



Women: Their choices and social pressures: A study of *Main Street* of Sinclair Lewis

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Abstract

Lewis was consciously exploring through fiction the choices and pressures that women felt personally and socially during the first third of the twentieth century. In *Main Street* he depicts a woman who is wholly trapped into dependent existence as a wife and mother. He views life for women in American society as a struggle against very oppressive and very stubborn obstacles. *Main Street* is historical document which preserve for us the struggles of women in the past to solve some of vey same problem that still exist in society today.

Keywords: *Main Street*, pressures, stubborn obstacles

Introduction

Reading about Carol Kennicott's suffering in his very Middle American marriage in a very Middle American town in Main Street, one wonders whether her situation was actually reflective of her day and whether Lewis had written other novels showing a similar sensitivity about the particular circumstances of women in society, Sinclair Lewis was consciously exploring through fiction the choices and pressures that women felt personally and socially during the first third of the twentieth century. And this fictional exploration still has relevance emotionally and politically because the choices for and pressures on women have not been significantly notified.

The *Job* (1917) is about women workers; *Main Street* (1920) explores marriage and motherhood; *Ann Vickers* (1933) depicts both the career women and the political women in the suffrage movement. The novels follow the struggle of a woman-Una Golden, Carol Kennicott, and Ann Vickers- for identity as a human being central to the focus of each – is the dilemma: work or marriage. While neither *The Job* nor *Ann Vickers* is of as high a literary quality as *Main Street* all the three novels present acute historical insight into what life was like for woman.

In all three novels, Lewis depicts women who at least in one part of their lives go to work. In 1906 UnaGolden is forced to go to work by economic necessity; Carol Kennicott holds a job for three years until she marries in 1912; from 1912-1930 Ann Vicker holds off and on different jobs. In all three cases of the work marriage conflict is excruciating. The choices the three make regarding career and family reflect more than the propaganda; they are also affected by the struggle for women's rights, Carol and Ann Vickers even become activist in the movement for a time.

Although in *The Job* Sinclair Lewis writes a woman who succeeds in achieving a type of independence, three years later when he writes *Main Street* he depicts a woman who is wholly trapped into dependent existence as a wife and mother in a small Midwestern town. In a sense, it is Sinclair Lewis's

Diary of a Mad Housewife. Certainly the book is an examination of the limitations of life and culture, 1906-1920, in a small town the aspect of the book on which most critics have tended to concentrate. However, the issue of the stultifying effect of marriage upon women in this era is at least equally prominent and has significance for big cities and small towns alike.

Carol is pictured as a rebellious young woman of the Middle West. She has no ties, having lost her parents as a child. First she goes to Blodgett college and then to library school in Chicago. She is a restless woman, interested in causes and clubs. She consciously rejects a life of housekeeping and dishwashing because she wants to be active in the world and not sequestered in the home.

After three years of working as a librarian in the Paul, Carol Marries Dr. Will Kennicott of Gopher Prairie. She marries him because "she is slightly weary of her employment and sees no glam ahead". She does see glory ahead in an alliance with a doctor; as the wife of a doctor, she can dedicate herself to uplifting the town. In addition, Dr. Kennicott, who is twelve years older than Carol, provides her with "a shelter from the perplexing world"¹

The rest of the novel details Carol's disillusionment with marriage and its jobs: housekeeper, husband-tender, childbearer. This disillusionment begins the moment she arrives in Gopher Prairie, her new a home. She suddenly feels Will Kennicott to be a stranger to her and a distasteful one at that. She realizes he is coarse, drab, and unimaginative. However, she is not ready to heed her momentary intuition that in order to preserve her saintly and her identity "she would have to break loose from this man and flee"². Worse than the repulsion for her husband is her realization that the myths of marriage are only myths: "why do these stories lie so? They always make the bride's home-coming a bed of roses. Complete trust in noble spouse. Lies about marriage. I'm not changed. And this town –O my god I can't go through with it. This heap"³

She is disappointed to learn she is still Carol Kennicott;

marriage has caused no magical transformation. After this first traumatic day, with will escaped to the world of men's affairs, "Carol tries to adjust herself to her new life. She tries to take pride in being a housewife. Nevertheless, despite her real efforts to be happy in her new role, she can see herself only as a servant and her home as a prison. Significantly, Carol Kennicott's life in Main Street struck a chord of recognition in many women. Sinclair Lewis received numerous letters from women who saw Carol's prison as their own.⁴

Carol, though, sees very limited alternatives for herself: "Have Children; start her career of reforming; or become so definitely a part of the town that she would be fulfilled by the activities of church and study club and bride parties. A fourth option, employment, is taboo for a married woman, especially a doctor's wife in a small town. Carol tries all three of the options which are open to her.

She first fears and postpones pregnancy, seeing a baby, quite realistically as the final lock on her prison. Yet she desires something to commit herself to. And so she has a baby. Hugh, her son, becomes simultaneously her reason for living. Carol also works frenetically "reforming" the town an organizing women's clubs. But finding none of these activities satisfying, in desperation, she finally goes beyond the accepted alternatives for respectable married women. She begins but never consummates an affair. In the end, a combination of fear and the realization that another man is not her answer to restrain her.

She demands and wins a room of her own from wounded and uncomprehending husband. Like the heroines of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Doris Lessing's "To room nineteen," Carol tries to close the door on the demands of the world.

Carol is growing emotionally more desperate as the novel progresses. She swings between the extremes of love and hate towards her husband and home; she rebukes herself for the feelings of dissatisfaction; she feels isolated and friendless; she reverts to childlike behaviour of a girl and like fears; she longs for a father-protector; she rages; she is immobilized; she dreams of escape; she succumbs to the ghostlike performance of her routines. She edges close to hysteria and insanity. At thirty, begins to fantasize about killing people with carving knives. She thrashes around for something or someone to flee to a room, a mate. She fantasies. She has sleepless nights envisioning Will; first married to Will, another woman, then imprisoned, then dead. She goes deeper and into a depressed and desperate state

If *The Job* describes the emotional frustration of the working woman, *Main Street* details the same condition in the middle-class housewife. Like those of the 1950's described by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, the class housewife of the years around world war I faced an overabundance of spare time, feelings of inadequacy, boredom, and uselessness.⁵ In the November 1921 *Ladies Home Journal*, Dr. Abraham Meyerson describes the symptoms of the "disease" to be hidden or open dissatisfaction, discontent. He correctly locates the cause of "the neurosis of the housewife "as having" a large part of its origin in the increasing desires of women in their demands for a fuller, more varied life than that afforded the lot of the housewife"⁶ The solution Meyerson offers to women is fairly typical of the inadequate and superficial advice

dispensed by the mass media of this period: the "neurotic housewife" should take a rest or a vacation or join a club. Her husband should show her more love and sympathy. If all else fails, Meyerson suggests separation-but not divorce. The media virtually admitted that there was no real solution within accepted modes of behavior for women in Carol Kennicott's predicament.

It is interesting to note that many feminist leaders of the period, such as Inez Haynes Gilmore, Jane Addams. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Margaret Sanger, describe themselves in their autobiographies as having gone through the "nervous housewife "stage.⁷

As part of their own solutions to the problem of finding an unconfined way of living their lives, many prominent feminists broke up their marriages. Carol Kennicott finally takes this road, also, and does what she suspected from the beginning would be necessary by "stalking out of the Doll's House".⁸ She declares to her flabbergasted husband:

But was I happier when I was drudging? (Before she got her maid) I was just bedraggled and unhappy. It's work-but not my work. I could not go office or a library, or nurse and teach children. But solitary dish-washing is not enough to satisfy me-or many other women. We are going to chuck it. We are going to wash 'em by machinery, and come out and play with you men in the offices and clubs and politics you have cleverly kept for yourselves. Oh, we are hopeless, we dissatisfied women 'Then why do you want to have us about the place, to fret you? So it is your sake that I am going',

It may be noted that many feminists of this period were urging that technological developments and labour-saving devices to be employed to free women from housework.⁹

Carol takes her son and moves to Washington, D.C., working for the Bureau of War Risk Insurance. She finds a "home, her own place and her own people"¹⁰ among militant suffragists who "when they were not being mobbed or arrested, took dancing lessons or went picnicking up the Chesapeake Canal or talked about the politics of the American Federation of Labour."¹¹

After one year passes, Will Kennincott visits Carol. Although he wants her to return to GropherPrarie, he does not pressure her. Carol somewhat confused, consults the "generalissima of suffrage" as to her predicament. The suffrage leader says she is giving Carol the advice she would give to any woman who came to her:

I'm thinking of thousands of women who came to Washington and New York and Chicago every year, dissatisfied at home and seeking a sign in the heavens-women of all sorts, from timid mothers of fifty in cotton gloves to girls just out of Vassar who organize strikes in their own father factories.¹²

It is not clear whether Sinclair Lewis is reflecting or merely mocking conditions in the feminist 'movement. The advice the "generalissima" gives is obviously unrealistic for Carol. She tells Carol to go back home, back to the original source of her oppression, and be a radical in isolation from the movement-unless she is willing to give up her son, even though she has been doing well enough with him for over a year.

So, Carol returns to Gropher Prarie, Main Street, and her husband. She is pregnant with a second child and, at first, pregnant with commitment to bring feminism to the hinterland. Her baby girl is born and her commitment slowly

dies as the demands of the storm windows, the hurting trip, and all the petty details of life on Main Street take precedence. In a large measure, the difference between Carol Kennicott in *Main Street* and Una Golden in *The Job* stem from their economic circumstances. Una was compelled to work, but Carol, apparently, was not. Una had high school education, whereas Carol had a graduate school education. Una's marriage was totally unsuccessful in the conventional sense that her husband was unemployed, penniless, and a drinker, whereas Carol's marriage was eminently successful by all the conventional criteria. Moreover, Una had no children when she left her marriage, but Carol did. Una operated in an urban environment where there were at least some opportunities for employment and independence; small town life provided Carol with none of this.

Although it might seem that in some ways Carol had more in her favour than Una, one other factor enters the picture. *The Job* was written in 1917 when the war was creating a need for women workers. By 1920, when *Main Street* saw print, the war was over and women were being shooed back into the home to warm the hearth. To some extent, then finding a resolution to the novel in independence, however limited might have seemed less likely to Lewis in 1920 than it had been three years earlier.

The value of his works lies in the fact that he views life for women in American society as a struggle against very oppressive and very stubborn obstacles. Beyond this *The Job*, *Main Street* and *Ann Vickers*, are historical documents which preserve for us the struggles of women in the past to solve some of the same problem that still exist in society today.

If it is true that the novels of Lewis contain a rich collection of men, it is also equally true to say that they have also a gallery of women equally rich. Like his men, his women do not lack in variety. We have here good friends, devoted wives, idealistic reformers, as we have nagging women, unfaithful wives, spying hags, sexual deviates and many others. However frustrated his own married life might have been, Lewis, unlike Hemingway, did not suffer from any "antagonism towards women". He had a normal attitude towards them. If he had did not always look upon them as paragons of virtue, he did not also think them to be embodiments of evil or inferior to men. Nor did he believe that the ideal woman was one who completely subjected herself to man. Lewis' ideal women like Leora or Vestal are equal partners in man's life and share equally their trials, tribulations and achievements. He did not think, as Faulkner seems to have done that the supreme aim of the life of the woman was "marriage, the family, the fire and the hearth". His new women like Ann Vickers and Bethel Holiday refused to be confined within the bounds of the family and the hearth. If they take to marriage, they do so with "men who would treat them as equal partners and would not demand their complete subjection".¹³ He refused to treat women "as wholly sexual beings". His women are as varied, as normal or abnormal as are found in everyday life. Within the limitation of their sex, they display the same strength or weakness as men.

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