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Social criticism in the novels of Sinclair Lewis

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Thesis

SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE NOVELS OF
SINCLAIR LEWIS

by
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SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE NOVELS OF SINCLAIR LEWIS

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CHAPTER I

THE NOVEL AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CRITICISM

When the novel is used, as it has been frequently in recent times, not merely as a place for the author to express his social views but as a vigorous attack upon existing society and its institutions, it is the accepted thing for the critic to say that art was slaughtered, or at least badly mangled, in order to serve sociology. The criticism is applied to Godwin's Caleb Williams, Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and Dickens' Oliver Twist. The question is not whether these particular books or any certain others suffered because the author had an ax to grind, but whether it is necessarily true that art is incompatible with an interest in sociological, or any other sort of reform. The attitude taken in this paper is that social criticism itself, even the implied projection of a reform, does not necessarily destroy art; but it is no substitute for honest art. Every person in whatever he says honestly is a propagandist for his own views, in the sense that he cannot be impartial outside of complete and acknowledged ignorance. However, there is a very great difference between telling the truth of what one believes and telling lies for what one favors. It is not a justifiable criticism of a novelist to say that he is too much of a social reformer to be an artist, with the inference that one cannot be both. A similar kind of sensitivity may lie behind both, and reforming in its most literal sense is the artist's own business. An artist without a philosophy is no artist but a
technician, and even the most futilitarian philosophy involves some element of social criticism and some element of social reform. It implies, at least, a conversion of others to itself. On the other hand, the apparent reformer does not of necessity have a philosophy, although he too needs one to be a true reformer. In other words, a man can be a good artist and a true reformer; but, of course, he need not be either.

This thesis is an attempt to discover the social criticism of Sinclair Lewis as he has expressed it in his novels; to discuss it as consistent, workable theory; and to reconstruct on the basis of this theory an hypothetical society as Lewis would seem to want it, not for the purpose of either ridicule or idealization, but for an aid in understanding and evaluating Lewis' attitude. The assumption is made at the beginning that being a social critic, or reformer, does not of itself make Mr. Lewis either great or small as an artist, but that if the social criticism is faulty the artistry is faulty in the same degree. The converse, however, is not true. The artist, if he takes up social criticism, must criticise well; but such criticism is not the whole of art. Any flaw in a work of art, outside of the limitations of medium, is an artistic flaw; and faulty thinking is the least excusable.

These statements are not preparatory to finding Mr. Lewis either a brilliant artist with a great message for the age or a pulpwood scribbler with an adolescent iconoclasm. Most of the brief criticisms that have so far been written of Sinclair Lewis
seem to be too emphatic summations by writers who, if they were not looking only for good or only for bad points, were nevertheless given, when they came to making a critical judgment, to withholding enough from one of the pans of the balance to make the descent of the other unmistakably clear. It is a universal tendency. Our rules of rhetoric do not mention careful inclusion of contradictory elements; and unity, emphasis and coherence are qualities most easily secured in any game by the use of loaded dice. Probably the most outstanding thing about Lewis, both as an artist and as a social critic, is the great range between his writing at his best and at his worst. It is the most difficult thing about him to explain.
CHAPTER II

OPINIONS CONCERNING LEWIS' SOCIAL CRITICISM

Needless to say there is a wide range of opinions concerning Lewis as a social critic. It is a range rather than two extremes, because there are moderates in between, although the numbers are most heavily weighted at the ends.

A. Non-critical opinion

Non-critical opinion—which means the opinions of people who make no claim to be literary critics—is, of course, more likely to be extreme than critical opinion, because personal prejudice enters in, if not more, at least more openly. Of the large group that will judge almost entirely by personal prejudice it is safe to say there are three main classes: There will be those who feel that they are the people satirized in Main Street, Babbitt, and (worst calumny) Elmer Gantry and who resent what they consider the unfairness of the caricatures; there will be others who, being certain that they are not Babbitts, Kennicotts or Gantrys, enjoy the castigation of those tribes; and those with a healthy sense of humor who can see themselves satirized, both fairly and unfairly, without violent resentment. The vehemence of Elmer Gantry has undoubtedly thrown nearly all of the clergy into the first class. People who identify themselves with Arrowsmith or Ann Vickers belong in the second, as do those who can think of themselves as Samuel Dodsworths or Myron Weeks, although these latter are close to the third. Since the general
public buys and reads only what it likes, the sales of Lewis' books indicate that many people are in the second and third group; and it is probably not too optimistic to suppose that a good proportion of them are in the third. The Middle West has been tolerant enough to repudiate by action rather than words some of what Lewis has said about it.

This non-critical, or popular opinion is, for the most part favorable then. It regards Lewis, with the prestige that comes from refusing a Pulitzer Prize and accepting a Nobel one, as one of the great novelists and the outstanding critic of American life. It sees in Main Street a ruthless, but accurate exposure of small town life and in Babbitt an exact living portrait of the American businessman. It is the common attitude to regard Main Street and Babbitt as the best criticism, with opinion between the two somewhat in favor of Babbitt; Arrowsmith as the best novel; Eimer Gantry as containing much truth, but overdrawn; Dodsworth as having the good novel qualities of Arrowsmith; and Ann Vickers as having the excesses of Eimer Gantry. It Can't Happen Here is accepted as a timely warning. Work of Art, The Man Who Knew Coolidge, Mantrap and everything before Main Street are hardly known to have ever been written by Lewis and are not important enough to have been stolen from the public library shelves.

On the other side, conservatives opposed to Lewis' radicalism have insisted that practical Will Kennicott is a much more admirable character than the flighty dreamer Carol, with whom the author urges us to sympathize; that Babbitt is not a character but a scarecrow;
that *Elmer Gantry* is outright, wholly unjustifiable libel; that *Ann Vickers* is unreal, as well as immoral and obscene; that *It Can't Happen Here* simply leaves the impression expressed by the title rather than any warning that it could happen here; that *Arrowsmith* and *Dodsworth* are only fair; and that the rest—if in looking for flaws they have uncovered the rest—are downright amateurish and incredibly empty of everything. For the most part, they urge these opinions with the vehement contempt arising from the feeling of being in the minority.

B. **Critical opinion**

Among the critics the proportion is different. Very similar attitudes are expressed—which is to say, probably, that the popular statements have been selected from the critical writers—but there is relatively more condemnation. Lewis has pleased the public better than he has the critics. That fact cannot be taken as too significant; for someone can always say irreverently, "So did Shakespeare," it is a curious fact that later critics are more apt to accept earlier popular judgment than that of their own predecessors.

In praise of *Sinclair Lewis*, Carl Van Doren has compared him with other American writers:

The passion of Theodore Dreiser has been to turn up *with his* powerful spade the neglected subsoil of American life; of H. L. Mencken, to nail the hides of a million American absurdities upon an immeasurable barn-door; of Eugene O'Neill, to reduce the most tragic complications to the language and dimensions of the American theatre; of James Branch Cabell, to throw the light of wit and beauty upon the endless comedy of disillusion; of Edwin Arlington Robinson, to study the mysteries of the heart in whatever past or present he finds hearts to study. Not one of them
has kept so close to the main channel of American life as Mr. Lewis, or so near to the human surface.\(^1\)

On the other hand, Mr. Lippmann can find little good in Sinclair Lewis except that *Babbitt* "is pervaded by an almost serene kindliness" and *Arrowsmith* "reaches moments of spiritual understanding." "Mr. Lewis," he says, "is not a great artist. He has great skill. He himself is a practical man with the practical man's illusion that by bending truth to your purposes, you can make life better."\(^2\)

The reasoning, so far as it infers that the artist cannot be a practical man, might be challenged; but most people would agree that the artist must not "bend" truth for any purpose, although he may properly emphasize one segment of truth to the exclusion of some others.

The same criticism of Lewis is expressed more moderately by Mr. Boynton when he says, "Mr. Lewis is not primarily a story-teller; he is an expositor who uses the narrative form." This opinion is important with regard to the social criticism in Sinclair Lewis, because if he has bent truth his criticism is rendered invalid to the same degree. In direct bearing upon the validity of Lewis' criticism is another statement of Mr. Lippmann's that "Mr. Lewis's characters are all adolescent, and they express an adolescent rebellion." Concerning this, one can see what it is in Lewis that Mr. Lippmann is objecting to and yet at the same time be offended by this too frequently and too glibly used word "adolescent" as a


\(^{2}\) Lippmann, *Men of Destiny*, 76.


term of derogation. It is too commonly used to designate qualities which, though they may be quite worthy of contempt, are almost, if not wholly, as common in thirty and forty year old adults as in sixteen year old adolescents; and, if these "adolescent" qualities are characteristic, Lewis has every right to use them. The fact is that, as we use the terms, the intellectually mature adult is something of a rarity; and such expressions are based more upon similes than statistics. It could be well maintained that Carol Kennicott is the more real as a character for having an "adolescent" vagueness of aim at points in her revolt. The clearly consistent protagonist is one of the least real characters in fiction. This argument, however, in no way justifies the author himself in being vague. If Mr. Lippmann is accusing Lewis of an uncertain indiscriminateness, he should have said so, not identified the author with his characters. Apparently that is what Mr. Lippmann intends; for in the same book he says, "There is more than a touch of the ex-naif in Mr. Lewis, not a little of the snobbery of the newly arrived. For he has as yet none of the radical skepticism of the true metropolitan. His iconoclasin is merely a way of being sure that the household gods of Gopher Prairie are a joke." It would be easy, of course, to pick flaws also with this as criticism, particularly for being an example of the same sort of superciliousness it derides; but the intention to stamp Lewis as turbid in his thinking is clear.

Mr. Leisy has said, "Mr. Lewis has too strong a satiric vein
to give an entirely truthful picture of contemporary life; yet there are in his novels many vividly reported passages that accurately depict our usages." With this moderate and judicial criticism it would be difficult to disagree, although the phrases "vividly reported" and "accurately depict" seem to infer another term, "superficial naturalist", with which Sinclair Lewis is frequently condemned. Few would hesitate to admit that Sinclair Lewis' characters and scenes are pointed up beyond reality for the sake of satire. That fact does not make him necessarily, in a larger sense than Mr. Leisy is using the word, untruthful. The cautious use of "necessarily" is deliberate.

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1 Leisy, American Literature, 216.
CHAPTER III
SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE NOVELS

What criticisms of society does Sinclair Lewis make in his novels? Without any attempt at first to criticise or evaluate, we turn now to the novels themselves.

A. Early novels

Sinclair Lewis became known, in any important way, with the publication of Main Street in 1920; and it is with that novel that his social criticism begins. Before then Lewis had published Our Mr. Wrenn (1914), The Trail of the Hawk (1915), The Job (1917) and Free Air (1919), as well as a number of short stories. None of these was noted for any outstanding quality. Free Air is the only one which the writer of this thesis has been able to secure. Free Air is a very simple story of a daughter of Long Island aristocracy taking her father, who has had one of those breakdowns that come from too much business, across the continent by auto. On the way she stops at a garage owned by a young footloose Midwesterner who falls in love with her and follows her in his "bug" to Seattle. After a sequence of highway adventures, in which the young man is her ever-present rescuer, the girl recognizes herself in love with him. Arriving at Seattle, he enters engineering school; and eventually, in spite of the opposition of her snobbish Seattle relatives and their connivance with her earlier suitor, the girl marries him. It is a breezy story, formless, more or less purposeless, which might provide a pleasant sort of change for mild-tempered, elderly
convalescents from the reading of Joseph Lincoln. As for social criticism, there is nothing more than the conventional novelist's conventional exposure of the fact that Long Island aristocracy, particularly when exported to the provinces, is a very stuffy and worthless thing and its choicest claims are shams. Beyond that, the idealism is that of rosy Americanism, where a young man's future is limited only by his ambition. There is, in the book, no vague hint of Main Street, which was to follow in the next year.

R. Main Street

Main Street is Lewis' real beginning. The story is of Carol Milford, daughter of a kindly, learned Minnesota judge with a New England background. Carol has been left an orphan before she entered college. In college and afterwards she is driven by the ambition to make her life creatively useful. At the time when she meets Will Kennicott, she is working in the public library of St. Paul without feeling that she has any great social importance in her work. Kennicott is a doctor, a general practitioner, in Gopher Prairie, a "Minnesota wheat-prairie town or something over three thousand people." Somewhat lonesome without any close relatives and eager to be of some culturally inspirational service in the world, Carol is attracted by Kennicott's patriotic enthusiasm for Gopher Prairie, which needs, he convinces her, only her directional influence to become the best little town in the best of all nations; and, having seen nothing of Gopher Prairie except a few snapshots, she marries Kennicott, less for love of him than for the romantic
opportunity to mold out of this plastic Midwestern town her own tangible Utopia. Then, arriving with her husband at Gopher Prairie, she finds it incredibly more small-townish than she had expected; and, more frightening still, she discovers that not only is it wholly unconscious of needing a cultural influence, but it is prepared to resist with all the impervious strength of egotistic ignorance any idea that it has not already attained as near to the summit of excellence as it is comfortable to be. Instead of eagerly accepting her leadership, the town is determined to grind her down to conformity with itself. Worst of all, Kennicott himself is part and parcel of the town now that he has won her and, however tolerant of her own conduct, in no way aroused to the need of extensive reform. With much valor but no strategy, Carol attacks on all fronts at once; and the town meets her with stolid, entrenched resistance and a subtly moving retaliation. Hurled back repeatedly, Carol falls into disillusion and despair and eventually seeks an anodyne in the worshipping affection of Erik Valborg, an aesthetically inclined tailor's assistant. Inevitably the conventions of the town and its appetite for gossip take this escape from her also. At length Carol leaves her husband and, taking their son, Hugh, with her, goes to Washington where she supports herself by government work in connection with the war. There she finds relief, but not satisfaction. Finally, after Kennicott comes to re-woo her, she returns with him to Gopher Prairie; and, with her eyes open but with a serenity acquired from the new perspective of Washington, she prepares to take up again the battle with Gopher Prairie, this time without hope or expectation of any large victory.
This framework, of course, is constructed to throw the focus of the story upon the crudities, conceits, prejudices, unconscious brutalities, and malicious cruelties of the small, isolated, Midwestern town.

The italicised preface gives the keynote. The stress of its criticism falls upon uniformity and smug self-satisfaction.

This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.

The town is, in our tale, called "Gopher Prairie, Minnesota." But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hammibal invaded home and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unpriitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.

Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark's annual hardward turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God's Country. In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor strictly moral.

Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith. Would he not betray himself: an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths?

In the account of Carol's first examination of Main Street the critic pounces first upon the slovenly ugliness of the small town tolerated because the people have come to see it with the blind eyes of the habituated and because, being materialistic in every respect, they are too enervated spiritually to think of beauty in
terms of anything except machine-made, nationally advertised baubles. This is the main salient of Lewis' attack—this denunciation of spiritual obtuseness resulting from the stultifying influence of price in materialistic success. It shows itself in another form in the commercial's men's carrying over their successful business techniques of standardization of products into the institutionalization of thought and the application of simplified uniformity to the fundamental principles of living—the reduction of human experience to a limited number of classified movie reels to be selected and played as the occasion requires and according to the instructions on the package.

This spiritual barrenness of the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie shows up in their speech. In her first social gathering after her marriage Carol discovers "that conversation did not exist in Gopher Prairie. Even at this affair, which brought out the young smart set, the hunting squire set, the respectable intellectual set, and the solid financial set, they sat up with gaiety as with a corpse. Juanita Haydock talked a good deal in her rattling voice but it was invariably of personalities...." Sam Clark, the host, in order to liven the party up, has the members do stunts, the same stunts for which each one has been famous for decades—joke-book gags, sentimental recitations, ancient imitations. Finally, the women and the men segregate themselves and fall into their natural conversation. The women talk of children, sickness and the difficulties of getting

1 Main Street, 46.
good cooks; the men discuss business and motoring and argue in unsupported assertions about some half-forgotten triviality in local history.

Lewis does take a moment off to show us that the aspect of Main Street is relative to the mind of the observer; but this fact he immediately ignores in his own progression as quite apart from his purpose. The same day that Carol is comparing Gopher Prairie with Minneapolis and St. Paul, Bea Sorenson, whom Carol later takes on as "hired girl", is seeing it from the mental viewpoint of Scania Crossing with sixty-seven inhabitants and finding it amazing in its splendor. However, although Lewis maintains an interest in Bea as a member of a simpler, more wholesome class than the people of Main Street, he is not seeing through her eyes; and this tangential bit of deeper psycho-realism is no more than an aberrant spatter from the central wheel of his satire. It may be that he feels she is superior to Main Street because she aspires to it while it is satisfied with itself.

But it is through Carol that Lewis is speaking. With regard to the farmer class which Bea comes from, Carol tries to shake Kennicott loose from Main Street's serenity in its own importance. "I wonder," she says while she is accompanying him on a hunting trip, "if these farmers aren't bigger than we are? So simple and hard working. The town lives on them. We townies are parasites, and yet we feel superior to them. Last night I heard Mr. Haydock talking about 'hicks.' Apparently he despises the farmers because

Main Street, 56-7.
they haven't reached the social heights of selling thread and buttons." "Parasites? Us?" explodes Kennicott, "Where'd the farmers be without the town? Who lends them money? Who--why, we supply them with everything!" He goes on to say that if the farmers had their way he would be put on a salary instead of collecting fees and then where would she be. She points out, or tries to, that the farmers think that they are made to pay entirely too much for the services they buy from the town; and Kennicott replies with a statement to the effect that there are many cranks among the farmers and that they would probably like to fill the statehouse with a lot of men in manure covered boots to run the place.

The point of the passage is that Lewis agrees with what Carol is trying to say. He considers the people on the farms to be intrinsically superior to these small town people like Kennicott. He does feel that the towns are parasites upon the farmers. In another place they hear a farmer holding forth on his grievances. He tells how, when the shippers and grocers in Gopher Prairie wouldn't pay a reasonable price for potatoes, the farmers tried to ship their goods directly to Minneapolis only to find that the merchants there had an agreement with those of Gopher Prairie. Then, when the farmers tried to send the goods to Chicago, the railroads refused to let them have freight cars. Kennicott says the man is a crank and ought to be run out of town; but the reader is supposed to understand that this is the sort of thing the town does to insure its prosperity.

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Main Street, 229.
This is the sort of materialism that destroys all integrity in the town and makes it spiritually and intellectually barren.

Lewis says in his own name:

Large experiments in politics and in co-operative distribution, ventures requiring knowledge, courage, and imagination, do originate in the West and Middlewest, but they are not of the towns, they are of the farmers. If these heresies are supported by the townsmen it is only by occasional teachers, doctors, lawyers, the labor unions, and workmen like Miles Bjornstam, who are punished by being mocked as "cranks", as "half-baked parlor socialists." The editor and the rector preach at them. The cloud of serene ignorance submerges them in unhappiness and futility.

It would be hard to say from Main Street alone whether Lewis intended his structures to apply to only the small, intermediary trading towns or whether he is thinking of urbanites in general as against the agriculturists. Of the largest cities, at any rate, he does have a different opinion; for Carol looks back upon Minneapolis and later upon Washington as places where life had originality and interest. But Babbitt is coming to treat of Zenith, the city between three and four hundred thousand.

It is worth noting here that several of the points of criticism which Lewis is later to deal with in a more unified way in some of his following works are scattered throughout Main Street. In Main Street he is firing with a shot gun. In his later books he learns to employ the rifle more.

For instance, here and there, through Main Street is distributed criticism of religion and the church, the ideas which are

1 Main Street, 266.
expressed with such savage vehemence in *Elmer Gantry*. From the
time Carol arrives in Gopher Prairie she is urged, as the wife
of one of the town's prominent men, and a woman of trained abili-
ties, to enter the church work. Vida Sherwin, the high school
teacher of English and French, tells Carol that through Sunday
school teaching she will be able to get the personal influence
necessary for her reforms. Presumably Carol's attitude toward
religion is that of an enlightened agnostic. At any rate, al-
though Vida herself is a reformer and Carol's closest friend,
Carol remains noncommittal and realizes to herself that she and
Vida hardly speak the same intellectual language.

The main attack on the church is made in the person of Mrs.
Bogart. Mrs. Bogart is a "widow, and a Prominent Baptist, and
a Good Influence. She had so painfully reared three sons to be
Christian gentlemen that one of them had become an Omaha bar-
tender, one a professor of Greek, and one, Cyrus N. Bogart, a boy
of fourteen who was still at home, the most brazen member of the
toughest gang in Boytown. Mr. Bogart was not the acid type of
Good Influence. She was the soft, damp, fat, sighing, indigestive,
clinging, melancholy, depressingly hopeful kind." This description,
for all of its adjectives, does not accurately prepare one for Mrs.
Bogart's later conduct. She is a malicious gossip, a muck-raker, and
a fanatic trouble-maker. If this character were all, one might
suppose that Lewis were simply describing another type of villager
and a certain hypocritical sanctimoniousness belonged in the picture;

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1 Main Street, 69.
but Lewis represents all of the characters as having the same qualities proportionate to their religious devotion. In Mrs.
Bogart, for *Main Street*, he has personified what he thinks is
the attitude of religion, at least as it appears in the small
town. Church attendance is linked with prudish "morality", hawk-
eyed censoriousness and sadistic persecution of the "sinner".
Along with it goes prohibitionism and literary censorship. All
are products of hypocritical Puritanism. For Lewis Puritanism
is always hypocritical and self-extenuating. It is not only irra-
tional and sterile, but it is false, a pietistic covering for in-
ner depravity. Mrs. Bogart, when Cy has compromised Fern Mullins,
would have it that the girl had led him astray and hounded the girl
out of town with revolting cruelty. Of the real Puritan for whom
sin exists as an implacable reality and who can be rigorously
severe with both himself and his own Lewis says nothing.

Such then is the criticism in *Main Street*. It is diffuse,
ranging through every aspect of life in Gopher Prairie from the
architecture of the homes to the "culture" of the women's club;
and it leaves little uncondemned.

C. Babbitt

*Main Street* deals with the farmers' trading center
of four or five thousand; *Babbitt* is leveled at the industrial
city of three or four hundred thousand. In the Floral Heights
suburban development where Babbitt has his home there is none of
the ugliness which Carol saw on Main Street although in the tene-
ment district of Zenith, where the substratum of factory workers
live, the story would be different; but spiritually Zenith is as bleak as Gopher Prairie.

George F. Babbitt is a prominent real estate dealer of the firm of Thompson and Babbitt. His income, he estimates, to the year of the story will be about eight thousand. When Babbitt graduated from the State University twenty-four years before, he intended to become a lawyer; but, almost by accident, he had found himself engaged to Myra Thompson, and he had been unable to explain to her that it was all a mistake. Instead, he had let himself be led into marriage and had given up his plans for a law career to enter the real estate business with his father-in-law. There, as he recognizes, he has probably made more money than he would have made as a lawyer; but there has always remained an unfulfilled ambition, symbolized by a fairy child who visits him in dreams. Now he has become strangely restless. He is no longer able to quite convince himself that his life is truly important and worthwhile. A vacation to the Maine woods with his one intimate friend, Paul Riesling, gives him only temporary satisfaction. A kicking over of the traces at a real estate men’s convention leaves him less satisfied than ever. City politics, where he aided the campaign against the reds, and an enterprise applying business methods to the reorganization of the city's most fashionable Sunday School interest but fail to satisfy him. At the moment when he feels that his importance has been recognized by his election to the vice-presidency of the Boosters' Club, he learns that Paul Reisling has been taken to jail for shooting Zilla, Paul's wife. Reisling has
been Babbitt's one devotion, his only intimate. After Paul is sentenced to three years in the State Penitentiary, Babbitt tries a few flirtations then runs off to Maine again, this time by himself; but he is no sooner there than he desires to be back in Zenith. On his way back, he gets in conversation on the train with the radical lawyer, Seneca Doane, whose campaign for mayor Babbitt helped to defeat; and, when the workmen of Zenith go on strike, Babbitt finds himself perversely liberal in his arguments. As a result of his defection from the ranks of the strict conservatives, he becomes shunned by his friends, particularly after he refuses to join the Good Citizens' League. In the meanwhile, during the absence of his wife, he is carrying on an affair with Tanis Judique. All the time, however, he is alarmed at his isolated position; and, when, as an indirect result of his wife's illness, he is able to rejoin his business acquaintances and reconsecrate himself to the Old Guard Republican faith, he seizes his chance eagerly. The last symbolic act in his futile rebellion is to champion his son Ted when Ted gives up college to elope with Eunice Littlefield.

The social criticism in Babbitt is much less scattered and much better focussed than it is in Main Street. Lewis does not try to bring every class and person in Zenith under fire, but concentrates upon the business man of Babbitt's type, letting the reader himself apply the criticism further. He has not felt the same necessity to enumerate. Incidentally, he has let his characters speak for themselves with far less editorial comment than those of Main Street. Babbitt is not a protagonist of Lewis' idea; but, for
the most part, an illustration of what Lewis is criticizing. Consequently, there is more insight into what Lewis is attacking, which is, of course, materialism.

We have first a picture of Babbitt. He is childish, garrulous, credulous, and not very intelligent. He lives in a standardized suburban house, well designed and well furnished, with only one fault—it is not a home. His wife is an indistinct personality. Their three children are described at breakfast table: "Verona, a dumpy brown-haired girl of twenty-two, just out of Bryn Mawr, given to solicitudes about duty and sex and God and the unconquerable bagginess of the gray sports-suit she was now wearing. Ted—Theodore Roosevelt Babbitt—a decorative boy of seventeen. Tinka—Katherine—still a baby at ten, with radiant red hair and a thin skin which hinted of too much candy and too many ice cream sodas." Babbitt is irritated by Verona's sociological yearnings. He warns her, "The first thing you got to understand is that all this uplift and flipflop and settlement-work and recreation is nothing in God's world but the entering wedge for socialism. The sooner a man learns that he isn't going to be coaxed, and he needn't expect a lot of free grub and, uh, all these free classes and flipflop and coo-oods for his kids unless he earns 'em, why, the sooner he'll get on the job and produce—produce—produce! That's what this country needs, and not all this fancy stuff that just enfeebles the will-power of the working man and gives his kids a lot of notions above their class."

1 Babbitt, 15-16.
2 Babbitt, 17.
As Babbitt starts on his way to the office, he stops to speak with Howard Littlefield, his next door neighbor. Littlefield is a Ph.D., and the "Great Scholar of the neighborhood; the authority on everything in the world except babies, cooking and motors. He is the employment manager and publicity counsel for the street car company. "He could, on ten hours' notice, appear before the board of aldermen or the state legislature and prove, absolutely, with figures all in rows and with precedents from Poland and New Zealand, that the street-car company loved the Public and yearned over its employees; that all its stock was owned by Widows and Orphans; and that whatever it desired to do would benefit property-owners by increasing rental values, and help the poor by lowering rents." Littlefield, however, does more than placate the political guardians for the non-too-honest economic masters of Zenith. He placates their consciences also and keeps their egotism comfortably inflated. He has figures and facts to prove that what they like to believe is only what the scientific scholar has already learned to be true. He not only mollifies their opponents, but he keeps them steadfastly believing in themselves. In his criticism of the American businessman, Lewis takes delight in pointing out the agencies by which this pompous conceit is maintained.

Babbitt is very childish in his thinking. Lewis thinks the American businessman, in general, is immature. For instance there is his megalomania. Babbitt loves the city because of its size.

"It was big--and Babbitt respected bigness in anything; in mountains,
jewels, muscles, wealth, or words." When he gets up a form letter for his real estate customers, it is slangily florid: "Say, old man! I just want to know can I do you a whaleuva favor? Honest! No kidding! etc." He carries the hail-fellow-well-met high pressure sales methods to their extremes. As a matter of fact, Lewis makes him carry the point not only beyond the bounds of realism, but almost beyond the bounds of satire, and certainly beyond the bounds of sales effectiveness. But it is to be remembered that Babbitt likes this for itself as well as for the sales it makes. He is quite as susceptible to its appeal as his most gullible client.

When Ted, eager to leave high school, brings his father a pile of advertisements clipped from various magazines, Babbitt is almost as interested as Ted. They represent a varied assortment of correspondence school courses—be an Osteo-vitalic Physician, a ukulele player, a fingerprint detective; study music, poultry raising, engineering, window trimming, chemistry. Babbitt is much impressed after looking them over by the size and efficiency of the correspondence school business. He is only a little bit skeptical that things can be taught so easily, that "they'd be able to jam you through these courses as fast as they claim they can." The only real reason he can find for Ted's having to continue his preparation for college is that college gives a necessary prestige. He says, "I've found out it's a mighty nice thing to be able to say you're an A.B. Some client that doesn't know what you are ain't thanks

1 Babbitt, 61.
2 Babbitt, 51.
you're just a plug business man, he gets to shooting off his mouth about economics or literature or foreign trade conditions, and you just ease in something like, 'When I was in college—course I got my B.A. in sociology and all that junk—' Oh, it puts an awful crimp in their style! But there wouldn't be any class to saying 'I got the degree of Stamp-licker from the Bezusus Mail-order University!'

Babbitt's knowledge derived from any source is very sketchy and uncertain, although he is always ready to speak authoritatively on the basis of it. He has no accurate information about anything. He has "an enormous and poetic admiration, though very little understanding, of all mechanical devices. They were his symbols of truth and beauty. Regarding each new intricate mechanism—metal lathe, two-jet carburetor, machine gun, oxyacetylene welder—he learned one good realistic-sounding phrase, and used it over and over, with a delightful feeling of being technical and initiated."

Although he knows the market price "inch by inch" of the property he deals in, he knows nothing about police protection, the existence of graft, fire protection—except as in some way influencing insurance rates—schools, prison, vice districts or basic industrial conditions in the city; yet he considers himself able to give an incontrovertible opinion on any of them, providing he has read some statement on the matter in the editorials of the Advocate-Times.

1. Babbitt, 86.
2. Babbitt, 68.
He does have the abiding feeling that labor unions are not to be tolerated, except where a conservative open shop union serves to keep more radical unions from coming in. Although he is responsible for the development of new neighborhoods, he knows nothing at all about sanitation; and one of his largest and most highly advertised projects suffers from the fact that its sewers have insufficient outlet.

This particular project, as a matter of fact, is a considerable swindle. Babbitt considers himself an upstanding, patriotic member of the community; but he does not let honesty interfere with his business. We have given an incident of his transactions:

Six months ago Babbitt had learned that one Archibald Purdy, a grocer...was talking of opening a butcher shop beside his grocery. Looking up the ownership of adjoining parcels of land, Babbitt found that Purdy owned his present shop but did not own the one available lot adjoining. He advised Conrad Lyte to purchase this lot, for eleven thousand dollars, though an appraisal on a basis of rents did not indicate its value as above nine thousand. The rents, declared Babbitt, were too low; and by waiting they could make Purdy come to their price. (This was Vision.) He had to bully Lyte into buying. His first act as agent for Lyte was to increase the rent of the battered store-building on the lot. The tenant said a number of rude things, but he paid.

Now Purdy seemed ready to buy, and his delay was going to cost him ten thousand extra dollars—the reward paid by the community to Mr. Conrad Lyte for the virtue of employing a broker who had Vision and who understood Talking Points, Strategic Values, Key Situations, Underappraisals, and the Psychology of Salesmanship.¹

Purdy is bullied into buying the property under threat of Babbitt to sell it to a chain store company competitor if he doesn't.

¹ Babbitt, 47.
Iyte gets the lion's share of the booty, although it is really Babbitt's project. In addition to these deals Babbitt is employed in much larger stealings involving the Zenith Street Traction Company. In these he is the tool of his father-in-law, Henry Thompson. Thompson, a man of more intelligence and less conscience than Babbitt, acknowledges himself a crook, and considers Babbitt a rather pompous fool. At this point, Lewis' satire is pointed not so much at Thompson's cynical disregard for honesty as at Babbitt's easy assumption that he is the only very honest "realator" in Zenith when in actuality he is probably as dishonest as the worst of his competitors. Babbitt, as the passage quoted above indicates, excuses his shady deals by labeling them business foresight or some other virtuous sounding quality. Lewis is not making Babbitt a scoundrel here. On the contrary, he makes his readers have much sympathy with Babbitt. He simply takes delight in exposing what the psychologist would call escape mechanisms—pointing out the various devices which the business man employs to excuse his actions both to himself and others and to protect his illusion of being an honest man. He takes a keener delight in mocking the justification of a fault than he does in pointing out the fault itself.

All of Babbitt's little foibles, as well as his greater defects, come in for their share of irony—his worship of his auto, his stupid and repetitious conversation, his guilty interest in women's ankles, his petty and meaningless nagging at home, his sly evasions of prohibition, his futile attempts to stop smoking and to take
more exercise, his crude Booster Club speeches. As Mr. Lippmann says, Lewis "will take the trouble to be as minutely devastating about poor Babbitt's fondness for a trick cigarette lighter as about the villainies of Elmer Gantry."

We have an account of Babbitt's taste in movies which is not only a criticism of Babbitt but a criticism of the movies themselves. It is explained that Babbitt and his wife and Tinka go to the movies at least once a week. The theatre they attend is the Chateau, which holds 3000, is very gaudy, and has an orchestra to play arrangements from the classics and fantasies on a four alarm fire. Babbitt is agreeably awed by the magnificence of the place. "He liked," we are told, "three kinds of films: pretty bathing girls with bare legs; policemen or cowboys with an industrious shooting of revolvers; and rummy fat men who ate spaghetti. He chuckled with immense, moist-eyed sentimentality at interludes portraying puppies, kittens, and chubby babies; and he wept at death-beds and old mothers being patient in mortgaged cottages. Mrs. Babbitt preferred the pictures in which handsome young women in elaborate frocks moved through sets ticketed as the drawing rooms of New York millionaires." Their literature is the comic supplement.

Throughout the book Babbitt and his kind are satirized nowhere so much as in their organizations.

Of a decent man in Zenith it was required that he should belong to one, preferably two or three, of the innumerable (sic) 'lodges' and 'prosperity-boosting lunch-clubs; to the Rotarians, the Kiwanis, or the Boosters; to the Odd Fellows, Moose, Masons, Red Men, Woodmen, Owls, Eagles, Maccabees, Lippmann, Men of Destiny, 87. Babbitt, 158.
Knights of Columbus, and other secret orders characterized by a high degree of heartiness, sound morals, and a reverence for the Constitution. There were four reasons for joining these orders: It was the thing to do. It was good for business, since lodge brothers frequently became customers. It gave to Americans unable to become Geheimräte or Commandatori such unctuous honorifics as High Worthy Recording Scribe and Grand Hoogow to add to the commonplace distinctions of Colonel, Judge, and Professor. And it permitted the swaddled American husband to stay away from home for one evening a week. The lodge was his piazza, his pavement cafe. He could shoot pool and talk man-talk and be obscene and valiant.

Babbitt was what he called a 'joiner' for all these reasons.

The Good Citizen's League, which Babbitt is compelled later to join, is something of a different sort and much more sinister in Lewis' eyes. It is an organization formed after the Zenith strike to militate against labor. Lewis is more serious when he shows Babbitt being forced by the pressure of social and business ostracism to ally himself with this.

Lewis ties this "joiner" tendency with all of the other standardizing influences of modern city life.

Just as he was an Elk, a Booster, and a member of the Chamber of Commerce, just as the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined his every religious belief and the senators who controlled the Republican Party decided in little smoky rooms in Washington what he should think about disarmament, tariff, and Germany, so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality. These standard advertised wares—water heaters—were his symbols and proofs of excellence; at first the signs, then the substitutes, for joy and passion and wisdom. 1

1Babbitt, 205.
2Babbitt, 95.
The key of Lewis' criticism is in that last sentence. He is concerned with exposing the pitiful substitutes of materialism for "joy and passion and wisdom."

Lewis makes it plain that the Riesling domestic tragedy results in large measure from the fact that Zilla has nothing to do in the tiny apartment in which she and Paul live. In the city all pleasure and individuality is standardized, condensed and hurried out of existence.

All about him the city was hustling, for hustling's sake. Men in motors were hustling to pass one another in the hustling traffic. Men were hustling to catch trolleys, with another trolley a minute behind, and to leap from trolleys, to gallop across the sidewalk, to hurl themselves into buildings, into express elevators. Men in dairy lunches were hustling to gulp down the food which the cooks had hustled to fry. Men in barber shops were snarling, "Just shave me once over. Gotta hustle." Men were feverishly getting rid of visitors in offices adorned with the signs, "This is My Busy Day" and "The Lord Created the World in Six Days—You Can Spiel All You Got to Say in Six Minutes." Men who had made five thousand, year before last, and ten thousand last year, were urging on nerve-yielding bodies and parched brains so that they might make twenty thousand dollars hustling to catch trains, to hustle through the vacations which the hustling doctors had ordered.

Among them Babbitt hustled back to his office with nothing much to do except see that the staff looked as though they were hustling.¹

Prohibition comes in again, as it always does in Lewis' works, for ridicule. Babbitt and his friends are inclined to believe confusedly in prohibition and to consistently violate it. They

¹ Babbitt, 154.
explain that it is the best thing for the welfare of the irresponsible masses to have prohibition; but for intelligent men like themselves it is an interference with personal liberty. There is hardly a page in the book where Lewis is not holding up to view some such muddled hypocrisy; but in this case he is thinking that not only their attitude toward prohibition but prohibition itself is hypocritical.

The geniality of the criticism in Babbitt makes it more effective than that in Main Street. The latter has less exaggeration; but being more vindictive it is less honestly penetrating. Having limited its scope, Babbitt gives, in spite of its boisterousness, a fuller picture within its scope; and it comes much nearer to the typical. Babbitt is a much more universal character than anyone in Main Street; and, regardless of what some critics have said, he is a true character, not a scarecrow.

D. Arrowsmith

Lewis' next novel was Arrowsmith, generally accepted as his best. As a novel it undoubtedly is that. From the standpoint of social criticism, however, it is not so important as Babbitt. Although it has much social criticism in it, it does not have for its main purpose as Babbitt did, the exposure of American life. Its primary interest is in the character of Martin Arrowsmith; and it becomes a novel of quite a different type from either Babbitt or Main Street. What it does do in social criticism is to relate the qualities criticised in the business world of Babbitt to their
influence upon medical men and science.

In college and medical school Martin Arrowsmith is fired by the example of Max Gottlieb with the desire to be ruthless and indefatigable in the search for scientific truth. When he gets married, however, he has to give up his ideas of research and enter hospital internship and then general practice in a small town. From general practitioner and County Superintendent of Health in Wheatsylvania he moves to the city of Nautilus to become assistant to Dr. Almus Pickerbaugh, Director of Public Health; and, after Pickerbaugh is elected to Congress, Martin takes his place as director. When he is forced out of there by the politicians for being too active, he goes to Chicago to take a place on the fashionable Houncefield Clinic. The publishing of some of his independent research findings at last gets him the invitation to join Max Gottlieb again at McGurk Institute of Biology, where he makes great discoveries in a new principle for disease control; but his work is anticipated in publication by another investigator. However, he gets a chance to experiment with the new principle on a large scale in an outbreak of plague on the island of St. Hubert, but spoils the experimental data of his work after his wife dies of the disease by not keeping an untreated control group for comparison. He is married again to a woman of great wealth and social position; but, feeling his real work hampered by display and the demands of social prestige, he leaves his wife and quits the institute to join his friend Terry Wickett in their own laboratory free from all gods except science.
Lewis shows how science is hampered by simple stupidity, greedy commercialism and the desire for social display. He points out how rare the true scientific spirit is even among those who have chosen science for their careers. None of Arrowsmith's medical school acquaintances have a real passion in the search for truth. Many of them, like Fatty Pfaff, are too stupid. Those who, like Angus Duer, have the intellectual capacity are interested only in becoming fashionable surgeons with five figure incomes; and a commercial success is almost certainly a scientific failure. Arrowsmith, Gottlieb and Terry Wickett are shown as rare exceptions.

When Arrowsmith sets up in general practice at Wheatsylvania, he is hampered from the start by the stupidity of the people. When he is successful in stopping an epidemic in the cattle of the region, he is severely criticised for having gone outside of his province to interfere in the work of the state veterinarian, although the latter, as a result of using stale serum, was getting no results at all. He is abused as cruel and inhuman for having a typhoid carrier confined, although he is convinced she has been responsible for a hundred cases from which nine deaths resulted. Finally, when he takes precautions for an epidemic of smallpox and it turns out that only the first case was smallpox and the other suspicious ones chickenpox, ridicule is heaped upon him until he loses all of his authority; for the people are far more interested in enjoying a joke at the expense of the doctor than they are in having the health of themselves and their families.
An assistant to Almus Pickerbaugh in Nautilus, Arrowsmith finds that his superior, although he wears the community out in successive health-consciousness campaigns, has neither a knowledge of nor an interest in anything truly scientific. Inaccurate and fabricated statistics are regarded as wholly justifiable in a health drive. At a large "Health Fair" which Pickerbaugh gets up, all sorts of ridiculously showy and very unscientific displays are made. One sentence in description of this gives the quality of Lewis' satire: "There was a W.C.T.U. booth at which celebrated clergymen and other physiologists would demonstrate the evils of alcohol." The sentence combines Lewis' continuous ridicule of prohibition with his more specific criticism of pseudo-scientific demagogy. When Arrowsmith suggests that the pasteurization of milk and the destruction of tuberculosis-breeding tenements would save more lives than "ten thousand sermons and ten years of parades by little girls carrying banners and being soaked by the rain," Pickerbaugh says, "No, no, Martin, don't think we could do that. Get so much opposition from the dairymen an the landlords. Can't accomplish anything in this work unless you keep from offending people."

When Martin himself is director, after Pickerbaugh's election to Congress, he increases the staff and scope of the free clinic. At once the doctors of the city protest vigorously against the

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1 Arrowsmith, 227.
losses in fees which they expect to result and demand that Arrowsmith pare the clinic down to handle nothing that would not be a charity case anyway. Martin, however, goes ahead and, further, has the disease breeding tenements wrecked. Thereupon the politicians deprive him of his salary and he is forced to give up his office.

At Rouncefield Clinic in Chicago he encounters commercialism in a different form. Rouncefield Clinic is a model medical factory, a splendidly efficient commercial enterprise. "Martin would without fear have submitted to the guided and ardent tonsil-scraper of the clinic, would have submitted to Angus for abdominal surgery or to Rouncefield for any operation of the head and neck, providing he was himself quite sure that the operation was necessary, but he was never able to rise to the clinic's lyric faith that any portions of the body without which people could conceivably get along should certainly be removed at once."

For a while, after he goes to McGurk Institute, he feels that at least he has found the place where science is supreme; but he learns gradually that the institute is a social toy of Capitola McGurk and its purpose is to give her something to talk about in society. The directors of the institute are men who have given up the weary routine of research for easier pleasures of social life. They lean gracefully upon their one well displayed laurel. Wickett leaves the institute because, in spite

1 Arrowsmith, 270-1.
of the director's hurry to get the credit for the institution, Wickett refuses to publish the results of his investigation until he has checked them positively and completely. Arrowsmith leaves when he is promoted to the socially decorative position of Assistant Director under Holabird, a change that would increase his salary and prestige but destroy his work.

The criticism of Arrowsmith is the condemnation of society for placing egotistic prestige and individual greed before the discovery of truth.

E. Mantrap

The next book chronologically was Mantrap. For the purposes of this study it may be dismissed with a very few sentences. Mantrap is a very surprising reversion to the type of book Lewis wrote before Main Street. It contains no more social criticism than Free Air had, in brief, none at all. It is one of the most amazing things about Lewis that he could have written this after Arrowsmith.

F. Elmer Gantry

The year following this Lewis returned to his old critical position with the publication of Elmer Gantry. Elmer Gantry raised the greatest storm of opposition of any of Lewis' books, being considered a very unfair and savage attack upon the church. Vehement it certainly is; for Lewis picks an utterly despicable
person to be the main character and in a certain respect, at least, to represent the church.

Elmer Gantry, drunk and looking for a fight, finds himself defending religion, in the person of Eddie Fislenger, with his fists against a mob. Eddie, who has been doing some street corner preaching, is a student at the same small Baptist college which Gantry attends. Gantry, known as Hell-cat, was simply looking for a fight; but he is embarrassed to find his action interpreted as evidence of a most astonishing conversion. Eventually he is "converted" by a physically magnificent evangelist, although his conversion does not prevent him from continuing to get drunk regularly nor from seducing almost any pretty woman he can. After his conversion, he discovers that he has an extraordinary power to move people by his excellent voice and he decides to enter the ministry. At his first student charge he seduces one of his parishioners then escapes marrying her by tricking her into being seen in the arms of another man. Discovered in an alcoholic stupor at the time when he should have been interviewing the deacon of a church where he was to preach, he is expelled from theological school. After a period as a salesman he joins the woman evangelist, Sharon Falconer, who becomes both his employer and his mistress. After she is burned to death in a tabernacle fire, he turns to various kinds of mystic healing fakes; but eventually, having gained the acquaintance of Bishop Toomis, he gets into the Methodist Church. There, with the veneer of intelligence
and culture he is able to acquire from his wife, he shoulders his way up using whatever will help him to succeed—wire-pulling, sentimentality, sensationalism, politics—until he gets into the largest churches in Zenith. He bribes a small college to grant him a D.D. degree. When his licentiousness lets him be putted into a scandal and blackmailed, his lawyer friend is able to blackmail the blackmailers and the widely publicised scandal reverts to the greater glory of Elmer Gantry.

Lewis assails the church for its irrationality, its crude emotionalism, its hypocrisy and its sordid commercialism.

By setting the first part of the story in Terwillinger College, a small Baptist school of fundamentalist teachings, and later in Mispah Baptist seminary, Lewis gives himself opportunity to ridicule church dogmas. He makes his characters discuss such things as the virgin birth, the miracles of Christ, the literal interpretation of the Bible, infant damnation, in such a way as to make all religious dogmas appear ludicrous superstitions. Along with this he shows the hypocrisy of ministerial candidates. The students at Mispah range everywhere from literalists like Eddie Fislinger, through affectedly exalted ceremonialists like Horace Carp to muddled libertines like Gantry and atheists like Harry Zenz. The only admirable one shown is Frank Shallard who gradually loses his belief in religion as he thinks seriously about it. It is Gantry's attacks from the pulpit of one of the largest churches in Zenith which has Shallard expelled as a heretic from one of the smaller ones. Shallard takes up the lecture
fight against fundamentalist bigotry after the Tennessee "monkey trial". He is mobbed and has his sight destroyed for denouncing the tactics of the popular Gantry.

Gantry's conversion is a burlesque upon the trade of "soul snatching". Judson Roberts, the evangelist, first wins Gantry's admiration by his display of physical strength; and Gantry requires no further arguments. Any reasoning would be wasted upon his stupid mind it is indicated, although later he shows much shrewdness in getting ahead. When Judson has finished his enthusiastic campaign at Terwillinger, we are permitted to see him musing on the train about what he has done:

No, really, it wasn't so bad for him, that Elmer what's-his-name, to get converted. Suppose there isn't anything to it. Won't hurt him to cut out some of his bad habits for a while, anyway. And how do we know? Maybe the Holy Ghost does come down. No more improbable than electricity. I do wish I could get over this doubting! I forget it when I've got 'em going in an evangelistic meeting, but when I watch a big butcher like him, with that damn' silly smirk on his jowls--I believe I'll go into the real estate business. I don't think I'm hurting these young fellows any, but I do wish I could be honest. Oh, Lordy, Lordy, Lordy, I wish I had a good job selling real estate.¹

Gantry's "call" to enter the ministry comes as a result of corn whiskey and an eagerness to have power over people through his excellent voice.

When Gantry is with the evangelistic team of Sharon Falconer,

¹ Elmer Gantry, 60-1.
Lewis shows the emotionalistic revival in its worst aspects. He shows all of them to be organized as purely commercial, money-grabbing schemes by the evangelist leaders, who are themselves without either faith or morals.

Lewis has had his fling at evangelists before. In Babbitt there are several sarcastic references to a great evangelist, Mike Monday. The name, of course, is a take-off upon Billy Sunday, whom Lewis undoubtedly has in mind in almost all of his attacks upon this aspect of religion.

When Gantry starts in the Methodist Church, his initial rise is due to his flattery of the bishop. Later he climbs by all sorts of crude publicity stunts and sensationalistic sermons. And, this is the underlined portion of Lewis' criticism, he succeeds. He succeeds; and, as far as we can see at the end of the book, he will continue to succeed before increasingly larger audiences in increasingly larger cities. The most biting criticism is not in the fact that Gantry is such a villain but in the thought that the church and the people reward him highly for his villainy and hypocrisy, whereas an honest thinker like Shalard is hated. This is the sort of thing for which Lewis condemns the church completely. That he does intend to condemn it completely there can be no mistake, although there might be some doubt as to whether he has drawn a sufficiently representative picture to make his condemnation very effective. The book has not only a personal interpretation but a very biased selection of elements. It is not simply a prejudiced report but a rather garbled one.
G. The Man Who Knew Coolidge

Elmer Gantry was followed by a largely insignificant work, The Man Who Knew Coolidge. This is really not a novel but a somewhat lengthy burlesque character sketch. It is made up of nothing except the conversation of Lowell Schmaltz as he talks with men on the train, or visits with the Babbitts or makes a speech. Schmaltz is nothing except a very much paler and cruder Babbitt; and he serves no purpose of social criticism that Babbitt has not already served. The book achieves nothing except the humor of mimicry.

H. Dodsworth

The next book is Dodsworth. Dodsworth, published in 1929, is like Arrowsmith in being more a novel of character than of social criticism; but, also like Arrowsmith, it has much social criticism in it.

Its social criticism is in one respect very similar to that in Babbitt, but in another respect it is quite different from and, in fact, somewhat contradictory to Babbitt. Dodsworth is an American big business man, but not the American big business man. Whereas Babbitt was the rather small real estate speculator, Dodsworth is a large industrialist, a manufacturer of automobiles. He has made his fortune, and, although we see him considering what he will take up next, he is quite able economically to retire when the automobile company passes out of his hands as the result of a
profitable merger.

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 Revelation Motor Company; he was a millionaire, though decidedly not a multi-millionaire; his large house was on Ridge Crest, the most fashionable street in Zenith; he had some taste in etchings; he did not split many initiatives; 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.1

As a matter of fact, it is these last three unexpected things which Dodsworth does do and which make him not "the" American Captain of Industry which he has been labeled. Lewis' interest in Dodsworth is to develop the individuality of him in the unfamiliar environment of Europe. In doing this, however, Lewis does not condemn Dodsworth for his earlier absorption in business. On the contrary it is shown that Dodsworth is much happier—am, properly so—when his faculties are engaged by business than when he is loafing through Europe. In this respect the social criticism somewhat contradicts that of Babbit; for, where that work satirized the business man, this one tends rather to idealize him a little, at least in comparison with the European characters presented. It is Dodsworth's shallow and flirtatious wife, whom Lewis thoroughly disapproves of. She has continually

1Dodsworth, 10-11.
nagged her husband, accusing him of being a coarse and clumsy Babbitt—Lewis likes to use theterms he himself has made current—when in point of fact Dodsworth, as Lewis would have us understand, is a far more truly cultured person than she is. The novel is concerned with how she leaves him for every romantic European and how he tolerates her bahavior during the slow process of realizing her true character until at last he deserts her. Dodsworth himself sets forth Lewis' idea of their relationship: "I know it. I've baby'd you. You regard yourself, young woman, as the modern American with fancy European improvements. But I'm a lot more modern than you are. I'm a builder. I don't have to depend on any title or clothes or social class or anything else to be distinctive. And you've never seen it!" He goes on to accuse her of having robbed him deliberately of all his self-confidence; but the important thing from the point of view of social criticism is that Lewis does think of the American business man as a builder as well as a parasite, for it is only too disturbingly clear in the passage quoted that Dodsworth is speaking of himself for Lewis.

Throughout the book Dodsworth is shown as the natural aristocrat of constructive power against the background of inherited aristocracy with its dilettante culture. There is no thorough criticism of European upper class; but it is made plain that Lewis prefers the American system with all of its commercialism.

There are some thoughtful commentaries upon American and

\[\text{Dodsworth, p.3.}\]
European life which Dodsworth makes us struggle with his problem during his successive trips. His trouble with his wife makes him sensitive and thoughtful about his surroundings. "All thinking," the author tells us, "about matters less immediate than food, sex, business, and the security of one's children is a disease, and Sam was catching it." He notices upon his return from Europe that prohibition has made Americans drink too much. He is disturbed by American cheap imitations of art and culture. He notes that talk in Paris had been interesting even though he had not always understood it. It had comprised everything from latest international politics to systems to win at Monte Carlo; it had always been lively and varied. His American friends, he finds, are dully repetitious and boring even to themselves.

He saw that it was not a question of Ross Ireland be interested in kingdoms and of Tub being interested only in coupons and aces. He saw, slowly, that none of his prosperous industrialized friends in Zenith were very much interested in anything whatever. They had cultivated caution until they had lost the power to be interested. They were like old surly farmers. The things over which they were most exclamatory—money, golf, drinking—didn't fascinate them as brush-strokes or wood-winds fascinated the peering Endicott Everett Atkins; these diversions were to the lords of Zenith not pleasure but ways of keeping so busy that they would not admit how bored they were, how empty their ambitions. They had as their politics only a testy fear of the working class. (Why, Sam perceived uneasily, the whole country turned the dramatic game of politics over to a few seedy professional vote-wranglers!) To them, women were

1 Dodsworth, 191.
only bedmates, housekeepers, producers of heirs, and a home audience that could not escape, and had to listen when everybody at the office was tired of hearing one's grievances. The arts, to them, consisted only of jazz conducive to dancing with young girls, pictures which made a house look rich, and stories which were narcotics to make them forget the tedium of existence.¹

Only once in an evening of different night clubs, none of which were different, did Sam worry again:

"Good Lord, are all of us here in America getting so we can't be happy, can't talk, till we've had a lot of cocktails? What's the matter with out lives?"²

This is, at bottom, the same criticism of America that appeared in Babbitt; but the approach and manner is distinctly different, being less boisterously satirical and more deeply reflective.

Towards the end of the book, Lewis says through the voice of Mrs. Cortright that the essential fineness of Europe is in the nearness of its common people to the epic qualities of life, and he compares the European and the American in much the same way that in Main Street he compared the wheat farmers with the business men of Gopher Prairie.

That's the strength of Europe—not its so-called 'culture, its galleries and neat voices and knowledge of languages, but its nearness to earth. And that's the weakness of America—not its noisiness and its cruelty and its cinema vulgarity but the way in which it erects steel-and-glass skyscrapers and miraculous cement-and-glass factories and tiled kitchens and wireless antenae and popular magazines to insulate it from the good vulgarity of earth.³

¹Dodsworth, 192-5.
²Dodsworth, 181.
³Dodsworth, 369-60.
Admittedly there is some confusion here, not only in a statement which classifies two such similar things as movies and popular magazines one as an unessential difference and the other as an essential one, but in such an idea as this following others which praise Europe chiefly for being more varied and lively in its intellectual interests. Moreover, nowhere does Lewis give us anything about the European peasant, whose life would be closest to the soil, and compare him with the American farmer. Nothing in the Europeans Lewis shows us would prove them to be any closer to the universal realities of life than Americans are. To use this criticism, therefore, we should probably have to pry it loose from the comparison in which it is expressed and say simply that Lewis feels that one of the underlying faults of American life is that it has got too far from the epic realities of existence. That, we could say without hesitation, is a criticism running through all of his works, although it is hardly his main one and it is not one fundamental to all his others.


In 1933 appeared Ann Vickers. This is the story of a woman social worker and prison reformer. As far as social criticism is concerned, it is, in comparison with the other novels, more directly a condemnation of specific institutional practices instead of a criticism of a whole social philosophy. It is to be understood, however, that in all his books Lewis has passages which seem direct from Babbitt. As a whole, though, Ann Vickers falls into the class of expose reformist novels rather than into that of
pointed social satire. The difference is between revealing what is not generally known and satirizing what is commonly accepted.

For the reason that it is chiefly the exposé type of work, the story outline of it has little to do with social criticism. Ann Vickers, early left an orphan—Lewis regularly detaches his characters from the complications of parental families—goes from college to social welfare work, becomes a paid worker for the women's suffrage organization, then successively head-resident of a settlement house, charitable secretary to a rich dilettante, and at last a student of prison science and reform. She becomes superintendent of a large prison for women modeled to carry out the best sociological and psychological ideas of reform. Much more is involved in the personal story—Ann's admiration for her college professor, Glenn Hargis; her affair with Lafe Resnick; her abortion; her marriage with Russel Spaulding; and what we must take as her real romance with Barney Dolphin.

In Ann's sociological career Lewis strikes specifically at prison abuse. While she is a student-matron at Copperhead Gap Prison, Ann sees prison life at its worst. She sees inhuman and senseless cruelties inflicted upon people who are far less vicious than their jailors; graft in prison food, prison labor, cigarettes and drugs; bestial men in unsupervised control; and humane legal restrictions ignored. She is required to be present at the gruesome hanging of a poor negro woman who has killed her husband for beating her. Lewis heaps up the horror and the ugliness. He
criticises through his treatment all social punishment based on the idea of revenge and shows that criminals are made and not reformed by the prisons. His criticism includes not only prisons but laws and the courts. There is nothing new, of course, in all this. It is hardly likely that Lewis thought there was. He is trying, however, by vivid portrayal to bring these things to mind. This exposé treatment is so different from what the public has come to expect from him that the book has probably failed to have its expected result. He is nearer to his own effective criticism where he departs from describing the prisons to lay the blame on the self-complacency of righteous people. It is the bland unawareness of the self-righteously moral people to conditions which do not concern themselves and their irrational vindictiveness towards an offender which prevent humane and sensible reform. When Ann tries to bring conditions at Copperhead Gap to public attention, she is regarded as a sentimental crank who helps to bring about crime waves by being foolishly lenient with prisoners. This occurs after the prison officials have "framed" her in a scandalous position to try to insure her silence; but her protests are not listened to well enough to make it worth their bother to use their "fixed" photographs. Lewis makes the stern religionists, in this case, the blind allies of conscienceless greed and brutality.

The unconventionality of Ann's personal life is part of the picture of what Lewis regards as the emancipated woman, it
would appear; but it is very difficult to be certain. On first reading, it would seem that, though he might not approve of the things she does—for example, having an abortion—he feels that the faults are not hers but those of the Puritan society around her. On the other hand, it is very hard to know with Ann, as it frequently is with Lewis' other woman character Carol, just how far she is a character independent of him; for Lewis has the very serious fault of now letting his characters run away with the theme in such a manner that often it is almost impossible to tell whether a character is expressing what Lewis thinks or what he thinks that character would think. The characters usually set out representing Lewis in some way, but at moments he forgets himself in them. The woman characters, Ann and Carol, are particularly hard to interpret for this reason.

The indictment and sentencing of Ann's lover, Judge Dolphin, for receiving bribes and a building up of the reader's sympathy for an acknowledgably guilty man probably is not to be interpreted as having any bearing upon Lewis' social criticism, since it is certain that he does not approve of corrupt court practices and he just as certainly does not disapprove of Barney Dolphin. It is just another incident of Lewis' ignoring his theme of criticism when he chooses to write simple story.

Criticism in Ann Vickers then involved three main things: It exposes and condemns the present prison system; it places the blame for such a system upon the moralist people; and it
approves the feminist movement which has not yet achieved its goal.

J. Work of Art

Ann Vickers was followed by Work of Art. This latter work belongs, for the most part, to that group of rather insignificant books which includes Mantrap and The Man Who Knew Coolidge. It is the story of Myron Beagle, a young man of much steadiness and energy, who carries always in his mind the idea of an hotel so perfect that it will not be merely a commercial enterprise but a work of art. These plans change as he rises from bell hop, waiter and cook to manager of the largest hotels; but the author's point is that Myron always looks up on his work with the builder's pride of creation. When at last he gets a chance to create his work of art, the enterprise is ruined by an entirely fortuitous event; but Myron, even when he is reduced to small hotel keeper in a small western town, keeps making plans for building something --this time it is tourist camps--which will be the best of its type that can be built. Myron is a character parallel to Dodsworth; he is the creative business man whom Lewis admires. Contrasted with Myron is his brother Ora. Ora is cynically indolent. Ora makes a superficially brilliant success as a writer at the time when Myron becomes a commercial failure. Lewis intends to show that, in spite of this irony of fate, Myron remains a far more significant and happier person.

Critically, Lewis approves of Myron because Myron, like Dodsworth, really finds a cause of devote himself to, no matter that
it is something as prosaic as hotel keeping. In contrast with Babbitt, he devotes himself to a purposeful business rather than simply to making money.

K. It Can't Happen Here

The latest of Sinclair Lewis' books is *It Can't Happen Here*, published in 1935 as a sort of H. G. Wells prediction of the 1936 election and its results. It shows the establishment of a Nazi-like (Corpo) dictatorship in the United States. As a prophecy which, so far at least as it was dated for 1936, has failed, it has lost abruptly much of its interest. Lewis doubtless hoped it would have some effect upon the campaign for the presidency. How much it did have is, of course, impossible to ascertain, even if it were within the purpose of this thesis to do so.

The details of the story concern a liberal newspaper editor, Doremus Jessup. Jessup sees the country swayed by fear of communism, military enthusiasm, fantastic promises, and intoxicating oratory into electing Buzz Windrip president. In spite of the warnings of Jessup and a few like him the solid people are comfortably sure that dictatorship can't happen here. Of course, it does happen very promptly on the day Windrip is inaugurated; and the country suffers all of the terrors that go with a military fascist dictatorship. Doremus, caught working against the government, is sent to concentration camp; his son-in-law is shot; and his daughter kills herself and the officer who ordered the execution.
The story is filled with ugly incidents patterned after the worst that has happened in Italy and Germany.

Here is a story of an entirely different type from any of Lewis' others. It is hardly social criticism but a prophetic warning. It is based very largely upon an adaptation of incidents, events, and characters of the German Nazi movement to an American background—things doubtless impressed upon Lewis' mind as a result of the experiences of his wife, Dorothy Thompson, in Germany. To analyse the book as social criticism, we shall have to say that Lewis criticises those elements in our American life which might help in bringing about a fascist dictatorship. These, naturally, are those people, organizations, and attitudes which are shown as helping to put Buzz Windrip in the presidency.

To begin with, there are as a threat to democracy, Lewis feels, the militarists. They are conservatives and reactionaries by nature and are eager to stamp out liberalism and radicalism with force. With them are the business men and industrialists desiring the same thing and fearing the mob. Then there is the lowest portion of the mob—Shad Ledue's—which is attracted into the military organization. Finally there is the very dangerous religious demagogue exemplified by Bishop Prang. Bishop Prang is simply a Methodist Episcopal edition of Father Coughlin, although Coughlin himself is mentioned in the book as taking no part in the campaign.

Concerning organizations, Lewis specifically mentions the Daughters of the American Revolution and the American Legion.
The Rotarian Clubs are also shown as falling in line with Minard. The church, through such subsidiary organizations as Bishop Irang's, is one of the most dangerous groups of all.

Naming persons and organizations as dangerous to democracy under these circumstances does not constitute social criticism in any real sense. Social criticism rather would point out the general attitudes which either account for the origin and direction of these organizations or give these people their influence. In this connection Lewis mentions the desire to convert people by force, childish enthusiasm for military display, respect for such fetishes as "discipline" without inquiry as to what this is for or what it means, pessimistic-optimistic muddled thinking which guesses that any change will have to be for the better, the slovenly acceptance by the intelligent or unintelligent people in politics, the easy credulity which doesn't trouble itself about obvious inconsistencies and believes the specious arguments of acknowledged interested persons, and above all the indolent complacency of liberals and moderates who blandly assume that it can't happen here. The American tendency to standardization and to belief in pat slogans which Lewis criticised in his other works are shown as contributing factors; but for the most part It Can't Happen Here is not connected with the line of criticism which runs through the other works. In taking its prophetic form it set itself apart from them in type.

Having analysed the novels separately to discover the social criticism in them, we will now attempt to see what sort of society Lewis would think ideal.
A. Inconsistencies to be reconciled

In trying to construct from the criticism in the novels what we might regard as Lewis' Utopia, we encounter the difficulty of reconciling certain contradictions, either apparent or real. *Main Street* and more particularly *Babbitt* condemn the American business man. They particularly condemn him for having no real interest in anything except business. On the other hand, *Dodsworth* and *Work of Art* show in very favorable light men whose strength of character is shown by their devotion to their work. The inconsistency would not be so disturbing if the satire in *Babbitt* had not been so sweeping. There is a plain and important difference between *Babbitt* and *Dodsworth* and *Myron Weagle*, although we should have to say that part is real difference of character and part is only difference of treatment. *Babbitt*, and to a certain extent the business class of Gopher Prairie, exist as parasites upon society. They have no ambitions except to make money. *Babbitt* creates nothing; he merely speculates in land. *Dodsworth* and *Myron Weagle*, on the contrary, are creative; and they have found in their business a cause to which they have devoted themselves. *Dodsworth*'s is to produce an automobile that is the best in its price range; *Myron*'s is to build a hotel which will have none of the flaws of those hotels which he has worked. Both men are too absorbed in mastering the whole field of their enterprise to have time for much
outside. But in the field of their endeavor they have what Babbitt does not have, a challenge and a cause, something besides themselves to work for. Babbitt is not busy, he pretends to be. He is not important, he bolsters himself up to think that he is. He lacks not culture, but a purpose in life.

We are never given, however, any good opportunity to compare Dodsworth with Babbitt; for they are not shown in comparable situations. Both Babbitt and Dodsworth are Republicans in politics. Babbitt's politics we see in action, but Dodsworth's we do not. We do not know how Dodsworth regarded his workers nor what his attitude was in the Zenith strike. Had Lewis shown Dodsworth in his business relationships, Dodsworth could hardly have escaped having some of the qualities which were satirized in Babbitt. Myron Weagle does have many of them, but they are not ridiculed in him.

Again, Lewis frequently mentions Europe in comparison with America when he is criticizing America for lacking culture and being materialistic; yet in Dodsworth, in spite of such speeches as the one quoted from Mrs. Cortright, Americans are shown as greater than Europeans because of their virility. America is satirized for having no culture; and almost immediately afterwards Europe is satirized for being dilettantes in its culture. When a somewhat similar sort of thing occurs in a single character like Carol, who is satirized for her own attitude although in general she is Lewis' protagonist, we can attribute it to the fact that Lewis is too much a realist to have any character perfectly represent an ideal; but, after this has been said, the fact remains that the issues are clouded
because the author does not let us know when the character is speaking only for himself and when he is speaking for Lewis.

In *Main Street* Lewis makes the radical Miles Bjornstam something of a *raison
deur*; but in *It Can't Happen Here*, Doremus Jessup, through whom Lewis is commenting, cannot, even in a concentration camp, come to regard socialism or communism as the proper alternative to Corporate Fascism. He appears at the time to be representing Mr. Lewis. But Doremus does not always represent Lewis. Lewis satirizes him somewhat also for having been timid and ineffectual in his liberalism. Then the question again arises: Is this Lewis speaking through Jessup or is it Jessup alone? Another question might be put: Does Lewis himself shift ground on certain issues? The answer probably is that he does not always maintain the same position. He is trying more to shake everything he thinks is too easily accepted than he is to establish anything of his own. Moreover, he cannot bring any of these elements into his story without passing a satiric judgment upon it; and, since his tendency is to find faults rather than virtues, he will condemn it now for a fault although he seemed before to praise it in comparison with something of less merit. He seldom has a judicially balanced treatment that finds good points and bad points in a thing at the same time; but he must give us the good points of the American business man all in *Dodsworth* and the bad points all in *Babbitt*. The statement is not strictly true—*Babbitt* has some good points and *Dodsworth* conceivably some bad ones—but the tendency is very strong. The method makes for emphasis but also makes such a synthesis as we
are attempting very difficult and uncertain.

Such minor contradictions as making movies only symptomatic but popular magazines a cause of American weakness are probably oversights in revision more than anything else. They are more disturbing than they are significant.

B. Qualities of a Lewis Utopia

If we disregard these contradictions for the moment and attempt to construct Lewis' Utopia we still hit upon the difficulty that Lewis is what is commonly called a destructive critic. He ridicules and satirizes more than he builds up. That is not to dismiss him; for, in a sense, destructive criticism of society is the only kind that can be made. Reform is necessarily a matter of experimentation; and one can with some assurance point out what is bad but only with greatest uncertainty predict what will be good. Nevertheless, for our present project, it is easier to tell what Lewis does not want than what he does want.

One thing we may be sure about this reformed society the people in it would be individual and not standardized. Their individuality would not be destroyed because each one was afraid of being different, because all of their opinions were fixed by the same newspaper or the same senators of the same party or the same influential people of their town, because they felt that only perfect unity in their class could preserve the class against the barbarians outside. They would be varied in their interests and lively in their conversation. They would be wary of accepting one another's
ideas too easily and would be too critical to swallow either propaganda or fanaticism. They would be contemptuous of slogans as a substitute for thought.

This new society would not be materialistic. It would not have an aristocracy built upon wealth. It would not let money-making be the goal of life. Its ideal would be the rich enjoyment of life; and it would not hurry all of the joy out of existence. Automobiles, radios, and all the luxuries of the machine age would be enjoyed without being worshipped and they would not be the accoutrement of social display.

Lewis would exclude religion, at least the organized churches of today, from his new society. The people would be free from this sort of hypocrisy, superstition, and bigotry. Distorted notions of morality which make sex a vulgar hidden thing, art a Sunday school teacher and taking a drink a crime would be rejected.

The gods of the new society would be science, intelligence and social justice. There would be some way of supporting scientific research independent of commercial enterprises and independent of the generosity of multi-millionaires and the whims of their wives. The careful, accurate check and proof of scientific discoveries with a view to their ultimate service would take precedence over any benefits derived from a premature use which might handicap the investigation. Scientists would be free from social climbing ambitions and from over eagerness to profit from their discoveries either in wealth or fame.

Intelligence would be required of people in responsible
positions. Educational institutions would teach only arts and sciences and not perpetuate superstitious doctrines and unfounded ideas. Demagogues would not be tolerated in politics, and neither would business men be allowed to manipulate things in their own interest. Rotary Clubs and chauvinistic patriotic organizations would disappear, and an intelligent internationalism would take their place. People would take an interest in all that went on in society around them, and they would insist upon solving such social problems as crime by attacking the causes rather than by torturing the offender.

They would all be aroused to the ideal of social justice. It would not be possible for some men to amass great fortunes while others had insufficient means to live. Courts would not punish small thefts and legalize the dishonest acquiring of millions of dollars. Speculators such as Babbitt would not be permitted to get a living by mere manipulation on the basis of inside information; and middlemen like the traders of Gopher Prairie would not be allowed to bleed the farmers they serve.

These more or less general things we may be sure of. As to the political composition of the new society, we could safely say it would be socialistic. How completely so, it would be hard to determine. Certainly it would not be communistic, because Lewis, in spite of the fact that he shows the average member of all classes to be stupid, believes in democracy. There should be in this new society a place for both Miles Bjornstam and Sam Lodsworth to be influential. The workers would have power; but probably not
complete control. At least entrepreneurs like Dodsworth and Myron Weagle, with constructive power and creative enthusiasm, would be encouraged although perhaps they would not be permitted to receive the same rewards.

Another uncertain point is that of how American or how European the new society would be. Much more American than European probably. It would have American productive genius; it would have an even broader than American ideal in regard to the position of women; it would have American modernization and convenience. On the other hand, it would have Europe's honest culture and Europe's livelier intellectual interests and conversation. In addition, if Europe is nearer to the soil, then it would be like Europe in that respect.

At that point another question arises. Lewis thinks that people should be near to the soil, but he admires the metropolis and dislikes the small town. The point seems to be that Gopher Prairie has lost all contact with the soil without achieving any of the cultural advantages of the city. People must neither be provincial nor forget the basic things of life. The fine arts must be brought to the farmer and the sense of the soil to the metropolitian.

The outstanding difficulty in all this is that it requires a fundamental change in what is called "human nature" and a much higher minimum level of intelligence. This so-called "human nature" can with difficulty be changed to some extent; but there is no discovered means of boosting intelligence. The stupidity which
irritates Lewis most is apparently one of the least remediable faults.

Of course, Lewis does not expect to get rid of it. He is concerned with first having it recognized and then having it relegated to a position where it can do little damage. To make our construction of his world less fantastic, we must say that these things we have been mentioning are not what he would expect to have in any society but the ideals for which he would have the intelligent people working. If he could not abolish superstition and stupidity, he could perhaps arouse the intelligent people into not giving way to them. If he could not abolish materialism, he could make it difficult for materialists to be accepted as idealists. If there is no hope that everybody will think for himself, at least those who can may be given a chance.

C. Method of achievement

How can the reforms be brought about? Lewis makes no suggestion for change beyond pointing out the evils themselves. The way that things are to be reformed is by pitilessly exposing them in Lewis' own manner. Strip off their disguises and expose their inadequacies. Ridicule them as he does in Babbitt and denounce them as he does in Elmer Gantry. Shatter the false traditions and taboos which surround them and shout them off the stage. That is his own method, and he suggests no other.
CHAPTER V

AN ATTEMPT AT EVALUATION

A. The question of theme and character

In attempting to evaluate the social criticism in Sinclair Lewis, we will deal first with the question of theme in relation to character; for it has an important bearing upon the criticism itself whether Lewis uses full dimensional characters in his novels or whether, as some have accused, he merely dresses scarecrows with his ideas. When it was stated before that Lewis sometimes shifts his attention from theme to character, it was not meant to imply that his characters necessarily suffered as his theme was advanced. As a matter of fact, his social criticism is sharpest where his characters are truest. The confusion mentioned earlier arises from the fact that he does not always make clear his own attitude towards a literary character at a given place. The question as to how far he has sacrificed character for theme is a different one.

Two quotations, one from Mr. Lippmann and one from Mr. Boynton, concerning the character of Babbitt are interesting here.

Babbitt is not a man; he is assembled out of many actual Babbitts. The effect is at once lifelike and weird. As with an almost perfect scarecrow the thing is so much like life that it nearly lives. Yet it is altogether dead. It is like an anatomical model of the average man, a purely theoretical concept that has no actual existence. For in any living man the average qualities are always
found in some unique combination.

The creation of a character is, of course, what Mr. Lewis did achieve in Babbitt. The success of George F. as an artistic creation lies in the fact that he is not the caricature that he is often said to be. He is sufficiently complicated to belong to the race of little people, who are usually more multiplex than the great ones of the earth, whose greatness is in their relative simplicity.\(^1\)

The right of it is undoubtedly with Mr. Boynton. Babbitt is a character rather richly developed and thoroughly consistent as an individual. By nature he does differ from his fellow businessmen in Zenith; but his fear of standing alone makes him conform to the rigid pattern. That is the main stress of the book. The majority of Lewis’ characters are well developed. Arrowsmith is almost magnificently real. Elmer Gantry has the single fault, as a life-like character, in becoming distinctly more intelligent after Lewis has him under way than he is at the beginning. Dowsworth, although not so well conceived as Arrowsmith, is good. The melodramatic nature of It Can’t Happen Here prevents any rich development of Jessup’s character, but he is not unreal for the story in which he appears. It is with the women characters that Lewis fails, if he does fail. Carol is not entirely real. We remember better what she does than what she is. Lewis never quite reconciles the serious and the flirty elements in her. Ann Vickers fails very seriously as a book because in the story of Ann’s experiences we fail completely to find her character.

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\(^1\) Lippmann, *Men of Destiny*, 74-5.

The best of Lewis' women characters is Arrowsmith's wife, Leora, with whom, it is true, he has no critical purpose; but the general facts would show that it is not his satiric purpose which injures his characters.

B. The accuracy of Lewis' observation of American life

How accurate has been Lewis' observation of American life? It is true that he is too much the satirist to give an entirely truthful picture of American life. What he has written is exaggerated. Besides exaggerating he has selected his material to give a concerted effect. In a given book, his characters fall into a few groups; and within their groups they repeat one another with different emphasis. Lewis simplifies, as all satirists must simplify, in order to get sharpness. He studiously avoids the anomalies which would destroy the main effect. He does not intend to be fair; reformers seldom are. Only the ineffectual latitudinarian, perhaps, ever is perfectly fair in his judgments.

Beyond this, however, Lewis has his blind spots. It is not a complete picture he has given us, not only because he has accentuated what he has given but because there are elements which he has not seen at all. This serious failing is perhaps most conspicuous in his attacks upon religion. There he has seen only the hypocrite and the bigot. He has no picture of religion that, however mistaken, is honest. It has already been said that nowhere does he show the true Puritan whose sternness applies to
himself even more than it does to others and for whom sin is not merely something to be castigated in others but a grim enemy in his own life. Here is an aspect of religion, still existing at least to as great extent as some of the aspects Lewis has chosen to take up, which is worthy of attack. Neither has Lewis seen that there exists in the church the mild mannered humanitarian, although such a character would not at all be impervious to ridicule and satire. These are not good points which he has passed over because he was interested only in picking out the bad; but logical points of attack which he has not seen. Similar types in business he has likewise passed over—for instance the paternalistic employer who desires out of his bounty to consider little points in the welfare of his employees but keeps them more helplessly dependent upon him than they would be under his more conscienceless rivals. For a man of Lewis’ individualistic ideals and satiric pose, there is a splendid subject for ridicule; but, although it is right within his range, he does not see it. In his observations of American life he is accurate, but not keen.

Nevertheless, he has painted a picture of American life that people recognize without mistake. Its distortion is distortion for more real effect; and, if he is sometimes unfair to the particular people he uses, he is never wrong about the attitudes he has them show. With what he has chosen for his material he has dealt in fine detail; and his criticism is effective because it is hard to escape. He has made us very conscious of things which we knew but did not fully realize before. His work
has been more in the nature of a peroration than a closely reason argument.

C. The depth of Lewis' insight into American life

His insight is not deep. They are superficial aspects, for the most part, which he has presented. His social criticism is largely limited to modern American aspects; and it says little that has not been said before, although perhaps nowhere else has it been said so effectively. He brings no new viewpoint and no thorough philosophy. His power lies not in original thinking but invigororous writing and realistic detail. He has seen nothing which his critical contemporaries have not seen, but he has presented it with more force and directness.

D. Lewis' ideal for the novel

Percy Boynton summarizes Lewis' ideal novel and the ideal novelist as Lewis expresses it in his preface to Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer:

The ideal novel—what may be the foundation of a whole school of novel-writing—will do what all novelists have frequently proven could not be done, will give the panorama, the soul, of a whole community. It will be full of the passion for the beauty and stir of life—of people, of rivers, and little hills and tall towers by dawn and furnace-kinded dusk. Many wise persons will call such a novel sordid. But it will not be. For Keats himself felt no more passionate and sensitive reaction to beauty in her every guise than will inform it. It will not be expressed in terms of breakfast food, easy for the moron to digest; nor in suave
couplets, nor in descriptions of skyscrapers so neat that the real estate sections of the Sunday newspapers will beg to reprint them. It will not deal in photography but in broken color.

It will give the town, smell or it, sound of it, harsh and stirring sight of it; the churn and crunch of littered water between ferry-bow and slip; the midnight of skyscrapers where a dot of yellow betrays an illicit love or a weary accountant; insane clamor of subways in the dark; taste of spring in the law-haunted park; shriek of cabarets and bowl of loneliness in nail-bedrooms—a thousand divinations of beauty without a touch of arty beauty-complex whereby one hates the lyrical, the charming, the demure aspect of beauty, and perversely proclaims ugliness as alone noble; that natural yet also puerile revolution against the prettifying of the machine-made manufacturing of commercial tales. Yes, this novelist will be slated as a sordid, a low fellow. He will not see life as necessarily approaching the ideals of a Hartford insurance agent. He will see it as a roaring, thundering, in- calculable, obscene, magnificent glory.

Lewis has fallen short of his ideal, as all men with ideals must fall short of them. He has given us panoramas of sections of the community, but there are too many blank spots for them to become one panorama of the whole. Of the soul of the community he has again revealed an aspect but not the whole. A vigorous attitude toward life he does have; but he has not yet shown it as "roaring, thundering, incalculable, obscene, magnificent glory." He has not penetrated deeply enough into it for that.
SUMMARY

From the beginning writers have always used their fiction narratives to criticise and reform. Social criticism in itself does not destroy art. This thesis proposes to discover and evaluate social criticism as it appears in the novels of Sinclair Lewis.

Opinion is divided concerning Sinclair Lewis. Popular opinion is more favorable than opinion of the critics. Favorable opinion says that Lewis has exposed American materialism, dullness and characterless standardization with great accuracy. Unfavorable opinion says that he has distorted the American picture, if not out of recognition, at least out of fair criticism and that his characters are mere scarecrows to carry out his critical themes.

In Main Street Lewis has criticized the small Mid-western town for being ugly, smugly self-satisfied, spiritually and intellectually barren and parasitical upon the farmers. In Babbitt he has given a picture of the American business man in the city of three or four thousand population. He shows this business man to be crude, uncultured, childish, stupid, fatuously ego-tistic, ignorant and dishonest. Everything about his life is materialistic, repetitious and dull. Babbitt himself is not content with this sort of life, but he is afraid to differ from the crowd. Babbitt is a better work than Main Street from the point of view of social criticism. Arrowsmith expresses much
the same sort of criticism that *Babbitt* does only with special reference to the influence of the attitudes criticized upon the field of medicine and science. There Lewis shows stupidity, selfish business interests from the outside and commercialism and the desire for social position working from the inside destroying the ideals of science and spoiling the results of scientific research. The true scientific spirit, Lewis thinks, is very rare and not very heartily welcomed by those who do not have it. In *Elmer Gantry* Lewis makes a very vehement attack upon the church, charging it with irrationality, emotionalism, hypocrisy and sordid commercialism. He represents Gantry as a most despicable type and condemns the church because such men make big successes in the profession. Lewis particularly ridicules evangelists of the sort of Billy Sunday and Aimee MacPherson. To Lewis almost all religion is hypocrisy: he shows no sincere people who retain religious doctrines. *Dodsworth* ranks after *Arrowsmith* as one of Lewis' best novels; but it is not so replete with social criticism as some of the others. In a certain respect it contradicts *Babbitt* because it rather idealizes a type of American business man represented by Dodsworth. Dodsworth, an automobile manufacturer, is shown as having a natural nobility that arises out of creative work; and he is presented as a much more worthwhile character than his flighty, flirtacious wife, who is not without a certain resemblance to Carol Kennicott. Social criticism in the book is largely brought out through a comparison of Europe with America.
Lewis' attitude is not altogether clear; but it would seem that he much prefers America as represented by Dodsworth, although he links European interests to be much more lively and varied, its conversation much more interesting and thought provoking, and its people much nearer to the epic quality of the soil. 

Ann Vickers differs somewhat from the other works in having an exposed character. It gives a very ugly picture of prison conditions and accuses self-righteous people of aiding the viciously cruel people to maintain conditions which are not only inhumane but which breed rather than cure crime. In addition the book gives in a somewhat confused way Lewis' ideas about the freedom of women. Work of Art has in Myron Peagle a character comparable to Dodsworth in that he represents Lewis' idea of the constructive business man. It Can't Happen Here, although hardly social criticism in the same sense that Babbitt is, shows the danger to democracy in our American habits of being influenced by demagogues, being tolerant of crookedness and unintelligence in politics and remaining inactive on the bland assumption that dictatorship could not happen here.

In attempting to construct a Sinclair Lewis Utopia we encounter three difficulties. We cannot always be certain about Lewis' characters as to whether they are saying what their author would agree with or not. Lewis is not always consistent but sometimes gives us a picture of the American business man as Babbitt and sometimes as Dodsworth. Lewis is what is called
a "destructive critic" and has told us much more about what he does not want than about what he does. Such a Utopia however, would undoubtedly be characterized by being free from materialism, the standardization of personality, and the hypocrisy and bigotry of religion. It would reverence only the ideals of science, intelligence and social justice. Its political complexion would probably be socialistic; and in some way it would bring the culture of the city to the farmers and the epic nearness to the soil to the city dwellers. In bringing about this Utopia, Lewis has no plan except to ruthlessly expose the inadequacies of our present life.

Evaluating Sinclair Lewis as a social critic, we find that he has succeeded in creating real characters, for the most part, not scarecrows to carry the force of his criticism, although his women characters, particularly Ann Vickers, tend to remain unreal. In his interpretation and criticism of American life, so far as he sees, he reports accurately; if we allow for the exaggeration of satire; but he has many blind spots, and his insight is not new or deep. He has presented with great force what many others have realized before.
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