But the Minnesota press continued to jab at him. When Lewis rejected the Pulitzer Prize in 1926 but accepted the Nobel Prize in 1930, the *Minneapolis Tribune* carped that "it is a good deal easier to reconcile one's artistic conscience to a $46,350 prize than it is to one which happens to be, under the terms of the Pulitzer award, exactly $45,350 less" ("Mr. Lewis Wins"). Yet a change toward Lewis was evident in 1939, when the traveling production of *Angela Is Twenty-two*, a play he conceived with Fay Wray, better known as King Kong's unwilling companion, made a stop in the Twin Cities. Even though Lewis bragged that he "bounced off the prairie at age seventeen" ("First Group") and fussed in a speech to the legislature about Minnesota's provincialism ("Lewis Returns to Warn"), Governor Harold Stassen greeted him warmly, allowed him to sit in the gubernatorial chair, and later joined a reception in Minneapolis where a number of Lewis's former Sauk Centre neighbors, teachers and classmates assured *Main Street*'s creator that they had forgiven his depiction of the prairie town and were proud of him ("Folks from 'Main Street' Honor Lewis").

Although Lewis spent most of his adult life away from Minnesota, he made extensive return trips to his home state in the 1940s, establishing the setting for three later novels. Driving through small towns in the summer of 1942, he queried his diary, "These Main Streets have improved so much in solidity of architecture. Did the complaining Carol Kennicott help?" (Lewis, *Minnesota Diary* 89). Of Sauk Centre he notices "stores have new fronts with tapestry brick; black and translucent glass; neon and fluorescent lights . . . Even second-rate country roads hard-surfaced . . . Beauty shops in small places; women using many cosmetics, have hair dressed, nails colored" (Lewis, *Minnesota Diary* 113-14). But the next day, outside of Old Clitherall, he is more critical, describing the atmosphere "under the gray sky, a melancholy prairie slew among low hills—dull water, gray muskrat house, long drooping grasses," and declaring, "A state like this needs more eccentrics and more Jews" (Lewis, *Minnesota*

Diary 117). Writing from the Duluth mansion where he lived from 1944 to 1946, Lewis created the fictional Grand Republic, Minnesota, as the setting of *Cass Timberlane*, a judge who pursues a younger woman in much the same way Lewis sought to convince actress Marcella Powers, thirty-six years his junior, to marry him. The protagonist of *Kingsblood Royal* is confident about his white identity and place in Grand Republic until he finds a letter revealing the existence of an African American ancestor, throwing his family life into chaos and putting him at violent odds with his neighbors. Lewis's penultimate novel, *The God-Seeker*, drawn from months of research at the Minnesota Historical Society, fictionalizes the mid-nineteenth-century cultural collision between Christian evangelists and indigenous people in and around the Twin Cities. Invited in 1947 to address the Sauk Centre Chamber of Commerce on what would be his last visit to his hometown, with issues of racism and oppression on his mind, he praised the pioneers but lamented that "they had brought their prejudices with them" ("Sinclair Lewis Aids").

In poor health exacerbated by alcoholism, Sinclair Lewis died in Italy in 1951. He was cremated and his brother Claude ordered his ashes sent back to Sauk Centre for burial. The funeral service held in the high school auditorium included a reading from "The Long Arm of the Small Town," a piece Lewis had written twenty years earlier in which he voiced not "the slightest regret that [he] was born and reared in a prairie village." If he seemed to criticize such villages, it was not in excess of what he leveled at "New York, or Paris, or the great universities," concluding about his years in Sauk Centre that "[i]t was a good time, a good place, and a good preparation for life" (272).

Reverence for the man his first wife called "The Minnesota Tumbleweed" deepened. Sauk Centre honored his memory in 1960 by designating in what it called the "Sinclair Lewis Main Street Year," which included dramatic performances, library exhibits, and a square dance festival ("Sauk Centre Presents"). For the seventy-fifth anniversary of the book in 1995, the Sinclair Lewis Foundation sponsored a panel discussion in Sauk Centre on the question, "Is Main Street Still Relevant?" The panel was the first that was held since the centennial celebration in 1985, when a variety of scholars, plus an actress portraying Carol Kennicott, discussed how the legacy of Lewis affected his hometown. There was an enthusiastic audience and great questions, noted Sally E. Parry, one of the panelists. Writing in the *Star Tribune* later that year, Roger K. Miller answered in the affirmative: “Using his trademark satire and parody . . . Lewis’s sword was double-edged: It sliced at the townspeople of Gopher Prairie, certainly, but it also nicked the superficial intellectualism of those who despise them” (Miller 91). In 2001, the paper that had pilloried him eighty years before noted without complaint that the Modern Library put *Main Street* on its list of the one hundred best English-language novels of the twentieth century (“Sinclair Lewis Book”). In the twenty-first century, evidence of the novel’s continuing relevance is found on college syllabi from New York University to the University of Southern California.

Normally, visitors to Sauk Centre can enter his family home, preserved as a museum on the street renamed Sinclair Lewis Avenue, and view at the corner of Main Street a mural featuring Lewis as a young man. They can stroll in Sinclair Lewis Park and see high schoolers wearing apparel emblazoned with their athletic teams’ name, the Main Streeters. They can participate in July’s annual Sinclair Lewis Days Festival sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and attend October’s annual Sinclair Lewis Writers’ Conference organized by the Sinclair Lewis Foundation. But in 2020 these activities were impacted by Covid-19, which also caused the postponement at least until 2021 of the Sinclair Lewis Society’s Sauk Centre conference celebrating *Main Street*’s centennial anniversary, as well as the Minnesota Historical Society’s exhibit presenting a plethora of Lewis memorabilia.

While we await a proven vaccine, other Lewis novels besides *Main Street* call for at-home attention. *It Can’t Happen Here*, of course, reminds us of the hazards of electing an autocratic president. But these days his 1925 novel *Arrowsmith* offers a historical perspective on our current moment. As Dr. David J. Eisenman recently pointed out in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, we see in *Arrowsmith* “social distancing born of fear rather than concern for others, denial of the reality of infection, [and] economic and political objections to quarantine and other top-down proclamations” (E1). Dr. Eisenman concludes that “a halting or disorganized national public health response . . . alone is a good reason to reread *Arrowsmith* now” (E2).

Lewis’s fiction, dismissed by some as journalistic, sociological, or otherwise devoid of art, nevertheless provides continuing insights by which his legacy endures.

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STOPPING BY FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE ON THE WAY TO GOPHER PRAIRIE: READING *MAIN STREET* THROUGH THE FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE STORIES OF ZONA GALE

SALLY E. PARRY

Friendship Village. The name alone evokes a sentimental and romantic ideal of the small town.[1] Scholars who have written on the revolt from the village movement have identified stories from such early twentieth-century authors as Zona Gale and Booth Tarkington as what Sinclair Lewis, Floyd Dell, Edgar Lee Masters, and Sherwood Anderson were responding to in their critical writings on small towns. Anthony Channell Hilfer's *The Revolt from the Village, 1915-1930* provides a summation of this critique, noting that "To Zona Gale, no less than Tarkington, the Midwestern village was the ideal community" (20). Hilfer further dismisses Gale's writing as a "warm dream of a world in which all conflict is resolved and everyone drinks from the cup of instant communion" (21).

Like many other scholars, I have joined in the chorus of criticism against these seemingly sentimental writers until just recently. I realized that what I was doing was akin to what scholars did who dismissed the later novels of Sinclair Lewis after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. It was not that they had read Lewis's later novels and found them inferior to his writing of the 1920s but that they had read Mark Schorer's *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*. Because Schorer had said, from his New Critical perspective, that the novels after 1930 were not very good, scholars accepted and perpetuated his attitude.[2]

Carl Van Doren, in a 1921 *Nation* essay, first identified the revolt from the village movement, saying that too many authors presented the small town as "a rural paradise exempt from the vices, complexities and irremediable tragedies of the city" (407) and that *Main*

Street provided a corrective to that. Many critics agreed, although some, like Nelson Manfred Blake, noted Lewis's ambivalence about small towns, "torn between affection for the village virtues of simplicity and friendliness and distaste for the village vices of dullness and censoriousness" (16). More recently, Jon K. Lauk proposed a revisionist argument, saying that Lewis et al. were misunderstood by Van Doren and others, and that in general these authors wrote approvingly of small towns. Lauk's voice is still in the minority, as scholarship seems mostly to ignore the sentimental regional writers of the beginning of the twentieth century or bring them up only to dismiss them.

In light of the 100th anniversary of the publication of Lewis's *Main Street*, I decided to read a selection of Gale's Friendship Village stories to see what Lewis may have been reacting to when he wrote about Gopher Prairie, seemingly the antithesis of Friendship Village. Gopher Prairie is rougher, not very welcoming to outsiders, and set in its ways. Friendship Village seems to be a friendly place (hence the name) and a close-knit community. These comparisons may indicate, at first glance, totally different takes on the small town; in fact, the parallels between the two are striking. The inhabitants of both places share similar concerns about loneliness and belonging. These places aren't as homogenous as they first appear, and in both towns those who are marginalized by society don't share in the general welfare of the community.

Gale's Friendship Village was thought to be based on Portage, Wisconsin, where she was born in 1874 and spent the greater part of her life. Although Gale earned several degrees at the University of Wisconsin, wrote for newspapers in Milwaukee and New York, and traveled a fair amount, Portage was her home and she lived there permanently from 1903 until her death in 1938. At the turn of the twentieth century, Portage had a population of about 5,500 people, a thriving commercial center, and a railroad.

Gopher Prairie was based to a great extent on Sauk Centre, Minnesota, where Sinclair Lewis was born in 1885, and shares some similarities with Portage; both are small upper Midwestern towns situated near lakes with railroad stations. Although Friendship Village is portrayed as a cozier community than Gopher Prairie, Sauk Centre had a population of a little over 2,200 in 1900, about half the size of Portage, and was more of a frontier community than a center of commerce.

Gale wrote about Friendship Village a great deal, often in free-standing short stories that eventually became collections: *Friendship Village* in 1908, *Friendship Village Love Stories* (1909), *Mothers to Men* (1911), *Neighborhood Stories* (1914), and *Peace in Friendship Village* in 1919. Many of these stories were first published in popular magazines, including *Good Housekeeping, Everybody's Magazine, Woman's Home Companion, the Delineator, Collier's Weekly,* and *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. Gale wrote an author's note to her first collection that sets a sentimental tone for the stories and eschews a direct parallel with any other community:

> Friendship Village is not known to me, nor are any of its people, save in the comradeship which I offer here. But I commend for occupancy a sweeter place. For us here the long Caledonia hills, the four rhythmic spans of the bridge, the nearer river, the island where the first birds build—these teach our windows the quiet and the opportunity of the "home town," among the "home people." To those who have such a bond to cherish I commend the little real home towns, their kindly, brooding companionship, their doors to an efficiency as intimate as that of fairy fingers. If there were shrines to these things, we would seek them. The urgency is to recognize shrines. (*Friendship Village* vii)

The description is certainly that of an idealized community, reinforced in the third and fourth stories, "Nobody Sick, Nobody Poor" and "Covers for Seven." Calliope Marsh, who is the focal point for many of the stories, is a single sixty-year-old woman who seems to serve as the conscience of the town. She wants to invite a "few poor sick folks" to her Thanksgiving dinner, but her trouble is "that in Friendship I don't know of a soul rill sick, nor a soul what you might call poor" (Gale, *Friendship Village* 30). At face value, the story is overly sentimental. The subtext, though, is one that reveals Gale's awareness of the loneliness and isolation inherent in this town and, by extension, all small towns. Calliope asks some of her friends if they know anyone she could invite and whether they could contribute something to the feast. Everyone she speaks with doesn't know a soul to be helped; as Mis' Mayor Uppers says, "We ain't got nobody sick nor nobody poor in Friendship, you know" (Gale, *Friendship Village* 32).

What these women say and what the truth is, are not quite the same. Mis' Mayor Uppers, for example, was the wife of the mayor, but he was discredited, removed from office, and has moved out of town. Nevertheless, "we yet gave her old proud title" (Gale, *Friendship Village* 32).[3] The Liberty sisters, whose mother died recently, suffer from deep depression, hoping to "let the holidays just slip by without noticin'. . . Seems like it hurts less that way" (Gale, *Friendship Village* 35). Mis' Holcomb-that-was-Mame-Bliss, described by what she once was, says that she feels "soul-sick" (Gale, *Friendship Village* 39). All these women bring food to the dinner to help out Calliope and become the surprise guests, realizing that their sadness and isolation are better met through being together and providing a community for each other, a theme echoed in one way or another in many of the Friendship Village stories.

Sinclair Lewis wrote short stories for many of the same publications as Gale, and in some of them there is a streak of sentimentality. However, *Main Street* was written to stand on its own as a novel, not serialized as were some of Lewis's earlier works like *The Innocents* (1917), serialized in *Woman's Home Companion*, and *Free Air* (1919), serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post*. *Main Street* also begins with a brief headnote, although not identified as an author's note. It takes the same rhetorical form as Gale's, consciously announcing that the town is not based on any one place but is representative of small towns everywhere. Unlike Gale's narrator, the narrative voice of *Main Street*, rather than celebrating Gopher Prairie as a community to cherish, critiques the self-satisfied town, where everyone thinks things are just fine as they are, and a good sight better than in most places:

> 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. . . .
>
> Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea. . . .
>
> Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith. Would he not betray himself an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths? (Lewis, *Main Street* n.p.)

For Lewis, Gopher Prairie is not a comforting community, but an entropic place where changes are viewed with suspicion and outsiders remain outsiders, regardless of how long they have lived in town.[4] It has "many of the virtues of small towns, especially friendliness and a sense of decency, but they have been carried to extremes. The friendliness becomes an unhealthy curiosity to know what all one's neighbors are doing, while the sense of decency is transformed into impossibly rigid moral standards that are used as a way to judge everyone's thoughts and actions" (Parry 19). In *Main Street*, Carol Kennicott comes from the city of St. Paul, where she worked as a librarian, to the town of Gopher Prairie as the new bride of Dr. Will Kennicott. Because she is Will's wife, she is welcomed by his friends, who want her to become like them, rather than appreciating her for what she can bring to the community.

Will had wooed her with the possibility of her becoming an agent for change: "It'd be you that would transform the town . . . You have ideas without having lost feminine charm" (14). But many of Carol's attempts fall flat, from improving the architecture of the town to creating a little theater, and she does not have the patience that someone like the local schoolteacher, Vida Sherwin, does to make changes. Part of the problem is that Carol continues to perceive herself as an outsider. For example, after living in Gopher Prairie for about three years, she is appointed to the town's library board. At first, she is condescending because she was a professional librarian and assumes that she knows more about books than anyone else in town. When it becomes clear to her that other members of the board know about literature as well, from *Don Quixote* to the Koran, her somewhat vague plan "to revolutionize the whole system" is deflated (231). However, she proposes some specific ideas, such as having everyone on the library board contribute fifteen dollars so that they can buy recent European novels, as well as books on psychology, education, and economics. This idea is dismissed because it would establish a bad precedent and cost everyone money. That's the end of her efforts. She serves a two-year term, "but she did not try to be revolutionary. In the plodding course of her life there was nothing changed, and nothing new" (233).

The reason that Carol is unable to make changes quickly in Gopher Prairie and that her ideas are received with suspicion may be explained through the words of Calliope Marsh. Since Calliope speaks as an insider rather than an outsider like Carol, it is as though she speaks for the townspeople of both communities: "Land, land, I like New as well as anybody. But I want it should be put in the Old kind o' gentle, like an *i*-dee in your mind, an' not sudden, like a bullet in your brain" (8).

Carol always seems to be on the outside looking in, even though her position as doctor's wife entitles her to certain social privileges. But with a maid and no children, there is not much to do. "She was a woman with a working brain and no work" (85). She even wonders how to become "an authentic part of the town" (85), and whether in order to do so she has to give up any ideas that she has beyond those expected of every other woman of the same social class: "She reflected that she did not know whether the people liked her. She had gone to the women at afternoon-coffees, to the merchants in their stores, with so many outpouring comments and whimsies that she hadn't given them a chance to betray their opinions of her. The men smiled—but did they like her? She was lively among the women—but was she one of them?" (85).

One of the main differences in the way these two towns are presented is through narrative voice. In Friendship Village the narrative is a very female-centered one, the "I" of the first collection being that of a single unnamed woman who moves to the village to get away from the City and becomes friends with Calliope Marsh. Men play a somewhat distant role in the stories, usually brought in to fight fires, march in parades, and manage businesses. The narrator's circle of friends, in addition to Calliope, includes widows, spinsters, and wives of some of the prominent officials of the town. They are all members of the Friendship Married Ladies' Cemetery Improvement Sodality, even though many are not married, and the aims of the group range far beyond cemetery beautification to various kinds of social improvement and public service. Mis' Postmaster Sykes is the social leader, "if they *is* a leader" (13). Calliope describes her as "rilly a great society woman. They isn't anybody's funeral that she don't get to ride to the cemet'ry" (13).

There is a somewhat omniscient narrator in *Main Street* who can be critical of the town and, more generally, of society's expectations, but the focalization, although most often from Carol's perspective, includes her husband Will, her maid Bea, and the socialist Miles Bjornstam. Rather than the female community that exists in Friendship Village, the town of Gopher Prairie makes clear the divisions: between immigrants and townspeople, people born in the town and those who come from elsewhere, and those who belong to a higher social class (usually because they have a servant) and those who have to do housework for themselves. There is even a distinction made between those who are Dr. Kennicott's patients and those who go to another doctor. People tend to dismiss or belittle those who are not like them. Carol even comes in for criticism by the other women in town when she wants to pay her maid more than the going rate.

Although the sentimentality of Zona Gale is evident in her early collections, her attitude toward the town and its inhabitants changes over time. In *Friendship Village*, the first volume, the focus is often on unrequited love stories, usually requited by the end, as in "The Shadow of Things to Come" and "The Hidings of Power," and on lonely older women who just want to hug children, as in "The Grandma Ladies" and "In the Wilderness a Cedar." The biggest social critique in most of these stories focuses on how women who are single or widowed and without family support tend to be marginalized by society. Michelle Ann Abate notes that in Gale's aesthetic practice authors "had not just a right but rather a duty to examine current societal practices, critique them and offer better alternatives" (6). And to Abate, the creation of Friendship Village does that, as women "band together to create their own self-contained community and, hence, their own meaningful existence. In brief, they can live independent from the harmful historical roles established for their position" (6).

In Gale's *Neighborhood Stories* (1914) there is a preface addressed to "The Little Towns of the Time to Come." Clearly, Gale, as well as the narrator and her town are becoming more progressive:

> The new ideals of the great world are here, in our little world . . . But both in cities and in villages perhaps it is to-morrow rather than to-day that we shall see women free from kitchen drudgery, and home economics a paid profession, such as nursing has lately become . . . We are beginning to be ashamed of charity and to see that our half dozen dependent families need not have been dependent, if their own gifts had been developed and their industry had not been ill-directed or exploited . . . We are coming to applaud divorce when shame or faithlessness or disease or needless invalidism have attended marriage, and for a village woman to continue to earn her livelihood by marriage under these circumstances is now to her a disgrace hardly less evident than that of her city sister. (Gale, *Neighborhood Stories* n.p.)

The preface is several pages long, and although these changes are presented gently rather than stridently, it is evident that Gale is acknowledging that the world is evolving. She also mentions the need for acceptance of racial differences and a call for peace, issues that are amplified in *Peace in Friendship Village* (1919).

There is some progressive change in Gopher Prairie as well, but Carol, and by extension the narrator, are frustrated by the slow pace. Lewis identified with Carol, partly because she was based on Lewis's first wife, Grace Hegger, and partly because of her lack of patience. He once told his friend Charles Breasted, "Carol is 'Red' Lewis: always groping for something she isn't capable of attaining, always dissatisfied, always restlessly straining to see what lies over the horizon, intolerant of her surroundings, yet lacking any clearly defined vision of what she really wants to do or be" (8). Carol works on some projects, including beautifying the downtown area and participating with others in creating a waiting room for farmers' wives and their families, something that Lewis's stepmother also did.[5] Carol recognizes that she needs to have the cooperation of others in making changes, but is awkward and abrupt in convincing others of her ideas. For example, she had put off going to meetings of the Thanatopsis Club,[6] a women's study group, although this seems to be a community with which she would have a natural affinity. When she finally attends a meeting, under duress, her worst intellectual snobbery fears are realized when the topic of the afternoon is English poetry. When she asks what poets are being studied, the terrifying response is all of them, including Shakespeare! Carol tries to be a good sport and is immediately elected to membership. Seizing on this official membership, Carol decides that this group could be her way to improve the town.

From her very first walk around Gopher Prairie, shortly after she arrived with her new husband, Carol had been dismayed by what she perceives as the ugliness and dirtiness of the business district. The one hotel in town has "fly-specked windows" and when she peers inside, she sees "stained table-cloths" (34). At the local grocery a cat is sleeping on the lettuce, there is the "sour smell of a dairy" (36) in the air, and, in sum, "[i]t was not only the unsparing unapologetic ugliness and the rigid straightness which overwhelmed her. It was the planlessness, the flimsy temporariness of the buildings, their faded unpleasant colors" (37). After her election to the Thanatopsis Club, Carol visits Mrs. Leonard Warren, the president, with her plans to remake Gopher Prairie into a model town with Georgian architecture, "as graceful and beloved as Annapolis" (131). Carol describes her dream community, and "at two minutes to five a town of demure courtyards and welcoming dormer windows had been erected; and at two minutes past five the entire town was as flat as Babylon" (131). Other women in the club push for their own pet projects—a new city hall, a new school building, a church clubhouse—and Carol gives up in disgust.

Some of Gale's early stories address social problems. Julia Ehrhardt argues that the members of the Friendship Village Married Ladies Cemetery Improvement Sodality "work on municipal-housekeeping projects such as implementing regular garbage collection and street cleaning, planting for public gardens, organizing community social events for both townspeople and their rural neighborhoods, encouraging children to create public art, and ensuring the suitability of the 'moving pictures' shown in 'local nickel theaters'" (32). Although Ehrhardt overstates how much "municipal-housekeeping" is done, *Peace in Friendship Village*, published the year before *Main Street*, goes beyond the other Friendship Village stories in looking at how national and international issues affect the affairs of the town. Many of these stories are melancholy, with "The Feast of Nations," "Peace in Friendship Village," and "The Cable," commemorating the dead of World War I through parades, a festival, prayers, and a cable sent by the local newspaper editor to editors of six European newspapers that says, "Friendship Village memorial services held to-day for Europe's dead. Love and sympathy from our village" (272).[7]

In "The Feast of Nations," the ladies of the Red Cross decide to hold a final entertainment to celebrate the work they have done as well as the end of the war. They decide on a celebration of the allied countries and realize how little they know about them or the people living in town who come from overseas. Several women, including Calliope, decide to pick up some materials from the part of town where immigrants live for the celebration and realize "it wasn't a neighborhood we'd known much about" (9). In the title story, "Peace in Friendship Village," the Flats are described in more detail. It's "where the Friendship Village ex-foreigners live—ain't it scandalous the way we keep on calling ex-foreigners foreigners? And then, of course, nobody's so very foreign after you get acquainted" (26).

Although this seems neighborly, the ladies admit they never visit this part of town, unless "to see my wash-woman, or dicker for a load of wood, or buy new garden truck, get somebody to houseclean" (26), and they think nothing of the fact that the new sewer lines that are going through town won't go down as far as the Flats. The Red Cross women invite women from the Flats to the peace celebration not because of a sense of neighborliness but because that way they can get the women to wash dishes, mop the floors, and clean up for free, "for patriotism" (28). These middle-class women seem to ignore the immigrant women's poverty, as the women from the Flats all claim not to be hungry but say proudly that their husbands can afford the "fifteen-cent supper" (33). What draws these two parts of the community closer together is a fire down in the Flats during the peace celebration. Everyone pitches it; the Red Cross ladies take some of the children back to their homes for safety and offer everyone in town sandwiches and other refreshments after the fire is put out. This seeming tragedy also kicks off the municipal housekeeping mentioned above. Prior to the celebration many of the ladies thought they would feel bored and useless since their work for the Red Cross had ended. The fire awakens them to the needs of their own community, and as the story ends, the Sodality women resolve to bring the sewer system to the Flats and help the women there with home economics and health education.

Other outsiders to Friendship Village, including veterans, play a part in these later stories as well. In "The Story of Jeffro," an immigrant toymaker who has moved to town with his eight-year-old son is amazed that his child is educated for free and that services such as the fire brigade are free as well. He leaves his son with a neighbor for the winter so that he can earn money by mining and be able to bring his wife and other children to the United States. His life outside the village is awful: he's injured in a strike and jailed, the bank that his money is in fails, and someone tries to buy his vote. When he comes back, he hates America. His homecoming is softened as the children of the town welcome him back, Calliope brings him dinner and tells him of the garden she has planted for him, and others ask him to do work for them, so that he'll feel useful again. He tells Calliope, "Thes' is what I thought America was like" (73). Jeffro, in "When the Hero Comes Home," has suffered further, losing an arm while fighting for the United States in World War I. He rejects the over-the-top patriotic displays, connecting with the children of the community rather than with those who want to exploit his war service.

In "Dream," the only story in the collection that was not first published in a magazine, a family rents a house in Friendship Village for the summer. The ladies want to have a reception for them after hearing that the husband is a college professor, his wife is a college graduate, and their daughter is in college. In addition, their son is a decorated war veteran, and they have a piano—a sure sign of class. Calliope visits early and finds out that the Fernandez family is Black. Calliope speaks to her friends about this, and, with the help of Mis' Sykes, the reception takes place, and the family is welcomed as neighbors. The title is Gale's most pointed comment.

Although Lewis has strong Black characters in a number of his novels, including *Arrowsmith, Work of Art,* and *Kingsblood Royal*, the outsiders in Gopher Prairie are primarily Scandinavian and German immigrants. Lewis spoke serviceable German and often accompanied his father to help translate when Dr. Lewis went on his rounds to visit German farmers (Simpkins 15-16). Dr. Kennicott treats the farmers well, traveling to their farms at all hours when there is a serious accident or illness. Many of the references to these immigrants by the white Protestant villagers of Gopher Prairie are condescending or derogatory. Carol is criticized by the other women in town for paying her maid, Bea Sorenson, more than the going rate for "hired girls" and for befriending Bea, rather than just treating her as a servant. When Bea and her husband, Miles Bjornstam, have a baby, Carol's friends refer to him as a "Swede brat," partly in jealousy when Olaf wins the town award for "Best Baby" (247). Luke Dawson, the richest man in town, calls the immigrants "shiftless beggars" (140) when Carol suggests he should invest in housing for the inhabitants of Swede Hollow.

Carol takes her ideas about housing to the Thanatopsis Club where the women call them "fakers" who won't pay their bills on time and are insufficiently grateful for the old clothes they're given. Miss Stowbody, sounding like someone from Friendship Village says, "There isn't any real poverty here" (142), and then they all agree that their club already does plenty, what "with tree-planting and the anti-fly campaign and the responsibility for the rest-room—to say nothing of the fact that we've talked of trying to get the railroad to put in a park at the station!" (143). When America joins the Allies in World War I, bigotry against German immigrants spikes. The town bully, Cy Bogart, gains a reputation "by whipping a farmboy named Adolph Pochbauer for being a 'damned hyphenated German'" (275).[8] The narrator draws attention to how ignorant the town leaders seem to be. When the millionaire Percy Bresnahan returns to his hometown of Gopher Prairie and exchanges touchy words with Miles Bjornstam about economic conditions, Bresnahan shuts down the argument with "If you don't like this country, you better get out of it and go back to Germany, where you belong!" (282). This statement, which the locals find very amusing, demonstrates the lumping together of all immigrants as Other, since Miles is Swedish and his nickname in town is the "Red Swede," primarily for his politics.

Swede Hollow is the Gopher Prairie version of Friendship Village's the Flats and is similarly ignored by the middle-class people of town, both in terms of friendly relations and infrastructure. Because Miles does not have a well, and because he doesn't like being kidded about his socialist beliefs, he gets his water from a woman in the hollow rather than from a fellow countryman. The water is bad and, despite the medical treatment of Will and the nursing of Carol, both Bea and Olaf die of typhoid. Carol's friends visit Bea only when she's on her deathbed, too late to be of any help. The town gossips connect the death to Miles's drinking and lack of patriotism, claiming that he was seditious, and "loving German workmen more than American bankers" (323). Heartbroken, Miles leaves town.

There is little of the welcoming back of veterans at the end of the war in Gopher Prairie. Raymie Wutherspoon, who had been described in somewhat effeminate terms, returns as a major and is made manager of the biggest store in town. But the town soon forgets his service. "For a month small boys followed him down the street, and everybody called him Major, but that was presently shortened to Maje, and the small boys did not look up from their marbles as he went by" (413). Honest Jim Blauser, a professional hustler, comes to town, hoping to cash in on all the money being made by the townspeople and farmers who were selling their crops to the military. Carol is disgusted by the way Blauser ties together patriotism and business, and Will is frustrated by her negative attitude. She retorts, "Am I pro-German if I fail to throb to Honest Jim Blauser . . . ?" (420).

Our last glimpses of Friendship Village and Gopher Prairie differ greatly in tone. In the final story, "Folks," Calliope is sent to a women's convention in the City, where she hears a social worker call for women to move beyond municipal housekeeping to broader issues, the "securing of economic justice for labor, the liberation of women, and the great deliverances: From war, from race prejudice, from prostitution, from alcohol, and at last from poverty" (*Peace in Friendship Village* 304). Although none of this will be accomplished quickly, Calliope comes back home with a sense of purpose. Carol Kennicott, in trying to find freedom from a confining existence, moves to Washington for nearly two years and works for the Bureau of War Risk Insurance. Will visits but tells her she should come back only if she wants to. She is drawn back by the challenge of trying again, now that she has more experience behind her. She says to herself, "I will go back! I will go on asking questions. I've always done it, and always failed at it, and it's all I can do" (441). Her manifesto is undercut by the mundane needs of her children and her husband, but she looks to her baby daughter as the arbiter of change, calling to Will to notice the baby as "a bomb to blow up smugness" (450), part of the next generation who will be able to make the changes that she has been unable to.

The presentation of the village in the first part of the twentieth century was a more complicated affair than Carl Van Doren would have us believe, and both Gopher Prairie and Friendship Village had serious social issues to deal with as small towns became more connected to the wider world. Calliope Marsh, despite her happiness in living in Friendship Village, knows that things could be better, and Carol Kennicott, despite having made a sort of peace with Gopher Prairie, continues to imagine a more vibrant and welcoming town.

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NOTES

[1] There are quite a number of retirement communities and nursing homes in the Midwest called Friendship Village, no doubt referencing the idealized small-town atmosphere.

[2] See Cohen for a discussion of the changing nature of the critical reception toward Lewis.

[3] In Friendship Village, as in numerous other small towns, people are often described by profession, a wife by her husband's trade, or some other distinction.

[4] Gopher Prairie also appears in several other writings by Lewis. In *Free Air* (1919), Claire Boltwood, who is traveling with her father, stops in Gopher Prairie for the night and notes "that if she didn't stop at once, she would miss the town entirely" (37). See also "A Woman by Candlelight," "A Rose for Little Eva," "Main Street's Been Paved!," and "Main Street Goes to War," all republished in *The Minnesota Stories of Sinclair Lewis*.

[5] Lewis's stepmother felt it was necessary to help farm families have a place to stay while waiting for the men to come out of the stores and the bars, especially in wintertime (Lingeman 9; Schorer 17).

[6] The inspiration for the name of the Thanatopsis Club comes from the poem "Thanatopsis," by William Cullen Bryant, probably written in 1811. It was a popular poem, but the word means love of death, a devastating comment on the life of the mind in Gopher Prairie.

[7] "The Cable" was originally published in *Collier's Weekly* as "Over There" before the United States entered the war.

[8] Lewis sardonically notes that Adolph Pochbauer "was killed in the Argonne, while he was trying to bring the body of his Yankee captain back to the lines. At this time Cy Bogart was still dwelling in Gopher Prairie and planning to go to war" (Lewis, *Main Street* 275).

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ERRATA

Necessary corrections to Spring 2020 *Midwestern Miscellany* on Bonnie Jo Campbell
Submitted by Andy Oler and Ross Tangedal to Marcia Noe on 5 Aug. 2020

Location	**Current**	**Correction**
TOC	[authors’ names misaligned]	
p. 6, 1st para.	the Society for The Study of Midwestern LIterature	the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature
p. 6, 2nd para.	*American Savage*	*American Salvage*
	In”Family Reunion,”	In “Family Reunion,”
	as a semen-and blood-stained	at a semen- and blood-stained
	the rest of the story	The rest of the story
	woldlessness	wordlessness
p. 6, 3rd para.	proliferated	proliferate
	mements	moments
p. 7, 1st para. (carryover)	sustained— Campbell	sustained—Campbell
	conscioius	conscious
p. 7, 2nd para.	invitation to consciousness	invitations to consciousness
	In these poesm	In these poems
p. 29, works cited list	[URL for Anderson on its own line, missing access date (this URL was not on the final version submitted by AO/RKT, so maybe it was placed here during editing, in consultation with author)]	
	[URL for Levitt on new line]	
	[URL for Philip and Harpold on its own line, missing access date (this URL was not on the final version submitted by AO/RKT, so maybe it was placed here during editing, in consultation with author)]	
	[Taberski URL is underlined. Citation also includes new dates (perhaps this is due to MLA 7?)]	
p. 39, works cited list	[URL for Bell on its own line]	
p. 46	[alignment error between poem title, “Margo,” and poem text]	
p. 51, works cited list	(2017):163-77	(2017): 163-77
	(2010):78-85.	(2010): 78-85.
p. 64, works cited list	[URL for Campbell, “Cow Milking” on its own line]	
	[URL for Campbell interview by West and Larson on its own line]	

	[URL for Eaton on its own line]	
	[URL for Rice on its own line]	
p. 65, secondary sources	[Andy Oler, *Old-Fashioned Modernism* should be listed among secondary sources]	
	[Laura Fine, "Sexual Violence and Cultural Crime in the Country Noir Fiction of Bonnie Jo Campbell," *Critique* 60.5, should be listed among secondary sources]	
p. 67	[section formatted in MLA 8, inconsistent with rest of issue]	
	[most poetry titles not italicized]	
throughout	[New York City abbreviated to "NY" in works cited entries, which is inconsistent with treatment of other cities and causes confusion between city and state.]	