

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Main Street

by

Sinclair Lewis

Book Information

Sinclair Lewis, Main Street
Quiz Number: 5991
Signet, 1961
ISBN 0-451-52461-6; LCCN
439 Pages
Book Level: 8.6
Interest Level: UG

This novel showcases the humdrum existence of a small American town and its inhabitants.

Topics: Community Life, Civic/Economic Progress; Community Life, Neighborhood; Community Life, Social Iniquities; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Bea Sorenson Carol's first maid, who marries Miles Bjornstam and later dies of typhoid fever
Carol Kennicott the principal character in the story; a young, educated woman who marries a doctor and constantly questions the wisdom of her move to a small town in Minnesota
Cy Bogart the widow's son, who causes a lot of trouble in town
Erik "Elizabeth" Valborg a young tailor who comes to town with dreams of becoming a dress designer and with whom Carol thinks she could have an affair
Fern Mullins a young teacher who loses her job because of false claims by the Widow Bogart
Guy Pollock a bachelor lawyer with whom Carol initially thinks she could have an affair, but realizes she is mistaken
Hugh Kennicott Carol and Will's son
Juanita Haydock Harry's wife, who loves to gossip, especially about Carol
Maud Dyer Dave's wife; a link between the Jolly Seventeen and the Thanatopsis Club; most likely a woman who has an affair with Will Kennicott
Miles Bjornstam (the "Red Swede") the fix-it man in town, who speaks his mind and has few friends except Carol
Oscarina Carol's second maid

Percy Bresnahan president of the Velvet Motor Company of Boston, who is the most famous person to come out of Gopher Prairie
Raymie Wutherspoon a clerk at the Bon Ton Store who marries Vida and becomes a major during the war
Sam Clark the owner of the hardware store in Gopher Prairie
Vida Sherwin a schoolteacher who becomes like a big sister to Carol
Whittier and Bessie Smail Will's aunt and uncle, who move to Gopher Prairie
Widow Bogart Carol and Will's neighbor who claims to be very religious and who is very nosy
Will Kennicott Carol's husband; a doctor in the small town of Gopher Prairie

Vocabulary

agnostic someone who believes there can be no proof of the existence of God, but does not deny the possibility that God exists
ingenu an artless girl or young woman
lugubrious mournful to an exaggerated degree
prosaic lacking in imagination or spirit

Synopsis

Carol Milford is a young woman who has graduated from college without the prospect of marriage. She takes a job as a librarian in St. Paul for several years until she marries Dr. Will Kennicott. She has never seen his home in Gopher Prairie, although she has looked at quaint pictures he has shown her. When they arrive at this small town in Minnesota, Carol is appalled at its ugliness and vows she will reform it.

After meeting the "smart set" of Gopher Prairie, Carol tries to break out of their old mold by throwing a party with a Chinese theme. Shortly after this event, she overhears some boys commenting that everyone is gossiping about her. She is very embarrassed and withdraws for a time. She becomes her old self again when she meets Miles Bjornstam, the "Red Swede," who also dislikes Gopher Prairie.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Main Street

by

Sinclair Lewis

Shortly after her visit with Miles, Carol decides to attend a Thanatopsis Club meeting. This group comprises upstanding women in the community who like to believe they are very intelligent and sophisticated. After her first meeting, Carol is motivated to change the town through this group. Her first mission is to rebuild City Hall, until she runs into opposition everywhere.

After her defeat with City Hall, Carol spends months tolerating life in Gopher Prairie and doing what is expected of her. One evening she accidentally ends up in Guy Pollock's office. Guy is a bachelor lawyer who has a lot in common with Carol. They feel a mutual attraction for a while, until she realizes Guy is not what she wants at all.

Carol's next project is forming a dramatic association and directing a play. The play goes poorly, and the association dies after only one performance. Carol also serves on the library board. She is motivated to rally for new books, and again she fails. After that, she attends board meetings, but has very little input and is eventually replaced.

Carol's life for the next three years is nondescript. When her baby, Hugh, arrives, Carol is fulfilled for two years. She and Hugh regularly visit the home of Miles, who has married Carol's maid, Bea. They have a son, Olaf, who becomes a wonderful playmate for Hugh. Carol is ashamed that she doesn't want to be seen associating with the Bjornstams.

Kennicott's Uncle Whittier and Aunt Bessie Smail come to stay with Will and Carol for several weeks and make Carol feel more hemmed in than ever. The Smails decide they like Gopher Prairie and move there permanently. Carol is "privileged" to experience their frequent visits.

Vida Sherwin, a schoolteacher and Carol's friend, marries Raymie Wutherspoon. It is at this point that the reader learns how Vida and Will had been attracted to one another, but nothing ever came of their relationship. Vida has always been jealous of

Carol. Now that she is married, Vida blossoms and makes Carol feel left out of her affairs.

Percy Bresnahan, the one man who has left Gopher Prairie and made it big, comes back for a visit. Carol blames him and his type for keeping towns like Gopher Prairie satisfied with themselves.

When Kennicott talks about building a new home, Carol is initially excited. Then she realizes he wants a home that is the same as everyone else's in town. She becomes afraid of the new house, which she thinks would become a prison, and the subject is eventually dropped.

Kennicott tries to get close to Carol again, but she isn't responsive. He ends up visiting Maud Dyer and is most likely unfaithful to Carol.

When Carol goes to visit the Bjornstams, she finds a very ill Bea and Olaf. Dr. Kennicott diagnoses typhoid fever, and they both eventually die. Miles leaves town, never to return.

At this point, Erik Valborg appears in town. He is Swedish and was raised on a farm. He became a tailor and gained experience in Minneapolis. The residents of Gopher Prairie call him "Elizabeth" because of his fancy style of dressing. He and Carol find an immediate attraction to one another. Although they never act on their feelings, other people pick up on them. Finally Kennicott runs into them one evening as they are walking. Kennicott talks Carol out of loving Erik, and Erik ends up leaving town.

After some of the residents hint that Carol is the reason for Erik's departure, Carol begs Kennicott to go on a vacation. They leave for California and are gone for over three months. When they return, Carol is still unhappy with Gopher Prairie. She decides she must leave for a while with Hugh.

Carol and Hugh go to Washington, D.C., where Carol finds an office job. She spends two years there trying to find herself and experience the life she thinks she has missed. When Kennicott comes

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Main Street

by

Sinclair Lewis

to visit her, he doesn't try to talk her into returning to Gopher Prairie. He tells her he doesn't want her to return unless she really wants to.

Carol does return to Gopher Prairie with Hugh when she realizes she can learn to love the town. She gives birth to a girl and plans great things for her. She shows that she is conforming to the town's ways when she calls Mrs. Clark by her first name.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why did Maud Dyer seem disappointed when Carol returned to Gopher Prairie from Washington, D.C.?

While this text is prim in asserting the fact, Maud and Kennicott were certainly involved with one another sexually. Maud's disappointment is explicit, although the specific grounds could have been either Kennicott's blunt termination of the affair or her own presumption that Carol's return would end it. Kennicott does start to confess his behavior, and Carol forgives it without requiring him to tell the tale.

Literary Analysis

How do Will and Carol change during the course of the story?

They both become more tolerant of the other's opinions and ways of approaching life. In the end, they both make compromises. Will is no longer as defensive of Gopher Prairie, and Carol is no longer as intolerant of it.

Inferential Comprehension

Why was Carol attracted to both Guy Pollack and Erik Valborg?

Each character represented interests and qualities that looked beyond the narrow sensibilities of Main Street. Guy was a well-read hermit, who was nostalgic for an era of country gentility. Erik was a youthful lover of beauty who discovered the fact of culture too late to fully hone his talents to match his ambitions. Carol valued both men's artistic horizons--but Guy would never leave the comfort of his hermitage, and Erik was unlikely to bloom into the artist Carol dreamed he could become.

Constructing Meaning

Early in Carol's marriage, "She discovered that conversation did not exist in Gopher Prairie." In what sense was conversation an "extinct species" there?

What passed for "conversation" among the natives was a repetition of the same greetings, jokes, topics, and rejoinders. To Carol's mind, true conversation required a spark of spontaneity and interest in stimulating topics. Even in the most intellectual setting, at the meeting of the Thanatopsis Club, papers on authors were replete with pedestrian details of their lives and devoid of ideas. The town folk did not talk; they chattered.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Dr. Will Kennicott was a general practitioner who made house calls and devoted his life to his patients. It might be interesting for the students to research more thoroughly the life of a doctor in the early 1900s. What instruments would he carry with him? What type of office or hospital would he use? What were the common ailments? What was the leading cause of death?

Understanding the Author's Craft *Main Street* is told in the third person by an all-knowing narrator. Ask the class to rewrite a chapter of the story from a different perspective. For instance, Carol could tell it in the form of a diary. Or they could choose to have Will Kennicott tell the story from

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Main Street

by

Sinclair Lewis

his point of view. How would this change the story?

Comparing and Contrasting Does Carol's struggle with the gulf between her desires for a fulfilling life and the mores of Main Street progress significantly through the novel? One way to focus students' approach to this question would be to ask them to compare her initial complaints about Gopher Prairie with her mature observations of life in Washington, D.C. Might she have reacted differently to Washington if that had been her first home as a young woman? What was the most important source, wherever Carol was living, of her basic feelings of disappointment with life? Was the fault within her, or part of the social world within which she was cast?

Recognizing Setting This story takes place in a small Midwestern town during the early 1900s. Ask the students to research what life is like today in a town similar to Gopher Prairie. Are there many of these towns left? Is there a downtown or a mall? Are there social circles similar to those discussed in *Main Street*? Do trains still service these towns? How would Carol's life differ in a typical small town today?