

Hamlin Garland. *Main-Travelled Roads*. 1891, reprint New York: New American Library, 1962.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The publication of six original stories in *Main-Travelled Roads* in 1891 launched the literary career of thirty-one-year-old Hamlin Garland. Over time, expanded by five additional stories, the book emerged as a minor American classic. Its setting was what was referred to at the turn of the century as the “Middle Border,” straddling the boundary between the Middle West and the West and including places where he had lived growing up in western Wisconsin, Iowa, and Dakota Territory near Aberdeen. The original impulse for writing these stories was a trip Garland, an adoptive Bostonian, took back to visit his parents on their farm. His main observations on that journey concerned the oppressive economic and social conditions existing on the frontier, especially the drudgery and isolation suffered by his mother and other rural women. These images worked their way into the stories he wrote soon afterwards. While the pieces he wrote made for searing and dramatic indictments of life on the Middle Border, however, they did not necessarily present a fair and balanced view. It certainly is true that conditions there were harsh, toilsome, and precarious, but there were many compensations provided by life in the region that Garland failed to celebrate or appreciate, at least in his published work.

His collection of short stories (borrowing the judgment of William Dean Howells, he calls them historical fiction) drew upon the difficult experiences of his family on several claims as they moved about on the frontier. It was not a life based on romantic vistas, but one based on conditions on an “enormous sun-burnt, treeless plain.” In the preface to the book, Garland observes that his view of rural life echoes “the ugliness, the endless drudgery, and the loneliness of the farmer’s lot.” This experience “smote me with stern insistence. I was the militant reformer.” It was a militancy rooted in resentment—a resentment that grew with later visits to his parents’ farm.

The first story in the expanded version of *Main-Travelled Roads*, “The Branch Road,” opens with a young man named Will Hannan (“young, jubilant, and a happy lover”) on his way to help “thrash” (thresh) the wheat of a man named Dingman. He is home between semesters at the seminary (equivalent to a high school) he attends to help his family and neighbors, but what holds him is the allure of a young woman named Agnes Dingman, with whom he shares a “tacit understanding of mutual love.” That it is tacit is shown by his unwillingness to show regard for her, or have it shown in return, though he boils inside when others respond to Agnes’s serving them at lunch. None of the others are fooled by Will’s seeming indifference. Nevertheless, Will remains emotionally paralyzed. When an accident with a buggy keeps him from meeting Agnes later that night and she goes out with another, the young suitor is devastated, and he writes her an angry farewell letter.

Seven years later, Will returns to the area, having worked in the Southwest as a railroad conductor and a ranch owner (though thought by some to have become a

gambler). The scene is “bountiful and beautiful,” and lush with growth. And what of Agnes? She is married to his one-time quicker rival, who has turned out to be a bully and a lout. At first, the notion of a suffering Agnes pleases Will, but her obvious despair moves him to apologize for his earlier rashness and to attempt to overcome the mistake he had made. “I’ve made you suffer, so I should spend the rest of my life making you happy. . . . Stay here and be killed by inches,” he says, or go to Europe and beyond and reclaim your health. And so they leave the scene of their mistake and, with her (and his) child, they seek their fortune in the outside world.

If the first story is a romantic fantasy based on stark choices between stultifying rural life and the promise of the whole world, “Up the Coulee” makes the choice even clearer. Howard McLane, another seminary graduate, returns to where he grew up, having become a successful actor and having stayed away much longer than he had intended. Elegantly dressed, he meets his brother, Grant, who is rudely, though sensibly, dressed and working ankle-deep in mud, raising a calf to its feet. The contrast is clear. Howard’s guilt at ignoring his family is matched by his mother’s frailty and his brother’s resentment. The family farm has been foreclosed on, and they are living on a smaller place. The contrast in their situations strikes at Howard like “the lash of a wire whip,” but the pain it causes is made stronger by his brother’s accusations. Howard has become someone who wears elegant clothes and toadies to millionaires, while Grant has remained a poor rustic in a two-dollar suit who has to work too hard to try to make ends meet.

A welcome party the second night makes the choices even clearer. It underscores “the infinite tragedy of these lives which the world loves to call peaceful and pastoral,” but which are unfulfilled and economically precarious. As Grant’s wife says, farm life is “nothing but fret, fret, and work the whole time.” Home is not a home, but “a bare, blank, cold, drab-colored shelter.” When Howard’s mother recoils at the prospect of living in the city, Howard replies, “There speaks the true rural mind.” When Howard’s brother refuses his financial aid (“life’s a failure for ninety-nine percent of us”), it is clear that Howard’s escape from the dreariness of rural life was fortunate for him, but also that it added to the misfortunes of those left behind.

Garland’s stories hammer home the same truth again and again. Rural life means “bondage to hard labor,” as Julia Peterson thinks in “Among the Corn-Rows,” and with little material gain to show for it. Escape for Julia from “ploughin’ corn and milkin’ cows till the day of judgment” is provided by marriage to a man with a hundred good acres of wheat. Her new relationship will trade virtual indentured servitude for the promise of hard work with someone who needs a wife, but hard work will mark either situation. When Ed Smith returns from the Civil War (“The Return of a Private”), he exchanges fighting the South for fighting nature, the banks, and social injustice. Tim Haskel, an energetic farmer set on improving rented land (“Under the Lion’s Paw”), exchanges his hard work for being swindled by the land speculator who holds the mortgage. After all, the land that Haskel has improved is now worth more to the land speculator, who thereby charges Haskel that much more when he seeks to buy the land he has improved. As William Dean Howells observes in the preface, the story “is a lesson in political economy, as well as a tragedy of the darkest cast.”

Fortunately, there are occasional human compensations for living such a hard life. In “The Creamery Man,” the compensation is love. In “A Day’s Pleasure,” it is the sympathy of one woman for another that lightens the load for a moment. In “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip,” it is the journey back to see her family after twenty-three years that lightens Mrs. Ripley’s life. And in “God’s Ravens,” it is the kindness of new neighbors that gives strength: “We know our neighbors now, don’t we? We can never hate or ridicule them again.”

The last story, “A Good Fellow’s Wife,” has the most consolation built into it, and the most character development. A banker who has lost his depositors’ money in illegal speculative mining investments finds redemption when he owns up to his malfeasance and sets about repaying those to whom he owes money. He also takes comfort from his wife, who stoically assists him by building a thriving business to help him settle his debts. They come to a renewed understanding of their relationship and begin anew as partners, both in the store and in their marriage. “It’s almost like getting married again,” observes the husband. Sometimes hardship can be ameliorated.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What major points does Hamlin Garland seek to make in *Main-Travelled Roads*?
2. Do you think Garland’s own rural background gives his stories credibility?
3. How much does the meaning of the varied short stories in *Main-Travelled Roads* overlap?
4. How does Garland present rural life?
5. Which story makes Garland’s point most clearly?
6. Which story is the most engaging?
7. Which story works least effectively?
8. Does Garland offer any suggestions for reform, either explicitly or implicitly?
9. Is Garland’s work reinforced by anything else that you have read from the time period (Frank Norris, William Dean Howells, for instance)?
10. “A Branch Road” paints a depressing, but ultimately hopeful, picture of wounded pride, stubborn revenge, and ultimate redemption. In your opinion, has life in rural American changed much since the late 1880s, when the story is set?
11. In “Up the Coulee,” a farmer who stays at home in a life of poverty while his brother becomes a successful and well-paid actor in the East concludes that “life’s a failure for ninety-nine per cent of us.” Is that too bleak a view of conditions on the prairie or just hard realism, in your opinion?

12. “Among the Corn Rows” impresses us with the hard work that prairie homesteads required of everyone, male and female alike, whether it was demanded by others or self-imposed. What kind of new life do you imagine Julia Peterson had with her new husband, Rob?

13. What do you think Garland was trying to do in his story “The Return of a Private”?

14. What do you think the message of “Under the Lion’s Paw” is, and what do you think the story might reveal about Garland’s political views?

15. “The Creamery Man” is a story about unrequited love and love on the rebound. Part of the dynamics relates to the influence of ethnic background upon what we might call the “marriage market.” How, in general, would you compare and contrast today’s courting and marriage patterns with those described in the story?

16. What does “A Day’s Pleasure” have to say about gender relations and class divisions on the prairie frontier?

17. “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip” is revealing about gender relations, marital communication (or the lack thereof), geographical mobility, and the aging process during the late nineteenth century.” Comment.

18. “Uncle Ethan Ripley” relates a story about people being suckered into doing things they really don’t want to do. Does the story have contemporary relevance?

20. After many stories describing the harshness, drudgery, and financial insecurity of rural existence, “God’s Ravens” depicts a Chicago man who wants to ditch city life for a nostalgic return to the country living of his boyhood. What does this story tell us about farm life, city life, and life in general?

21. “A ‘Good Fellow’s’ Wife” is a tale of a man’s fall and redemption, but, more poignantly, it is a story of a woman’s strength, assertiveness, and ultimate triumph. To what extent do you think the story constitutes a manifesto for feminism?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Hamlin Garland was born September 14, 1860, on a homestead near West Salem, Wisconsin. He grew up moving with his family from farm to farm in Iowa and Dakota Territory. Garland’s boyhood experiences gave him a strong personal sense of life on the prairie as well as a fierce determination to be a writer. He left the land, moving first to Boston and then Chicago in pursuit of a literary career, but he maintained the vision, one deeply rooted in his family’s hardscrabble life. It led him to call for a realistic literature of the West, based on experience, not just on hope.

The realistic local-color stories contained in Garland’s first book, *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), were followed three years later by a collection of literary essays, *Crumbling Idols*. He wrote a biography of Ulysses Grant (1898) and a narrative of the

Alaskan Gold Rush (1899), and he also gained popularity as a public lecturer. *Rose of Dutcher's Coolley* (1895) was his first novel, and there were several others, such as *Her Mountain Lover* (1901) and *The Captain of the Grey Troop* (1902), though he soon tired of fiction and turned to his family's history. *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), *A Daughter of the Middle Border* (1922), *Trail-Makers of the Middle Border* (1926), and *Back-Trailers of the Middle Border* (1928) were even more popular than his fiction. *A Daughter of the Middle Border* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for biography. Although he wrote other memoirs and a book of Indian stories, *The Book of the American Indian* (1923), his last books were defenses of psychic phenomena. He died in Hollywood on March 4, 1940.

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