

Rural Life on the Great Plains

Hamlin Garland



OVERVIEW

Hamlin Garland (1860–1940) spent his youth in rural areas of the Midwest. He became a novelist and short story writer and often wrote of the hardships of farming life. In the following excerpt from *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), he tells of returning home to visit old friends and neighbors.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- How does Garland seem to view pioneer life?
 - Why is pioneer life difficult?
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Every house I visited had its individual message of sordid [miserable] struggle and half-hidden despair. Agnes had married and moved away to Dakota. And Bess had taken upon her girlish shoulders the burdens of wifehood and motherhood. . . . In addition to the work of being cook and scrubwoman, she was now a mother and nurse. As I looked around upon her worn chairs, faded rag carpets, and sagging sofas, the bare walls of her pitiful little house seemed a prison. I thought of her as she was in the days of her radiant girlhood, and my throat filled with rebellious pain.

All the gilding [bright surface] of farm life melted away. The hard and bitter realities came back upon me in a flood. Nature was as beautiful as ever. The soaring sky was filled with shining clouds. . . . A mystical sheen was on the odorous [fragrant] grass and waving grain. But no splendor of cloud, no grace of sunset could conceal the poverty of these people. On the contrary, [the beauties of nature] brought out . . . the gracelessness of these homes and . . . the mechanical daily routine of these lives. . . .

Men who were growing bent in digging into the soil spoke to me of their desire to see something of the great eastern world before they died. Women whose eyes were faded and dim with tears listened to me with almost breathless interest [while] I told them of the great cities I had seen—of wonderful buildings, of theaters, of the music of the sea. Young girls expressed to me their longing for a life which was better worthwhile. And lads, eager for adventure and excitement, confided to me their secret intention to leave the farm at the earliest moment. "I don't intend to wear out my life drudging on this old place," said Wesley Fancher, with a bitter oath.