

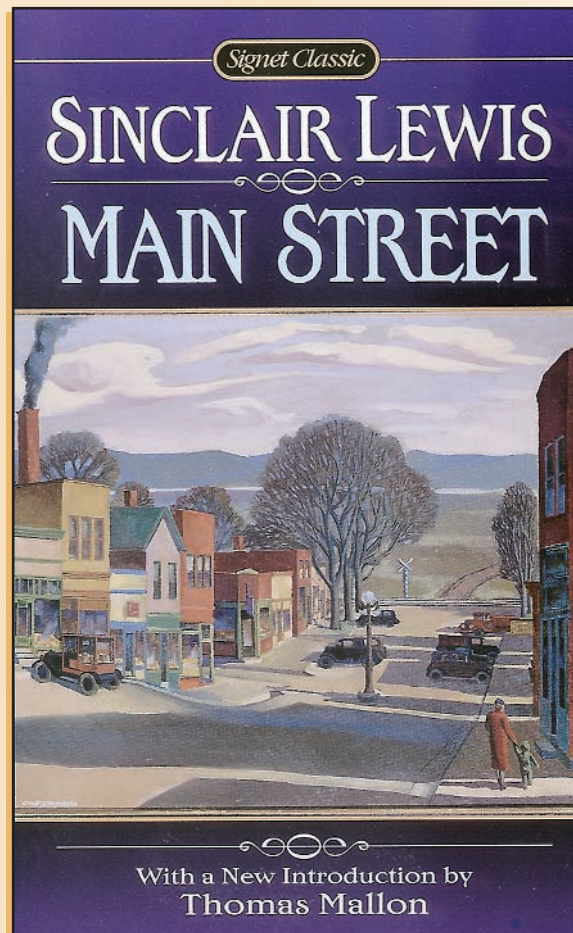


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSIC EDITION OF

SINCLAIR LEWIS'S

# MAIN STREET

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## INTRODUCTION

Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, published in 1920, was not expected to be a commercial success. Lewis felt it would sell 10,000 copies, and his publisher predicted a run of 20,000 would be adequate. In the first six months of 1921, it sold 180,000 copies.

The novel is set in Gopher Prairie, roughly based on Sauk Centre, Minnesota, Lewis's hometown. In his article from the *Boston Globe*, "Dropping by Main Street 60 Years Later," Charles E. Claffey writes: *Main Street* at first evoked wrath in this town and its environs. In nearby Alexandria it was banned; the *Sauk Centre Herald* kept editorial silence for five months before noting in its edition of March 13, 1921: "A perusal of the book makes it possible for one to picture in his mind's eyes local characters having been injected bodily into the story."

Sinclair Lewis became *persona non grata* in Sauk Centre for many years, but gradually, the town forgave him, and he remains a cottage industry. Lewis, however, never really came to terms with the town of his youth. After he died in Rome, his brother Dr. Claude Lewis decided to use Lewis's funeral urn as a memorial rather than bury it in the ground. As he opened the urn, a gust of wind sent the ashes flying. According to town lore Charles Corrigan, the mortician, commented, "Well, Lewis got away from this town after all."

The novel examines the homogenizing influence of small town life, how it kills cultural diversity, and how hunger for money prevents its residents from pursuing insider interests. *Main Street* also deals with the struggles in developing a new relationship—whether private as in a marriage or public as with society—and the compromises necessary to adapt an individual personality to make the relationship successful. Adolescents can relate to the idea of being outsiders and should enjoy responding to changes in the main character. Because of the mature nature of the novel's themes as well as its parallels to the struggles of early 20th-century America, *Main Street* is recommended for students of American Literature in senior high school or college.

## ABOUT THIS TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide contains four sections: Before Reading the Novel, While Reading the Novel, After Reading the Novel, and a Bibliography. The pre-reading activities involve and engage students, preparing them to read this mature work. "While Reading the Novel" guides students during their reading. Organized by chapters, it provides questions, historical notes and allusions, vocabulary study, quotations, and assorted activities. Although every chapter does not necessarily incorporate each of these features, there are ample suggestions to encourage reading and to enhance understanding. Numbers in parentheses refer to the page number in the Signet Classic edition of *Main Street*.

Questions may be used for whole-class discussion, for individual writing, or group activities. Historical Notes/Allusions can aid understanding of matters that are generally remote for today's readers. Vocabulary Words are listed with the page number of their first use in the text. Many of these words are slang from the 1920s. When possible, students should ascertain definitions through context. Less able students may benefit from a review of these words prior to their reading of the respective chapters, while more able readers may be able to handle them when encountered in context. Quotations, like the Questions, may be discussed by the whole class or handled in small groups or individually. Activities are suggested from which the teacher or students may choose. It would be too time-consuming to use all the activities. Also, some may be delayed for use as part of the post-reading experiences. After Reading the Novel helps pull together the reading experience through an examination of themes. Finally, a bibliography assists those who wish to pursue interests more extensively.

## OVERVIEW

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

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**CAROL MILFORD KENNICOTT:** central character of the novel; determined to change Gopher Prairie into the small town of her dreams despite the wishes of the townspeople

**WILL KENNICOTT:** young town doctor; Carol's husband

**BEA SORENSON:** Scandinavian housekeeper for the Kennicotts; marries Miles Bjornstam Sam Clark; president of the school board

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RAYMIE WUTHERSPOON: war hero who is considered “artistic” by other Gopher Prairians Vida Sherwin; “old-maid schoolteacher” who had a brief affair with Kennicott; marries Raymie Wutherspoon

GUY POLLOCK: described as “gray”; Carol’s first flirtation

MRS. (MA) BOGART: Carol’s nosy, gossipy neighbor

MILES BJORNSTAM: town rebel, also known as “The Red Swede.”

THE JOLLY SEVENTEEN: exclusive women’s club in Gopher Prairie

JUANITA HAYDOCK: a gossipy busybody

THE THANATOPSIS: a study group for women in Gopher Prairie

MISS VILLETS: the town librarian

MRS. LEONARD WARREN: the president of Thanatopsis

MRS. DAVE DYER (MAUD): woman who has an affair with Will Kennicott

MR. AND MRS. CHAMP PERRY: town establishment; an older couple who remember the pioneer days of Gopher Prairie

MRS. LYMAN CASS: established townswoman who finds local gossip more interesting and taxes too high already to improve the city hall building

MR. DAWSON: town millionaire who sees no reason to change the town; plans to move to Pasadena

HUGH KENNICOTT: Carol’s first baby

AUNT BESSIE AND UNCLE WHITTIER: Will’s relatives who come to live in Gopher Prairie and are immediately accepted into the town

OLAF BJORNSTAM: Bea’s and Miles’s son, voted “Best Baby” in Gopher Prairie by Carol, despite their blue-collar status

CY BOGART: Ma Bogart’s mean-spirited teenager who ruins Fern Mullins’s reputation

PERCY BRESNEHAN: former Gopher Prairie resident, now millionaire president of Velvet Motor Car Company of Boston

OSCARINA: the Kennicotts’ maid after Bea gets married

MRS. SWIFTWAITE: new seamstress and target of gossip

MRS. FLICKERBAUGH: eccentric town curmudgeon who is alienated by the town, in whom Carol can see her own unhappy, lonely future

ERIK VALBORG: new tailor, mocked and called “Elizabeth” by townspeople for his snappy dress and extravagant behavior; Carol’s most serious flirtation

FERN MULLINS: new young schoolteacher whose reputation is ruined by Cy Bogart and who is run out of town

MRS. WESTLAKE: woman who befriends Carol then betrays her confidence by relaying their conversations to others

MYRTLE CASS: young woman whose father owns a flour mill; Carol is jealous of her flirting with Erik Valborg

JAMES BLAUSSER: land speculator and recent transplant, who volunteers to head the campaign to promote Gopher Prairie.

## BEFORE READING THE NOVEL

### LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

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1. Research the slang of the 1920s. How is it similar to today’s slang? Which words or expressions do we still use? Why have they endured? How does it differ? How does slang reflect its culture?
  2. Make a list of today’s slang expressions. Which will still be used in 50 years? Why will they last? Of those that will not endure, why?
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**RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

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1. Research the women's suffrage movement. How did it change how women were regarded by society? How did it affect the way women thought about themselves? How did it affect the American family structure?
2. Research the major political, intellectual, and social figures of the first decade of the twentieth century. How do these people reflect values of the era? How do those values differ today?
3. In the Introduction to the novel, Thomas Mallon asserts, "Calvin Coolidge presided over the Roaring Twenties like a Latin teacher manning the punch bowl...a Puritan in Babylon." First, determine the meaning of his analogy. Then, research Calvin Coolidge and the 1920s to support or refute his analogy.
4. Research socialism of the early 1900s. Why were Midwesterners afraid of socialism?

**THEMATIC ACTIVITIES**

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1. You have a friend who is moving to a small town in another state. What will your friend need to do socially to become a part of that town? What advice will you give?
2. How do you decide whether or not you like an individual after an initial meeting?
3. If you could change one thing about your home town, what would it be? How would you get others interested in helping? How would you implement that change?
4. Develop a brochure to interest people in moving to your home town. Highlight its most positive features. Also, acknowledge its problems.
5. Design your ideal town. First, decide what businesses, organizations, and services your town will need. Design the town layout, creating street names and locations. Write the town history and illustrate the architecture of buildings.
6. Listen to the "Lake Wobegon" portion of *A Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor's NPR radio program. How does he portray its citizens, culture, and mores?

**WHILE READING THE NOVEL****PREFACE AND CHAPTER 1****QUESTIONS**

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1. What is Lewis's purpose in showing Carol as a solitary figure in section I of this chapter? What is your impression of her?
2. Who are Voltaire, Darwin, and Robert Ingersoll? (17) Why would their ideas be thought of as heretical?
3. What influenced Carol while growing up?
4. Why does she abandon her dream in favor of becoming a librarian?
5. Why does she feel unfulfilled in her librarian's job and in her intellectual life? Give examples of her dissatisfaction.
6. What rekindles Carol's dream of small town improvement?

**VOCABULARY**

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bulwark (17): protector, like a fortress

heresies (17): sinful ideas; ideas that contradict religious doctrine

"twosing" (18): going out in pairs

Bostoned (18): dancing the Boston, a popular dance of the 1920s

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mastiff (20): dog-like

malevolent (22): evil

ferruginous (23): resembling rust in color

somniferous (25): sleep-inducing, boring

propinquity (27): proximity; nearness

## QUOTATIONS

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The following may be used as points for discussion, response starters, writing analysis, or other creative assignments.

“What’s better than making a comfy home and bringing up some cute kids and knowing nice homey people?” (25)

“No! No! You’re a dear, but I want to do things. I don’t understand myself, but I want—everything in the world! Maybe I can’t sing or write, but I know I can be an influence in library work. Just suppose I encouraged some boy and he became a great artist! I will! I will do it! Stewart dear, I can’t settle down to nothing but dish-washing!” (25)

## HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS

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Section V alludes to Sappho and the captains of Zenobia. (25) Research this in Greek literature and relate what you learn to Carol’s response.

Section VI contains a “photograph” of the trends of Carol’s day. (25-6) References include Studio Parties, beer/cigarettes, bobbed hair, Bohemians, Freud, Romain Rolland, syndicalism, the Confederation Generale du Travail, feminism vs. haremism, Chinese lyrics, nationalization of mines, and Christian Science. Research these in small groups. How are they reflections of the culture, especially the changes in women’s roles?

## ACTIVITIES

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1. Read Lewis’ prefatory remarks immediately preceding Chapter 1 (p. xv). Rewrite this in your own words considering the following questions: What governs the ways of the town? How is Main Street (anywhere) the “climax of civilization”?
2. As a continuing exercise throughout the novel, keep a journal logging your impressions of Carol after each chapter. Make sure to cite examples from the novel.
3. View a video of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story “Bernice Bobs Her Hair.” Compare Bernice’s lifestyle to Carol’s. How is she like Bernice? How does she differ?

## CHAPTER 2

### QUESTIONS

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1. What makes Will attractive to Carol?
  2. How does Will make Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, appealing to Carol? According to Will, what are the people like?
  3. How does the poor quality of the photographs Will brings affect Carol’s impression of Gopher Prairie?
  4. What convinces her to marry Will and move to Gopher Prairie? Why are Will’s persuasive efforts different (and more successful) than Stewart Snyder’s?
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**VOCABULARY**

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making love (30): courting, flirting

**HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS**

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Section I contains two allusions: nymph and satyr, Elaine and Sir Lancelot. How do they add drama to the meeting of Will and Carol?

Marr'd as he was, he seem'd the goodliest man  
That ever among ladies ate in hall,  
And noblest, when she lifted up her eyes.  
However marr'd, of more than twice her years,  
Seam'd with an ancient swordcut on the cheek,  
And bruised and bronzed, she lifted up her eyes  
And loved him, with that love which was her doom.

—"Lancelot and Elaine,"  
from *Idylls of the King*  
by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

**CHAPTER 3****QUESTIONS**

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1. How do the towns along the train ride to Gopher Prairie appear to Carol?
2. How do the people on the train differ from the people in the towns? from each other?
3. What frustrates Carol about these prairie towns? How does she talk herself out of her irritation?
4. What is Carol's first impression of the townspeople of Gopher Prairie? What is it based on?
5. What do you think is Sinclair Lewis's opinion of small town mentality? Is he being ironic or disdainful? Give examples from the novel to support your opinion.

**VOCABULARY**

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slatternly (36): sloppy

stolid (37): immovable, unchanging

tumultuous (37): turbulent; agitated

stalwart (37): strong, brave, resolute

florid (39): excessively ornate; showy

vampire costume (39): sexy outfit—from the idea of the movie vamp, a seductive woman from the silent films.

plunks (44): dollars

Frau (44): wife (German)

brown study (44): a dark painting used to illustrate a heavy mood

prosaic (45): dull, mundane

"parking" (45) : driveway

lugubrious (45): depressing; gloomy

quavered (45): trembled; quivered

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**QUOTATIONS**

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"They do not read; apparently, they do not think. They wait." (35)

"Isn't there any way of waking them up?..."

"These people? Wake 'em up? What for? They're happy." (37)

"For the first time, she tolerated him rather than encouraged him." (38)

"Here—she meditated—is the newest empire of the world; the Northern Middlewest; a land of dairy herds and exquisite lakes, of new automobiles and tar-paper shanties and silos like red towers, of clumsy speech and a hope that is boundless. An empire which feeds a quarter of the world yet its work is merely begun." (39-40)

**ACTIVITIES**

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1. Write an internal monologue of one of the train's passengers. What is going through that person's mind? Why is this person on the train? Where is he/she going?
2. Write a conversation between a citizen of Gopher Prairie and one of his/her family members about Will Kennicott's new wife. Try to imitate Sinclair Lewis's ear for dialect.
3. Draw a split screen picture of Kennicott's house: half as he sees it, half as Carol sees it.

**CHAPTER 4****QUESTIONS**

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1. Note Sinclair Lewis's use of internal monologue in the beginning of this chapter. What purpose does it serve? How does it help define Carol's character? Her struggles?
2. What does Lac-qui-Meurt mean? How does that place name add dimension to Lewis's description of and Carol's thoughts about Kennicott's place?
3. Why does Carol think she can slip through the streets unnoticed in Gopher Prairie? How do the grocer's comments reflect the personality of the town?
4. Note the repetition in the description of the shops of Main Street. What does each description have in common? From whose perspective do we see the town? Carol's, Lewis's, or both? Give reasons for your response.
5. How do Carol's and Bea's views of Gopher Prairie differ? What accounts for the differences? Why does Bea's verbal response seem low-key?
6. What mistakes does Carol make at Sam Clark's party? Why does Carol think it is so dull?
7. What is unusual about Sam Clark's house and its furnishings? Why does Kennicott like them?

**VOCABULARY**

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nebulous (47): indistinct; cloudy

yourn (56): yours (dialect)

passemeteried (58): edged in fancy trim

vociferous (60): noisy

troglydyte (63): a rude beast

flivver (66): slang: small, cheap, usually old automobile

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**QUOTATIONS**

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“Which of these people whom she passed—now mere arrangements of hair and clothes—would turn to intimates, loved or dreaded, different from all the other people of the world?” (48)

“They were so small and weak, the little brown houses. They were shelters for sparrows, not homes for warm laughing people.” (49)

“She fought herself: ‘I must be wrong. People do live here. It can't be as ugly as—as I know it is! I must be wrong. But I can't do it. I can't go through with it.’” (53)

“She discovered that conversation did not exist in Gopher Prairie. Even at this affair, which brought out the young smart set, the hunting squire set, the respectable intellectual set, and the solid financial set, they sat up with gaiety as with a corpse.” (62)

“She panted, ‘They will be cordial to me, because my man belongs to their tribe. God help me if I were an outsider!’” (67)

**ACTIVITIES**

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1. Note Lewis's ability to record accents and dialect. Read a passage aloud to hear how Lewis captures the sound of speech. Tape record a conversation from your everyday life using dialect.
2. Tell about a time you felt out of place or describe an awkward situation.
3. Predict what Percy Bresnahan is like based on the boasting of Gopher Prairie citizens.
4. Reread the fable of the country mouse and the city mouse. Rewrite the story to reflect Carol's and Bea's experiences with Gopher Prairie.

**CHAPTER 5****QUESTIONS**

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1. Why does Carol want to go hunting with Kennicott?
2. What does Carol find in common with Raymie Wutherspoon?
3. How does the newspaper article about Sam Clark's party differ from Carol's perception?
4. What does Carol find comforting about living in Gopher Prairie? How does this affect the way she sees the town and its inhabitants? What still bothers her?
5. How is Vida Sherwin different from the other women of the town? What makes her attractive to Carol?
6. What are Vida's ideas about how Carol can change the town?

**VOCABULARY**

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Weltschmerz (72): sentimental sadness

effusively (74): gushily talkative

hwa pollwa (76): hoi polloi; Greek term meaning common folk

dogma (81): conviction or strong belief

Thanatopsis (81): a view or contemplation of death

rest-room (81): slang, a lounge—actually a place to rest and relax, not a bathroom.

jocular (83): witty, humorous

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**QUOTATION**

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"I'm afraid you'll think I'm conservative. I am! So much to conserve. All this treasure of American ideals. Sturdiness and democracy and opportunity...." (82)

**ACTIVITIES**

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1. Reread Raymie's comments regarding literature and movies. (75) Do you agree or disagree with him? Give reasons for your response.
2. Illustrate Vida drawing upon the description of her. (80)

**CHAPTER 6****QUESTIONS**

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1. How does Kennicott react to the renovation? How does the rest of the town?
2. What is Mrs. Bogart's true intention in visiting Carol? List her indirect insults.
3. What irritates Carol about the family finances? How is this a gender issue?
4. How is Carol's party similar to Sam Clark's? How is it different? What do the guests think of the differences (both publicly and privately)? How does her party affect future parties?

**VOCABULARY**

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gadding (86): being on the go for no real reason

spendthrift (89): one who spends lots of money

calyx (90): green leafy part of a flower

superciliousness (92): scornfulness with an air of superiority

vicarious (92): living or experiencing through another's actions

apoplectic (95): like a stroke; liable to fits of rage

**QUOTATIONS**

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"There are in every large chicken-yard a number of old and indignant hens who resemble Mrs. Bogart, and when they are served at Sunday noon dinner, as fricasseed chicken with thick dumplings, they keep up the resemblance." (85)

"It was twenty minutes later when Mrs. Bogart finally oozed out the front door. Carol ran back into the living-room and jerked open the windows. 'That woman has left damp fingerprints in the air,' she said." (86-7)

"Daily she determined, 'But I must have a stated amount—be business-like. System. I must do something about it.' And daily she didn't do anything about it." (89)

"Even the dancers were gradually crushed by the invisible force of fifty perfectly pure and well-behaved and negative minds; and they sat down, two by two. In twenty minutes the party again was elevated to the decorum of a prayer-meeting." (91)

**ACTIVITY**

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1. Plan a party you think the people of Gopher Prairie would enjoy. Include a menu, activities, and decorations.
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**CHAPTER 7****QUESTIONS**

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1. What is your opinion of Carol's poem? How does Lewis's inclusion of the actual lines shed an objective light on her personality?
2. What are the implications of Carol being a "woman with a working brain and no work"? (101) What are her options? How does she feel about these options?
3. How do the townswomen feel about Scandinavians?
4. What mistakes does Carol make at the Jolly Seventeen meeting? How does she try to make up for those errors? Whom does she offend and how?

**VOCABULARY**

---

lucidity (102): clarity; clearness

guffawed (103): laughed heartily

prodigality (103): reckless extravagance

sirocco (104): a strong, hot wind

supplication (104): apology; begging forgiveness

peroration (107): a lecture; speaking at length

**HISTORICAL NOTE**

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The only acceptable options for an upper-class wife in the Midwest in the 1920s were: "having children; starting her career of reforming; or becoming so definitely a part of the town that she would be fulfilled by the activities of a church and study club and bridge parties." (101)

**ACTIVITIES**

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1. Create a telephone conversation between two of the women present at the Jolly Seventeen meeting about Carol's behavior. What do they think of her? Role play the conversation with a partner.
2. Write a conversation between Bea and one of her friends about Carol and role play it. What is Bea's opinion of Carol?

**CHAPTER 8****QUESTIONS**

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1. How does Will respond to Carol's attempts to find out about his work? How does that reflect his opinion of her?
2. According to Vida Sherwin's report, what are some of Carol's faults? Is Vida really Carol's friend?
3. Why isn't Will bothered by Carol's feeling criticized by the town?

**VOCABULARY**

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debacle (111): sudden downfall or collapse

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**QUOTATION**

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"I wonder if you understand that in a secluded community like this every newcomer is on test? People cordial to her but watching her all the time." (111)

**CHAPTER 9****QUESTIONS**

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1. Why does Carol go to Axel Egge's store? What comforts her about his store?
2. How does Kennicott's oblivion to the town's opinion of Carol affect her feelings toward him?
3. How does Will's mother restore Carol's confidence?
4. How does Carol's confidence affect her view of Gopher Prairie and the news she hears?
5. Is the narration of this novel objective? Defend your answer.
6. Why won't Carol go out without Kennicott?

**VOCABULARY**

---

roués (119): villains

Hoochi-Koochi (119): a seductive dance

mollycoddles (119): weaklings

charivari (120): a mock serenade with noisemakers for newlyweds

anecdotal (124): full of stories

**QUOTATIONS**

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"She had tripped into the meadow to teach the lambs a pretty educational dance and found the lambs were wolves." (116)

"She could not go on enduring the hidden derision. She wanted to flee. She wanted to hide in the generous indifference of cities." (116)

**ACTIVITIES**

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1. Give examples of friendly rudeness practiced by the merchants of Gopher Prairie. Cite examples of this behavior from your own experience.
2. Using the language of today's youth, rewrite the young roués scene from section II. Perform the scene.

**CHAPTER 10****QUESTIONS**

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1. What does Carol hope to accomplish by making tea?
  2. What kind of afternoon did Bea describe? What is the relationship between the two women?
  3. How does Carol feel about Guy Pollock? Which of his qualities is most attractive to her?
  4. Why does Sinclair Lewis associate Guy Pollock with gray? What does he do at the Kennicotts'?
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5. How is the immigrants' side of town different from Main Street?
6. How is talking to Miles Bjornstam a relief for Carol?
7. How does Miles differ from the other people? Who does he see himself as similar to? What does he do to ensure that he remains a pariah?
8. In what ways does the town exhibit prejudice? In what ways is Carol prejudiced?
9. What do the Kennicotts do after Will fails at poetry appreciation? How does Carol respond to the movie?
10. At the Jolly Seventeen what do the members of the group expect Carol to share? Why?
11. Why is it important to Juanita (and Gopher Prairie) to have "cunning and original" ideas that are "not too queer or freaky or anything"?

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### VOCABULARY

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conciliate (128): to win over

scarlet tanager (130): a brilliant red and black woodland bird

caste (131): social division

pariah (132): social outcast

sacerdotal (136): priestly

polemic (139): controversial

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### QUOTATIONS

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"The dollar sign has chased the crucifix clean off the map." (132)

"Me, I want to yank it up on the ways, and fire the poor bum of a shoemaker that built it so it sails crooked, and have it rebuilt right, from the keel up." (134)

"...when she saw how much he was suffering she ran to him, kissed his forehead, cried, "You poor forced tube-rose that wants to be a decent turnip!" (138)

"That was her last attempt to harvest the April wind, to teach divine unhappiness by a correspondence course, to buy the lilies of Avalon and the sunsets of Cockaigne in tin cans at Ole Jensen's Grocery." (138-9)

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### HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS

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Vincent de Paul (128): saint from 17th-century France who attended to the poor.

Avalon (138): spiritual land in Arthurian myth

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### ACTIVITY

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1. Write about what Carol's child would have to be like in order to be acceptable in her eyes.

## CHAPTER 11

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### QUESTIONS

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1. Where do the ladies of the Thanatopsis research the papers they present? How do you know this?
  2. Why do they feel they have covered the whole of English poetry?
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3. What is Carol's suggestion for the group? What is their reaction? What is the common thread found in objections to Carol's proposal?
4. Why does Miles think Carol has been unsuccessful?
5. Why is Carol uncomfortable at Maud Dyer's house?
6. How does Mrs. Lyman Cass decorate her home? What does this say about her personality?
7. Why doesn't the Thanatopsis want to help the poor? What matters take precedence?
8. Which of the town's women are known by their first names instead of their husband's? How does this affect your view of them?

### VOCABULARY

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supercilious (144): haughty

tattoo (148): rhythmic tapping

lugubrious (156): gloomy

noblesse oblige (159): the obligations of generosity and respectability associated with high rank or birth

### QUOTATIONS

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"She wanted to kick the chair and run. It would make a magnificent clatter." (142)

"Besides, what's the matter with this town? Looks good to me. I've had people that have traveled all over the world tell me time and again that Gopher Prairie is the prettiest place in the Middlewest. Good enough for anybody. Certainly good enough for Mama and me. Besides! Mama and me are planning to go out to Pasadena and buy a bungalow and live there." (157-8)

"You aren't one of the people—yet." (158)

"He had changed from her friend to a cynical man in overalls." (158)

"Had she actually believed she could plant a seed of liberalism into the blank wall of mediocrity?" (162)

### HISTORICAL NOTE/ALLUSION

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Babylon (148): an important city of the ancient Near East, capital of Babylonia, was destroyed (c.689 B.C.) by the Assyrians.

### ACTIVITIES

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1. In a collage illustrate Carol's competing desires to fit in and to change the town.
2. Compose and act out an argument between these two sides of Carol's nature.

## CHAPTER 12

### QUESTIONS

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1. Why does Lewis make a point of discussing the Thanatopsis anti-fly campaign? How does it contrast with Carol's ideas of improvement?
  2. Why do the problems of Gopher Prairie evaporate at the cottages? How is the routine different?
  3. Has the town kept its pioneer principles, according to the Champ Perrys? Give examples to support your opinion.
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**VOCABULARY**

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Pierrot (163): mime-like stock character with white face and loose clothes

heretical (166): not conforming to an established attitude or doctrine

jocosely (167): comically

panacea (167): cure-all

daguerreotypes (171): pictures

**HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS**

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Oriental imagery is used throughout the novel. Why would it have been significant during the 1920s?

Salon (167): a gathering of leaders in society, art, or politics common during the 17th- and 18th-centuries

Syndicalism: an organization of producers for the immediate betterment of their economic and social status.

**ACTIVITY**

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1. In small groups, discuss Miles's and Carol's summers considering the following: What is Lewis's purpose in juxtaposing the two? Whom does Lewis favor?

**CHAPTER 13****QUESTIONS**

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1. What, according to Guy Pollock, is the "Village Virus"? What are its symptoms? What does Pollock mean by the small town being a "social appendix"?
2. What happens to the old guard of a town such as Gopher Prairie, according to Pollock? How does Pollock provide insight into the reasons for people's petty behavior?
3. Why does Pollock believe the town can't be changed?
4. Why hasn't Carol called on the Dillons, the new couple in town? Why is it significant that they talk about Minneapolis?

**VOCABULARY**

---

dolors (173): griefs; depression

oligarchy (173): rule by high society

salaciousness (175): lechery; lasciviousness

cajoled (176): persuaded by joking

**QUOTATION**

---

"Most places that have lost the smell of the earth but have not yet acquired the smell of patchouli—or of factory smoke—are just as suspicious and righteous" (172).

---

**CHAPTER 14****QUESTIONS**

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1. How does Carol succumb to the “Village Virus” in talking to herself on her way home from Pollock’s?
2. How does Will compare to Guy in Carol’s view?
3. How does her guilt about Pollock reveal itself in her conversation with Will?
4. What is the turning point in the conversation? When does it become an argument? What are the real issues?
5. What are Carol’s faults, according to Will? Why does this affect Will’s relationship with the town? What does Carol discover about the townspeople that she didn’t realize before?
6. How does the argument end? What does Carol realize about Will’s dreams?

**VOCABULARY**

---

palavering (182): profuse and idle talking; chattering

eugenics (189): science of improving offspring by careful selection of parents

**QUOTATION**

---

“She suddenly saw the foot-board of the bed as the footstone of the grave of love.” (186)

**CHAPTER 15****QUESTIONS**

---

1. This chapter is written as a whole rather than divided into sections. What is the effect of the continuity of this chapter?
2. Why does Sinclair Lewis include a section about Carol observing Kennicott’s practice? How does Carol react to overhearing her husband treat the immigrant farmer?
3. Why is it important that she idolize him? How does that idolatry change with his grumpiness?
4. Why is Carol bothered by meeting Guy in the drugstore? Does she believe what she tells him?
5. How does Carol’s reforming nature negate her attempts at marital bliss?
6. How does she attempt to rid herself of suspicion in the town?
7. Why are Mrs. Bogart’s comments about the town’s gossipy habits ironic? How are Carol and Mrs. Bogart similar?

**QUOTATIONS**

---

“He suddenly had in her eyes the heroism of a wireless operator on a ship in a collision; of an explorer, fever-clawed, deserted by his bearers, but going on—jungle—going—” (195)

“It was a humble wife who followed the busy doctor out to the carriage, and her ambition was not to play Rachmaninoff better, nor to build town halls, but to chuckle at babies.” (207)

“He speaks a vulgar, common, incorrect German of life and death and birth and the soil. I read the French and German of sentimental lovers and Christmas garlands. And I thought that it was I who had the culture!” (210)

---

**ACTIVITIES**

---

1. Show similarities and differences between Mrs. Bogart and Carol in a dramatic skit involving a problem at a bank. Based on your knowledge of the book, how would each react to the same problem?
2. Conduct a small group debate over the following topic: Which is better for Carol—being the housewife or the town activist? Defend your opinion with examples from the novel.

**CHAPTER 16****QUESTIONS**

---

1. In what order of importance would you put Kennicott's five hobbies: medicine, Carol, motoring, land-investment, and hunting? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Why is Carol bored by his interests? What are the signs of Carol's growing discontent with Will?
3. What do you think of Will's philosophy that there are only three types of people? (217) Give reasons for your answer.
4. What does Carol mean when she says, "I am trying to save my soul"? (218)
5. What does the neglected violin (218) represent?
6. Why does Lewis include the scenes from Buenos Aires, New York, and Gopher Prairie? (220)
7. Why doesn't Carol join Miles and Bea for lunch? What does she find of interest in their conversation?

**VOCABULARY**

---

nebulously (215): vague or indistinct manner

patois (217): a rural form of speech; a mixture of two or more languages

kids (218): kid-glove shoes

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"It wasn't enough for him [Will] that I admired him; I must change myself and grow like him. He takes advantage. No more. It's finished. I will go on." (218)

"She saw that he had never been anything but a frame on which she had hung shining garments." (221)

**HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS**

---

Research the movie-going habits of Americans in the 1920s.

Desdemona and Othello (222): doomed lovers of Shakespeare's play *Othello*. He is a black Moor warrior who, consumed by jealousy, murders his white wife.

Robert Ingersoll (222-3): religious agnostic author of "Why I Am Agnostic" (1896)

**ACTIVITY**

---

1. Write a responsive journal telling about a time you realized you had made someone into something they really weren't—that your expectations of them exceeded their reality.
-

**CHAPTER 17****QUESTIONS**

---

1. Why does the group agree to join the dramatic club? Predict what will happen with it.
2. Why does Carol invite the Dillons?
3. What are the disagreements about the play to be produced?
4. How does being in Minneapolis affect the way Carol sees her husband?
5. Why does Will go to the plays with Carol? What is the quality of the plays? How do they affect Will? Carol?

**VOCABULARY**

---

fictive (223): imaginary

babel (223): a confused mixture of voices

puerilities (227): childishness

**QUOTATIONS**

---

“For a moment she wanted the secure quiet of Gopher Prairie.” (229)

“Whatever the McGanums were at home, here they stood out as so superior to all the undistinguishable strangers absurdly hurrying past that the Kennicotts held them as long as they could.” (231)

**ACTIVITY**

---

Write a responsive journal telling about a time you felt out of place.

**CHAPTER 18****QUESTIONS**

---

1. How does Vida control things without being at the head of them? Give examples.
2. What play does the group finally select? Why?
3. How do the players perceive Carol's casting decisions? Are they based on politics? Explain.
4. What effect does the theatrical experience have on the members of the dramatic club? How do they perceive Carol as a director?
5. What does the Gopher Prairie *Dauntless* write about the performance? Which opinion is correct, the paper's or Carol's? Explain your answer.

**VOCABULARY**

---

scabrous (236): requiring tactful treatment; hard to handle with decency

abominably (245): horribly

**QUOTATIONS**

---

“And with that instant, Carol realized it was a bad play abominably acted.” (245)

---

"In the prairie heat she trudged along unchanging ways, talked about nothing to tepid people, and reflected that she might never escape from them." (248)

---

**HISTORICAL NOTE/ALLUSION**

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Decoration Day: created after the Civil War, is now called Memorial Day.

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**ACTIVITIES**

---

1. Create a "stream of consciousness" monologue about a time you were nervous. Recreate the thoughts running through your head.
2. Write a letter recounting your experience to a friend as if you had been one of the actors in the play.
3. Write a letter recounting the play to a friend as if you were Carol.
4. Write a letter to a friend telling about the play as if you were in the audience.

**CHAPTER 19**

---

**QUESTIONS**

---

1. How is Miles's transformation into respectability similar to Carol's? How is he still looked on as "trash"?
2. Why does Carol remain friendly with Juanita Haydock?
3. How does Carol's perception of the town change at the library board meeting?
4. Why does the board not promote the library?
5. How does Lewis emphasize the lack of change in Carol's life?
6. What does the train represent to Carol?
7. What does the Chautauqua bring to town?
8. How is the last speaker seen by the townspeople? How is he like Carol?

---

**VOCABULARY**

---

decorous (258): polite and well behaved

---

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"She found that for all their pride in being reading men, Westlake and Cass and even Guy had no conception of making the library familiar to the whole town. They used it, they passed resolutions about it, and they left it as dead as Moses.... They had no tenderness for the noisiness of youth discovering great literature." (251)

"She was content. But it was the contentment of the lost hunter stopping to rest." (256)

---

**HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS**

---

The Great War (1914-1918) is also known as World War I.

Chautauqua: an adult education movement offering presentations by musicians, explorers, authors, and political leaders first proposed in 1873 and continuing into the 20th-century.

---

**CHAPTER 20****QUESTIONS**

---

1. Now that Carol is in the midst of change, how is she reacting to it? Why is this surprising?
2. What do all the older married women of town think the child will do for Carol? How does their attitude towards her change? Give examples.
3. What is Carol's attitude toward organized religion?
4. What are Carol's hopes for Hugh?
5. What is the effect of Aunt Bessie and Uncle Whittier's visit on Carol? on Will? Why does Lewis describe their treatment as "pure affection"?
6. How are the Smails received by Gopher Prairie? How is this different from the way Carol was received? Why?
7. How does the Jolly Seventeen become a refuge for Carol against Aunt Bessie and Mrs. Bogart?
8. How are Miles's dreams for Olaf and his family similar to Carol's?

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"Each morning she was nauseated, chilly, bedraggled, and certain that she would never again be attractive; each twilight she was afraid." (259)

"Carol was discovering that the one thing that can be more disconcerting than intelligent hatred is demanding love." (263)

**CHAPTER 21****QUESTIONS**

---

1. How is Vida similar to Carol?
2. What do you think of Vida's encouraging Carol's reforms? What are her real thoughts about them?
3. What happened to other women from "the Outside" when they came to Gopher Prairie?
4. Describe the conversation between Raymie and Vida? What characterizes it? What do they discuss?
5. How is Vida's attachment to Will Kennicott apparent?

**VOCABULARY**

---

veritably (272): truthfully

astral self (272) : a projection of herself through space

traducers (275): those who ruin another's reputation

circuitously (278): in a roundabout way

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"She was indignant that Carol should not be utterly fulfilled in having borne Kennicott's child." (274)

"Made taller and younger by his interest she poured out...." (277)

---

**ACTIVITIES**

---

1. In a small group discussion, compare Lewis's description of Vida in this chapter with an earlier one in Chapter 5. How are they alike? How are they different? Share your discoveries with the class.
2. Write a poem depicting the change from Vida Sherwin to Vida Wutherspoon.

**CHAPTER 22****QUESTIONS**

---

1. How is the married Vida different from Carol?
2. What are Carol's and Vida's versions of the American small town? Which fits Gopher Prairie?
3. What happens to the Scandinavian immigrants in Gopher Prairie?
4. What, according to Lewis, is the main characteristic of a town like Gopher Prairie that keeps it from becoming as great as Rome or Paris?
5. Why does Lewis get the men and the children out of the way for Vida's and Carol's conversation?
6. Why is change scary to the settled Gopher Prairians, according to Vida? Why is it necessary, according to Carol?
7. What is the effect of their conversation on Carol? Does this last?

**VOCABULARY**

---

diaphanous (291): light, delicate, translucent

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"The greatest mystery about a human being is not his reaction to sex or praise, but the manner in which he contrives to put in twenty-four hours a day." (281)

"It has not yet been recorded that any human being has gained a very large or permanent contentment from meditation upon the fact that he is better off than others." (282)

"A book was a book, and if you had several thousand of them right here in the library, free, why the dickens should you spend your good money?" (282)

"It is an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment...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." (284)

"It is the Harry Haydocks, the Dave Dyers, the Jackson Elders, the small busy men crushingly powerful in their common purpose, viewing themselves men of the cash-register and the comic film, who make the town a sterile oligarchy." (287)

"It is a 'parasitic Greek civilization'—minus the civilization." (288)

**HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS**

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Thorstein Veblen: In his writings Veblen was able to dissect American social and economic institutions and analyze their psychological bases, thus laying the foundations for the school of institutional economics. Other books by him: *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (1904) and *The Engineers and the Price System* (1921).

Anatole France (1844-1924): 1921 Nobel Laureate in Literature in recognition of his brilliant literary achievements, characterized as they are by a nobility of style, a profound human sympathy, grace, and a true Gallic temperament.

---

Rolland: Author of books about Francois Millet (1902), Beethoven (1903), Michelangelo (1905-1906), Handel (1910), and Tolstoy (1911), as well as articles and reviews.

Nexo: Martin Andersen Nexø, Danish novelist (1869-1954), focused attention on conditions of poverty in Denmark in *Pelle the Conqueror* (1906-1910) and *Ditte, Daughter of Mankind* (1917-1921).

Wells: H.G. Wells (1866-1946), an English author of science fiction, over the years became concerned with the fate of human society in a world where technology and scientific study were advancing at a rapid pace. For a period he was a member of The Fabian Society, a group of social philosophers in London. His later works were less science fiction than social critique. Books by him: *The Time Machine* (1895), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933).

Shaw: George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Irish playwright and critic, authored *Pygmalion* (1913), about class distinction and the role of women.

Key: Francis Scott Key (1779-1843), American lawyer, poet, and author of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Edgar Lee Masters: author (1869-1950) of *Spoon River Anthology*, a series of poetic portraits about the people of a small town.

Theodore Dreiser: American novelist who portrayed people as victims of such ungovernable forces as economics, biology, and society. His books include: *Sister Carrie* (1900), *The Financier* (1912), and *An American Tragedy* (1925). Sherwood Anderson: author of *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), a series of grotesques about a small midwestern town.

Henry Mencken (1880-1956): Known as a literary critic, however in the 1920s became more interested in social criticism.

Confucius (551-479 B.C.): Chinese philosopher; "I will not be afflicted at men's not knowing me; I will be afflicted that I do not know men."

Mary and Martha: From the gospel of Luke, Jesus goes to the home of the two sisters. Mary sits at Jesus's feet, listening to him, while Martha rushes around trying to prepare a feast. When Martha asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her, Jesus tells Martha that Mary has "chosen the greater portion."

---

## ACTIVITIES

1. Conduct a debate on the question: Has the United States become more or less homogenized? How has this affected the country's greatness? Support for positions should be drawn from *Main Street*.
2. Conduct research into how advertising affects our culture. List popular advertising slogans and discover how many people can identify the product by its slogan. Ask your subjects if they can recall other slogans or ads associated with these products. Discuss your results with the class.

## CHAPTER 23

---

### QUESTIONS

1. Explain the irony of Cy's "heroism."
  2. Is Carol a socialist? Explain your answer.
  3. Is Vida patriotic? Explain your answer.
  4. What kind of person is Percy Bresnehan? Why does the town canonize him? How does Carol react to him?
  5. Evaluate Bresnehan's "top secret" information based on what you know about WWI. Was it correct?
  6. Why does Kennicott belittle Carol in front of Bresnehan?
  7. Why is Carol afraid of Bresnehan?
  8. Why does Miles verbally attack Bresnehan? What is Bresnehan's response?
-

9. Why does Bresnehan consider both Miles and Carol “big bluffs”?
10. What reason does Carol give for wanting to change Gopher Prairie? Why does Percy think it can't be changed?

### VOCABULARY

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inanely (297): stupidly

strictly on the QT (299): (slang) to be kept secret

vacuousness (303): emptiness

denizens (304): residents

spieler (305): talker

neophyte (305): someone new to a town or experience

iconoclast (305): severe critic; rebel

### QUOTATION

---

“There’s always about a million young women just out of college who want to teach their grandmothers how to suck eggs.” (304)

### ACTIVITIES

---

1. In a small group discussion, compare and contrast Percy Bresnehan’s debate with Carol about Gopher Prairie with Vida’s in the previous chapter. Share your results with the class.
2. Illustrate Percy’s “gospel: love of outdoors, Playing the Game, loyalty to friends” (305) in a gospel-type song.

## CHAPTER 24

### QUESTIONS

---

1. How does the heat affect Carol’s mood?
2. In what ways does Lewis show, not tell, Carol’s displeasure with her husband and her life in Gopher Prairie?
3. Why does Carol reject Bresnehan’s opinion of the men Kennicott plays cards with?
4. Explain the irony in Kennicott’s ideas of patriotism.
5. Why does Carol move into her own room? How does this affect others around her? Who supports her decision? Why?
6. Why did Carol not notice the bad accommodations for their servants earlier?
7. What kind of house does Kennicott want? How is this different from the kind Carol wants? What does a house represent to him? To her?
8. Why is Carol excited about going to Joralemon?
9. How is Joralemon—the people and the town— like Gopher Prairie? Why does Carol call it an “ash heap”? (325)

### VOCABULARY

---

brusquely (306): rudely, roughly

leprous (307): diseased

---

sanctimonious (307): making a show of righteousness  
solecisms (308): grammatical blunder; error  
acrid (310): bitter  
epicure (311): one who enjoys well-prepared food and drink  
anarchy (314): destruction of the status quo  
incumbencies (315): residencies  
puerile (315): childish  
gyrated (322): circled  
debauch (322): abuse; pervert  
erudite (322): educated  
adumbrated (323): predicted

---

**HISTORICAL NOTE/ALLUSION**

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Grabbing the gold ring (324): On carousel rides in the early part of the 20th-century, a gold ring was hung on a pole so that merry-go-round riders could try to grab it. Whoever did won a free ride. It was rather dangerous—people were flung from the carousel or damaged their hands in the gears—so the practice was discontinued. The expression “grabbing the gold ring” or “going for the gold” has come to mean taking a risk in order to get the most out of an experience.

---

**QUOTATIONS**

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“She made much of her consoling affection for him in little things.” (306)

“She realized they found little to say; that, incredibly, they were like the talked-out couples whom she had pitied at restaurants.” (308)

“There are two races of people, only two, and they live side by side. His calls mine ‘neurotic’; mine calls his ‘stupid’. We’ll never understand each other, never; and it’s madness for us to debate—to lie together in a hot bed in a creepy room enemies, yoked.” (313)

“Her ambition was to get to bed at nine; her strongest emotion was resentment over rising at half-past six to care for Hugh.” (316)

“While Kennicott was chattering about a patent swing-door for the garage she saw the swing-door of a prison.” (320)

---

**ACTIVITIES**

---

1. Write a responsive journal: When do you tend to lose patience with people around you?
  2. Throughout the novel characters classify people into certain groupings. Develop your own system of classification of people in your school and describe each grouping. Illustrate this system in a poster.
  3. Design your perfect bedroom. How does it compare with Carol's?
  4. Make a collage showing what Carol's life would be like in today's society. What kind of car would she drive? What kinds of interests would she have? What would her house look like?
-

**CHAPTER 25****QUESTIONS**

---

1. What attracts Will to Maud Dyer? How is she different from Carol?
2. Why does he reject Nat Hicks's invitation to carouse with Mrs. Swiftwaite and her friends?
3. Why does the town gossip about Mrs. Swiftwaite?
4. Why does Carol find it inconceivable that Will would be unfaithful to her?

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"She simply hasn't got an i-dea how hard it is for a full-blooded man to go on pretending to be satisfied with just being endured." (326)

"My moral in life is, 'What they don't know won't hurt 'em none.' The way to handle wives, like the fellow says, is to catch 'em early, treat 'em rough, and tell 'em nothing." (332)

**ACTIVITY**

---

Develop a piece of creative writing showing Gopher Prairie's attitude towards women.

**CHAPTER 26****QUESTIONS**

---

1. Why does Carol find the Bjornstams good company?
2. How is Miles a better father figure to Hugh than Kennicott?
3. How does Miles fulfill his family's dreams?
4. When Bea and Olaf contract typhoid fever, why does Carol volunteer to nurse them?
5. Why do Vida and the ladies of town finally come to visit the Bjornstams? What does Miles tell them?
6. Why doesn't Carol go to the funeral?

**VOCABULARY**

---

resplendently amiable (336): radiantly friendly

vulgarian (336): one who is rude, vulgar

august (336): noble, elegant

pariah (337): an outcast

agnostic (337): skeptic

flaccid (340): lacking firmness

cyclonic (341): storm-like, like a tornado

**QUOTATION**

---

"Carol saw, though she did not admit, that Olaf was not only more beautiful than her own dark child, but more gracious." (336)

---

**ACTIVITY**

---

Write a eulogy for Bea and Olaf.

**CHAPTER 27****QUESTIONS**

---

1. How is Miles Bjornstam like Sinclair Lewis in his attitude toward the town?
2. How is Kennicott's opinion of Miles influenced by the town?
3. Why is walking considered odd in Gopher Prairie?
4. How are Mrs. Flickerbaugh and Mrs. Westlake like Carol? How do they cope with their dislike of the town?
5. How do we know Kennicott is continuing his affair with Maud Dyer?

**VOCABULARY**

---

seditious (342): defiant, rebellious

raiment (343): clothing

**QUOTATION**

---

"Suddenly, to the woman rocking on the porch of the doctor's house, the night came alive, and she felt that everywhere in the darkness panted an ardent quest which she was missing as she sank back to wait for—There must be something." (345)

**ACTIVITY**

---

Draw a picture of Mrs. Flickerbaugh based on the description beginning on page 343.

**CHAPTER 28****QUESTIONS**

---

1. Why are Carol and Maud friends?
  2. Why does the town call Erik Valborg "Elizabeth"? Why do they play tricks on him?
  3. What is the role of the church in Gopher Prairie? What does the minister discuss in his sermon?
  4. What is Carol's first reaction to Erik Valborg? When she discovers who he is, why does her reaction change? How is this ironic?
  5. How does Lewis inject humor into the luncheon at the Smails's?
  6. Who is the other newcomer to town? What does Carol find in common with her?
  7. How does Carol classify people she doesn't know well? What expectations does she have for them? How is this similar to her relationship with Guy?
  8. How does Valborg know about Carol? What does he know about her?
  9. How does Carol's snobbishness get in the way?
  10. What is the difference in the way Kennicott treats Fern and Valborg?
  11. How does Kennicott's reaction to Valborg's play selections and ideas parallel Carol's experiences with the town?
-

**VOCABULARY**

---

farcicality (356): ridiculousness

**QUOTATIONS**

---

“Sure, religion is a fine influence—got to have it to keep the lower classes in order—fact, it’s the only thing that appeals to a lot of those fellows and makes ‘em respect the rights of property.” (347)

“Isn’t it wonderful how much we all know about one another in a town like this,’ said Carol innocently.” (353)

“Everything has changed! I have two friends, Fern and—But who’s the other? That’s queer; I thought there was—Oh, how absurd!” (355)

“I wonder how much of the cement is made out of the tombstones of the John Keatses?” (359)

**HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS**

---

“Workmen in every nation showing a desire to control industries” (348): Movement towards socialism growing during the early part of the 20th-century.

“Russia hinting a leftward revolution against Kerensky” (348): The beginnings of the Russian Revolution (1917).

Farmers’ Nonpartisan League: An attempt to organize those in the farming industry.

John Keats: Romantic British poet of the 18th-century, perhaps best known for his “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Died at age 25.

**ACTIVITIES**

---

1. Write a responsive journal telling about nicknames you had as a child. Why were you given these nicknames? Which did you like? Which did you hate? Explain.
2. In small groups discuss how your school tries to get teenagers to conform. How does television? Other peers?
3. Write a responsive journal : Why do new people always attract interest in a school or town?
4. Draw two pictures of Erik Valborg: One as the town describes him; the other as Carol sees him at church.
5. Lewis characterizes Main Street as a person on page 359. Write a piece describing the kind of person Main Street would be.

**CHAPTER 29****QUESTIONS**

---

1. What kind of child is Hugh? How do his observations color Carol’s world and her views?
  2. Why does Carol suggest that Erik find out pronunciations of words from the dictionary? What does she imply by this?
  3. What is Erik’s background? What has reading done for him?
  4. What does Erik see in Carol?
  5. How does Carol become like Vida in this chapter?
  6. Why does Harry Haydock change the location of the tennis matches without telling Erik?
  7. What is the real reason Maud Dyer approves of Carol’s friendship with Erik?
  8. Why hasn’t Carol previously made it a point to find out anything about Mrs. Swiftwaite?
  9. In trying to rid herself of her small-town image, whom does she subconsciously imitate?
-

**VOCABULARY**

---

thrummed (361): pulsed

discursively (361): in a roundabout way

glowered (363): stared angrily

averted (364): looking away

affable (364): friendly

farceur (372): faker

**QUOTATIONS**

---

“You see, it’s so awful recent that I’ve found there was a world—well, a world where beautiful things counted.” (361)

“Oh, I don’t want to deny the prairie future. It will be magnificent. But equally I’m hanged if I want to be bullied by it, go to war on behalf of Main Street, be bullied and bullied by the faith that the future is already here in the present, and that all of us must stay and worship wheat-stacks and insist that this is ‘God’s Country’—and never, of course, do anything original or gay-colored that would help to make that future!” (363)

**HISTORICAL NOTE/ALLUSION**

---

Susan B. Anthony (367) *Women’s Suffragist*. Jailed many times for attempting to vote, she believed that if women were to activate change, they needed the opportunity to vote. In 1866 Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton founded the American Equal Rights Association, and in 1868 they started publishing the newspaper *The Revolution* in Rochester, NY with the masthead “Men their rights, and nothing more; women, their rights, and nothing less,” and the aim of establishing “justice for all.” Anthony advocated dress reform for women. She cut her hair and wore the bloomer costume for a year before ridicule convinced her it detracted from the causes she supported. (from “The Susan B. Anthony House” homepage), see *Works Consulted or Sited* section for url.

**ACTIVITY**

---

Research leaders of the woman suffrage movement. What did each contribute and when? (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone)

**CHAPTER 30****QUESTIONS**

---

1. Why does Carol get jealous of Maud and Erik talking?
2. Why does she call Erik “Will” by mistake?
3. Why does Carol feel guilty about her feelings for Erik?
4. Why doesn’t Carol suspect Maud’s affair with Kennicott?
5. Why is Carol disappointed that Erik plans to work at the flour mill?
6. How does Carol feel about the success of her marriage?

**VOCABULARY**

---

sprightliness (377): nimbleness

damascened (377): ornamented with wavy patterns

disquietude (380): being unsettled

---

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"But I wonder if she isn't just a bit fond of fishing for men's sympathy? Playing with Erik, and her married—Well—But she looks at him in that languishing, swooning, mid-Victorian way. Disgusting!" (376)

"He was himself, and in him, in the personality that flowed from him, she was, unreasoningly, content." (378)

"Don't you think it's a shame, Mrs. Bogart, that people in this town don't do more nice clean things like that, instead of all this horrible gossip?" (380) "I have become a liar. I'm snarled with lies and foggy analyses and desires—I who was clear and sure." (386)

**ACTIVITIES**

---

1. Write a responsive journal discussing a habit you have that you dislike in others. Why do you notice it?
2. In small groups discuss Carol's attraction to Erik in comparison to Kennicott's affair with Maud. How is each couple brought together? How are Carol's and Kennicott's rationalizations of their relationships similar? Share your results with the class.

**CHAPTER 31****QUESTIONS**

---

1. Is what Kennicott hears about Carol's opinions true? Explain.
2. Why did Carol want to trust Mrs. Westlake? Whom can she trust now?
3. What is Vida's advice to Carol? What is Carol's response?
4. Why does Carol imagine Will would be lost without her?

**VOCABULARY**

---

incalculable (388): unable to be figured out

fetishes (388): obsessions

rectitude (392): moral correctness

scrupulously (393): painstakingly careful and thorough; strictly honorable

infractions (393): breaking rules

fatuous (393): stupid

deferential (395): respectful

abysmal (395): extremely bad

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"Enemies leered through windows, stole on her from the hall." (391)

"There are two insults which no human being will endure: the assertion that he hasn't a sense of humor, and the doubly impertinent assertion that he has never known trouble." (392)

"Think how much better you can criticize conventional customs if you yourself live up to them, scrupulously. Then people can't say you're attacking them to excuse your own infractions." (393)

---

**ACTIVITY**

---

Respond in a creative journal entry: How prevalent is gossip in your school? How do you deal with it? What effect does it have on those talked about? On those who do the gossiping?

**CHAPTER 32****QUESTIONS**

---

1. Why is Mrs. Bogart so adamant that Cy has been corrupted by Fern? Why does Carol feel that the “sinless town [corrupted him], five years ago”?
2. Whose version of the story do you believe—Mrs. Bogart’s or Fern’s? Why?
3. Whose version of the story does the town believe? Why do they not support Fern? How did Main Street ruin Fern?
4. Why does Carol suspect the town goes so eagerly after Fern and not after the rumors of her own affair?

**VOCABULARY**

---

interlocutor(396): speaker

unctuous (397): oily

exonerate (406): to free from blame

bovine (408): cow-like

**HISTORICAL NOTES/ALLUSIONS**

---

Nemesis (398): in Greek myth, the goddess of punishment. As a reference today, it generally means enemy.

On the scaffold (407): an allusion to Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, in which Hester Prynne refuses to reveal to the town the name of her partner in adultery.

**ACTIVITY**

---

Stage a school-board hearing based on Fern Mullins’s incident with Cy Bogart, using class members as witnesses. Gather testimony from this chapter as evidence.

**CHAPTER 33****QUESTIONS**

---

1. Why is Carol in love with Erik? How does her imagination color her perceptions?
  2. Why does Carol consciously put on her rubber overshoes?
  3. Why does Carol take off her glove?
  4. What does Carol think of Erik’s poem?
  5. Why is Carol frustrated that Will doesn’t seem to know about her feelings for Erik?
  6. What does Will think about Carol’s role in the whole relationship? How does Will convince Carol to let go of Erik?
  7. What happens to Carol when Erik leaves town? How did Carol “ruin” Erik?
  8. What is the word old Mr. Valborg says to Carol before he leaves? Give reasons for your answer.
-

9. Why does Will defend Carol in front of Aunt Bessie?
10. How does Carol deflect the town's gossip?

---

**VOCABULARY**

---

vacuous (411): empty

abeyance (413): inactivity; stopping

covertly (422): in a hidden manner

catechize (422): preach to

---

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"But sometimes he had vanished; he was only an opinion." (412)

"No matter even if you are cold, I like you better than anybody in the world. One time I said that you were my soul. And that still goes." (416)

---

**ACTIVITIES**

---

1. Write and perform a skit comparing and contrasting Will's and Carol's "ignorance" of each other's romances.
2. Respond in a written journal entry: What is your opinion of Will in this chapter?

**CHAPTER 34**

---

**QUESTIONS**

---

1. Why do the Kennicotts travel west and not east? What is different about that area of the country?
2. Why is it ironic that they head back home on April 1? Why are Carol's expectations foolish?
3. What was the most important part of the trip to Kennicott? to Carol?
4. How is their conversation with the Haydocks about California different from the one they had had before their trip?
5. What is different in what Carol notices about Main Street and what Will notices?

---

**QUOTATION**

---

"At that instant she knew that in running away she had merely hidden her doubts behind the officious stir of travel." (429)

---

**ACTIVITY**

---

Read Carl Sandburg's poem "Mamie." How is Carol like Mamie?

**CHAPTER 35**

---

**QUESTIONS**

---

1. How does Carol try to keep herself content? Why is she obsessed with the idea of contentment?
  2. Why does Lewis emphasize Champ Perry's deterioration? What does it illustrate?
-

3. How is Raymie's fall from fame similar to Perry's?
4. Why is Carol aloof to "Honest Jim" Blausser? Why does the town embrace him?
5. How are the improvements to the town different from what Carol would have liked?

### **VOCABULARY**

---

salient (432): a projecting part of a battle line

cootie (432) a body louse

aloof (433): cool, not friendly

imprimature (433): permission or approval

### **QUOTATIONS**

---

"Carol tried to be content which was a contradiction in terms." (431)

"Kennicott had begged her, in courtship days, to convert the town to beauty. If it was now as beautiful as Mr. Blausser and The Dauntless said, then her work was over, and she could go." (438)

### **ACTIVITIES**

---

1. Write a poem or an essay describing what would make Carol content.
2. Write a poem or an essay describing what would make you content.
3. Read aloud Blausser's speech at the Minniemashie House. What kind of accent would you use? Try to capture his appeal to the citizens of Gopher Prairie.
4. Using the description on page 437, design the pamphlet promoting Gopher Prairie.

## **CHAPTER 36**

### **QUESTIONS**

---

1. Why won't Carol participate in promoting the town?
2. Why doesn't the town want the NNL organizer to speak? What has happened to freedom of speech?
3. What do the people of the town expect from the farmers? Why are they considered different from the townspeople?
4. What does Kennicott think would make Carol contented? Would it? Explain.
5. What makes Carol decide to move to Washington D.C.?
6. How does she feel once she is gone?
7. Why does Hugh like Mrs. Bogart? How does Carol feel about it?
8. What does The Dauntless say the reason for her leaving is?

### **VOCABULARY**

---

Jovian (438): Like Jove, the supreme Roman god.

timorous(440): timid, fearful

---

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"Here you been complaining for years about us being so poky, and now when Blasusser comes along and does stir up excitement and beautify the town like you've always wanted somebody to, why, you say he's a roughneck, and you won't jump on the band-wagon." (438)

"Precisely how do you expect these aliens to obey your law if the officer of the law teaches them to break it?" (439)

"Carrie—what the devil is it you want anyway?"

"Oh, conversation! No, it's much more than that. I think it's a greatness of life—a refusal to be content with even the healthiest mud." (442)

**HISTORICAL NOTE/ALLUSION**

---

National Nonpartisan League: (438-9) Organization of Western farmers and workers formed by Arthur C. Townley in 1915. Its greatest strength was in Minnesota and the Dakotas. It worked to promote state-owned grain elevators, flour mills, and packing houses as well as low-cost public housing.

**CHAPTER 37****QUESTIONS**

---

1. How is Washington D.C. different from Gopher Prairie?
2. Why does the Methodist church make her unhappy?
3. How has Gopher Prairie changed Carol?

**VOCABULARY**

---

enmities (445): hate-relationships

putative (446): reputed or supposed

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"She discovered that an office is as full of cliques and scandals as a Gopher Prairie." (445)

"She felt that she was no longer one-half of a marriage but the whole of a human being." (446)

"Not individuals but institutions are the enemies, and they most affect the disciples who the most generously serve them. They insinuate their tyranny under a hundred guises and pompous names, such as Polite Society, the Family, the Church, Sound Business, the Party, the Country, the Superior White Race; and the only defense against them, Carol beheld, is unembittered laughter." (451)

**ACTIVITIES**

---

1. Reread Sinclair Lewis's details regarding the small towns of America in this chapter. What is similar about them? What are the differences? Select a few of the towns to make a colorful poster showing these similarities and differences.
  2. Select one of the "guises of tyranny" from page 451 and make a collage demonstrating how it forces the individual to conform.
-

**CHAPTER 38****QUESTIONS**

---

1. What influences Carol's decision to return to Gopher Prairie?
2. What has happened to the town's promotional campaign since Blausser left?
3. How does Carol's opinion of Bresnehan change, seeing him outside of Gopher Prairie? How is it similar to the way she once was?
4. How has Carol mellowed? How has Kennicott?
5. What does Carol realize about Kennicott while they are in Charleston?
6. Why didn't Carol succeed in reforming Gopher Prairie, according to the "generalissima"?
7. How does Carol plan to survive as an individual back in Gopher Prairie?

**VOCABULARY**

---

vociferously (453): expressing oneself forcibly and insistently

habitué' (454): a "regular"—someone who frequents a place

catacombs (454): underground passageways or cemetery

piqued (457): irritated

feted (461): celebrated

proletariat (461): common person

**QUOTATIONS**

---

"But I know it must have been pretty tiresome to have to live with anybody as perfect as I was.' He grinned. She liked his grin." (457)

"It had not occurred to her that there was also a story of Will Kennicott, into which she entered only so much as he entered into hers; that he had bewilderments and concealments as intricate as her own, and soft treacherous desires for sympathy." (460)

"Do you want to sacrifice yourself in such a topsy-turvy world, where popularity makes you unpopular with the people you love, and the only failure is cheap success, and the only individualist is the person who gives up all his individualism to serve a jolly ungrateful proletariat which thumbs its nose at him?" (461)

"The prairie was no longer empty land in the sun-glare; it was the living tawny beast which she had fought and made beautiful by fighting; and in the village streets were shadows of her desires and the sound of her marching and the seeds of mystery and greatness." (463)

**CHAPTER 39****QUESTIONS**

---

1. What is ironic about the change in Carol's friendships?
  2. What concessions does she decide to make for Kennicott? Why is this unnecessary?
  3. What has changed about Carol's attitude? How does this affect the attitudes of the townspeople?
  4. What does Carol realize about Aunt Bessie's meddling?
-

**VOCABULARY**

---

ardent (465): heart-felt

foibles (465): mistakes

rhapsodize (465): to talk or write about something in an ecstatic way

**QUOTATIONS**

---

“Who in Washington could be depended upon like Guy Pollock? When she saw him on the street, smiling as always, he seemed an eternal thing, a part of her own self.” (464)

“It was the first time she had called Mrs. Clark by her given name; the first time she had willingly sat back, a woman of Main Street.” (470)

“But I have won in this: I’ve never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dish-washing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.” (471)

**ACTIVITY**

---

Write a description of a day in the life of Carol Kennicott twenty years after the time of this novel. What is she like? What is her position in the community? Does she continue her battles? If so, how? If not, why not?

**AFTER READING THE NOVEL****WRITTEN ACTIVITIES**

---

1. How would Sinclair Lewis feel about the town in which you live? Write a feature story for the travel section of a newspaper as if you were Sinclair Lewis visiting your area. What would he find of interest? What would he like? What would he dislike?
  2. Read the Boston Globe article found on the [almaz.com](http://almaz.com) website. What do you think about the author’s take on Lewis’s opinion of his hometown?
  3. In an essay, Sinclair Lewis writes, “Sauk Centre was a good time, a good place, a good preparation for life.” Find examples in the novel that defend or refute this quote.
  4. Select a character from the novel who reminds you of someone you know. Develop a character sketch of your acquaintance using Lewis’s style.
  5. Defend or refute the following quote from critic Mark Schorer: “He was one of the worst writers in modern American literature but without his writing one cannot imagine modern American literature. That is because, without his writing, we can hardly imagine ourselves....He gave us a vigorous, perhaps a unique thrust into the imagination of ourselves.”
  6. Although Sinclair Lewis wrote twenty-two novels and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930, his epitaph in Sauk Centre reads, “Sinclair Lewis, 1885-1951, author of *Main Street*.” How does his epitaph reflect the way the people of Sauk Centre think about Sinclair Lewis?
  7. *Main Street* has been discussed as “the courtship of Carol and Gopher Prairie.” Explain, using examples from the text as support.
  8. Examine your journal of reactions to Carol after each chapter. What incidents/events affected your opinion of her? What made her sympathetic? What made her unlikable?
  9. What is Carol’s attitude toward organized religion? Give examples from the novel to support your ideas.
  10. How is Miles a foil for Carol? Give examples from the novel to support your answer.
-

## ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES

---

1. Draw, paint, or otherwise illustrate a character from the novel using Lewis's description.
2. Create a scale model of Main Street relying on passages from the novel as your guide.
3. Create a shadowbox diorama of Carol's private room, using your artistic talents to show what solace she gets from the room.

## EXTENDING LEARNING

### RELATED WORKS

---

#### FICTION

Cather, Willa. "The Sculptor's Funeral." *Collected Stories*. Vintage Classics, 1992.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Bernice Bobs Her Hair*. Signet Classics, 1997.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill A Mocking Bird*. Warner Books, 1988.

#### CRITICISM

Bloom, Harold, editor. *Sinclair Lewis: Modern Critical Views*, Chelsea House, 1987.

Bucco, Martin. *Main Street: The Revolt of Carol Kennicott*. Twayne's Masterwork Studies, No 124, 1993. (Out-of-print book)

Dooley, D.J. *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, 1967. ASIN: 0803250517 (Out-of-print book)

Hutchisson, James. *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis: 1920-1930*, Penn State Press, 1996.

Light, Martin. *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, 1975. ASIN: 0911198407 (Out-of-print book)

Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, 1961. ASIN: 0816602905 (Out-of-print book)

Pastore, Stephen. *Sinclair Lewis: A Descriptive Bibliography*, Yale Books.

#### WORKS CONSULTED OR CITED

Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism Page (<http://www.xchange.anarki.net/~huelga/aasind.htm>)

Confucius Page Myths and Legends Home Page (<http://pubpages.unh.edu/~cbsiren/myth.html>)

St. Vincent DePaul and St. Louise Page (<http://www.cptryon.org/vdp/vdp-ldm/index.html>)

The Susan B. Anthony House (<http://www.susanbanthonyhouse.org/sbabio.html>)

#### RELATED WWW SITES

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Nobel Prize Internet Archive (<http://www.almaz.com/nobel/literature/1930a.html>) Good source of information and articles about Lewis's life.

Sauk Centre Herald (<http://www.saukherald.com/>)

The Sinclair Lewis Society (<http://www.english.ilstu.edu/separry/sinclairlewis/>). A great resource, with links to other Sinclair Lewis sites

#### VIDEOS

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*Bernice Bobs Her Hair*. Short Story by F. Scott Fitzgerald (American Short Story Series of videos)

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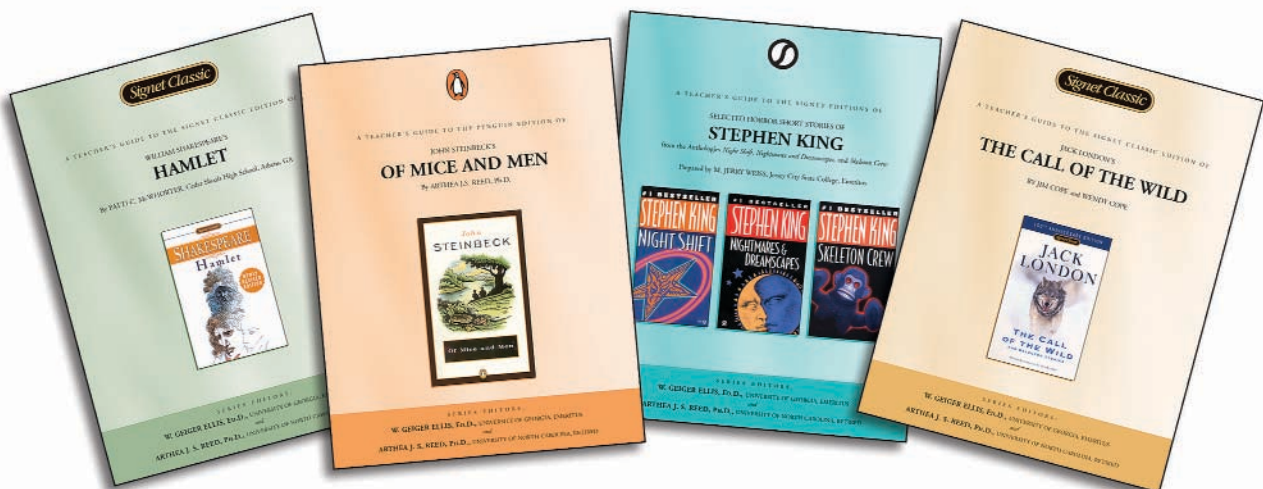
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