Sinclair Lewis and American Society of the 1920s

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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IV. The Search for Truth in the 1920s
Flappers, speakeasies, and bathtub gin—all are popularly associated with the Roaring Twenties or, as F. Scott Fitzgerald dubbed the era, the Jazz Age. But just how accurate are these labels? From approximately 1917 to 1929, American life underwent a variety of changes. Traditionally, historians believe that, as a reaction to these changes, the Twenties was a period of disenchantment and rebellion. This somewhat constrained rebellion, however, was limited mainly to the intellectuals while most common men retained a more traditional point of view, especially in politics and social attitudes.¹

World War I had destroyed the optimism of the Progressive movement, the idea that life could be improved through legislation and social programs.² When international rivalries intensified, nations had not compromised to resolve their differences. Instead, they had reverted to the age-old alternative of war. Americans, as a result, had contended with conscription, meatless days, the war economy, the League controversy, and the Red scare.³ By the election of 1920, the nation was weary of Wilson's idealistic programs and turned to Warren G. Harding, the Republican advocate of "normalcy."

This "normalcy" expanded into Republican control during the entire decade of the Twenties. After Harding's death, two other Republicans followed him into the President's office, and
these men also reflected the conservative trends of the times. Calvin Coolidge was a "frugal, farm-oriented Puritan" who performed his duties by doing as little as possible; yet, he lent respectability to the office after the Harding scandals. Herbert Hoover epitomized the self-made man who championed rugged individualism and free enterprise. Government, they believed, owed the people liberty, justice, and equal opportunity; competition would take care of the rest. In their minds, material success was equated with progress.

The reputation of business and the businessman soared during the Twenties. What was the finest game in town? The soundest science? The truest art? The fullest education? The fairest opportunity? The cleanest philanthropy? The sanest religion? According to Kowry, the answer was business. Evidently Calvin Coolidge agreed because in one of his most-quoted statements he remarked that the "business of America is business."

Devotion to laissez-faire economics along with faith in mass production and mass consumption permeated both government and business. However, the government did sometimes intervene—that is, intervene on behalf of large corporations. Mergers allowed large corporations to dominate American industry, transportation, and finance. This led to the disappearance of small businessmen who were often forced out of business by the competitive prices of larger organizations. Government
also assisted and encouraged business by raising tariffs, searching for markets and raw materials, minimizing regulatory activity, reducing taxes, and subsidizing the merchant marine and aviation groups.9

With the advantage of hindsight, though, the Republican ideals of government cooperation with business during the Twenties appear only superficially effective. Nevertheless, during the 1920s businessmen were esteemed as never before, and the following rules demonstrate the businessman's code:

1. The biggest thing about a big success is the price.
2. Great men are silent about themselves.
3. The best way to keep customers is to make friends.
4. The only way to unite the laborer and the capitalist is community experience.
5. Every business needs a woman counselor. (The issue here is marketing advice, not women's rights.)
6. The greatest new field for professional men is corporate work.
7. The pleasure of money is not having it or spending it. The pleasure lies in obtaining it.
8. A family heritage of wealth alone is the worst kind. (One should leave children a business as well as capital.)
9. Age is nothing to a live man.
10. The most powerful preacher is, or can be, the lay preacher.
11. Charity must be cleansed of poverty and sentimentality. 10
12. Industry will be the savior of the community.

Thanks to improved communications and increased advertising, businessmen, with the use of consumer credit, were striving to induce rural areas to adopt urban life styles. Labor-saving devices freed the middle class from many hours of drudgery; consequently, they then searched for ways to occupy their new-found leisure hours. Automobiles helped eliminate isolation
and provincialism, as did radios and movies. Tennis and golf became popular sports, but it was professional baseball that captured the hearts of millions. In fact, much of America looked to professional athletes such as Babe Ruth for heroes.\textsuperscript{11}

The Twenties also improved the status of women somewhat. In 1920, they gained the vote, and throughout the decade they continued to gain entry into professions such as medicine, law, and teaching. Also, irons, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and other helpful household items in addition to some birth control information allowed women to escape from the housewife stereotype and take a feeble, but real, step towards independence.\textsuperscript{12}

Urbanization, too, continued throughout the Twenties. For the first time ever, fewer than fifty percent of Americans lived in rural areas.\textsuperscript{13} Naturally, life styles, social customs, clothing trends, among other things, shifted, causing city life to be steeped in an aura of mystery and excitement; therefore, many people fled to the cities in order to enhance their opportunity for a more enjoyable life style.

There was, however, another reaction. The intellectual adjustment of some people simply could not keep pace with the changing times. As a result, rural and middle-class Americans fought against the swift decline of nineteenth-century values. In an attempt to restore the "good old days," they fostered an intolerance of anything not seemingly one hundred percent American.\textsuperscript{14}
The Ku Klux Klan (whose creed praised patriots, whites, and Protestants) arose again in the Twenties with Catholics as its main target. Surprisingly enough, its greatest strength lay not in the South but in the Midwest where Klansmen carried on campaigns against blacks, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. By 1925-26, though, the Klan's power had declined. David Stephenson of Indiana was imprisoned, and when influential Klansmen failed to pardon him, Stephenson in revenge implicated other prominent members.\(^{15}\)

Immigration Acts of this era also demonstrated a level of intolerance. The 1917 act contained a literacy requirement for immigrants.\(^{16}\) In 1921 following the Emergency Immigration Act of that year, only 357,000 people from outside the Western hemisphere were admitted. The 1924 law discriminated in favor of those of Western European descent and against those from Southern or Eastern Europe, and by 1929 only 150,000 newcomers were allowed per year.\(^{17}\)

Other examples of the attempts to preserve the values of an older America during the Twenties were the Sacco-Vanzetti case (1920-1927), the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee (1925), and the Presidential election of 1928 in which a Catholic, Al Smith, ran as the Democratic candidate.\(^{18}\) The two major issues of the 1928 campaign, in fact, were prohibition and the Catholic menace, not the competency of the candidates or the impending financial disaster.\(^{19}\)
An area of conflict between urban sophistication and rural or middle-class virtue concerned Prohibition. The Volstead Act which took effect on January 17, 1920, outlawed the sale of alcoholic beverages. This effort to legislate morality did not succeed in prohibiting drinking in the United States. Rather, it gave organized crime an opportunity to expand its sphere of power. Bootleggers, speakeasies, and rum-runners became familiar terms to many citizens. 20

Opinions, definitely divided over this issue, were hotly debated. The "dry" group was comprised mostly of small-town and rural people of middle-class status who equated liquor with crime, immigrants, and the immorality of cities. 21 Ironically, their attempt to alleviate a problem, namely drinking, created more controversy than before. The "wet" coalition, on the other hand, consisted mainly of immigrants and urban dwellers who were freer and more tolerant in mixing religious beliefs with secular life. 22

Religion also suffered some traumas during the Twenties. Hoffman claims the decade's most significant contribution was its interest in science. 23 But scientific inquisitiveness generated tension in the religious world. The influence of psychology (Freud, James, Watson) and the theory of evolution in addition to increasing urbanization and technology triggered a return to fundamentalist religious beliefs for some and a relaxation of old mores for others. Einstein's theory of
relativity created doubt and uncertainty, too. With relativity accepted as truth, old absolutes were fast collapsing. The Scopes trial further questioned the infallibility of the Bible.

Intellectuals offered alternatives, namely a "re-emphasis of traditional dogma and ritual," "an easy way to God or heaven," and "an elegance lacking in the spare Protestant religion." Many rural and middle-class believers, however, embraced the Bible as an absolute in the midst of changing ethics. Revivalists such as Billy Sunday who vigorously berated jazz, bootlegging, evolution, and the new morality attracted a number of people. Aimee Semple McPherson, too, drew quite a crowd of followers with her "religious vaudeville act" of the Four-Square Gospel (savior, baptism, healing, and the second coming).

The aforementioned ideas constitute only a few of the forces of change during the Twenties. The society was too complex to list neatly herein a comprehensive analysis. But, these changes, among others, caused Americans to take long, searching looks into their past, their present, and their possible futures. As a result, the Twenties produced a dichotomy between dissatisfied intellectuals and complacent common folks. This may be further explored by examining Sinclair Lewis and his peers as well as by analyzing Lewis's characters who embody the spirit of the Twenties so well.
Conflicting interpretations exist about the intellectual reaction to the Twenties. According to Thomas Nash, author of *The Nervous Generation*, the Twenties have traditionally been "portrayed as a time of profound cynicism and disillusionment on the part of American intellectuals, a time when 'the highbrows' recoiling from the mindless materialism and uncultured babbity of American life turned against the United States and everything it stood for."\(^{27}\)

Artists rebelled against the "lack of direction and grace and distinction that made American life difficult or impossible for a sensitive artist."\(^{28}\) Ideals which had been respected earlier were condemned as illusory and artificial. Consequently, some of these intellectuals willingly experimented with any new ideas about the nature of man, his personal beliefs, convictions, or way to salvation.\(^{29}\) Other societies, these intellectuals realized, had honored the priest, the knight, the artist. America, it seemed, worshipped the merchants and realtors instead, especially during the Twenties.\(^{30}\) Furthermore, the deception and hypocrisy purported by these businessmen, coupled with new advertising gimmicks, appeared dangerous and disgusting to the "highbrows." Hence, writers churned out work full of "criticism, cavil, and denunciation."\(^{31}\)

Nash disagrees with this traditional interpretation, though, and contends that intellectuals were not really disillusioned with America, just with the war.\(^{32}\) The generation
that came of age in the Twenties was not lost, only nervous, and he defines this nervousness as a "general condition of anxiety in the Twenties which was reflected in thought as well as behavior."

Perhaps the rebellious intellectuals theme has been overdone. True, they protested and criticized American shallowness, hypocrisy, and materialism; yet, they offered no solution, no alternative, to improve the society they renounced. No real revolution occurred because their writing did not change the status quo. Finding this hard to accept, some built their own little societies while ignoring the masses as best they could. Others simply fled to Europe.

The common denominator in both groups, though, was a homesickness for the certainties of childhood.

If a social revolution did not arise as a result of the intellectuals' endeavors, at least a new movement in literature did indeed develop during the Twenties. Psychological, not economic, naturalism was resurrected, especially in Sherwood Anderson's works. Moreover, social criticism appeared in such works as Sinclair Lewis's Main Street and Babbitt. Other notable social critics were Zona Gale, H. L. Mencken, Robinson Jeffers, Joseph Hergesheimer, John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, Thomas Wolfe, and John Steinbeck. This new realism was concerned with the "sights and sounds of common life." Reproducing and participating in the average experience was
important to these writers, or, as Kazin states, novels were not written to be "revelations of life" but to be "brilliant equivalents of it." 39

"Brilliant equivalents" were produced by Ernest Hemingway during the Twenties. An expatriate himself, Hemingway created characters who were usually "lost." Violence, pain, death, war wounds, child-like men, and shallow women are common themes running through his short stories and novels. The Hemingway hero is a man's man. Although he may exist in an existentialist world, there is a code by which he can live. He can choose his reactions. Fate, over which man has no control, may hurl him into any variety of situations. However, he controls his responses (hopefully with grace under pressure) just as Lady Brett Ashley, one of Hemingway's more admirable females, does in The Sun Also Rises. When faced with a crisis, she simply decides not to be a "bitch." 40

F. Scott Fitzgerald, another self-imposed exile, was concerned with life during the Twenties, too, but he never reached his full potential or the status of a Hemingway or a Faulkner. Yet he captured the spirit of decadence and frivolity of the Roaring Twenties perhaps better than anyone else. Fitzgerald's themes center around ungratified ambition which consumes men, wealth which in the end makes no difference, and passion which obscures truly lasting love. 41 He depicts the emptiness of the rich who played and played and played but
who, after all was said and done, had nothing to show for it except, like Daisy, they could sighingly remark, "'Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!""42

Sinclair Lewis, on the other hand, was not truly a lost generation writer. He was older than most of them yet yearned to belong.43 He, too, protested against materialism and the intellectual squalor of the masses, the herd, the "boobus Americanus" of Mencken.44 He employed satire, biting satire, to criticize and to ridicule a people or a class but not to repudiate them. "Hating is no more his forte than loving, liking, or approving," according to Carl Van Doren.45 It appears Lewis constantly struggled between cynicism and idealism when creating common men and their plight and their reactions to their plight.

If one were to list great literary figures of the Twenties, one would have to agree with Morison's list of Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, O'Neill, Dos Passos, Wolfe, and Steinbeck.46 Even Schorer, Lewis's own biographer, admits Lewis's inadequacies as a writer. Without his influence, however, American literature would not be the same. He perceived and imitated so well that he caught an essential slice of American life, even if at times his viewpoint was biased—thus, the explanation, in part, for his winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930.47

Although not respected by posterity as one of the greatest writers of his era, he was quite popular in his time. Ironically, the very people whom he satirized kept him financially secure.48
His name often accompanied Edgar Rice Burroughs, Gene Stratton-Porter, Zane Grey, and Harold Bell Wright on the 1920s best-seller lists while Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Mencken never appeared. 49

In the final analysis, literature is important to history, not necessarily as a social document, but as a "culmination, a genuine means of realizing the major issues of the times." 50 These issues must be truly depicted, too. If they are not, Sinclair Lewis believed literature degenerates into mere entertainment, especially if false glorification is the major demand on literature. 51 DeVoto agrees. 52

DeVoto does not, however, believe the literature of the Twenties constitutes a golden age of letters. In his opinion, it lacks absolute truths and final judgements, again the idea that authors of the Twenties proposed no solution. 53 But are absolute truths and final judgements necessary criteria for good literature? How do men who cannot discern answers for themselves possibly give advice to the public? If writers accurately capture the torment and confusion, cannot this be hailed as a success? Are didactic intentions really imperative? Accordingly, Lewis attacked DeVoto's The Literary Fallacy for its generalizations, superficiality, and irresponsibilities. 54

Perhaps Sinclair Lewis did not provide a plan for society's renovation; however, through his characters he effectively portrayed the village virus and babbitry of America. Therein
lies his success which really started in 1920 with the publication of Main Street. Other novels he produced during the Twenties include Babbitt (1922), Arrowsmith (1925), Elmer Gantry (1927), Dodsworth (1929), The Man Who Knew Coolidge (1928), and Mantrap (1926). The last two are poor, but the others are worth examining.

Woodrow Wilson once stated that the "history of a nation is only the history of its villages written large." Lewis, appropriately, really began with a village story Main Street, and it developed into the "most sensational event in the twentieth-century publishing history." Lewis had picked the right place about which to write at the opportune moment. By 1920 the village's importance in the American economy had declined from previous years. Also, people recognized themselves in the often futile, sometimes encouraging struggles of Lewis's characters.

On the whole, though, Lewis defied the traditional view of the village as truly the best of all possible worlds. Instead, he imposed a Panglossian slur upon it. Consequently, a furor arose. Nash's nervousness also applied to the average American who resembled Lewis's characters. Old ideas and values became attractive to the rural and middle-class citizens as a remedy for this very nervousness. Lewis's satire was resented by those traditional Americans while most intellectuals cheered his efforts. Controversy, however, sold books.
Lewis employed a puritanic moral code and an empty commercial drive as the principal motifs of the middle class in his novels. The middle class, it seems, had developed an arrogance which irritated many other people. This newly-arrived bourgeoisie assumed that economic success automatically entailed cultural privileges and moral immunity from criticism. So just who did this Sinclair Lewis think he was? Actually, though, the middle class of the Twenties adhered to standardization—that is, standardization of thought, ownership, and belief. This may have resulted from a frustrated pride on their part. Most middle-class citizens experienced only a narrow field of culture and lacked the opportunity to further their education.

So when *Main Street* appeared on the market, Mencken hailed it as the opening of a new decade of literary revolt. Every accepted value—religious fundamentalism, industrial capitalism, educational and scientific and artistic commercialism, and public reactionism, to name a few—was challenged. *Main Street* implied that life in small towns during the first quarter of the twentieth century was basically dull, shallow, and frustrating. It is the institutions, however, such as polite society, the family, the church, parties, government, and business which are usually attacked by Lewis, not the people. Although Lewis's satire outweighs his idealism in *Main Street*, there does exist a glimmer of hope.
Main Street is really Carol Kennicott's story, told from the vantage point of a young, idealistic, citified college coed who willingly chooses to begin a new life in the small town of Gopher Prairie. Her husband, Dr. Will Kennicott, is also idealistic in his desire to serve the people of Gopher Prairie, but he possesses a streak of realism foreign to Carol's nature. They both embrace a mission, a secular mission common to the Twenties in that they desire to give service to man, not to God. Will only wants to cure their bodies. If people possess physical health, he believes they can attain spiritual and cultural well-being through their own efforts. His wife, however, disagrees. Her mission entails bringing culture into the rustic and stark prairie town that is now her home.

Thus, the conflict develops. Just what right does Carol possess to attempt to alter the lives of smugly satisfied small-town folks? If she had succeeded, would the people truly have been edified or would they have become merely as dissatisfied as she? On the other hand, how dare the citizens of Gopher Prairie ignore the world and all its wondrous offerings. There arises a definite conflict between free intelligence and meaningless conventions of the village which stifles creativity.

Literary critics differ in their opinions of Carol Kennicott. Kazin chides her for being a little "silly with her passion for uplift." DeVoto mocks her adolescent ideals. Mark Schorer is even more critical, though, he believes Carol
failed because she is shallow and superficial. In 1920, Lewis would have argued vigorously against this thesis. In 1930, however, he tended to agree. Today, Carol's feeble attempts do appear even more ridiculous and adolescent, but this cannot erase the fact that she tried. Perhaps she is not an artistic genius. Perhaps she is barely superior to the village in her talents. Still, she experiences discontent—a discontent that signifies aspiration, not effete snobbery.

The story of George F. Babbitt also stirred public opinion because Babbitt was Sinclair Lewis's vehicle for attacking business. The businessmen's code of the Twenties (p. 3) applied to Babbitt and his peers, with the only exception being the second rule. George and his cohorts never missed a chance to boast of their accomplishments. Van Doren believes the following further explains the psychology of the Twenties' businessmen: uncertainty of purpose, insecurity of fortunes, pretensions with which they covered up their self distrust, adolescence in their societies and jargons and amusements, and finally infantilism of imagination.

Again, it is the civic organizations, the church, the business world, and wild social life—all institutions—which are attacked. Characters may be presented as weak or overly sentimental or just plain foolish; yet, they are not really malicious or stingy except, perhaps, for a few, i.e., Vergil Gunch who mercilessly hounds Babbitt during the latter's rebellious stage.
In keeping with the Lewis style, Babbitt is Babbitt's own story. Life in the city of Zenith is observed through this conformist's eyes. For years, George had been going with the flow, blundering into roles without ever truly making conscious decisions about them. Real estate was not his first career choice; his father-in-law just happened to own the business. Also he acquired his wife quite by accident because he was not strong-willed enough to assert his true feelings. It just proved more comfortable agreeing with the crowd.

Babbitt, however, is not a completely blind follower. After Paul Riesling, Babbitt's best friend, is imprisoned for shooting his own wife, Babbitt's rising discontent explodes into rebelliousness. He, like Carol, catches glimpses of another world, a world of art, culture, and beauty. As Paul forces George to question his alliance with the Boosters, Tanis Judique and the Bunch impel him to examine emotional and aesthetic facets of himself. He is then torn between the security of his old life and the allure of the Bunch's exciting life style.

Mrs. Babbitt's illness suddenly jolts George back into the reality of his situation, and with sighing relief he discards Tanis and the Bunch and rejoins the Boosters who joyfully welcome him back into the fold. He apparently does not possess the long-suffering perserverance needed to devote himself to a worthy cause in which he believes, unlike Seneca
Doane, the token socialist in Zenith. Still, George is improved as a human being simply because he sampled more than one of life's dimensions.

Commager, however, contends that Babbitt's rebellion was futile. Accordingly, Farrington describes him as "an empty soul." They propose the popular stance which accuses Babbitt of being the source for gross materialism, commercialism, bigotry, hypocrisy, boneheadedness, and complacency in American life. Hoffman, on the other hand, believes Babbitt's rebellion against accepted society, politics, and sexual mores distinguishes him from the other standardized men in the novel. This fling saves George from a boorish existence and demonstrates Lewis's hope for the common man. Babbitt is resigned in the end to his old way of life; the time for change has passed him by. However, his son has an opportunity to break the mold, and Babbitt not only approves but even encourages him.

Arrowsmith is Lewis's third novel written in the 1920s. After the overwhelming satire of Main Street and Babbitt, Lewis desired to create a truly heroic American novel. The Twenties' criteria for heroes were stringent, though. To qualify, one must represent strength, courage, honor, self-reliance, and rugged individualism as did Lindbergh when he soloed across the Atlantic. In Martin Arrowsmith these qualities emerge, and consequently he measures the remainder of
society by his own strict standards. Needless-to-say, society fails the test.

Arrowsmith embodies scientific idealism, a new subject and perspective in literature. Commercial research accompanied by shallow spirits receive his condemnation, but Max Gottlieb, Martin's eccentric European professor, epitomizes the true scientist. Martin's dedication to his work, encouraged by Gottlieb, surpasses any other facet of his life, even his marital relationships.

Leora, his first wife, received universal praise as the ideal heroine at the time of Arrowsmith's publication. She dutifully served Martin before her death, waiting up for him, delivering meals to him in his lab, sitting or sleeping near him while he worked, and welcoming him with open arms whenever he found time for her. Leora most definitely was created by a male author, and this is not the first time Lewis uses such a personality. Babbitt's fairy child of his fantasies appears quite similar to Leora. Anyway, today Leora seems unreal—that is, simply too good, too agreeable, too accommodating, to be true. Schorer concurs.

Martin chooses a completely different type of woman, though, when he remarries. Joyce, his wealthy high-society second wife, demands his attention and, unlike Leora, refuses to cater to his every whim although they love one another deeply. Joyce appears loving and considerate up to a point, but she requires thoughtfulness in return. Martin, she makes clear, will
never force her into a subservient, obedient role.

Joyce represents the crisis Martin must confront and eventually solve. Her society which represents the elite of the Twenties and his job which demonstrates the rising importance of public relations in business stifle his creativity. As a result, he rejects career advancement and a terrific salary, not to mention his wife's companionship, love, and fantastic wealth. Escape is possible for Arrowsmith, unlike Carol and Babbitt, so he flees to the country, wishing to devote his life to pure research along with his bachelor friend Terry. Women, money, and career status almost disappear from Martin's list of priorities, an uncommon occurrence during the Twenties.

DeVoto admits Arrowsmith embodies the heroic way of life so honored by Lewis. Still, he sees no maturity in Martin. He merely recognizes Martin as a selfish little boy who thinks "me, me, me" all the time. After all, Martin deserts a wife and a son who truly love him. Schorer also remarks that there exists a fine line between the "idealism of 'rebellious optimism' and that of plain sentimentality." In Arrowsmith, Lewis walks on the cutting edge. On the other hand, Schorer realizes Arrowsmith is truly American in that it delves into the roots of the Twenties' confusion and tension. Another critic labels Martin as a "highly distinctive individual" in Lewis's fiction. This assertion can be readily supported by the fact that while Carol and Babbitt both resigned themselves to their plight, Martin resisted. He followed his own instincts as a proper forerunner of the "me" generation should.
If possible, *Elmer Gantry* aroused more furor than *Main Street* even though by this time Americans expected almost anything from Sinclair Lewis. Once again, Lewis employed biting satire, but this time any idealistic optimism which had permeated *Main Street* or any of his earlier novels had faded. Elmer functions as the symbol of all the phoniness Lewis hated in American life during the Twenties, causing Carl Van Doren to hail the novel as Lewis’s ugliest book.\(^7^9\) Drawing consciously from William Stidger and unconsciously from Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson, Lewis produced a searing novel which bitterly caricatured the religious movements of the Twenties.\(^8^0\)

*Elmer Gantry* emerges as a charmer who possesses neither decency, kindness, nor reason. Dr. Drew and Sheldon Smeeth of *Rabbit* fame appear angelic when compared to Elmer. Gantry is a showman who closely approaches amorality. Selfish designs, not religious devotion, had drawn Elmer to the church. In the pulpit he projects the power, authority, and wisdom which eludes him in common, everyday life. His innate gifts for oratory is surpassed only by his other natural talents: drinking, wenching, lying, sneaking, and bullying other people. By incorporating all his many faculties, he achieves his dream of preaching in a prominent Zenith church. That he must switch faiths (from Baptist to Methodist) to do so is no obstacle whatsoever. In this novel, Elmer demonstrates the new breed of businessman, the only difference being he applies their techniques to the church.
For the most part, the other personalities in Elmer Gantry are as hypocritical as he. Sharon Falconer and Old Judson Roberts, who are reminiscent of Twenties' revivalists, also ply the public with false religion and cheerfulness, hoping that great will be their rewards on earth. Unfortunately, Sharon and Old Jud, like Elmer, succeed in fooling susceptible fundamentalists who view these revivalists as direct instruments of the Lord.

Two exceptions to the scoundrel syndrome in Elmer Gantry do exist, though. Elmer's mother and Frank Shallard are decent people. Mrs. Gantry is a little old lady who desperately desires to believe her son is pure in heart, but she is a bit too sharp for her own peace of mind. Frank, a fellow student at the seminary with Elmer, faithfully adheres to his well thought-out beliefs. His reward, however, includes being beaten and blinded by the masses who objected to his righteousness (egged on by Elmer, of course).

No, in Elmer Gantry the meek certainly do not inherit the earth; the swindlers do. Even when faced with a crisis, Elmer always manages to invent a lie or a trick, thus weaseling out of any trouble and landing safely on his feet. Undoubtedly, this work is the high point of Lewis's cynicism which pervades the book from beginning to end. As Van Doren states, there is no balance in Elmer Gantry between Lewis's hatred of mountebanks and his vision of good men which occurs in other novels.
Dodsworth was written at the end of an era--1929. Here Lewis explores the successful businessman, a Republican who supports high tariffs, Prohibition, and the Episcopal Church. Dodsworth is not entirely enlightened, but he possesses more culture and wealth than George F. Babbitt. At least Dodsworth sometimes recognizes Beethoven, dresses well, claims some knowledge of art, and owns a million dollars. However, he appears throughout most of the novel, as Schorer remarks, not wholly as a businessman or as a man. There is a tension between the two. He has neither discovered a way to buck large corporations nor experienced passionate love affairs or tragic losses. Instead, he balances precariously between the two, but by the end of the work, he has achieved more depth as a man.

Dodsworth, an automotive baron, is demoted (a conscious but unwilling decision on his part) when competitive tactics force him to merge with a larger auto corporation, a common development of the Twenties. This corporation offers him a position, and he flirts with the idea of accepting it. Yet, he procrastinates in making a final decision partly because his extended European vacation occupies him and partly because the company and the cars are no longer "his baby."

After selling his auto company, Dodsworth allows his wife Fran to persuade him to travel about Europe indefinitely. This gives Lewis the opportunity to follow Mark Twain and Henry James in ridiculing the "American tourist in the Old
World. Dodsworth is the typical American tourist desiring to see the Grand Tour highlights while Fran scorns mere travel and wishes to move into European society. She is a cold, spoiled rich lady who panics at the thought of aging, especially before she tastes what she believes life owes her. By contrasting these two characters, Lewis develops a theme that Americans who are true to their heritage, like Dodsworth, do not need Europe to be fulfilled. Fran, on the other hand, tries to deny her historical legacy—thus, being true to neither her native nor adopted roots, much like intellectuals who fled the United States for Europe. Lewis seems to be saying that only with recognition and acceptance of one's past can any effective progress for the future be implemented.

While in Europe, Fran and Dodsworth constantly accompany one another for the first time in years, and unfortunately discover their marriage is a farce. Dodsworth loves Fran but finally does not like her at all, and Fran detests Dodsworth's American ways. So when she flirts with counts without discerning their shallowness or hypocrisy, the reader is not surprised. Fran views the world through rose-colored glasses with herself on mainstage playing Cinderella and everyone else adoring her.

DeVoto has called Fran Dodsworth the most developed character Lewis ever created. This could only mean that her simple frigidity and selfishness constitute her entire being; therefore, Fran is as developed as possible considering what little there
is to work with in her personality. In any event, she is realistic. The dependent, middle-aged wealthy socialite who desires youth, adoration, and a title are common enough in American literature and much more believable than a Leora Arrowsmith.

Cowley says Dodsworth himself is unrealistic. But Van Doren admires him. Lewis portrays this wealthy American in Europe, homesick for the good old United States of America, as a man of severe limitations; however, Lewis keeps him "solid and likable." Usually the outsiders in Lewis's novels--Carol Kennicott, Paul Reisling, Martin Arrowsmith, and Frank Shallard--receive the most favorable treatment, but in Dodsworth Lewis asserts the positive factors of staying loyal to one's own club--that is, staying loyal to America. The reader finds himself both sympathizing with and cheering for Dodsworth, and in turn Dodsworth comes through quite well. When faced with the crisis of divorce, a growing occurrence in the Twenties, he makes a few false starts, but in the end he and Edith (his new, mature love interest) and Fran come to grips with their situation. The first two will survive contentedly; in fact, the go-getter is coming out in Dodsworth and he is planning a new business venture once in America again. But Fran will merely exist because she does not possess the capacity to be happy or satisfied. Dodsworth, like Martin Arrowsmith, was offered another chance and grabbed it, an admirable move in Lewis's eyes.
Admiration, though, was not an emotion easily evoked from Sinclair Lewis. But as with Hemingway, he believed man controls his own responses to situations. Consequently, admirable reactions really are viable alternatives. Furthermore, in Lewis's mind, the only road to happiness lay in determining the proper action to take for oneself. As Lewis himself stated, "Happiness in the long run is to be achieved only by obedience to the genuine impulses of the individual, never by conformity to the outward habits of the mass of men," a view shared by other intellectuals of the 1920s.99

This happiness, however, is not easily achieved. The basic tension appearing in Lewis's works occurs between the individual's impulse toward freedom of choice and society's attempt to restrict it.90 Carol Kennicott, George P. Babbitt, Martin Arrowsmith, Frank Shallard, and Sam Dodsworth all are perfect examples of this. Each in his own way tried to question the status quo and then to discover the reality of life. The process was similar, but the results were different. Carol, Babbitt, and Frank finally resigned themselves to society's expectations—that is, Carol retreated to Gopher Prairie as a devoted wife and mother after her revolt, Babbitt returned to his old gang and family after his fling, and Frank withdrew from people after the attack which incapacitated him. Dodsworth and especially Arrowsmith, though, succeeded in breaking away from society's demands and following their own consciences. Dodsworth's
new system was less radical than Arrowsmith's in that Dodsworth
did not reject society, like Martin, but discovered a way to
exist more happily in it, manufacturing mobile homes.

Solley asserts that Lewis's characters are not romantic
in their struggles. In fact, he believes they evade conflict
by constantly posing instead of facing the truth of the situations.
Moreover, these men and women struggle without allies, without
hope of victory, and without full-fledged faith in themselves.
So when their opponents are strengthened, Carol, B-bbitt,
and Frank merely "subside into that outward acquiescence and
inward rebellion that is the death of drama. . ."91 Or as DeVoto
remarked, the "lives explored are uncomplicated, the experience
revealed is mediocre."92 Karin, however, disagrees. In his
opinion, satire designed the novels of Lewis but a final
happy recognition (on the part of the characters) embued the
work with life."93

Although Lewis's novels definitely reject the sugar-and-
spice existence and the happy-ever-after endings, they do
project some grains of optimism. In four of Lewis's best
novels examined herein, the common man or woman of the 1920s
searches for something that represents truth. Carol longs for
beauty in her dull, drab, every-day life. Babbitt yearns for
freedom from the pressures of conformity and later non-conformity.
Arrowsmith sacrifices greatly in order to preserve his integrity
and to pursue knowledge. Lastly, Dodsworth merely dreams of
loyalty in love and usefulness in the business world. The
other good novel Lewis produced in the Twenties presents a main
character who embodies the drive for ruthless power, but as
stated previously, people fighting the good fight sometimes appear in *Elmer Gantry* even though they are secondary figures.

True, the reader is challenged to discover a truly old-fashioned hero in Sinclair Lewis's body of literature. Martin Arrowsmith, though, probably fits the mold better than any of the others because Jake occasionally seems foolish, Babbitt frequently appears absurd, and Dodsworth at times seems ridiculous. However, this coincides nicely with the emerging twentieth-century concept of a hero. No longer are imposing stature, national or international importance, and legendary or historical significance employed by respected authors as prerequisites for heroes. Instead, striving for acceptance of the past and the present become more important for the would-be hero. Perhaps this partially explains Lindbergh's popularity; somehow he managed to combine the old-fashioned values which were cherished with the modern technology which was threatening to the Americans of the 1920s.

Anyway, the future lies before the new hero waiting to be captured, and whether or not he succeeds is, for the most part, his own responsibility. In modern fiction, though, material prosperity is not necessarily equated with success. Rather, success is viewed as the peace of mind which can only be achieved by following one's own instincts and making decisions with which one's conscience is comfortable—again, the Hemingway code.
Sinclair Lewis discerned this truth, perhaps the only absolute to which he adhered, and thus this idea flows throughout his works. His cynicism and satire seized the readers' attention; the responsibility then lay in their hands to sift through the cynicism and to discover underlying currents of idealism or optimism. Even if one fails to accomplish one's goals, Lewis appears to be saying that the struggle will normally improve the human spirit. As Martin Arrowsmith states at the close of his story, "We'll plug along on it for two or three years and maybe we'll get something permanent--and probably we'll fail." But the struggle, the effort, is all-important. In the above quote Martin Arrowsmith is referring to quinine research; Sinclair Lewis, to life.
Notes


3 Morison, p. 415.

4 Nash, pp. 132-133; Blum, p. 592.


6 Blum, p. 591

7 Blum, p. 592; Morison, p. 413.

8 Morison, p. 427.

9 Morison, pp. 413-414, 424-428.

10 Turlington, pp. 6-10.

11 Morison, pp. 448-450; Blum, pp. 600-601.

12 Morison, p. 450; Novy, p. 173.

13 Nash, p. v.

14 Nash, p. 142; Novy, p. 121.


16 Nash, p. 142; Morison, p. 113.
17. Morison, p. 438; Blum, p. 596.


31. Hoffman, p. 11.


33. Nash, p. x.


Parrington, p. 373.


Kazin, p. 220.

Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), chapter xix.

Morison, p. 460.


Hoffman, p. 90. Also see Cowley, p. 101.

Kash, p. 59.


Morison, pp. 460-463.


Commager, p. 261.

Kash, p. 1.

Hoffman, p. x.

Cowley, pp. 5-6.

DeVoto, p. 174.

DeVoto, p. 12; Cowley, p. 101; Parrington, p. 365; Commager, p. 262.


Schorer, p. 272.
56Schorer, p. 268.
57Moore, p. 2. Also see Nash, p. 4; Morison, p. 413.
58Hoffman, p. 335.
59Hoffman, p. 327.
60Hoffman, p. 370.
61Schorer, p. 228.
62Nash, p. 33.
63Yazin, p. 221.
64DeVoto, p. 99.
65Schorer, p. 272.
67Van Doren, Sinclair Lewis, p. 40.
68Commager, p. 262.
69Tarrington, p. 369.
70Hoffman, pp. 366-368.
71Nash, p. 127. For Lindbergh information see Moore, p. 75; Nash, p. 7; Plum, p. 301.
72Schorer, p. 414.
73Schorer, p. 420.
74Ibid.
75DeVoto, p. 99.
76Schorer, p. 417.
77Schorer, p. 416.
78Van Doren, Sinclair Lewis, p. 44.
79Van Doren, American and British Literature, p. 95.
30 Schorer, pp. 440, 460, 474.
31 Van Doren, American and British Literature, p. 95.
32 Van Doren, Sinclair Lewis, p. 45.
33 Schorer, p. 355.
34 Schorer, p. 312.
35 Devoto, p. 100.
36 Schorer, p. 97.
37 Van Doren, American and British Literature, p. 96.
38 Schorer, p. 515.
39 Van Doren, Sinclair Lewis, p. 93.
40 Schorer, p. 811.
43 Yazin, p. 211.
Bibliography


