



## Portrayal of society in the novels of Sinclair Lewi

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### Abstract

Lewis is a critic of his times. He depicts life and society as he sees them. Lewis does not believe in false idealisation of things. Instead, he expresses the sickness and misery of the American Society Lewis has been often called the “Dickens of America”. The peculiar mixture of radicalism and orthodoxy in Dickens’ political and social views was much like Lewis’s. Not unlike Dickens, Lewis was always highly critical of American proclivities.

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### Introduction

Most modern writers portray the tragic experience of the American machine-age. They are disillusioned and sad. The modern generation, they maintain, is a lost generation devoid of human values. It is uprooted and betrayed. In such horrible conditions, the camera eye is a great necessity to make the people realize their bad ways of life and save themselves from dehumanization. These novels are greatly influenced by W.D. Howells, America’s most prominent realist, whose *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907) is a beautiful commentary on the contemporary social chaos. He found in society ‘the cleavage between the very rich and very poor, the despoilers and despoiled’<sup>[1]</sup>. He is at pain to point out the limitations and weakness of his age. His is the cry for justice with its attachment to socialism and abhorrence for imperialism.

Sinclair Lewis aims at fair representation of human life. He is out to destroy, by disclosure, the provincialism and self-complacency of the people. Willa Cather’s novels are a study of the degradation of American life, responsible for her pessimism and darkened feeling. Theodore Dreiser’s novels are a study of America’s spiritual poverty in the midst of material progress. Her relationship between them the cash nexus and biological urge<sup>[2]</sup>. Like Hemingway. Dreiser’ believes in giving a vivid picture of modern life with all the misery and sickness.

Scott Fitzgerald is the chronicler of the Jazz age, the ten year period of 1920 to 1929. The period has also been named the ‘flapper generation’ because of the writer’s turning to the theme of the fallen women. Fitzgerald depicts the life of the sad, though rich, young men. There is no doubt that he is attracted by flappers and undergraduates and wealthy legatees and that he portrays them realistically<sup>[3]</sup>. In speech of acknowledgement of the Nobel Prize in 1950, Faulkner expresses his views in these words:

“the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflicts with itself which alone can make good writing about, worth the agony and the sweat<sup>[4]</sup>.”

Faulkner feels it his utmost duty to write about the prevailing

condition in American life. Influenced by William James, he is essentially a pragmatist. According to James, a pragmatist ‘turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solution, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards facts, towards action and towards power’<sup>[5]</sup>. The secret of Lewis’ art is his living the life of his characters. His emphasis is on creating living people, not characters. He writes about the life he has lived or experienced.

Lewis is a critic of his times and belongs to the hard-boiled school of fiction. He depicts life and society as he sees them. Consequently, one finds his world constantly at war. Hemingway maintains that all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark twain called *Huckleberry Finn*..... All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since<sup>[6]</sup> Lewis does not believe in false idealisation of things. Instead, he expresses the sickness and misery of the American Society and says the truest things of his age truly. He would not write about what he has not seen, experienced and found real for himself.

Born and brought up in a small town in Minnesota, Sinclair Lewis had ample opportunity to study the manners and habits of the small town and people living there, Generally speaking what he saw and experienced at Sauk Centre made him strongly dislike small town ways. The provincial bigotry and complacency of his father did little to moderate his anger and resentment. He had suffered too much from the villagers’ cruelty, insensitivity, and smugness from childhood to youth and even as a married young man, to forgive them or their ways. In fact his soul was in revolt against everything which the narrow villages and small towns of those days represented. It was this background that helped him in writing a novel like *Main Street* which was, in fact the result of this long accumulated anger, allgery and resentment.

While *Main Street* is the debunking of provincial narrowness and bigotry, it is not the criticism of small town and villages as such. A great hiker in youth and middle-age, Lewis could not be blind to the natural beauty of the village. He had,

therefore, nothing against the villages or small towns as geographical entities. He found corruption so rampant in the society that he could not help write against that with all the emphasis at his command. Indication of this can be found in his short story "Land" (1931) in which the central character- a city dentist..... Feels about villagiatura and himself as follows;

"So Sidney came to feel as it was some wickedness in him that made him prefer trees and meadows and kind cattle to trolly cars and people who made little flat, worried jokes all day long [7].

Lewis was opposed to complacency, arrogance, and bigotry wherever he found them, whether in the village or in city. Thanks to Booth Tarkington, Meredith Nicholson and others a rhapsodic picture of the American village of their times – reminiscent of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* was conjured up in the minds of the American public.

To him, nothing could be more false than this rosy picture which kept the American ignorant about the real condition in the villages and the small town. The reality was just the other way. The American villages were already declining due to the hardship of the independent farmer in making a living within the framework of a fiercely competitive society. The brighter life, better jobs, and grater personal freedom in cities progressively denied the small towns of the younger and better type of people. Those who remained behind materially tried to find self-justification in vanity, arrogance, and a false sense of superiority.

It was against this myth of the villages that Lewis sounded the revolt and projected his more merciless but truthful and realistic account. As he gave voice to the dissatisfaction which thousands of men and women like him were nursing in their heart, his version spread from coast to coast and even beyond. It was largely because of his vivid exposure of a national scandal that he "arrived" after arduous apprenticeship.

*Main Street* is not a novel without shortcomings. In the first place, it juxtaposes two dissimilar themes in the same story. The first half narrates Carol's revolt against village narrowness and bigotry. The second half is the story of a marriage and how it founders on the rock of incompatibility. The earlier part dissects village podsnappery and holds it upto ridicule while the rest of the novel deals with the complications and conflicts of misalliance. If in *Main Street*, Lewis' motive was as an earthly paradise, in *Arrowsmith* (1925) he registered a protest against circumstances and institutions which try to crush the spirit of an idealistic seeker after truth. One other point emerges after a close reading of the novel. It is in *Arrowsmith* that for the first time, Lewis identifies himself with the central character. *Arrowsmith* may be regarded an affirmative novel besides being a novel of revolt like *Main Street*. Like his creator, Martin Arrowsmith has an inborn dislike of Babbitt expressed in any form whatsoever. As the novelist says:

"Martin was alienated from the civilized, industrious, nice youngmen of Digamma. P, in whose faces he could already see prescription, glossy white sterilisers, smart enclosed moters, and glass office-signs in the best gilt lettering. He preferred a barbarian loneliness [8].

Martin Arrowsmith has a string under current of live for his fellowbeings, specially for simple and humble people. But this

love finds a strange expression in the desire to uproot everything that is worn out and to change the existing order of thing though that might cause inconvenience and even suffering. In fact, he is like Lewis, a reformer at heart who is impatient to sweep aside all the debris that society has collected over the ages.

Though Arrowsmith is the hero of the novel, Lewis' ideal of the true scientist finds expression in the character of Max Gottlieb, Arrowsmith's teacher and mentor, and life-long idol. Lewis has made ottlieb a German and jew, probably to disabuse the American readers of the post-war Xenophobia against jews. Though Arrowsmith is chiefly a story of the protagonist's struggle against a society which cramps and hampers an idealistic approach, it is not without its share of satire and social criticism.

It is understandable and to some extent excusable, that all professors cannot have a sweet voice or a lively interest in their subjects beyond what they learnt in their own student days. But the same evils are excusable in a research institution dedicated to extent the bounds of knowledge. Hence Lewis's satire against the McGurk institute goes directly home and exposes the fact that even the highest citadels of science and research are not free from chicanery and mediocrity.

One quality of Lewis's satire and social criticism may noted here, the same as in previous two books, namely, *Main Street*, and *Babbitt*. Scattered through the pages of *Arrowsmith* are shots and gibes against the same human follies, the same social evils which Lewis ridiculed again and again in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. Lewis take care to make irony and ridicule aesthetically more effective. Thus, when Martin is just assailed with doubt as to the bonafides of the McGark institute, Lewis mischievously declares: "Thus, however, 'satisfying his work, Martin began to wonder what the perfection of his sanctuary..... [9].

Then describing the character of the scientist working there, he goes on : "No rocking..... Chair chique on a hotel porch, no knot of actors, ever whispered more warmly of complete idiocy in their conference that did these uplifted scientists. Besides being a satire on the social conditions which impede the development of science and the activities of the idealistic researcher, with Babbitt and Elmer Gantry, Arrowsmith may be considered one of the three best novels of Lewis and a masterpiece of American Literature.

*Ann Vikers* is another novel of Lewis in which he has magnificently presented a realistic portrayal of the contemporary Babbittic society. It is Ann's revolt against the values of Babbittic society. In the major half of the novel we see Ann the society investigator and reformer in action. In the later half, we find her up in arms against the accepted conventions of marriage and morals. Throughout the novel there is an under-current of a favorite Lewisian theme – the eternal need of men and women for each other. What Ann asserts and what Lewis tries to emphasise through the novel is the common place of modern times, a call for eternal revolt- revolt against the prisons, marriage, social conditions, and established values. Though the call for revolt is unmistakable, it is not clear with what Lewis wanted these outworn systems to be replace unless it be vague form of utopia, popular those days through the writings of Shaw and Wells. However, in no other novel has Lewis attacked so many social institutions at

the same. In fact, his revolt against accepted norms of sex and marriage is rather outstanding.

One glaring defect in the character of Ann Vickers is that from a selfless seeker idealistic rebel, she becomes a woman too preoccupied with her own self rather than with sex. Though this transformation in Ann has been convenient for Lewis to explore the hollowness of conventional marriages; it is hardly convincing.

There is no doubt that Lewis wanted to draw a picture of the emancipated woman in this novel. But he committed a major mistake in planning the novel. He, in fact, tried to cram into one novel the subject matter of two. Hence the dissimilarity of the two parts which have not, and could not, be fused well. For example, Ann has been made to act the parts of two heroines- a rebellious and uncompromising social reformer and a woman who strives for her personal fulfillment discarding all social and moral conventions in the process. Since social reforms and personal happiness are contradictory, the marriage of Ann which is the first part of the novel.

Though Ann Vickers does not belong to the class of Main Street or Arrowsmith, it has its moments of illuminations. Lewis was dealing with social problems like small-town small-town smugness or handicaps in scientific research which, though vital, were not fundamental problems of an acquisitive society. In Ann Vickers for the first he attacks a large number of basic social evils so rampant in the society of his times- prisons, patriotism, war, anti-abortion laws, incompatible marriages and so forth.

Sinclair Lewis launched on his career as a major novelist of the twentieth century with a novel of revolt- Main Street (1920). He also completed it with another novel of revolt in Kingsblood Royal (1947). He wrote two more novels after this, it is true. Both are minor novels compared with Kingsblood Royal. While in Ann Vickers, he wrote about the revolt of the emancipated woman against the social moral conventions and decrepit civilisation, in Kingsblood Royal, he plots the final revolt of American Negroes against a social and political system which asserts that "the Negro good enough to fight for freedom in war (world war II) is not good enough to share in peace."

Though Kingsblood Royal does not reach the level of the novels of Lewis's great decade, it approaches them very nearly. The allegorical significance of the title of the book should not be missed. It is capable of a number of interpretations. The one most significant and appealing is the suggestion that the colored man has nothing to be ashamed of his color or blood, because it is the blood of the kings, the royal blood.

As the sales of the book exceeded even the total sales of Main Street, it can hardly be denied that its impact was as great as that of the former. Howard Fast contrasted Lewis' with all his vigour to the young hopefuls of the thirties- Steinbeck' and Dos Passos and Saroyan Farrell and so many others "who" have rotted into a spongy frightful literary helplessness."

Satire is the dominant note in Babbitt, Elmer Gantry, and Gideon Plenish. Lewis goes on heaping satire, ridicule, and irony on the individuals and systems which he disapproves: On the other hand though there is as large measure of social analysis in It Can't Happen Here, as the title suggests, satire and irony are the predominant notes in this novel also to such

an overwhelming degree that it, too, must be classed with great satires.

Of the four essentially satiric novels of Sinclair Lewis, two are chiefly concerned with individuals and the other two mainly with social organisations. In these novels Lewis has made an in-depth realistic study of social organisation and individuals, sometimes affecting these organisations with superb skill. In Babbitt and Elmer Gantry we find "weak humanity" sharply held up to mockery. In Gideon Plenish Lewis turns his focus on corrupt social organisations and in It Can't Happen Here on a self-complacent social system. It is true that characters and situations in these novels are, to some extent, exaggerated and distorted, and Lewis follows more or less the same module operandi with slight changes here and there in all his satirical novels.

Another point about Lewis's satirical novels is that as a confirmed realist, he never wrote any allegorical satires like Gulliver's Travels or Animal Farm; nor did he write satirical fantasies like Brave New World or 1984. His novels belong to the genre of social satire. Even It Can't Happen Here which deals with a hypothetical but probable situation falls in this category, because it does not perfect itself into a distant and nebulous future but deals strictly with contemporary times when the Fascist menace was quite real.

The chief object of Lewis' satire in Babbitt is the protagonist himself. In and through Babbitt, it has been argued, Lewis has held up to show that the average American businessman is a philistine; a mammon worshipper, has no sense of values and, in fact, does not have a soul. A notable fact about Babbitt is that it started the famous Lewis method of research and investigation to collect his facts and verify his conclusions somewhat à la Zola.

To heighten the impact of the story he adopted in Babbitt a strategy which was rather new for his time. In the first hundred pages of the novel he describes only a day's event in the life of the hero. Babbitt's every action, from getting up in the morning to going to bed, is described in great detail. His room, his home, his office, the places he visits on his way home; are all treated with same minuteness. Lewis uses this technique to show how hollow are the pursuits of Babbitt and how soulless are his material surroundings. Just when the reader starts marveling at the gadgets and conveniences of Babbitt's house, Lewis shatters this illusion with a bang. "In fact there was but one thing wrong with Babbitt's House. It was not a home"<sup>[10]</sup>.

Babbitt is a satire. Only it is not so much directed against Babbitt as it is against the milieu which produces Babbitt, enslaves them, and finally destroys them. To the discerning reader it is obvious at every step. When, at the very beginning of the novel, giving a description of Babbitt's bedroom, Lewis writes: "Every second house in Floral Heights a bedroom precisely like this", he is making fun of a system which produces a state of standardization more than he is making fun of Babbitt who is but a victim of a system

Lewis's next novel in this genre, *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), is also an angry work. Lewis had an excellent sense of timing and could gauge the public mood with great accuracy. Eight years after Elmer Gantry the American scene had shifted had shifted from religion to politics. People were less preoccupied with religious question than they were with the rise of fascism

abroad, and the threat it posed at home. The presence of men like Father Coughlin of Detroit who poenly preached anti-seveitism and the notorious Huely Long whose demagogy helped him to wield vast power over large masses pointed at the growing Fascist menace in American life. Like many radical liberals of the time, Lewis, too, was alarmed at the prospect of a Fascist take over.

It was in a surcharged atmosphere like this that *It Can't Happen Here* appeared. The novel is in direct line of *Babbitt* and *Elmer Gantry* and may be considered as a natural sequel to the latter in its denunciation of the thing Lewis hates. In mood, subject-matter, and the fierce tone, *It can't Happen Here* is a bitter satire as *Elmer Gantry*

As a realist, or critical realist, Lewis exercised a potent unfluence on the modern American novel. Though he attracted no close imitators and founded no schools like Hemmingway and William Faulkner, he is, however, responsible for continuing the Vogue of "debunking". Marquand is the only novelist who has a near resemblance to him, although Lewis holds a more important place among the realists. Both Marquand and Lewis are remembered for the skill they showed in the portrayal of contemporary social conditions and traits.

Lewis has been often called the "Dickens of America". The peculiar mixture of radicalism and orthodoxy in dickens' political and social views was much like Lewis's. Not unlike Dickens, Lewis was always highly critical of American prolieties, although not of its structure. He was greatly aware of class distinction and hated snobbery. He came to see the upper classes as aggressors and oppressors with the popular classes as fighting back in self-defence. His novels symbolize the spirit of revolt against the existing order. In fact, it was the mission of his life to portray the life of American people in relation to contemporary conditions and he did succeed in presenting an indepth critical study of the contemporary society using satire and irony as the most powerful instrument of protest. In his own chosen field, he stands not only without an equal but without a rival. Anderson and other writers are left behind.

From Sinclair Lewis' life and from his autobiographical record, we are left in no doubt that he found in Europe and easthetic sensibility transubstantiated in to innumerable particulars of daily living, a culture, in short having a real presence', instinctively accepted in which America was deficient. His novels, however, are raised upon no such categorical antithesis. They moderate the antithesis and it is a necessary part of the moral conflicts they enunciate that it should be thus moderated. Lewis prophesied no realization of the American dream' – his view of human nature prohibited that – but detached from his country's affairs a new inconography of the endless contest between lawless enterprise and the laudable toils, as he finally presented it inauspicious, of holding together a tradition of civilized life. Lewis' fiction reminds us sharply that novels are not reality, are successful. As Dr. Johnson said of 'limitations' generally, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind'. These his novels incisively do. The realities they bring to mind are selective, but provide the basis for interpretation of his times of a balance and comprehensive ness not to be achieved simply by accumulating 'facts' in the

manner of the orthodox realists, who, indeed, were even more selective. Concrete, representational realism plays no part in his fiction, but more important is the realism which sees through the social paraphernalia to the moral diversity in the segment of American life he knew best. His predilection of the charm of the European synthesis of social poise, artistic accomplishment and public service, he was remarkably successful in evaluating within its own bounders a society whose intellectual energies and moral sensibilities – complex enough for any novelist – operated for the most part in law, commerce and petrifying observance of fashionable deportment. His novels are roman de moeurs of European extraction but dealing with American society and congnate with the work of his American predecessors in the novel, themselves in various ways indebted to European origins.

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