Some manifestations of the democratic ideal in the novels of Sinclair Lewis

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SOME MANIFESTATIONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL
IN THE NOVELS OF SINCLAIR LEWIS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Sinclair Lewis has been the recipient of much praise for the contributions he has made to the great body of American literature of the twenties and thirties. Nevertheless, the volume of adverse criticism of his writings is also very large. Without discussing here the reasons for the unfavorable comment it is sufficient to say that Lewis's contribution has been immense.

He is, therefore, of such stature that the interested investigator may go to Lewis' works and find there all sorts of problems discussed. For this particular study the field of thought selected is Lewis's ideas on democracy in America. The immediate importance of this subject is vividly attested to by both the caustic criticism that the democratic concept is object of today, and the shock that its practical operation has been called upon to bear under the present struggle with totalitarian states. The aim has not been to collect here all that Lewis ever said about democracy; the effort has been rather to present enough of his work to gain a clear understanding of what was his actual opinion of democracy. Aside from the attempt to define democracy in Chapter I, no effort has been made to study political conditions in America, except through Lewis's eyes.

No other work has been discovered by the writer which attempts to sift Lewis's writings in this manner in order to reassemble in a few pages a group of his representative thoughts on democracy.

With no intention of passing final judgment, the writer has offered an occasional analytical or interpretative comment; at the close, a few opinions crystallized from the study of this collection of Lewis's ideas.
suggest the writer's point of view. It is to be hoped that they will not interfere with the reader's enjoyment of the right to form his own conclusion.

In this thesis the author will essay an analysis of Lewis's major novels in order to show, first, that Lewis attacked the abuses that developed on democracy in America, and second, that throughout he held consistently and constantly to a genuine faith in the land.

In Chapter I of this thesis a consideration of the spirit of the twenties in America and the ideal of democracy is given. Such a study is necessary since Lewis, as all great writers, was influenced by his age and since his attack was not upon democracy as such, but upon the abuses it suffered at the hands of Philistine Americans.

In Chapter II the concern is with reference to the expression of democracy found in two of Lewis's novels—Main Street and Babbitt.

In Chapter III, the writer has made a study of Elmer Gantry and Arrowsmith, pointing out Lewis' severe attack on charlatanism.

In Chapter IV, It Can't Happen Here, Dodsworth and Ann Vickers were discussed as culminations of Lewis's attacks on false democracy and his faith in the real tradition of America.

Inevitably, then, the conclusion of this thesis, Chapter V, relates Lewis's attack on the abuses of democracy to the faith he has in the tradition and heritage of the country.

The author here expresses her gratitude to Mr. Gladstone L. Chandler for the helpful suggestions and the valuable assistance which he has given so generously from the time the subject first was conceived until the thesis was completed.
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CHAPTER I

THE ROARING TWENTIES AND DEMOCRACY

"The war," states a soldier proverb, "will last a hundred years--five years of fighting and ninety-five of winding up the barbed wire." Reconstruction after a great war is generally irksome and confusing. The decade after Yorktown and the decade after Appomattox include many perplexities which Americans would prefer to forget. The effect of World War I on the people of the United States, however, was apparently less profound than that of either the War for Independence or the Civil War. There are perhaps two fundamental reasons for this. The first is that American participation in the Great War was briefer and the second is that it was fought on foreign soil. In Eastern and Central Europe, where conditions were most deeply disturbed, either radical democracies or dictatorships took form. In the countries of Western Europe and in the United States, however, reactions were registered, for the most part, peacefully.

It must be kept in mind, nevertheless, that a too hasty survey of the post-war era will eclipse the fact that something indefinable was released in Americans after the Treaty of Versailles. The people of the United States, at home as well as abroad, had made great sacrifices during the struggle of 1914-1918. Commodities and productions for civilian consumption were curtailed to a dispairing degree. Denials of the richest foods--sweets, fats, meats and flour--were only a few of the war demands. Herbert Hoover, the food administrator, effected meatless days

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which were observed as rigorously as Catholic Fridays.\textsuperscript{1} The conservation of coal was required of civilians and the Fuel Administration issued a "lightless" edict.\textsuperscript{2} Many American lives had been lost at home as the result of an influenza epidemic and the populace, as a whole, was restless, unhappy, and discontent as they prayed for the termination of the conflict. Under the pressure of war-time conditions, they spent themselves. With the treaty which announced peace, their "war neurosis" subsided. Their war-torn nerves began to crave the anodynes of speed, excitement and passion.\textsuperscript{3} Gaiety and recklessness of the old and young alike became the keynote of American society. This spirit of heedless sportiveness is captured almost to a point of precision in the following lines from \textit{Runnin' Wild}:

\begin{verbatim}
Runnin' wild; lost control
Runnin' wild, mighty bold,
Feelin' gay and reckless too
Carefree all the time; never blue
Always goin' I don't know where
Always showin' that I don't care
Don' love nobody, it ain't worth while
All alone runnin' wild.\textsuperscript{4}
\end{verbatim}

This popular tune together with the statements of many authorities attests to the nervous recklessness which characterized the twenties. This was not, however, the only notable feature of the times. Another significant aspect of the decade after the war was inflation.

That the post-war decade was a period of material prosperity and inflation can scarcely be denied. America's boom days, an era resulting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1}Ibid., p. 59.
\item \textsuperscript{2}Frederick L. Allen, \textit{Only Yesterday} (New York, 1931), p. 17.
\item \textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{4}V. F. Calverton, \textit{Anthology of American Negro Poetry} (New York, 1939), p. 10.
\end{itemize}
from mass production, increased machination and inventions made the average man proud to be a member of the great industrial nation. Dewey calls it "a money culture." Facets of this period of material accumulation are apparent upon examination of the popular tune, "My God, How the Money Rolls In." Statisticians’ graphs show that in a period of nearly seven years American "big business" held the secret of economies which war-stricken Europe sought desperately.

Not merely were there absolute gains in wealth but the production and distribution of wealth proved an interesting development. The boom in the automobile industry, particularly the Ford Motor Company, is one illustration in which the principles of high wages, low prices, and standardized manufacture were highly successful and effective. Other stimulants to the flush years were increased installment buying and stock-market speculation. The salesman had his heyday by planning elaborate campaigns and eloquently cajoling and exhorting the consumer into buying. Slogans were equally as zealous, sometimes outrageous. The twenties were indeed days when the business man was looked upon with veneration.

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2 P. W. Slosson, op. cit., Chapter VI.
3 Ibid.
5 Frederick L. Allen, op. cit., p. 168.
6 Ibid. P. W. Slosson, however, debates whether the prevalence of the installment system indicated national prosperity or extravagance. Op. cit., p. 182.
7 Frederick L. Allen, op. cit., p. 169.
8 Sales inducements were carried by such slogans as "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet" or "Often a bridesmaid but never a bride."
Consequently, the nation bowed in obedience to this new god. In comparing and contrasting the American business man with his prototype in England, Van Wyck Brooks characterizes the new god not only with clarity but with admiration and reverence:

The idealization of business, to begin with, has, in America, a certain apparent rightness which elsewhere it could not have. For business in America is not merely more engaging than elsewhere, it is even perhaps the most engaging activity in American life. You cannot compare the American commercial type with the commercial type which England has evolved without feeling in the latter a certain fatty degeneration, a solemn fatality, a sanctified, legalized self-satisfaction, which our agile, free, open, though sometimes indefinitely more unholy type is quite without; for even in his unholliness the unholy business man in America is engagingly crooked rather than ponderously corrupt. Beside the English business man as one figures him...the American business man is a gay, sprightly, childlike being, moved and movable, the player of a game, a sportsman essentially, though with a frequently dim perception of the rules. You have only to compare the Bank of England, that squat impregnable mass which grips a score of London acres, with, for example, the Woolworth Tower which has in it so much of the impulse that has built cathedrals to feel this divergence in the quality of English and American business.¹

Prosperity manifested itself in almost every detail of life. Let it be understood, however, that as usual, poverty accompanied riches in many sections of America. The average farmer remained poor.² The lumbermen and tobacco workers did not share in the prosperity. But the general trend of things pointed toward abundant and available money. Bathrooms, cars, telephones, radios, typewriters, refrigerators and central heating

¹ Van Wyck Brooks, America's Coming of Age (New York, 1924), pp. 134-136.

became indispensables in the daily life of the majority in America.\textsuperscript{1} Slosson holds that materialism flourished to such an extent that fine arts and an appreciation for the aesthetic absented themselves. According to him, "...the modern American creative instinct finds expression in changing the washers on the faucets or tinkering with the Ford."\textsuperscript{2}

But not only did materialism flourish after the war, it became extremely well organized in the forms of clubs and societies. Impressive to native-born as well as to foreigners were the numerous trade associations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Merchants' Association and the National Manufacturers' Association. Other organizations, more civic and social than purely "business", were the Rotary Clubs and Kiwanis Clubs. Besides these national societies there were local business clubs, civic betterment clubs and local "booster" societies. Indeed, the American business man in the twenties often seemed to have time for anything and everything but his own special business. "Charles Dickens," writes Slosson, "must have had him in prophetic mind when he said, through the medium of Marley's ghost, 'The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.'"\textsuperscript{3}

What does all this indicate as far as the practice of American democracy is concerned? Simply this. As the ordinary man became more and more absorbed in the energies of production and money-making, about intangible and spiritual values he cared less and less. The French critic, Andre Siegfried, said of the material prosperity of the twenties:

\begin{enumerate}
\item Andre Siegfried, \textit{America Comes of Age} (New York, 1927), p. 161.
\item P. W. Slosson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 406.
\item ibid., pp. 188-189.
\end{enumerate}
The Americans are so bound up with their machines that they are losing interest in anything that cannot be turned out by mass production.

So it was with affairs of law and order. Violations of the provisions in the Constitution occurred on every hand, but the American public remained smugly complacent and impervious to the deeper prophecy which these frauds betokened. True, they stirred when the press announced a heavy-weight boxing match or a transatlantic airplane flight, but to the graft in the White House surrounding their president, Warren Harding, or the oil scandals or the undemocratic practices of the Ku Klux Klan, it generally refused to bother itself. Interested in headlines and having to read the news on the run, few had time for serious matter and reflection. In fact, as Slosson points out, the press catered to sensationalism rather than nationally important events. To illustrate this point, Slosson relates details of the manner in which newspapers reprinted the death of former President Charles W. Eliot, of Harvard, generally considered the leader of American education, who died on August 22, 1926, and of Rudolph Valentino, the moving picture actor, who died the following day. Most newspapers printed only one solemn column on the editorial page deploring the death of the educator to every full page they gave the actor. This instance, while interesting in itself, is even more significant as a witness to the tastes and standards of the time.

For America after the war was a busy, rushing, restless, hustling country. She had little time for contemplation, for essentials, for idealized thoughts, for speculation about her own demerits. Pertinent

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to this, James Truslow Adams, noted historian, tells a personal experience. He had dined with an American friend of his whom he had not seen in some years. After dinner the two "chronies" went into the library to have their coffee before an open fire. After coffee and an after-dinner cigar, Adams' host asked the inevitable question, "Where do you want to go now?" Adams suggested that since he had not seen him for a long time he would prefer to sit at home and talk to him. Relieved, his host replied, "Thank heaven. I haven't had a good talk with anybody in ages." Again, we have an actual experience marking the absurd preoccupation of Americans in physical comforts and trivial standards of living. Comparing the American vertigo of the twenties to a vast Sargasso Sea, Van Wyck Brooks writes:

A prodigious welter of unconscious life, swept by ground-swells of half-conscious emotion. All manner of living things are drifting in it, phosphorescent, gaily colored gathered into knots and clotted masses, gelatinous, uniformed, flimsy, tangled, rising and falling, floating and merging, here an immense distended belly, there a tiny rudimentary brain (the gross devouring the fine)—everywhere an unchecked, uncharted, unorganized vitality like that of the first chaos. It is a welter of life which has not been worked into an organism, into which fruitful values and standards of humane economy have not been introduced, innocent of those laws of social gravitation which, rightly understood and pursued with a keen faith, produce a fine temper in the human animal.

This highly graphic comment on America in the twenties explains why ideas, ideals and all the possible varied interest and charm of human life were

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choked to death in a colossal, unthinking prosperity. America was strikingly similar to the England of 1842 which Carlyle described:

We have more riches than any nation ever had before; we have less good of them than any nation ever had before. In the midst of plethoric plenty the people perish; with gold walls, and full barns no man feels himself safe or satisfied. Workers, master workers, un-workers, all men, come to a pause; stand fixed, and cannot farther. Fatal paralysis spreading inwards, from the extremities. Have we actually got enchanted then; accursed by some God?¹

Like the England which Carlyle castigated, America in the twenties also suffered a "fatal paralysis." She had lost her sense of values; she deliberately refused to shake herself out of her coma of complacency. But more than this, she was bigoted. Tyranny and intolerance supplanted liberty and individualism, the pillars of true democracy. Divergent views offered by liberal elements were directly opposed, first, by opinion, then by force.² Persecutions were prevalent—its victims being sometimes, radicals,³ again, Communists or Reds,⁴ and often, the

¹Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (London, 1843), pp. 5-6.
³e.g. the "Sacco and Vanzetti Case." For information on this famous trial, see Mark Sullivan, Our Times (New York, 1935), pp. 172-176.
⁴See Frederick L. Allen, op. cit., pp. 45-75.
Negro.\textsuperscript{1} Riots and mobbings were assisted by the mushroom growth of the Ku Klux Klan.\textsuperscript{2} Democracy was forgotten as America's emotions parted ranks with her logic in her action against minority groups. Truly the superstructure of American democracy was dangerously veering from its foundations. But what is the composition of this foundation? An answer to this question will entail a cursory review of American democracy—a way of life ingrained in the character of every American no matter how he abuses its principles.

However, to trace democracy to discover the source of evil, the discrepancy between the practice of democracy in America in the twenties and the spirit\textsuperscript{3} as it was conceived by the "Fathers of our Country," we must

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\textsuperscript{1}The importance of the Negro in the twenties must not be minimized. After the war, a school of Negro poets emerged, led by such talented men as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown and Claude McKay. These poets caused the works of Mrs. Harper, George Moses Horton and Paul Lawrence Dunbar to be looked upon as antediluvian. This development, designated by critics as the Negro Renaissance, reached all branches of literature. W. E. B. DuBois, Walter White, Rudolph Fisher and Jean Toomer led the way in fiction; Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown and Claude McKay in verse; and Alain Locke, Franklin Frazier, Charles S. Johnson, Abram L. Harris and George Schuyler in the essay. A new spirit developed in Negro literature, the significant note of which was protest against the injustices Negroes receive in America. Vigorous, challenging and inspiring are Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," "To the White Friends" and "The Lynching." Equally challenging are Langston Hughes "I, too," "Songs for a Dark Girl" and "Lulatto." See V. F. Calverton, \textit{op. cit.}, and James W. Johnson, \textit{The Book of American Negro Poetry} (New York, 1922).

\textsuperscript{2}Gilbert Seldes, \textit{Mainland} (New York, 1936), p. 15.

\textsuperscript{3}Alexander Meiklejohn, in a scholarly treatise, says the following:

"It seems to me that the most striking feature of the modern mind, as against the ancient, is its loss of the term "Spirit." \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 21.

Our deepest tragedy lies in the fact that our current institutions, our current beliefs, our current practices fail to give recognition to old ideals which are still the essential and fundamental cravings of the American spirit. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 126."
examine definitions of the various types of democracy as well as to examine the philosophy and drift of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Nevertheless, before going directly into a discussion of true democracy, it may prove pertinent to examine some popular, everyday conceptions of the term.

Bacon made mention of the worship of "the idols of the market-place, those words and phrases which pass current among men carelessly and without testing." This is what has happened to the term, democracy. We too often speak lightly and in familiar terms of this word. Several years ago a man introduced a new game of contract bridge which he declared was much more democratic than the older game and suggested that for that reason, it be called "American Contract." The main idea was that all the suits should have equal value. Perhaps if he had given all the cards equal value it would have been still more democratic! There are Americans who think it is democratic to take a vote in order to decide the merits of plays or pictures or actors, as though there were some necessary relation between merit and popularity. Some think that to show everyone a "hail-fellow-well-met" spirit is a manifestation of the democratic ideal. There are organizations that propose to establish democratic practices by handing baubles out all around. The New York World Fair, in planning its art exhibition, announced that it would have a nation-wide system of selection committees and that quotas would be established for the various regions throughout the United States. This system was hailed as "the most complete application of democratic methods ever attempted in an exhibition of this kind."}

Even in the attempts to define the word democracy, we find great variations and faulty understanding of the term. Most commonly, one author says, it is thought of

As a political theory, often as an economic program, frequently as an ethical idea, sometimes as a metaphysics, not seldom even as a religious faith, and occasionally as a state of mind. The accounts of what it is are sometimes precise, often vague and frequently conflicting. It is popular sovereignty, the rule of the many—the 'government of the people, by the people, for the people, by the people,' it is 'fair play' and the 'square deal,'...its basal concept is liberty; its basal concept is fraternity; its basal concept is equality;...it is Socialism; it is Communism; it is Anarchy in its polite sense;...it is social equality;...it is the greatest good of the greatest number; no, not this, it is rather, the great good of everybody;...it is the Golden Rule made real; and, recently, whatever else it is it is something to 'make the world safe for.'

Moreover, "says Hudson, democracy has been extravagantly praised and just as extravagantly condemned from Plato up to the present. Plato says: 'It is an agreeable, lawless, parti-colored, commonwealth, dealing with all alike on a footing of equality, whether they be really equal or not.' Aristotle said, 'it is the depraved form of government.' Matthew Arnold said, 'it is the flower of moral and intellectual mediocrity.' Byron called it 'an aristocracy of blackguard.' St. Thomas Aquinas called it 'a breeder of dissension.' Says Nietzsche, it is 'everybody sick and everybody a sick nurse.' Edmund Burke—'the most shameful thing in the world.' John Adams—'it is "the most fragile and insecure of governments."'

1Wiltsee holds that"...Democracy and socialism are alike motivated by the desire to free the individual from expression, and to guarantee to each an opportunity for pursuit of happiness, for self-realization, for practical liberty and spiritual freedom. Democracy is an attempt to distribute political power among the masses with the purpose of obviating once and for all the possibility of dictatorial control; socialism is a recognition of the fact that political and economic power must be identified." Charles Maurice Wiltsee, The Jeffersonian Tradition in American Democracy (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1935), p. 215.


3Ibid., p. 3.
The condemnations found in the foregoing are sometimes very inconsistent. Nullification of one concept by another is possible by the simple process of putting the ideas in pairs. For example,

1. Democracy means too much personal initiative; democracy destroys personal initiative.

2. Democracy means a universal leveling tendency; democracy, far from reducing all to the same level, actually creates castes.

Although each critic may use the same word democracy, each conceives its meaning with such shades of difference or with such vagueness that even with the same thinker it signifies now one thing and now another. Thus the criticisms cannot be adequately evaluated since they do not always refer to the same thing; and even what particular species of democracy a specific criticism intends is often a question. Yet everyone takes for granted that he knows what democracy is. Hudson notes that the literature of democracy assumes that everybody knows what democracy is and therefore nobody takes the trouble to put it into exact terms.

However, in a study of this kind, it is important that a clear-cut conception of the usage we shall make of democracy throughout the thesis, be obtained at the outset. To obviate confusion we shall, first, define the term etymologically, and, second, define the term in light of an understanding of the traditional concept of the form in America, in an attempt to extricate a set of principles that will be valid and pertinent to our purposes.

Democracy, a term derived from two Greek words, means etymologically, "authority by the people." It may be defined as that form of government in

\[1\text{Ibid., p. 4.}\]

\[2\text{Ibid.}\]
which a people rules itself either directly (as in an absolute or pure democracy) through a system of representation and delegated authority periodically renewed, as in a constitutional representative government or in a republic.¹ This definition, though wholly valid, is not entirely pertinent to our study. The present thesis attempts to deal more with the economic, moral and social aspect of democracy than with the political. Social democracy is centered around the philosophy of the French Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, based on the conception of human perfectibility and postulating as its objective an equalitarian democracy in which the political state should function as the servant to the common well-being. Because the Constitution of the United States is more a symbol of the political spirit of democracy than a social philosophy of the ideal, it remains a vital force amidst a drift of expansion, a counter influence to the disintegration of states-rights particularisms, and an appeal to national loyalties of men², but is of little service to this study.

Influenced greatly by this Enlightenment, Jefferson's ideas of democracy are fundamentally social and are, therefore, important as a starting point for our work.

The Declaration of Independence with which Jefferson's name is inextricably connected and which contains the germs of the social concept of

¹Adapted from Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged, 1936. See also definitions of democracy in Thames Ross Williamson, Problems in American Democracy, (New York, 1925), and R. G. Gettell, Political Science, (New York, 1933).

²V. L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1927), p. xxv.
democracy is a natural source for the study of Jefferson's ideas:

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.¹

In this, Jefferson conceived of man as a gregarious animal, endowed by nature with a moral sense which enabled him to distinguish right from wrong, and with a sense of justice to keep him from encroaching on his fellows. The ethical end of man, to Jefferson, is happiness. This happiness can only be achieved in society; the end of which is to promote the individual happiness of its members. In a letter of F. A. Van de Kemp in 1812, Jefferson wrote the following:

The only legitimate end of government is to secure the greatest degree of happiness under it. Government, then, exists for men. The chief duty of those placed at the head of a democracy is to inform the minds of the people, and to follow their will.²

Jefferson took account of division in opinion. He made the "necessary corollary," an acquiescence in the will of the majority.³ He also made provision for change. Whenever the government should become destructive of the ends for which it is established, the people have the right to alter or abolish it. As Wiltse has so aptly expressed it:

Law is not static and immutable, but growing, changing, expanding as man's horizon widens.⁴

³Ibid., p. 84.
⁴Ibid., p. 159.
Thomas Jefferson was extremely human. He championed the common man. However, his humanity was of the head rather than of the heart. He remained always slightly aloof from the masses even in his plea for the equality of men. He realized that all men were not equal in the literal sense but he reasoned that they should be so in spirit. He fought for harmony and affection in social intercourse. In his first Inaugural address, he unreservedly expressed this.

Finally, in the case of Jefferson, the successful government was one which adequately combined liberty and power. He deemed that some form of political state was necessary to guarantee the rights of individuals in the state; consequently, he proposed a democracy. His scheme revolved around the idea that the Individual comes first, the establishments of society come second; the freedom and fellowship of individuals is the goal; the institutions of government, religion and affairs are but instruments to attain this goal, valid not by what they are but by what they do. Consequently, the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson rests on two basic assumptions, both of which are ethical: that the end of life is individual happiness, and that the purpose of the state is to secure and increase that happiness. Men are more important than institutions, and social good is to be reckoned in terms of human values. The ultimate end of government, like that of science, of art, of philosophy, is to

1Ibid., p. 41 ff.
2Ibid.
3Ibid.
4It must not be assumed that Jefferson was original with his theories. Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Milton, Rousseau are only a few of his sources.
further the material and spiritual well-being of men.¹ Government must be responsible to the people. It is an instrument for the better attainment of the individual ethical end, to be altered or abolished when its usefulness is over. Certain things are necessary to a happy life; liberty, security in the possession of material goods, freedom from arbitrary coercion by others. Hudson has set up a credo for democracy which well synthesises Jeffersonian democracy:

We believe 1. That the welfare of all men is a genuine part of the welfare of each man;

2. That, although men are differently endowed, no person or class knows enough to set limits to what any man may become;

3. That true equality means an equal chance for every man to show what he can do;

4. That the resources of civilization belong to each man in proportion to his power to use them for his good and the good of all;

5. That every man should add what he can to these resources of human progress;

6. That the issues that affect human welfare should be decided by reason not by authority, and that the collective reason is, on the whole, a safer guide than the isolated reason of an individual or class.²

¹Charles Maurice Wiltse, op. cit., p. 204.
We have here the form which should, if practiced faithfully, not only guarantee freedom of opportunity to every citizen but support a wholesome democracy. The question which directly concerns us in this thesis, however, is, "Did the practice of democracy in America from 1918 to 1928 proclaim the faith of the nation in the intelligence and integrity of the common man?" For nearly two centuries the country had declared its belief that the common man could be depended upon to cooperate with his fellow citizens, not only to maintain society in the best possible order, but also to advance civilization to higher and happier planes. The tenets of Jefferson's democracy supposed that every common man would appreciate the confidence placed in him; that he would make a special effort to prove himself worthy—and to protect, safeguard, and promote the advantages which the system placed before him. Was it possible that a decade of money-grabbing, "corruption in high places", and a false sense of ideals and standards should betray the spirit of democracy?

It was more than possible; it became a prevailing reality. One noted writer has said that "democracy depends on the full operation of conflicting opinions." But America in the twenties would tolerate no conflicting opinions. Witness her mobbings, Ku Klux Klan activities, riots of native borns and foreigners. The country aspired to Americanization and standardization. Just as the products she manufactured were mass productions and standardized, so her citizens adhered to "mass-mindedness" and uninspired routine living. Dullness was common. The majority of the people thought alike, lived the same lives with little or

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1W. G. Clugston, Rascals in Democracy (New York, 1941), p. 27.
2Thurman Arnold, op. cit., p. 65.
no idea that their existence was mediocre. Can anyone truthfully say that America in the twenties was not missing the mark in her practice of democracy?

Alexander Meiklejohn says of democracy, it "is a society all of whose members are spiritually alive: they are active in appreciation, in insight—as men should be." He continues:

...If what we have said is true, the striving of a democracy is always against dullness. At every point it is favorable to sensitiveness...It is forever at war with stupidity. Its one over-mastering ambition is the building up of intelligence, of insight from one end of the community to the other.

...No democrat is willing that any human being should go through his few years on this earth without being stirred by beauty, excited by meaning, challenged and aroused by perplexing endeavor. Aristocracy, on the other hand, reserves these experiences for the few."  

Butler upholds Meiklejohn's observations in a discussion of true and false democracy. He says:

...False democracy shouts, 'Every man down to the level of the average.' True democracy cries, All men up to the height of their fullest capacity for service and achievement.

...True democracy rejects the doctrine that mediocrity is a safeguard for liberty, and points to the fact that the only serious menace to liberty comes from the predominance of monopoly of privilege of the majorities.

As has been stated, American society in the decade after the First World War was not spiritually alive and active in appreciation of the finer things of life. Sensibilities and sensitivities were things out-

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1 Alexander Meiklejohn, op. cit., pp. 196-197.

moded, and dullness took the throne. Cities and communities were little
stirred by beauty or excited by meaning or challenged and aroused by per-
plexing endeavors. Intelligence was cause for suspicion. No fellow
American encouraged his neighbor to rise up to his fullest capacity for
service and achievement. As a consequence, the octopus of mediocrity
seized youth and old age alike in its tentacles and held them in an un-
relenting grip. John Dewey says of this period:

There is not only absence of social discrimina-
tion but of intellectual; critical thinking is con-
spicuous by its absence...Homogeneity of thought and
emotion has become an ideal. 1

The soundness with which Dewey develops this idea will be better grasped
by quotation than by paraphrase:

Quantification, mechanization and standardization;
these are the marks of the Americanization that
is conquering the world. 2

He gives two reasons for this standardization,

I shall not deny the existence of these characteristics,
or of the manifold evils of superficialism and externalism
that result in the production of intellectual and moral
mediocrity. 3

Every stream of life, says Dewey, is tied up with machines:

Not only are big mergers the order of the day, but
popular sentiment now looks upon them with pride rather
than fear. Size is our current measure of greatness in
this as in other matters...Personal motives hardly count
as productive causes in comparison with impersonal
forces. Mass production and mass distribution inevitably
follow in the wake of an epoch of steam and electricity.
Aggregated capital and concentrated control are the con-

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 25.
temporary responses.  

Thus by those keen students and lovers of real democracy America was severely criticised during this epoch. The critics for the most part

1 John Dewey, op. cit., p. 36.

2 Many writers, however, during the twenties either flattered the age or winked at its practices. For material concerning these writers see G. K. Anderson and E. L. Walton, This Generation (New York, 1939); also Lucy L. Clemmons' master's thesis, "The Redemptive Nature of the Poetry of Archibald McLeish." (Atlanta University, 1941).

The dominant tone in radical books was, none-the-less, dislike of America. In the hand of H. L. Mencken, scoffing editor of The American Mercury, literature had as its business to "debunk" the crack-brained deeds and words of Americans. Less a "smart aleck", more a satirist in the true sense of the word, Sinclair Lewis made his protest on American life through a series of orange-backed novels. Waldo Frank and Ludwig Lewisohn contributed their share to American criticism through the eyes and the ears of mystic idealists. Criticism became emotional in Sherwood Anderson, the psychological naturalist of the twenties; indignant in The Nation; aesthetic in the writers for The Dial; reformist in The New Republic, abusive in the symposia; tragic in Eugene O'Neill, the foremost playwright in American drama; and actually gay in the plays of Kaufman and Connally. Cf. P. W. Slosson, op. cit., p. 359.

Gilbert Seldes states: "From sex to scenery, nothing in the United States was good. A few of the critics held out a faint hope of better things to come, some associated the miseries of life in America with the general evil of life anywhere under the stars; most of them slashed away at their country with that peculiar gusto and energy and carelessness which happen to be typical of America itself." Mainland (New York, 1936), p. 13.

Seldes informs us of the acceptance of the attack in America: "The attack was brilliant and the victims took it in good part, rewarding the less angry (or perhaps the more astute) of the attackers with great quantities of money which, although the desire for money formed one of the most doleful complaints against America, the attackers accepted with a certain complacency." Ibid., p. 14.

had in mind both the foundation upon which America was founded and the kind of country she should be—noble, idealistic, sophisticated, moved by a sense of tragic destiny, philosophical, artistic, devoted to both the body and the soul, all beauty and refinement and spirituality and, finally above all, democratic in social practice as well as in theory.

The items of reproach from these critics to America can be placed under several general heads, of which these are the most important:

That life in America is entirely materialistic;
that we have no care for the spirit and the finer things of life;

that we have no culture, never have had one, and do not desire one;

that our lives are dull and monotonous, without great passion;

that we are surrounded by ugliness and glory in it;

that we sink ourselves in business, making money, at the expense of the art of living, sacrificing everything to profit;

that we are trivial;

that we are corrupt;

that we fail to create a country in which superior beings can comfortably exist, forcing them into exile;

that we belittle or starve or corrupt or spoil the few great men who stay with us;

that we are morbidly patriotic, infantile, and our civilization is a sham;

that we maintain a doomed economic system by injustice, cruelty and cynical defiance of our own professed principles;

that we are unhealthy, and unfit for the great
The majority of the items which Gilbert Seldes lists can be tied up with a violation of the democratic spirit. If men are materialistic, it is because in our democratic set-up every man, irrespective of class or creed, may work himself up into the so-called higher aristocratic brackets of society. It is, therefore, natural that the average proletariat in America becomes materialistic. Again in his search for happiness, the average American identifies the term with material comforts and inventions. His life becomes monotonous; for, day after day, money is his chief concern. His spirits are dulled; the art of living is sacrificed to profit at the office or factory. Should an intelligent person suggest to the average American a better mode of existence, all efforts would be made to bring the offerer down to the level of dullness with himself, or else force him to leave the surroundings. In the event the superior man stays and does not become like all the other men around him, he is censured or belittled. Patriotism itself is dull and too much of it is cause for suspicion.

We can point out few real men. Most of America's citizens are babies, children. Finally, the cause of complaint was traced directly to the outcome of the practice of an invalid form of democracy.

Undemocratic practices were occurring in every society in America: in the small town, in the large city, within groups, in economic practices, in religious ventures, in science. There was scarcely any time when men were in contact with each other that this hostility to the democratic ideal was not evident.

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1Gilbert Seldes, op. cit., p. 19.
One last question may be asked: -- To what extent did the critics help cure America's morbidity and mediocrity? The writer of this thesis has been unable to find authorities who believe that the effect on America of these critics was great and telling. Most critics agree, however, that in a positive way, the intellectual "high brows" of the twenties had little effect on the American, beyond, perhaps, making him a bit self-conscious about being in conference or using the word "service" too glibly.¹

But this study is not so much concerned with the effect of these critics' attacks as it is with the manifestations of the democratic spirit in one among them. In order to deal with this problem adequately it was deemed best to point out two important things. The first effort was to delineate, in this first chapter, the character of the decade, 1918--1928, its prosperity, its scale of values, standards of living, and interests. This delineation served as a background for the second purpose--to arrive at the real meaning of democracy in order to throw light upon the undemocratic practices of the twenties. These practices indulged in by the majority of Americans were severely criticised, and satirized by such men as H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, with the latter of whom this paper deals. In the next chapter an attempt will be made to reveal Lewis's concept of democracy despite his heavy blanket of negation, criticism, and satire found in his early novels like Main Street and Babbitt.

¹Gilbert Seldes, op. cit., p. 20.
CHAPTER II

MAIN STREET AND BABBITT: THE CONFUSION OF LICENCE WITH LIBERTY

In the first chapter of this thesis, two main steps were taken. One pointed out the tenets of the democratic ideal as it had been conceived in the America of Jefferson and Washington. In the spirit and practices of Americans during the twenties, however, this ideal had become clouded or somewhat forgotten, it was shown. For undemocratic practices, that is, those practices which violated the end purpose of a government established "to secure the greatest degree of happiness to the general mass of those associated under it," were prevalent and popular. Liberty, individual rights, and freedom were bartered for the dictates of the prosperous middle class of business men and merchants.

The other step in the previous chapter presented a discussion of the reasons for this indifference to and distortion of the ideal of democracy. Business was booming, things of the spirit were being replaced by material gains, the desire to get rich was uppermost in the minds of Americans. After a long period of privations and sacrifices caused by the war, Americans rejoiced in their wealth and were too busy in their quest of mammon, to perceive undemocratic injustices or to think deeply on the significance of the abuses and violations. As a result, manifestations of dictatorial rulerships despotic practices and even tyrannical activities became grafted onto the democratic spirit.

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1Harry Hartwick, op. cit., p. 80.
For this chapter, the purpose is to show the reaction of Sinclair Lewis, through his two novels—Main Street and Babbitt—to those violations, abuses, misunderstandings and misapplications of the democratic spirit. Instances of the violation of the democratic ideal shall be selected from each book and an effort made to discover to what extreme the practices of democracy discredited the spirit, as Lewis seems to conceive it. Each novel shall be treated from the standpoint of plot, characterization, thesis and application.

The first novel for our consideration is Main Street. This book was a crowning attack on the undemocratic practices of an American small-town.¹

¹In Main Street Lewis uses a setting that had been often treated in literature. In fact, the small town background is a tradition in literature. Oliver Goldsmith's "Deserted Village", Washington Irving's "Sketch Book" and Booth Tarkington's Gentleman from Indiana, present the village as one big, happy, public-spirited family of beautiful people. William Allen White also wrote stories glorifying small town life. A Hoosier Chronicle by Meridith Nicholson pointed out the wealth of human kindness one finds in a village. Zona Gale's Friendship Village and Meridith Nicholson's The Valley of Democracy continued to beatify the sturdy independence, sincere fundamental virtues, breadth of vision and devotion to the common good found in the small town. In our own generation, Ruth Suckow wrote three books, Country People, The Odyssey of a Nice Girl and The Bonny Family, all of which exalt the village. More recently Phil Strong's State Fair and James Gould Cozzens' The Last Adam are continuations of Goldsmith's and Irving's tradition of the village. These are the favorable treatments of small-town life. On the other hand, George Crabbe's poem, "The Village", published in 1783 in England is negative. He portrayed the small town as a menagerie of ignoble creatures, who bore malice, hated liberalism, thrived upon ugliness, and lacked the rustic ideals usually attributed to them by bards. E. W. Howe's Story of a Country Town was likewise critical of small town life. The Damnation of Theron Ware attacked the small town through the eyes of Harold Frederic. Zona Gale's birth was a novel which described the village as ugly, numb, prudish and ignorant. Winnebuck, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson is the story of bigotry and complacency in the small town. In 1915, Edgar Lee Master's "Spoon River Anthology" further overturned the myth of the friendly village. Homer Croy's West of the Water Tower and R. E. D. No. 3, Roger L. Sergel's Artie Golston and Carl Van Vechen's The Tatooed Countries are more recent treatments of the stupidity found in small towns.
The plot revolves around a central heroine, Carol Milford Kennicott, who after graduation from a small midwestern college, marries a small town doctor and goes with him to live in Gopher Prairie. This fabulous town, Gopher Prairie, a village of three thousand inhabitants in Minnesota, situated in the heart of agricultural America, is the setting. As a student at Blodgett College, Carol's hobby was sociology—a subject that inspired her to become a reformer of small town life and living. Seeing no reasons why garden suburbs should be confined to Long Island, she recognized in Will Kennicott's proposal of marriage the opportunity to use Gopher Prairie as an experiment in reform. Her experiences with her neighbors, her maid, her family and one or two friends, form the crux of the story. Her first walk down Main Street is a disheartening experience which sets the pace for her future disillusionment and unhappiness. The town itself, she discovers, is a fly-specked, drab, repressed, dirty hamlet. The disorder of the town, however, is not what discourages her. Rather it is the hypocritical, prejudiced, standardized people. They discourage her attempts to help them look toward finer things, smirk at her modern clothes and liberal viewpoints, cling to their own narrow way of doing things when she tries to offer suggestions, label her as a radical and snoop behind her, ready to strike when she acts natural and happy, and finally turn the tables on her and dictate the way to rear her children, conduct herself and run her household. Carol, as a consequence, becomes very unhappy. Not even with her husband, who proved to be a dolt with a "rubber-stamp mind, good natured and well meaning, but a smug, optimistic provincial,"¹ can she be herself. There are one or two people

in the community, however, who, like herself, perceive its faults. To them only can she carry her troubles and inner emotions. For six years Carol lives in Gopher Prairie disillusioned until finally she feels herself weakening and becoming much like her neighbors and the town. Against this she rebels, leaves the town and her husband, to make her own way in Washington for an indefinite space of time. She obtains a position as a clerk in an office, which is ample to provide for her son and herself. After living there for several months with good contacts and few worries and much freedom of thought and action, she is visited by her husband. Though he does not ask her to return to the village, she sees that he needs her. She gives up her position, her friends (who talk of European revolution, guild socialism and free verse), and her happy, precious freedom to go back to the hamlet which thinks "in cheap motor cars, telephones, ready-made clothes, silos, alfalfa, kodaks, phonographs, leather-upholstered Morris chairs, bridge prizes, oil-stocks, motion-pictures, land-deals, unread sets of Mark Twain, and a chase version of national politics."1 Thus Carol returns to live in Gopher Prairie with its savorless people, who, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with inane decorations, listen to mechanical music, say mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles and who view themselves as the greatest race in the world.2 Carol's return, does not indicate, however, that she admires the village or aspires to be like it. Instead, she gives up her hope for reform of the town and determines to

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1Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York, 1920), p. 264. Hereafter this book will be referred to merely as Main Street.
2Ibid., p. 265.
understand her neighbors. Embittered, she says to Will that she has fought a good fight and kept the faith. Shifting her interest from social reform to an interest in her child's welfare she finds some measure of content. The novel closes with Carol praying that her daughter will be both happier and more successful than her mother had been.

So far as the plot of the novel is concerned, it is not unified. Nor does the delineation of characters strengthen it. In fact, the characters in the story leave little impression when compared to the interest Lewis takes in giving the reader a picture of the town.\(^1\) Lewis presents excellent examples of caricatures and mimicries, but his delineation is stilted, perhaps because of the importance he attaches to the thesis of the story. Perhaps Carol is the only figure who represents an approximation to real characterization. She is a zealous person but tactless, selfish and restless. Restlessness, in the opinion of Michaud, is her pet defect.\(^2\) Though she is coquettish at times, she is not an unwomanly woman. Her chief ambition is reform and in this respect Lewis sinks his character into the role of a mouth-piece to express his own convictions and agitations. Were she a solid character, the author would possibly have given her the power to understand the people of Gopher Prairie and to approach them gradually by trying to bring to account their better instincts.\(^3\) She does not possess the ability to

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diagnose and understand the qualities of human nature, despite her knowledge of psychology. Consequently she becomes a pathetic creature. Her critical sense is deficient. Hazard thinks that Carol, too, is branded as essentially a part of Main Street, "rather more unprofitably and unpleasant than the more genuinely earthy of her neighbors."¹ Whether we agree with Hazard or not, we must admit that, at the end of the story, Carol makes no stronger impression on the reader than her husband or any of the other Gopher Prairieites. She is soon forgotten.² In like manner, none of the other characters create lasting impressions. Lewis simply uses them as a medium for communication of his attack on smugness, dullness, and standardization.

The absence of strong characterization in the story, however, is made up for by a driving unified thesis—one, if of little interest to us today, was greatly beneficial to the mind of America in the twenties. Lewis's thesis for Main Street, then, hedges around his loathing of the petty tyranny in America after the Great War, which reduced men to one level, particularly in the small town. He was indeed well equipped for writing such a novel, for he was reared in a country-town, Sank Centre, Minnesota. Here he received his first taste of the ugliness of the American small town and, as F. L. Allen says, "the cultural poverty of its life, the tyranny of its mass prejudices and the blatant vulgarity and insularity of the booster."³ Lewis's purpose was, therefore, as the

²Régis Michaud makes a vital comparison between Carol and Madam Bovary. He calls Carol a "Middle Western Bovary". Op. cit., pp. 137-142.
foreword to Main Street states, to expose,

our comfortable tradition and sure faith...
to betray himself as an alien cynic,... and to
distress the citizens by speculating whether
there may not be other faiths.\(^1\)

In short, Lewis's task was to attack conditions in the small town
for violations of the right of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happi-
ness." That his thesis was valid is upheld by Parrington and Slosson.
The former expresses the idea that Lewis's \underline{Main Street} is realistic,\(^2\)
while Slosson describes the small town as having a "universal public
school system, ubiquitous commercial clubs and secret societies, with
competitive Protestant sects and a combination of Yankee business
ruthlessness on week days with sentimental aspirations on Sundays and
civic holidays..."\(^3\)

But it is not so much with the validity of Lewis's thesis that
this study is concerned. Rather it is with the expressions or manifesta-
tions of the democratic spirit. And in \underline{Main Street} there are these
manifestations—striking illustrations of the confusion of liberty and
license. There are four reasons for Lewis's slashing attack on Gopher
Prairie. The contemptible qualities of sham, hypocrisy, dullness and
mediocre existence are a direct assault upon the democratic spirit and
its imaginative values. This is Lewis's first contention. In a country
founded upon the nobleness of the individual and upon the desire to

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\(^1\)Preface to \underline{Main Street}. Elsewhere in the book, Lewis says \underline{Main
Street} was written to reveal "not only the heart of a place called
Gopher Prairie, but ten thousand towns from Albany to San Diego."

\(^2\)See. J. L. Parrington, \underline{Main Currents in American Thought} (New York,

\(^3\)P. W. Slosson, \underline{op. cit.}, p. 417.
secure his ethical end, happiness,¹ the vices of the small town placed
the democratic ideal on the auction-block. Secondly, there was an
oligarchy of opinion in Gopher Prairie which made the community
venomously hostile to human values and to change. To Lewis this con-
fusion of liberty with license was intolerance of the most damnable
sort. No person or class knows enough to set limits to what any man may
become.² The issues which affect human welfare should be decided by
reason—collective reason, but never by authority or the isolated reason
of a class.³ Thirdly, democracy stands for true equality,⁴ that is, an
equal chance for every man to show what he can do; but in Gopher Prairie
only the Mrs. Bogarts, Jack Elders and Dave Dyers had any right to show
what they could do. The radical Carol Kennicott, along with the
servants, foreigners and farmers, was kept in her place. There was
no liberty of thought or action. Personal motives were discredited and
censored by the licensors. Freedom meant stupidly adhering to a
standardized formula of existence. All the town people were cut
from the same pattern and acted in a conventional, stodgy manner. Lastly
in Gopher Prairie, there was no sensitiveness to human beings and their
desires.⁵ The town was either forever suspicious of or at war with intelli-

¹Jefferson assumed that the ethical end of man was happiness. This
Epicurean doctrine is traceable through the writings of Locke, Priestley,
Bentham and Bolinbroke.

²This idea is expressed by Jay William Hudson in his book Why

³Ibid., p. 227.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Alexander Keiklejohn uses this principle as one with the democratic
gence and insight. Gopher Prairie never felt proud of the citizen who was stirred by beauty, excited by meaning, or challenged and aroused by perplexing endeavors. None of its citizens encouraged their neighbors to rise up to their fullest capacity for service and achievement. Consequently, instead of liberty, happiness, fellowship and high values, democracy had become step-mother to malice, smugness, ugly gossip and sham. Individual initiative was its chief hatred and license its chief duty.

Clear examples and expressions of these violations of the meaning and purpose of democracy are in abundance in Main Street. In the town of Gopher Prairie, human happiness is bartered for sham, hypocrisy, convention and dullness. Dull contentment licenses happiness. Lewis describes it as,

...an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment...the contentment of the quiet dead who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dullness made God.

Respectability in Gopher Prairie was almost synonymous with want of knowledge. In fact the community seems proud of its ignorance.

To be 'intellectual' or 'artistic' or in their own word, to be 'highbrow' is to be priggish and of dubious virtue.

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2 Main Street, p. 265.

3 Ibid., p. 266.
Large experiments in politics and in co-operative distribution, ventures requiring knowledge, courage and imagination, do originate in the West and Middle West, but they are not of the towns, they are of the farmers. If these heresies are supported by the townsmen it is only by occasional teachers, doctors, lawyers, the labor unions, and workmen..., who are punished by being mocked as 'cranks' or 'half-baked parlor socialists!' The editor and the rector preach at them. The cloud of serene ignorance submerges them in unhappiness and futility.¹

In an effort to show how unprogressive, conventional and stupid the people of the town were Lewis gives the following:

The Baptist Church (and, somewhat less, the Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian Churches) is the perfect, the divinely ordained standard in music, oratory, philanthropy, and ethics. We don't need all this new-fangled science, or this terrible Higher Criticism that's ruining our young men in colleges. What we need is to get back to the true Word of God, and a good sound belief in hell, like we used to have it preached to us.

The Republican Party, the Grand Old Party of Blaine and McKinley, is the agent of the Lord and of the Baptist Church in temporal affairs.

All socialists ought to be hanged.

Harold Bell Wright is a lovely writer, and he teaches such good morals in his novels, and folks say he's made prett' near a million dollars out of 'em.

People who make more than ten thousand a year or less than eight hundred are wicked.

Europeans are still wickeder.

It doesn't hurt any to drink a glass of beer on a warm day, but anybody who touches wine is headed straight for hell.

Virgins are not so virginal as they used to be. Nobody needs drug-store ice cream; pie is good enough for anybody.

The farmers want too much for their wheat.

The owners of the elevator company expect too much for the salaries they pay.

¹Ibid.
There would be no more trouble or discontent in the world if everybody worked as hard as pa did when he cleared our first farm.¹

The above passages stir both humor and pathos in the reader. For Lewis, Gopher Prairie was a source of annoyance. He uses instances like the foregoing to prove that a widening gap had sprung up between the spirit and the practice of democracy. No longer did democracy mean happiness, prosperity and loyalty to the tenets of the doctrine—it meant outmoded conventions that a mediocre citizenry clung to, ugly towns, and a lack of spiritual and intellectual idealogy. It meant such absurd faiths as those in the above credo. It meant license, not liberties.

Carol, however, stood as a contrast to the stodginess of Gopher Prairie. She was the personification of individual liberty.² The husband, Will Kinnicott, along with all the other Gopher Prairiëites, represented the tyranny of accepted standards.³ The conflict came when they learned of Carol's new-fangled ideas. They were staggered to learn that she apparently believed that divorce was not always unmoral; "that illegitimate children do not bear any special and guaranteed form of curse, that there are ethical authorities outside of the Hebrew Bible; that men have drunk wine yet not died in the gutter; that the capitalistic system of distribution and the Baptist wedding ceremony were not known in the Garden of Eden; that mushrooms are as edible as corn-beef hash; that the word 'dude' is no longer frequently used; that

¹Ibid., pp. 152-153.
²Régis Michaud, op. cit., p. 136.
³Ibid.
there are ministers of the Gospel who accept evolution; that some persons of apparent intelligence and business ability do not always vote the Republican ticket straight; that it is not a universal custom to wear scratchy flannels next the skin in winter; that a violin is not inherently more immoral than a chapel organ; that some poets do not have long hair; and that Jews are not always peddlers or pantsmakers."¹

The foregoing is representative of Lewis's implied indictment of stodginess in Gopher Prairie. This stodginess was anathema to Carol, an imaginative, spirited young woman, physically and mentally alive and bursting with fresh ideas. Such a personality is good material for a healthy democracy, for, as Meiklejohn points out, in a democracy all its members are spiritually alive.² In Gopher Prairie, however, there were twenty dead people to every living one. The majority, then, did not know what was going on outside the strict confines of their hamlet, nor did they care. Values that meant change or a brightening up of their coat of behavior and interest they directly and uniformly opposed.

An instance of the abuse of another principle of democracy appears early in the book. Its form comprises an oligarchy of opinion hostile to human values. At a woman's club meeting, Carol encountered Gopher Prairie's prejudices toward minority groups. The women gasped when she announced that she paid her hired girl, the Scandinavian Bea Sorenson, the exorbitant sum of six dollars a week and that foreigners were

¹Main Street, pp. 244-265.
²Alexander Meiklejohn, op. cit., p. 196.
honest and sturdy.\(^1\) Gopher Prairie had fixed the wages for hired girls from three dollars and a half to five dollars and a half a week and anyone who paid more was violating a traditional practice in addition to encouraging the ghastly, ignorant animals into demanding outrageous sums for their unskilled labor. They should be lucky for anything they got, was the sentiment of Juanita Haydock, the voice of Gopher Prairie. Carol protested:

A maid has one of the hardest jobs on earth. She works from ten to eighteen hours a day. She has to wash slimy dishes and dirty clothes. She tends the children and runs to the door with chapped hands and—\(^2\)

She was interrupted by another arbiter of Gopher Prairie, Vida Sherwin, and the conversation ended. Nevertheless, Carol's mind wandered away from the women's gathering to a more universal aspect of the same problem. She saw that this insignificant discussion, echoed celler-plots and cabinet meetings and labor conferences in Persia and Russia, Rome and Boston, and the orators who deemed themselves international leaders were but the raised voices of a billion Juanitas denouncing a million Carols, with a hundred thousand Vida Sherwins trying to shoo away the storm.\(^3\)

The instance in \textit{Main Street} is an example of the violation of two principles of a democratic state. We find, first, a tyrannical stronghold of opinion in Gopher Prairie, a despotism approximating the Fascist concepts; an inflexible mass-mindedness which imprisons liberty

\(^1\)Main Street, p. 90.
\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 91.
and leaves the individual in chains. The second principle violated was
the law of equal rights of citizens. In Gopher Prairie, the foreigner,¹
the common workman, the radical and, no doubt, the Negro,² were objects
of an unequal chance for survival and expression. They were molded into
a conventional pattern and warned to be quiet. They had no liberty.
They merely had permission or license to be in Gopher Prairie. Miles
Bjornstorm, one of the characters in Main Street and a foreign-born, in
one of his chats with Carol, expressed his resentment of this license,
this pseudo democracy:

Yes, I'm probably a yahoo, but by gum I do
keep my independence by doing odd jobs, and that's
more'n these polite cusses like the clerks in the
banks do. When I'm rude to some slob, it may be

¹Carol reflected on the situation of the immigrants who at that time
flooded the West. They were usually put into a huge melting pot. Quickly
they forgot their folklore and picturesque costumes. They became conven-
tional, Americanized and standardized.

²Take the Norwegian women of Gopher Prairie. Light-heartedly and thoughtlessly they exchanged
their red tunics, pearl necklaces, black chami-
settes lined with blue, green and gray aprons
and stiff capes (so well designed to enhance
their fresh little faces,) for congealed white
American blouses. The Minnesota Swedes ex-
changed their spiced puddings for fried pork
outlets and the ancient Christmas hymns of the
fjords for "She's My Jazzland Cutie." They
became commonplace; within a generation they
lost their identity and charm. Their sons,
with ready-made clothes and ready-made college
talk, soon assumed a respectable air. Ibid.,
p. 265.

The environment made of these picturesque strangers is a banal replica
of the world around them. What Alice Meynell once called "decivilization"
was occurring in Gopher Prairie, and this manifestation smirked of the evil
force of undemocratic inanity. Uninspired routine living and an insensi-
tiveness to the imaginative values of the components of society was a com-
pelling, overwhelming force in Gopher Prairie.

²The investigator found no reference to the Negro in Main Street.
partly because I don't know better (and God knows I'm no authority on trick forks and what pants you wear with a Prince Albert), but mostly its because I mean something. I'm about the only man in Johnson County that remembers the joker in the Declaration of Independence about Americans being supposed to have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.²

Indeed Bjornstorm personifies, in an indignant manner, the ideal of independence crying to democracy for the chance of survival. His objections to Main Street are those of Sinclair Lewis, namely, that the law of equal rights was being purged from the annals of democracy and a senseless conformity to a tyranny of opinion was supplanting the blessed doctrine. Lewis senses the hypocrisy of conforming to the dictates of a wretched majority rule of prudish blockheads. Liberty of thought and action was gradually slipping from the fundamental principles of democracy and license was usurping the favored seat.

The final examples, for our purposes, of the confusion of license with liberty are evidenced in Gopher Prairie’s war on intelligence. The town was hostile to Carol's intelligent interpretation and progressive reforms of its evils. It opposed her on every side. When she went to her first meeting with the women's study club, the Thanatopsis, she was abashed as she heard that the whole range of English poetry was the subject for the thirty minutes discussion. She was upset when papers were read by the members, mentioning only dates of birth and death, life-history and one or two of the most popular works of great poets like

1Ibid., pp. 265, 266.

2Ibid., p. 117.
Shakespeare, Burns, Tennyson, Browning and "other poets."¹ Five or ten minutes were given to each poet. Gopher Prairie had finished the poets and was ready for next week's labor: English Fiction and Essays. Carol was in a panic. She said to herself:

They're so self-satisfied. They think they're doing Burns a favor. They don't believe that they have a belated quest! They're sure that they have culture salted and hung up.²

When she suggested that they devote more meetings to discussions of Keats or Matthew Arnold or Rossetti, or Swinburn, for example, the wife of the minister objected. A compromise was reached, however, and the club decided to devote one more meeting entirely to English poetry.³

Another instance of the war on intelligence came out of Carol's interest in dramatics. She organized a dramatic club and proposed that they present a play for the town. At the play-reading committee, she received another hard blow from Gopher Prairie. One averagely intelligent Gopher Prairieite suggested the overworked "The School for Scandal" or the difficult "Oedipus Tyrannus." The Latin teacher in the high school offered as her suggestion, a school farce, "McGinerty's Mother-in-law," generally described in entertainment catalogues as:

Riproaring knock-out, 5 m. 3 f., 2 hrs. interior set, popular with churches and all high school occasions.⁴

¹The "other poets" worthy of consideration were Coleridge, Woodsworth, Shelley, Gray, Mrs. Easons and Kipling. Ibid., p. 127.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., p. 128.
⁴Ibid., p. 218.
Carol, on the other hand, suggested George Bernard Shaw's "Androcles." This was immediately voted down in favor, first, of "His Mother's Heart," and, finally, of "The Girl from Kankakee"—a play that had run for eleven months in New York. Carol's vote was the only one cast against "The Girl from Kankakee."¹

Gopher Prairie was, therefore, a town of ignorant, stupid people at war against intelligence, aliveness and beauty. Instances of this point are numerous throughout the book; for Gopher Prairie isolated liberty from liberality. Dullness, malice, narrowness and ignorance directly contributed to its violation of the spirit of democracy and at the same time were products of false practices of democracy. Main Street,² as a whole, is a vital example of the confusion of license with liberty.

This same confusion is again satirized and illustrated in Lewis's next novel, Babbitt, a story whose setting this time is a city in the Middle West of three thousand people. There is no conventional plot for the story, but the main events center around a central figure, George

¹Ibid., p. 219.

²John Farrar has a significant account of the approval of Main Street by the American public. He says Lewis made America Main Street conscious; that he was Main Street's midwife. Lewis "didn't expect a golden shower or even a silver one; he was ready for brief but passing favor, acknowledgment by the critics of an honest effort, then perhaps silence...His friends all bought the book, then the cognoscenti, then the literati, then the literate. A paltry thousand or so--then the sleeping beast turned over, rubbed its eyes, and woke up. Fifty thousand. It howled in an ecstasy of self-torture. One hundred thousand. It cried for more. Three hundred thousand. His publishers estimated that it has beyond doubt reached two million readers. The Literary Spotlight (New York, 1924), pp. 32-42.

Camile McCole says "...But sugared or not, we somehow like the pill which he offers us, Main Street and we swallow it because we find it hard to doubt his diagnosis of our case." "Future Significance of Sinclair Lewis," Catholic World, CXXII (1930), p. 314-22.
F. Babbitt, a real-estate business man of Zenith. The reactions of Babbitt to the various phases of his existence form the crux of the story. As Quinn says,

> the book is simply a series of interviews of Babbitt with life.¹

We meet Babbitt first in April, 1920, in his habitual quarters. We see him in his bath in his standardized house at Floral Heights, a residential district of Zenith after being awakened by the "best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks."² We meet his wife and his three children. The remainder of the book acquaints us with his routine, with his boosting, and with his activities and methods in business, in his clubs, the church, and with his friends. It also acquaints us with his fishing trip to Maine, with his one love escapade, with his dabbling in religion and with his stereotyped speeches at business dinner parties. At one time in the story, Babbitt stops to contemplate his existence. He finds it commonplace and attempts to escape to a freer, more natural life. His rebellion fails because of a whispering campaign inaugurated by some of his business associates and he returns to the routine existence with his dreams shattered. At this point, his son, Ted Babbitt, stops school, runs away with his childhood sweetheart, marries and returns to Zenith to work. Such is the dull, monotonous existence of the routinists of Zenith. It is no wonder that Babbitt is a novel without a plot, for plot suggests a weaving, a changing of events, a vital conflict with opposing forces. This static nature of the

¹R. H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 662.

²Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt (New York, 1922), p. 3. Hereafter this book will be referred to simply as Babbitt.
plot naturally would produce a similar kind of characterization. For instance, the minor characters in the novel create little or no impression on the reader. And Babbitt, himself, is but a robot. As Van Doren says of him:

He has no thorough going character because he has never needed one. It has been enough for him to do whatever others do, like an indistinguishable bee in an instinctive hive.¹

Quinn calls Babbitt a symptom of a social and economic disease.² Parrington describes him as a member of a vast herd of animals:

...like those earlier herds that rumbled about the plains, it drives foolishly in whatever directions their noses point—a herd endowed with tremendous blind power, with big bull leaders, but with minds rarely above their bellies and their dams. In the mass and at their own romantic rating they are distinctly imposing—big-necked, red-blooded, lusty, with glossy coats got from rich feeding grounds, and with a herd power that sweeps majestically onward in a cloud of dust of its own raising, veritable lords and masters of a continent. But considered more critically and resolved into individual members, they appear to the realist somewhat stupid feeble in brain and will, stuffed with conceit of their own excellence, esteeming themselves the great end for which creation has been in travail, the finest handiwork of the Most High who spreads the plains for their feeding grounds: with a vast respect for totems and fetishes; purveyors and victims of the mysterious thing called Bunk, who valiantly horn to death any audacious heretic who may suggest that rumbling about the plains filling their bellies, bellowing sacred adequate objectives for such immense power: a vast middleman herd, that dominates the continent but cannot reduce it to order or decency.³

²A. H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 662.
³Cf. Thomas Carlyle, "Happy", Past and Present (London, 1834)
⁴Vernon Louis Parrington, op. cit., pp. 11-12.
Perhaps this is a bitter attack on Americans in general, but in any event, Babbitt is representative of a type of blind conformity in America during the twenties. He might be called a philistine—a term, which according to the dictionary, is applied to:

A blind adherent to conventional ideas; an ignorant and narrow-minded persons, especially one given to money-making; one devoid of culture, or indifferent to art.¹

Babbitt was forever wondering "what will the neighbors think?" Michaud calls him Monsieur tout-le-mond ²—in other words, a man of the crowds.

Though Babbitt does not suggest a real person (this should be clear even to a Babbitt), he is, however, an unforgettable type. Representative of a middle class business man, he does what the average business man did in the twenties and likes what the average man liked. His thoughts are the thoughts, his foibles the foibles and his words the words of the business man. He is no more or less honest than the average business man.

Babbitt likes to work and do business on a large scale. He is fond of his home, fond of living in it and fond of leaving it too, once in a while.³ There is a dormant romanticism in him, but it is harmless and unheroic. In a sense, he is humorous; in another sense he is pathetic, and he generally acts on impulse. He has no culture or discriminating sense for the finer things in life; he is not capable of original thinking. He blunders into success. His ambition to be a lawyer was strangled

¹Funk and Wagnalls, New Standard Dictionary of the English Language.
²Régis Michaud, op. cit., p. 145.
³Ibid.
when accident chose real estate for him. Accident also chose his wife for him. He is proud of his business, proud of his clubs and associations, and proud of his country in a blustering, boastful sort of way. Despite his limitations as a strong, independent character, however, Babbitt has power of an impelling sort. And it is from this power that the driving thesis of the novel is created.

Lewis's purpose was, evidently, to satirize business and business methods in the twenties and to show the effect of all this on democracy. Indeed, Babbitt is dated within its own decade when "boosting" was extremely pronounced, when optimism rode on the back of inflation, and when everyone worshipped a metal god, money. Thus, through the figure of Babbitt the book presents business in all of its unlovely aspects. It shows the antagonistic and autocratic force of an overwhelming industrial environment, seeking to dominate man and making of him an empty, mechanical thing. In short, the book definitely drives home the thought that any society that so mechanizes man is not a true democracy. Therefore, the city of Zenith is, with respect to hypocrisy, complacency, standardized living, low spiritual values, and an overwhelming interest in money-making, no freer than the town of Gopher Prairie. In Zenith, however, the influences of business is naturally greater, and the degree of standardization on a wider scale. But the two locales are cut from the same cloth. In Zenith as in Gopher Prairie, happiness is inextricably identified with material comforts; individual liberty of thought and emotion are denied; homogeneity of ideas and actions become a symbol of progress for the city—a conspicuous instance of the confusion of liberty and license. Mediocrity and externalism are other manifestations of a false practice of democracy. Again, we have the result of a levelling
process in society, a mass-mindedness, an oligarchy of censorship. The spirit of men is either cloaked with boosterism or is dead; so also is the democratic spirit slowly dying as a result of violations of its ideals. Few men survive the pressure of Zenith; some have contemplative moods when they reflect that all is wrong with their society. However, if they attempt to escape from the side-show to reality, either their will is too weak to survive independently, or the licensing board, made up of Zenith associates, is too powerful for them to escape entirely. Usually they creep gratefully back into their chains after such an escapade and continue their mediocre existence forever. Truly Zenith is a giant octopus whose tentacles hold their victims inextricably in their grasp. It is a city that forces its population to glory in an accumulation of devices expressive of prosperity. Every family has to own an automobile, a refrigerator, a sleeping-porch and other luxuries which it identifies with success and happiness. But everything about this city is spurious and hollow. As Whipple says,

Zenith has attained a real beauty in its grouped towering skyscrapers, yet wholly by luck and accident, not purpose. And this beauty is only in the large; a closer inspection, though it shows comfort and luxury and even a kind of aesthetic striving, reveals this effort at beauty as spurious; from the Old English dining room of the Athletic Club to the sepia photographs on the living-room walls in Floral Heights, the taste for art is affected and unreal. The material showiness of Zenith is no improvement over the ugliness of Gopher Prairie for it is conventional only, and the inhabitants find their truest pleasure in the accumulation of ingenious mechanical contrivances and conveniences. Zenith has arrived at the perfection of the mechanical luxury in which the only flow is that it is altogether inhuman.¹

Growing out of Zenith's lust for mechanical luxury and its insensitiveness to the spurious and superficial, is the second major violation of the principle of liberty. This violation, advertising or boosting, is ingrained in business\(^1\) and in business methods. A brief account of American business will show this. Speculation came into the United States after the Industrial Revolution. At the turn of the present century, industrial growth took strides in leaps and bounds and market monopolies followed its development. Competition between business firms sprang up and the standardization of products gave impetus to the birth of advertising.\(^2\) Manufacturers, eager to outsell another company,

\(1\) Lewis gives his own theory of the tyranny of business in an early novel. He says:

For business, that one necessary field of activity to which the egotistic arts and sciences and theologies and military peurilites are but servants, that long-despised and always valiant effort to unify the labor of the world, is at last beginning to be something more than dirty smithing. No longer does the business man thank the better classes for permitting him to make and distribute bread and motor-cars and books. No longer does he crawl to the church to beg pardon for usury. Business is being recognized—and is recognizing itself—as ruler of the world.

With this consciousness of power it is reforming its old, petty, half-hearted ways; its idea of manufacture as a filthy sort of tinkering; of distribution as a chance pedling and squalid shopkeeping; it is feverishly seeking efficiency...In its machinery...But, like all monarchies, it must fail unless it becomes noble of heart. So long as capital and labor are divided, so long as the making of munitions or injurious food, is regarded as business, so long as Big Business believes that it exists merely to enrich a few of the lucky or the well born or the nervously active, it will not be efficient, but deficient. Lewis has hope for business in America, however.\(^2\) But the vision of an efficiency so broad that it can be kindly and sure, is growing—is discernible at once in the scientific business man and the courageous labor unionist. The Job (New York, 1917), pp. 25-26.

\(2\) Régis Michaud, \emph{op. cit.}, p. 146.
resorted to the megaphone and the amplifier for their success. Although advertising was first discovered as a safe business method, soon, the churches, the government, the universities, art, literature and even philanthropy began to rely on it. By 1920 there were 1,800 Kiwanis Clubs in America and 1,200 Lions Clubs, all singing 'pep' songs, adoring Dr. Frank Crane, reading advertisements on "How to Develop Power at Home," doting on Efficiency, organizing social service campaigns, speaking often of 'the redemptive and regenerative influence of business', quoting the Bible in directors' meetings, and building up, from the pages of Bruce Barton, a conception of Jesus as a 'horn executive', who had by sheer force of 'personality' and salesmanship 'put over' or 'swung' Christianity.

Zenith was a city of this type of boosters. Cholmondeley Frink supplied the words and Dabbitt and others, the "zip-zowie" for the banners with which they boosted their town, their business, the church. Flowery, alliterative advertisements were popular. Frink wrote such slogans as,

Zenith, the zip city-zeal, zest and zowie.

For the realtors' convention Frink added to the "City Song" a special verse for the business,

Oh, here we come,
The fellows from
Zenith, the Zip cites.
We wish to state
In real estate
There's none so live as we.

---

1 Harry Hartwick, op. cit., p. 260.
2 Ibid.
That advertisement was rampant is evidenced by one business man who put up a large sign in a window,

Toy Town for Tiny Tots,

and placed some doll houses and trees around, with the inscription at the bottom,

Baby likes this Dollydale, but Papa and Mama will Prefer our Beautiful Bungalows. ¹

As a result of such advertising, people rushed in to buy his real estate. Another instance of the widespread use of advertising occurred when the Manufacturer's Association gave a dinner. The Association presented to each of the ladies a chrysanthemum and to each of the men a leather billfold inscribed,

From Monarch the Mighty Motor Mart.²

A small town near Zenith boosted itself with pictures of the state capitol and large ears of corn with the label,

Nature's Gold, from Shelby Country, the Garden Spot of God's Own Country.³

Another town floated this pennant,

Hamburg, the Big Little City with the Logical Location, where every man is open-handed and every woman a heaven-born hostess, throws wide to you her hospitable gates.⁴

These examples, innocent as they appear, are in fact vicious, unthinking attacks on liberty and freedom of choice, according to Lewis.

¹Ibid., p. 162.
²Ibid., p. 165.
³Ibid., p. 164.
⁴Ibid., p. 167.
For advertising is presented in *Babbitt* as a usurping tyrant dominating the will and life of individuals and rendering them incapable of the rugged thinking necessary in a democracy. Pertinent to this is a statement of Michaud:

One cannot very well imagine the American methods of advertising as exposed in *Babbitt* succeeding in a nation as traditionally ironical and freeminded as France, for instance, where the average man is imbued with the Cartesian spirit and refuses to accept as true anything which does not appear evident—even if it were offered to him in a gold spoon.¹

This advertising mania greatly helped to standardize the mind and ideas of George Babbitt. He conformed to the superficial, external, mediocre conventions of his fellow-business men. When he spoke he said what they would have wanted him to say. An illustration is his speech to the Real Estate Board of the city of Zenith. He defines the "Ideal Citizen":

I picture him first and foremost as being busier than a bird-dog, not wasting a lot of good time in day-dreaming or going to sassety teas or kicking about things that are none of his business, but putting the zip into some store or profession or art. At night he lights up a good cigar and climbs into the little old bus, and maybe cusses the carburetor, and shoots out home. He mows the lawn, or sneaks in some practice putting and then he's ready for dinner. After dinner he tells the kiddies a story, or takes the family to the movies, or plays a few fists of bridge, or reads the evening paper, and a chapter or two of some good lively Western novel if he has a taste for literature, and maybe the folks next-door drop in and they sit and visit about their friends and the topics of the day. Then he goes happily to bed, his conscious clear, having contributed his mite to the prosperity of the city and to his own bank account.²


²*Babbitt*, pp. 181-182.
That is to say, he is,

a God-fearing, hustling, successful, two-fisted regular guy; who belongs to some Church with pep and piety to it, who belongs to the Boosters or the Rotarians or the Kiwanis, to the Elks or Moose or Red men or Knights of Columbus or any one of a score of organizations of good, jolly, kidding, laughing sweating, upstanding, lend-a-handing Royal Good Fellows, who plays hard and works hard, and whose answers to his critics is a square-toed boot that'll teach the grouchies and smart alecks to respect the He-man and get out a root for Uncle Samuel, U.S.A.!

Through this swift, full, loquacious address Babbitt is revealed as a symbol of zenith. He has no personality; his innate free spirit has been kidnapped and this garrulous, common-place creature is the ransom. His talk is free, but not his will. He is a type of the perverted form of the democratic spirit. The first settlers of the country chose the democratic form of government because it guaranteed freedom of the individual rights in a society. The family, the school, church—in short, no institution or association should prohibit man’s liberty or manufacture his thoughts, feelings and speech in a democracy. Of Babbitt, however, institutions and environment had made an automaton.

Sometimes, however, he realizes that something is wrong, incomplete, in his way of life. He is not satisfied:

Kind of comes over me; here I've pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six-cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven't any vices 'pecially, except smoking—and I'm practically cutting that out, by the way. And I belong to the church, and play enough golf to keep trim, and I only associate with good decent fellows. And yet, even so, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied.

1Ibid., p. 188.
2Ibid., pp. 60-61.
This expressed dissatisfaction in Babbitt is undoubtedly an inarticulate yearning for a free, rich and balanced life. He senses that he is the result of mass production, not of individuality. And so, at the close of the book, he encourages his son, Ted Babbitt, to marry for love and to do the work he likes best. Just as Carol standing over the cradle of her daughter dreams that Vassar—or perhaps Bryn Mawr—may do for her all that Blodgett College should have done for her mother, so Babbitt greets with approval the runaway marriage of his son. He says the following:

Practically I've never done a single thing I wanted to in my whole life! I don't know's I've accomplished anything except just get along. I figure out I've made about a quarter of an inch out of a possible hundred rods. Well, maybe you'll carry things on further. I don't know. But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you know what you wanted to do and did it. Well, those folks in there will try to bully you, and tame you down. Tell 'em to go to the devil! I'll back you. Take your factory job if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I've been...Go ahead old man! The world is yours.2

It is with a forlorn cheerfulness that Babbitt says, "Practically I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life." He has been a booster and a Rotarian, a member of the athletic club, with a wife, a son, a home and a car of his own in the typical city of three hundred thousand; yet he has never been happy. He was not happy because he tried to feed his soul upon bread alone. He has been without desire for anything but bread, for bread and ease and talking big. He has been un-

1See Main Street, p. 448.

2Babbitt, p. 401.
disciplined except by the noisy mob of standardized robots. And all his life he has been haunted, as so many Americans are haunted, with the fears of a deserted and lonely old age.¹ This was a classic experience: a man in the midst of prosperity stopping to weigh and value his possessions.² Like a flash, it comes to him the hypocritical, complacent thing his life had been. He has allowed material comforts to identify themselves with happiness. His freedom has been licensed by Zenith—by her board of censorship, and, as he says, by himself. He sees the mean thing his life had been and recognizes what he missed. His wish for his son, therefore, is for a different kind of freedom, a freedom from license of liberty.

As has been said, Babbitt's life exemplifies the pressure a highly mechanized society places on human and spiritual values. Had his son not revolted in his youth from such a deadening influence, he would, like his father, become a dismal failure in the midst of his material success.

Lewis's objection to philistinism and conformity to a purely material standard is similar to that of the prophets of the Victorian era—Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold. Like them, he sees happiness and success in terms of genuineness and total self-realization. This self-realization is to be achieved in a truly cultural society—in short, in a milieu founded upon basic democratic principles and practices.

To set forth this faith of Lewis in true democracy, despite his seeming attack on the American way of life, was the main purpose of this chapter. In order to achieve this purpose an effort was made to examine

²Carl Van Doren, op. cit., p. 305.
his first two outstanding novels, *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. In the examination of these books we have seen that *Main Street* and *Babbitt* are important not only in giving, respectively, a picture of life in a small town and in a city in the twenties, but in being a serious criticism of the cheap cultural pattern America was weaving for herself—a pattern which in principle and behavior was in discord with the original.
CHAPTER III

ELMER GANTY AND ARROWSMITH: CHARLATANISM IN PUBLIC LIFE

In America, most of us—not readers alone but even writers—are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification...of our faults as well as our virtues...we still most revere the writers for the popular chorus chant that the America of a hundred and twenty million population is still as simple, as pastoral, as it was when it had but forty million,...that...America has gone through the revolutionary change from rustic colony to world-empire without having in the least altered the bucolic and Puritanic simplicity of Uncle Sam.1

These are the words of Sinclair Lewis, first American Nobel Prize winner, upon acceptance of the award from the Swedish Academy at Stockholm in December, 1930. He is referring to a popular tradition in America that a man of letters must not negatively criticize the country. Upon Lewis's acceptance of the award, many complaints came from his countrymen who, though proud that the honor had at last fallen to an American, objected to the pictures he had drawn of Americans. Their condemnation upholds Lewis's statement that Americans are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification. Lewis had killed sacred cows, had written unlovely descriptions of the American way of life, had discredited a fatherland in his novels. Americans were, therefore, distrustful of him. For, had not Main Street and Babbitt, vitriolic satires on American types, made the provincial as well as the urban elements in America shudder?

What his countrymen failed to see was the innate sincerity of the man, his profound love of true democracy. Williams calls him the "naughty

1Quoted by Carl Van Doren, Sinclair Lewis (New York, 1933), p. 8.

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boy at the party,"¹ but at bottom Lewis's cynicism and scathing attacks
were not indications of capriciousness, but were a conscious effort to
quicken the nation to a richer way of life. They were not treason to a
faith but a boring from within of a candid realist. Lewis could not
write a glorifying literature when the America he saw was banal and foul.
He had, as Van Doren says, by nature and by instinct demanded that human
life be beautiful and splendid; had always been disappointed that he could
not everywhere find what his passion looked for; had always offset his
anger at stupidity by his delight in comedy; and had always spoken without
muffling his words.² As it was pointed out in our examination of Main
Street and Babbitt, attacks on standardized behavior in two different
locales of American life in the twenties. The former, as it was shown,
was Lewis's assault upon the illiberal, bigoted environment of the small
town, while Babbitt is a story of a city where avariciousness in business
developed a license on freedom. Lewis's treatment and tone were acrid in
both of these novels as he slashed away at hypocrisy, stupidity and abuse
of liberty. As he advanced from these novels to ones like Arrowsmith and
Dodsworth, however, his disgust is less corrosive and violent and his
satire tempers itself. As he concerns himself with the practices of
science and the spirit of international affairs, his powers as a novelist
tend to broaden and he seems to become less of the iconoclast and more of
the sympathizer.

However, in Elmer Gantry, Lewis continues his role of idol-breaker
in the same vein as Main Street and Babbitt. The ministry is Lewis's
field of attack for this effort, and the story of Elmer Gantry is earthy

¹Stanley T. Williams, American Literature (Philadelphia, 1933), p. 141.
²Carl Van Doren, Sinclair Lewis, pp. 13-14.
and detailed in its description of a hypocrite in religion. The story opens with the following graphic lines which form a setting for the story:

Elmer Gantry was drunk. He was eloquently drunk, lovingly and pugnaciously drunk. He leaned against the bar of the Old Home Sample Room, the most gilded and urbane saloon in Cato, Missouri, and requested the bartender to join him in "The Good Old Summer Time", the waltz of the day.1

The book closes with these lines:

...in a sacred silence Elmer prayed:
'O Lord, thou hast stooped from thy mighty throne and rescued thy servant from the assault of the mercenaries of Satani! Mostly we thank thee because we can go on doing thy work, and thine alone! Not less but more zealously shall we seek utter purity and the prayer-life, and rejoice in freedom from all temptations!

He turned to include the choir, and for the first time he saw that there was a new singer, a girl with charming ankles and lovely eyes, with whom he would certainly have to become well acquainted. But the thought was so swift that it did not interrupt the paean of his prayer:

'Let me count this day, Lord, as the beginning of a new and more vigorous life, as the beginning of a crusade for complete morality and the domination of the Christian Church through all the land. Dear Lord, thy work is but begun! We shall yet make these United States a moral nation!2

It is sufficient to say that Elmer Gantry was a reprobate and a blasphemer at the beginning of the story and remains so until the ending.

When the narrative opens, Elmer Gantry was a senior at Terwellinger College in Kansas. Jim Lefferts, a very riotous young man, was his sole friend and room-mate, with whom he was sportive in bar rooms, on the

1Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry (New York, 1927), p. 1. Hereafter this book will be referred to simply as Elmer Gantry.

2Ibid., p. 432.
street with girls, in their own rooms, and at other persons' houses. As a freshman, Elmer was class president but not very beloved in the office. As a senior, he desired the office again, and obtained it, despite protests, through his Machiavellian tactics. Contemptuous of the church from the outset, Elmer Gantry joined the ministry as one joins a racket, because he saw it as an easy way to make money. A speech which he made to a Y.M.C.A. group at school, the most important part being taken from Robert G. Ingersoll, is an example of the type of preaching he does throughout the book:

Love is the only bow on life's dark cloud. It is the Morning and Evening Star. It shines upon the cradle of the babe, and sheds its radiance upon the quiet tomb. It is the mother of Art, inspirer of poet, patriot and philosopher. It is the air and light of every heart, builder of every home, kindler of every fire on every hearth. It was the first to dream of immortality. It fills the world with melody, for music is the voice of Love. Love is the magician, the enchanter, that changes worthless things to joy, and makes right royal kings and queens of common clay. It is the perfume of the wondrous flower—the heart—and without that sacred passion, that divine swoon, we are less than hearts; but with it, earth is heaven and we are gods.¹

The applause he received after this speech was immense. Later whenever he was desirous of great applause (which was nearly always) he would quote the foregoing passage or parts of it.

The story moves heavily through a series of ugly ventures of Elmer Gantry. His first church was at Schoenheim, a country town. But he soon leaves this charge after he had unscrupulously taken liberty with a young, innocent girl and after he had cowardly placed the blame for the misdeed on Floyd Naylor, one of her country lovers. His next church,

¹Ibid., p. 57.
larger than the first, was lost because of a drunken escapade. For this
he suffers the loss of his license as a Baptist minister. Afterwards
he becomes a salesman but forsakes this business to join a woman
evangelist, Sharon Falconer, and her troupe. Remaining with her for
several years in the capacity of business manager, part-time evangelical
leader and lover, he is grieved, in a selfish way, when she dies in a
fire. Gantry then goes to New York, where he becomes a partner of Mrs.
Evans Riddle, proprietor of the Victory Thought-power Headquarters. He
does not remain here long, however, because of his theft of money from
the collection plate. Beginning a series of independent lectures on the
psychology of making money, he cannot make enough to support himself. A
school mate lends him money to travel back to the West, where he becomes
a minister again—this time in the Methodist Church. Near the end of the
story he marries an honest woman, in spite of his graft, dishonesty and
immorality, obtains a large church and exerts unwarranted influence in
the community; later he pastors a larger church and at the close of the
book has very good chances of becoming a bishop. Such is the checkered
career of Elmer Gantry, a thoroughgoing wolf in sheep's clothing.

But he is not a full-blooded character. He is a type just as Carol
and Babbitt are types. In fact, with only a few exceptions, Lewis's
characters are treated externally and superficially rather than
emotionally and sympathetically. "He is above all," as Whipple notes,
"a collector of specimens."¹ Elmer Gantry, Sharon Falconer and Frank
Shallard are outstanding among those specimens.

Elmer Gantry, the figure around whom the central action is constructed, is a type of charlatan. He is a type of the false priest—not a real person. His body yearns for depraved and perverted experiences. Therefore, it is the absence of soul, the absence of inner conflict between worldly aspiration and religious idealism that causes Michaud to call him "a hypocrite by excess, by hyperbole" and Van Doren to consider him "a bully, a sneak, a liar, a lecher, a drunkard and an ignoramus." A mammonite and an imposter, Gantry never fluctuates, as a real man would do, between a conception of right or wrong. Satisfaction for his own villainy marks him as a conformist to a type which Lewis conceived. An example of this and one of the most distasteful episodes in the book occurs in the country home of one of his church members, Mr. Bains. The entire family group and Reverend Gantry were singing "Beulah Land", while the young daughter of the house, Lulu, played. Gantry sang tenderly and soothingly:

O Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land,
(You little darling!)
As on thy highest mount I stand,
(I wonder if I kinda looked pathetic, would she baby me?)
I look away across the sea
(Oh, I'll be good—won't go too far.)
Where mansions are prepared for me,
(Her wrists while she plays—like to kiss 'em!)
And view the shining glory shore,
(Going to, by thunder! Tonight!)
My heaven, my home for evermore.
(Wonder if she'll come down-stairs in a wrapper?)

'I just wish I knew,' said the wife..., a sentimental lively lady, 'what you were thinking of while we sang, Brother Gantry?'

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1 Régès Michaud, op. cit., p. 151.
2 Carl Van Doren, Sinclair Lewis, p. 27.
"Why—-I was thinking how happy we'll all be when we are purified and at rest in Beulah Land."

"Why, I knew it was something religious—you sang so sorte happy and inspired."

Another part of the story that illustrates that Gantry is consistent to a type, is that which deals with his introduction to a boarding house near his newest church. The screen door was opened by a jolly girl of fourteen or fifteen, with a caroling voice. Gantry followed the child as she frisked in front of him to show him his room. Elmer was clutched by the familiar feeling, "swifter than thought, more elaborate than the strategy of a whole war."2

In brief, Gantry is a type who is always beyond truth, not under it, a hypocrite by ambition and anticipation, a scoundrel, a debauche and a cheat—a Daemon of religion.3 For this reason most critics agree that Elmer Gantry is overdrawn.4

1Elmer Gantry, pp. 109-110.
2Ibid., p. 263.
3Regis Michaud, op. cit., p. 151.
4A. H. Quinn holds that Gantry is unconvincing because he is not important enough to make a book. Says Quinn, "Dickens painted the hypocritical evangelist in the Reverend Mr. Chadband perfectly, but he knew that such a characterization was useful only as a minor figure. All that is necessary to place Elmer Gantry properly is to compare it with The Damnation of Hare. Bar, by the side of which it sinks into insignificance. Op. Cit., p. 664.

Fred Lewis Pattee in his book has this charge: "Elmer Gantry, exposure of utter depravity of the Christian ministry, a concentration into one character of all the charges ever made against ministerial hypocrisy... too strong... too much, and art is 'nothing too much'. The New American Literature (New York, 1930), p. 343.

Grant Overton says: "With Elmer Gantry its author seems to be rapidly slipping into the abyss on the edge of which realism constantly walks." Grant Overton, An Hour of the American Novel (Philadelphia, 1929), p. 136.
The second person who follows caricature is Sharon Falconer, also a half-crazy mountebank whose supreme ambition is to fleece the public. Sharon is believed by many readers to have been drawn directly from Aimee McPhersons.¹ This is doubtful, but, nevertheless, she stands as a representation of an arch hypocrite who, with a huge evangelistic troupe with musical directors, costumers, advertising managers, press agents, moves from one triumph to another. She and Elmer exchange kisses back stage "rake in the shekels, plan investments, and do faith healing."² In short, theirs is a show of religion. But when their Waters of Jordan Tabernacle, which they have erected on the New Jersey Coast, burns down on opening night and Sharon is killed, Elmer Gantry is broken. He had cultivated a fairly decent devotion to her. Sharon herself, although only a symbol, became quite a commanding figure in the novel. As Boynton notes:

she is so commanding a figure that the author has to invoke a holocaust to get her out of the story.³

However, not once does she rise from the sphere of caricature.

A third example of caricature in the novel is the Reverend Frank Shallard. More positive in his faith in liberal religion and decidedly more virtuous than Elmer or Sharon, Lewis sets Shallard up as a symbol of the central confusion in the Protestant ministry. But Lewis merely sketches him in. The author seems not to be sympathetically interested

¹A woman evangelist, touring in the twenties, of a Four-Square Gospel made in California. See Arthur B. Maurice, "The History of Sinclair Lewis's Books", Bookman, LXIX, (March, 1929), 52-53. The author holds that the Sharon Falconer part of Lewis's novel had assumed form before any one had ever heard of the Los Angeles evangelist.

²Harry Bartwick, op. cit., p. 269.

³Percy Boynton, op. cit., p. 194.
in the man who was somewhat vaguely trying to make organized religion suit the needs and doubts of modern man.\textsuperscript{1} He makes Shallard a mouthpiece for a few of his own convictions and then has the Ku Klux Klan lynch him.

Now that the plot and main characters in \textit{Elmer Gantry} have been discussed, we turn to an examination of the purpose of the work. As the question of the purpose or thesis of the novel arises, one may be concerned with two possible approaches. There are those critics who believe that \textit{Elmer Gantry} is an attack on religion as an ideal in America. An attack on the institution at large, they think, would indicate a belief that all ministers are like the profligate Elmer Gantry\textsuperscript{2} and that all religious ideals have declined. Squire notes that if this be true, "his Lewis's job is rather to start another Reformation than to write a book about them."\textsuperscript{3} The other side of criticism upholds the idea that Lewis is making a stroke at the hypocrisy of some of the clergy.

Lippmann takes this view. He writes:

\textit{Elmer Gantry is the study of a fundamentalist clergyman in the United States portrayed as utterly evil in order to injure the fundamentalists.} \textsuperscript{4}

Boynton agrees with Lippmann. He holds that Gantry is the product of a philistine and stupid social order, and exploits the church without ever in a real sense belonging to it.\textsuperscript{5} Michaud combines the point of view that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1}Walter Lippmann, \textit{Men of Destiny} (New York, 1928), p. 88.
\item \textsuperscript{2}Rebecca West, the English critic, calls the book "a sequence of sermons and seductions."
\item \textsuperscript{3}J. C. Squire, \textit{Contemporary American Authors} (New York, 1923), p. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{4}Walter Lippmann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 89.
\item \textsuperscript{5}Percy Boynton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 196.
\end{itemize}
the book is an attack on religion with the idea that Lewis is attacking a type of clergyman. He says:

Religion, as everything else, has become automatic. Mysticism has been replaced by respectability. The American churches failed to raise the people to their high level, and, in order to make themselves popular, they brought their ideals down to earth. To make up for the absence of the really faithful they relied more and more on the larger number. They were seized with the spirit of greed and material comfort, and betrayed the teachings of Him who said that His Kingdom was not of their world. They courted money to keep the congregations, they resorted to the advertising methods of the 'realtors.' A display of riches and material splendor outside, and within the walls everything except Christianity. Hygiene, sport, eugenics, prophylaxy, domestic and political economy, entertainments and very little Bible. Churches vied with one another to see which could present the most gorgeous facade. Cathedrals were erected. Cathedrals of stone and not of faith. The church became fashionable, a club, a school, a hotel, a parlor. Elmer Gantry had no difficulty in investing his lust and greed in such a temple. It repaid him well.¹

It is not the purpose of this study to prove that Lippmann and Boynton take the more plausible view or that Michaud is correct. However, it might be true that as one reviewer has said, Elmer Gantry is a comic valentine sent to the clergy.² Since it was dedicated to F. L. Mencken, one may believe that Lewis, like Mencken, was exposing stupidity and charlatarism wherever he found it. Also one may observe the bearing of the Bryan-Darrow case controversy on the writing of Elmer Gantry³.

¹Regis Michaud, op. cit., p. 132.

²Numerous ministers rose in arms against Lewis when the book appeared. Two Kansas City ministers announced themselves as originals from whom the Reverend Elmer Gantry had been drawn and reviled Sinclair Lewis. When informed that there was a rival claimant in the field, each stopped the attack on Mr. Lewis for a moment to denounce the other as a rank imposter and a colossal and vainglorious liar. A very prominent minister of Los Angeles pointedly invited Sinclair Lewis to visit that city, promising that in such an event he himself would lead a mob in a lynching party.

However, whatever the speculations might be concerning Lewis's purpose, one thing seems fairly certain: In *Elmer Gantry*, there are subtle and powerful manifestations of Lewis' love of and stand for democracy.

The ideal of democracy is attacked by the conduct of Elmer Gantry. In the first instance, democracy was not established to give men the right to trample over their brothers. In a democracy every man is bound to honor every man. This is agreeable both with nature and religion.

Honor all men (I Pet. ii, 17)

Elmer Gantry, however, honors no man or woman. His life is a series of taking from his neighbor whatever afforded him pleasure. As Boynton said, his life was a "series of intrigues." He violates sanctity of person and thing in his zest for power and pleasure; he injures Lula Baines and does abuse to Franck Shallard with absolute disrespect for human nature and the dignity of mankind.

Also, Gantry's life was a violation of the spirit of democracy in the manner that he discharged his office. The constitution makes no provision for a man to be entrusted with power whose appetite and disposition prey upon men, embezzle their rights, life, liberty and estate. Gantry's role was that of public servant and like any official his oath was one of duty to men. Not only did he violate the dignity of human nature but he did sacrilege upon his office. As a leader, a spiritual leader, his task was a distinguished one. The people had faith in him, entrusting the purposeful part of their lives to him--their spiritual

happiness. Holiness, integrity and virtue are the ideals for priests, clergymen and ministers; they are keepers of the temple of God and in this respect should be upright as the highest type of public servant. Gantry's office should have been an inspiration to himself and should have inspired sincerity, purpose and dignity in others. Instead, he fouled it and made it rank. On occasions, as the following instance shows, his love of dictatorship over his fellowman is made articulate:

He was disappointed that the church could not give him a pastoral assistant or a director of religious education. He'd have them soon enough—and boss them! Great!  

Not only did he possess a secret burning desire for power over people; but as he progressed in his dastardly career it became ever more consuming. The following illustrates the frenzy of the dictator:

'Oh, I can put it over the whole bunch!' Elmer stretched his big arms in joyous vigor. 'I'll build a new church. I'll take the crowds away from all of 'em.' I'll be the one big preacher in Zenith. And then—Chicago? New York? Bishopric? Whatever I want! Wheel!  

The foregoing is adequate to condemn this modern Machiavelli. In no way can his life or work be reconciled with the spirit of democracy—a government of and for the people.

Finally, government as everyone will agree, is to provide for the security, the quiet and happy enjoyment of life, liberty and property. It is an attempt to find the most nearly perfect condition for the existence of mankind. We have already pointed out that a democratic government is based on a liberal federation of souls, a fellowship where men are equal

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1Elmer Gantry, p. 311.
2Ibid., p. 328.
before the government and where there is a striving for contentment and happiness of the whole. Elmer Gantry was a sensationalist, a usurper. His services were conducted with theatricality and hysteria in religion. Significant contributions to the happiness of men are not translated in terms of loud, boisterous demands that people worship God nor are they a series of meetings where the leader sings pep songs similar to college football yells. Gantry's offering to the happiness of a democratic people was a perverted form of the things needed. It was an unenlightened attempt to make people express emotions without ever experiencing anything deeper than a feeling of ecstasy. For example:

In the autumn of his first year in Zenith Elmer started his famous Lively Sunday Evenings. Mornings, he announced, he would give them solid religious meat to sustain them through the week, but Sunday evenings he would provide the best cream puffs. Christianity was a glad religion, and he was going to make it a lot gladder.

There was a safe, conservative, sanguinary hymn or two at his Lively Sunday Evenings, and short sermon about sunsets, authors, or gambling, but most of the time they were just happy boys and girls together. He had them sing 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'Swanee River', with all the balladry which might have been considered uneclesiastical if it had not been hallowed by the war: 'Tipperary' and 'There's a Long, Long, Trail', and 'Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag' and 'Smile, Smile, Smile.'

He made the women sing in contest against the men; the young people against the old; and the sinners against the Christians. That was lots of fun, because some of the most firmly saved brethren, like Elmer himself, pretended for a moment to be sinners. He made them whistle the chorus and hum it and speak it; he made them sing it while they waved handkerchiefs, waved one hand, waved both hands.

Other attractive features he provided. There was a ukulele solo by the champion uke-player from the University of Winnemac. There was a song rendered by a sweet little girl of three, perched upon the pulpit. There was a mouth-organ contest,
between the celebrated Harmonica Quartette from the Higginbotham Casket Factory and the best four harmonists from the B. and K.C. railroad shops; surprisingly won (according to the vote of the congregation) by the enterprising and pleasing young men from the railroad.¹

Of course, his congregation laughed and seemed happy as it entered with him into this "theater of religion." But it was only superficially happy. True happiness comes when people have high ideals in life to strive for, when they are inspired by rich, meaningful experiences and when their souls are fed by a comforting faith in men, in institutions, in God and in life. Elmer Gantry used these perverted methods to work his congregation into a humor so that he could drive home some fears and horrors which he identified as instructive of the "good life." He told about the horrors of hell, and,

Once to illustrate the evils of betting, he had them bet as to which of two frogs would jump first. Once he had the representative of an illustrious grape-juice company hand around sample glasses of his beverage, to illustrate the superiority of soft drinks to the horrors of alcohol. And once he had up on the platform a sickening twisted motor-car in which three people had been killed at a railroad crossing. With this as an example, he showed his flock that motor speeding was but one symptom of the growing madness and worldliness and materialism of the age, and that this madness could be cured only by returning to the simple old-time religion as preached at the Wellspring Methodist Church.²

Elmer Gantry led his congregation to look on religion with fear, to shudder with him as he told stories how repentence in sinners comes too late, how the Bible must never be disputed, and how hell-fire burns. In short, he lacked high seriousness, and did nothing to know the best and to make it prevail.

¹Ibid., p. 341.
²Ibid., p. 342.
Moreover, Elmer Gantry was not alone in his tramp on the tenets of democracy. The incident of the brute violence done Frank Shallard, an honest minister in the profession, is proof of an unjust society.

Shallard, because he expressed liberal views of the function of religion, became the victim of a savage mob attack. Injustice of the lowest, most treacherous type is his reward for questioning the evangelists, the fundamentalists and the shouters. His penalty was out of the bounds of law, out of the bounds of a democratic country. The public officials allowed the Ku Klux Klan spirit to take the law in its hands, to torture and to murder a man, unprotected under the realms of existing democracy. This incident, given to us in detail by Lewis, shows the sort of dastardly practices our country often permits.

But if both Lewis’s stand for democracy and the American practice of it can be seen in Elmer Gantry, in Arrowsmith, we have a novel that deals with the problem even more clearly and powerfully. In the development of the novel, Lewis carries Martin Arrowsmith, a young bourgeois physician, through the ordinary handicaps and temptations which this nation sets before the gifted medical practitioner. A cross-section of the medical vocation in the United States is unfolded before our vision as we observe the hero successively as a country doctor in a replica of Gopher Prairie, as Assistant Commissioner of Public Health in the upstart city of Zenith, as a pathologist in the fashionable Rouncefield Clinic of New York, as a bacteriologist at the endowed McGurk Institute of New York, as a commissioner of fighting a tropical plague on the Island of St. Hubert in the West Indies, and as a hermit of science in a laboratory located in the wilderness of Vermont. Arrowsmith’s checkered career, therefore, reveals the tragedy of rural quackery, the politics and fraud connected with
public health administration in the small urban center, the refined commercialism of hospitals for the wealthy, the financial temptations and underhand practices of distinguished research laboratories, the manifold problems of the commissioner of tropic medicine, and the numerous disadvantages of the independent bourgeois researcher.

Carrying the hero through so many varied experiences in the medical profession, Lewis shows that he had made a careful study\(^1\) of the field. Not only this—he has made a careful study of human nature. For Martin Arrowsmith and his wife are two of the most vividly drawn individuals in modern fiction; and Dr. Max Gottlieb, the austere Jewish devotee of pure science, is a product of whom any novelist might well be proud.

Martin Arrowsmith, possessing genius and loyalty to science that amounts to a religion, is shown as he confronts the material forces that threaten to corrupt his work and vision. But the worst enemy to his idealism is his soul's yearning for wealth and security for himself and his wife, Leora. And it is in the deft handling of this stirring inner conflict between worldly aspiration and scientific idealism that Lewis demonstrates his power to create what Quinn aptly calls "a character of spiritual significance,"\(^2\) and what Carl Van Doren appropriately considers "a highly distinctive individual."\(^3\) Given every opportunity to become a

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\(^1\)In writing Arrowsmith, Lewis was assisted by a scientist, Dr. Paul de Kruif, the author of Microbe Hunters. Lewis and Dr. de Kruif even travelled to the tropics collecting facts.


\(^3\)Carl Van Doren, op. cit., p. 44.
dilettante or a mammonite, Arrowsmith fluctuates between his conceptions of right and wrong. One of the most dramatic episodes in the book occurs in the West Indies, where the protagonist struggles with the temptation to test the effectiveness of his personally compounded antitoxin by inoculating half of the plague-stricken native population and leaving the other half without treatment. The pressure of governmental officials and the pitiable pleas of the sufferers finally overcome Arrowsmith's devotion to pure science, and the whole population receives injections. Another well-handled part of the story is that which deals with the death of Leora during the plague and with the subsequent marriage of Martin to a wealthy woman whose views on the medical profession are similar to those of the scientists at the McSuk Institute. Rather than stagnate in this form of matrimony, Arrowsmith finally returns to his reasoned convictions and takes refuge in a laboratory in Vermont. In brief, the inner struggle in Arrowsmith between the temptations of a capitalistic society and the integrity of an honest character, constitutes a probing into the inner life, an exploration of the heart and mind, that our foregoing emphasis on Lewis as a portrayer of types must not let us overlook.

Though not accorded so extensive treatment as her husband, Leora must be accepted as one of the best feminine characters of contemporary fiction. In her character, the reader feels human warmth and senses a sympathetic attitude on the part of the author. Sweet, tender, and likeable, Leora, nevertheless, possesses elements of strength and is a worthy wife for Martin until her death, which Lewis touchingly draws. Another magnificent creation in the novel is Dr. Max Gottlieb, the high-minded professor, who first converted Arrowsmith to ideal and unselfish
devotion to scientific research. Throughout the novel we see the influence of this noble man on the hero. But at least one main character is merely a type. He is Dr. Pickerbaugh, "A montebank, who is the scientific prototype of Elmer Gantry."¹

Arrowsmith, as Blankenship has noted, "is specifically a study of the conflict between commercialism and the scientific spirit."² Its thesis is that the impersonal quest for truth in a social order that is organized around monetary interests, is difficult, if not impossible. It does not take the reader long, consequently, to realize that Lewis's major aim is to expose the medical profession in its weaker and more vulnerable phases. Throughout the book we see the middle-class scientist, swayed by the power of politics and the weight of wealth, restless and recalcitrant before the forces of greed and intrigue. The stupid and two-faced policies of the Mid-west are repeated, but in a more subtle fashion and with more devastating results, in the great Eastern Metropolis. There is a detailed exposition of the evils of the endowed medical institute, where investigators contrive to anticipate each other's discoveries and are prodded by publicity-seeking big business that has no sympathetic understanding of the unselfish idealism on which pure science is based. The conclusion of the novel suggests that it is better to have scholarly independence, even at the risk of social prestige and financial inconvenience, than to submit to the tyranny of American capitalism. With this as its target, the book is adequately supplied with illustrations of the absence of the democratic spirit in America. The stupid and two-faced

¹Russell Blankenship, _American Literature_ (New York, 1931), p. 662.
²Ibid., p. 661.
policies of the Mid-west are perverted ideals of democracy of the type found in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. At the university, Arrowsmith realizes that American society is

"a mill to turn out men and women who will lead moral lives, play bridge, drive good cars, be enterprising in business, and occasionally mention books, though they are not expected to have time to read them,"

that is

"a Ford Motor Factory,"

whose graduates

"are beautifully standardized."

He also realizes, as Hartwick notes,

"that the medical college is very much the same sort of place with professors whose only interest is to teach their acquiescent students a handful of staple prescriptions, the importance of 'making money', 'how to impress your patients', the proper choice in office furniture, and the essentials of 'getting ahead'."

This teaching and practice of charlatanism in medicine became common. Under the letter of democracy scientists continued their practices of fleecing the public year after year. Lewis's protests were great against this violation of the fundamental spirit of democracy. He gives several characters who exemplify this protest.

When Dr. Almus Pickerbaugh crosses the path of Martin, Lewis again shows "the case of advertising, and its evil influences in the higher spheres," as Michaud notes. An echo of Babbitt, Pickerbaugh violates

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2Ibid.

3Ibid.

4Harry Hartwick, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

5Reges Michaud, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
the law of liberty under a democracy by forcing down the throat of the public, moronic displays and addresses. Pickerbaugh, as Hartwick calls him, "is a bubbling Billy Sunday crusader against drinking and germs, whose chief delight is to spread his views by means of jingles and rousing address before clubs" on such themes as "Health First, Safety Second, and Booze Nowhere at all." He has organized his eight daughters, Orchid, Verbena, Daisy, Jonquil, Hibiscus, Narcissa, Arbota, and Gladiola, into what he calls the Healthette octette, and trained them to recite his doggerel verses and sing "The Health Hymn" (to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic):

Oh, are you out for happiness or are you out for pelf?
You owe it to the grand old flag to cultivate yourself,
To train the mind, keep clean the streets, and ever guard your health.
Then we'll all go marching on.
A healthy mind in a clean body,
A healthy mind in a clean body,
A healthy mind in a clean body,
The slogan for one and all."

Almus Pickerbaugh is a medical demagogue and, as Boynton says, "he is drawn with almost Dickensian finality."3

When Arrowsmith goes to join his old teacher at the McGurk Institute in New York, Lewis gives a detailed exposition of the evils of the institute. Arrowsmith finds that the institute is nothing more than a social playground for Mrs. McGurk, the rich and exasperating wife of its founder.

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1Harry Hartwick, op. cit., p. 264.
2Arrowsmith, p. 203.
3Percy Boynton, op. cit., p. 192.
Before Martin had been at McGurk long he realized that all his colleagues were secretly grouped in factions:

Tubbs, Holabird, and perhaps Tubb's secretary, Pearl Robbins, were the ruling caste. It was murmured that Holabird hoped some day to be made Assistant Director, an office which was to be created for him. Gottlieb, Terry Nickett, and Dr. Nicholas Yea, that long-mustached and rustic biologist whom Martin had first taken for a carpenter, formed an independent faction of their own, and however, much he disliked the boisterous Nickett, Martin was dragged into it.1

Also the instance of Director Rippleton Holabird suggests charlartanism and philistinism:

Director Rippleton Holabird had also married money, and whenever his colleagues hinted that since his first ardent work in physiology he had done nothing but arrange a few nicely selected flowers on the tables hewn out by other men, it was a satisfaction to him to observe that these rotters came down to the Institute by subway, while he drove elegantly in his coupe.2

Boynton says that

Arrowsmith's experiences have illustrate the thesis that though the countryside is stupid and inhospitable to science the city, with its show of friendliness, is subtly and insidiously dangerous. It offers the scientific investigator a laboratory and assistant and a large wage, but it begrudges him the time to follow his curiosity to its final goal, to be certain of his findings, to be deliberate and modest in his statement of results. According to this thesis the control of the great research foundation inevitably falls into the hands of men who are managers, exploiters, publicity-seekers...To oppose them is to risk not merely personal success, but to put in jeopardy the five ends to which the scientist is dedicated. To place a genuine devotee of the truth in such a position is either to break him

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1Arrowsmith, p. 297.
2Ibid., p. 416.
or to banish him.¹

McGurk Institute is then seen to be a demagogue that holds supposedly free men in its clutches. There is no liberty for the individual scientist, only compliance with what the bosses order—a mass production of charlatans of science.

Arrowsmith's idealism, which is the first instance of Lewis ascribing to his protagonist a rejective power over his environment, shows the author's solution to the problem of America and refutes some critics who have said that he gives no positive, no pragmatic philosophy for its recovery from a dread disease. For in Arrowsmith Lewis offers the scientific method as a possible alternative to the confusion of the age. And in order to do this, he shows his hero in the grips of all sorts of temptations and confusion of values. Sometimes Arrowsmith, like Babbitt and Gantry, is not truly heroic in his pursuit of truth as opposed to the mere making of money. He is often swayed by the forces of matter, for the milieu in which he lives is hostile to his ideals. As a result, Arrowsmith struggles several times in the story to stifle his idealism and to play the game the easy, popular way, to immediate results, publicity, and profits. Leora's death, notes Lovett, from smoking in the laboratory a half finished cigarette on which a maid had spilt a test-tube of germs, at the time when Martin was caressing another woman, is necessary to Lewis's program of showing Arrowsmith's prostitution of purposes. This other woman, Joyce Lanyon, the symbol of the intrusion of the social world into the privacies of science is an important step in Lewis's campaign to de-bamboozle

the American public and relieve its institutions of bunk."

However, Lewis's hatred for alarm, his contempt for the jocular hail-fellow show of solidarity, for the speeded up manufacture of shoddy results—in short, every manifestation of false democracy—bring Arrowsmith back to scientific research and to hostility to the immediate and mediocre.

Nevertheless, we are forced to conclude that idealistic research has little chance to survive in a democracy dominated by industrialism and unscrupulous politics. Arrowsmith preserves his personal integrity only by giving up both his position and his wife; and although he continues his research in isolation, his only hope of success is in his satisfaction and contribution, not in returns and popularity. But why

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2Hazard believes Arrowsmith to be a much strange character than he is drawn in the novel. She compares him with the Puritan pioneers in his contempt for the immediate and practical as compared with the abstract and eternal; in his suspicion that any form is tainted with insincerity; in his ruthlessness toward anything or anybody that gets in the way of his dedication. She says:

But while his resemblance to the Puritan is probably one of which he himself was unconscious, he is proudly conscious of his resemblance to the pioneer...Like the transcendentalists, Arrowsmith must revert approximately to the conditions of regional pioneering in order to find opportunity for his adventure in spiritual pioneering. Martin Arrowsmith is the most recent incarnation of that familiar frontier character, the Refugee from Civilization...He and Terry in their cabin laboratory in the woods joyously plan their work—not work for immediate results, for assured profits, for sensational publicity, but long, unrecognized, unremunerative work which may very probably in the end get them nowhere. A new note in American pioneering is struck in this exultant acceptance of failure..." Op. cit., pp. 284-285.
in a country supposedly democratic should a man be forced into asceticism when his work is for a higher public good? This is Lewis's supreme attack on democracy in the novel—the stagnating influences it exerts on a would-be serious soul.

The foremost lesson of Arrowsmith, then, is the stultifying effect that charlatanism in science casts over the democratic way of life in America. The preceding generation—souls like Jack London and Upton Sinclair—was aware of the shortcomings of American institutions established upon the foundations of democracy. Even from the days of Carlyle and Ruskin, society had been persistently subjected to sharp and devastating analysis. But never before had an author pointed out by his pen, concrete illustrations of the effect dictators, charlatans and quacks had upon the law of progress, the ultimate reign of justice, and the finality and sufficiency of democracy. What in substance, emerges from the pages of Arrowsmith, as Parrington says "is the authoritative pronouncement that the effects forecast by the earlier critics have become in our day the regnant order of things."1 Therefore, not only in Main Street and Babbitt are the manifestations of a way of life at variance to traditional democracy, but Elmer Gantry and Arrowsmith illustrate that man is at the mercy of charlatans in the offices of public service.

In conclusion, the attack on democracy in Elmer Gantry and Arrowsmith are similar and different. Elmer Gantry represents a type of false democracy in an individual and shows how the individual spreads this

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1V. L. Parrington, op. cit., p. 369.
disease in society. Arrowsmith is a picture of false democracy, too; but this time Lewis shows how a corrupt society may in its blindness drive out one who seeks sweetness and light. In Elmer Gantry, as in Main Street and Rabbit, Lewis is primarily a satirist and is therefore denunciatory in tone and emphasis. But it is not to be understood that, in his attacks on the democratic way of life pictured in these novels, he is against democracy as such. Far from it. What he really attacks are the abuses of democracy, not the thing itself. In Arrowsmith, we have a more positive treatment of his stand for democracy. With sympathy, he frees Martin Arrowsmith from the shackles of a tyrannical society and allows him freedom to live to and with himself. This positive treatment of material and this sympathy found in Arrowsmith stand as a turning point in the growth of Lewis as a novelist, and in the next chapter we shall see the pertinence of this change to his belief in democracy.
CHAPTER IV

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE, DODSWORTH AND AYN VICKERS:
FAITH IN THE AMERICAN TRADITION

The time is out of joint—Hamlet I, v,39.

...if a drowsy wisdom blinks and leans
Too much on legioned innocence
Armed only with a huge mistake
Something is due to shake.¹

In countless ways, during the twenties, as it has been pointed out in chapters two and three, America—we need not now speak of the rest of the world—was "armed only with a huge mistake." A near-slavery evolved in America from the institutions men hoped would set them free. Sinclair Lewis's Main Street illustrates how an American community disintegrates because of the denial of liberty to its subjects. Babbitt, a story of tyranny in an acquisitive society, is an attack on intellectual and civic somnolence in an era when business and industrialism were destroying men's souls, happiness and individualism. Babbitt is the modern illustration of Goldsmith's lines:

Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.

Lewis's displeasure with the expert and diabolic techniques devised by men to disintegrate people from within the church, is voiced in Elmer Gantry. Finally, in Arrowsmith, he attacks another foe of traditional democracy—the bond placed on free, disinterested science by various prejudices, class antagonisms, egoisms, and fears.

The thoroughgoing criticisms of Sinclair Lewis and others, Rousseauistic in their fierce rejection of the existing order and in their romantic anxiety for the principles of a new equilibrium\(^1\), failed, however, to move the average American, blind and reckless in his pursuit of the temporary, the mundane, and the quantitative. Not until the thirties did the spark of error become a violent enough conflagration to disturb the majority of Americans. With this change, came a change in the tone and technique in the novels of Lewis. Striking is the detection of his weakening powers as a novelist in *Dodsworth*, *Ann Vickers*, and *It Can't Happen Here*, but more striking is the revelation of a subdued Lewis, a Lewis expressing a faith in the land he so brutally attacked in the twenties. Not that his venom is gone, but that it is replaced by a constructive, more positive criticism. It is conceivable that this change was in large part the result of the influence of his second wife, Dorothy Thompson, the columnist whose chief preaching is that of American democracy. It is not the purpose of this discussion, however, to determine the root of Lewis's transformation, but rather to examine the spirit of the thirties and to relate this spirit to *It Can't Happen Here*, *Dodsworth* and *Ann Vickers* in their manifestations of the democratic spirit.

The absolute challenge to American freedom during the thirties was the spread of a wave of "isms" upon the international scene. The terrorizing forces of Fascism, Nazism and Sovietism shook the whole world. For the most part, they were all hodge podges of ancient discarded political philosophies appearing under new apppellations—Totali-

tarian States in which the citizen is but a robot.\textsuperscript{1} The rise to power of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin were merely different versions of the same despotism. Under the pretense of serving the greatest good of the greatest number, they all concentrated absolute political power in one individual, a dictator who put shackles on the liberties of the people.\textsuperscript{2} This was simple, primitive tyranny with power over the lives, minds, souls and bodies of their subjects. Their modes of thinking, their strategy, and their ambitions were the same and politically, in their hatred of Nineteenth Century Liberalism and in their contempt for the ideals of democracy and for civil liberties, they are in accord with one another. Article Eight of the Fascist decalogue declared:

"Mussolini is always right"; and Article Ten: "One thing you must hold dear to you above all—the life of the Duce."\textsuperscript{3} General Goering enunciated the same doctrine for Hitlerism in his book, Germany Reborn:

We Nazis believe that in political affairs
Adolf Hitler is infallible...His will is my law.

Mussolini, in his article, "Fascism: Its Theory and Philosophy" in

Treccani Italian Encyclopedia, said:

For the Fascist everything is within the State,
and nothing human or spiritual exists and much less has worth, outside of the State.\textsuperscript{4}

Hitler's autobiography, Mein Kampf, the Bible of Nazism, was only a furtherance of these dogmas of the dictator's divinity and omnipotence.

\textsuperscript{1}Raoul F. Desvernine, Democratic Despotism (New York, 1936), pp. 1-2.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., p. 59.
\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 66.
\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., p. 68.
The years 1932 and 1933 saw the menace of dictatorships grow. The most confident felt uneasy when Hitler, with his profound hatred for human liberty, came into power in Germany in 1933. The countries in which the dictatorships flourished were bitter from the aftermath of the World War and were restless and ruthless in their quest for power. The "isms" grew and grew. By 1936 the Fascist party in Italy numbered approximately 2,500,000 members out of an entire population amounting to 42,000,000. In Russia the Communist party numbered less than 2,000,000 out of a total population of about 170,000,000. In the Nazi party in the same year there were about 2,000,000 members in a population of 62,000,000. These minorities were the party workers in a "one party system" where a citizen either belonged to that party or was disenfranchised and became a political outcast.

In America, the country was being "recovered" from a three-year depression by Franklin D. Roosevelt. The question of despotic power (naturally) arose when the president inaugurated his New Deal as an attempt to stabilize the nation economically. Accusations were made that the Roosevelt Administration attempted to absorb the States into a Federal Government and thereby make the Federal Government omnipotent. Persistently, persons who were generally respected for their intellectual

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5. Ibid., ix.
attainments, moral integrity and political astuteness held that the Roosevelt Administration was adopting measures, pursuing policies and engaging in activities, intended to transform American political institutions and remodel the social and economic order in a manner absolutely incompatible with traditional ideals, in a manner closely akin to the European "isms." The distinction between reform and revolution was undoubtedly not clearly made by these critics. What the New Deal intended was a correction of abuses, a prevention of their recurrence, and the adaptation of the existing State to changed conditions. On the other hand, Stalin and Mussolini advocated Revolution—a discarding of the existing order and the substitution of a different system.

America, then, was at the cross-roads. Her ideals were being shaken by the giant strides of despotism in Europe on one hand, and, on the other, the stroke of bureaucracy\(^1\) at home. America began to take stock of herself and wonder whether she was a vulnerable prey to the threat of despotism. Could it happen in America? Out of a milieu of comments, rose Sinclair Lewis's propagandistic novel, *It Can't Happen Here*. Considered by many critics\(^2\) to be one of his most feeble works, it is, never-the-less, indicative of the spirit of the times and includes several characters modeled directly from the American panorama of would-be dictators. The character, Berzelius Windrip, is said to be a prototype of Huey Long. The chief issues into which our theme carry us are, first, the


\(^{2}\)A. H. Quinn is perhaps foremost among these critics.
culmination of the fervor of Lewis’s criticism of democracy and second, the underlying tone which signifies a quiet faith of the author in America, the brave.

It Can’t Happen Here is the story of what might occur if fascism came to America with the election of a fascist president in 1936. Berzelius Windrip brings tyranny to America, based upon force and oratory. The novel is told mainly through the eyes of a newspaper editor, Doremus Jessup, and the incidents are based on the atrocious events and purges in Nazi Germany. Reportorial in nature, the story is a succession of cruelties, first, in the form of the Minute Men (Windrip’s associates) who kick and slash innocent wives and mothers and invade personal liberty on every hand. Secondly, jobs were usurped, men tortured and thrown into concentration camps. Next, because some men asserted themselves to the burly, ignorant officials, they were shot down in cold blood or beaten with horsewhips. The novel relates how the objecting elements, under the leadership of Jessup, organized themselves, began a new underground railroad and published propaganda against the existing order. Though the end of the story is not strongly conclusive, one is definitely impressed with the thought that fascism could not successfully supplant democracy in America.

The character-interest in the story is slight as the plot itself. Again Lewis resorts to the old trick of caricature without giving his figures human proportions. Doremus Jessup (fondly called "Doormouse" by his wife), the protagonist, is apparently an example of liberalism in America. Quinn thinks he represents a failure of the liberal to meet the
dangers created by extremes of Capitalism and Communism.\textsuperscript{1} Berzelius Windrip, the antagonist, is unmistakably a symbol of fascism in all its ugly aspects. No character in the book, however, is firmly established. Even Sissy Jessup, Doremus' daughter, who rides the tide of liberalism with her father, makes no great impression.

Moreover, the characterization and the plot are not the only features that weaken the power of the novel. The tone itself, which is one of pure prophecy, is a deadening force to the novel. Prophecy, says Van Doren, is almost always unsubstantial in fiction.\textsuperscript{2} It Can't Happen Here proves the maxim because it proceeds with no probability.\textsuperscript{3} Its thesis is the common statement that men used to comfort themselves with as the dark menace of Hitler arose over Europe and threw an ominous shadow across the Atlantic. However, as a pamphlet against cruelty and tyranny, a passionate defense of all that was generous and tolerant in the American way of life, it is tremendous. On this score it is very important to the purpose of this thesis.

It Can't Happen Here, as has been inferred before, is the culmination of all of Lewis's attacks on undemocratic practices in America. The outcome of the book registers a supposition and is modeled on what was happening in Germany, Soviet Russia, Italy, Hungary, Poland and Spain.\textsuperscript{4} In spite of the fact that the events are modeled on foreign affairs, Lewis enumerates the evils of democracy as they actually developed in America.
during the post-war era:

Why there's no country in the world that can get more hysterical—yes, or more obsequious—than America. Look how Huey Long became absolute monarch over Louisiana, and how the Right Honorable Mr. Senator Serzelius Windrip owns his State. Listen to Bishop Prang and Father Coughlin on the radio—divine oracles, to millions. Remember how casually most Americans have accepted Tammany grafting and Chicago gangs and the crookedness of so many of President Harding's appointees? Could Hitler's bunch, or Windrip's, be worse? Remember the Ku Klux Klan? Remember our war hysteria, when we called sauer kraut "Liberty Cabbage" and somebody actually proposed calling German measles "Liberty measles"? And the wartime censorship of honest papers? Bad as Russia! Remember our kissing the wall, the feet of Billy Sunday, the million-dollar evangelist, and of Aimee McPherson, who swam from the Pacific Ocean clear into the Arizonas desert and got away with it? Remember Voliva and Mother Eddy?... Remember our Red scares and our Catholic scares, when all well-informed people knew well that the O.G.P.U. were hiding out in Oskalooska, and the Republicans campaigning against Al Smith told the Carolina mountaineers that if Al won the Pope would illegitimize their children? Remember Tom Hefflin and Tom Dixon? Remember when the hick legislators in certain states, in obedience to William Jennings Bryan, who learned his biology from his pious old grandma, set up shop as scientific experts and made the whole world laugh itself sick by forbidding the teaching of evolution?... Remember the Kentucky night-riders? Remember how trainloads of people have gone to enjoy lynchings? Not happen here? Prohibition—shooting down people just because they might be transporting liquor..."

This is a culmination of all the opposition Lewis can muster in his attack on the misuse of freedom in America. It is a summarization of the proposition of each novel—charlatanism and bigotry and license in ethics, business, religion and now politics. To gain power by the cunning twisting and misuse of democratic methods is the technique

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1Ibid., pp. 21-22.
adopted by all the Elmer Gantrys, Babbitts, Mrs. Bogarts and Dr. Pickerboughs in the world.

The singular thing, however, is that Sinclair Lewis seems to say in *It Can't Happen Here* that America is different from Germany, Italy and Russia. The tradition of the land makes America invulnerable. It is obvious to the most superficial student that Americanism and despotism are basically incompatible. They will not, and cannot be mixed. In America, the State is created for man, constituted to further the enjoyment of individual freedom in an orderly civil society. Our government is, therefore, a means to an end—a government of laws. Despotic states are the ends themselves and man is the mere creature, the "means" of the State. Fascistic government is a government of men, not laws. The redeeming feature in our land is the philosophy upon which our State has been created. All nations are built out of philosophy, not out of bricks and mortar. It is their national ideals which shape their national destinies. The Founding Fathers selected the ideals of our institutions in America and we have been living, or attempting to live, by the concepts we inherited from them. The highest of these concepts is Constitutionalism, and any attack on this concept is a challenge which every American meets fighting. Sanction and mandate would not be given Hitler in America. Tradition is our anchorage to the past and as we have fought for our heritage in the past, so the Americans will always fight for freedom, equality and justice. As Louis B. Wright says, 

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1Raoul F. Desvernine, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
2Ibid., pp. 29-44.
"Americans have a new, quiet faith in the integrity of the country." Lewis implies this faith in the land, when he voices his conviction through his mouth-piece, Doremus Jessup:

"Whatever might happen," exulted Doremus, "the revolt proved that a belief in America and a hope for America were not dead."

Lewis's expression of a belief in America is not expressed in *It Can't Happen Here* alone. In another novel, *Dodsworth*, Lewis appears confident that the sort of adventure men have in America is the greatest in the world--

...and not a certainty of manners in an uncertainty of the future, like all Europe.

Van Doren notes this expression of Lewis's faith in the land and the superiority of America over Europe:

...Both in implied contrasts and in outspoken conversations the differences between America and Europe are set forth, not only with the traditional comedy and the traditional nostalgia, but with, in addition, a restored balancing of values which few Americans had or could have before the war.

Here Van Doren echoes Crevecour, the eighteenth century "American Farmer" who wrote on the contrasts of America and Europe with the conclusion that America was inevitably superior to the old country.

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2 *It Can't Happen Here*, p. 447.


4 Carl Van Doren, *Sinclair Lewis*, p. 46.

The plot of *Dodsworth* centers around Samuel Dodsworth, a Zenith automobile magnate, who retires from business and goes to Europe to enjoy the leisure he has earned and to please his wife.\(^1\) Fran, his gay, shallow wife is convinced that they can "make more passionate lives merely by running away to a more complex and graceful civilization."\(^2\) However, the experiment does not work. Europe has certain advantages, such as its freedom from optimism and oratory, from high pressure advertising, from prohibition and morality hounds, but Dodsworth does not adjust there. He seems to overlook the fact that

Wherever he traveled he must take his own familiar self along, and that that self would loom up between him and the new skies, however rosy.\(^3\)

Fran, on the other hand, manages to give herself up entirely to European ways\(^4\) and has a succession of flirtations and courtships with Europeans. When Dodsworth is bored and is ready to return to America, Fran refuses to leave; therefore he comes back alone. Still dissatisfied, the hero drifts back to Europe a second time. His wife, however, is still not ready to meet him and deserts him for a German nobleman. Although Dodsworth loves Fran deeply, he manages to break with his past and to find a measure of peace with a Mrs. Cortright, the widow of a diplomat. They return together to America to carry out Dodsworth's schemes of the

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\(^1\)The plot begins as if the hero was to be another "Innocents Abroad."


\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)Harry Hartwick, *op. cit.*, p. 271.
building of a modernized and uniquely American suburb in Zenith.

The characterization in *Dodsworth*, most critics agree, is intensely better than in any of Lewis's previous novels, except *Arrowsmith*. In *Dodsworth*, Lewis studies the inner and outer springs of a heart through a "crucial chapter of human life." Pertinent to this is the point Quinn makes about Sam Dodsworth:

"...he is a real person, and he has qualities that make him worth reading about."

Although Dodsworth would never

"...love passionately, lose tragically nor sit in contented idleness upon tropic shores."

Boynton says he is

"Babbitt undefeated, Arrowsmith with a stiffened backbone; for he is big enough to resist the silly coerciveness of men who are littler than he, and to learn from men who are bigger."

Externally Dodsworth is the essence of modern America, on its grand tour, neither cocksure like Mark Twain's travellers in Europe, nor quivering and colonial like Henry James. He is a simple, fair-minded character as he comes in contact with the more extravagant varieties of American abroad. Dodsworth's travels are complicated by his wife, a pampered woman desperately holding on to her youth, fascinated by what seem to her the superior graces of European society, and susceptible to its men. "Fran is drawn with great care but not with great skill," says

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Quinn.\(^1\) In her bitter discontent she becomes a poisonous shrew, then deserts her husband for a lover. She is wholly selfish and her ambitions are only for external social opportunities and for extravagant excursions. Fran is of value, however, as a means of revealing Dodsworth. Her treatment of him when she leaves him a lonely wanderer on the continent while she has an affair with Kurt von Obersdorf, an Austrian Count, brings him to our sympathy.\(^2\) Long in love with her, and long used to cherishing her in spite of her temper, Dodsworth cannot break off either his affection or his sense of responsibility. She is in his blood, though. Finally he gives her up. He grows in dignity through his quiet sacrifice. The history of his recovery is like a convalescence of a spirit, and it is told with feeling and insight.\(^3\) When he at last finds comfort in Ethel Cartright, the reader feels that justice is done.

However, it is the implied faith in America represented in *Dodsworth* that we are directly concerned with at present. Possibly the least satiric of all Lewis's novels, *Dodsworth*, suggests that despite philistinism, boosterism and mechanical comforts, America is a great country, a good and noble nation—one every American (no matter how harshly he criticises it) is immensely proud of. One episode in the book, in particular, is obviously representative of this belief. Sam Dodsworth met a group of fellow Americans (all of whom now live in England) at dinner in a London cafeteria. These men believed, and belli-

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\(^1\) A. H. Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 664.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Carl Van Doren, *The American Novel*, p. 311.
gerently announced that

America was the greatest country in the world; not only in its resources and increasing population and incomparable comforts of daily life, not only in its energy and mechanical ingenuity, but equally in its generosity, its friendliness, its humor, its aspiration for learning. Scarce one of them, Sam judged, but longed to see his own beloved quarter of America.¹

One man announced his stand:

But I'm American, just's American as I ever was. And thank God there's enough Americans here so I can see a lot of 'em. I admire the English, but they make me feel kind of rough-neck. But live here—you bet! Say, that's one of the best proofs that America is the greatest country in the world. Paris and London have become two of the nicest of American cities! Yes sir!²

Elsewhere in the book, Sam says to Fran:

—I suppose I have been sort of assuming that America is the greatest nation on earth. And maybe it is. Maybe because we have got so many faults. Shows we're growing! Sorry if its bad manners not to be ashamed of being an American, but then I'll just have to be bad mannered!³

When Sam finally leaves England, he says:

I never could prefer England above America.⁴

Edith Cartright expresses her feeling of faith thus:

Something could be done—not just Italian Villas and Swiss chalets—for a town with a tradition of Vermont Yankees and Virginians in buckskin. Why shouldn't one help to create an authentic and unique

¹Sinclair Lewis, Dodsworth, p. 95.
²Ibid., p. 98.
³Ibid., p. 84.
⁴Ibid., p. 110.
American domestic architecture? Our skyscrapers are the first really new thing in architecture since the Gothic cathedral, and perhaps just as beautiful. The foregoing passages speak for themselves and are contradictions of the critics who hold that Sinclair Lewis is always on the side of abuse. From these quotations one is impressed with the fact that Americans have a certain faith and national individuality of their own conception and creation which they cherish and defend. This faith, in turn, is their preservation, protection, salvation. As long as Americans are resplendent, as were Sam Dodsworth and Edith Cartright, with a dedication to American traditions and ideals, no power in the world can stand against them.

Indeed, Dodsworth and It Can't Happen Here are alike in the faith in the American way of life suggested by Lewis. But in Ann Vickers we see little of this faith. For this reason it is unlike Dodsworth and It Can't Happen Here. But it is like them in other respects—respects which make it pertinent to our discussion.

The last novel to be discussed in detail is, like It Can't Happen Here and Dodsworth, significant because of the paradox it presents when considered in light of the whole gallery of Lewis's novels. Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith, and Elmer Gantry are, as some critics hold, typical of the Lewis' order of satire on Americans and American institutions. They all fall gracefully into line as rebukes on the American practice of democracy. In advancing to It Can't Happen Here, we discover Lewis branching out into the field of propaganda, tempering his satire and ex-

1Ibid., p. 363.
pressing, through it all, a subtle faith and love for America. Also, in
*Dodsworth* his satire again lessens and the international question of
America versus Europe becomes his theme. In *Dodsworth* the reader dis-
cerns his faith in America. With *Ann Vickers*, Lewis is again different
from the Lewis who wrote *Main Street*, *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry* and
*Babbitt*. In three important ways this book is different from his novels
written during the twenties. This is the first book that Lewis deals
 copiously with social problems, in the sense that Upton Sinclair deals
with them. Second, his satire is restricted to a very small area. The
third significant difference lies in the fact that Lewis swings from the
mordant to the morbid.¹ His heroine is simultaneously unwholesome,
nauseating, and carnal.

The story itself traces the career of Ann Vickers, who begins as a
social worker and ends as the mistress of a politician.² Her early years
are spent at Point Royal College for Women where she plunges into debating
and socialistic activities in the school to drown her doubts about the
wisdom of her refusal of the avert advances of her history professor,
Glenn Hargis.³ After graduation she spends the next ten years in welfare
work. She takes nursing in a New York hospital and agitates for Woman’s
Rights in Ohio. Thrown into prison, she comes out with a revised view of
the suffrage movement; teaches in a New York settlement house; lives with
a soldier for ten days; has an abortion; leaves charity work; takes a
trip to England; comes back to a job as educational director in the

¹Harry Hartwick, *op. cit.* , p. 274.
²Ibid., p. 273.
³Ibid.
Green Valley Refuge for Women; studies criminology; enters prison reform; works in a western penitentiary until, nauseated by the 'licensed sadism' there, she revolts, 'is framed', and resigns; goes back to New York to superintend a large reformatory; and in time has bestowed upon her honorary degrees and has her name in headlines.¹ She marries the prosaic J. Russell Spaulding; wearies of him; goes away for a week-end with Barney Delphin, a Tammany judge; and has a child by him. Delphin is sent to prison on a graft charge, and when after a year he is pardoned they retire to live in happy adultery.²

None of the characters in the story seem alive.³ Van Doren believes that Ann is the female counterpart of Arrowsmith and that she has knowledge, will, force. He asserts that she aspires, she persists, she succeeds.⁴ We cannot agree with Van Doren's conclusion of the character of Ann because Lewis makes her ignoble and utterly unconvincing. Hemingway's tawdry affairs with her sentimental aspirations, but the reader is left unimpressed and uninspired. She is not once the human, vital person that Leora Arrowsmith⁵ became.

The thesis of Ann Vickers is doubtless an attempt to prove the age-old adage that woman's place is in the home. For Lewis discusses the position of women in the modern world—a world that is fundamentally

¹Ibid., pp. 273-274.
²Ibid.
³A. E. Quinn, op. cit., p. 666.
⁴Carl Van Doren, Sinclair Lewis, p. 2.
⁵Van Doren compares Ann with Leora Arrowsmith and with Fran Bodsworth. He concludes that she is a more thorough character than either.
hostile to the career woman. He scorns the women's college as a nunnery and depicts the introverted life of girls in a school without men, to illustrate his thesis. Lewis is much interested in the question of women and careers. The end of the book seems to indicate that even the most successful career cannot satisfy a woman, that devotion to a man and a child is eventually more necessary and more satisfactory.¹

Ann Vickers is then a study of a career woman who in her interest in social welfare battles against odds and social evils. This interest of the heroine in social work affords Lewis a chance to strike directly at war,² prison,³ anti-abortion laws,⁴ graft,⁵ chauvinism, the "idle rich,"⁶ and the tendency of settlement houses to become mere "cultural comfort stations."⁷ Lewis discloses in this novel that "slavery exists in the United States."⁸ His conclusion is that "the more punishment there is, the more things there are to be punished, and the general philosophy of the whole business is that of an idiot chasing flies."⁹ Again he says:

¹Ralph Doas and Katherine Burton, Social Backgrounds of American Literature (Boston, 1931), p. 262.


³Ibid., pp. 392-393, 346-347, 315, 292-293.


⁵Ibid., pp. 312-313.


⁷Ibid., pp. 235-239.

⁸Ibid., p. 310.

⁹Ibid., p. 307.
There is no more reason for punishing the ethically sick than the physically sick. Prison makes the man who hates his bosses come out hating everyone. Prison makes the man who is sexually abnormal, sexually a maniac. Prison makes the man who enjoyed beating fellow-drunks in a bar room come out wanting to kill a policeman.¹

This is why Ann Vickers asks:

Don't you think that, after all, the most important thing in the world is justice?²

To justice, Ann's life was dedicated. She once said of herself:

'So long,...' as there is one hungry and jobless man, one ill-treated child, one swamp in all the world causing malaria—and that will doubtless be forever—I must go on scolding at slackness and cruelty.'³

But once she was a social worker she found that justice was not easily accomplished. The most important obstruction she found to be the faults of organized charity-settlement work:

It was too parochial. It touched only a tiny neighborhood, and left all the adjoining neighborhoods that did not have their own settlements, which was most of them, without provision for such recreation, education, emergency relief, and advice as the settlement could give. It wasn't, Ann decided, much more valuable than its parent, the good old heart-warming and tear-bringing system whereby the elder daughter of the Vicar (the one who had never married) amused herself by taking coals and blankets and jelly to such of the bed-ridden parishioners as were most slobberingly obsequious to the vicar and to the squire.

In the modern version, the settlement house, the gayly mendacious and clutching Jew boy with the big black eyes, who brought

¹Ibid., pp. 272-273.
²Ibid., p. 252.
³Ibid., p. 265.
presents to the workers and who most loudly bawled the Salute to the flag at Boy Scout rallies, was the one who got the extra golf pants and the left-over ice cream, and, later the scholarship in dental school; while the sullen boy down the street, who had nothing but a genius for wood-carving and for minding his own business, got nothing.\(^1\)

Justice was a thing which Ann Vickers decided America in the thirties had not rightly grasped. To Ann, America is fundamentally democratic but not consistently so in her practices and interpretation. For this reason Lewis argues for a wide diffusion of democracy and a consistent loyalty to concepts of human liberty. He says,

> Just as it is felony to help a condemned murderer cheat the state of its beloved blood-letting by passing poison to him, so that he may decently die and alone, with no sadistic parade of priests and guards and reporters, so it is a crime to assist a woman condemned to the tittering gossip that can be worse than death by helping her to avoid having what is known as an illegitimate baby.\(^2\)

This concept of human liberty causes Lewis to think of war as stupid, conducting business for the profit of a few owners as insane, thrones and crowns and titles and degrees as childish toys. And to the whole philosophy behind imprisonment he is opposed. He writes that

> in all the entire range of human imbecility, there was nothing quite so senseless as imprisonment as a cure for crime...and that the worse the crimes become, the more serious it was that there should be only so barbaric an effort to cure.\(^3\)

It is clear that Lewis has a fight to do with certain institutions of society. Yet over and above his attacks on institutions comes this

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 236.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 197.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 152.
appealing example of his faith in and hope for America, despite her grievous faults:

...saw America as the only Galahad among the nations, clad in armor of the best stainless steel, and entirely engaged in questing the Sangrael of international peace and holiness.¹

¹Ibid., p. 215.
In American literature of the first quarter of the twentieth century, Sinclair Lewis is one of the most interesting figures and at the same time one of the most anomalous in the large group of prominent writers. To give him professional classification is difficult. One might call him a misanthrope, but he is not a man, like Pope or Swift, who hates the things or persons that he criticises. Rather, as things that he loves, he is indignant at them for their unwarranted stupidity and errors. One might call him a burlesquer, but his attitude does not represent horseplay; it is serious judgment. One might call him an insurrectionist, but his attacks are all lawful; indeed, they are for the proper exercise of law. One might call him a snob, but his censure is for persons of wealth and position as well as for those whom he considers his inferiors, socially and mentally. None of these titles is adequate for Sinclair Lewis.

Men of the twenties, however, hailed him as a reformer. In England, Germany and other countries as well as his own country, Sinclair Lewis became an established figure of reform. Sundry lusty buffets he no doubt received, but critics’ hard words break no more bones than other people’s—especially when applause for the most part drowns them out. Lewis’s voice was perhaps the most articulate and seismographic of liberals, with the possible exception of H. L. Mencken, in the decade before 1929. "There can be no question," says Van Doren, "that his books are landmarks in the
history of American opinions through two crucial decades.\textsuperscript{1} This acknowledged influence of Lewis is the more remarkable when it is considered that his various messages, with all their strength, were infected with so many obvious weaknesses.

One possible weakness was his superficiality, his lack of passion and of thoughtfulness—as Whipple says, "his meretricious writing,"\textsuperscript{2} in his delineation of characters. It may be said that since Lewis is a satirist, this has no point. Indeed, though the art of a satirist is more conducive to caricature than to the delineation of real characters, it is possible for a satirist to manifest penetration, strong feeling and intellectual power in his construction of characters. Other satirists, Swift and Balzac, for example, have possessed these qualities. But Lewis's characters, for the most part,\textsuperscript{3} lack depth. There is no evidence of profound insight at work toward their delineations.

Lewis's refusal to assume an impersonal, unemotional, scientific attitude in his approach to current problems constituted another weakness. Subject to fits of exasperation, he worked himself into a passion when he wrote about vital problems, and in this he is more like an energetic child than a deliberate, self-possessed scientist. Consequently, his language is frequently jerky, spasmodic, uneven and in many instances too colloquial to be considered skillful or dexterous.

\textsuperscript{1}Carl Van Doren, \textit{The American Novel}, p. 314.

\textsuperscript{2}T. K. Whipple, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 227.

\textsuperscript{3}See Chapter III, p. 70 of this thesis for discussion of Arrowsmith, Leora, and Dr. Gottlieb.
Habitual vehemence of expression became in time a handicap to Lewis. As Pattee says, he "pussy-foots" \(^1\) at nothing; he hits problems with pep and punch; he is pointed, probing like a surgeon with a sharp knife \(^2\); his sting is that of the bee. This vigor and militancy effected in his novels a certain tonic quality best described as stridency. The resultant form is harsh, grating sounds and pitch which generally become very unpleasant if read in large quantities.

Chronic reporting proved to be another weakness of Lewis. Burdened with the distress he pictured, the people of his generation were probably more in need of a message of optimism than one of forlorn cheerlessness. It is granted that a written account of ascertained facts, accurately described, is of intrinsic worth in waking up a people and making it conscious of its faults. However, if directed in too severe a manner, without careful, calm planning and with the necessary human approach, such account might "miss the bus." Lewis seems to ignore the fact that the people he satirizes have feeling, and sensitivity—that a whipping can work two ways: toward reform and toward stubborn resentment.

Despite these obvious weaknesses—the tendency toward superficiality in his delineation of characters, the narrow and personal point of view, the habitual violence of expression and the chronic desire to report facts—potent virtues give his writings marked prestige in his own generation and after. The fact that these virtues are so evident will permit the dismissal of their consideration in a few words.

Lewis's first asset is his talent for timeliness. His attacks on the

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\(^1\) F. L. Pattee, op. cit., p. 342.

inanities of human life were seasonable and geared to the period after
the World War. In Chapter I some outstanding features of this period
were presented for the purpose of showing the kind of milieu in which
Lewis lived and about which he wrote.

Another element of his strength grew, in a sense, out of a con-
comitant weakness. This element was his ability to give details so
vividly and accurately that his readers see either themselves or some
one they know in the pages of his books. The inevitable comment
especially during the twenties, whether his readers were flattered by
his thrusts and descriptions or not, was "How true!

His unquestioning courage in the delivery of an unwelcome message
regardless of the effect on himself was a virtue of no small importance.
Lewis was the daring herald of a new era in American literature, and for
this his own innate courage is due the highest respect.

His talent for details, his excellent ability to time the appearance
of his books, and his courage in the delivery of an unwelcome message might
still leave him an irritable and irritating critic were it not for the
noblest virtue of all—an unselfish, passionate solicitude for the social
and intellectual welfare of his people. That virtue combined with the
others makes of him a potential modern Moses because he longs to save
America from tyranny of all kinds; but the majority of her people will
not follow him to green pastures. For the American Philistines interpret
his preaching either as the words from the mouth of a cynic or as an
iconoclastic admonition to destroy the American way of life. This was
never Lewis's message and purpose, as we have shown in this thesis.
Throughout his novels, he attacks the abuses of democracy, never democracy
itself. He is not for revolution in America, but simply for reform—an
effort to return to the traditional democratic concepts of institutions and society—the foundation upon which America has stood for over two hundred years. This is Lewis's message. If his attacks are hard and bitter, it is because his mission is dear to him and he, along with a few other Americans, perceives, and in a sense, attempts to correct the evils of persons and institutions. His effort was one of correction of abuses and a purging of our sham practices of democracy. Moreover, behind this effort, one sees in him a strong, burning, positive faith in the land. Dodsworth and It Can't Happen Here, not to mention the others, are indeed permanent monuments reared in this faith.
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