

TEACHING *MAIN STREET*: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE NOVEL ENDS?

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Whenever I teach *Main Street*, especially to students in my English Senior Seminar, I like to ask them to imagine what would happen to Carol after the novel ends. The course is the last one that English majors take before they graduate, and I find that they need to be encouraged to think about the possibilities for life after graduation and the problems that can arise. Carol's despair, as "a working woman with no work," and her fight to maintain some kind of vibrant intellectual life in a small town, is something that may happen to my students.

Last semester, when I posed the question and asked them to write a creative response, I received more positive letters about Carol's state of mind than I usually do. Whether this is because of the more conservative climate due to the world situation or because they identify with Carol's struggles more than some classes, it is difficult to say. Below is a summary of some of the responses I received.

Two wrote as Carol writing to Fern to bring her up to date on the goings on in town and her attempts to make her marriage to Will work. Several others also wrote in Carol's voice. Sonya Beese created a diary entry in which Carol hopes that she can start a book club with her daughter. She says, "We will read nothing but high-class literature." Christina Butzen created correspondence between Carol and her adult daughter who is writing from Washington, D.C. In a number of these responses Carol's daughter is the woman Carol wanted to be: independent, musically talented, and ambitious. One student wanted to see Carol run for mayor of Gopher Prairie and a couple of other students had her move to another town, where, in one of them, she became a city planner. Another wrote in Will's voice, commenting on how much Carol had settled down.

Eric's influence is evident in several of the responses. Nikki Ronowski wrote an obituary for Carol, noting that she had twins, Eric and Fern, several years after her daughter was born. The conclusion to the obituary was suitably ambiguous, "She acted as though she despised this town until the day she died but we all know she had a soft spot for Gopher Prairie, just as we have one for Mrs. Kennicott." Another had her write to Eric, although it's not clear whether the letter was ever sent, and in it Carol imagines her own obituary. One of the most thoughtful ones, by Jessica Bowman, had an older Carol being visited by

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Eric Valor and the emotions that this caused:

In an instant I was transported back to our time together and felt that immediate longing I thought had disappeared. We did not talk about old times together, since there really was no need to put ourselves in the past. Yet, why is it that when Eric left I watched my door close on my dreams, goals, and the missed opportunity to say so many things, things that were probably better left unsaid?

In the most unusual of these responses, Jennifer Witt imagined Carol literally shrinking as the pres-

sure to conform became more and more onerous. Eventually she shrinks to the size of Will's pinkie and he happily keeps her in a box where she is "as cute as a button."

My teaching Lewis's novels on a regular basis is always rewarded by creative efforts such as these when students try to imaginatively enter the life of the characters.

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