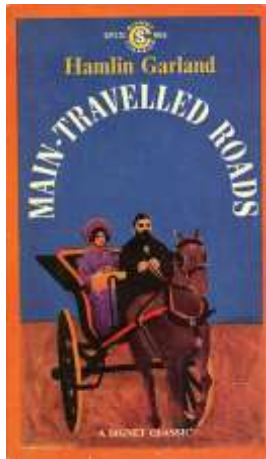


About the Book



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

Synopsis

Garland (1860-1940) stands as one of the most acclaimed and respected writers about rural America in U.S. history. Born on a farm near La Crosse, Wisconsin, he grew up on homesteads in Iowa and near Aberdeen, Dakota Territory, before leaving for Boston in his early twenties to pursue a literary career. The original stories constituting *Main-Travelled Roads* were inspired by a visit home when he was in his late twenties. Chronicling the day-to-day lives and emotions of prairie settlers in the region, these stories rocketed him to literary fame in 1891 and remain his foremost fictional legacy.

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.

Hamlin's collection of short stories (borrowing 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 informer." 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 other 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.

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Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).

<http://library.sd.gov/PROG/sdbookbag/index.aspx>