

## MAIN STREET

Critical Paper  
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Carol Milford a college senior, soon to graduate from Blodgett College, a small religious, coeducational school, on the outskirts of Minneapolis. She was taking a break from the routine of her student life standing on a hilltop with her clothes blowing in the breeze, drinking in the air as she longed to drink in life. Her student life was filled with multiple activities such as playing tennis, giving chaffing-dish parties, taking graduate seminars in drama and stalking General Culture. She was petite and energetic. Throughout her senior year she struggled to find a career that she would find fulfilling. She was an orphan and had used most of her inheritance to pay for school. She had no serious beaux during college. Her future needs would have to be paid for by her earning a living. But how to earn it? At various times she had thought about studying law, writing motion picture scenarios, professional nursing and marrying an unidentified hero. A new sociology instructor was hired and Carol became entranced with the subject. During her perusal of the material, she stumbled upon a book on village-improvement – tree planting, town pageants, girls' clubs. It had pictures of greens and garden walls in France, New England, and Pennsylvania. Given the drabness of her surroundings she decided that after college she would get her hands on a prairie town and make it beautiful with a village green, darling cottages, and a quaint main street. She had grown up in Mankato an atypical Minnesota town with garden-sheltered streets and aisle of elms reminiscent of a New England town. Before her career as a town planner could commence a professor of English suggested that she should study professional library work in Chicago. She saw herself persuading children to read charming fairy tales, helping young men to find books on mechanics, and being ever so courteous to old men hunting for newspapers. This would be an intellectual existence, dinners with poets and explorers.

Besides studying library-cataloguing, recording, reference books, while in Chicago, she enjoyed the Art Institute, the symphonies, violin recitals (she played the violin) and chamber

music. There was also theater and classic dancing. After attending several Bohemian parties with beer, cigarettes, and Russian émigrés singing the Internationale she decided that it had no interest for her. She returned to the public library in St. Paul. Carol was not unhappy but was not exhilarated. There was little interest among the clientele of the library for a change in their lives. She had the time and the opportunity to read volumes of books on esoteric subjects. During her three years at the library, she went to dances and suppers at the houses of colleagues but there was no encounter of a man of great interest. At a Sunday evening supper with friends she encountered a stranger, a thick tall man of thirty-six or-seven, with stolid brown hair, lips used to giving orders, eyes which followed everything good naturally, and clothes which you could never quite remember. He was introduced as Dr. Will Kennicott of Gopher Prairie. Gopher Prairie was a Minnesota wheat-prairie town of about three thousand people. After a period of schmoozing, about his education in the Twin Cities, Dr. Will described how he was an influential person in his small town rather than a “flea on a dog’s back”. There were also the advantages of country driving and hunting in the fall. The town was full of up-and-coming people and is darn pretty with lots of fine maples and box elders and two of the dandiest lakes you ever saw. Their courtship was of a well-to-do unmarried man encountering a pretty girl at a time when she is slightly weary of her employment and sees no glory ahead nor any man of great interest. They were married after a year of courtship with Carol only seeing some blurry photos of Gopher Prairie.

The train ride on the No. 7 brought reality to Carol. It is September hot and very dusty. There is no porter, no pillows, no provision for beds, but all day and all night they are in a long steel box. The car is full of farmers with perpetually tired wives and children who seem to be all the same age; workmen going to new jobs; traveling salesmen with derbies and freshly shined shoes. The travelling hordes had now become her own people, to bathe and encourage and adorn, she had an acute and uncomfortable interest in them. The train passes through a multitude of new small towns devoid of any semblance of beauty. Carol is appalled by their appearance, but Will just accepts them for what they are with hopes for their future. Arriving in Gopher Prairie, Carol realizes that it was merely an enlargement of all the hamlets that they had passed. Only to the eyes of Kennicott was it exceptional but not to her. Her impression of

the welcoming party was that all the men had coarse voices, large damp hands, toothbrush mustaches, bald spots, and Masonic watch-charms.

After a thirty-two-minute walk Carol had completely covered the town with its two-story brick shops. Its story and a half wooden residences. Its muddy expanse from concrete walk to concrete walk was too hard for her to absorb. She wanted to run, fleeing from the encroaching prairie, demanding the security of a great city. In the entire town not one building save the Ionic bank building gave her pleasure. She was disheartened by the plainness of it all. She was overwhelmed by the welcoming party held at the new house of Sam Clark, the hardware merchant. Carol listened to the ongoing talk but discovered that conversation did not exist. As the evening progresses the men and women divided, Carol was deserted by the men and left to the patter of matrons about children, sickness and cooks. At one point in the evening the discussion turned more serious about and Carol asked if there had been labor trouble in the area. No ma'am, thank god we 've been free of that, except from some hired girls and farm hands. All this profit-sharing and welfare work and insurance and old age pension is simple poppycock was the prevalent sentiment shared by the group. There was some talk about literature and the evening ended. On the way home Carol was cautioned by Kennicott to be less risqué in her conversation as some of the ladies might be out to get her. She gradually settled into the routine of life as Mrs. Dr. Kennicott. She met the schoolteacher Vida Sherwin and the lawyer Guy Pollock. She thought that they might form a dramatic society. Her neighbor Mrs. Bogart, a widow, a prominent Baptist and a "Good Influence" had a 14 year old son who was the most brazen member of the toughest gang in town. The usual situation was that the men earned the money and doled it out to their wives on an as needed basis with the women having to beg at times. Carol in a fit of independence demanded an allowance from Kennicott and a business-like accounting system for their home.

One evening in the middle of her first winter in PG, Kennicott was on an emergency call, Carol realized that she had nothing to do. She could not plan meals, had no choices in the stores, housework was done by Bea. Kennicott was not ready for children. As the Dr's. wife she could not get a job. She had self-doubt about whether she was liked by the townspeople or just

tolerated. She did not fit into the routine of bridge-whist afternoons with the Jolly Seventeen. Where the social distinctions of the Seventeen and their hired girls were discussed (negatively)(p75). Carol was at odds with there treatment of the “help”. The discussion of the town library came up with the librarian Ethel Villets. In discussing the library Miss Villets thought that the role of the librarian was to preserve the books while Carol thought the librarian should get people to read books. She felt that she was the only person there that had her opinion as to what a librarian role should be. She went home completely distraught. She was the talk of the town in a negative way. Criticized about a Chinese themed party that she had given and the furniture that she had purchased from Minneapolis. She had difficulty dealing with the local merchants because she never been able to play the game of friendly rudeness. She was clearly the gossip talk of the town when she overheard a group of teenage boys discussing her. She was invited to the Thanatopsis Club, the women’s study group, that met weekly and was the cultural center of PG. Carol had been reared to assume that servants belong to a distinct lower species but discovered the Bea was like the girls she had loved in college, and as a companion superior to the young matrons of the Jolly Seventeen.

On a solitary walk one winter day Carol stumbled upon the outskirts of the town, Swede Hollow where the poor folks lived in shanties, without sewerage or street cleaning. She encountered Bjornstam ‘The Red Swede’ who was considered a pariah, the town atheist and anarchist who doesn’t kowtow to the bankers and the Grand Old Republican Party. She somehow finds the Swede a kindred spirit with his eclectic knowledge, and irreverent attitude towards the muckamucks of the town, and his socialist thoughts. She learned to play bridge, poorly, and joined in the discussion of the personal habits of the inhabitants of the domiciles of the Jolly Seventeen.

The Thanatopsis Club covered a broad range of literature in a very superficial manner and rapid fashion. Carol thought she could enlist the group in her struggle to beautify the town but there was discordance upon what should be changed and how to do it. She tried to get Luke Dawson, the richest man in town, to spend some of his money on improving the living conditions of the poor, but he laughed at her. Miles Bjornstam also thought it was nonsense

since the people need to do it by themselves and not accept handouts. Carol suggested to the planning committee of the Thanatopsis Club that they should help the poor of the town but there was denial that there was real poverty. It seemed that the club thought it was already doing enough with tree plantings, an anti-fly campaign and maintaining the women's rest room. Politically they were against woman suffrage and would politic against another representative from the Twin Cities who was in favor of it. The committee decided to focus on Furnishings and China for the following year. Carol was checkmated. She had thought she could plant a seed of liberalism in the blank wall of mediocrity that was GP. But the prevalent attitude of the community was The Republican Party, the Grand Old Party of Blaine and McKinley, is the agent of the Lord and of the Baptist Church. Carol had an intellectual interlude with guy Pollack, the town's lawyer. An intelligent, well-read attorney who was afflicted with the Village Virus, inability to face new challenges and different situations. One afternoon as a surprise, in their otherwise routine lives, Carol took coffee and cookies to Kennicott at his office. She observed that the waiting room was old and dilapidated and over his objection refurbished it and which he liked. She went with on a social visit to a farm family from which he was called for an emergency. A crushed arm, which he had to amputate with Carol giving the ether anesthesia. She thought he was great.

One day Bjornstam arrived at the house to cut some firewood. The job was long and Bjornstam was invited into the house for lunch with Carol and Bea. The afternoon was long with many visits by Miles to the kitchen to warm up. After a winter evening sleigh ride the group decided that they would form a dramatic society, the "Gopher Prairie Dramatic Association." They work long hours with many rehearsals and stage arrangements of the rented floor of h City Hall but to no avail. The play was a flop with the audience oozing out. Carol spent the next several years doing nothing. She arranged the wedding of Bea to Miles who had turned respectable and started a farm. There were many nasty comments about the marriage from the matrons of the town. Carol was appointed to the library-board. She went to her first meeting and was surprised that the Board members were well read and knowledgeable. She was disappointed when she discovered that they did not think that the library should be familiar to the whole town. She suggested that each Board member contribute fifteen dollars to purchase

a list of books that she had carefully crafted. There was complete rejection of the idea. For the rest of her two-year term, she had no future suggestions,

Kennicott had made some successful land deals and suggested that it might be time for her to have a baby. but there appeared no change in their drowsy relations, she forgot all about it, and life was planless. There was a visit to the town by “Chautauqua” for a week, but rather than being inspirational and educational it seemed to be a combination of vaudeville performance, Y.M.C.A. lecture, and the graduation exercises of an elocution class. Two weeks later the Great War broke out in Europe, but she was not too concerned about it since she was struggling with the sickness and fear of her pregnancy. The baby was born, without unusual difficulty. Named Hugh after her father and for two years nothing else existed. She refused to have the baby christened. Kennecott’s Aunt Bessie and Uncle Whittier arrived for a visit of indefinite length and to give unsolicited advice and counsel about how absurd her “notions” were. After, what seemed like an inordinately long period of time the Smail’s decided they would stay in GP and became local grocers.

With the baby she was content to talk about Hugh to Kennicott, Vida and the Brornstrams. Kennicott was motivated to establish the first child-welfare week held in GP. The entire town, including the Matrons participated. Because of their respectability she was embarrassed when she took Hugh to play with Olaf. There were changes in the town with some of the long-time residents moving to different locations and new people moving to take their place. There was rivalry in the Jolly Seventeen as the new tried to replace the old. The presence of the baby had made her take GP and the brown house seriously, as a natural place of residence. A major event was when Carol’s friend, Vida, the schoolteacher resigned from the high school and was married. There follows a long section about Vida’s crush on Kennicott years before and her jealousy about his new wife and how the relationship developed between her and her new spouse Raymie Witherspoon. While Carol was content with the routine chores of being a mother and a housewife, but she was lonely. She read an astonishing varied number of books. Her discontent with the life of Main Street increased upon seeing the more intelligent young people flee to the cities. She felt that the town was controlled by a sterile oligarchy of

old men. One afternoon Vida told Carol that she was not a reformer but an “imposibilist” wanting for things to occur immediately and not doing the work to get it done. A new school building had been agreed upon after years of badgering the influential individuals in the town without Carol. In a conversation with Perce Bresnahan, she disparaged small towns for being dull and uninteresting. His response was that the faults she found were human nature and present in big cities as well as small towns. Her marriage was foundering. She realized that she had not closely looked at her husband for over a year. His table manners, his clothing, his personal appearance all appalled her. They had little to say to each other, they were “talked out”. After a squabble about his friends’ behavior and in the heat of the summer Carrie decided she wanted to have a room of her own. She moved into the guest room. Made it her own. Kennicott did not object.

Carol’s main interest was in her walks with Hugh and visiting with the Bjornstrams and their son Olaf. Will objected to her talking to that “crank” and his “Swede hired girl” wife. Miles confided to Carol that he would always be a pariah, an agnostic to Bea’s Lutheran friends and radical to the merchants. On a visit Carol found Bea and Olaf sick, possibly from some contaminated well water. Carol nursed them for several weeks to no avail. A visitation by the Matrons of the town, to offer help was rebuffed by Miles, saying that they were too late. Bea waited for them when she was well, and they never came. Only Miles was at the funeral. Word in the town was that Miles drank too much and treated his family badly and that is why they died.

A new topic of conversation for the Jolly Seventeen was the arrival of Elizabeth in town. A worker in the tailor shop who dresses elegantly and speaks in a refined manner. He also likes poetry and reads books. He is made fun of by all the boys in town. At a very boring church service that she was attending she noticed a strange young man who was totally different from the surrounding crowd. He was “Elizabeth”, Erik Valborg the tailor’s apprentice. There was disparaging talk about his appearance and why he was not in the army. Carol while walking with Hugh encountered Erik and a relationship began, intellectual rather than physical but was the whisper event of the town, courtesy of Mrs. Westlake. Also, at the same time a new young

high school teacher, Fern Mullins, was staying with Mrs. Bogart. Fern consider Carol young and they became friends. She asked Carol to Chaperone a barn dance which she did not do. Fern went to the dance with Cy Bogart who stole some whiskey and became blind drunk Then the storm hit. The stories began generated by Mrs. Bogart (Mark twain: A lie can travel round the world while truth is putting on its shoes; Dr. Bartalo). Carol pleaded Fern's case before the school board, but Fern was forced to resign and leave town with dire consequences. A grand denouement occurred when Carol was out walking with Erik and Kennicott picked them up. They exploded in an exposition of their thoughts and feelings. A long trip to California did not change anything. Upon their return everything was bustling. The increased prosperity from the profits of the War brought a hustler came to town who exclaimed how GP could become a booming center of commerce. Kennicott was impressed Carol was not. An organizer for the National Nonpartisan League was run out of town without being allowed to speak. A major disagreement occurred between Carol and Kennicott and she announced that she was taking Hugh and leaving. After a month of bitter bickering Carrie left. She found a job in Washington, D.C. and an apartment with roommates. She met many varied people and found out the GP in comparison to many other towns was a "model of daring color, clever planning, and frenzied intellectuality". After about a year in Washington she happily encountered GP residents Harry and Juanita Haydock. They spent the afternoon together catching up on the news, including that Cy Bogart had the flu but was too mean to die. After thirteen months Kennicott came for a visit. They toured the south and had a two-week honeymoon. Will told Carol that he wanted her back but that she had to make the decision herself. She returned after another 5 months much more satisfied and content with GP. "I do not admit that dish-washing is enough to satisfy all women! I have not fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith."

The book became a hit, best seller and made Sinclair Lewis famous. It is a dispiriting tale of a young woman who wished to live a fairy tale life where she could make everything beautiful but ran into reality and the need to accommodate rather than to change.





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1, Why did Carol marry Will Kennicott and why did Kennicott marry Carol?
- 2, Satire can be described as the art of oversimplification, or a literary work in which vices, follies, abuses, etc. are held up to ridicule or contempt (Webster Dict.). Many reviewers of *Main Street* describe it as a satire of small-town America. How do you see it?
- 3, What did Vida mean when she told Carol that she was not a sound reformer at all but an "impossibilist" (p 222). Do you agree or disagree with her assessment?
- 4, What did Carol see in Erik Valborg?
5. Mark twain said," A lie can travel round the world while truth is putting on its shoes". What could the School Board have done differently after Mrs. Bogart's description of Fran Mullins behavior with Cy Bogart?
6. What did Carrie learn in Washington that allowed her to go back to Gopher Prairie and continue her marriage with Kennicott?
7. How were Sinclair Lewis' socialist views expressed in the book?