Sinclair Lewis and His Critics

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SINCLAIR LEWIS AND HIS CRITICS

being

A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the Fort Hays Kansas State College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sinclair Lewis, a novelist of note, especially in the "Roaring Twenties," was a controversial writer in a period of American history when the nation was to pass through such crises as the depression of the thirties and World War II. Lewis considered the typical American a smug individual who was indifferent to the problems which surrounded him. As far as Lewis was concerned, these indifferent Americans were characterized by an interest in bootleg whiskey, speakeasies, and stock market speculation.

The reading of Babbitt was the first step to a desire for further knowledge of his creator. Main Street compelled the writer to study that person who could so skillfully tongue-lash staid American institutions. Since Lewis's subjects touched so many American sore spots, critics found fertile soil for criticism. That criticism put forth by leading critics is of prime interest in this study. The writer sought answers to many questions. Why did Lewis write five great novels in the twenties and then fail to get a favorable reaction from the readers of the thirties and forties? Did he merely "run out," or did social conditions in the United States change so that his work was no longer timely? Was he a realist or a romanticist? Were his characters true to life or merely caricatures? What was the quality of Lewis's satire? The writer also desired to determine Sinclair Lewis's status in the minds of his contemporaries and his place in the literary world.
The first step in the research was to determine what previous research had been done at this college on Sinclair Lewis. The only other work done at Fort Hays Kansas State College was a thesis, "Sinclair Lewis: Social Satirist," by Mildred L. Parsons in 1951. Then a careful study of all of Sinclair Lewis's novels available was the next step in the research. This reading was coupled with a search into books and periodicals for criticism of Lewis. This criticism appeared not only at the time of the publication of each novel, but also very recently when Lewis died in 1951. The amount of material available in periodicals was so vast that the writer found it necessary to select the work of firmly established critics. Some of those selected were Maxwell Geismar, Joseph Wood Krutch, Carl Van Doren, Bernard de Voto, Henry Commager, Lewis Mumford, and Sherwood Anderson. These criticisms coupled with those of some less important critics and reviewers supplied a rather complete picture of the reception of one of the most controversial social historians of the past four decades.
CHAPTER II

THE BACKGROUND OF SINCLAIR LEWIS'S CAREER

Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Center, Minnesota, on February 7, 1885. Lewis pictured Sauk Center as a small village in the most Scandanavian part of America.\(^1\) His father, Dr. Edwin Lewis, was a Connecticut Yankee of Welsh ancestry who had gone west from his native New Haven. Lewis described him as "very dignified, stern, rather soldierly, absolutely honest, and a fair to good country doctor."\(^2\) He spoke of his father rarely and with no affection.

Lewis's mother, Emma Kerrott, was of English extraction and the daughter of a Civil War doctor. Mrs. Lewis died when Lewis was a child, and he and his two brothers were brought up by the second Mrs. Lewis. One brother became a surgeon; one ran a small flour mill.

Sinclair Lewis was a thin-skinned, gawky, shy, and inquisitive boy who never missed a thing. His was a commonplace boyhood except for a love of reading not very usual in the new town of Sauk Center. He reveled in Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and Washington Irving. This habit of reading led to his writing. Lewis began writing romantic poetry at the age of eleven. Psychologists would say that he did this as a compensation for the fact that his classmates were better than he


in sports. This is found to be not entirely true when one considers his literary background. Hal, or "Red," as his friends called him, was quite a normal boy in relation to school. He hated the village grade and high school. Christian Gauss advanced the theory that Lewis hated Sauk Center because his romantic mind found no ruined castles, beauty, or adventure in the staid Minnesota town of Sauk Center. He took refuge in nature and hunting, but he rarely killed anything. This escape was preferable to school where he felt out of place with his red hair and freckles.

Sinclair Lewis liked to debate, and he wanted to start a school magazine. At fourteen he began to send poems to magazines. Soon afterward he got a job on the Sauk Center Weekly Herald where he was the society reporter and a type setter. The editor, Mr. Hendryx, tried to tame Hal's romantic reporting. Lewis had developed an idea of perfect schools somewhere, so he decided to go to Harvard. His father chose Yale instead, so he became a student there in 1903.

Sinclair Lewis went East hunting spiritual adventure. At first he was entranced with Yale. He liked the teachers and studied hard. Lewis loved words, and the professors used those he had never heard. Although he spent long hours in the library reading, Lewis still found time to write. As a result of this writing, he became the first man in his class to have anything accepted in the Yale Literary Magazine.

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3Christian Gauss, "Sinclair Lewis Vs. His Education," The Saturday Evening Post, 204:20, December 26, 1931.
of which he eventually became the editor. At this time he still wrote poetry, not satire. During his summer vacations he worked for the Sauk Center Weekly Avalanche. The perfectness of Yale soon disappeared, however, and imperfections glared. A stupid and pointless question asked of another Yale student caused Lewis's fellow students to laugh at him. That queered him at Yale, and from then on he was considered odd. Consequently, his professors failed to appreciate his creative ability also. Even work on a New Haven newspaper failed to help his need for something more thrilling and vital.

Bored to death in his senior year, Lewis withdrew from Yale and went to Upton Sinclair's socialist community, Helicon Hall. He was not a socialist but was seeking something lively. At Helicon Hall he worked as a janitor. The hall didn't meet Lewis's expectations. He found the place full of crackpots, food fadists, anarchists, frauds, socialists, and loafers.\footnote{Stolberg, op. cit., p. 454.} In a few months he saw through the place, and since he was suffering from jaundice, he left Helicon Hall. He did some free lancing in the Lower East Side of New York. He went to Panama on a cattle boat, but he found the big world so disappointing and uninteresting that he returned to Yale.\footnote{Gauss, op. cit., p. 35.} Sinclair Lewis looked on his last year at Yale with satisfaction. He had returned to Yale with a man's perspective. He worked hard during that school year, and he was able to graduate in the spring of 1908.
In the years after 1908, he became a magazine writer and editor. Lewis was such a non-conformist that he failed to fit in at any place he was employed. He drifted for two years as a newspaper reporter in Iowa and California. His first full-time newspaper job was on the Waterloo, Iowa, Courier. Lewis made puns about Waterloo and assured his failure by having trouble with the staff of the paper from which he was fired in ten weeks. While he was loafing in California for several weeks before getting another job, he met the authors, William Rose Benet and Jack London. When his money ran out, he went to San Francisco and got a job on the San Francisco Evening Bulletin. Lewis was good at "human-interest" stories, but he never saw or brought in the news.6

In 1910 at the age of twenty-five he got a position with the George Doran Publishing House in New York at fifteen dollars a week. For the next five years he had a series of typical white-collar, unromantic, office literary jobs. He learned in the hard school of experiment how to write short stories for The Saturday Evening Post and two or three other popular magazines. Lewis battled for freedom from routine tasks so that he could devote all of his time to writing novels. His first book, Hike and The Aeroplane, was published by Frederick A. Stokes under the pseudonym of Tom Graham. It was written for boys, and the author's own copy was inscribed, "To Sinclair Lewis from the author, Tom Graham, his altered ego."7

6 Maule and Cane, op. cit., p. 91.
7 Ibid., p. 198.
During this period he met Alfred Harcourt who worked in the trade department of Henry Holt and Company. Harcourt realized the potentialities of the young rapid-fire conversationalist and reformer, and they became great friends. Even then Lewis had a passion for the little people submerged in the cities and crossroads of America. He had been inspired by this theory when he began a novel, Village Virus, in 1905. In 1916 he walked into Harcourt's office, shut the door, and said,

Alf, I'm going to write that small town novel you've been pestering me about. The title is Main Street, and don't you mention it to a single soul."

Previous to this, in 1914, Sinclair Lewis had married Grace Hegger. He had also published his first novel, Our Mr. Wrenn, under his own name. The novel portrayed the romantic idealism of Mr. Wrenn whose whole life had been spent in the disorganized files of the "Souvenir Company." When he inherited a fortune, he sought adventure and free love in Europe. He met the bohemian, Ista Nash, who showed him how to revolt against respectability. Although he gained sophistication, confidence, and culture in Europe, he returned to the United States saddened because this added knowledge brought no freedom from the dullness of daily living. His sentiments were summed up simply, "For when a person's free, he is never free to be anything but free."9


Mr. Wrenn's experience led him to a new discovery of America and recognition of the business world.

The book sold well enough—perhaps three thousand copies—and had two or three cordial reviews. Thomas Horton, who wrote for The North American Review, called the book one of Lewis's best early novels.

The Trail of The Hawk appeared in 1915. The hero, Carl Ericson, was one of the most ambitious characters of Lewis's early novels. The book had taken shape on a commuter train to New York. Carl's early life followed Lewis's own early life quite closely. Carl, the son of a Norwegian carpenter, had an equal passion for Gertrude Cowles and flying. However, he left Gertrude for Ruth Winslow, who represented aristocratic eastern society. Gradually, the hero lost sight of his early idealism. The book represented superficial thinking on the part of the author. If he accomplished anything with the book, he described the impact of the machine and of wealth on society. These early Lewis characters had a curious pattern of fear, deep conviction, and deep feelings, which might be answered by their desire to get ahead in that society. The novel was not essentially a satire but a romance. Lewis called these first two novels financial failures. He added that they were dead before the ink was dry.

A less whimsical and more fully realized novel, The Job, appeared in 1917. His new heroine, Una Golden, was the first full-length woman character in the novels. Sinclair Lewis traced Una's business career

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10 Ibid., p. 81.
through several jobs--secretary, cosmetic expert, hotel manager--a series of unhappy romances on to her marriage to Walter Babson. Simultaneously she conquered job and home. Maxwell Geismar called this novel an example of Lewis's early realism. Here his character escaped from Main Street to achieve freedom in the business world. Thomas Horton found a forerunner of Lewis's later style in the clarity of thought and middle class speech.

In 1916 Sinclair Lewis gave up his editorial work to devote himself to writing. In 1918 he drove across the country to the West Coast with his wife and then back to Sauk Center. In 1919 he wrote a serial, Free Air, based on this trip. The novel turned out to be an innocently romantic and adventurous story of a small town garage hand who fell in love with a girl from Brooklyn while she was motoring through the Middle West. The hero gradually acquired enough culture to become acceptable to the belle of Brooklyn Heights. In this same year Lewis wrote The Innocents, which was meant to be a pot-boiler. Lewis maintained that it was a love story of the later years of an aged New York couple who tried to find happiness in a little Indiana town. Edward Wagenknecht found some of the pre-Main Street, small town ideas which became so prominent in the twenties. 11

Maxwell Geismar credited the writing of that early period as the beginning of the conflict of cultural values embodied in the "East" and

"West." One might say that these cultural extremes were the true poles of Lewis's modern American world in the next period of his writing. In the raw frontier towns of the early Sinclair Lewis, social position was even more desirable than it was in the drawing rooms of the East.

Sinclair Lewis's friendship with Alfred Harcourt had deepened with the years. In 1919 when Harcourt resigned from Henry Holt and Company, he wrote to Lewis for advice about his future work. Lewis advised, "Start your own business. I'm going to write important books. You can publish them."¹² Both of the young men were risking their careers, but both were shrewd enough to sense success to come. In 1919 Sinclair Lewis borrowed five hundred dollars from his father and finished Village Virus. It was published in 1920 as Main Street. Lewis expected it to sell five thousand copies, but it exploded in the United States with a sale of over a half million copies.¹³ Thus approached the golden period of Lewis's work.

¹² Smith, op. cit., p. XI.
¹³ Stolberg, op. cit., p. 455.
CHAPTER III

CRITICS' RECEPTION OF THE NOVELS OF THE TWENTIES

The election of 1920 marked the close of a period of democratic idealism and optimism about the perfectability of American society which began in its modern phase with William Jennings Bryan, was expressed by Theodore Roosevelt, and culminated with World War I and the defeat of the idealistic League of Nations. By 1920 the American people were weary of their old faith that happiness could be found by public work. They had found that the problem of living was deeper and more complex than it had been. Machines had taken over. People had become rich, and they were ready to examine themselves. Sinclair Lewis was in a position to supply the demand for this self-examination. He had developed his background in the previous decade and was well-fitted for the task before him in writing such novels as Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith, and Elmer Gantry. Critics were divided on their reception of these controversial novels.

The timeliness of the publication of such novels as Main Street and Babbitt was not questioned. Walter Lippman, famous writer of the twenties, felt that Lewis wrote Main Street with no idea of money and applause. It just so happened that the personal mood of Lewis suited exactly the mood of the large part of the American people. These first novels quickly became source books for the new prejudices of the citizens of the Harding-Coolidge era.\(^\text{14}\)

Edward Wagenknecht, author of *Cavalcade of The American Novel*, noted that *Main Street* had the good fortune to appear at the very moment when the American people were beginning to believe that they had been bulldozed into fighting a needless, useless war. From *Main Street* the novels were to go on to other timely subjects embodied in the characters of businessmen, scientists, and clergymen.

Harry Hartwick, formerly on the staff of the University of Iowa, wrote with a critical eye on the fiction of the first forty years of this century. He saw the timeliness of *Main Street*. When the book appeared in 1920, the small town as the last home of virtue and benevolence was enshrined in popular fancy by the people who had been brought up on Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*, Booth Tarkington's *Gentleman From Indiana*, and Meredith Nicholson's essay on the friendly village myth in *The Valley of Democracy*.

Thomas Horton, critic for *The North American Review*, called the twenties dizzy. There were quackeries in the air, and capitalism was at its height, and the novelist in closest touch with the period as well as with the psychological trends was Sinclair Lewis. Horton noted that *Main Street* was published when people were sick of Wilsonian idealism and war, and the nation was in a state of critical self-consciousness,

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15 Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 357.

ready to be scolded.  

Two years later Babbitt did the same thing for the big town, using the boisterous, nervous, bewildered, unhappy businessman. Arrowsmith hit out at scientific foundations, and Elmer Gantry at religion. The Man Who Knew Coolidge would appeal at no other time than in the late twenties.

An article in The Nation in 1930 conceived the theory that only an artist like Lewis could see so piercingly the elements of civilization present at that time and have the craft to produce them so clearly in a novel.

A few quotations from these novels illustrated better than words the validity of these critics' ideas.

The days of pioneering, of lassies in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings are deader than Camelot; and a rebellious girl is the spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest.

Critics debated over the problem of whether Sinclair Lewis was a realist or romanticist. The opinion was divided quite drastically.

Maxwell Geismar first picked out the realist tendencies of Lewis in Main Street. He illustrated this point by citing the delicate and shifting marital relationship between Carol Milford, the cultured university girl, and Will Kennicott, the typical small town doctor.

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19Geismar, op. cit., p. 84.
He reversed his theory of realism completely when he commented on Babbitt. In this second novel he could find realism in the terms of the introductory setting and then only to a degree. To illustrate this idea one could notice realism particularly in this quotation:

The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist: austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office buildings.20

In the central concept of the novel, in its final and dominant mood, in its true theme, and in its craft technics, Geismar thought that Babbitt was an imaginative work of a high order. From its start in Babbitt's bedroom to the conclusion of his latest real estate deal, it was an almost perfectly conceived vision of a moneyed society.21

Mr. Geismar again reversed himself in Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry, and Dodsworth. In Arrowsmith he found a return to the realistic elements of Lewis's work. Elmer Gantry marked an increasing vitality in his realistic tendency, and Dodsworth could be regarded as probably the best example of Lewis's realism. The portrait of Sam Dodsworth was a complex and interesting view of the middle class American Businessman.

T. K. Whipple, an associate professor of English at the University of California, called Lewis a romanticist. As far as Mr. Whipple was concerned, Lewis's romanticism was of two kinds:

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21Geismar, op. cit., p. 96.
(1) Conventional romanticism and sentimentalism.
(2) Romance of the common place. 22

This second type of romanticist was shown in the Lewis who spoke as a man of the soil, one of the common herd, a Rotarian, and a booster. Even though he seemed to show the ugly, realistic side of the small town, he was sure to point out the essential goodness of small towns and boosters. His first four novels of the twenties had the tendency to bring a warm glow of self-satisfaction to the heart of the great American majority.

Thomas Horton hinted at romanticism by making a comment that Arrowsmith smelled a little of Horatio Alger.23 Perry Miller, a professor of literature at Harvard, met Lewis on a boat to Europe in late 1950. He concluded that Americans had called Lewis a realist, but in reality he was a romanticist.24 Gerald Johnson, a professor of English and chairman of the Department of English at City College of New York, pictured everyone recognizing his own thoughts in Lewis's books and called him a realist. In truth his work was no more realistic than Tom Sawyer.25 Sinclair Lewis was unhappy and indignant about life, and his indignation betrayed his romanticism. If he had been a realist, he wouldn't have been indignant.

23Horton, op. cit., p. 384.
Clifton Fadiman, noted columnist and critic, evaluated Sinclair Lewis in 1953 two years after Lewis's death. According to Mr. Fadiman, Sinclair Lewis was influenced by Mallory's *Morte D'Arthur*. He read of knights but found none in Minnesota. He remained a romantic medievalist who never got over the disappointment that the United States was vowed to other quests than that of the Holy Grail.  

That idea made him write good novels.

Lewis Gannett, a noted journalist and book critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, considered Lewis a disappointed romantic who had found no Lancelots in shining castles in his home town. A statement made by Lewis in *The Man From Main Street* showed his romantic tendencies. He said:

> If I seem to have criticized prairie villages, I have certainly criticized them no more than I have New York, or Paris, or the great universities. I am certain that I could have been born and reared in no place in the world where I could have had more friendliness. It was a good time, a good place, and a good preparation for life.

This did not have the ring of a realist's thoughts. *Mantrap*, published in 1926, was a highly romantic novel whose sole interest was in plot, atmosphere, and money for Lewis.

The public was confronted with an accomplished satirist when Sinclair Lewis zoomed into the literary scene in 1920. Christian Gauss

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defined a satirist in his article about Sinclair Lewis's education.

He said:

A satirist is a man who fights back against life. From the standpoint of an ordinary person, his demands on it are excessive. A sympathetic critic will find that a satirist's work affords a new perspective against which to judge the American scene. More conservative critics will call him a "Sore-head." Such a refusal of life lies at the heart of the artistic temperament.29

Sinclair Lewis was considered a major satirist of American life and fundamentals. Lewis himself observed that satire was, "one of those back-attic words into which is thrown everything for which no use can be found."30 Yet he was the man who put his finger on the weaknesses of the important citizens of the republic. Lewis's great stock-in-trade was his ability to see the worm in the apple. Moreover, he could describe that worm in satiric terms and could illustrate its horrid character in detail.

T. K. Whipple characterized Lewis as primarily a satirist. Whipple attributed Lewis's success as a satirist to his amazing skill of reproducing his world. His knack for mimicry was unsurpassed. Lewis's was a world ruled by the desire of each individual to get ahead. Gopher Prairie was conspicuous for its ugliness and its dreariness. Whipple didn't wonder why Lewis had sold satire to the nation because he made it attractive with a coat of brilliant varnish.31

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29Gauss, op. cit., p. 54.


31Whipple, op. cit., p. 226.
pictured *Arrowsmith* as a satire of a national gallery of frauds and fakes.

Henry Seidel Canby called *Arrowsmith* a biting satire of the medical profession. He concluded that the book was not a great novel but a shrewd satire of American society. Maxwell Geismar noted that Lewis's main purpose was to satirize the exploitation of medical research by vested interests.

Sinclair Lewis chose the values of American life for a theme. He didn't choose the ideal values, but the actual values, "materialistic villains and not idealistic." Irony was too delicate to express his ideas, so he chose satire and sarcasm. He had a distinct talent for this and used it to perfection.

*Main Street* satirized the small town of the Middle West. Lewis must have been aware that there were thousands of foreign villages duller than Gopher Prairie, but his fierce idealism for America made the book not only a picture but a crusade against smugness and dullness. Carol's walk down Main Street on her first day in Gopher Prairie was the satirical picture of ten thousand towns from Albany to San Diego.

*Main Street* with its two-story brick shops, its story-and-a-half wooden residences, its muddy expanse from concrete walk to walk, its huddle of Fords and lumber-wagons, was too small to absorb her. The broad, straight, unenticing gashes of the streets let in the grasping prairie on every side. She realized the vastness and the emptiness of the land... She thought of the coming of the Northern winter, when the unprotected houses would crouch

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together in terror of storms galloping out of that wild waste. They were so small and weak, the little brown houses. They were shelters for sparrows, not homes for warm laughing people.33

As she continued her walk down Main Street, she saw the fly-specked windows of the local hotel, the drug store with its greasy marble soda-fountain, the small wooden motion-picture theater, the grocery store, with overripe bananas, the fly-buzzing saloon, the tobacco shop, the Bon Ton Department Store, Axel's General Store, the bank, the post office, and many other typical small-town businesses. Lewis had hit out at the ideas and lives of the dull people who lived in Gopher Prairie. Carol summed up Lewis's ideas in her last speech as she stood looking at her tiny daughter. She said:

Do you see that object on the pillow? Do you know what it is? It's a bomb to blow up smugness. If you Tories were wise, you wouldn't arrest anarchists; you'd arrest all these children while they're asleep in their cribs. Think what that baby will see and meddle with before she dies in the year 2000! She may see an industrial union of the whole world, she may see aeroplanes going to Mars.34

_Babbitt_, which started out with an ironical description of a perfect bathroom, soon passed into satire. George F. Babbitt's clubs rapidly began to threaten his personal experiences. His world was like a river steamer, built for quick profits, sailing down a treacherous stream with no pilot at the bridge. Lewis branded Babbitt as the go-getting American who was kind, pathetic, sincere, and devoted to self-knowledge, but a Babbitt who had never done what he wanted. He was

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33Lewis, *Main Street*, op. cit., p. 33.

34Ibid., p. 450.
living in the speed-up of the Industrial Revolution. Babbitt's world in Zenith had no soul, but this was compensated by a pride in gadgets. A new cigar lighter was a baptism into a faith, while a new automobile was a conversion. "Root, hog, or die," was twisted to cover everything that made money. Babbitt was not a representation of Babbittry, but a victim of it. He became a symbol of the false values that got him down.

Warren Beck thought that a satirist should be a philosophical man of the world, able in the practice of idealism. He considered Lewis a pseudosatirist who opposed men with his own caprice, frustration, and vanity.

Lloyd Morris criticized the American reading public for restricting Lewis to satire. Lewis really was a writer who had entered the American folklore. Morris concluded that people considered Lewis's principal interest to be an indictment of American culture and environment. If that were true, then he was essentially a satirist. Satire depended on distortion and exaggeration. In that sense Lewis was a satirist. One only had to read Elmer Gantry to see that Lewis exaggerated the religious hypocrisy of the twenties. The book represented the lower range of the Middle-Class Empire. Gantry represented the archetype of


opportunist and false prophet, the epitome of bourgeois villainy and vice.\textsuperscript{37}

Joseph Wood Krutch, noted critic, considered Elmer's character far more impressive than most satire. The book was a sort of cathedral where everything was a gargoyle.\textsuperscript{38}

Henry Seidel Canby didn't feel that Lewis was satirizing the church but the educational system that permitted the ignorant boor to pass as an educated follower of Christianity.\textsuperscript{39} Carl Van Doren pictured Lewis as St. George exposing the reverend dragon of the church. A fearful roar was set up in pulpits, parsonages, conventions, conferences, and synods. The book was a full-length exposure of Baptists and Methodists. As far as Van Doren was concerned, Lewis defeated his satiric purpose by becoming so angry. A good example of this angry satire was found in a conversation between Frank Shellard, a minister, and one of his friends, Philip McGarry. Frank questioned the validity of the character of Jesus Christ. It was no wonder that the following words shocked ministers everywhere.

I'm appalled to see that I don't find Jesus an especially admirable character. He is picturesque. He tells splendid stories. He's a good fellow, fond of low company—in fact the idea of Jesus, whom the bishops of his day cursed as a rounder and wine-biber, being chosen as the god of the Prohibitionists is one of the funniest.

\textsuperscript{37}Geismar, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 103.


twists in history. But he's vain, he praises himself outrageously, he's fond of astonishing people by little magical tricks which we've been taught to revere as "miracles." He is furious as a child in a tantrum when people don't recognize him as a great leader. He loses his temper... Did he ever--think of it, God himself, taking on human form to help the earth--did he ever suggest sanitation, which would have saved millions from plagues? And you can't say his failure there was because he was too lofty to consider mere sickness. On the contrary, he was awfully interested in it, always healing some one--providing they flattered his vanity enough. ¹⁰

Maxwell Geismar considered Elmer Gantry the most violent and brutal example of Lewis's social satire in the late twenties. Perhaps another quotation from the novel would bear out Geismar's feeling that satirists were unfair writers who were blind in one eye and deaf in one ear. ¹¹ Again Lewis was hitting out at his favorite subject, dullness.

My objection to the church isn't that the preachers are cruel, hypocritical, actually wicked, though some of them are that, too--think of how many are arrested for selling fake stock, for seducing fourteen-year-old girls in orphanages under their care, for arson, for murder. And it isn't so much that the church is in bondage to Big Business and doctrines as laid down by millionaires--though a lot of churches are that, too. My chief objection is that ninety-nine per cent. of sermons and Sunday School teachings are so agonizingly dull ¹²

The Man Who Knew Coolidge, published in 1928, was a satire as a whole of the life of Lowell Schmaltz, the typical citizen of the boom. He was arrogant, assertive, narrow, mean, and the epitome of complacency and conformity. According to the critics he was a second-class Babbitt.


¹¹"Sinclair Lewis," The Saturday Review of Literature, 7:357, November 22, 1930.

¹²Lewis, Elmer Gantry, op. cit., p. 378.
Dodsworth, published in 1929, was Babbitt grown older, richer, and more dissatisfied. Sam Dodsworth represented the best product of the new provincial-urban pattern of American life, and Lewis's satire lashed out at that society in the following quotation from the novel:

Samuel Dodsworth was, perfectly, the American Captain of Industry, believing in the Republican Party, high tariff, and, so long as they did not annoy him personally, in prohibition and the Episcopal Church. He was the president of the Revalation Motor Company; he was a millionaire, though decidedly not a multimillionaire; his large house was on Ridge Crest, the most fashionable street in Zenith; he had some taste in etchings; he did not split many infinitives; and he sometimes enjoyed Beethoven. He would certainly (so the observer assumed) produce excellent motor cars; he would make impressive speeches to the salesmen; but he would never love passionately, lose tragically, nor sit in contented idleness upon tropic shores.43

Granville Hick, an author, critic, and teacher, who showed leftist leanings, summarized Lewis's satire very well. He advanced the theory that Sinclair Lewis was not far from the people he satirized, and he enjoyed many of the things they did. Mr. Hick felt that any one who criticized or satirized should be able to substitute something better for the thing criticized. Lewis knew what he would destroy—provincialism, complacency, hypocrisy, and intellectual timidity, but he had only the vaguest idea of what kind of society he would like to see in existence. Only in Arrowsmith did Lewis speak in positive as well as negative terms.44

Bernard De Voto wanted to know what all the shouting was about. He answered his own question by noting that it was only old Doc Lewis's boy, Red, whom he considered a brilliant satirist.45

Critics have debated loudly and long whether Lewis's characters were real people or just types. In other words, Character vs. Caricature.

Sinclair Lewis had an extraordinary talent for inventing stereotypes. This talent was uninhibited. C. Carroll Hollis, who wrote a critical review of Sinclair Lewis for the book, Fifty Years of The American Novel, stressed the type characters in Lewis's novels. Lewis created an individual who exemplified the type he wished to satirize. Hollis concluded that Lewis had really only one subject, the philistine, who revolted against sumptuousness and dullness.46

Carol Kennicott, the unhappy heroine of Main Street, was not really important as a person. Will Kennicott and Guy Pollack represented a typical country doctor and a small town lawyer. The Dyers, the Haydocks, and Raymie Witherspoon were types in any small town. Norman Cousins found Carol noteworthy in 1955 because she was no longer exceptional but a symbol of the new American woman, who wanted more than housework to fulfill her life.47


In Babbitt, Lewis reached his height in creating a caricature or a type. Someone once said that the book became an overnight best seller because all Babbitts read it and each of them said of himself, "How true of my neighbor." Babbitt was accepted as the personification of the American Businessman. Lewis's description of Babbitt illustrated this type casting.

His name was George F. Babbitt. He was forty-six years old now, in April, 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter no shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay.

His large head was pink, his brown hair thin and dry. His face was babyish in slumber, despite his wrinkles and the red spectacles on the slopes of his nose. He was not fat but he was exceedingly well fed; . . . He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic. . . . Yet Babbitt was again dreaming of the fairy child, a dream more romantic than scarlet pagodas by a silver sea.

Thus Babbitt was assembled out of many actual Babbitts. Lippman realized that the Babbitt pattern covered no actual Babbitt perfectly, but it covered so many Babbitts that it was highly serviceable.

Henry Steele Commager, the historian, dealt most extensively with Babbitt in his book, The American Mind. He pictured Babbitt as a caricature who came to life. He was the symbol of success and of a new era.

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48 Gardiner, op. cit., p. 98.
49 Lewis, Babbitt, p. 2.
50 Lippman, op. cit., p. 74.
Harry Hartwick called Babbitt a:

blind adherent to conventional ideas; an ignorant and narrow-minded person, especially given to money making. He was devoid of culture, or indifferent to act.\textsuperscript{52}

Thomas Horton called Babbitt a caricature of a type rather than an individual character. He came nearer to being a living personification of the average businessman.\textsuperscript{53} Joseph Wood Krutch decided that Babbitt might not have been truer to life but more nearly mythical.\textsuperscript{54}

A few interesting comparisons by two leading critics showed the universality of Babbitt. Benjamin Stolberg said:

Like Huck Finn is the spirit of self-criticism on Main Street, each Sinclair Lewis Character has a long background in our history. Who is Babbitt but the city slicker of Benjamin Franklin's day?\textsuperscript{55}

James Branch Cabell's comment was the one most penetrating and clear. He said:

Babbitt has passed from the book into the racial consciousness of mankind. He is a symbol. Even the new humanists can't kill Babbitt. He graces sound business enterprises everywhere. His voice is heard in our legislative assemblies, nor is it silent on Wall Street. His matured opinions on politics have been known to issue from the White House. He writes most of our books; he reviews all of them. He shapes all our laws; he instructs us how to evade laws. We can't escape him even in death, for there will be Babbitt, the doctor, Babbitt, the clergyman. He will overcharge our heirs for our coffins, and he will engrave our tombstones. . . . There is something of Babbitt in everyone of us. He has existed since time began. He rose from the eastern merchants with

\textsuperscript{52}Hartwick, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 260.
\textsuperscript{53}Horton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 383.
\textsuperscript{55}Stolberg, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 452.
Marco Polo. He shouted "Crucify Him" in Jerusalem, burned Jews in Seville, and hanged witches in Salem. All this has been to Babbitt merely what is expected of him or any other level-headed regular guy in his then present circumstances.56

In an interview with Sinclair Lewis when he was sixty-five, the reviewer asked him what he thought of Babbitt after all these years. Lewis said:

I like Babbitt. I just can't stand that boisterous sense of humor he has, like, "Hello, you old horse thief, how the devil are you?" and he slaps you on the back. But people get Babbitt wrong. There are all kinds of Babbitts. Some of them collect pretty fine books, and others are really socially conscious.57

Arrowsmith was the exception to the rule in Sinclair Lewis's decade of caricature. The people in this book were more roundly put together, and Arrowsmith and Leora became individuals not types. Some critics felt that Lewis pictured his father in Arrowsmith and came nearest to creating a character.

T. K. Whipple, Maxwell Geismar, and C. Carroll Hollis picked Leora Arrowsmith out of the caricatures as a character who was a real heroine. Mr. Canby described her as the realist's version of a "good pal" who was not in the book for any satiric reason.58

Elmer Gantry was the portrait of a complete scoundrel, and critics quickly agreed that Gantry was no real character but a


58Canby, op. cit., p. 575.
caricature. Robert Littell, writing in the *New Republic*, pictured Elmer as the arch-bishop of preachers. As far as Littell was concerned, Elmer had no traits of a man but was made up of the contemptible features and actions shared by religious boomers, madmen, and hypocrites. He was a monster who served in a war against Old Testament Gods, puritanism, Methodism, bigotry, and dollar evangelism. He drank, swore, prayed, and seduced. No one man could possess so many undesirable characteristics.

The women in *Elmer Gantry* were mere phantoms. Sharon Falconer, the lady evangelist with whom Elmer had an affair, was a real woman only a few times in the entire book. The rest of the time she was the composite of all evil in women through the ages. Lewis's first description of her implied those characteristics. He described her thus:

> Coming from some refuge behind the platform, coming slowly, her beautiful arms outstretched to them, appeared a saint. She was young, Sharon Falconer, surely not thirty, stately, slender and tall; and in her long slim face, her black eyes, her splendor of black hair, was rapture or boiling passion. The sleeves of her straight white robe, with its ruby velvet girdle, were slashed, and fell away from her arms as she drew every one to her.

Henry S. Canby criticized Elmer's type as unfair to the average minister. He didn't feel that the type was unfair to the system which sent out evangelists. C. Carroll Hollis pictured Gantry as the type

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character of a Revival Preacher, but Mr. Hollis concluded that the type was hastily and inartistically done in comparison to Babbitt. He accounted for this weakness by pointing out that Elmer was not a universal character created by abstraction from a recognized group.  

Edward Wagenknecht could find no better word to describe Elmer's type than "swine." He had no character whatever. All that Gantry could think of when he was given a reprieve from public denouncement for having an affair with a married woman was the "charming ankles and lively eyes" of the new singer in the choir.

Maxwell Geismar described Elmer Gantry as the archetype of opportunist, the false prophet, and the epitome of bourgeois villany and vice. Joseph Wood Krutch called Elmer the type most fit to occupy pulpits supported by materialists like himself. Elmer was completely heartless, treacherous, and cruel.

As far as most critics were concerned, of all of Sinclair Lewis's novels, The Man Who Knew Coolidge, represented the true type casting. Lowell Schmaltz was the George F. Babbitt of 1928. He was a one hundred per cent American who was contemptible, ridiculous, petty, and mean. Sinclair Lewis had no pity for this type of man.

Geismar called the book a blueprint rather than a novel. The hero was hardly so much an individual as a product of a standardized

63 Geismar, op. cit., p. 103.
cultural mold of mass production temperament. All of Lewis's earlier characters had been confused about the world, but Schmaltz was absolutely incoherent.

Hershel Brickell, book critic for The North American Review, called Lowell Schmaltz a caricature of the broadest sort with only two dimensions--bad taste and repetitiousness.

In 1929 Dodsworth appeared. Many critics considered it a glorified Babbitt. Sam Dodsworth was the portrait of a more complex and more interesting middle class American businessman. Sam represented the best product of a new pattern of society. He was actually an aristocrat and ruler of middle class society instead of a self-deluded small town industrialist. Mr. Geismar compared Fran Dodsworth to Leora Arrowsmith in representing the true character. Edward Wagenknecht called Sam Dodsworth one of Lewis's most convincing characters.

T. S. Mathews, book critic for New Republic, gave Lewis credit for almost making a hero out of a man of straw. Mr. Canby called the novel another Main Street whose characters were neither boobs, bilks, Babbitts, or pseudo-intellectuals. Somehow, Sinclair Lewis always failed to make living individual people out of the types he chose.

64 Ibid., p. 107.
After World War I the United States was building economic supremacy. The middle class arose, and people wrote about it. Thus Lewis took the average man as a subject for a series of novels. He started his attack on the institutions of the nation he loved by holding his own home town, Sauk Center, up to ridicule. In *Main Street* he indicted the small town, Gopher Prairie, as the machinery of economic waste and the center of spiritual decay.

Lewis Gannett described Gopher Prairie as Any Town, U. S. A., in 1912 or 1920. The shouting was over smugness. He felt that Lewis saw the town full of nice people, determined that the whole world should admit that the end and purpose of living was to ride in flivvers.\(^6_8\) Sinclair Lewis argued that he loved the dull people of Gopher Prairie, but he wanted to stir them out of their smugness.

Harry Hartwick based his approval of Lewis's theme by citing other writers who had touched on the small village. He cited Oliver Goldsmith, Edgar Lee Masters, Phil Stong, and others. *Main Street* found the small town enshrined in virtue and benevolence in 1920.\(^6_9\) Maxwell Geismar pointed out that the novel was filled with a description of new towns grown up as a result of a moneyed society.

Most critics agreed that Lewis hit out at the standardization of the innumerable Main Streets or all small towns, the savorless flatness of that life, the hardness and thinness of the small American

\(^{68}\text{Gannett, op. cit., p. 31.}\)

\(^{69}\text{Hartwick, op. cit., p. 256.}\)
village, and the spiritual poverty of the people. Did Sinclair Lewis really hate the small town? In an article written in 1931, Lewis lauded the small town as a good place in which to live and a good preparation for life.

In *Babbitt* Lewis indicted the city and such organizations as the Booster's Club, the Rotary, the Y.W.C.A., and churches which had conspired to make Babbitt an ordinary businessman. Babbitt's story was a merciless attack on the cultural imbecility, childishness, the coarseness, and the cowardice of too many solid American citizens. In an unpublished introduction to *Babbitt*, Lewis said:

>This is the story of the ruler of America—the tired businessman with a toothbrush and a harsh voice who talks about motors and prohibition in smoking compartments, plays third-rate golf, and first-rate poker at a second-rate country club. There are thirty million Babbitts. Their autocracy is unparalleled.\(^7\)

Maxwell Geismar added to this conception of the theme of Babbitt in these terms:

>For material possessions are the symbol of power to Babbitt. The possessions mark the difference between a real-estate salesman and a realtor, between the Athletic Club and the Union Club, between Babbitt's less successful friends, whom he snubs, and the socially prominent people, who snub him. For the sake of these possessions Babbitt sacrifices both his physical vigor and his peace of mind.\(^1\)

Every type of medical chicanery known was pilloried somewhere in the pages of *Arrowsmith*. The book became a conflict between the idealistic American scientist and materialistic American society. A casual meeting with Paul de Kruif, a young man of science, led to the

\(^7\)Maule and Cane, *op. cit.*., p. 15.

\(^1\)Geismar, *op. cit.*., p. 90.
developing of Lewis's old idea, a novel founded on the familiar practitioner of his youth. His research was quite extensive on this subject. Martin Arrowsmith was the American scientist who fought failure and seemed to find success. He was rough, unmoral, almost illiterate except for his own science, bad mannered, and unsympathetic. He wanted to find what things were so that he could get at the truth, but the human race interested him only mildly.72

T. K. Whipple didn't see the book as an attack on the medical profession but on the United States. The story was of anyone who tried to live a creative life in the practical United States. The quarrel was between two types of people: one type who cared only for getting ahead, and one type who cared less for personal advancement than taking in the experience of the journey.73

The year, 1927, found Sinclair Lewis in Kansas City gathering material for his "preacher novel." He shocked the country by standing up in the pulpit, jerking out his watch, and giving God ten minutes to strike him dead for stating that he did not believe in the existence of a Divine Being.74 In a few months a loud bang resounded over the nation. That was Lewis blasting the ministry in Elmer Gantry as he had previously lashed out against Babbitt and Main Street.

72Canby, op. cit., p. 575.
74Hartwick, op. cit., p. 253.
Walter Lippman had no sympathy with Lewis's attack on the church. The animating spirit of Gantry was the bigotry of the anti-religious. He called it a "witch-burning to make an atheist's holiday." The book caused a storm of criticism throughout the whole nation, and the Methodists and Baptists received the brunt of the attack. Some people even threatened to lynch Lewis. Joseph Wood Krutch commented that Lewis added the third member of his impressive trilogy devoted to the most grotesque aspects of American life when he had Elmer Gantry represent the vulgarist type of pulpit thumping materialists. Carl Van Doren felt that Lewis aimed at whole churches; he classified him as a spokesman for a notable phase of American discontent.

The Man Who Knew Coolidge attacked a great many American institutions--domestic life, private affairs, sports, vices, pleasures, politics, and moral sentiments. The economic inferno of Babbitt became more of a reality here. The wife was more emancipated; sexual life was more standardized and cheaper. Malcolm Cowley described Schmaltz as a dealer of office supplies in Zenith and a friend of Babbitt.

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75Lippman, op. cit., p. 91.
76Krutch, op. cit., p. 292.
78Geismar, op. cit., p. 107.
Lewis called the book an account by a Babbitt, entirely in his own words, as to how he called on Coolidge in the White House.  

Dodsworth again hit out at the business world. However, most critics viewed the novel as a story exposing sex war in America. Carl Van Doren noted that Europe and its cultural values here were the theme for the novel. Sinclair Lewis mentioned many names for the novel before he settled on Dodsworth. Some of them were; Neighbor, The Exile, A Man Alone, and The Yearner. These titles would indicate what Lewis was trying to attack. Maxwell Geismar saw in the book the final rejection of the "Eastern" heroine which had figured so largely in Lewis's work previous to this book.

In short, Sinclair Lewis rendered in minute detail a vast panorama of an ideal practical society. He selected and emphasized certain aspects of American life, and he treated the most conspicuous phases of our civilization. Maxwell Geismar acknowledged Lewis's attack on American institutions but concluded that he really hit only a small part of the "real" United States. In general he presented a very limited view of the North American Continent. Gradually his work had become a conflict between the "East" and the "West."

Sinclair Lewis's style came in for much criticism from different critics. The craftsmanship of Lewis was good, and he worked hard at

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80 Maule and Cane, op. cit., p. 255.
81 Geismar, op. cit., p. 114.
82 Ibid., p. 131.
his books. He developed a gift for mimicry which added to the authenticity of his characters. However, many critics classed his style as journalistic. T. R. Tyvel said that Lewis would be remembered as a "cartoonist and a journalist, with neither poetic or psychological depth." 83

Lewis made a comment on his style. It was dependent on two things: his ability to feel and his possession, through reading of conversation, of a vocabulary adequate to express his feelings. Without these, a writer would have no style. 84

Sherwood Anderson criticized Lewis's prose for giving little joy. A critic in The Nation lauded Lewis as a very considerable artist who could see piercingly and relentlessly the elements of civilization and had the craft to produce them. He had an incredible flow of language. 85

Thomas Horton could not call Main Street a novel. It was more of a journalistic commentary, and he compared Lewis to a district attorney. Some critics compared his method to that of H. G. Wells. Lewis had a briskness and naturalness of discourse, and all critics complimented his incomparable mimicry. Walter Lippman credited his art to his ability to assemble in one picture a collection of life-like

84 Smith, op. cit., p. 189.
Lewis had a photographic and phonographic memory combined with his gift of mimicry. Lippman did not see Lewis as a great artist. Frederic Carpenter felt that Lewis had almost achieved a realist's ideal of allowing Babbitt to tell itself.

T. K. Whipple attempted to analyze Lewis's style. Some of the points he listed to show Lewis's ability as a writer were:

1. A tendency to mimic.
2. Dependence on his own experience. This was the best proof of Lewis's ability to do creative writing.
3. A keen eye for inconsistencies or weakness in his prey.
4. A great use of irony as a defensive weapon.
5. An awareness of a hostile audience.
7. A resemblance to his characters.

Whipple concluded that his style was founded on the uses of salesmanship, publicity, and advertising. He used all the tricks of a crack reporter.

Henry Seidel Canby listed several defects in Lewis's style. They were:

1. No nice people in his stories.
2. Narrow vision.
3. Insensitiveness.
4. Obsession with detail.
5. Lack of Spirituality.
6. Negative philosophy.

With all of these faults Canby still credited Lewis with writing three of the most remarkable books of our time.

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86 Lippman, op. cit., p. 74.
87 Whipple, op. cit., p. 3.
88 Canby, op. cit., p. 575.
The Man Who Knew Coolidge, which was a series of interminable monologues, was, according to the critics, the most empty and boring of Lewis's books. Henry Commager commented on Lewis's devastating mimicry and his immense rage. He was pictured as a historian in defeat with few happy endings in his books. Granville Hicks listed Sinclair Lewis as a recorder of the contemporary scene. Maxwell Geismer and Bernard de Voto summed up Sinclair Lewis's style as a remarkable study of the middle class mind of America. As a result he became one of the finest novelists of the period.

European reaction to Sinclair Lewis was expressed most clearly by Erik Axel Karlfeldt, permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy for the Nobel Prize. He praised Lewis for using Swedish background for some of his stories. He considered Main Street the best description ever written of a small town. He thought that Gopher Prairie could be European. Of Babbitt he commented that Zenith was one hundred times larger than Gopher Prairie and therefore one hundred times richer in Americanism and one hundred times as satisfied with itself. Mr. Karlfeldt was convinced that Babbitt was the ideal of an American popular hero of the middle class. Lewis wanted to get at an institution with false values and not individuals. Karlfeldt viewed Arrowsmith as a book of a more serious nature. He saw Arrowsmith as a gallery of medical types—medical schools, the country doctor, the organizer of public health, and large medical institutes. Arrowsmith was an honest servant of science, but he had many faults. Elmer Gantry represented to Karlfeldt a surgical operation on one of the most delicate parts of the
social body. He realized that the book's satire had devastating influence, but he was sure that hypocrisy did exist in religion. Karlfeldt considered Dodsworth's families too aristocratic for Babbitt to gain admission. Karlfeldt concluded that Sinclair Lewis was typically American. Lewis had the blessed gift of welding his land-clearing implements, not only with a firm hand, but with a smile on his lips and youth in his heart. 89

Lloyd Morris discussed the European reaction to Lewis's novels. In Europe Lewis was never a satirist but a realist. They considered that his purpose was to achieve a scrupulously faithful picture of American life. They wholeheartedly approved of his winning of the Nobel Prize. 90

In 1926 Sinclair Lewis had been offered the Pulitzer Prize. He scorned the prize on the grounds that all prizes were dangerous. A few comments taken from a letter by Lewis to the Pulitzer Prize Committee explained his reasons for refusing. He said:

All prizes, like all titles, are dangerous. The seekers for prizes tend to labor not for inherent excellence but for alien awards; they tend to write this, or timorously to avoid writing that, in order to tickle the prejudices of a haphazard committee. The Pulitzer Prize for novels is peculiarly objectionable because the terms of it have been constantly and grievously represented. 91

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91Smith, op. cit., p. 212.
This indictment of the prize raised many questions in the minds of writers and may have helped to bring about changes in the system of giving prizes.

In 1930 Sinclair Lewis became the first American to receive the Nobel Prize. He was as happy and excited as a boy. Also he was highly honored. In an attempt to explain the differences in the two prizes, he stated that the Nobel Prize was an international prize with no strings attached, and it was awarded on the basis of excellence of work. The Nobel Prize was given on the basis of an author's entire work, whereas the Pulitzer Prize was given on the basis of only one novel.

Sinclair Lewis was one of the most powerful novelists of a decade when American fiction matured. He had pricked the bubble of American complacency when the nation needed a gadfly to sting them. He called them back to the tradition of American independence when many Americans were chasing after strange gods. In the next decade of Lewis's writing the nation was to suffer a severe shock and sharp change at the base of the middle section of American society. The changes in the social history of the United States was also to bring a change in the writing of America's number one satirist.

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CHAPTER IV

BARTHELESS OF THE NOVELS OF THE THIRTIES

The thirties dawned on a dark and dismal United States. In 1929 the American nation had been thrown into a depression. The stock market crash affected the middle class American about whom Sinclair Lewis had been writing. Bread and relief lines were formed. Sinclair Lewis found the period hard creative going. He didn’t embrace Communist ideas, but somehow his work was inferior to that of the twenties. Lewis’s insight into American life came from his sensitiveness to American society, his keen ability to satire, and his great mimic gifts. The people of the thirties had so many things on their minds that they failed to care about Lewis’s troubles. Somehow, too, he seemed to have lost contact with these people who were facing trouble and defeat.

For several years Sinclair Lewis published nothing. Then in 1933 Ann Vickers appeared. This book was meant to expose the prison conditions of the period. Ann Vickers was a social worker who worked for prison reform. There were several disgusting interludes of illicit love on Ann’s part. She ended up the mistress of a crooked politician who was sent to prison. In the very beginning of the book Lewis seemed to be his old satiric self. Ann was the “western" heroine from a small Illinois town. Lewis said:

That small town and its ways, and all her father’s principles of living, entered into everything she was to do in life.93

There were other instances throughout the book where the old Lewis of
the early twenties came to light. He hit out at organized charity. He
kept Main Street in front of his readers throughout the book. Olympus
City, the location of Copperhead Penitentiary, was described like this:

Main Street, Olympus City, was distinguished by drifted piles of
red dust, in which dogs were sleeping or lazily scratching fleas,
one-and-two-story frame shops, not recently painted, in front of
which, in tilted chairs on the plank sidewalks, the owners were
sleeping, and dusty sycamore trees in which the sparrows were
sleeping. 94

Lewis's description of the penitentiary was so realistic that it
was almost sickening. Again his journalistic style was very much in
evidence. In this way Lewis described the Copperhead Penitentiary.

Ann might well have gone mad, for horrors enough she did see during
her fifteen months; cells with vile air, cockroaches, rats, lice,
fleas, mosquitoes. Punishment in the dungeon, lying on cold cement
with neither a blanket nor any clothes save a nightgown, with two
slices of bread every twenty-four hours. A dining-room filthy with
flies, which left their hierglyphics bountifully on the oilcloth.
Food tasting like slop and filled with magots and beetles. Under-
garments coarse as sailcloth, stiff with sweat after work in the
shirt-shop. 95

Harry Hartwick found little to compliment about the book. He
noted three important things about Ann Vickers which he had not previously
noticed in Lewis. They were:

1. This was the only book in which he had dealt so much with actual
social problems. Before this he had dealt more with smugness
and dullness. In this he struck out at war, prisons, anti-
abortion laws, graft, patriotism, the "idle rich," and settle-
ment houses.

2. Lewis seemed to have lost or discarded his genius for satire.

94 Ibid., p. 287.
95 Ibid., p. 306.
3. The most significant feature of his latest work was his lack of moral health. Ann Vickers was a rebel like Carol Kennicott and Martin Arrowsmith, but Ann had no moral standards.96

Maxwell Geismar saw nothing too bad about the novel. Ann was not only not ashamed of her provincial small town life, but she actually profited by it. The book was intended to portray the emotional emancipation of the new Lewis woman. She transcended the usual moral boundaries of the middle class empire. Mr. Geismar viewed the novel as a prelude to Lewis's most celebrated novel of social revolution, *It Can't Happen Here*.97

Granville Hick called to his readers's attentions that Sinclair Lewis tried to believe in socialism. He had Ann become interested in the Communist movement, but Lewis was irritated with this movement and had Ann reject the ideas.98 Horton described the novel as a Sunday supplemental of the conditions of American prisons from the eyes of the very upset social reformer.99

Henry Hazlett commended Lewis for doing a thorough job of research on his subject. He felt that people were too tempted to review the book in light of previous novels. He called the book a powerful social document and safely in the upper half of Lewis's work.100

96 Hartwrick, *op. cit.*, pp. 274-75.
97 Geismar, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
Shrill and defective in technic were Bernard de Voto's criticisms of the book. Nevertheless, he still thought that Lewis was one of the best novelists of his generation.\textsuperscript{101} For a propaganda novel which might survive, Hershel Brickell found that the book was good in spots and bad in others. He thought that it was stupid to call Lewis a literary artist.\textsuperscript{102}

*Work of Art* appeared in 1934. The book chronicled the life of Myron Weagle, an American hotel-keeper, whose dream was to create a perfect hostelry. Harry Hartwick claimed that Lewis had sheathed his claws and again betrayed his secret fondness for Babbitt. Myron served an apprenticeship in hotel keeping and climbed to a position of real eminence in the hotel world. When Myron tried to start the Perfect Inn, he failed. Slowly he came down the ladder of success only to find his dream fulfilled in a Middle Western commercial hotel and tourist camp.

In general the critics found little to compliment in his novel. Maxwell Geismar called it a strange document. He found it highly perverse that Lewis should concoct a perfect success story of the twenties in the very midst of the depression years when practically every other major writer was trying to deal with the pressures of the new age. Geismar called the book a *Horatio Alger* tale which appeared just at the point when the rags to riches tradition had vanished. As a result the book was an uneasy, disturbed tale.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{101}De Voto, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

\textsuperscript{102}Hershel Brickell, "Mr. Lewis's New Book," *The North American Review*, 325:383, April, 1933.

\textsuperscript{103}Geismar, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
Elmer Davis reviewed the book for *The Saturday Review of Literature*. Basically, he found the book a long way inferior to Lewis's previous novels. However, he still felt that Lewis should be remembered solely for his two good books, *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, and be judged by his best. He didn't find the book very interesting, but he thought that it was worth $2.50.104

"A sheer piece of virtuosity," was the way Henry Seidel Canby labeled the book.105 The sociological novel dramatized Lewis's ability to deal with an American institution so very characteristic of American life.

No excuse for bad writing could be found by Hershel Brickell. He saw nothing but the thinnest kind of characterization and a manipulated plot. He felt assured that this book was clear evidence that Lewis would never become a first-rate creative writer.106 Florence Codman, who reviewed the book for *The Nation*, considered the novel the poorest of Lewis's later novels. She found that Lewis's extraordinary talent for dialogue was absent, and no figure stood out in the book.107

In 1935 Adolph Hitler and Facist Germany were the subjects of discussion in the United States. Sinclair Lewis dramatized this fear.

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of Fascism by describing a Huey Long like dictatorship in the United States. The book, *It Can't Happen Here*, represented Lewis's answer to people who believed that Fascism was a peculiarity of a benighted Europe. Doremus Jessup, a liberal and a Jeffersonian Democrat, was the editor of a country newspaper in Vermont. He and his kind suffered acutely when Buzz Windrip, a glorified Huey Long, became the President of the United States. All of the usual manifestations of Fascism—the muffled press, concentration camps, the Gestapo, torture, and brutality—sprang up on American soil. In the book Lewis was alarmingly convincing. He transported the Nazi methods to America almost too liberally. A few examples of that realism were shown in these following quotations:

The Corps ended all crime in America forever, so titanic a feat that it was mentioned in the *London Times*. Seventy thousand selected Minute Men, working in combination with town and state police officers, all under the chiefs of the government secret service, arrested every known or faintly suspected criminal in the country. They were tried under court-martial procedure; one in ten was shot immediately, four in ten were given prison sentences, three in ten released as innocent... and two in ten taken into the M.M.'s as inspectors.

There were protests that at least six in ten had been innocent, but this was adequately answered by Windrip's courageous statement: "The way to stop crime is to stop it."

Another example of this realism was given in an order for concentration camps to be formed.

The kind-hearted government was fed-up, and the country was informed that, from this day on, any person who by word or act sought to harm or discredit the State, would be executed or interned. Inasmuch as

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the prisons were already too full, both for these slanderous criminals and for the persons whom the kind-hearted State had to guard by "protective arrest," there were immediately to be opened, all over the country, concentration camps.\textsuperscript{109}

Maxwell Geismar complimented the novel as the first of the new decade to allow Sinclair Lewis the full play of his satirical imagination. This imagination was brilliant now that he had found a proper target for his cynicism. This was a new America. The Horatio Alger tradition had disappeared, and the country was plagued by group antagonism and racial prejudice. Here the rigid class distinction of Lewis's earlier work became the actual line of class distinction. Geismar didn't have all praise for the novel, however. He saw the novel become progressively more disappointing. He felt that the novel showed Lewis's inability to deal with a situation, and the limits of the Nazi terror became a sort of bad joke. He could only see the book leading into the realm of whimsy.\textsuperscript{110}

Thomas Horton thought that the book was not quite as poor as Lewis's two previous novels, but it was feeble enough. His characters were stock magazine individuals who didn't seem credible. As a novel of character and situation, the book had no standing whatever. The theme was good, but Lewis had no knowledge, maturity, or artistic skill to execute it.\textsuperscript{111} Edith Walton called the book an important piece of

\textsuperscript{109}Ibid., p. 260.

\textsuperscript{110}Geismar, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 118-122.

\textsuperscript{111}Horton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 392.
political pamphleering and one of the most exciting and arresting books Lewis had written.\textsuperscript{112} A sample of Lewis's satire in the novel was given in Doremus Jessup's realization of the cause of the serious situation in which the country found itself.

The tyranny of this dictatorship isn't primarily the fault of Big Business, nor of the demagogues who do their dirty work. It's the fault of Doremus Jessup! Of all the conscientious, respectable, lazy-minded Doremus Jessups who have let the demagogues wriggle in, without fierce enough protest.\textsuperscript{113}

The fourth novel of this barren decade was \textit{The Prodigal Parents}, published in 1938. The book reached the best seller list, but it took a beating from the critics. J. Donald Adams thought that Lewis was reduced to a shadow of his former self.

\textit{Lloyd Morris} didn't go along with the critics who found the book a complete failure. The book was attuned to the reader's present temper of perplexity, prejudices, distrusts, and resentments. The book was not a failure but a thesis and a method. Mr. Morris realized that the book was inferior but was also served by its most glaring defect. The novel added up to a moral sermon. The audience undoubtedly recognized themselves in Fred and Hazel Cornplow who were the salt of the earth, the saving remnant, and the bulwark of the old decencies and of an established way of life. The younger generation was portrayed as a kind of variant caricature which threatened the peace of several


\textsuperscript{113}Lewis, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 224.
million old fashioned Americans. As far as Morris was concerned, Lewis had never been less an artist than in Prodigal Parents.\textsuperscript{114}

Frederick Cornplow was depicted as a typical Lewis figure who lived in a home which was distasteful to him. He was an auto salesman who had a nagging wife and children who were rebellious. He revolted against his children and left them to their own devices. It was certainly a reversal of the usual theme of having the children desert the unfair parents.

Elmer Davis, book critic for The Saturday Review of Literature, showed no excitement about the book. Davis remembered that Lewis had always slapped on satire with a trowel, and it usually stuck. This time he was afraid that was not true.\textsuperscript{115} Malcolm Cowley found that the book was flat, obvious, and full of horseplay. There wasn't a character that arose above the level of a good comic strip.\textsuperscript{116}

In places the satire of the old Lewis was seen. He attempted to hit out again at the smugness and dullness of any city or town. This passage bore that out.

The present house of the Frederick Cornplows was a good brick Georgian house, on a good street, with a good little lawn and a good big maple tree, and it proved to their world that they were successful. But it was like fifty other residences on Fenimore

\textsuperscript{111}Morris, op. cit., p. 390.

\textsuperscript{115}Elmer Davis, "From Babbitt to Cornplow," The Saturday Review of Literature, 17:6, January 22, 1938.

Cooper Boulevard, which was like five hundred and fifty other handsome boulevards in America.\textsuperscript{117}

A quotation from Fred Cornplow again illustrated Lewis's satire of American life.

Fred was almost reverent. Like most Americans he was perfectly democratic, except, perhaps, as regards social standing, wealth, political power, and club membership.\textsuperscript{118}

Louis Kronenberger reviewed the novel for \textit{The Nation}. He called it a fatally illiberal book because it was equally anti-intellectual and reactionary in its whole view of life. He couldn't help but wonder what moved Lewis to write this very unfortunate story since it was so naive and corny.\textsuperscript{119}

Maxwell Geismar called Frederick Cornplow a typical Lewis figure when the book started, but he gradually became weary of the domestic mediocrity which surrounded him and had Babbitt's dream of escape. In some ways Fred retained his typical Lewis character throughout the book. This quotation of Fred on his return from Europe seemed to be in keeping with other Lewis types.

The sight of the Statue of Liberty was not his chief thrill on arriving in New York, but rather his first American "cuppacoffee, slabapie, a la mode, please, sister."\textsuperscript{120}

Geismar concluded that Fred became the epitome of all waiting, snapping, howling, and beseeching citizens of the middle class American empire.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{117}Sinclair Lewis, \textit{The Prodigal Parents} (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1938), p. 34.

\textsuperscript{118}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 12.


\textsuperscript{120}Lewis, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 284.

\textsuperscript{121}Geismar, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 125-126.
Commonplace things were as hard to get as an empire. The book presented unemployment, social unrest, and political reform. Lewis again took a slap at Communism by having his characters attempt to embrace its ideals and then reject them in complete disillusionment.

Thus Sinclair Lewis ended the thirties on a sour note. He seemed to have lost the ability to strike out effectively at the American faults with any type of satire. The social tenor of the nation seemed to have changed and moved ahead while Lewis remained behind the times. He was to approach the forties with this blight on his previous work.
APPRAISAL OF THE NOVELS OF THE FORTIES AND FIFTIES

The forties brought another change in attitudes. War took over the thoughts of most of the world, and war novels held the spotlight. The period was a tossed and upset time for writers with Lewis's social consciousness.

Sinclair Lewis seemed to have disregarded completely the restlessness of the world when he wrote Bethel Merriday in 1940. It seemed that the story was set not only outside of the world of Hitler and Mussolini, but almost outside of the modern age. The novel dealt with the theater and actors. In the introduction to the novel Lewis wrote:

Until the nineteenth century actors were classed as Rogues and Vagrants. They were outside of respectable society--like Kings--and I am not sure but that this was better for their art and their happiness than to be classed as lecturers, tax-payers, tennis-players, suburban householders, and lovers of dogs. --Arthur Kulosas--122

Sinclair Lewis hit out at the theater this time but with a more kindly attitude. The critics were not overly enthused about this book. Maxwell Geismar again added his sage criticism to the others. He felt that the novel was the poorest of Lewis's late books. Lewis seemed to sink into a land of make-believe. The characters in the book were not real, and the heroine, Bethel Merriday, was the least life-like. She

was merely a dull, virtuous young lady whose ambition to become an actress was finally realized.

Edgar Johnson, professor of English at City College in New York and a book critic for the *New Republic*, enjoyed the story but called the people in it slapdash and superficial portrayals of character types.\(^{123}\) "The least successful and the least satisfying of Lewis's novels" was the opinion of Ben Ray Redman. He criticized Lewis for glibly recording the mechanics of the theater life without benefit of a credible character.\(^{124}\) Only a few critics were still able to find Lewis's old ability to satirize. In general, the book was considered a complete flop.

In *Gideon Planish*, published in 1943, Sinclair Lewis returned to the Midwestern scene which had been the real battleground of his work. The theme, which centered around an oratorical charlatan and the extravagant girl he married, was another variation of Lewis's familiar American Success Stories. He exposed a racket—that of organized philanthropy. He turned his analysis to uplifters, do-gooders, lecturers, professional philanthropists, and public dinner presidents. Two new terms, "Organizers" and "Philanthrobers," were coined. Lewis's idea of giving to charity in this book was summed up in the following statement:


The Biblical virtue of philanthropy was in this era turning into something far nobler than the impulsive handing out of a quarter. It was no longer emotion and friendliness, but social engineering, planned giving, with a purpose and a technique; it was Big Business, as big and busy as General Motors, but with God as executive vice-president.125

Lewis tried to return to his old style in Gideon Plannish. Dianna Trilling, book reviewer for The Nation, compared the book to Elmer Gantry in its satire.126 She called the novel unimportant, sloppy, and even dull. Howard Mumford Jones discovered a few golden moments, but he decided that it was written by a second-rate Lewis who was out-of-date.127 It was possible, however, to find some rather biting satire in the book. A speech by Gideon Plannish served to illustrate this.

As many of you know, philanthropy, in hard dollars and cents, already ranks eighth among the major industries of America. But it ought to rank first. What can a man purchase in the way of a motor car, a bathtub, or a radio that will afford him such spiritual benefit, or for that matter such keen pride and pleasure and social prestige, as the knowledge that he is permitting the better organization executives the means and the leisure to go around doing good, and the reputation of being the best giver in his whole neighborhood?

It's the deepest and richest mine in the country, and yet it hasn't hardly been prospected. Don't the Scriptures say, "As a man thinketh, so he is"? Well, if you'll get your thinking right, and on a higher plane, you'll realize that there's almost a hundred and thirty million people in this far-flung land, and that, at a mere

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127Howard Mumford Jones, "Sinclair Lewis and The Do-Gooder," The Saturday Review of Literature, 26:6, April 24, 1943.
dollar apiece, means one-hundred-and-thirty-million gold simoleons, and I guess that’s worth the attention of even a highbrow.\textsuperscript{128}

The critics again studied Lewis’s characters. They were for the most part straw-men whose speech was exaggerated. Howard Mumford Jones could never get inside the character of Gideon or Peony. Gideon had no distinctive characteristics of any kind; he was simply a moral lesson.\textsuperscript{129}

In an article, "Fun with Fund Raising," the reviewer found that the characters had as little inwardness as a fudge sundae. In place of people Lewis offered types.\textsuperscript{130} As far as Edward Weeks was concerned, Lewis filled the book with abstractions because he became more interested in organizations than in Gideon. Even though Geismar didn’t find the novel noticeably matured, he called Lewis one of the most vivid and wittiest of novelists.\textsuperscript{131}

Lewis evaluated his own worth in connection with this book. Of it he said:

This man, Lewis, is certainly going downhill fast. In each of his early books, Babbitt, Main Street, and Elmer Gantry, there were one or two characters you could like. But in Gideon Plansh everybody’s a scoundrel.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{128}Lewis, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 306-308.

\textsuperscript{129}Jones, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{130}Fun with Fund Raising," \textit{Time}, 41:98, April 19, 1943.

\textsuperscript{131}Maxwell Geismar, "Young Sinclair Lewis and Old Dos Passos," \textit{The American Mercury}, 56:62, May, 1943.

Gideon started a society first and looked for a purpose later. "This isn't the time for it," was the slogan for all of his life.

In 1945 Cass Timberlane appeared. The novel was one of integrity and a patient study of marriage between an older man and a younger woman. The novel was Main Street revisited after a quarter of a century of progress. The town, Grand Republic, was bigger, and the people were richer than in Gopher Prairie. Carol Kennicott became Jinny Marshland, and Will Kennicott became the middle-aged judge, Cass Timberlane. The differences in the stories were revealed in the relations of the husband and wife in the two stories. Will became dominant over Carol in Main Street. In Cass Timberlane Jinny dominated Cass.

In general the critics considered the book much better than Lewis's previous ones. Geismar felt that Lewis had completed the cycle of the East and West which he had been tracing for a quarter of a century. Edward Weeks was joyful that Lewis had again "sliced through the main trunk of American life to lay bare a cross-section more worm-eaten than we like to suppose." The people of Grand Republic had definite ideas on things such as:

Strikes must be stopped by law, but the government must never in any way interfere with industry.

All labor leaders are crooks.

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133 Geismar, op. cit., p. 141.

Children are now undisciplined and never go to bed till all hours.

All public schools are atrocious, but it is not true that the teachers are underpaid, and, certainly, taxes must be kept down.\textsuperscript{135}

Lewis again hit out at the businessman in this way:

Some of these smart-aleck critics claim that Middlewestern businessmen haven't changed much since that book—what's its name?—by this Communist writer, Upton Sinclair—Sabbitt, is it?—not changed much since that bellyache appeared, some twenty years ago. Well, we'd like to tell those fellows that in these twenty-odd years, the American businessman has changed completely. He has traveled to Costa Rica and Cuba and Guatemala, as well as Paris, and in the Reader's Digest he has learned all about psychology and modern education. He's been to a symphony concert, and by listening to the commentators on the radio, he has now become intimate with every branch of Foreign Affairs.\textsuperscript{136}

The novel was often called one of husbands and wives since the marriages of the leading citizens of Grand Republic were closely scrutinized. A quotation from the novel backed up those critics who said that Lewis was interested only in a study of marriage.

If the world of the twentieth century, he vowed, cannot succeed in one thing, married love, then it has committed suicide, all but the last moan, and whether Germany or France can live as neighbors is insignificant compared with whether Johann and Maria or Jean and Marie can live as lovers. He knew that with each decade such serenity was more difficult, with careers for women opening equally on freedom and on a complete weariness. But whether women worked in the kitchen or in the machine-shop, married love must be a shelter, or the world would freeze, out in the bleak free prairies of irresponsible love-making.\textsuperscript{137}

Not all of the criticism of this novel was favorable. Dianna Trilling called it a curiously unrevealing book which failed in an


\textsuperscript{136}Ibid., p. 24.

\textsuperscript{137}Ibid., p. 173.
attempt to investigate marriage. The novel became only a disgusting series of bedroom scenes between characters robbed of true human affection by satire.\textsuperscript{138} Mary Colum, reviewer for The Saturday Review of Literature, saw all of the typical novelists faults in the novel. As far as she was concerned, Lewis gave exterior life to his characters but no inside life. They had exaggerated biological instincts but no religious feelings.\textsuperscript{139} The book was turned into a rather successful movie starring Spencer Tracy.

Sinclair Lewis tackled America's most vexing problem, racial prejudice. He attacked the question with no holds barred in Kingsblood Royal, published in 1947. The result was a book of tremendous importance which showed the utter stupidity, the terrible unreasonableness, and the sheer folly of race prejudice.\textsuperscript{140} Clifton Fadiman called the book the best conversation starter since Hiroshima. It made all Americans proud that Lewis would not let rottenness rot completely.\textsuperscript{141} Neil Kingsblood was a red-headed American on the way to success until Lewis let him find out that he was one thirty-second Negro. He could either bury the knowledge or tell

\textsuperscript{138}Dianna Trilling, "Of Husbands and Wives," The Nation, 161:381, October 13, 1945.

\textsuperscript{139}Mary M. Colum, "Sinclair Lewis's Newest Thesis Book," The Saturday Review of Literature, 28:8, October 6, 1945.


\textsuperscript{141}Clifton Fadiman, "The American Problem," The Saturday Review of Literature, 30:9, May 24, 1947.
and take the consequences. His choice to tell brought up the many problems in the book.

A controversial subject like this stirred up criticism on all sides. Clifton Fadiman couldn't rate the worth of the book at that time, but he knew that it made him feel. He noticed also that Lewis discovered that Negroes were people—dirty, clean, ugly, pretty, decent, and bad. Some of them suffered from race pride and provincialism. They simply wanted to be treated as ordinary American people. Mr. Fadiman saw the dullness of the race problem as Mr. Lewis wrote about it. Lewis hit hard so that Americans wouldn't slide into universal boredom. 142

Most critics thought that Lewis expected his book to be ranted at. Margaret Marshall, book critic for The Nation, didn't like the book. She saw its timeliness and called it an Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Industrial Middle Class North at the end of World War II. She felt that it was extremely unlikely that a successful young banker in Neil Kingsblood's position would tell his secret. She admired Lewis's creative talent but was grieved that a writer with such a gift as that of Lewis should have written such a few good novels. 143

The reviewer for Time praised the book for its cut-and-slash blow at the smugness of the North. He considered Lewis's negroes very

142Ibid.
real characters. Warren Beck, writing in *College English*, criticized Lewis severely for not knowing more about Negroes. As far as Beck was concerned, Lewis's treatment of the race problem lacked social and psychological penetration. The book surely did not add anything to Lewis's reputation. The characters were crude, exaggerated, superficial, and coarse.

Through Neil, Lewis attempted to give the public's opinion of the Negro.

To be a Negro was to live in a decaying shanty or in a frame tenement like a foul egg-crate, and to wear either slapping old shoes or the shiny toothpicks of a procurer; to sleep on unchanged bedclothes that were like funguses, and to have for a spiritual leader only a howling and lecherous swindler.

To be a Negro, once they found you out, no matter how pale you were, was to work in kitchens or in choking laundries or fever-hot foundries or at shoeshine stands where the disdainful white gentry thought about spitting down on you.

It was to know that your children, no matter how much you loved them or strove for them, no matter if they were fair as Biddy, were doomed to be just as ugly and treacherous and brainless and bestial as yourself, and their children's children beyond them forever, under the curse of Ezekiah.

Sinclair Lewis attempted to give his version of the book. His definition of prejudice was "the most precious birthright of the ignorant." Actually, in his mind the race problem was only a small part


of *Kingsblood Royal*, but he realized that people would forget everything but that. He didn't think that the race problem was *the* big issue or was it insoluble since he didn't think there was a race problem. He tried to point out the variations of any race. He said of the Negro:

... Negroes are nothing more or less than human beings. They have the same motorcycles, admiration for Ingrid Bergman, and hatred for getting up in the morning that characterizes the rest of the human race--white, pink, tan, yellow, green, and office-color.

The book was to arouse American indignation for several years, and it tore at the social consciousness of the nation.

Sinclair Lewis's last two novels were a kind of epilogue to his career. *The God Seeker*, a historical novel set in Minnesota one hundred years ago, was written in 1949. Again Sinclair Lewis struck out at a time-honored American character, the missionary. This was his first attempt at a historical novel, and there were times when he didn't keep in step with his background.

The book received quite a different reception from the critics than most of his books of the forties had. Surprisingly enough, most critics applauded the book. Howard Mumford Jones felt that the novel had bounce and energy. Aaron Gadd was a stereotype of a young man who became disillusioned by religion and turned to a craft to become a success in life. At times, Lewis seemed to be sympathizing with missionaries, but he couldn't help spoofing their naive ideas.148

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147Maule and Cane, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

Some of Lewis's typical satire was found in a few places in the book. His description of Minnesota in 1848 contained some biting sarcasm which struck at the institutions of later years.

In a scarce-mapped wilderness bordering on Wisconsin and Iowa, in a solitude called Minnesota, there were fewer than a thousand white men: traders, lumbermen, missionaries, soldiers, trappers, and half a dozen farmers along the St. Croix; and all of it save a sliver was held by the Dakota and Ojibway—Indians corruptly and popularly, or unpopularly, known as the Sioux and Chippewa. Not till six months after Aaron's arrival would the district be recognized by the Congress as a territory, and Aaron believed that he had come at the beginning of the beginning. He was luckily ignorant that French traders and missionaries had threaded the whole land two hundred years before.

This decade of revolutions in Europe and of unease in the Atlantic seaboard was a reasonable one in which to bring forth a new state dedicated to the proposition that storekeepers and farmers and carpenters and doctors may be as wholesome a population as bishops and judges, and financiers and patroons.

It is true that within another generation and a half, the carpenters and farmers and the more guileless storekeepers and doctors would hand the control of their eighty thousand square miles of land over to energetic Maine lumbermen, New Hampshire millers, Canadian railroad land jugglers, New Jersey Bonanza-farmers, and to top-hatted investors who were too portly or to anemic to follow the marshy trails westward. 149

In the appendix of the book Sinclair Lewis tried to explain that every state had historical treasures.

It is an illusion that the haze of the far-off hills is bluer and more romantic. In every state of the union as in Minnesota, we have historical treasures small and precious and mislaid. 150


150 Ibid., p. 422.
Edward Wagenknecht felt that the book was pale but that Lewis had a fairly good understanding of the Indians. H. W. Hart, assistant librarian at Columbia College Library, viewed Aaron Gadd as one of Lewis's most sympathetic portraits. The whole book had verve and energy. Margaret Marshall called it a book to cherish. Her criticism came from a feeling that Lewis became bored when he was about half-way through it. His heart was not really in Aaron Gadd.

Book reviews in *Newsweek* and *Time* found nothing to compliment in the book. The novel was neither satirical nor bitter. It worried between a realistic portrait of prairie life and a satirical account of a mission to the Indians. In *The God Seeker*, Sinclair Lewis left belief in God only to Babbitts in frock coats. John Woodburn, critic for *New Republic*, called Lewis's last six novels a "soggy mishmash of sentimentality and half-digested social consciousness." The satire had become sarcasm in this book, and the characters appeared like pictures cut from a poster. With it he joined the ranks of less promising writers.

In late 1950 Sinclair Lewis attempted to revaluate American life again in *World So Wide*. He again had a hero, Hayden Chart, flee


to Europe in search of happiness. For a while Europe was the answer to his quest, but eventually he returned to the American Main Street of Newlife, Colorado.

The book was published in 1951 a few months after Lewis's death. C. Hartley Grattan, writing in New Republic, concluded that the novel would neither add nor detract from Lewis's reputation. It contained the familiar ingredients of his previous books, but he didn't combine them in any organized way. The story was not profound; it was just Sinclair Lewis telling a story. The critics compared the theme of the book to that of Dodsworth. C. Carroll Hollis didn't even think the Dodsworthian theme had been resurrected but exhumed. It had no life nor art. It even had the slang of twenty years ago.

Like Sam Dodsworth, Hayden Chart, architect, whose wife was killed in an automobile accident, went on an excursion to Italy in an attempt to forget. Hayden was attracted to the cold beauty of Olivia Lomond, a scholar and authority on all things Italian. Hayden's love for Olivia was complicated by little Roxy from back home. Eventually Hayden returned to Newlife, Colorado, to settle down to a staid American existence with Roxy. As in Dodsworth, Lewis gave a merciless picture of Americans abroad. Lewis's opinion on this matter was well summed up in Hayden's thoughts as he attended church. He was faintly lonely for home.

He knew then that he was unalterably an American; he knew what a special and mystical experience it is, for the American never

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155Grattan, op. cit., p. 20.
really emigrates but only travels; perhaps travels for two or three generations but at the end is still marked with the gaunt image of Tecumseh. 156

Very few critics could say anything good about this last book. Paul Pickrel, writing in The Yale Review, called the book Lewis's bread-and-butter letter to the land he so often scorned. He found the book more gracious than might have been expected. 157 Charles J. Ralo, book critic for The Atlantic Monthly, found it disagreeable to talk so tartly about the last work of an author. Mr. Ralo couldn't do otherwise, however, without being a hypocrite. As a whole he described the book as unconvincing and commonplace. 158 Reviewers in The Saturday Review and Time called the novel awkward and rambling. It was Red Lewis's valedictory to his fellow Americans. Lewis was again the Midwesterner who discovered the world and couldn't get over it.

Thus Lewis's work came to an end. It had marked the beginning of a new era in the twenties, and its termination with his death marked the end of an era in the fifties.


CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In the years after the war, Sinclair Lewis had become a quiet trans-Atlantic commuter. Like Dodsworth he was no longer at home anywhere. He was a restless, lonely man constantly looking for something he couldn't find. His last work was poetry rather than novels.

In the last few months of his life, Lewis befriended Alexander Mansen in Assissi. They met when Mansen, who worked for a British travel agency, was asked in for a drink by Lewis. Mansen was never separated from him for a single day from December 9, 1949, to December 31, 1950.

In those months Lewis was not healthy. He had no appetite and was disfigured by exzema. When he was finishing World So Wide, he began overworking, oversmoking, and overdrinking. In July, 1950, he had his first heart attack. He rebelled against the doctor's orders to stop drinking and smoking. By November he was able to drink only milk.

On December 31 he worked hard. Suddenly he staggered into Mansen's room and said, "Alec, something terrible is happening. I am going to die."¹⁵⁹ Those were his last conscious words. He died on January 10, 1951, in the Villa Electra Nursing Home in Rome, Italy, of paralysis of the heart. He was attended only by his doctor and Franciscan nuns. One nun said that his last words were, "I am Happy. God Bless you."¹⁶⁰


Sinclair Lewis once remarked that he wanted no ceremony at his funeral except the singing of "Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here." However, the people of Sauk Center, Minnesota, recited the Lord's Prayer in unison. Dorothy Thompson, Lewis's former wife, thought that Red's chuckling ghost would, at that moment, have brushed away a tear.

What was and what will be Sinclair Lewis's place in literature? Edward Wagenknecht concluded his evaluation of Lewis by summarizing Lewis's achievement. He definitely made Lewis a satirist. Lewis mixed up "phony" names with real names so that they seemed real. In spite of limitations of act and insight Lewis served his country well and deserves to be held in grateful remembrance. Thomas Horton felt that Lewis's historical importance will probably grow with the years. Lewis held up a mirror to Americans in a restless period of history.

Lewis had his gun loaded for smugness and the mental lethargy of Rotarianism, the "village," tourists, business, the theater, religion, and medicine. Benjamin Stolberg concluded that Lewis's characters were preposterously life-like because Lewis had a gift for picking out stereotypes in real life. He was a genius of satire who could turn a man into a pathetic puppet. His genius lay in his ability to give the details of American life and a superb picture of American behavior.

162 Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 366.
163 Stolberg, op. cit., p. 450.
Several of the critics compared Lewis to Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Clifton Fadiman compared Dickens and Lewis in their restlessness, their addiction to travel, and their dissatisfaction. Both possessed creative energy; both wanted to be actors; and both burned with social indignation. Also both came from modest backgrounds and were superb journalists. Robert Cantwell described Lewis as having a line on American society. He had a sense of physical variety and cultural monotony of the country, and an easy familiarity of small town squares, cities, real estate developments, country doctors, religious fakers, club women, county office holders, village atheists, school teachers, librarians, windbags, crazy professors, and high pressure salesmen.

Bernard de Voto pictured Sinclair Lewis as a novelist and a satirist at each other's throats. He never succeeded in creating a complex character, but his satire was good. He became a flaming hate, and out of this hate came the best sociological novels of our time. Harry Maule and Melville Cane, editors of The Man From Main Street, believed that Lewis's books roused the world to a better understanding of America. They prophesied that a century from now literate people would look to Lewis to tell what this country was like in these amazing four decades between 1910 and 1950.

166 De Voto, op. cit., p. 398.
167 Maule and Cane, op. cit., p. XIV.
Carl Van Doren said of Lewis in a biographical sketch:

None of them (Lewis's contemporaries) has kept so close to the main channel of American life as Mr. Lewis, or so near to the human surface. He is a part of that channel and surface. To venture into hyperbole, not only is he an American telling stories, but he is America telling stories. 168

In a strange article entitled "The Death of Arrowsmith," Sinclair Lewis wrote his own obituary. He called himself a romanticist and a fanatic American. He said of himself:

It is to be surmised that his influence on our literature has been healthful in his derision of dullness and formalism, his use of American lingo and humorous exaggeration. 169

Lewis was credited with these following things:

1. He has called into question a version of American life based on fear of looking into a mirror.
2. He has created a new word in the dictionary—Babbitt.
3. He has given to the United States villagers and small townfolk a spiritual habitation and a name, Main Street. 170

The study of Sinclair Lewis was an interesting and thought-provoking project. For the writer, Lewis's social implications were challenging, and she constantly saw the characters in Lewis's books in the small town in which she has lived her entire life. Out of the wealth of material on Lewis some conclusions can be made. Sinclair Lewis was a master satirist who created for the United States and the world several types which will not soon be forgotten.  

168 Ibid.
169 Ibid., p. 106.
will live in the minds of Americans as long as there are small towns with one main thoroughfare where the business of the community is carried on. Lewis's attack on American institutions made people stop and think for a time about indifference and smugness which is as prevalent today as in the twenties. Lewis was an accomplished and angry social historian. Even though he was aroused over social justice, he rarely advanced any ideas of reform.

The success of Lewis in the twenties was undoubtedly due to the timeliness of those novels which he published then. He attempted to continue his satire of such institutions as prisons, hotels, politics, and the Negro in the next two decades, but the reading public had become too preoccupied with depression, dictators, and war to appreciate him. His worst satire no longer seemed so biting to readers who were hungry and unsettled. Then his romantic tendencies made his novels seem idealistic and unreal.

It will be many years before the whole man and artist will be completely evaluated. The niceties of his style, his satire, and his type characters will be debated by critics, and he may be given a prominent niche in the literary parade. On the other hand the fact that his books are no longer in print may indicate that his name and work will be forgotten by the turn of the next century. Regardless of how long Lewis's work is discussed and criticized, his own epitaph seems to sum up his life better than any other statement.

This was a good workman and a good friend who could still laugh when the world had almost worried itself out of the power of laughter.171

171Manle and Cane, op. cit., p. 107.
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