

SESSION 2013

**CAPES
CONCOURS EXTERNE
ET CAFEP**

**Section : LANGUES VIVANTES ÉTRANGÈRES : ANGLAIS
Section : LANGUES RÉGIONALES**

COMMENTAIRE DIRIGÉ EN ANGLAIS

Durée : 5 heures

L'usage de tout ouvrage de référence, de tout dictionnaire et de tout matériel électronique (y compris la calculatrice) est rigoureusement interdit.

Dans le cas où un(e) candidat(e) repère ce qui lui semble être une erreur d'énoncé, il (elle) le signale très lisiblement sur sa copie, propose la correction et poursuit l'épreuve en conséquence.

De même, si cela vous conduit à formuler une ou plusieurs hypothèses, il vous est demandé de la (ou les) mentionner explicitement.

NB : La copie que vous rendrez ne devra, conformément au principe d'anonymat, comporter aucun signe distinctif, tel que nom, signature, origine, etc. Si le travail qui vous est demandé comporte notamment la rédaction d'un projet ou d'une note, vous devrez impérativement vous abstenir de signer ou de l'identifier.

Tournez la page S.V.P.

Comment on the following text, paying particular attention to the vision of the American small town conveyed here by Sinclair Lewis through the conversation between his heroine, Carol Kennicott, wife of Dr. Kennicott, and Vida Sherwin about the town of Gopher Prairie.

She had sought to be definite in analyzing the surface ugliness of the Gopher Prairies. She asserted that it is a matter of universal similarity; of flimsiness of construction, so that the towns resemble frontier camps; of neglect of natural advantages, so that the hills are covered with brush, the lakes shut off by railroads, and the creeks lined with dumping-grounds; of depressing sobriety of color; rectangularity of buildings; and excessive breadth and straightness of the gashed streets, so that there is no escape from gales and from sight of the grim sweep of land, nor any windings to coax the loiterer along, while the breadth which would be majestic in an avenue of palaces makes the low shabby shops creeping down the typical Main Street the more mean by comparison.

The universal similarity—that is the physical expression of the philosophy of dull safety. Nine-tenths of the American towns are so alike that it is the completest boredom to wander from one to another. Always, west of Pittsburgh, and often, east of it, there is the same lumber yard, the same railroad station, the same Ford garage, the same creamery, the same box-like houses and two-story shops. The new, more conscious houses are alike in their very attempts at diversity: the same bungalows, the same square houses of stucco or tapestry brick. The shops show the same standardized, nationally advertised wares; the newspapers of sections three thousand miles apart have the same "syndicated features"; the boy in Arkansas displays just such a flamboyant ready-made suit as is found on just such a boy in Delaware, both of them iterate the same slang phrases from the same sporting-pages, and if one of them is in college and the other is a barber, no one may surmise which is which.

If Kennicott were snatched from Gopher Prairie and instantly conveyed to a town leagues away, he would not realize it. He would go down apparently the same Main Street (almost certainly it would be called Main Street); in the same drug store he would see the same young man serving the same ice-cream soda to the same young woman with the same magazines and phonograph records under her arm. Not till he had climbed to his office and found another sign on the door, another Dr. Kennicott inside, would he understand that something curious had presumably happened.

Finally, behind all her comments, Carol saw the fact that the prairie towns no more exist to serve the farmers who are their reason of existence than do the great capitals; they exist to fatten on the farmers, to provide for the townsmen large motors and social preferment; and, unlike the capitals, they do not give to the district in return for usury a stately and permanent center, but only this ragged camp. It is a "parasitic Greek civilization"—minus the civilization.

"There we are then," said Carol. "The remedy? Is there any? Criticism, perhaps, for the beginning of the beginning. Oh, there's nothing that attacks the Tribal God Mediocrity that doesn't help a little... and probably there's nothing that helps very much. Perhaps some day the farmers will build and own their market-towns. (Think of the club they could have!) But I'm afraid I haven't any 'reform program.' Not any more! The trouble is spiritual, and no League or Party can enact a preference for gardens rather than dumping-grounds.... There's my confession. WELL?"

"In other words, all you want is perfection?"

"Yes! Why not?"

"How you hate this place! How can you expect to do anything with it if you haven't any sympathy?"

45 "But I have! And affection. Or else I wouldn't fume so. I've learned that Gopher Prairie isn't just an eruption on the prairie, as I thought first, but as large as New York. In New York I wouldn't know more than forty or fifty people, and I know that many here. Go on! Say what you're thinking."

"Well, my dear, if I DID take all your notions seriously, it would be pretty discouraging. Imagine how a person would feel, after working hard for years and helping to build up a nice town, to have you airily flit in and simply say 'Rotten!' Think that's fair?"

50 "Why not? It must be just as discouraging for the Gopher Prairieite to see Venice and make comparisons."

"It would not! I imagine gondolas are kind of nice to ride in, but we've got better bathrooms! But—My dear, you're not the only person in this town who has done some thinking for herself, although (pardon my rudeness) I'm afraid you think so. I'll admit we lack some things. Maybe our theater isn't as good as shows in Paris. All right! I don't want to see any foreign culture suddenly forced on us—whether it's street-planning or table-manners or crazy communistic ideas."

60 Vida sketched what she termed "practical things that will make a happier and prettier town, but that do belong to our life, that actually are being done." Of the Thanatopsis Club she spoke; of the rest-room, the fight against mosquitos, the campaign for more gardens and shade-trees and sewers—matters not fantastic and nebulous and distant, but immediate and sure.

Carol's answer was fantastic and nebulous enough:

65 "Yes.... Yes.... I know. They're good. But if I could put through all those reforms at once, I'd still want startling, exotic things. Life is comfortable and clean enough here already. And so secure. What it needs is to be less secure, more eager. The civic improvements which I'd like the Thanatopsis to advocate are Strindberg plays, and classic dancers—exquisite legs beneath tulle—and (I can see him so clearly!) a thick, black-bearded, cynical Frenchman who would sit about and drink and sing opera and tell bawdy stories and laugh at our proprieties and quote Rabelais and not be ashamed to kiss my hand!"

Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*. 1920. New York: Penguin, Signet Classics, 1998, p. 287-90.

ANNEX 1

This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.

The town is, in our tale, called "Gopher Prairie, Minnesota." But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says 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.

Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark's annual hardware turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God's Country. In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor strictly moral.

Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith. Would he not betray himself an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths?

Sinclair Lewis, Preface to *Main Street*. 1920. New York: Penguin, Signet Classics, 1998, p. 15.

ANNEX 2

Spoon River Anthology was a collection of poems, *Winesburg, Ohio* was a collection of short stories, *The Anthology of Another Town* was a collection of anecdotes. It remained for a novel in the customary form, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, to bring to hundreds of thousands the protest against the village which these books brought to thousands.

Mr. Lewis, like Mr. Masters, clearly has revenges to take upon the narrow community in which he grew up, nourished, no doubt, on the complacency native to such neighborhoods and yet increasingly resentful. Less poetical than his predecessor, the younger novelist went further in both his specifications and his generalizations. Instead of brooding closely, ironically, profoundly, under the black wings of the thought of death, Mr. Lewis satisfies himself with a slashing portrait of Gopher Prairie done to the life with the fingers of ridicule. He has photographic gifts of accuracy; he has all the arts of mimicry; he has a tireless gusto in his pursuit of the tedious commonplace. Each item of his evidence is convincing, and the accumulation is irresistible. No other American small town has been drawn with such exactness of detail in any other American novel. Various elements of scandal crop out here and there, but the principal accusation which Mr. Lewis brings against his village—and indeed against all villages—is that of being dull. "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."

(...)

Had Mr. Lewis lacked remarkable gifts he could never have written a book which got its vast popularity by assailing the populace. The reception of *Main Street* is a memorable episode in literary history. Thousands doubtless read it merely to quarrel with it; other thousands to find out what all the world was talking about; still other thousands to rejoice in a satire which they thought to be at the expense of stupid people never once identified with themselves; but that thousands and hundreds of thousands read it is proof enough that complacency was not absolutely victorious and that the war was on.

Carl Van Doren, *Contemporary American Novelists 1900-1920*. New York: Macmillan, 1922, p. 161-64.

ANNEX 3

It was fashionable in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America to pour scorn on the way of life which, before the post-Civil War revolution in industrial and urban growth, had been dominant in America: life on the farm, in the village and in particular in the small American town. The small town might have a library and an amateur theatrical society, a band even; but what were these compared with the museums, the theatres and orchestras of the city?

Ann Massa, *American Literature in Context IV, 1900-1930*, London ; New York : Methuen, 1982, p. 106.