

Main street:the myopic nature of gopher prairie

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Small towns are often depicted as serene and bucolic places filled with caring people. Gopher Prairie appears, at first glance, to be one of these towns. But through the trials of Carol Kennicott the true nature of these towns is exposed. In this town the people are narrow-minded and despise outside influences. Carol is a young woman with great ambition who marries a doctor from Gopher Prairie. Some of the town's citizens; including Carol, Fern Mullins, and Miles Bjornstam, are individual thinkers who do not wish to conform to the ways of Gopher Prairie. When they try to keep their foreign ways this quaint prairie town turns into a vile place filled with rejection and prejudice towards them. The town and its Village Virus essentially suck the life out of Carol by the end of the novel. In *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis suggests through social setting, tone, imagery, and satire, that the myopic nature of Gopher Prairie can overwhelm individuals and crush their ideas, creating a truly tragic environment. As its natives are unwilling to accept change, Gopher Prairie has become isolated and its views are myopic. As Carol and Kennicott first arrive in Gopher Prairie, Carol is stricken with an unwavering sense of fear and hopelessness. She feels that there is no hope for her to fit in or to realize her goal of reforming the town. As she explores the town further, " she realized the vastness and emptiness of the land" (48). As she is noticing this, Lewis juxtaposes Carol and another young girl named Bea Sorenson, who is enlightened by what she perceives as an oasis of culture and modern society. Bea was a farm girl who desired city life, so she moved to Gopher Prairie. Lewis uses satire like this to show that the natives of the area believe that Gopher Prairie is a wonderful modern town, when in actuality it is an archaic town that doesn't change. As Carol

proceeds to meet the town's folk, she realizes that they are quite uncultured and have a bitterness towards outsiders. Later in the novel, Carol and Kennicott take an extensive vacation and when she returns nothing has changed. Carol thinks to herself, " she was back home! Nothing had changed. She had never been away" (429). Through this diction, Lewis suggests the futility of Carol's hopes that Gopher Prairie will change. Though she is not defeated at this point, her ideas are still being oppressed by the single-minded entity made up of the unchanging residents of Gopher Prairie. These citizens who oppress Carol attack any idea which come from the outside world and which do not fit their everlasting ideals. The people of the town cling to their religion and their morals as the only truths in the world; a world, which they believe, is being corrupted by the reformers. They fear what they do not comprehend and they lash out at those who bring these changes. An example of this exists in the book club they have created known as Thanatopsis. This word means meditation on death, which is satirical when used in reference to a book club. In this club they only read things like biographies which provoke no original thoughts. Carol takes a chance and arranges a play and acting group. These town's people all want to do plays which rely on their morals to portray a story. When Carol suggests a play that is more enlightening they deem it atheist and untactful. People whom exist in Gopher Prairie such as Carol and Miles Bjornstam are called things like anarchists and atheists. Town folks have extreme views on these types of people. Dave Dyer even goes as far as to say " ' what they ought to do is simply to hang everyone of these agitators, and that would settle the whole thing right off' " (66). The tone of this passage is dark and brutal. As is the

townspeople's views on anyone who have thoughts that exist beyond the limits of their moral and righteous minds. Everyone in the town, save Carol, Miles, and a few others, use gossip and religion as the only truths in the universe. This over reliance on personal opinions as truth causes many problems within Gopher Prairie. Because of their myopic views, the residents of Gopher Prairie use gossip as truth. They consume the half-truths which they feed each other, and use them to formulate their own opinions on people. Soon after the play fiasco, Miles Bjornstam marries Bea and they have a son together. He tries his best to fit into Gopher Prairie society but they do not truly accept him. He was seen as " the Red Swede" for so long that he has become an outcast. Miles attempts to succumb to the Village Virus for the sake of his family, but it is futile. When Bea and his son die from typhoid Miles is once again alienated and is eventually excreted from Gopher Prairie. Gossip rages about what really happened to Bea and his son. In a conversation with Carol, Juanita Haydock says. " ' too bad about Bea... 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' " (341). This shows the irony of the town's peoples knowledge, because it clearly contradicts what is known fact in the novel. Miles was none of the things that Juanita proclaimed, and in reality he was a great father. Gopher Prairie defeats all that oppose its ideals with its gossip. For through this gossip, it demonizes individual thinkers so that they become social outcasts. This alienation is a sign of the town's ignorance to foreign ideas, because only those who bring an influx of new ideas are outcast. Conformity, this is the true nature of Gopher Prairie, and those which oppose this order are forever

seen as outsiders in the town. Fern was a young teacher who comes to the town and brings her modern ways with her. She is seen as strange at first and is looked down upon by some. Then Cyrus Bogart attempts to sleep with her, which turns into date rape. Ms. Bogart believes that she has kept Cy innocent, and that he is not capable of such an act. She places the blame on Fern and says she tried to force herself on Cy, because to Ms. Bogart, Fern is an outsider who brings corruption into the bucolic, tranquil town of Gopher Prairie. By doing this she permanently slanders Fern's name and causes her to be outcast from the town. When Miles is first introduced he is also an outcast and is demonized by gossip solely because he does not function in sync with the ever-conforming nature of Gopher Prairie. In one of his first conversations with Carol, Miles says to her " ' I guess. I'm the town badman, Mrs. Kennicott: town atheist, and I suppose I must be an anarchist, too. Everybody who doesn't love the bankers and the Grand Old' Republican Party is an anarchist' " (133). This passage explains how the non-conformists are treated in a community such as Gopher Prairie. They are truly outcast from not only the physical limits of the town but they are also thrown from the social setting of Gopher Prairie. When isolation or even the fear of being an outcast becomes too much to handle, the Village Virus can set in. This is what truly brings about Carol's demise. The Village Virus, the figurative contagion that runs in the veins of every Gopher Prairie native who conforms to the town's ideals, and can take hold of the outsiders who are defeated by the town. Miles fights this infection off as long as he can. It is only when his family dies and he has lost everything that he gives in and becomes a victim of the virus. Guy Polluck, a lawyer in Gopher Prairie, is an individual thinker

who believes it is futile to fight the Village Virus. He resigns his individuality and conforms without a fight. Guy realizes that there is no fighting the ways of the town. Carol on the other hand doesn't give up her ways until the last few pages of the novel, when she realizes her defeat. In these pages she tells Kennicott, " ' I'll go on, always. And I am happy. But this Community Day makes me see how thoroughly I'm defeated' " (471). This characterizes Carol as being affected by the Village Virus. It also reveals the tragic nature of her life. At the start of the novel, we see that she is filled with ambitions and hope, then slowly we see her begin to grind down into the defeated reformist at the end of the novel. Her dreams are seen to be futile against the overwhelming nature of Gopher Prairie. Carol's life is truly tragic in the sense that her dreams are never fulfilled. It is ironic that the place, which she had hoped to reform, is the place that tore her down and annihilated her ambitions. Gopher Prairie was a dream come true for Carol at the beginning of the novel; that ended as she realized the vicious nature of the town. No one there has original thoughts, and the conformists and their myopic views alienate the ones that do. The truly tragic nature of this is that nothing will ever change in Gopher Prairie without an influx of new ideas, which is ironic because these ideas inspire fear in the residents of the town. Tragic loss of individuality: the true effect of conformity, which is Gopher Prairies overwhelming true nature.