

# Discussion Guide for Educational Settings

## The Life & Loves of Sinclair Lewis

A two-part streaming video presentation



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Prepared by:

Dr. James V. Gambone, Producer and Director of "The Life & Loves of Sinclair Lewis,"  
and Evan and Molly Heil, Assistant Directors

## Expected Educational Outcomes

After viewing this two-part film, students and teachers will learn:

- More about Sinclair Lewis, an icon of American Literature, and how he approached the craft of writing;
- How social issues like provincialism, nativism, racism, corruption, and authoritarianism influenced Lewis, and how they make him relevant today;
- How a professional person attempts to balance work, family, and fame;
- How can an addiction like alcoholism affect the personal life of a professional writer;
- How your birthplace can play an important role in your private and professional life.

## Film Characters

**Don:** Former television journalist and professional interviewer.

**Sinclair Lewis:** Author of *Main Street* and many other socially relevant bestsellers, and first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Gracie Hegger Lewis:** First wife of Sinclair Lewis, author, and mother of Wells Lewis.

**Dorothy Thompson:** Renowned radio broadcaster and journalist, second wife of Sinclair Lewis, and mother of Michael Lewis.

## Plot Preview

Former Television Journalist Don interviews Sinclair Lewis and his two former wives, Gracie Hegger Lewis and Dorothy Thompson. As we learn more about Lewis' works, we also get a deeper look into his personal life and relevance to the world then and today.

# Suggested Discussion Questions

## Act 1

As stated by the television journalist/interviewer in Part 1, “Mr. Lewis was one of the most prolific novelists of the 20th century.” During a span of 10 years, starting in the 1920s, he wrote five best-selling novels. . .books that are still relevant today. How did Sinclair Lewis use his trusty companion “Ebenezer” to write his novels? What and how do you use anything similar to help in your own writing?

What are the main themes you think were covered in the book *Main Street*, and are how are they relevant today?

What did Sinclair Lewis learn growing up in a small town? How similar and different do you think is a small-town upbringing today?

Based on what you saw in this first part of the production, what do you think are the similarities and differences between Sinclair Lewis’ wives, Gracie Hegger Lewis and Dorothy Thompson?

What do you think are the most important points Lewis made when he gave his Nobel Prize address?

## ACT 2

How would you describe the relationship between Gracie and Dorothy in “The Life & Loves of Sinclair Lewis?” How did these women help Sinclair Lewis’ writing career?

If you picked one of the novel vignettes you watched in the streaming video (vignettes from *Main Street*, *Arrowsmith*, *Research for Elmer Gantry*, *Kingsblood Royal*, and *It Can’t Happen Here*), what would you say that could help us understand how our society has changed or has stayed the same?

How would you describe the emotional highs and lows of Sinclair Lewis’ life? What are the lessons young people like yourselves can take away from watching this presentation?

Lewis suffered from alcoholism off and on throughout his life. How do you think alcoholism may have affected his relationships with his wives and his writing career?

There is a saying, “your ashes speak louder than your words.” Why do you think Lewis wanted his ashes returned to Sauk Centre after his death?

## Additional Reading (Not Required)

*Main Street* – Read about Carol Kennicott, a librarian from the big city of St. Paul, who marries a doctor and moves to the conservative community of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, where she tries to make her community better and more exciting. *Main Street* is Sinclair Lewis’ most famous novel and shines with its colorful rhetoric and satire.

## Assignments (Not Required)

Here are some suggestions. . .

In the play “The Life and Loves of Sinclair Lewis,” an historical figure who is no longer alive is interviewed and allowed to provide context to his life, thus humanizing him. By yourself, write two new questions about Lewis or his wives based on what you just watched and what you would like to know.

The play “The Life and Loves of Sinclair Lewis” explores themes relevant to the outside world. Explore a recent movie, streaming film, or television show that also makes connections to the real world. Does it do it effectively? With evidence, explain why or why not?



Sinclair Lewis boyhood home in Sauk Centre.

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