

# MAIN STREET

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SINCLAIR LEWIS

*With an Introduction and Notes  
by Brooke Allen*

GEORGE STADE  
CONSULTING EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



**BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS**  
NEW YORK

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## FROM THE PAGES OF MAIN STREET

This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves  
(page 2)

The days of pioneering, of lassies in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings, are  
deader now than Camelot; and a rebellious girl is the spirit of that bewildered empire called the  
American Middlewest. (page 3)

He lifted her, carried her into the house, and with her arms about his neck she forgot Main Street  
(page 56)

“Miss Sherwin’s trying to repair the holes in this barnacle-covered ship of a town by keeping bus-  
bailing out the water. And Pollock tries to repair it by reading poetry to the crew! Me, I want to yank  
up on the ways, and fire the poor bum of a shoemaker that built it so it sails crooked, and have  
rebuilt right, from the keel up.” (page 120)

“I went to a denominational college and learned that since dictating the Bible, and hiring a perfect  
race of ministers to explain it, God has never done much but creep around and try to catch  
disobeying it.” (page 161)

“We want a more conscious life. We’re tired of drudging and sleeping and dying. We’re tired of  
seeing just a few people able to be individualists. We’re tired of always deferring hope till the next  
generation. We’re tired of hearing the politicians and priests and cautious reformers (and their  
husbands!) coax us, ‘Be calm! Be patient! Wait! We have the plans for a Utopia already made; just  
give us a bit more time and we’ll produce it; trust us; we’re wiser than you’. For ten thousand years  
they’ve said that. We want our Utopia *now*—and we’re going to try our hands at it.” (page 207)

“I wonder if you can understand the ‘fun’ of making a beautiful thing, the pride and satisfaction of it  
and the holiness!” (page 230)

Aunt Bessie was a bridge over whom the older women, bearing gifts of counsel and the ignorance  
experience, poured into Carol’s island of reserve. (page 253)

The greatest mystery about a human being is not his reaction to sex or praise, but the manner in which

he contrives to put in twenty-four hours a day. It is this which puzzles the longshoreman about the clerk, the Londoner about the bushman. (page 270)

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“When I die the world will be annihilated, as far as I’m concerned.” (page 281)

There are two insults which no human being will endure: The assertion that he hasn’t a sense of humor, and the doubly impertinent assertion that he has never known trouble. (page 379)

“You must live up to the popular code if you believe in it; but if you don’t believe in it, then you *must* live up to it!” (pages 380-381)

“We’d get sick on too many cookies, but ever so much sicker on no cookies at all.” (page 430)

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FIRST PRINTING

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# SINCLAIR LEWIS

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born on February 7, 1885, in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, an immigrant farming village with a population of little more than a thousand. When he was six years old, his mother died and his father, a country doctor, remarried a year later. Lewis's early experiences living in a rural midwestern town would influence much of his writing; *Main Street's* Gopher Prairie, for example, modeled after Sauk Centre and features many of the community organizations in which his stepmother participated.

In 1903 Lewis moved east to attend Yale University, where he began contributing regularly to the *Yale Literary Magazine*. He became dissatisfied with college life, however, and dropped out in 1906 to work as a janitor in the utopian community Helicon Hall. Founded by Upton Sinclair, Helicon Hall was a mecca for progressive thinkers of the time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson. Lewis left after two months and spent the next few years working at odd jobs before returning to Yale to graduate in 1908.

Lewis traveled around the country for two years, and then settled in New York City's Greenwich Village, a center for avant-garde artists and writers. He worked in publishing during the day and spent his evenings writing short stories and novels. His first book, a boys' adventure story titled *Hike and the Aeroplane*, was published in 1912.

In 1914 Lewis married Grace Livingston Hegger and the couple moved to Port Washington, on Long Island. Lewis became editor and advertising manager at the George H. Doran Publishing Company. He continued to devote his evenings to writing fiction, and when the publication of a story in the *Saturday Evening Post* proved lucrative, Lewis quit his job to become a full-time novelist.

The 1920 publication of *Main Street* marked the beginning of Lewis's international acclaim as a satirical novelist. An instant best-seller, *Main Street* sold more than 250,000 copies by the end of its first year of publication. Lewis quickly followed this success with several other well-received novels—*Babbitt* (1922), about an unhappy businessman wanting more in his life; *Arrowsmith* (1925), about an idealistic doctor and researcher; and *Elmer Gantry* (1927), a send-up of an evangelical scam artist. In 1926 Lewis was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith*. He declined to accept the prize, stating that his novel did not meet the "wholesome" standards of the committee.

Lewis married the well-known journalist Dorothy Thompson in 1928, having divorced his first wife, Grace, earlier that year. He spent the next several years writing and traveling between the United States and Europe. In 1930 he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Lewis's reputation declined in succeeding years. After the publication of *The Prodigal Parents* (1938), he was never able to draw the wide readership of his earlier days. His marriage to Dorothy Thompson ended in divorce in 1942, and he spent the last years of his life in Europe, alone and suffering from alcoholism and ill health. On January 10, 1951, Harry Sinclair Lewis died of a heart attack in Rome at the age of sixty-five. He is buried in Minnesota.

# THE WORLD OF SINCLAIR LEWIS AND MAIN STREET

- 1885** Harry Sinclair Lewis is born on February 7 in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, to Dr. Edwin J. Lewis and Emma Kermott Lewis.
- 1891** His mother dies of tuberculosis. A year later his father marries Isabel Warner.
- 1902** Lewis enrolls at Oberlin Academy in Ohio.
- 1903-1906-** Lewis attends Yale University, where he contributes to the *Yale Literary Magazine*. He spends two summers working on cattle boats that sail between America and England.
- 1906** Lewis leaves Yale for a brief stay at Helicon Hall, a utopian community in Englewood, New Jersey, founded by the writer Upton Sinclair.
- 1908** He returns to Yale and graduates.
- 1908-1910** Lewis travels around the United States working as a freelance newspaper reporter. In 1910 he moves to New York City, where he lands a job working in a publishing house for \$15 a week.
- 1912** Lewis's first book, a boys' adventure story entitled *Hike and the Aeroplane*, is published under the pseudonym Tom Graham.
- 1914** Lewis marries Grace Livingston Hegger, an active philanthropist and editor at *Vogue*, and moves to Port Washington, New York. He works as an editor and advertising manager at the George H. Doran Publishing Company, and devotes his evenings to writing novels. His first adult novel, *Our Mr. Wrenn*, is published.
- 1915** *The Trail of the Hawk* is published. In late fall, Lewis receives a check for \$500 from the *Saturday Evening Post* for one of his stories. Finally able to make a living from freelance writing, Lewis resigns from the Doran Company to travel across the country with his wife.
- 1917** Lewis and Grace visit Sauk Centre several times over year, and Lewis begins gathering notes for *Main Street*. The United States declares war on Germany on April 2. Lewis's first son, Wells, is born. *The Job* and *The Innocents* are published.
- 1919** *Free Air* is published. Lewis's play *Hoboemia* is staged in New York City's Greenwich Village.
- 1920** The fall publication of *Main Street* establishes Lewis's reputation as a satirical novelist. The novel is his first commercial success and becomes a best-seller, with 250,000 copies sold by the year's end. Lewis is listed in *Who's Who in America*.
- 1921** In January, Lewis collaborates with Harvey O'Higgins and Harriet Ford on the dramatization of *Main Street*, which opens in October at the National Theatre (now the



- 1922** *Babbitt* is published, and the term “Babbittry” enters the language as a synonym for conformism and complacent commercialism. The Hollywood film version of *Free Air* is released.
- 1923** A silent film version of *Main Street* is released.
- 1925** *Arrowsmith*, which Lewis dedicates to the American novelist Edith Wharton, is published.
- 1926** *Mantrap* is published. Lewis is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith*, but declines it.
- 1927** *Elmer Gantry* is published. Lewis postpones a planned autobiographical book and sets sail for Europe.
- 1928** *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* is published. Lewis and Grace Hegger divorce. In England he marries Dorothy Thompson, the central European correspondent and bureau chief of the *New York Evening Post*. He moves to a 290-acre farm in Barnard, Vermont, spending the winters in New York and traveling intermittently to London, Berlin, Vienna, and Moscow.
- 1929** *Dodsworth* is published.
- 1930** Lewis becomes the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. His second son, Michael, is born in June.
- 1931** A film version of *Arrowsmith* is released.
- 1933** *Ann Vickers* is published, and a film version of the novel is released.
- 1934** *Work of Art* is published. Lewis collaborates with Sidney Howard on the theatrical version of *Dodsworth*, which receives critical acclaim when it premieres. A film version of *Babbitt* is released.
- 1935** *It Can't Happen Here* and *Selected Short Stories* are published.
- 1936** A Hollywood film version of *Dodsworth*, for which Lewis receives writing credit, is released.
- 1936-1942** Lewis writes several plays and acts in a few of them.
- 1938** *The Prodigal Parents* is published.
- 1940** *Bethel Merriday* is published.
- 1941** Japanese warplanes attack Pearl Harbor on December 7. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declares war on Japan the following day.
- 1942** Lewis divorces Dorothy Thompson. He begins to spend most of his time in Europe.

**1943** *Gideon Planish* is published.

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**1944** Lewis's son Wells, a lieutenant in World War II, is killed by a sniper in the Piedmont Valley of France.

**1945** World War II ends. *Cass Timberlane* is published.

**1947** *Kingsblood Royal* is published. A film version of *Cass Timberlane*, starring Spencer Tracy and Lana Turner, is released.

**1949** *The God-seeker* is published.

**1951** On January 10 Lewis dies in Rome of heart disease. *World So Wide* is published posthumously.

**1960** The Hollywood film version of *Elmer Gantry*, starring Burt Lancaster in the title role, is released.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Main Street* is one of those very rare novels that, with the force of its impact on the population, becomes a national event rather than just a literary one. In its day, everyone read *Main Street*; within months of its publication in 1920 the very title had become a by-word for provincialism and narrow-mindedness. Its obscure author quickly became one of the most famous writers in the world, a notorious scourge of polite convention and accepted pieties. As the critic and poet Malcolm Cowley later commented,

Our normal book-buying public consists, perhaps, of two or three hundred thousand people. When a novel passes the latter figure, it is being purchased by families in the remoter villages and families which acquire no more than ten books in a generation. In the year 1921, if you visited the parlor of almost any boarding house, you would see a copy of "Main Street" standing between the Bible and "Ben-Hur" (*Brentano's. "Book Chat,"* May/June 1927, p. 26).

Defying the conventional wisdom that novels about small towns sell poorly, *Main Street* soared to the top of the best-seller lists and stayed there. Only a few months after its publication, sales had reached 100,000, and they continued at a high rate. It became the best-selling American novel for the entire 1900 to 1925 period, and probably the most influential as well. As the novelist and critic Ludwig Lewisohn commented, "perhaps no novel since 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' had struck so deep over so wide a surface of the national life" (*Expression in America*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1932).

One of the reasons *Main Street* made such an immediate impression was that it spoke for so many people. In 1920 the majority of native-born adult Americans had grown up in small towns or rural areas, despite the demographic shift to cities that was beginning to take place. Most of the novel's readers had intimate knowledge of their own particular Main Street, which was usually not so very different from Gopher Prairie's; as Sinclair Lewis writes in the novel, Gopher Prairie is not only its distinct self, but "ten thousand towns from Albany to San Diego" (p. 37). *Main Street* told the literary truth about many thousands of American lives, and readers recognized themselves and their world. "Some hundreds of thousands read the book," Lewis later commented, "with the same masochistic pleasure that one has in sucking an aching tooth" (autobiographical sketch for the Nobel Committee; see "For Further Reading"). "I lived every page of *Main Street* for fifteen years," one female reader wrote, with feeling (quoted in Hutchisson, *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis, 1920-1930*, p. 44; see "For Further Reading").

It was an intensely liberating document that toppled a number of dearly held American myths: that in the midwestern United States, and there only, is to be found God's Country; that "broad plains necessarily make broad minds, and high mountains make high purpose" (p. 350); that the American small town had achieved a level of perfect and simple democracy unknown to older and more effete societies; that institutions such as "Polite Society, the Family, the Church, Sound Business, the Party, the Country, the Superior White Race" (p. 437) are recipes for general happiness rather than tyrannical enforcers of arbitrary norms. *Main Street* lanced the bubble of self-satisfaction that had formed around provincial American culture, and cast mockery and doubt on Middle America's creed formulated at the opening of the novel:

*Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters ... whatsoever Ezra does*

not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.

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Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark's annual hardware turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God's Country.

Sinclair Lewis could not have written of Gopher Prairie with such a potent combination of love, hate, affection, and contempt had he not been a product of it himself. A native of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, a prairie town that had a population of some 1,200 at the time of his birth in 1885, Lewis knew his subject intimately—too intimately, perhaps; it was not until he revisited his hometown with his bride, a city girl like *Main Street's* Carol Kennicott, and saw it, as though for the first time through her alien and feminine eyes, that he was able to move ahead with the vague idea for a novel about small-town life that had been haunting his imagination for years.

As early as 1905, when he was still a college student at Yale, the germ of what was to become *Main Street* was born in him during a series of conversations with Charles Dorion, a dreamy, bookish lawyer who was dissatisfied with life in Sauk Centre but too passive to move on. In his diary Lewis recorded their talks, dubbing Dorion's disaffection "the village virus." "I shall have to write a book of how it getteth into the veins of good men & true. 'God made the country & man made the town—but the devil made the village.' Where in the city one would see a friend or go to the theatre, in Sauk Centre there is nothing to do save drink or play poker (for those who do not read much)" (quoted in Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*, p. 24). Later Lewis claimed that at that time he had written 20,000 words of a novel he called "The Village Virus," but no trace of this aborted work remains.

But the idea for *Main Street* continued to percolate over the course of the next decade, during which time he published three novels, a boys' adventure story, and a good many short stories. Then, after several years in New York as a Greenwich Village bohemian, Lewis went to visit Sauk Centre with his new wife, Gracie. He noticed Gracie's reactions to things he had always taken for granted: as, for example, when she attended a meeting of the Gradatim Club (which would become the Thanatopsis Club in *Main Street*), and they discussed their literary agenda for the following year, deciding to devote their entire course of study to the Bible.

The visit almost magically refocused his thoughts, and he suddenly knew how the novel must evolve. The Charles Dorion character, whom he had named Guy Pollock, retreated into the background and the novel's central intelligence became a woman, based in large part on Gracie: the fastidious, artistic Carol Kennicott, full of real dreams and ambitions, and just as full of silly affectations and vanities—a perfect foil for ugly, utilitarian Gopher Prairie.

In much the same way that Jane Austen, in *Northanger Abbey*, used the heroine's romantic expectations to emphasize the banality of her actual experiences, Lewis used Carol's fantasies of village life, fed by literature, to underline the crudity of the genuine article. Just arrived in her new home, for instance, she goes to the bedroom window,

with a purely literary thought of village charm—hollyhocks and lanes and apple-cheeked cottagers. What she saw was the side of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church—a plain clapboard wall of a sour liver color; the ash-pile back of the church; an unpainted stable; and an alley in which a Ford delivery-wagon had been stranded (p. 34).

It is easy to make fun of Carol's overheated imagination, but we can never really do that, for we can realize that the ugliness she perceives everywhere in Gopher Prairie is not incidental but spiritual. In the entire town there are "not a dozen buildings which suggested that, in the fifty years of Gopher

Prairie's existence, the citizens had realized that it was either desirable or possible to make this, the common home, amusing or attractive" (p. 40).

Likewise, when Carol founds a theater group in Gopher Prairie she is inspired by heady visions of Yeats, the sparkling wit of Shaw, and the Abbey Theatre and the scenic artistry of the great Gordon Craig; but the best that she and the town are able to come up with is a lowbrow farce called *The Girl from Kankakee*, which even she, after the event, must admit turned out to be "a bad play abominably acted" (p. 233). Again and again Carol's hopes are shattered, and while we are often amused by her aspirations, we are never really unsympathetic to them, however ridiculous they might be. At least she tries for something better; at least she refuses to be content with utility and mediocrity.

Harry Sinclair Lewis, midwestern America's rebellious but not unaffectionate son, was born in Sauk Centre on February 7, 1885, the third child of Dr. Edwin J. Lewis. Dr. E. J., as he was known, was transparently the model for Dr. Will Kennicott of *Main Street*. Like Will, he was solid, hardworking, utterly respectable, and uncommunicative, but with a humorous, sardonic streak. Like Will, he could be seen in a rather heroic light: making country calls four or five times a week, driving far into the frozen countryside in a sleigh, and performing surgery by candlelight on kitchen tables.

Lewis's mother died of tuberculosis when he was six, and a year later Dr. E. J. married Isabella Warner, a kind, motherly woman who soon became a pillar of the community, taking a leading role in the Gradatim Club, the Monday Musical Club, and the Order of the Eastern Star. Like Carol, she was interested in the welfare of the Scandinavian farmers in the surrounding countryside, and established a rest room in Sauk Centre where farm wives and children could be comfortable while their husbands drank or did business in town.

Young Harry did not appear to be marked for success. His father reportedly informed his older brothers that they might have to look out for him: "You boys will always be able to make a living," he told them. "But poor Harry, there's nothing he can do" (quoted in Lingeman, p. 7). This change came when, as a teenager, Harry became fired with a driving ambition to attend Harvard.

He was sent for a pre-college year to Oberlin Academy in Ohio, then a religiously oriented school where, for the first and last time in his life, he took a serious interest in Christianity and decided he wanted to become a missionary. Furious, Dr. E. J. laid down the law: Missionary work was out, and so was the relatively freewheeling Harvard. "You must prepare for Yale or go to No college," he stormed (quoted in Lingeman, p. 17).

Lewis toed the line, not without some relief, as his zeal was already waning; he would quickly develop into what he was to remain for the rest of his life, a confirmed atheist with a deep dislike for fundamentalist Christianity. Asked, in the 1940s, whether a lack of religious belief did not make for an unhappy life, he objected heatedly to the idea.

If I go to a play I do not enjoy it less because I do not believe that it is divinely created and divinely conducted, that it will last forever instead of stopping at eleven, that many details of it will remain in my memory after a few months, or that it will have any particular moral effect upon me. And I enjoy life as I enjoy that play (Lewis, *The Man from Main Street*, p. 42).

He was not by any definition a success at Yale. Loud, overenthusiastic, extremely provincial and unsophisticated, he was also physically unprepossessing, with his tall, gangling frame, red hair, and acne. Added to these disadvantages was the fact that he was poor, at least in comparison with most of the other Yale boys.

Lewis made a little extra money by taking a night job on the *New Haven Journal Courier* as a rewrite man. This job, instead of being a hardship, opened new worlds to him, for it allowed him to attend plays on a press pass. His discovery of the theater, and most particularly of George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen, who would become his prophets and heroes, changed his life. These two playwrights were revolutionary in their refusal to passively accept the status quo. They examined all the monolithic institutions of society—Marriage, the Family, Business, the Church, the State—and found them not only inadequate but arbitrary in their exercise of power. Things need not be as they were; anything could be questioned, changed, rejected.

This doubting, reforming mode was one religion Lewis could adhere to wholeheartedly, and it would dominate his career. All of his great novels—*Main Street*, *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927)—would question his society's most basic values and assert that a better world was not only necessary but possible.

Lewis dropped out of Yale in 1906 and went to work with his friend Allan Updegraff at Upton Sinclair's utopian community, Helicon Hall. They soon found that Helicon Hall, like so many utopias, was a hotbed of petty feuds and jealousies, and they left after a very short stay. Lewis then took a series of short-term jobs, and returned to Yale to graduate in 1908.

After graduation, Lewis set out to be a newspaperman, an obvious career move for him. The lightning pace of the newsroom was not congenial to him, however, for he wrote best when he had the leisure to think, rewrite, and revise; he lost jobs in rapid succession. During this time, Lewis was beginning to write fiction and to see that as his vocation. Finally, later that year, he moved to New York, the nation's intellectual and artistic capital.

He took an apartment in Greenwich Village and eagerly participated in the "Little Renaissance" that was in full swing there, soaking up modern art and literature, as well as new ideas like Freudianism (which he instinctively rejected), and becoming a socialist. Lewis's socialism was of the gradualist, Fabian variety: He followed Shaw and H. G. Wells rather than the revolutionary Marxists, and he found *Das Kapital* "dreadful," worse even than the Bible. Lewis's political views would change very little over the years. His fundamental creed, voiced succinctly in his 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, was the classic liberal view that "everything that is worth while in the world has been accomplished by the free, inquiring, critical spirit and that the preservation of this spirit is more important than any social system whatsoever."

Lewis published a boys' adventure novel and, shortly afterward, his first novel for adults, *Our Mr. Wrenn*, very much under the influence of his idol H. G. Wells, a socialist and a realist who, like Lewis, combined social passion with a powerful sense of humor. At the same period—in 1912—he met his future wife, Grace Livingston Hegger, a pretty and elegant beauty editor at *Vogue*. Gracie's family had slipped down into the middle class, but she tried hard to maintain the Park Avenue lifestyle and demeanor of their earlier prosperity. She spoke with an English accent, although she had spent her entire life in America: It was hers, she claimed, by inheritance, since her parents were English. She renamed her fiancé "Hal"; Harry and Red, his usual nicknames, she found too plebeian, Sinclair too formal.

Many of Lewis's friends found Gracie unspeakably pretentious and an embarrassing social climber, and wondered why Lewis was so deeply in thrall to her; H. L. Mencken, for instance, wrote that Lewis's "inferiority complex made it simply impossible for him to stand up to her. He lived in wonder that so ravishing and brilliant a female had ever condescended to marry him" (quoted in Lingeman,

209). It is true that the two proved, in the end, incompatible; Lewis's inability to settle down in one place and, eventually, to stop drinking made life almost impossible for her, and Gracie's snobberies and prejudices soured Lewis. But their relationship was a close one for years, and Gracie contributed a great deal to Lewis's life and work, not least as the model for Carol Kennicott. Most important perhaps, she shared his very real hatred for narrow-mindedness and intolerance, a hatred that was one of the driving forces of his life, and she supported him intellectually and emotionally to the best of her abilities.

Lewis was making progress in his fiction. His short stories were selling well, and when he was taken on as a regular contributor to the *Saturday Evening Post* he felt justified in quitting his job at publishing to become a full-time writer. His next two novels, *The Trail of the Hawk* (1915) and *The Job* (1917), were enthusiastically received, with critics laying bets that here, in embryo, was a major writer.

He was beginning to move in a more satirical direction, taking aim at some of the baneful aspects of contemporary life that would preoccupy him throughout his career: the cutthroat worlds of business and advertising, the business of evangelism, the American obsession with pseudo-religions like New Thought and theosophy. Lewis's disgust for the low tactics of business and the American tendency to apotheosize its ethics would come to full maturity in *Babbitt*, but was already bearing fruit in a series of short stories about a "bunk" advertising man, Lancelot Todd, and his series of imaginative scansions on the public. Fastidious *litterateurs* criticized what they considered the stories' vulgar style, but Lewis, to his credit, remained unconvinced that vulgarity was such a very undesirable quality. He was, as it turned out, creating a new way of dealing with language in literature, formulating a strongly stylized version of the American vernacular that would resonate in his readers' ears. Lewis's characters, like many characters in fiction, are what they speak. The high ideals of the young research physician Martin Arrowsmith struggle to break free from his limited, provincial vocabulary; the ethereal, Keatsian beauty of *Main Street*'s Erik Valborg is negated when he comes out with his characteristic "Yumps" and "You bets."

When America entered World War I in 1917, Lewis found his voice momentarily stilled. He was disgusted with the general outpouring of anti-German venom and disturbed by the effective limits that were put on free speech, or indeed anything that could be construed as the least bit anti-American. In 1918 one of Lewis's heroes, the labor leader Eugene Debs, was imprisoned merely for expressing his opinion that the United States ought to have stayed out of the war. Lewis waited; three years later, in *Main Street*, he would reveal his own feelings about the surge of wartime jingoism.

The postwar mood was more cynical, more willing to question American motivations and values—more in tune with Lewis's own personality and beliefs. *Main Street* was published at what was probably the perfect moment, with more and more people, not just artists and intellectuals but ordinary Americans, coming to share his doubts. Its success was not only attributable to his particular genius, but was a sign that America was ready to swallow his bitter medicine.

As an international celebrity in the 1920s, Lewis continued the peripatetic habits of his youth, dragging Gracie and their young son, Wells, around Europe—which Gracie enjoyed—and through various points west of New York, which she often did not. In France they were snubbed by their fellow expatriates the Hemingway-Stein crowd, who scorned their provincialism. In England they were intimidated by the Bloomsbury set; but they made an impression, of a sort, on other literary celebrities there. The brilliant critic and novelist Rebecca West found that after a few hours in Lewis's company

she “ceased to look upon him as a human being. I could think of him only as a great natural force, like the aurora borealis” (quoted in Lingeman, p. 229). The English writer Arnold Bennett, who like Lewis in spite of his brash, manic demeanor, provides a memorable portrait:

Lewis has a habit of breaking into a discussion with long pieces of imaginary conversation between imaginary or real people of the place and period of the discussion. Goodish, but too long, with accents, manner and all complete. He will do this in any discussion; he will drag in performance, usually full of oaths and blasphemy (quoted in Lingeman, p. 239).

To Europeans and Europeanized Americans Lewis might have seemed crude, but the strength of his voice and his vision were undeniable. *Babbitt*, whose eponymous hero was an unimaginative businessman who feels, vaguely and inarticulately, that there must be more to life, was published in 1922 and made nearly as strong an impression as *Main Street* had. H. L. Mencken had been urging him for some time to take on “the American city—not New York or Chicago but the cities of 200,000 to 500,000—the Baltimores and Omahas and Buffaloes and Birminghams.” Lewis assured him that *Babbitt*’s imaginary town of Zenith he had created the real thing. “All our friends are in it,” he told Mencken—“the Rotary Club, the popular preacher, the Chamber of Commerce, the new bungalow, the bunch of business jolliers lunching at the Athletic Club. It ought to be at least 2000% American, as well as forward-looking, right-thinking, optimistic, selling the idea of success, and go-getterish” (quoted in Lingeman, p. 173).

*Babbitt* was brilliant satire, but unlike *Main Street*, it was more satire than novel. George Follansbee Babbitt achieves pathos but not tragedy, and Lewis’s efforts to give him a soul were not entirely successful. This lack might have contributed to his decision to make his next novel, *Arrowsmith*, significantly less satirical than his two previous ones—a “straight” novel, in fact. *Arrowsmith*, the story of an idealistic doctor and medical researcher, is a powerful and emotional novel, and although it is very funny in places—Lewis did not find it easy to suppress his humor—it is essentially a serious piece of work about the assertion of personal beliefs in the face of social and financial temptations.

*Arrowsmith* was named the winner of the 1926 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, but Lewis, true to his convictions about his country and his role within it, refused the honor, explaining his decision to the Committee thus: *Elmer Gantry*, Lewis’s next novel, took on a subject he had long wanted to tackle—evangelism. Elmer Gantry is a bunk preacher just as Lancelot Todd was a bunk ad man. Lewis, who had been given a tremendous amount of help in researching *Arrowsmith* by a doctor, Paul de Kruijff, realized he needed the same sort of insider knowledge for *Gantry*, so he set up shop in Kansas City and started reaching out to men of the cloth of every type, entertaining them—which meant questioning them, heckling them, challenging them—at weekly lunches that came to be known as “Sinclair Lewis’s Sunday School classes.” Paradoxically he became very fond of these drinking, fornicating, doubting, and all-too-human ministers whom he was so soon to lampoon in his novel. As his publisher Alfred Harcourt said of Lewis, he hated bunk but it was never individuals he hated, only their bunk performances.

[The] terms are that the prize shall be given “for the American novel published during the year which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood.” This phrase, if it means anything whatever, would appear to mean that the appraisal of the novels shall be made not according to their actual literary merit but in obedience to whatever code of Good Form may chance to be popular at the moment (quoted in Lingeman, p. 279).



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