

The hidden Part of America in Lewis` **Main Street**

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English Abstract

Lewis satirizes the American society via his novel **Main Street**(1920) . He directs his bitter criticism to the small town to batter the American illusions and purify the small town and its inhabitants via the fire of embittered satire. Through Lewis' magnifying lens, the Americans see their folks bare from any garment or disguise that may impede the truth. He reveals the scandals of corruption, hypocrisy and blindness of the small town in **Main Street**. Lewis realizes that even life departs such shanty land of America. Lewis depicts his folks as dead, the tragic fact that they are not aware even of their spiritual death.

الملخص العربي

لويس انتقد المجتمع الامريكي من خلال عملة الروائي الشارع العام وقد وجه الكاتب النقد الأذع لمدينه صغيرة ومن خلالها حطم الوهم الامريكي والجديد ان لويس اراد من خلال الهجاء تنقيه تلك المدينه ومن خلالها امريكي ودقة الكاتب كانت من خلال تصويره للمجتمع الامريكي مجرد الا من الحقيقة. لويس كشف العديد من الامراض الاجتماعيه مثل النفاق الاجتماعي والضياع الذي تعاني منه تلك المدينة والتي تفتقر الى الحياة. وهذا المجتمع استطاع بنجاح تغطيه تلك الأمراض لكن لم يمكن الأمر صعب على الأقلام الصادقة.

Key words: Main Street, satire, corruption, illusion, America. scandal, hypocrisy.

The hidden Part of America in Lewis` **Main Street**

Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) was born in a small Minnesota town. It was rural and raw, its main street was muddy and unpaved and its social events were limited. His restlessness as well as his sensitiveness were the chief reasons behind his failure of acceptance in the university. He began early to question the towns people narrow-mindedness. Thus his society set him apart as many gifted youngsters because of his brave attitudes. Lewis answered this narrowness by flaying his America with embittered satire. Thus his men folk regarded him as the Bad Boy of the national letter. The American considered his satire as a betrayal of his people.

Lewis embarks a new chapter in his literary career as well as the American literature. He decides to bombard the corruption of the American Society. He arranges his attack to unmask the spoiled parts in his society. He directs his shotgun to the small town to batter the American illusions and purify the small town and its inhabitants via the fire of embittered satire. Through Lewis' magnifying lens, the Americans see their folks bare from any garment or disguise that may impede the truth. He reveals the scandals of corruption, hypocrisy and blindness of the small town in **Main Street.**(M. S.) Lewis realizes that even life departs such shanty land of America. Lewis depicts his folks as dead, the tragic fact that they are not aware even of their spiritual death.

In writing this novel Lewis starts a new theme in his literary career. He wants to batter all the illusions and myths that his people believe in.

Lewis “found in the sardonic laughter an effective anodyne for the village virus.”¹ Through his embittered satire, he makes the Americans taste the bitterness of true realization. Thus he starts the education in disillusionment. The myth of the small town is the first illusion Lewis directs his shotgun to destroy. Though Lewis is not the only prophet of the wilderness of the town, he remains the most effective one.

Lewis assails the shortcomings of the small town which recurs as the dominant socio-geographical context almost in all Lewis’s novels. It appears in **Main Street (1920)** as the emblem of the American culture. It starts as provincial locality and grows to be a picture of America. Lewis generalizes this attack to reach any practical land. Lewis in his short preface to the novel “This is America,” claims that “its main street is the continuation of main streets everywhere.” Gopher Prairie town witnesses the upheaval that sweeps America in the late of nineteenth and early twentieth century. This leads to massive growth of numerous cities which lead in turn to sharp decline of the American cultural significance of the small town.

Although by 1920 America was figured as a predominately urbanized nation, the small town continued to maintain its conventional significance in America as the valley of everything good. But the years proved that God made the country and the devil made the American cities. The small towns like Gopher Prairie and Sauk Centre were regarded as “the ideal compromise between these two otherwise conflicting American values, nature and civilization.”²

The publication of this novel is a major literary event in America from that date the American small town looks bare to the American’s eyes

and the world's. It is worth noting to reveal the views of the small town before and after 1920. The former views consider it as the seat of warmth, the last reservoir of the pioneer verve and the paradise, while the latter views regard it as a symbol of insularity and conformity. Lewis and Carol reveal the real face of the small town after removing the false mask through their counter education campaign. The lofty ideals of the small town can be seen in literature and magazine through which many traditions are propagated:

The first tradition, repeated in scores of magazines every month is that the American village remains the one sure abode of friendship, honesty, and clean sweet marriageable girls. Therefore all men who succeeded in painting in Paris, or in Finance in New York at last become weary of smart women, return to their native towns, assert that cities are vicious, marry their childhood sweethearts and presumably, joyously abide in those towns until death.

The other tradition is that the significant features of all villages are whiskers, iron dogs upon lawns, gold bricks, checkers, jars of gilded cat-tail and shrewd comic old men who are known as 'hicks'³

Lewis finds out that the small town is not quaint, but dull and ugly. Its people offers no warm friendship, but chilly suspicious, it offers no honesty but evasion. The great proportion of the supposed "marriageable girls" are likely to be gossipy prurient spinsters. Lewis with his iconoclastic intention brings painful pleasure to the Americans. He reveals the smugness of the townspeople, their political isolation and the

condemnation of the new or different ones. Max Lerner in **America as a Civilization** gives evidences of the small town decline, the evidence that supports Lewis' **Main Street** is the migration towards the city.⁴

Carol, who mirrors part of Lewis' character, is shocked to discover that the townspeople in America have in common an embarrassing heartiness, an unquestioned pride in their town, a contempt for cities and East, a rejection of anything liberal, intellectual, esthetic or even physically active. The very society is depicted by Alfred Kazin in his article "The Alone Generation," as "merely a backdrop to the aloneness of the hero,"⁵ she carries the responsibility to beautify the town after her marriage to Dr. Will. She ushers this campaign of counter-education. According to Brian Lee the difference "between her naive idealism and the reality of what she encounters gives Lewis's criticisms a satiric force."⁶ Carol's first impression of the small town that shocks her is the deadening routine and the rigid fixity. She discovers that:

Nine-tenths of the American towns are so alike that it is the completest boredom to wander from one to another. Always, west of Pittsburg and often east of it, there is the same lumber yard, the same railroad station, the same Ford garage the same creamery, the same box-like houses and two storey shops. The new, more conscious houses are alike in their very attempts at diversity: the same bungalows, the same square houses of stucco or tapestry brick. The shops show the same standardized nationally advertised wares; (M. S., p.268)

Her naïve attempts to get the townspeople to enjoy the countryside to swim or skate are defeated. She learns after that her ideas are considered ludicrous. Through Carols' eyes Lewis figures his people as inactive, incurious and dull. Also she realizes that even the conversation doesn't exist in Gopher Prairie. Even if it exists, it will be trivial and personal. Lewis depicts his people with a microscope capacity as a camera man, thus he is undeniably accurate. He groups the towns people into three groups according to their reaction to the narrowness of their small town. These who happily accept or who actually make the standard of the town; those who regret their standard, but manage to live by them; those who can not compromise therefore they choose to be rebels. Lewis treats the second group with a mellow satire.

It is important here to follow Carols' steps in her attempts as her results reveal the insularity of the townspeople. She plans new attempts by making a different party from that held in the town. She serves a Chinese food and wears Chinese costumes. The guests pretend to have fun, but they regard the whole affair as eccentric things. She carries the injury of this failure to usher a new attempt. She joins The Jolly Seventeen, the woman club, through it she tries to cure many social ills. For instance, she tries to convince them that housemaids deserve decent salaries, but in vain. She turns to her husband to improve the townspeople through him. She asks him to patronize the grocery store which is the cleanest and sells the best goods. She does not achieve any step forward in this attempt since her husband insists on caring for the store whose owner sends him more patients. Lewis alludes sardonically to the triumph of the materialism over the individual's will.

Carols' attempts reflect the narrowness of her people's minds which are too hard to solve. This may partly explain the reasons behind the massive success of this novel which mirrors the rebellious mood of the time and it summarizes mercilessly every thing that the new generation detests. Lewis for the first time expresses his deep anger and his outrageous satire towards the main streeters, he regards them as :

A savourless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.(M. S. p.265)

Carols' attempts to beautify the small town are part of her "witting to fight in the open,"⁷ the success of the townsfolk in keeping themselves from Carols' attempts means their deadening failure and proves their deep insularity. Carol in her energy is "more than *Madame Bovary*,"⁸ she is not mere frustrated wife. Lewis via Carol continues to present prove after another of the fatal failure of his people. He wants to slum any hope to beautify their minds by directing his heroine to penetrate their minds culturally. Thus she joins Thanatopsis Club, the woman's cultural group, she finds out the corruption creeps into this field too. She tries to make the members of this club study literature in some detail rather than superficial covering. Even in this she is defeated. Lewis hints that escaping is the sole semi-solution for the gifted youngsters and other:

With such a small-town life a Kennicott or a Champ Perry is content, but there are also hundreds of thousands, particularly women and young men, who are not at all content. The more intelligent young people (and the fortunate widows!) flee to the cities with agility and, despite the fictional tradition, resolutely stay there, seldom returning even for holidays. The most protesting patriots of the towns leave them in old age, if they can afford it, and go to live in California or in the cities.

(M. S., pp.264-65)

Lewis directs his weapons of bitter satire towards the leading women of the town who are opposed to the woman suffrage. Their minds are accustomed to flitting from trivial subject to other. They can not stand staying on one serious issue for a moment, and the private interest is the leading force among them. Carol realizes that there is no privacy or security in the small town. She learns that the townsfolk watch her and gossip upon each movement of her. Lewis gradually demonstrates that the insularity, provincialism, hypocrisy and cruelty are the identifying signs of the malady of the small town. In Lewis' words it appears to be "but vision of tragic futility"(M. S.,p.264).

The creeping corruption reaches the books and the librarians who discourage the people from reading books to keep the latter in good condition. The librarian's task is changed from encouraging reading to preserve books because to them "nothing is cheaper than minds" (M. S., p.92).

Her frustration reaches its highest point when the townspeople mercilessly kill a new plan to educate them via a drama. The actors change

the aim of this attempt from educational aims to exhibitional ones. Through many episodes, Lewis reveals the hostility and the cruel isolation of the townsfolk to anything creative or different. The campaign against Erik Valborg is a simple evidence for this. He is the tailor's assistant who is delicate and beautifully dressed. He is a victim of town's mockery for his effeminate manner. They call him "Elizabeth." Carol defies their false conventions by helping him despite their gossip. Carol raises the surrendering banner to find no way rather than to succumb. The accumulation of events make Erik also escape from the (American paradise) as the sole solution.

There are many victims of the village virus like Fern Mullins, a teacher who is falsely accused of seducing her student. Under the suppression of the hidebound people, she leaves the town without return. Miles Bjornstam, a radical thinker, is rejected because of his different social class. His people regard him responsible for the death of his wife and son. He flees from the unthinking blame of the townspeople. Guy Pollock is another victim of the very virus, his ambition as a lawyer is killed because of the town's infection and the new fear of the competition.

Carol restores to the pioneer spirit as a new attempt to find a shelter, because she knows that "in the history of the pioneers was the panacea for Gopher Prairie, for all of America. We have lost their sturdiness" (M. S., p.150). She finds out even this spirit is corrupted by the American materialism, thus she declares that "the days of pioneering, . . . are deader now than Camelot"(M. S. p.1). Lewis wants to stop the conquer of Gopher Prairie's philosophy to the whole country or may be to the whole world, this comes as a next step after the failure of improving the small town.

Lewis in depicting the townspeople proves that his imagination is gifted with what Stephen S. Conroy calls “the sociological imagination,”⁹ which is based on social interplay within the social matrix. This appears in almost all Lewis’ novels which are “about person . . . dwells in a definite house, street, city or class of society.”¹⁰

Carol realizes that the farmers and the workers have the lion share in the Gopher Prairie’s injustice. They also lose their rights and their jobs are to serve the rich. The irony here is that the rich themselves parasite on the farmers and at the same time deny them any right to be their equals. The rich regard them inferior and fear their valid ambitions. Carol says that:

The Prairie towns no more exist to serve the farmers who are their reason of existence than do the great capitals; they exist to fatten on the farmers, to provide for the townsmen large motors and social preferment; and, unlike the capitals, they do not give the district in return for usury a stately and permanent centre, but only this ragged camp. It is a ‘parasitic Greek civilization-minus the civilization.’(M. S., p.209)

Not only this but they despise the farmers and they refuse to accept any idea about “the union labor” because the farmers are regarded as “outsiders” (M. S., p.50).

Lewis suggests that the problems which face Carol in a highly conventionalized society are the process of adjusting to other social group and looking for away of life “commensurate with the promise of material prosperity.”¹¹ The struggle of Carol passes through many stages: an active fight, a bitter disillusionment and the reconciliation to contentment. Her

withdrawal is characterized by the contentment of the main streeters which is depicted as: “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”(M. S., p,265).

The small town is no more than waste land. In the latter there are dead trees or waterless rocks that can be used shelters, but in the former everything lacks safety. T. W. Whipple regards it as a “desert”¹² because there is no sign of development. Carol as an American woman lives under the ‘patriarchal system’¹³ she suffers from double oppressions, the conflict with her husband and with the small town. Thus she undergoes “interior” and “exterior”¹⁴ pressure. Lewis imbues her with additional power to endure the fight. She during her fight declares romantic tendencies which make some critics like Howell Daniels regards her “an absolutist of imagination.”¹⁵

After the death of Carols’ idealistic dreams to beautify Gopher Prairie, she, as a representative of the American women, declares an inner revolution. The American women identified with “a momie,”¹⁶ she wonders “what has made the darkness of the women. Grey darkness and shadowy trees” (M. S., p.201). Carol generalizes the revolution and carries national as well as universal representativeness, she associates herself with all socially oppressed groups. She declares that personal dissatisfaction turns to be general one, Carol says:

I believe all of us want the same things—we’re all together, the industrial workers and the women and the farmers and the Negro race

and the Asiatic colonies and even a few of the Respectables. It's all the same revolt, in all the classes that have waited and taken advice. I think perhaps we want a more conscious life. We're tired of drudging and sleeping and dying. We're tired of seeing just a few people able to be individualists. . . we have the plans for a Utopia already made; just give us a bit more time and we'll produce it; trust us; we'll be wiser than you.

(M. S., p.201)

Carol's fight to a white-collar job with a government agency is part of her feminist revolution against the limited sexual roles of housewife and after a year in Washington, she relinquishes the critical rejection of the town. She realizes that the sophistication of Washington fails to compensate the warmth of family. Her contemplation in Washington paves the way to her final reconciliation with Gopher Prairie "at last," she rejoiced, "I've come to a fairer attitude towards the town, I can love it, now" (M. S., p. 442).

The final reconciliation contrasts sharply with the earlier bitter attack of the small town. Under familial pressure she gives up fight, but not the war. The evidences of her continuing fight are many. She points to the head of her sleeping daughter and tells Dr. Will that "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"(M. S., p.450). also she professes that she "may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith"(M. S., p.451).

Lewis in writing this novel proves to have the gifts that are mentioned in the citation of the Noble Prize in 1930 for having "powerful

and vivid art of description and his ability to use wit and humour in creation of original characters.”¹⁷ He proves to have a rare daring and a unique boldness in facing the Americans with their corruption. Also he shows in this novel his “accuracy in mastering his national mood.”¹⁸ He goes on criticizing the shortcomings of the main streeters even after years of receiving the Noble Prize though the new period suffers from different problems.

Carol, Lewis’ instrument to demolish the American worshipped illusions, is provided with all the necessary weapons like intellectuality and modern thought of art. Also Lewis cleverly reverses the direction of her migration to achieve the same aim. He wants to draw the American attention to the insidious corrosion as one of the novelists of the Lost Generation who assail “provincialism of American life in their time.”¹⁹ Also he attacks hypocrisy and prejudice which are still in the American society, but they dress another garment to disguise. The very success of this novel not only increases Lewis’ fortune, but it makes him an acknowledged writer.

Though the corruption sweeps America, the American raise the banner of “B.P.O.E.” (B., p.165), which means (the best people on the earth). This

motto will become wonderful and understandable to all of Lewis' readers if we put 'W' instead of 'B' to be the worst people on the earth. The American fail to catch the meaning of fidelity, truth, democracy and love because they are beyond their understanding. At the same time they achieve full understanding upon certain defects like venality, hypocrisy and various scandals of corruption.

NOTES

¹Clarence Hugh Holman, **Windows on the World** .Essays on American Social Fiction (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), p.6.

²Ian Ousby, **An Introduction to Fifty American Novels** (London: Pan Books, 1980), p.196.

³Sinclair Lewis, **Main Street** (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), p.264. (All the subsequent quotations are taken from this edition).

⁴Max Lerner, **America as a Civilization** (New York: Simon, 1957), p.148.

⁵Alfred Kazin "The Alone Generation," in **Writing in America**, ed. John Fischer and Robert B. Silvers (New York: Rutgers, 1960), p.19.

⁶Brian Lee, **American Fiction, 1865-1940**. (London: Longman, 1988), p.141.

⁷James Oppenheim, **The Nine-Tenths, A Novel** (New York: Harvard and Brothers, 1954), p.168.

⁸Donald Heiney and Lenthil H. Dawns, **Recent American Literature to 1930** (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), p.116.

⁹Stephen S. Conroy, "Sinclair Lewis's Sociological Imagination," *American Literature*, 2(May, 1970), p.348.

¹⁰Sinclair Lewis, **The Man From Main Street Selected Essays and Other Writing, 1940-1950**, eds. Harry E. Maule and Melvili H. Cane (London: Heinemann, 1954), p.187.

¹¹Michael Spindler, **American Literature and Social Change** (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.169.

¹²T. K. Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis," in **Sinclair Lewis, A Collected of Critical Essays**, ed. Mark Schorer (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice Hall, 1962), p.74.

¹³Vincent B. Leitch. **American Literary Criticism** (New York: Columbian University, 1988), p.324.

¹⁴Walter Allen, **Tradition and Dream**. (London: Penguin, 1965), p.90.

¹⁵Howell Daniels, "Sinclair Lewis and the Drama of Dissociation," in **American Novel and the Nineteen Twenties**. eds. Malcolm Brabury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), p.91.

¹⁶David Riesman et. al.. **The Lonely Crowd**. (New York: H. L. Liveright, 1955), p.278.

¹⁷Jay B. Hubbel. **Who are the Major American Writers?** (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), p.204.

¹⁸Mark Schorer, **Sinclair Lewis: An American Life** (London: MaGraw Hill, 1961), pp.267-268.

¹⁹Arthur Mizener, "American Novel and Nature in the 20th Century," in **The Sense of Life in the Modern American Novel** (London: Heinemann, 1963), p.123.

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