

# Explication de texte of main street by sinclair lewis

Politics



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

I. SUBJECT Carol Milford is a student of Blodgett College, and the protagonist of Main Street by Sinclair Lewis. Her ambition is to settle down in a prairie village and transform it into a place of beauty. She works as a librarian at St. Paul after her graduation. She marries the doctor Kennicott, whom she met at a friend's house. Life in Gopher Prairie offers no challenges. Kennicott takes her on a long tour to California and other places. Carol returns to Gopher Prairie and tries to be enthusiastic about the town but feels tired of the hypocrisy and decides to leave.

Kennicott feels distressed and she assures him that she would come back if she is able to find out what she needs. She works in Washington for two years. Kennicott visits her in Washington to woo her for the second time. Carol mellows and admits her desire to return to Gopher Prairie. Kennicott asks her to return only when she is prepared. She talks to the leader of the suffrage movement who tells her that she cannot achieve anything without total dedication.

She convinces Carol that she can play at least a small role in changing life by persistently asking questions whenever she finds anything that hinders social change. Her life in Washington helps her to acquire a mature outlook towards life and is at last able to accept Gopher Prairie and its people as they are, but she does not give up her fight to make Gopher Prairie a better place. She gives birth to a daughter and feels optimistic that her daughter will carry on the fight that she had started and witness a united world. II.

THEME

The main theme of the story is rebellion and reformation. The rebellion is against materialism, lack of equality between the rich and the poor, the ugliness of the town, its narrow-mindedness and its prejudices. Carol wants to reform the town by teaching the people to appreciate poetry and to surround themselves with beauty and by teaching them to play. She tries to put up a play, read poetry to Kennicott and campaign for a new city hall, school and a better rest room and also by organizing parties and games. Though she cannot bring about any radical changes, her triumph lies in putting up a fight and keeping her faith. Main Street brings to light the discontent of the protagonist because of her inability to bring about a change in the attitudes of the people of Gopher Prairie. She appreciates beauty of simplicity. She believes that life should uphold the virtues of equality and freedom. She disapproves of exploitation. Therefore she opposes the industrialization which wipes out the beauty of the land and the spirit of adventure of the pioneers of America. She also rebels against the exploitation of the farmers and the laborers.

She incurs the wrath of the matrons of Gopher Prairie by paying six dollars a week to her maid and also by justifying the wages by pointing out that the job they did is very tedious. She insists that the rest room for the farmer's wives should have better facilities, because it brought the farmer's business to the merchants of the town. The reforms she proposes are very simple. She wants beautiful buildings. She wants to cultivate the taste of the people. She wants to teach the farmer's wives the proper way to care for their babies and to make good stew.

She suggests setting up an employment bureau so that they will not depend on charity. The women of Gopher Prairie snigger at Carol's suggestions. They oppose the idea of empowering the poor women to be self-sufficient because that will deny them the chance to be charitable. When Carol suggests that they should mend the clothes before handing them out as charity, the women pounce once again on Carol and overrule the suggestion as unnecessary because it would encourage those women to be lazy. Carol feels frustrated by this mindlessness.

Hence she leaves Gopher Prairie so that she can find out what she can achieve in life. In Washington, she gains the objectivity necessary for any reformer. She gains courage and learns how to direct her energy to effect changes, and returns to Gopher Prairie reconciled. The minor theme of the novel is that marriage is not to be taken lightly. Carol does not accept the institution of marriage blindly. Her expectations and demands as a wife are juxtaposed with the other wives in Gopher Prairie. Her rebellion seeps into her personal life as well and makes it so much the better for it.

III. DICTION Sinclair Lewis has a vivid style. His description of nature provides the appropriate background for the mood of the characters. When Carol goes out for a walk with Erik they pass a grove of "scrub poplars... looming now like a menacing wall" (392). When she is with Kennicott beside the lake she watches "long grass... mossy bogs and red winged black birds" (57). When she is brooding she sees gray fields closing in on her. He uses verbs very effectively. Carol "perceives" when she observes something seriously.

When she is upset with Kennicott for forgetting to give her money, she “ commands” him to come upstairs because she does not wish to discuss the matter in the presence of company and Kennicott “ clumps” after her. His use of satire is very effective and adds color to his narration. Carol watches a professional play, which to her is boringly ordinary in all aspects and finds the audience lapping it up. She comments sarcastically that “ the only trouble with *The Girl from Kankakee* is that it is too subtle for *Gopher Prairie*” (225). The description of the idiosyncrasies of the occupants of *Gopher Prairie* is full of humor.

When Raymie praises about the trust of Kennicott’s patients in the doctor comments wryly, “ It’s me that got to do all the trusting”, and in a dramatic aside, whispers to Carol “ gentleman hen” (59). When Kennicott is excited about the motor trip he expects Carol “ to be effusive about academic questions as ‘ now I wonder if we could stop at Baraboo... ’” (196). Kennicott’s faith in cars is a “ high-church cult with electric sparks for candles, and Piston rings become the alter-vessels” and “ liturgy” composed of “ intoned and metrical road comments” (196).

The plot moves through a combination of dialogue and narrative. With minor pauses in some seemingly meaningless conversation, the diction shows the inner workings in Carol’s mind and throughout the other characters of *Gopher Prairie*, such as Vida who was a devout Christian. The narrative half of the plot gives insight characterization. For instance, she says this to no one, but Vida had considered her moment with “ Professor’ George Edwin

Mott" somehow naughty, and thought that she was "superior... to have kept her virginity" (251).

The diction upholds the subject and theme through the usage of words such as "reformer", "suffragist", and other choice words involving civil rights. It relates to Carol's constant want to change the town of Gopher Prairie, and the other reformations happening in Washington, D. C. and the opposition she faces in her town, and in her own home. In times of despair, she finds her surroundings closing in around her: "She saw the furniture as a circle of elderly judges condemning her to death by smothering" (31). IV. TONE

The atmosphere of hostility is produced by the conflict between Carol's desire to change the town and the town's resistance to Carol's ideas. She is bewildered and hurt by the rebukes and rebuttals. Carol develops the right attitudes necessary for a reformer in the last three chapters of the novel.

This helps her to face life with more sympathy, tolerance and hope. V.

SYMBOLISM Carol's interests in trains, books, and nature all symbolize her desire to escape the narrow confines Gopher Prairie. In Chapter 19, she daydreams about taking a train to escape the town.

In Chapter 22, she escapes the town mentally through reading a number of books. Beginning in Chapter 5, she finds natural beauty in the countryside that she does not find in town. Indeed, throughout the novel, Carol often takes walks and spends time in the countryside in order to escape Gopher Prairie. In Chapter 2 and Chapter 38, Kennicott shows his wife pictures of Gopher Prairie as he attempts to court her and convince her return to the

town. In Chapter 2, Carol sees only "streaky" pictures of "trees, shrubbery, a porch indistinct in leafy shadows, [and] lakes" (18).

The fact that she sees the pictures in Chapter 2 as "streaky" and "indistinct" symbolizes her detachment from the community. However, in Chapter 38, she sees her own house and familiar faces in the photographs, symbolizing her connection to the town. As Lewis indicates in his preface, Gopher Prairie represents a microcosm of America in the early twentieth century. Lewis creates many characters as exaggerations, or typical, rather than individuals, to suggest that the people and institutions found in Gopher Prairie can be found anywhere. By criticizing Gopher Prairie, Lewis therefore attacks American society as a whole.

Carol and Vida seem to be foils in that Carol is a reformer, whereas Vida is the representation of a society reluctant to let go of their ways. Though in a passage Vida thinks that she is, "and always will be, a reformer, a liberal" (253), she puts lie to this statement at the beginning of the chapter: she displays as much open-mindedness as a nun when Lewis writes that "[s]he hated even the sound of the word 'sex'... and prayed to Jesus...addressing him as her eternal lover" (251). Carol, on the other hand, indeed does try to bring reform to the town.

She tries to bring beauty and culture, but is met by the bulwark of Gopher Prairie. Yet still she pushes on, introducing a professional play, music and poetry. Despite all her attempts, she still fails. Though some battles cannot be won, she wants to give her fighting spirit to her daughter. VI. SPEAKER

The speaker of Main Street is in third person, who is omniscient of the

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happenings and minds of the citizens of Gopher Prairie. VII. STRUCTURE The novel is divided into six parts, plot-wise. The first part introduces Carol, the heroine of the novel.

The second part deals with her marriage and elaborates on her fears of life as the wife of Dr. Kennicott in the small prairie town. The third part describes her house warming party in which Carol makes a statement about her taste and attitude followed by the details of the trials and tribulations of Carol as a reformer of the smug town. The fourth part is the thirty-sixth chapter, which may be called the climax of the story because Carol walks out of her marriage and Gopher Prairie. The following two chapters form the fifth part which describes Carol's work in

Washington, her reconciliation to life in Gopher Prairie and it also reunites Carol and Kennicott. The physical construction of the novel consists of a yellow and black cover, with a small portrait of the author in the approximate middle. It is four hundred and fifty-one pages, divided into thirty-nine chapters, which are then sub-divided; both are numbered by Roman numerals. Preceding the story is a miniature biography of the author (viii) and a small preface that explains Gopher Prairie is a small pocket of America, but America nonetheless, whose citizens are set in their ways.

VIII. IMAGERY This is an example of personification: " the land humming" (139). This describes the beauty of the land around Gopher Prairie and inspires Carol, since she wants to make the town just as beautiful through her reforms. This is an example of a simile: " Kennicott was as fixed in routine as an isolated old man" (291). With the use of " as", Kennicott is

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compared an old man being set in his ways. An example of antithesis would be that when Kennicott, before his marriage to Carol, had put his arm around Vida “ carelessly”. While she strained away, she longed to move nearer to him” (251). In this example of personification, “ the deep-bosomed bed stiffened in disgust” (32) at having such an extravagant shirt laid on it. In the same paragraph, the said “ chemise and lace was a hussy” (32) and seemed overly lavish in the simple house in which Carol lived. In this conceit, Lewis writes that “[a] village is...a force seeking to dominate the earth, drain the hills and seas of color” (267).

He is saying that such a village drains the world of its natural beauty, to be replaced by man-made materialistic things, with a standard style. Anything else would seem out of place. Carol calls the people who live in the Northern Midwest “ pioneers, these sweaty wayfarers” (24). They have just begun to build a society in that area, and she thinks that such an area has much hope. When Dr. Kennicott takes Carol hunting, she wonders why he hasn’t fired when a “ crash” sounded and “ two birds turned somersaults in the air, plumped down” (55). Such is an example of onomatopoeia.