

Chapter-II

Main Street and Babbitt

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Main Street

Published in 1920, Main Street marks the

beginning of Lewis's career as a novelist and satirist.¹

The publication of Main Street offered a different kind of out look and perspective on Lewis's art. Galsworthy in one of his letters to Lewis says about Main Street :

"....I am an ignorant person, but it seems to me that so wholesome and faithful a satiric attitude of mind has been rather conspicuously absent from American thought and literature.... It's altogether a brilliant piece of work and characterisation. My hearty congratulations. Every country of course, has its Main Streets, all richly deserving of diagnosis, but America is lucky to have found in you so poignant and just and stimulating a diagnostician...."²

This diagnostic nature of Lewis's satire is projected mainly through the heroine of the novel, Carol Milford, a girl from Mississippi ^{in the} Middle West ^{with a} who has moving and graceful beauty. Rebellious by nature and interested in sociology, Carol's ambition is to reform one of the prairie towns. She expresses her ambition thus :

I'll get my hands on one of these Prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration. I suppose I'd better become a teacher then, but I won't be that kind of teacher. I won't drone. Why should they have all the garden suburbs on Long Island? Nobody has done anything with the ugly town here in the North-West except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books. I'll make them put in a village green, and darting cottages, and a quaint Main Street !³

only three of life's ellipses,

It is with this idealism that Carol falls in love with Dr. Will Kennicott and ^mMarries him. They are on their way to Gopher Prairie after their weeding. On the way,

Carol sees flat houses and fields. She is disturbed by the dirt, and squalor of the train and its passengers. Later, she begins her married life in his Prairie town, Carol sees the shabbiness of Main Street. She realises the vastness and the emptiness of the land. There are no playing grounds and parks for the people. She finds that the emptiness of the landscape is reflected in the emptiness of the mind also. People in the town, and the new friends she has acquired all seem to be narrow, provincial in their taste, attitudes and outlook. Carol decides to do something about this.

to a Sam Clark, after building a new house invites Carol for party. She meets all the strange guests and social members at the party. She feels disgusted when she sees ^{the} social habits and behaviour of the people :

She perceived that personalities were failing to hold the party. The room filled with hesitancy and with fog. People cleared their throats, tried to choke down yawns. The men shot their cuffs and women stuck their combs more firmly into their back hair.⁴



As a part of her idealism to reform the town, Carol wants to start a dramatic club. She gets acquainted with Vida Sherwin, a French and English teacher and Guy Pollock, a lawyer. A country club named Jolly Seventeen is started by them. Middle class and high brow people are the members of it. Carol does not like the narrowness and the pettiness of these members.

Carol then forms the Thanatopsis Club. The rich ladies are the members of it. Mrs. Dawson is a leader. *who?* She becomes member of a literary club of which Mrs. Leonard Warren is the President. Carol wants to use this club to liberate the town. Participant of the club talk of Shakespeare, Milton and Tennyson. The function of the club is to plant trees, start ^{an} anti-fly campaign and help ^{the} poor of the town. But a controversy takes place among the members about exact reform programmes. The wife of the school Superintendent thinks that reform should begin with a brand new school building and ^{the} minister's wife wants a new church. The plan of Carol is lost in these petty controversies.

^{the} Patients from country visit Will Kennicott. Carol helps the doctor in his work of operation. Patients never

care about the medical bills. Doctors of Gopher Prairie are after money. They hate each other and never care about their furniture and their office. Carol describes the office of her husband Dr. Will Kennicott. She says :

The office was shabby. Kennicott had inherited it from medical predecessor, and changed it only by adding a white enamelled operating table, a sterilizer, a Rontgen - ray apparatus, and small portable typewriter.⁵

In Gopher Prairie farmers are not given decent prices for their goods. They produce potatoes and wheat in abundance. But the Commission Merchants always put them in dilemma by not making trams port available to them. Farmers become angry with merchants and say :

The shippers and the grocers here wouldn't pay us a descent price for our potatoes, eventhough folks in the cities were howling for lem.⁶

By placing ~~of~~ Carol's idealism at the centre of the novel, Lewis has given us a satirical exposé of the town. This satirical exposé covers a fairly wide range of realistic details such as the obsession of ~~the~~ Gopher Prairie with money and material pleasure, ^{cashier?} their exploitation of the farmers, their provincial cultural attitudes and their petty rivalries, jealousy and gossiping. He thus attacks ^{the} narrowness and dishonesty of Gopher Prairie women and men.

Carol is abused by Vida and Maud Dyer for her love affair with Erik which is not true. War brings a tremendous change in the economic and religious field. Methodist, Baptist and Catholic churches lose their importance. Prices of ~~the~~ wheat are very high. The wheat money doesn't remain in the pockets of the farmer. Iowa Farmers sell their land and come to Minnesota. Gopher Prairie becomes a perfect site for factories.

Carol goes to Washington and works in the Bureau of War Risk Insurance. She lives there for two years. She thinks that all the world is changing but Gopher Prairie remains as it is. She gives birth to the female child. She wants to bring them up like human beings.

Carol tries to destroy the provincialism, the hypocrisy, the narrowness and cruelty of the small town. But she becomes unsuccessful in that attempt. Her greatness remains in her tireless and continuous passion for reformation. At last, she becomes helpless and admits her defeat. She says :

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.⁷

The plot of the novel is episodic. Lewis often balances chapters of satire with chapters describing some development in Carol's private life. We see Carol as a wife, mother and reformer. The focus of the novel is directed towards the environment rather than at the individuals. The individuals are one dimensional pictures and they serve for the best satiric technique. Lewis tries to understand and gives the visual and audible stuff of the

understand
what?

American Middle West environment. He gives us an abundance of specific details so much so that Robert Lovett calls him as naturalist.⁸ Lewis tries to understand ^{the} morals and manners of Main Street people through the environment. Constance Rouke compares Lewis with Defoe. She says :

In his unflagging absorption of detail and his grasp of life about him he suggests Defoe; and it may be that like Defoe in England he will prove to have opened a way for the development of novel in America.⁹

Lewis creates a gallery of characters to strengthen his social point of view. His characters are true representative of the middle class. These middle class people are shop keepers, doctors, farmers and servants. They really represent each aspect of social life. As Richard Hulsbeck comments upon this aspect of Lewis :

Lewis does not say that this man is good and that one bad; he simply describes the good, the bad, the sublime, and ridiculous. Sinclair

Lewis a observer of the versatile life of America, whose brilliant colors he is the first man to have reproduced.¹⁰

Sinclair Lewis uses technique of contrast for satiric purpose. In Main Street, sophisticated Carol Kennicott is contrasted with naive Be. Carol is shocked by the provincialism and dinginess of the town. Be is thrilled by cosmopolitanism and color of Carol Kennicott. Marriage of Carol and Will is a contrast of values and personalities. Carol is moody, rebellious while Will is slave to routine. Vida Sherwin and Carol are contrasted in their approach and manner of reformation.

Lewis's satirical strategy is to create a sympathetic believable character through whose point of view the smug complacency and the cultural provincialism of the town are exposed. On the plane of fictional style, this strategy is transformed into verbal irony. Witness, for instance, the following passage :

Main Street is a climax of civilization.
That this Ford car might stand in front
of Bonton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome

and Erasmus wrote in Oxford Cloister.
 What Ole Jenson the grocer say to Ezra
 Stowbody the banker is the new law for
 London, Prague, and the unprofitable
 isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does
 not know and sanction, that thing is
 heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked
 to consider.¹¹

Lewis in his last press interview in 1949 said that
 the purpose of his satire was to reform American people.¹²

True to this, he doesnot merely concentrates his attention

only on the hypocrisy of his characters but takes into

account other aspects while satirizing them. Leonard

Feinberg says :

Hypocrisy is not the only object of
 his satiric attack; he also criticizes
 vice, sentimentality, folly and other
 qualities regarded as socially
 undesirable.¹³

*Other aspects
 to be
 elaborated
 with examples
 from the
 text.*

Babbitt

As we move from Main Street to Babbitt, published in 1922, we find a significant shift in Lewis's satirical focus and technique. In Main Street, the town Gopher Prairie is satirical in terms of Carol's progressively bleak, disillusioning perception, however, ^{her} adolescent idealism and reformatory zeal. Lewis's satire in Main Street is pervasive and discriminating enough to point out the adolescent nature of Carol's idealism. But in Babbitt, the central character itself is satirized to the ^{point} extent of caricature :

His large head was pink, his brown hair thin and dry. His face was babyish in slumber, despite his wrinkles and red spectacie-dents on the slopes of his nose. He was not flat but he was exceddingly well fed; his cheeks were pads, and the unroughened hand which lay helpless upon the khaki-coloured blanket was slightly puffy. He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic.¹⁴

This George F. Babbitt who is ^a typical businessman and who uses his business tricks to deceive people and accumulate money by illegal means. His family members are Verona, Ted and Tinka. His wife's name is Mary. She ^{Myra} is good, honest and kind. She is a loyal, industrious but sexless woman. Babbitt's business is selling houses to the people.

Babbitt begins with the description of a modern city - a city 'for giants'. But Lewis ironically says that giants never live there. They are nothing but a business society. In his conversation with his neighbour, Eunice Littlefield, Babbitt says :

What the country needs - just at this present juncture - is neither a college president nor a lot of monkeying with foreign affairs, but a good-sound-economical business-administration, that will give us chance to have something like a decent turnover.¹⁵

Lewis thus satirically comments upon the business ethic which dominates Babbitt and his environment.

The name of Babbitt's business company is 'Babbitt - Thomson Reality Co.' The function of this company is to find homes for families and shops for distributors of food. Babbitt gives ^hpeculiar advertisement of his company in the news papers. He always talks in terms of money when he talks to his friend Paul Riesling. He talks about profit and says :

I would up a nice little deal with
Conrad Lyte this morning that put
five hundred good round plunks in my
pocket.¹⁶

Babbitt knows nothing about architecture and landscaping. He does not know about his community. He is ignorant of the police and fire departments and their functions. He is also ignorant of the fundamentals of sanitation. He pretends that he knows everything and takes profit without rendering service or creating anything of worth.

Babbitt talks for fifteen minutes at a meeting of brokers and dealers. He talks on minor and wellknown

strategies of business. There he is praised by everybody. His entrance at the Athletic Club brings a volley of greetings. He is elected Vice-President of the Boosters Club. He is chosen to make a speech before the Zenith Real Estate Board. He attracts attention and praise by his speech-making during an election campaign. But he admits to Paul Riesling that he is not fully satisfied and really happy. He only maintains an appearance of respectability.

Babbitt uses religion for his own purpose. For the sake of influence in community, he takes part in religion. He goes to church regularly and takes money from Eathorne. He says to Ted :

I tell you, boy, there's no strong bulwark of sound conservatism than the evangelical church, and no better place to make friends who'll help you to begin your rightful place in the community than in your own-church home.¹⁷

Lewis's satire takes into account Babbitt's economic ethic, his religion and his sexual attitudes.



Babbitt appoints women in his office. Sometimes he thinks ill of them and wants to have immoral relations with them. He divides these women into real ladies, working women, old cranks, and flying chickens. He broads over their charms :

He mooned over their charms, but he was of opinion that all of them were "different" and "mysterious". Yet he had known by instinct that Louetta Swanson could be approached. Her eyes and lips were moist. Her face tapered from broad forehead to a pointed chin.¹⁸

But however successful Babbitt may be as a businessman, at the centre of this success there is a tremendous feeling of boredom. Carol's boredom in Main Street is largely a product of the gap between her idealism and the reality of ~~the~~ Gopher Prairie. In Babbitt, the hero's boredom is a product of the kind of life that he is immersed in. This feeling of foredom surfaces as a shock when a crisis in Babbitt's life takes place. He now comes to know the futility of his friends

and family. He is not treated well by his children. He has lost his pleasure in making money and supporting his children. He does not want to bring them up :

He had not much pleasure out of making money; that it was of doubtful worth to rear children merely that they might rear children who would rear children. What was it all about ? What did he want ?¹⁹

In Main Street, Carol starts her rebellion as a reformer of society. She wants to reform ^{the} ways and deviated norms of Gopher Prairie people. Carol's attitude ^{towards her society} is positive ~~towards her society~~. She remains moral and faithful to her work. But the middle class society does not accept her reformation. She has a self-realization by accepting defeat. In contrast, Babbitt's attitude towards society is negative. He tries to corrupt society by having immoral relations with his Secretary, neighbour's wife and widow. He pretends to be a democrat and gentle. He rejects ^{right} the values of life and collects money through unfair means.

Carol is weak in her conveying ideas to the people but she is a virtuous girl. Babbitt is a combination of strength and weakness, vice and virtue. Babbitt comes to realise this when he loses his business. His friends avoid him.

Lewis, in this novel lays emphasis on the smallness, the pittyness, the triviality, and lack of joy and freedom in the existence of a typical member of ^{the} moneyed class. Babbitt is a coward, a braggard and hypocrite. He is a poor husband and father. His work doesn't contribute anything to human betterment.

Lewis often uses his device of colloquialism and contrast for satiric purpose in this novel also. He compares George F. Babbitt's immorality with ^{the} virtuousness of his wife. George always creates chaos in society while his wife is ^a calm and silent woman. Again there is the contrast between Babbitt and his friend Paul Riesling. Paul is drastic in nature while Babbitt is mild. Lewis uses the device of caricature in the novel. Lewis is at its best in his creation of plot, setting and various satiric devices.

Lewis chooses Zenith City for the setting of the novel. Zenith serves as a satirical foregrounding of the environment. Lewis gives us an authentic and distorted account of the conditions of life in an industrial and commercial society.

In Main Street, Carol accepts the positive values and accepts the defeat. She is not free to do anything at last. But in Babbitt, George F. Babbitt is free to do anything. He corrupts people and doesn't bother for any value as such. Lewis offers a more poignant satire in Babbitt than in Main Street. Lewis says about Babbitt in one of his letters :

I think it's going to be good. It is satiric rather more than Main Street; and for that reason I think - I hope that the novel after Babbitt will be definitely non-satiric except, for occasional passages.²⁰