Main Street, published in October 1920, was the first in a string of satiric portraits of American life authored by Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951) in the decade of the 1920s. Tapping into the prevailing mood of cynicism and the widespread feelings of betrayal of the Wilsonian ideals for which World War I had been fought, Lewis took on cherished American institutions—business, the church, medicine—and stripped them to their hollow cores. His meteoric rise to prominence culminated in 1930, when he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. But it was in Main Street that Lewis probed the most sensitive spot in the public consciousness, for in that novel Lewis permanently redrew the literary landscape of the Midwest—and of much of middle-class America—by depicting the American small town, so long sanctified and idealized in Rockwellesque portraits and sentimental parlor melodies, as a place not of goodness and piety but of hypocrisy and ignorance. In short, Main Street demolished the most sacred of all American myths and made Lewis at once a populist hero and an enemy of the people.

The popular view of the country town at that time was best represented by the essayist Meredith Nicholson’s rosy assessment: “It’s all pretty comfortable and cheerful and busy in Indiana,” he wrote in A Hoosier Chronicle (1912), “with lots of old-fashioned human kindness flowing around; and it’s getting better all the time. And I guess it’s always got to be that way, out here in God’s country” (p. 606). Lewis had grown up in a small town: Sauk Centre, Minnesota, a rural outpost in the heart of the state, some one hundred miles northwest of Minneapolis. Unlike Nicholson, however, and other cheerleaders for small-town “values,” Lewis found the village to be characterized mostly by a deadening daily routine of “a savorless people, gulping tasteless food, . . . saying mechanical things . . . and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world” (Main Street, p. 287). This view was the animus of Main Street.

The novel had a long gestation. Escaping from Sauk Centre at his earliest chance, Lewis journeyed East and then spent time in California. He returned to his hometown in the summer of 1906 and, looking around him, came up with the idea for the book. Fresh from new experiences, Lewis saw with a flash of insight how small-town life could take a curious and creative person (like himself) and break him. He played with this theme of the revolt against conformity in a series of apprentice novels he published in the 1910s, all the time shaping and reshaping in his mind what he called his “village virus” novel. On another visit in 1916, Lewis saw the village through the eyes of his new wife, a sophisticated city woman who bristled at the hick character of the scene in which she found herself, and thus was born Carol Kennicott, the central consciousness of the novel and Lewis’s flawed but ultimately sympathetic heroine. Later still, in 1917 and 1918, when Lewis could no longer restrain his urgent desire to tell about “the flat hungriness of the Middle West,” as he described it to his friend Joseph Hergesheimer (quoted in Lingeman, p. 100), his acute observations about village life ordered themselves into a series of rapid-fire satiric bursts, and his arguments found forceful, magnificent expression in Main Street.
There had already been novels aplenty in America debunking small-town life. The tradition of what the critic Carl Van Doren in 1921 identified as “the revolt from the village” had begun perhaps as early as 1871 with Edward Eggleston’s *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, continuing on with E. W. Howe’s *The Story of a Country Town* in 1883, and supplemented by such works as Joseph Kirkland’s *Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County* (1887), Hamlin Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), and Harold Frederic’s *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896). Lewis’s closest models were probably Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). All of these authors took greedy gulps from the endless well of criticisms about small-town life: its grubbiness, its poverty, its smug complacency and corrosive isolation. But Lewis’s blast was the most devastating, for, like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Main Street* at once struck deeply and widely, covering in one broad stroke a vast expanse of the national life.

*Main Street* tells the story of Carol Kennicott, a free-spirited, bookish, and energetic young woman from the city who moves to Gopher Prairie as the bride of a country doctor. She is an idealist who goes to the hinterlands as much for the challenge of bringing beauty and social reform with her as for love of her husband. Having thus placed Carol’s illusions squarely before her, Lewis then smashes them one by one, as Carol is rebuffed by the townspeople. For all their outward displays of friendliness, they are inwardly small-minded and hypocritical. Moreover, her husband, Will, is interested in little more than stock tips and motor cars. So Carol runs away to Washington, D.C., expecting to find there a liberal, cosmopolitan society. But all she encounters are other former Main Streeteres, like her, on their own ill-defined quests for self-fulfillment. Carol therefore returns to Gopher Prairie chastened, but still feeling that she has won some battles and remained true to her ideals.

**PUBLICATION AND RECEPTION**

The appearance of the novel in 1920 was not so much a publishing event as it was a defining moment in American life. A legend grew that Lewis’s savvy publisher, Alfred Harcourt (who had just started his own company) had some months before publication started a “whispering campaign,” paying one hundred people across the country five dollars each to talk up the novel. Ernest Brace (the brother of Harcourt’s partner, Donald Brace), speculated that it was simply scandal which spurred the landslide sales and that “scandal [was] always exhilarating” (quoted in Lingeman, p. 158). Whatever the reasons, the book was a blockbuster. Harcourt’s small firm could barely keep up with the incoming orders. One morning, requests came into his offices for 9,800 copies, and from that point on interest never slackened. In 1921 the book was still on a tear, burying its closest competitor, Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s *The Brimming Cup* (1921)—not coincidentally, a view of small-town life that was a “response” to Lewis’s novel. *Main Street* was the bestselling novel in America for the entire period from 1900 to 1925, eventually selling more than 400,000 copies in its hardcover edition alone.

Lewis’s book became fodder for columnists and editorial writers in newspapers across the country, sparking a debate about whether his depiction of the American small town was distorted or accurate. Lewis and his publisher won either way, for with each new piece that appeared, sales in that region jumped. The name of the old hometown itself, Sauk Centre, became archetypal in jokes about small towns across the country. The term “Main Street” quickly entered the vernacular, with “Main Street: A Fox Trot Song,” appearing, as well as several parodies of Lewis’s novel, such as Carolyn Wells’s *Promaine Street: The Tale of Warble Petticoat* (1921), in which a shallow-minded waitress from Pittsburgh moves to a small town whose residents are zealously interested in architecture, poetry, and democratic reforms.

**CULTURAL CONTEXT**

*Main Street* resonated so tellingly with the American people because Lewis was writing at a propitious historical moment. “The history of a nation is only the history of its villages written large,” Woodrow Wilson had declared in 1900 (quoted in Schorer, p. 272), but by 1920 the village was no longer an important element in a capitalist economy, and the social and moral attitudes that it represented seemed outdated. The war had created an environment of restlessness and a persisting sense of dislocation. Postwar Americans left small towns in droves and moved to urban areas. In 1920 more people lived in towns and cities with a population of 2,500 or more than they did in villages of fewer than that number. These transplanted provincials were expecting, like Carol, to find fulfillment in their new worlds and a renewed sense of purpose. As Lewis says: “She fancied that her life might make a story. She knew that there was nothing heroic or obviously dramatic in it, no magic of rare hours, nor valiant challenge, but it seemed to her that she was of some significance because she was commonplaceness, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting” (p. 475). This was another appeal of Lewis’s
novel, the fact that most people believe there is a secret self buried beneath the day-to-day exterior that they show the world—another person who is unconventional, daring, and full of revolutionary zeal. Indeed, second only to the attack on conformity as a theme in revolt from the village novels is that of the buried life.

Yet these same people could also be defensive about where they came from. Lewis uncovered a class insecurity among the new urbanites—they retained many of their rural attitudes and loyalties, and they might even secretly have longed for the old-fashioned values of where they had been raised. They were in part influenced by the pervasive political uses of the village myth at the time. Urban America was gob-smackingly in love with its automobiles, its telephones, and its other technology as well as with the economic boom that had been created by the Republican administration. But working to limit government interference with big business, the nation’s leaders invoked the myth of the small town repeatedly, promoting it as a pure, ideal world—decentralized, rural, and independent, with no need for a centralized regulatory Goliath.

Immigration, which had flooded labor and industry since the turn of the century, forms another important backdrop to the novel. Lewis was a committed progressive, and he spoke out frequently in favor of the National Nonpartisan League (NNL), a left-wing farmer-labor group. *Main Street* is a populist novel in its profarmer sentiments. In the book, the NNL is regarded by the townies as a group of cranks who want to flood the village with socialist ideas. The local patriotism, or boosterism, is embodied by “Honest” Jim Blausser, a civic promoter who wants to turn Gopher Prairie into a city and earn big bucks in doing so. He polarizes the political situation by identifying boosters as patriots and everyone else (“knocks”) as pro-German subversives.

**THE FEMALE AUDIENCE**

But above all, the novel reached women; to many people, *Main Street* endures because it is so tellingly realistic a portrait of a marriage. The book was among the earliest in the national literature to depict women as something other than just appendages to their husbands, as seekers after autonomy and an individualized identity. Lewis was sympathetic to revolutionary causes, especially suffrage. In the 1910s Lewis was a member of the Socialist Party, and in 1914 he made several speeches on behalf of woman suffrage. He even marched in the famous Fifth Avenue parade for that cause. The Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the vote, had only been ratified in August 1920, just two months before *Main Street* appeared.

Carol forms part of an overarching social edifice that Lewis constructs in the book, the keystone of which is the liberation of women (and, by extension, all disenfranchised peoples). Carol crusades, not just on behalf of herself, but all women. She tells a friend: “I want you to help me find out what has made the darkness of the women. Gray darkness and shadowy trees. We’re all in it, ten million women, young married women with good prosperous husbands, and business women in linen collars. . . . What is it we want—and need? . . . I think perhaps we want a more conscious life” (pp. 218–219). Hundreds of women wrote to Lewis after the book was published, telling him how they had seen themselves in Carol.

Like the small town she tries to reform, however, Carol does not escape critique by Lewis. She is a quixotic dreamer, foolhardy and sometimes impetuous; but she is also benevolent, well-meaning, and intelligent. Lewis’s satiric method relied on a somewhat volatile mix of satire and sympathy, caricature and truth, compassion and scorn. The problem of the satirist is that he too often is remembered for the faults he lays bare and not the virtues he applauds. Nonetheless, Lewis’s novel created a term that still is standard for describing an essential part of the national mythology—both what it was and what it made possible later on.

*See also* Satire, Burlesque, and Parody; Village Dwellers

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**Primary Works**


**Secondary Works**


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