

## Exploration Of Self In Sinclair Lewis's Main Street

S.Rajarajan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. V.Gnanaprakasam<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar. Roll No. 2201070003, Email-id: rajarajansan1@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar- 608 002

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**Abstract:**

This paper explores the theme of American individualism through the character of Carol Milford in Harry Sinclair Lewis's Main Street. Situated inside the confines of a conservative small town, the novel presents Carol's inner conflict as she strives to hold onto her ideals of independence, reform, and identity while navigating the pressures of conformity. The study examines the conflict between Carol's urban upbringing and progressive mind set, which clashes with the stagnant traditions of Gopher Prairie, reflecting broader tensions in American society between the individual and the collective. Through Carol's personal struggles, ranging from marriage and domestic expectations to professional aspirations and social reform, Sinclair Lewis critiques not only the limitations placed on women but also the more profound ambiguity of American individualism itself. Drawing on sociological and literary perspectives, this paper reveals how Main Street challenges the romanticism of small-town life and highlights the persistent struggle of those who seek change in a world resistant to it.

### Introduction

American culture is based on individualism. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary characterizes individualism as the conviction that all values, rights, and obligations originate from the needs of the individuals and that needs of the individuals are or should be the most important ethical consideration. Even though it must conflict with every aspect of the culture in which people live, it allows them the ability to make decisions based on their own opinions.

Since the immigrants' intervention, when they discovered the new land as an unbounded area covered in wilderness, the lack of technology, and other things that were yet undeveloped in all the ways that Europeans were used to, American individualism has grown. The unpredictable situation made the immigrants resilient because they had no choice but to put in a great deal of effort to establish a productive land. According to Graham Greene, the outcome was a conviction in each person's autonomy.

Humans, however, are inextricably linked to the communities in which they reside. One's personality is shaped and indirectly impacted through the laws, conventions, religious beliefs, and other communal institutions that are enforced by the authority of the community. People will typically be left wondering if they will act in accordance with society's beliefs or the values of the community.

The traditional American individualistic polarities, the strong need for independence, self-sufficiency, and the equally strong belief that life is meaningless unless it occurs with others in a communal setting, remain in place. Because the person and the culture are not truly distinct, the individual's freedom regarding their culture cannot be total. Only becomes fully himself as a member of society, which is made up of many different people.

The twentieth century saw numerous authors and critics who wrote extensively about American individualism. Sinclair Lewis, one of America's preeminent novelists, often depicted social representations of American individualism set in the early twentieth century. His "big five" masterpieces, Main Street (1920), Babbitt (1922), Arrowsmith (1925), Elmer Gantry (1927), and Dodsworth (1929) all followed a similar

pattern: a determination to break free from social norms, flight, a partial triumph, and an inevitable concession to convention.

Main Street narrates the tale of a discontented young woman named Carol Milford, who persistently endeavors to assert her independence within her society but consistently encounters negative consequences. For Instance, Garry Disharone, one of the novel's characters, presents a straightforward issue: a woman who is perplexed by her culture. American individualism is tied to the most profound issues facing people and society as a whole; the character's perplexity truly mirrors Americans' perplexity over the meaning of individualism. Additionally, the manner in which Carol Milford leaves her town to escape her restlessness and then returns will be covered in this novel.

The narrative begins in 1906 or around that time. The protagonist, Carol Milford, attended Blodgett College. She is characterised as an ambitious, critical, and creative young woman with much energy. She placed a higher value on actualization than her peers; hence, she refused to be an average person. She frequently acted on her own convictions, even when they conflicted with those of her peers, since she valued independence and freedom of thought.

Carol Milford was raised in a well-educated urban home and became accustomed to having many opportunities to learn new things. Judge Milford's educational philosophy was to let the kids read whatever they wanted, and Carol was exposed to works by Henry David Thoreau, Francois Rabelais, Honore de Balzac, and Max Müller in his brown library. Carol Milford was a librarian in St. Paul after graduating from Blodgett College. Among the many persons she met was Dr. Will Kennicott, who in 1912 became her husband. She relocated to Gopher Prairie, the village where her husband was born, after he left for work. The majority of the narrative was told in the community. Although Gopher Prairie already had essential amenities like trains, telegraphs, and telephones, Lewis portrays it through the eyes of the main character as being unsightly, primitive, and dilapidated. In the meantime, the inhabitants are characterized as rustic and provincial based on their physical attributes. Since there was no sound or indication of activity in Gopher Prairie, the circumstance made her yearn for the city life she had known. She wants to escape the expanding grassland and demands the safety of the enormous metropolis. She recognized that Gopher Prairie resembled other tiny towns, mundane and unremarkable, characterized by unadorned residences, expansive fields, and a lack of dignity or potential.

After her marriage, Carol Milford changed her name to Carol Milford Kennicott; nevertheless, she made an effort to appreciate rural life in Gopher Prairie. The townspeople gave her a warm welcome and appeared to be quite lovely, yet she occasionally felt uneasy. She believed that everyone in the village was always keeping an eye on her conduct and the various things she had never encountered in St. Paul.

She continued to engage with the residents, despite her unease, and made an effort to appreciate the village's uniqueness. She became aware of her role as a newcomer who needed to adjust to the new surroundings. She had three options at the time: first, becoming a permanent resident of the town, second, establishing a career as a reformer, and last, having children. She wasn't ready to have children yet, and she wasn't sure whether the community would accept her as a permanent resident. She discovered that the second option was the only thing she could accomplish at the moment.

Sinclair Lewis illustrates several of Carol's reformation-related actions in this narrative. Making her "own house" by getting rid of all the outdated furniture and replacing it with more attractive pieces is the first step in her reformation. Her carpenter removes the divider between the front and rear parlours and replaces it with a new sofa and Japanese belt. Carol's actions sparked a variety of remarks. While many Gopher Prairians expressed their awe at the new furnishings and interior design, others derided her cynically by claiming that Carol appeared ostentatious. She warmly welcomed future visits and expressed concern that Will seemed unwell.

Because the people in the hamlet were difficult to change, Carol found it difficult to make her ambitions of changing them a reality. The people believed that nothing needed to be rebuilt or changed, as they were accustomed to the old customs and traditions. The majority of Gopher Prairians were accustomed to complacency and tradition. Paul Horton confirmed that a rural, isolated area in America is the epicentre of conservatism, stability, and resistance to social change. In contrast to societies that support individuality

and tolerance for a variety of cultural substances, those that place a greater emphasis on conformity and uniformity typically exhibit less receptive attitudes. When Carol expressed her idea to offer some funds for town reconstruction, the Dawsons, one of the Gopher Prairians, accused her of the following:

Despite receiving sarcastic sneers, Carol persisted in her goal of changing the town by engaging with the women's club, the library, the theatrical association, and other endeavors that could help her achieve her goal. Her ideas were initially welcomed, but as time passed, the public began to offer her criticism. Carol's dictatorial and unusual attitudes were the main source of their complaints.

Sinclair Lewis would likely address the subject of human equality as one of the most significant points. He attempted to elevate the concerns of human rights recognition, particularly the rights of women and children, via his primary character. It is evident on She couldn't tell anyone, not even her husband. Twelve or thirteen years her senior, Will Kennicott took pride in his native country. She believed that because servants had one of the most challenging professions in the world, they should be paid fairly. This unavoidably increased the people's strong response. Carol highlights that maids have some of the most taxing working circumstances and expresses outrage at the undervaluation of domestic employment. She describes the physical and psychological toll of their work, which includes cleaning, child care, and continuous domestic service, which often leads to physical hardship like chapped hands, as well as their unreasonably long hours-ten to eighteen per day.

Carol felt isolated in her attempts to change the town. She was unable to disclose the information to anyone, including her husband. Will Kennicott, twelve or thirteen years her senior, took pride in his homeland. Will Kennicott may not be able to leave his former rural existence in Gopher Prairie, despite having studied in Minneapolis and seen city life. According to Carol, Will Kennicott shares characteristics with other Gopher Prairians, including being physically outdated, unchanging, and provincial.

In contrast to Carol, who was constantly trying to change things, Will Kennicott found life to be straightforward and preferred to leave things alone. According to Will Kennicott, Carol enjoyed disputing and criticising, as though there was nothing in Gopher Prairie that she could find pleasing. Carol and her spouse have different backgrounds, which lead to disparities in how things are thought of and viewed. The teaching of children is an instance; Carol broke with precedent by allowing the child to behave as he pleased, whereas Kennicott used reprimands to instill discipline. Instead of let her child's thoughts be influenced just by the limited norms of Gopher Prairie, the speaker emphasizes the value of developing him as an autonomous person. She highlights that youngsters have an innate ability to think that has to be developed and states that her main duty is to shield herself and her family from forcing the town's constrictive viewpoint on him.

Carol's understanding of her rights as a woman was also closely tied to her individuality and identity. The Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century indirectly divided the spheres of existence between men and women. Women were often dedicated to working in domestic roles, while men typically worked in locations outside the home. Sinclair Lewis's primary heroine demonstrated an American woman's understanding of her rights, which is further reinforced by the country's progress in granting women the right to vote through the 19th-century Amendment. Carol is defined as a lady who yearned to work outside the home while still taking care of her family. She was a clever individual who completed her assignments independently, but she questioned the millions of women who had deceived themselves into believing they enjoyed housekeeping. She asked the holiness and practicality of the separate and monogamous household, which she had considered the cornerstone of any respectable existence. In his 1920 novel Main Street, Sinclair Lewis writes:

“But was I more happy when I was drudging? I was not. I was just bedraggled and unhappy. It’s work—but not my work. I could run an office or a library, or nurse and teach children. But solitary dish-washing isn’t enough to satisfy me—or many other women. We’re going to chuck it. We’re going to wash ’em by machinery, and come out and play with you men in the offices and clubs and politics you’ve cleverly kept for yourselves! Oh, we’re hopeless, we dissatisfied women! Then why do you want to have us about the place, to fret you? So it’s for your sake that I’m going!” (Lewis 418).

Carol was at a crossroads. She adored her husband and family, but she detested the life and system that had put her in this predicament. She was not a housework-behind lady who was simply aware of her duties, but she did value her husband's labor as a wife, so that she wouldn't bother him. She was also free to work outdoors and do anything she wanted. She didn't whinge to Kennicott with enthusiasm. She was no longer the girl who had prepared meals over a campfire in the Colorado Mountains five years earlier, and her eyes ached. She was compelled to travel to Washington and search for her ideal existence since she could no longer bear the demands of both society and herself. She felt that working in an office would allow her to express her thoughts and bring them to life without being constrained; unlike at Gopher Prairie. Since people are inextricably linked to society, ambiguity is always associated with individuality. American individualism's ambivalence and ambiguity stem from social and cultural conflict. M. David Potter highlights a paradoxical, yet antagonistic, collaboration that occurs in any society composed of independent individuals, pointing out that the struggle between each person and society can and often has been a positive factor.

Sinclair Lewis acknowledged the paradox and characterised Carol as a person who uncertainly applies her ideals. Even after she decided to go to Washington to be with her husband and family, Carol still had to deal with her uncertainties. He showed Carol's relief at her independence when she was prepared to depart at the station, but he also showed her the emptiness.

Carol relocated to the city to work at The Bureau of War Risk Insurance with her little son, Hugh. She claimed to have finally discovered genuine employment and a world outside Main Street, even though the position was. Finally, she had found her dream. Carol believed that she could work in an office without sacrificing her domesticity, a feminine value. In contrast to the people of Gopher Prairie, where everybody had unrestricted access to one another's homes and privacy, she found that the majority of Washington residents were more individualistic. She also learned that businesswomen may experience a euphoria that no housewife can experience on a free Sunday, and they can have friends and enemies just as openly as men. Although it didn't seem like the world needed her ambition, she believed that her correspondence and interactions with the worries of men and women nationwide were part of larger issues that extended beyond Main Street and the kitchen, and were connected to Paris, Bangkok, and Madrid. She learnt over time that Washington had dark aspects as well, which she was unaware of, and was a little taken aback to see that her workplace was as teeming with scandals and cliques as Gopher Prairie. She also learnt that the majority of women at government bureaus led unhealthy lives and ate stolen food in their cramped apartments. She also found that residents of cities, particularly women, experienced several social issues outside of the job. She had been persuaded that her perception of Gopher Prairie as dull and slattern had been aberrant. When Will Kennicott urged her to decide whether or not she would accompany him home because he didn't want Carol to feel compelled to go back to Gopher Prairie, she was perplexed. Carol allegedly contemplated the arrival of thousands of women in American cities, according to a friend of hers in Washington. They put a lot of effort into achieving their goals, but ultimately, they had to compromise their beliefs.

Carol, suffering from her uncertainty, eventually made her way back to Main Street. Her greatest possessions were Kennicott and her son, whom she did not wish to lose. Since Kennicott and Gopher Prairie took away her independence, she came to the realisation that she could not fundamentally alter the culture that had built tradition. People often tend to conform to the norms, values, and lifestyles of their group. Carol, however, still had her independent side. She was unable to live a Gopher Prairie existence as either a pure individualist or a pure conformist. Despite her conformist tendencies, she would continue to adhere to her own values.

Carol eventually realised that she could neither fully embrace her rebellious side nor fully adhere to social norms. She was able to adapt to their society and soften theirs. Main Street is a contentious novel that, at the time, drew criticism from both authors and readers. By depicting a small town as a locus of unattractive, rural, dilapidated characteristics and stagnant Main Street, it broke with the tradition of fiction that lamented the sweetness and beauty of village life. The populace was characterised as a complacent culture that is hesitant to change and enjoys just adhering to its traditions. These traits contrast with those of Carol Kennicott, who is portrayed as a feminist, independent, and mature. Conflicts arise as a result of these cultural variations and differences in values. The society itself is opposed to change, despite the desire

of one faction to alter it. Because society gently presses the rebels to comply gradually, one has a tendency to unconsciously and permanently conform to the institution and norm in which they live. He still upholds his own morals, but he learns that without interacting with other people, his pleasure is meaningless.

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