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SINCLAIR LEWIS: THE NOBLE BARBARIAN

A Study of the Conflict of European and American Values in the  
Life and Fiction of Sinclair Lewis

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## A B S T R A C T

In Sauk Centre, a fairly new and raw midwestern American town in the first years of our century, a solitary youth reads Kipling, Scott, Tennyson and Dickens and becomes enchanted with Europe: its history, traditions and people.

Seeing the monotonous and endless extensions of prairie land, the rustic farmer cottages and the haphazard design of his hometown, he imagines the superior graces of a variegated European landscape; historical cities, old structures, castles and mansions that hint of aristocratic generations. And his people, engaged in the routine of their daily activities; their settled forms of behavior, conversation and clothing, become quite uninspiring for him as contrasted to his idealization of a romantic, exotic and stirring European world wherein cultured gentlemen and gracious ladies abound. He is Harry Sinclair Lewis, later to be known as the novelist Sinclair Lewis.

Main Street (1920) makes him world-famous. In this novel his infatuation with European aristocratic values is strongly felt and he denounces his countrymen for their lack of "the grand manner, the noble aspiration, the fine aristocratic pride." Subsequently he becomes acquainted with Europe where he spends long periods during the 1920's and in the course of this decade he produces his best works aside from Main Street: Babbitt, Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry and Dodsworth. These works are expressive of a gradual change in his outlook upon the European aristocratic values that had for so long absorbed him, and manifest a reversal in his attitude as a result of his disillusion with them. Dodsworth (1929) brings the transition to a close; it represents a reconciliation of Sinclair Lewis with his native democratic environment.

## R E S U M O

Em Sauk Centre, uma bem recente cidadezinha do centro - oeste Norte Americano nos primeiros anos de nosso século, um jovem solitário lê Kipling, Scott, Tennyson e Dickens e se toma de encantamento pela Europa: sua história, suas tradições e seu povo.

Contemplando as monótonas e intermináveis extensões de pradaria, as cabanas rústicas dos colonos, e a delineação acidental de seu povoado, ele imagina a beleza superior de uma paisagem européia variegada; cidades históricas, velhas estruturas, castelos e mansões, que lhe sugerem a tradição de gerações aristocráticas. E os modos rotineiros estereotipados de comportamento, conversa e vestuário de sua gente lhe parecem completamente desestimulantes em comparação com sua concepção de uma Europa romântica, exótica e exuberante, habitada por cavalheiros cultos e damas sofisticadas e graciosas. Seu nome é Harry Sinclair Lewis, mais tarde conhecido como o romancista Sinclair Lewis.

Main Street (1920) o torna mundialmente famoso. Neste livro seu fascínio por valores aristocráticos europeus é patente e ele critica seus compatriotas por achar que lhes faltam aspirações nobres e um orgulho aristocrático requintado. Posteriormente se dá seu encontro com a Europa onde ele passa longas temporadas durante a década de 1920, e no decorrer deste mesmo período, ele produz aqueles que são considerados seus melhores romances ao lado de Main Street: Babbitt, Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry e Dodsworth.

Estas obras revelam uma mudança gradual em sua atitude com relação aos valores aristocráticos europeus que por tanto tempo o obcecaram, em consequência de seu desencantamento com eles. Dodsworth (1929) põe termo a esta transição e representa a reconciliação de Sinclair Lewis com seu ambiente democrático nativo.

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## 1. INTRODUCTORY

### 1.1. Statement of Area to Be Covered

This thesis is on Sinclair Lewis and it explores a theme that preceded Lewis himself, that existed almost from the beginning in American literature. It deals with the emotional conflict that many American artists experienced when they were torn between their native American democratic values and European aristocratic ideals.

Until the first quarter of our century it was commonly argued that in America, while democracy flourished, the standard of taste deteriorated; that American material civilization was responsible for the spiritual failure of its people and the tragedy of American talent. In a land given over to efficiency, mass-production, commercialism, standardization, machinery and the worship of wealth, the great majority of its population suffered from emotional and aesthetic starvation, lack of taste, sensibility and style. Talent, it seemed, failed to fulfill itself in this atmosphere, fundamentally inimical to art. Other complaints were that American themes were crude, commonplace and lacked dignity, that there were no long-rooted traditions in America except the recent pioneering past. In short, life was too thin to sustain artistically-inclined people.

Having no literary tradition of their own, the American artists were often attracted in one way or another to the qualities offered by other cultures. The European aristocratic culture with its standards of education and style, privacy and taste, with traditions, legends, history and architecture exerted a strong appeal and for a long time supplied American artists with an alternative for the values predominating in their native country. The dilemma of many American artists during the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth lay in the fact that despite loving their country they were drawn to the pleasures and beauty of great old Europe.

Henry James stands as an example of an extreme attitude in this situation. Having absorbed the "European virus"<sup>1</sup> and finding the United States too barren and crude to live in, he cut his roots with it and chose to be an expatriate for life. This pro-Europe mood of Henry James was shared by a great number of American "expatriates" who looked for another scheme of life during the early 1920's and it reached something of a climax in their attitude.

They do things better in Europe: lets go there.<sup>2</sup>

I'm sick of this country. I'm going abroad to write one good novel.<sup>3</sup>

Afterwards these feelings would gradually abate and before the end of the decade most of the "expatriates" had come back to their motherland.

As far back as 1840, the Frenchman Tocqueville,\* holding that the literature of a nation is subordinate to its social state and its political constitution, arrived at a number of conclusions which I will try to summarize here.

He says that in few of the civilized nations of the world have distinguished poets and celebrated artists been more rare than in the United States; that for the culture of the higher sciences or the more elevated departments of intellect nothing is more necessary than meditation, but the structure of democratic society is not suited to it. "A democratic state of society and democratic institutions," he explains, "keep the greater part of the men in constant activity; and the habits of the mind that are suited to an active life are not always suited to a contemplative one."<sup>4</sup> He adds that when the majority of a people are engaged in business rather than in study, in political and commercial interests rather than in philosophical speculation or literary pursuits, they can show neither talent

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\* Tocqueville, Charles Alexis Henry Maurice Clérel de (1805-1859) was a French politician and historian, a perceptive observer during the 19th century of the tendencies of political and social democracy. He wrote "De la Démocratie en Amérique" (1885) later translated as "Democracy in America".

nor taste for literature or art.

One of the reasons that he holds responsible for this state of affairs is the religion professed by the first immigrants and bequeathed by them to their descendants; "hostile to external symbols and to ceremonial pomp, it is naturally unfavorable to the fine arts and yields only reluctantly to the pleasures of literature."<sup>5</sup> Another factor that he cites as playing an important role is the width and breadth of the country upon which people may extend themselves at pleasure and which they can fertilize without difficulty. The American facility for making or increasing fortunes is without parallel in the world and this makes for the ever increasing spirit of gain with a consequent diversion of the mind from the pleasures of imagination and the labors of intellect.

The American mind is fixed upon purely practical objects, says Tocqueville, and "the universal desire for comfort and the constant efforts by which everyone attempts to procure it, make the taste for the useful predominate over the love of the beautiful in the heart of man."<sup>6</sup> Thus people will habitually "prefer the useful to the beautiful and they will require that the beautiful should be useful."<sup>7</sup>

At the other end of the scale Tocqueville places learned and literary Europe, "engaged in exploring the common source of truth and in improving at the same time all that can minister to the pleasures or satisfy the wants of man."<sup>8</sup> Among aristocratic people there are two definitely established classes and consequently there is nothing of the incessant quest for power and the continual striving of men after fortune that is found in democratic states of society. Enjoying more leisure and being less harassed by the drudgery of life, aristocratic people may "devote their energies to thought and enlarge in all directions the empire of mind."<sup>9</sup> The taste for ideal beauty and the pleasures derived from the expression of it are never so intense among a democratic as among an aristocratic people.

Having thus shown the intellectual and artistic life in America in an unfavorable perspective in relation to that in Europe, placing aristocratic ideals on the side of art and associating democracy with anti-art, Tocqueville asserts that "the larger part of that small number of men in the United States who are engaged in the composition of literary works are English in substance and still more so in form. They transport into the midst of democracy the ideas and literary fashions that are current among the aristocratic nation they have taken for their model. They paint with colors borrowed from foreign manners."<sup>10</sup> This is to say that the artistically and intellectually gifted Americans of his time were irremediably drawn to and influenced by European aristocratic cultural values. To establish the background for Lewis's problems we might find out to what extent this was true of Irving, Cooper and James.

Washington Irving had a passion for the past and he longed to endow his country with the color of romance and tradition. But the short period of history, America's rather recent past, was not equal to the task of charming his imagination very much. He wrote but little about it, or about America itself. The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, for instance, was inspired by European rather than American legend though America provided its setting. And yet, the source of inspiration itself was also European in nature: the valley of the Hudson river, old Dutch farms in pastoral valleys, the little old-fashioned stone mansions and the gravestones by the old church of Sleepy Hollow, all of which had meant romance and tradition for Irving in his boyhood. According to Malcolm Cowley, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, ... gave us any idea that an American valley could be as effectively clothed in romance as Ivanhoe's castle or the London of Henry Esmond."<sup>11</sup>

While Living in America Irving was fascinated by old Dutch legends, English tradition, and whatever spoke of

European mythology. In Europe, where he lived for seventeen years, he visited the time-worn shrines of past European traditions in a romantic mood. He reveled in the mouldering castles of Granada, Italian palaces with terraced gardens, ruins, obscure churches and convents all over Europe. He was excited by the legacies of feudal times and overwhelmed by Europe's "shadowy grandeurs of the past."<sup>12</sup> He visited old libraries, turning over the pages of mouldy manuscripts and worm-eaten volumes that spoke of the past. Irving's scope was the past, but the American past was of little or no avail for him. He recorded the history and legends, the manners and customs of European nations and in doing so he often disregarded American themes.

Cooper's scope, on the other hand, was national. Putting aside his tales of Europe, which were few, most of his books show his concern in depicting the beauties of his country and in endowing it with a heroic past. Cooper was eagerly interested in its history and particularly in that of his own state of New York. An ardent patriot, his historical stories and tales of adventure are full of the pride that he felt in his country. Yet it is noteworthy that the outstanding characters in his books are natural gentlemen who are fundamentally noble despite their low disguises: Harvey Birch, Long Tom, Natty Bumppo, Indians and sailors. They are aristocrats in plain clothes, the "kingly commons" as Herman Melville called them. Judge Temple in The Pioneers might easily be taken for an English lord; he is "squire" of the village and lives in a "hall" in the midst of the wilderness. His daughter, Miss Temple, is a genteel young lady, noble in her bearing, reminding one of a Dickens heroine.

All this is understandable if we take into consideration that Cooper himself was aristocratic in his tastes. Having grown up in a circle of the oldest New Yorkers, he lived as a county gentleman in an estate he had inherited from his father in Cooperstown, and he used to regard merchants and business men

with the typical scorn of an aristocrat in whose eyes these men and their activities are low and commonplace.

But Cooper was at war with himself because his tastes were not in keeping with what his conscience dictated to him. He loved his country deeply and though he was aristocratic in temper, politically he showed himself a republican who stood for equal rights. In a number of works he attacked monarchism, oligarchy, hereditary aristocracy, privilege and power, holding that the political power should be confided to the body of the people, and yet, he could not help being offended by the people's tastes and manners. Many of his writings were produced as a defense against the low opinions that prevailed in Europe about his democratic country, but he disliked commercialism and the rising power of business in America all the while. In his years abroad Cooper defended republican ideas and went as far as involving himself in the European struggle between the aristocratic past and the democratic future, welcoming and backing republicans and revolutionists of different nations. Interestingly, these attitudes were inconsistent with the life-style that he adopted in Europe itself. In spite of his political democracy he traveled and lived in the grand style of an aristocratic gentleman, keeping his own horses and carriage and being glad to be received by kings and dukes.

D. H. Lawrence in his book Studies in Classic American Literature gives us his version of Cooper's emotional ambivalence.

Fenimore lying in his Louis Quatorze hotel in Paris, passionately musing about Natty Bumppo and the pathless forest, and mixing his imagination with the Cupids and Butterflies on the painted ceiling, while Mrs. Cooper was struggling with her latest gown in the next room, and the déjeuner was with the Countess at eleven...

Men live by lies.

In actuality, Fenimore loved the genteel continent of Europe and waited grasping for the newspapers to praise his work.

In another actuality he loved the tomahawking

continent of America, and imagined himself Natty Bumppo.

His actual desire was to be: Monsieur Fenimore Cooper, le grand écrivain Américain.

His innermost wish was to be: Natty Bumppo.<sup>13</sup>

As for Henry James, one doubts whether he partook of this emotional ambivalence, this inner conflict in the same degree as Cooper did. Having gone abroad early to receive a "sensuous education"<sup>14</sup> (his father was partial to European education), it was apparently not so difficult for him to sever his roots with America after having been exposed to the European standards of culture and living. The lack of a richly cultural civilization in America made him make his choice early in his life and he stood by it until the end.

James's scope was not the past of America and not necessarily that of Europe either. It seems that if he was charmed by the past of the latter it was only insofar as he could associate it with the source of a rich and settled stability within which traditions had been able to come into bloom; the birthplace of an aristocratic life-style with a tradition of aesthetic sensibility, wisdom, style, grace, taste, privacy and sophistication, a mode of living that had been passed down the generations. And Henry James wanted to direct his life in accordance with its ethos as we may infer from what he reported to his brother William about the people among whom he was moving in London, in 1877.

Yesterday I dined with Lord Houghton—with Gladstone, Tennyson, Dr. Schiemann (the excavator of old Mycenaean, etc.) and half a dozen other men of 'high culture.' I sat next but one to the Bard and heard most of his talk.<sup>15</sup>

The American scene was apparently not able to inspire Henry James since Europe provides the back cloth for most of his stories. This may not seem to hold true as regards his fellow-countrymen who appear regularly in his books. Yet it must be allowed that they are always placed either in a European environment or else, they are put in contact with sophisticated

European aristocrats against whom their peculiar American qualities are enhanced; and this is a process that most always results in the presentation of their comparative innocence. The James American hero owes his existence, I would say, to James's method of comparison. He seems not to have a right to exist on his own, living both in his native physical environment and among people exclusively of his own kind.

Henry James spent most of his life in Europe; Cooper, seven years; Irving, seventeen. And their exposure to the culture of other civilizations undoubtedly affected them.

When Henry James visited America in 1905, after having spent three decades of his life in Europe, he was startled by what he saw: "interesting, formidable, fearsome and fatiguing and much more difficult to see and to deal with in any extended and various way than I supposed"<sup>16</sup> he wrote, and with that he returned to Europe. He had lost touch with "the vital facts of human character"<sup>17</sup> said his brother William; with his fellow-Americans either at home or abroad.

As for Cooper, he was disappointed with the new American world that he found in 1833 and its many changes shocked him. The stagecoach had been replaced by the train and the scholarly John Quincy Adams had given place to Jackson and ultra-republicanism. He resented "the coldness of the ordinary American manner"<sup>18</sup> and felt handicapped by what he called the vulgarity and baldness of American life. Besides complaining of the poverty of materials with which the American author had to contend, Cooper also deplored "the lack of aesthetic sensibility"<sup>19</sup> in his fellow countrymen.

We talk a great deal of our national intelligence in America, and certainly with truth, when we compare ourselves with these people in many important particulars; but blocks are not colder, or can't have less real reverence for letters, arts, or indeed cultivation of any kind, than the great bulk of the American people.<sup>20</sup>

Cooper continued to love his country but he did not like

the way it was going and because he often expressed this opinion he became a very unpopular man. He retired to Cooperstown where he spent the rest of his days.

One wonders whether all this would have happened if Cooper had stayed in his country; whether he would not have been able to keep pace with and get used to the various changes that America had undergone, had he but kept in contact with it. It seems that his European experience enabled him to perceive more clearly the contrast between the European aristocratic culture and the culture of democratic America, and that this contributed to sharpening his critical sense. And isolation came as the penalty for his "knowing".

Washington Irving complained of the "all-pervading commonplace"<sup>21</sup> that he sensed when he returned in 1832. But he was very curious about his country and made the grand tour of it in order to observe its changes, gather impressions, and commit them to paper. He wanted to write about American themes and yet, he seemed not to be able to become wholly absorbed in them. The Adventures of Captain Bonneville was produced out of material that he bought from Bonneville himself; the biography George Washington was a work that he had set out to do years earlier and which he brought to completion in America; and Tour of the Prairies, which celebrated the western prairies, is not sufficient to redefine Irving as a frontier writer, an interpreter of pioneer, homespun America says the critic Stanley T. Williams.

Irving loved his country, particularly "Manna-hata" and the blue-shadowed hills of the Hudson, but on the prairie the Indian ponies reminded him of Andalusian steeds and the arching trees of Moorish mosques. He was, and he remained, perhaps more so than any writer of his generation, a thoroughly Europeanized American.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from these works and a few essays that spoke of America, Irving wrote the biography Oliver Goldsmith, The Legends of the Conquest of Spain and Life of Mahomet. The bulk

of his work continued to focus upon alien subjects. His difficulty in dealing with native material was symptomatic in the fact that in Europe, shortly before returning to America, he had worked on a series of essays dealing with American scenery, manners and education, and that this work had come to nothing. It is also very revealing that at the end of his life he chose to settle in a small Dutch cottage overlooking the Hudson, on a cove at the end of a quiet lane, at little distance from the church of Sleepy Hollow. He returned to the very scene that had used to remind him of Europe during his boyhood.

Irving failed to find adequate nourishment in his country and his long stay abroad must have enhanced this shortcoming. "A writer should not leave his country for too long a time," said Dostoievski. "He should live one life with her. Otherwise he is lost." <sup>23</sup>

Sinclair Lewis was in a sense the heir to all these preoccupations and problems. He went through a romantic infatuation with Europe and aristocratic values, starting when he began to read Tennyson, Kipling, Scott, Dickens and other European authors as a boy, in his barren and bleak midwestern home-town of Sauk Centre in Minnesota. The atmosphere of picturesqueness, of a glamorous and romantic past that so many of such books created for him, charmed his imagination and stirred his fancy. Whatever was exotic and spoke of an older civilization was doubly dear to him, and the more so as contrasted to his native environment. Influenced by Tennyson he began to write imitative poems on medieval themes at the age of sixteen, a habit that he would not drop until he was nearly thirty.

But it was not only the glow and scent of former times that exerted a strong appeal for him. He was equally attracted to what he conceived to be an aristocratic mode of living, a combination of characteristics and attitudes that for him signified a taste for art and literature, breeding and manner,

sophistication, smart clothes and gentlemanly bearing. When he was a Yale undergraduate he thought very seriously about becoming a distinguished "author" of the gentlemanly sort, as he somehow associated literary achievement with the above-mentioned attributes.

Lewis's infatuation with European aristocratic values was a somewhat naive idealization of the virtues of European life, a product of his reading and imagination rather than the consequence of a contact with those values in loco. Except for two short cattleboat trips to England (during his Yale period) which gave Lewis a few days' knowledge and a very superficial contact with it, he had not had any experience abroad when he wrote Main Street in 1920, at the age of thirty-five. Yet in that novel he was very denunciatory of the American way of life, especially that of small towns like Sauk Centre, concentrating his criticism upon American business mindedness, philistinism, hypocrisy and repression, organized stupidity, vulgarism and dullness. On the other hand, he lavished praise upon the European aristocratic culture.

What happened to him subsequently was a reversal of what Irving, Cooper and James had demonstrated with their example. As we know, the exposure of these authors to European standards of culture and living affected them in the sense that it made them more critical of their country than they had ever been before, while they were still living in America. With Sinclair Lewis the opposite was true. His contact with Europe was established after he had published Main Street and in the decade of the 20's he would spend long periods alternately in different European countries, also traveling back and forth between America and Europe. And though he continued to criticize his country, Europe gradually lost its former spell as he came to realize that its true nature differed in many aspects from the image that his idealization of it had been shaping for him. Among a number of things, he was soon to find out that his place was neither among

aristocrats nor among sophisticated artists, for he met with successive disappointments in their milieus.

In the course of the 1920's, which were coincidentally the most celebrated and significant years of his career, Sinclair Lewis underwent a gradual change in his perspective and outlook upon the aristocratic values that had for a long time greatly influenced and absorbed him. And the gradual modification of his opinions in this respect can be detected in his major novels of the period, the last of which (Dodsworth, 1929) brings the transition to something of a close since it can be regarded as representing a reconciliation of Lewis with his native democratic environment.

#### 1.2. Review of Previous Criticism

Mark Schorer must be regarded as the greatest authority on Sinclair Lewis. He wrote an extensive biography (Sinclair Lewis: An American Life), a fair amount of criticism, as well as the afterword to all of Lewis's novels that I have had the opportunity of reading. He was also responsible for the edition of a collection of critical essays published under the title Sinclair Lewis. In the foreword to this book, which is the major critical work concerning Sinclair Lewis, he expresses himself as follows:

Generally speaking, the writings of Sinclair Lewis have almost never been the subject of serious criticism. Most of our best critics, when they have not ignored his work entirely, have assailed it for certain philistine attitudes that infected it, but either they did not analyse it as art, or they have treated him as "a publicist in fiction" whose work cannot sustain that kind of analysis. Even the novels of the 1920's, which seemed to so many to mark Sinclair Lewis as the leading novelist in the United States, which aroused enormous controversy in their enormous audience and to which hundreds of thousands of lines of newsprint were devoted, suffered this fate. 24

The scant critical material on Lewis makes it extremely

difficult to follow the usual procedure of setting up and working with a range of contradictory opinions in order to establish my own position in relation to them. And it so happens that the few critics who analysed Lewis's work differ very little among themselves even when they are dealing with specific aspects of it.

As to Lewis's infatuation with European aristocratic values, sensed in Main Street, Robert Cantwell says that he rebelled against American society because it had none of the picturesque feudal remains that he associated with a rich and stable culture.<sup>25</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch's opinion is very similar.

He was passionately sincere and he was engaged in a crusade which seemed to him profoundly important. He may have understood the culture of Main Street a great deal better than he understood the idealized European culture which he attempted to oppose to it. Indeed, there is something ludicrous in the way in which he falls back upon vague references to Europe, as if he were imagining some fabulous London, or Paris, or Vienna populated exclusively by cultured sophisticates. But he genuinely hated something which he saw very clearly; he genuinely loved something which he but dimly understood.<sup>26</sup>

The version that Mark Schorer gives of Lewis's shift in attitude in his novels during the 1920's is summarized in the following statement:

Sinclair Lewis himself, one of the gawkiest adolescents of all time, always aspired to become an elegant man of the world. So, his fiction, without more subtlety, tried to whip the most barbarous kind of American into the Lewis conception of culture. When his personal ambition failed, his novels fell back into a defense of the very barbarousness that he had always held on to as an ace in the hole.<sup>27</sup>

Lewis Mumford in analysing Dodsworth makes a vague reference to a change that he noticed in that novel, by saying that Lewis had returned in a sense to Main Street and Babbitt "with a new kindness toward his central figure, the business man."<sup>28</sup> Yet his remark has little to do with the problem of

Europe vis-à-vis America as regards aristocratic ideals and democratic values. It but reflects the attenuation of Lewis's criticism of America.

The critical appreciations that I have so far recorded deal with Sinclair Lewis's inclination towards European aristocratic values and his subsequent change. But there is a critical view that is in a sense related to this theme and which will be of great value for the presentation of my statement of purpose. It has to do with the fact that contrariwise from what one might expect of a writer who went through an infatuation with aristocratic values, Lewis's literary world is essentially an image of middle-class society. This point of view is forwarded by Maxwell Geismar.

It is interesting to notice the narrow social stratification of this purely middle-class cosmos of Lewis. There are no musicians, dancers, painters, poets or sculptors of consequence in Lewis's world. Furthermore, from the Raymond P. Wutherspoon of Main Street to the Lycurgus Watts of Dodsworth, are there any 'intellectuals' in Lewis's work who are not also by inference dilettanti or actual perverts - that is, when they are not 'radicals' and dangerous as rattlesnakes? 29

Mark Schorer partakes of the same opinion.

Aristocrats are suspect if not phony; intellectuals and artists are irresponsible bohemians. The picture of middle-class provincialism is framed by a middle-class provincial view. 30

Finally, I want to cite two critics who diverge in their opinion as to whether Lewis involved himself emotionally in what he discussed in his novels, whether his writings reflect his likes and dislikes or not. I must confess that this matter has little directly to do with the theme under appreciation, but it is nevertheless of great importance for me since it is related to the manner in which I have approached Lewis's novels. E. M. Forster talks about Lewis's detachment from the materials he deals with.

It is rather the detachment of the close observer, of

the man who stands half a dozen yards off his subject or at any rate within easy speaking distance of it, and the absence of superiority and swank (which so pleasantly characterizes the books) is connected with this. 31

He adds that Lewis's passion is for photography rather than for selection.

His likes and dislikes mean less to him than the quickness of his eye, and though he tends to snapshot muscular Christians when they are attacked with cramp, he would rather snap them amidst clouds of angels than not at all. 32

Lewis Mumford, on the other hand, holds that when Lewis writes well he writes out of the heart, and that his satire is effective because his heart has been hurt. The following statement is also his.

Were he not driven by some inner exacerbation to "get back at" the community that produced him, Mr. Lewis could give back much to it; for he has real insight and might easily create characters on a large scale who would exist in their own right, not merely as creatures in a malicious demonstration. 33

### 1.3. Statement of Purpose

In this dissertation I will deal with Sinclair Lewis's romantic fascination with European aristocratic values and the subsequent reversal in his attitude - to some extent implying a rejection of those very values - as a consequence both of his disillusion with them and the realization that their true nature differed in many aspects from the fanciful idealization he made of them.

The theme is developed out of biographical material on Lewis and related to the five major novels that he produced during the 1920's: Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry and Dodsworth. The biographical sources are Mark Schorer's Sinclair Lewis: An American Life and With Love from Gracie, which is an account given by Grace Hegger Lewis, Lewis's first wife, of their life from the time they met in 1912,

extending to 1925. The Man from Main Street, which contains a number of autobiographical articles that Lewis wrote, constitutes another source of reference.

There is nothing to remark about the critical appreciation that Joseph Wood Krutch gives of Main Street, except that it is very clear and expresses the truth. Mark Schorer's version of the reverse movement in Lewis's attitudes is very much to the point but it has the shortcomings of being too synthetic and simplistic. It seems not to do justice to Lewis because the matter is much more complex than Schorer presents it and therefore deserves a more thorough treatment.

The second chapter of this dissertation, which I have called "The Road to Main Street," is a rather extensive account and interpretation of Lewis's childhood, boyhood and early manhood; it covers the whole period of his life that preceded Main Street and is directed at a number of purposes which I will state here.

By analysing the physical and social environment in which Lewis grew up, and by stepping gingerly on the terrain of psychology in order to assess the different factors that contributed to shape his personality, this study will reveal the complex combination of motives that drove Lewis to grope for European aristocratic values, for a wider world of art and culture, honor and beauty. And it will explain that in doing so Lewis was countering his true nature as he was simple and plain at heart, much more of a Babbitt than the sophisticated cosmopolitan that he aspired to become. And hence the reversal in his attitude will not come so much as a surprise but as a natural consequence inherent in the very traits of his personality.

The analysis of this period in his life will also prepare us for a better understanding of his attitudes during the 20's as it outlines certain patterns of behavior that will remain unchanged until then.

Last but not least, the biographical chapter presents the European aristocratic values that enchanted Lewis, and to which I have alluded so many times. I will give a summary of them.

Lewis liked the European standards of culture, taste, style and also its literature. He was romantically attracted to the European past that had built up and shaped so many traditions in comparison to the American past which he thought was too thin and lacked them. And hence his love of pageantry, his interest in a vanished way of life as a substitute for the general aridity of his environment. He was enchanted with European architecture too, mainly old structures, castles and mansions that brought back to him former times enveloped in the peace of tradition. And he was equally interested in aristocrats themselves, in the gentlemanly European caste and what he thought their code of behavior and life-style to be. Living like them would be living in great style, he thought. The ideal woman that he pictured for himself should be a lady with breeding, manner, style and aristocratic elegance, and he actually found her in the person of Grace Hegger Lewis, his first wife.

The next five chapters of the thesis are named after the novels that I deal with. They are analysed and related to Lewis's life during the period he wrote them.

The last chapter is called "Summing Up" and contains an over-all appreciation as well as conclusions about Lewis's shift in attitude. It also tries to explain why the literary world of Lewis is a middle-class cosmos where there are no musicians, dancers, painters, poets or sculptors of consequence as Maxwell Geismar holds; and why the aristocrats, intellectuals and artists of Lewis's creation are suspect, phony, and irresponsible bohemians as Mark Schorer says. The interpretation that is given to this goes beyond Mark Schorer's affirmation that the picture of middle-class provincialism is framed by a middle-class provincial view. Although it does not deny that this may be partly true, it holds that if there are no true

intellectuals and artists in Lewis's novels this is due to the fact that Lewis was not sure of himself either as an artist or as an intellectual and that he would not stand the competition of such people in his own books. And his aristocrats are suspect and phony as a consequence of the fact that in actual life Lewis had a series of disappointments and adverse experiences with aristocratic people. Thus, I agree with Lewis Mumford when he says that when Lewis writes well he writes out of the heart and that he involves himself emotionally in what he discusses.

Lyon N. Richardson in referring specifically to Arrowsmith gives the following opinion:

Arrowsmith is peopled with characters subjectively drawn for a purpose. They stand as revelations of Lewis's responses towards different types of men. They are characters whom he despised or admired, creatures endowed either with characteristics he detested or with energy and ideals and foibles he could treat sympathetically and with understanding.<sup>34</sup>

It is my opinion that what this critic says applies to the other four novels as well and for this reason I feel justified for having adopted my method of work: to read Sinclair Lewis in his novels.

2. THE ROAD TO MAIN STREET2.1. Sauk Centre, Minnesota

Harry (Hal) Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, on February 7, 1885. His parents were Edwin J. Lewis, the town doctor, and Emma F. Kermott; he was the youngest of their three sons.

Describing Sauk Centre at the time Lewis was born, his biographer says that it was a place where "Thirty years before, there was nothing but native earth, rolling prairie, roving Indians, a crossing of stagecoach trails."<sup>1</sup> In 1885 the population of the village was 2,807 and not till 1924 was its Main Street paved. Until then it had been "muddy in the spring and autumn, dusty in summer, frozen into ruts of wagon wheels in the winter. It had wooden sidewalks and hitching posts and the continuous twang of the cracker barrel, the splatter of tobacco juice as it hit the cuspidor."<sup>2</sup>

Schorer's description very much resembles what Lewis himself wrote about Gopher Prairie in his novel Main Street where, not very inconspicuously, he drew upon his native town. The general ugliness and barrenness of Sauk Centre stood in vivid contrast with its surroundings which consisted of a beautiful countryside with rich farm-lands, numerous lakes, quiet undulating fields, and abundant fauna.

As to the boy Lewis, the earliest description we have is the following:

He was nearly six feet tall before he was sixteen, with a short torso set on very long and spindly legs, and weighed only a hundred and twenty pounds; lank and lean, with a puffy, acne-ridden face, big feet and hands, badly coordinated in his movements, everything about his body hanging and dangling and swinging and lungling, and stumbling, and ice-blue eyes (astigmatic) rather protruding, all of this thatched with a carrot-colored wig.<sup>3</sup>

After this brief description of Lewis and the physical environment in which he was brought up, I will now make some

considerations as to the social atmosphere in which he lived in Sauk Centre, be it in connection with his family, with boys and girls his own age, or else, with the villagers as a whole.

His father was to some extent a self-made man. At the time he got married in 1873 he was a school teacher in Redwood Falls, and while having to supply sustenance for his family (his first son, Fred, was born in 1875), he managed to enroll in the Rush Medical College in Chicago, taking his M.D. in 1877. With a second son (Claude, born in 1878), and being very poor, he started practising in Irontown, Wisconsin. In 1883 the family moved on to Sauk Centre where he was ultimately to thrive and spend the rest of his life.

Dr. Lewis had a keen sense of professional responsibility, was hard-working, and excessively methodical. At home he was a man of frugal habits and few words, thrifty, severe, and even a bit cruel. His son Harry was temperamentally different: eager, restless, endowed with an active, speculative and creative mind, and an intelligence a little above the average. It is difficult to imagine that the different characteristics in their personalities should greatly appeal to each other; I feel justified to say that they by no means shared an easy and harmonious father-and-son relationship. The cold and down-to-earth doctor could muster neither sympathy nor understanding for the boy's fantastic imaginative chattering, his over-sensitiveness, and the habit of wide and random reading which he developed very early.

It must not be understood that Dr. Lewis did not read himself. According to his son, he had in his house volumes of Scott, Dickens, Goethe and Milton. But the elder Lewis had a practical inclination; he valued education and literature because he related them to personal advancement and social distinction. As a matter of fact, deeply ingrained in Dr. Lewis there can be detected some of those characteristics that psychologists label remnants of a Puritan heritage and

tradition. He valued hard work for hard work's sake and his philosophy was that of getting ahead and succeeding, so as to convey that man's main purpose in life is that of pursuing a hard, decent and honest labor in order to be rewarded with the esteem and respect of his neighbors.

With his son Harry at the time he lived in Sauk Centre, reading was quite another matter. It had little to do with the practical ideal of getting ahead in society. On the contrary, one must regard it in part as a form of escaping society itself, of diving into a world of fantasy and reverie as a means of making up for his difficulty in attaining a normal and acceptable social conviviality and finding happiness and fulfillment in his dull and barren home town.

When Harry Lewis was six years old his mother died and a year later his father married again. The new Mrs. Lewis was soon to become tied down with outdoor activities related with cultural improvement and the betterment of health conditions in town, and she became an assiduous member of a number of clubs. She was an active woman, gifted in female accomplishments, opinionated, and "by no means abundantly open in her affections."<sup>4</sup> Although Lewis would later say that she was to him "more mother than step-mother,"<sup>5</sup> he also owned that she was not a softhearted creature at all.

In order to sum up his relation to his parents, it must be said that not only in his boyhood but throughout his parents' lifetime he experienced a harsh absence of sympathy and understanding on their part. They thought him scatter-brained, did not take him seriously and held that he was doomed to be a failure.

In 1910, working in the offices of a periodical called Volta Review in Washington, Lewis wrote his father about his plans of becoming a writer. The first move towards this goal would be to settle in New York for novel writing. He asked his father to make him a loan so as to enable him to start, and quite seriously proposed to pay 7% annual interest. The parental

response was not long in coming. "As to whether you will succeed as a writer you are the best judge. I have no criticism to make, but I know that I am not going to put myself short to make you a loan for I want a lot of it for fun this fall and my many years of hard work entitles me to that." <sup>6</sup> And when in 1911 Lewis wrote his step-mother about his interest in writing and his intention to go home in order to settle down to doing it, her response was even more aggressive.

Of course if you can get three or four weeks vacation and feel you can afford the trip, we shall be glad to see you - but as to staying a long time - do not think it will prove beneficial to you or any of us. You always were going to write when home before, but never did... & don't you see my boy that you like to be idle, dream, smoke & loaf - & think it is genius, but it is not. <sup>7</sup>

Fred, the eldest of the three brothers was a person of no account in Lewis's life. A poor student, he married early and left Sauk Centre to be a miller for all his life. The same does not apply to the other brother, Claude, who was Dr. Lewis's favorite. He was a clever, handsome, companionable boy, a good sportsman and a skillful hunter and fisher; he did well in school and his every feat in medical school was reported in the local news columns. His father was partial to him and showed him up to Lewis as an example to be followed. In I'm an Old Newspaperman Myself Lewis admits that "for sixty years I have tried to impress my brother Claude." <sup>8</sup> This also holds true for those his own age during his youth in Sauk Centre whom he could not impress either. He was generally disliked, especially by the boys, because of his inability in fishing, hunting, and taking part in their favorite games. And as for his interest in books, it was a strange and unusual activity to pursue according to the Sauk Centre boys' code of behavior. They patronized him, thought him queer and used to play hard jokes on him; not rarely was he told to go chase himself. During his adolescence he had but one friend, Irving Fisher. He was also an outsider in activities where both boys and girls belong. The difficulty he found in

attaining social acceptance was in great part due to his gawkiness and his unpleasant facial appearance; he shunned outside activities such as dances and parties, "I always wish after a party of this crowd that I had stayed home as I never have fun at one of them."<sup>9</sup> As to the girls, he tried to convince himself that it was not worth while wasting time on them, "Gott sei dank I am not 'stuck on' any one (at present!). Girls take up a part of a fellow's time out of proportion to their value if he spends any time at all on them."<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile he was developing an intense adolescent love for one Myra Hendrix and suffered intensely when he sensed the impossibility of his love; she was interested in other boys and would not pay the least attention to him. But his love was so acute that he began to dedicate poems to her.

Myra when I cease to love thee,  
 May this right hand lose its cunning,  
 May my life blood cease its flowing,  
 May I meet reward in Hades.<sup>11</sup>

The thought of the unobtainable Myra would continue to plague him for years to come.

In order to give a more rounded picture of how Lewis got along in Sauk Centre, I will follow an account of Hazel Palmer, the daughter of the Palmer House owner, a hotel in Sauk Centre where Lewis worked for two weeks in 1902. According to her he committed a number of blunders among which the most remarkable one was that of calling a traveling man at half past five in the morning to tell him that he had forgotten to wake him for the five o'clock train. She adds that it was common opinion that Lewis would never amount to much but that the children liked him "in spite of the mild contempt with which he was viewed by our elders."<sup>12</sup>

It would be highly unfair if I did not permit some air to enter the stifling atmosphere I have been creating. After all, there were his achievements in the Sauk Centre high school. Despite his general social unpopularity Lewis was recognized by

his teachers and classmates as possessing some talents. In 1900 he was elected president of the Delphian Society, one of the school's literary societies, "for his verbal and forensic gifts."<sup>13</sup> And it was he himself who composed most of the class yells, a matter which gave a student some distinction in school.

But that was all for Sinclair Lewis. One concludes that it is hard to believe that he had a totally normal boyhood in his native town as he would later promulgate. The qualities that are felt lacking in his youth are kindness, comprehension, love, a feeling of belonging and a knowledge of his relative need and importance in his family and the community. It goes without saying that these elements are essential in the life of any adult person, let alone that of a youth groping for self-affirmation, who is going through the years that are so important in the shaping of his personality, the very years that will dictate his possibilities of attaining growth and maturity through a wholesome experience. The social milieu in which Lewis was brought up did not allow him a free, unhampered growth; instead of having a valuable and beneficial experience he underwent a crippling process. This would no doubt affect his social conduct as well as misshape his subsequent outlook on life.

Little has been said as yet about how he reacted, what were his responses to the stimuli he received during this period. He sensed his social inferiority and felt himself an exception, or exceptional in comparison with the youngsters. And since he did not act up to the elders' conception of how a boy should behave, what he should think and aim at, Lewis must have become strongly turned upon himself. As a matter of fact, only people gifted with very solid and authentic personalities will not be robbed of their ease, naturalness and self-confidence under such circumstances. His social experience in Sauk Centre provided him with a marked self-consciousness which, in my opinion, he would never overcome.

The factors that played a major role in the development of his self-consciousness must have been the knowledge of his social inferiority, his rather forbidding physical appearance, his awkwardness, and his inability to take part in the activities of his equals in age. I hold that it did not develop out of a feeling of inferiority as regards culture and learning. He was quite sure of his intellectual endowments at that time, and the more so since he saw them enhanced against the dryness and cultural monotony of Sauk Centre.

Now, depending on the degree in which the self-consciousness of a person shows itself, he may become too much concentrated upon himself as he will continually be analysing his behavior in relation to that of others. It stands to reason that the result of this continual self-appraisal will prove utterly damaging in that the person will often find himself lacking in the qualities he detects in others. In fact, this inner struggle is absurd; it is fought on a totally unequal basis and the person in question will never be the victor since it is humanly impossible for him to put up with the attributes he sees in the people who are familiar to him. Consequently, if this process lasts long enough, we will have a human being who is at variance with himself and the world, who is reluctant to be spontaneous with those who could have been close to him. To a great extent, this seems to have been the case with Lewis. His lack of inner peace, ease and naturalness led him to extremes in his social deportment. He often showed himself a lonely, silent youth, given to introspective brooding; other times he was restless, eager and talkative and whenever he felt that he was not wanted he responded in the form of loud and insistent buffoonery; on other occasions still, he misbehaved so as to become the center of attention.

I smoked 2 cigarettes and a cigar. The latter left such a bad taste in my mouth that I got a glass of beer to destroy it (which it did). I do not smoke as an almost invariable rule but I wanted to have fun

hearing the Sauk Centre fellows say, "What, do you smoke too?" (lots of 'em said it too.)<sup>14</sup>

Lewis read inordinately whatever books he came across. He had an inborn, natural inclination for literature, but part of this interest must have arisen out of a wish to escape his hostile environment. The books his father had at home and which constituted the boy's first literary preferences were all foreign: Scott, Dickens, Goethe, Milton, Collins, Gray and Young. He read widely and continually, devouring works that ranged from trash to history, poetry and novels, with no clear determination of purpose. Subsequently his preferences became more evident; he reveled in Dickens, Kipling, Scott and Tennyson who built for him a realm of fantasy, mystery and adventure. The latter two were responsible for his growing interest in a vanished way of life in the form of medievalism and his companions in reverie were to become Robin Hood, Guinevere, Launcelot, troubadours and knights in armor coming to rescue defenceless ladies fair imprisoned in castles' dungeons. These were also the motives in the verse he began to write at the age of sixteen.

How strange that when I've been reading  
Some tale of an ancient knight  
I see him in the fire place  
Midst the embers, in armor bright -  
I see him ride into battle  
And charging with gleaming lance  
His foemen slain by hundreds  
Or flee before his advance.<sup>15</sup>

Such kind of verse he would be writing for years to come, until he was twenty-nine, a few months after his first marriage.

The absence of sympathy he had been experiencing for so long sent him into a world of illusion. He let himself be carried away on the wings of his fancy, taking flights towards what for him represented promise of light. It is strange that he should have to go so far in space and time, to such exotic and alien places as the dwellings of knights and troubadours and to such ancient times as those of the Middle Ages. Within this

spirit and with the absence of real females he began the dream about literary ones and in his mind the conception of "lady," of "the ideal woman" began to gain its first outlines.

In his last years in Sauk Centre Lewis also began to yearn for contact with a wider world, a world of art and culture, of honor and beauty, where he would seek success as a more widely cultivated person. He might thus make up for his unsuccess at home and prove his value to those he would leave behind. In his diary he made the following entry:

H. Sinclayre Lewis - Poet (?)<sup>16</sup>

Again in his diary he gave an account of his two weeks' work as a clerk at the Palmer House. It is interesting to notice that here again, owing to the influence the English authors must have exercised on him, he laid hold of an imported concept, alien to the American culture, that of "aristocracy".

The regular clerk arrived last night & I am through and for the same right thankful. A hotel - uuf!... a place where the walls are bare of pictures! Where there are no books! Where the cigar and the newspaper predominates! Where the intellectual life is as nearly nill as can well be in an assorted assemblage of men who can read and write! Who hasten to the cigar stand and the bar on their arrival instead to a bookcase. And in this crowd of stupid well-dressed plebeians\* to be a servant. <sup>17</sup>

What one derives from his words is that he felt himself an aristocrat in comparison with those businessmen he had had to serve. His aristocracy was based upon intellectual superiority.

In the autumn of 1900 Lewis read Charles Flandrau's Harvard Episodes and imagined the exotic charms and sophistication of Eastern university life. He translated his wish to enter Harvard in the form of speckling his diary with the capital letter H. If he was unable to find his standards at home he would have to look elsewhere for them, and this is exactly what he intended to do. He had plenty of vitality and

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\*The underlining is mine.

enthusiasm for pursuing this ideal and despite his difficulty in getting along in Sauk Centre he was by no means a defeated soul. What remains to be ascertained is whether his social experience and fanciful venture into literature (which had been after all a single-handed affair in which he received little or no orientation) had given him a capability of making sound judgments of people and literature alike. The picture I have been drawing seems not to suggest this. He is likely to be a youth full of illusions about the world beyond his hometown, with little power of discernment, and rather extravagant tastes.

His biographer says that "as a boy, he was expelled from rather than repelled by his environment, ejected rather than rejecting. In him we have the double pathetic sight of a youth who is driven into an inner world even more bleak and barren than the exterior world that expelled him, who would gladly have chosen that world."<sup>18</sup> If this is true, if at heart Lewis wanted nothing but popularity and recognition at home, he might be forcing his true nature by willing to belong to a world of intellectual refinement and sophistication, and it is therefore doubtful whether this world would absorb him. It seems that, had it given him but a little warmth, the simplicity of Sauk Centre would have exercised a much stronger appeal to him. But was Lewis aware of this, and did he know himself after all? Perhaps there had been too much conflict to have made self-knowledge possible.

## 2.2. Oberlin, Ohio

In September 1902, Lewis went to the academy of Oberlin College in Ohio in order to prepare himself for the entrance examinations at Yale. His father and he had agreed that Yale was the best choice in the way of university education.

It would take him but a very short time to learn that he did not belong in Oberlin either. He met with disdain and derision such as he had been used to in Sauk Centre, and this

would again drive him into isolation. Is it not possible that he was himself partly responsible for this situation? Was he not to blame a little? From what we know about his background he seems likely to have shown himself rather eccentric in behavior in his first contact with Oberlin, and this might, to a great extent, have shut him off from larger communion with other people. In other words, if in Sauk Centre he was often told to go chase himself by the boys, is it not natural that, conscious or unconsciously, he was expecting the same treatment from other people in other places? Thus it is not improbable that he assumed a defensive attitude even without actually being attacked, this defensive attitude taking on the form of withdrawal and aggressiveness on his part. At least this is what one derives from the account of his fellow boarders in the German House.

One of them wrote, "I can't remember ever seeing him laugh, and there was a lot of laughing at mealtimes there. Sometimes he'd come, eat, and go with no word to anyone. And if he did speak it was usually some caustic remark. I remember him first and last as a sarcastic person." Another said, "To the girls... he was very repulsive and when we drew names each week, to change our seats at the table, everyone hoped they would not have to sit beside him." Others thought him "conceited," "aloof and critical, without any friends or intimates," and "a sort of bore." "On any and every occasion he would say 'Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise.' The quotation needed not to be and rarely was apropos." 19

What is pathetic in this is that all the while he was aching for friendship. He did not take part in group festivities but became soon associated with the Y.M.C.A. and developed a sudden and intense interest in religion. Here again, with the absence of real love and friendship he transferred his potentialities in this field to the more subjective sphere of mysticism.

The whole German House went on an outing... and I sat way up in a big oak tree, far away from all the rest of the party, and sang a song of gladness to God, because he had permitted me to know in some small degree his miracles. 20

His religious purpose went as far as making him plan to become a theological student and later a missionary. At the same time the appeal of Eastern university life did not subside and so he managed to combine both interests, "In the evening I study, ending with reading a chapter of Bible. Then prayers and to bed (to dream of YyYyyYYyYale!)"<sup>21</sup>

Lewis's reading was now most of it connected with his studies to enter Yale and became more clearly directed and serious than it had been. But his singular taste had remained the same; it is evident in his willingness to mingle religion and his love of pageantry. He resolved to write "a sacred dialogue, 'The Praise of God,' all to be bound together by poetical dialogue representing these hymns ect,\* as delivered at the Court of Roderick the Good."<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile things foreign and ancient continued to attract him. In fact, he became obsessed by anything that might give him a feeling of the alien, the exotic and the strange. When he spent a few days in Chicago he was most of the time in the Egyptian room of a museum.

All such work as looking up these references gives me a desire to be master of some subject - say of the Ancient World, or Sanskrit, or Hist(ory) of Rome from 509 B.C. to Birth of Christ; of the History, Literature and Language of Phoenicia.<sup>23</sup>

In his diary he described a typical day of his activities in Oberlin and the most remarkable sentence in terms of enterprise and novelty was this: "Today I got a shoe from shoemenders & spent a few minutes in a book store after 3."<sup>24</sup> Thus, there was nothing better than a lyric to the blue of Yale to make up for it.

Bluer than the waves of the sea in the sun,  
Sparkling, untossed by the gale  
(When sea fairies beckon with white glistening arms)  
Bluer thy colors, oh Yale<sup>25</sup>

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\* Lewis used to misspell "etc" at this time.

And he was not alone after all. He had Milton, Spencer, Shakespeare and Macaulay to keep him company and to feel at one with.

Through cloudy rains  
And sunny lanes  
With Milton's mood I stray  
With Spencer oft I hold my breath  
And fear to see black armored death  
Triumphant in affray.

A judge severe  
(Will Shakespeare near)  
I look men through and through.  
Perchance I hear the deep, clear tone  
And those rich words which one alone,  
Macaulay only, knew. <sup>26</sup>

Lewis took his examinations in St. Paul and in July 1903 he received notice of his admission to Yale.

### 2.3. Yale

The intellectual life at Yale at that time was highly selective and characterized by a priggish gentility. The undergraduates were "conservative, conventional, respectful of accepted middle-class values and contemptuous of others." <sup>27</sup> The colleagues of Lewis would soon consider him a clumsy-mannered country bumpkin, extremely naif, and a nuisance for his restlessness and eagerness for talking all the time. His habit of constantly waving his hand during the classes in order to participate irritated them. According to one of his Yale professors, named Phelps, "he was not disliked in college, but was regarded with aimable tolerance as a freak." <sup>28</sup> Such experience must have proven itself a heavy set-back, the worst he had had as yet because the Eastern university life should after all have been different from all that had gone before. This would, of course, enhance both his uneasiness and eccentricity.

He did well in his courses and won honors at the end of the first two terms. In March, 1904, the Yale Literary Magazine

issued his first published poem, Launcelot, which must have been his very pride as it was also the first publication among the whole class of freshmen.

Oft Launcelot grieves that he loveth the Queen  
But oftener that she cruel hath been. <sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile his intense religious fervor waned, "because it goes 'against the grain to teach about 'manna falling from heaven,' partly because of press of work." <sup>30</sup> He was again plagued by the thought of the unresponsive Myra who never returned his letters and he fell in love with a literary female.

Florence! Just when I read Dombey and Son before, I fall in love with her. Gods, what would it not be to know a pure noble loving girl as she. I know none - I pray I may some time. <sup>31</sup>

Lewis rarely permitted himself to talk of his needs as he does here. From what has been recorded one might easily come to suppose that his tone should be, at least at times, that of wailing complaint. Surprisingly, it was not, as there was no touch of self-pity in his words. In fact, he did not allow his writing to give expression to his sufferings, anxieties and defeats, either because he was unable temperamentally to objectify them or because he would not acknowledge their existence even to himself. And in a letter to a Sauk Centre girl, Clara Carpenter, he was highly advisory about the East, about building up one's personal library, and about the delights of the Egyptian archeological exhibits in the Peabody Museum. Among a number of instructions he gave her was this one, "Better be your own college with such teachers as Milton and Wordsworth; nature and music; than one of the many whom one finds at college." <sup>32</sup> This is the first evidence of a strain he developed and which consisted in showing himself a knowing person, a man of the world who is willing to teach lessons and show the way. In other words, it is a way of making an impression.

In July 1904 Lewis signed on with a cattleboat bound for

England in what was to be his first experience abroad. He spent eight days in England but since he had little money, he had to content himself with wandering about Liverpool and Manchester. Before arriving in Liverpool he had become enchanted with the sight of Ireland, "the wonderful land of elves & banschees; of Burke & of Yeats; where Carleton's plays were enacted."<sup>33</sup> The coast of Wales, "land of my forefathers,"<sup>34</sup> had also stirred him. He would take another cattleboat crossing two years later, after his third year in Yale, this time having enough money to stay on in England for almost a month. He was charmed by what he called the "haze of history,"<sup>35</sup> in Oxford. Besides museums and galleries he saw the former residences of Keats, Shelley and Johnson. On these two occasions when he visited England he was kept to observing its exteriors; later, as a famous novelist, he would become acquainted with its social and artistic life.

At Yale his enthusiasm for reading was even more intense than it had been before. He read Boccaccio, Daudet, Thoreau, Yeats, Browning, Keats, Swinburne and his personal library was increased with volumes of nineteenth-century British poets. During his second year in Yale he developed great liking for Shaw, Edith Wharton and H.G.Wells. As to his writing, extravagant taste was again displayed in Matsu-No-Kata: a Romance of Old Japan (his first commercially published fiction, in 1905) in which the style does not fit the subject; it is "a tale of miraculous events in ancient Japan,"<sup>36</sup> written in the same archaic style that Lewis used to employ when he dealt with medieval subjects.

His poetry was also of the same kind as he used to write in Oberlin. He wrote continuously and sent his work to many editorial offices where they were refused one by one. His response came in the form of an outburst.

So many poets wept their melancholy hearts away,  
So many sang whose songs could not outlive their  
little day,

We, too, who are 'inglorious' Miltos,\* tho' we be  
 not mute,  
 Why should we sigh if we find song our singing's only  
 fruit.<sup>37</sup>

His identification with Milton reminds one that Lewis's reading was almost exclusively in European (especially English) literature and that his writing was strongly influenced by it as seen in the subjects he treated and the style he employed. In his disposition to look for European cultural values he seemed to support the view that all men of letters necessarily belonged to a gentlemanly caste. As a matter of fact, he associated literary merit and success with social manner, sophistication, gracious talk and smart clothes, all of which he would have to master since he wanted to achieve success in literature himself. "Phil\*\* and I had a long & serious talk about my future success in literature; & the need of my being a gentleman (tactful, quiet, ect.)"<sup>38</sup> He worried about his appearance and when he bought himself new spectacles he wrote, "In my new eye glasses & silk cord I look quite distingue, doncher-know. Almost as good as a monacle."<sup>39</sup>

In his third year in New Haven Lewis had given up the idea of belonging and being accepted as a Yale man; he became a nonconformist, an outspoken dissident. He was elected to the editorial board of the Yale Literary Magazine and in one of the contributions he made to it he broached a polemical subject. The article was meant to attack the conventionality of Yale and gives us a first glimpse of the critic Lewis was later to become.

The heretic is more likely to be unknown to you personally, than by fame. You may call him a "cheese with a grouch" and dislike him because he does not think and act as the "typical Yale man," which more or less unconsciously, you have been trying to become. Remember that he may have too big and too important a personality to permit it to be crushed in the mold you worship. Incidentally, the heretics of

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\*The underlining is mine.

\*\*Philip L. Morrison, a Yale classmate.

each age, the men with outlandish ideas and customs, have often become the heroes of the next. 40

It is not difficult to find out to what extent he draws upon his life in this discussion. In fact, he is the heretic himself; and as such he changes the perspective of his life in Yale. He remakes it in a form that will enable him to emerge from the discussion safe and sound, victorious and altogether superior to his milieu. I would like to explain the quotation in some detail, dividing it into three parts.

A. "the 'typical Yale man,' which more or less unconsciously, you have been trying to become." Lewis does not acknowledge that he himself had aspired at becoming a typical Yale man, which he might have done simply by substituting "you" for "me". But he seems unable to confess it since he must show himself a person who knows better.

B. "He may have too big and too important a personality to permit it to be crushed in the mold you worship." This has an undertone that suggests that his exclusion from larger communion with the Yale men had been a matter of free choice on his part.

C. "the heretic is more likely to be unknown to you personally, than by fame. You may call him a 'cheese with a grouch,'<sup>41</sup> and dislike him... Incidentally, the heretics of each age, the men with outlandish ideas and customs, have often become the heroes of the next." Lewis was little known, generally disliked and regarded as a "cheese with a grouch" himself; his ideas and customs were outlandish as they depended on ancient and imported values. As we see, he fits entirely into the picture. Yet, as a means of compensating for it, he foresees success for the heretic, for himself. Incidentally, time would prove that he was right. I found the quotation worth dissecting because it throws light upon an interesting and important peculiarity in Lewis: that of arranging points in a discussion and shifting the focus in such a way as to permit him to show himself in a favorable perspective.

In September 1906 Lewis enrolled as senior but he would soon interrupt his studies. He said that he was "thoroughly bored with years of sitting in classrooms sucking in secondhand wisdom."<sup>41</sup> He accepted an invitation to go to Upton Sinclair's Hellicon Hall as janitor and there he remained for a month. After this experience he went to New York where he tried to live by freelancing; he wrote stories for obscure periodicals, published some of his romantic verse, and worked for Transatlantic Tales translating from French and German. Meanwhile he became affianced to one Edith Summers whom he had met in Hellicon Hall but soon afterwards walked out on her. This was his first relationship with a person of the opposite sex. Who knows whether she could not live up to the standard of those lady-like female characters he was used to falling in love with.

In early December Lewis went to Panama intending to find work in its canal, but he did not succeed and saw himself forced to return to America. And now there was no alternative left except that of returning to New Haven in order to complete his studies. He graduated in June, 1908, after having done extra work to make up the courses he had missed.

#### 2.4. 1908-1919

The next period in Lewis's life that I intend to cover extends between his graduation from Yale in 1908 and the publication of his fifth novel, Free Air, in 1919. As we know, his major period - which is also the central focus of this thesis - begins with the publication of Main Street in 1920. I will try to be as brief as possible since I think that, broadly speaking, the formative years of his life have now fallen behind.

Lewis is now a man and as such he has a defined personality with peculiar and indelible characteristics. His life, as that of any other human being, will be a continual and never-ending process of experiencing and learning but it cannot

be denied that anything new in terms of experience will now be assimilated and analysed within the framework of that given personality which, in its turn, will channel it to its own ends; the reach of experience is thus limited and its effect is reduced. His reactions to the stimuli he will be receiving, even to those situations that are altogether new for him, will be rather stereotyped; and his behavior will follow a pattern that will hardly be able to surprise us in terms of novelty. Thus, the twelve years that will be focused upon will prove richer in unexpected events than in unexpected responses to those events on the part of Lewis as it will be possible to trace back most of the responses to earlier stages in his life.

I will now provide a summary of the most important dates and events in this period. During the first three years, pushed on by his restlessness (it stands to reason that a person who has been unhappy in all places where he has lived may develop the habit of constantly moving in search of "the other place" where somehow life is more fulfilling and where he can be happy), Lewis wandered erratically from place to place, having a number of short-lived experiences in different jobs: editorial writer and proof-reader at the Daily Courier in Waterloo, Ohio; clerk in a philanthropic organization in New York; part-time secretary to Grace Mac Gowan Cooke in Carmel, California; journalist for a San Francisco newspaper; subeditor and general clerk at the Volta Review in Washington. In the meantime he also contrived to write and occasionally sell pieces of fiction. He was employed by New York publishers from 1910 to 1915 and in November of that year he resigned his employment with the George H. Doran Company in order to live exclusively by his writing. His first novel, Our Mr. Wrenn, was published in 1914 and in that same year he married Grace Livingstone Hegger. The couple lived alternately in Port Washington, New York City, St. Paul, and Minneapolis. He would write four more novels, The Trail of the Hawk (1915), The Innocents (1917), The Job (1917), and Free

Air (1919). As the novels were not very successful, during this time Lewis had to earn his living by writing short fiction, especially for the Saturday Evening Post.

In his first job at the Daily Courier in Waterloo Lewis showed his uncentered dissidence. Having no direct target and no clearly defined point of view, he defended the Christianity of a University of Chicago professor who had publicly disputed the validity of Christian miracles; he also attacked the national temperance movement in spite of the fact that he took a temperance view - dissidence for dissidence's sake. It would cost him the job. In March 1908 he wrote this letter to William Rose Benét:

When I was in NYawk tother day I found Updegraff quite as much interested in Thompson as you are. He (Up not Th.) wants to be remembered to you. — "We" might get a very decent bunch of damn, iconoclastic, crazy, irreverent, lazy, adorable Bohs together in the only Paree for us, some day. Hope so. Lord, speaking of Paree, it must be great to be really one of that real Parisian bunch. Apparently there is as much gathering of young and enthusiastic asses today as there was when Gautier wore a purple veskit and "charming cubs called Victor, 'Le Maitre.'" Perhaps New York will have an inherent feeling akin to that genuinely metropolitan essence of Paree, some day. SOME DAY! Just as soon as that arrives I shall own evening clothes. 42

What this letter reveals is that Paris (one must say Europe in general) is for him still the model; it is the site of culture, art, learning and sophistication. Lewis undoubtedly advocates native inferiority by hoping that New York (which for him is the best available place in America in what regards the above-mentioned attributes) will soon and somehow become exactly like Paris. Another point that deserves our attention is that in which he talks about getting "a very decent bunch of damn, iconoclastic, crazy, irreverent, lazy, adorable Bohs together." What strikes me is that these are apparently the qualities he most appreciates in the Bohemians. There is nothing that suggests his willingness to share their philosophy and

intellectual pursuits and he mentions neither the beliefs and motives of the Bohemians as a group, nor a feeling of affinity with them, for their reasons. What attracts him to the Bohemians is that for him they represent novelty, they evoke another world, strange, exotic, with a certain style, and thus the more alluring for him. The letter is an adolescent's wish for adventure and play, for going on a spree with his bunch and having fun. It also summons forth the idea of "acting". How much would Lewis have liked to see himself cast in the role of Gautier, with his purple veskit, ordering "Le Maitre" about. And in such an atmosphere as that of "genuinely metropolitan essence" Lewis will not be able to remain himself and feel quite at ease. As he says, "Just as soon as that arrives I shall own evening clothes." The idea is again that clothes and manners make the artist and that he will have to "act" in order to become one.

In 1909 Lewis spent six months as part-time secretary to Mrs. Grace Mac Gowan Cooke in Carmel, California, where an experience in communal living was going on. The place was inhabited by artistic spirits who wanted to live free and inexpensively, leading a "loafing, individualistic and argumentative life."<sup>43</sup> There he tried to write short stories imitating the precise style of Edith Wharton; he had not yet found out his own style and did not succeed in copying that of another writer. As a result he wrote next to nothing during his Carmel stay. According to Katherine, Mrs. Cooke's daughter, Lewis was "fresh, gifted, pimpled and generally disliked."<sup>44</sup> His extravagances bored and irritated the community. After he left Mrs. Cooke wrote, "Hal proved impossible, went his way."<sup>45</sup>

In 1910, when Lewis was working for the Frederick A. Stokes Company in New York, that city was undergoing a phase of awakening and ferment among a great part of its intelligentsia. This was to be the beginning of a time of rebellion on the part of the "Young Intellectuals" who, full of idealism and reformist

ideas, had as their target traditional values of different sorts. They soon formed a literary society in Greenwich Village and were to be known as Bohemians.

The young intellectuals were experimentalists who tasted of everything and were eager to replace stale values with new ones. They were willing to set new standards in living, new techniques in writing, and they were sensible to the latest European fashions in literature, art, music, politics and psychology. Their readings were done in Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson, Dostoevski and they were excited by the revolutionary discoveries of Freud. As to Lewis, he could not bring himself to read and like any one of those authors but he somehow got acquainted with the group of intellectuals and joined them. One might expect that in this sphere of intellectuality, idealism and dissidence Lewis should find his place, but this did not happen.

He met with people of relative literary sophistication, dedicated to intellectual pursuits and apparently moved by little personal ambition as yet as regards success and money. Lewis, in his turn, had high literary dreams which he tried to fuse with another drive in him, that of making money. This combination would hardly have appealed to the idealists of Greenwich Village. Over and above, nothing Lewis had written so far suggested that he could belong to their milieu and be accepted by its leading spirits. At that time he was employed in a publisher's house, writing an adventure story for boys on commission.

On the other hand, it is possible that, owing to his midwestern background, he was still too much of a provincial, and as such too much of a conservative to espouse their values and let himself be carried away by their advanced ideas. And who knows whether the Puritan in him did not strongly dislike their Nietzsche and Freud. In addition to this, I guess that his was a sensibility that could not wholly assimilate, feel and

understand the rather sophisticated and refined intellectual atmosphere with which Greenwich Village was pregnant. This view is corroborated by a short dialogue in Henry Kemp's More Miles.

"He doesn't get us at all - "

"You bet he doesn't - strives so hard to be

'Bohemian'... feels it incumbent on himself to try to kiss all the women." 46

Last but not least, the excesses of his personality were also to encumber his acceptance by the group. Frances Perkins, a contemporary of Lewis, wrote,

As I remember it, he was at that time tasting of everything that came along, but he was always an outsider. I remember that a number of the men I knew very well, like Arthur Bullard and Howard Brubaker, regarded him as a pest and a nuisance and never took him seriously... He was... always making an exaggerated statement of any theory that any one of these people might have been interested in - a statement so exaggerated as to make them feel it was ridiculous and, of course, it made them withdraw from any friendship with him. 47

I have named the most widely read authors among the Greenwich Village intellectuals, adding that Lewis was not fond of them; but it has not been mentioned yet with whom his sympathies were ready in terms of literature at this time of his life. I intend to fill this gap making an over-all review and appraisal of his tastes and preferences.

Bernard Shaw and H.G.Wells were the authors Lewis most enjoyed at this time; he would never cease to like them. In some ways they resemble each other. They are both endowed with a critical mind and concerned with the problems of contemporary society. Their style is simple, not very polished, refined or subtle and their language is also simple and easy to understand. These qualifications about Shaw and Wells are of course simplistic and I am not doing them justice since they are writers of far greater accomplishments. Anyhow, I feel justified to do so because my intention is that of finding in them a few attributes that I think must have attracted Lewis.

Among the writers Lewis could not bear there were four novelists. In a 1908 article for the Daily Courier Lewis wrote that no man could read the work of Henry James; and his first wife later said that he had no esteem for James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence who, during the twenties were shaping modern English literature. Making a rough comparison between the two sets of authors one comes to the conclusion that James, Woolf, Joyce and Lawrence were too refined for him, too "highbrow" for the Sauk Centre standards which must have been strongly rooted in him. He was temperamentally and intellectually unable to muster a liking for subtlety and refinement, for the suggestive, the indirect and the highly subjective, for the use of psychology and experimental techniques.

Lewis preferred the downright and explicit to the subtle and implicit; the objective and outspoken to the subjective and suggestive; standard techniques and simplicity to experimental ones and complexity. And all the while he still was the romantic he had revealed himself years earlier. His love of pageantry did not subside and he continued to write the same kind of imitative verse. It must be allowed that the combination is rather odd.

From January 1911 to April 1912 Lewis was a dues-paying member of the Socialistic Party. He was not active as most other members who were engaged in a number of causes. His connection with the Socialists must be regarded as another attempt at seeking communion with an intellectual group. By associating with them he was also submitting to a strong urge in him, that of experimenting with and tasting everything that was novel, singular and strange for him, anything that might oppose an apparently solitary, commonplace and monotonous life. He did not embrace the cause and in fact he could not, because he had no strongly held political beliefs. It might even be said that he was politically apathetic. All the same, the Socialists attracted him more as a social group than as a political one,

and this seems logical if we take into account that he was soon to become a kind of novelist greatly concerned with depicting manners and behavior in different social strata.

In September 1912 Lewis met Grace Livingstone Hegger and found her the true embodiment of the lady of his dreams, the very "Princess Lointaine." She was a pretty young lady, spirited, literate, chic, snobbish, arrogant, and prided herself about her English background. She was by no means better off than Lewis but she was able to dress smartly on a small income and her job at Vogue gave her a certain distinction. For a better characterization of Grace I can quote a few things she says about herself in her book With Love from Gracie. It is quite revealing.

I was tall and slender with broad shoulders and a small waist, with good bones inherited from my Somersetshire and Hanoverian forebears - mine was a healthy, well-coordinated body which moved swiftly.<sup>48</sup>

I born in New York of English parents, and brought up there with frequent Atlantic crossings...<sup>49</sup>

I must say something about my father, for he was a personality in his day. Born in London of Hanoverian parents... He owned a gallery on Fifth Avenue.<sup>50</sup>

... my English accent to which I had a right by inheritance...<sup>51</sup>

I was almost made in Germany.<sup>52</sup>

It is not surprising that the awkward, blundering and loutishly dressed provincial who had always aspired to become a charming, gracious-mannered cosmopolitan should be attached to her. She was the incarnation of his conception of aristocratic elegance, realized from the basis of a bare and graceless midwestern youth. The solitary, despised, and still virginal man discovered breeding, manner and style in her. More than that, she represented a promise for him to become a wordly and more widely cultivated person by associating with her. Over and above, she was all the more enticing because she indirectly represented what he had always idealized as a wider world where people live in great style: Europe.

In his autobiography, William Woodward\* gives an account of how impressed Lewis had been with Grace's style when he was invited to her apartment for dinner.

Well Bill, she wrote me an invitation to dinner on an engraved card. Yes, written and sent by mail. How's that for being high class? I wondered why she didn't call me up on the phone and invite me, but I suppose she wanted to give the proper tone to the invitation, so she wrote it on engraved paper.

I'll tell you one thing, old man, Miss Hegger is no ordinary run-of-the-mill office worker. She's accustomed to elegance, and polite society and when I'm with her I feel always that I'll do the wrong thing.

I went to dinner at her house. Didn't know what to wear, but Grace told me to come in my everyday clothes. I met her mother, a fine old lady. They have a tiny apartment - only three or four rooms; they're poor, you know.

They had candles on the dinner table. Yes, sir; just candles in pink shades, with the other lights turned out. Candles shining down on the white tablecloth and the spotless napkins. They're gentle folks, and I watched all their movements. I learned a lot about how nice people behave. 53

Mindful of her standards he bought himself his first veskit and began to take lessons in dancing.

Their relationship was from the beginning marked by a sort of humility on his part, an acknowledgment of her superiority.

It's that beastly humility which does come to me when I think how wonderful you are, Silver Maid, most lovable, all fine and perceptive and understanding and trained, and a big spirit, too. I think there is something besides just the cheerful old hackneyed saying of 'I'm unworthy of her' in my attitude. It is founded on a real appreciation of you and a realization of what a jerky old bear I am. 54

An old proverb has it that a burnt child dreads the fire. Lewis had again and again suffered disappointments in his various attempts at making friends and associations. It is then natural that he should be cautious in conducting his affair with

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\* William Woodward was an acquaintance of Lewis at that time.

Grace, to a certain extent assuming a position of submission and inferiority. After all, he would not like again to be told to go chase himself as he was used to, and this time by the lady of his dreams. It is noteworthy that, from what is recorded of their relationship, one can easily conclude that Lewis was ashamed of his provincial origin and that he regarded it as something of a stain on him, a mark of his inferiority.

Jestingly he wrote her, "and I tell you, my dear friend, this ain't a person of no social standing what ever." <sup>55</sup> And on another occasion, "Re-ah-ly, are you quite sure that this 'Red' is not a boor?" <sup>56</sup> Despite the jovial and playful tone, these are pathetic appeals to be accepted and approved of.

At the beginning of 1914 Lewis's first novel Our Mr. Wrenn was published. He dedicated it to Grace and shortly afterwards they were married. But what were the motives that spurred them on into this venture? In her book Grace writes, "I married him because he touched my heart and delighted my brain. Add to these my love of generosity of spirit (which he had) and my pleasure in physical beauty (which he had not), and so I give my recipe for friendship." <sup>57</sup> He touched her heart because he gave her the sense of his utter helplessness without her and he delighted her brain because his was an active and creative mind. He was an intelligent and witty man who wrote poems in which she saw herself cast in the role of lady and princess; a man who was clownish in order to enchant and win her; his temperament revealed a feeling for adventure, fantasy and play akin to her own. Add to this that she felt herself highly valued by him. The things that she most prided herself about (her European background and her frequent Atlantic crossings), and the qualities that she most appreciated in herself (her chic, her poise, and her respect for social convention), constituted the core of his worship for her.

We already know his motives for marrying her, but the following statement might be added in order to supplement them.

"Dearest, you are the woman I serve as well as the girl I like to play with." <sup>58</sup> It is made up of two extremes, that of serving a woman and that of playing with a girl; there is no mention of loving a woman.

It is not for me to name the ingrédients of a good and endurable marriage but it goes without saying that it requires a little maturity in the narrowest sense of that word. And this is exactly what is felt lacking in their union. Two months after their marriage Lewis dedicated to Grace what was to be his last poem of that sort he had been cultivating so long.

THE FIRST SONG OF THE WRENN HOUSE

.....  
We-we can't be married dear!  
Why, we laugh and plot and play;  
While the grown-ups toil and fear  
We, like children, run away  
And go dancing down the road  
With blue bowls for all our load.

We who still are lad and lass,  
We who still are queen and king,

..... 59

Being on the right side of thirty, it is doubtful if Lewis had come of age. The poem suggests a whimsical boy who has at last found someone to toy with; Grace was not his wife, she was his playmate; and when they became wearied of their play, there would be broken toys about, and tears.

Lewis was stirred by Grace's habits when they presented anything that was in some degree different from his experience. Thus, when she chose a French maid-of-all-work because it pleased her to give orders in French before guests, he called it "furrin." The dishes she liked best were also "furrin." We know that anything smelling of foreignness and exoticism exercised a charm on him; an account Grace gives of their trip to Vancouver serves to confirm it. "We were excited by our sail to Vancouver and stepping on British soil. And we thought Vancouver itself - the red pillar boxes with the royal crown and the bobbies with straps under their chins, Hindoos with turbans driving vegetable

carts, and Chinamen balancing long poles with baskets swaying at either end - equally thrilling. 'Furrin!' said Hal." <sup>60</sup>

She was now frequently to correct him as she wanted him to live up to her standards as regards manners and clothing. At the beginning Lewis consented to being improved, since for him this all pertained to the game of marriage in which he had launched himself. She transformed his exterior by changing his wardrobe and tried to improve his flat Midwestern speech. The change in him was noted by France Perkins. "About that time he began wearing a monocle also, largely for spoofing but then serious affectation. He looked like a distinguished Scottish author, which is exactly what I think he was aiming at." <sup>61</sup>

This reminds me again that he apparently allied literary success with sophistication, but other factors come into play as well. The change in him (especially that in his appearance) no doubt permitted him to make an impression on other people; he who had never been able to arouse the interest of others, let alone make an impression. Acting had become a habit with him, an integral part of his character. The idea is that of the self-conscious person who assumes poses and attitudes befitting occasions, who can rarely show himself as he actually is, who possibly does not know himself how and what he is. There is something I have not mentioned and that is closely related to this. Lewis had a remarkable gift for mimicry and he sometimes made impersonations which he kept on for hours at a time. This is another form of evasion, a manner of not revealing one's self by being someone else.

I remember having been told that the best actors are often those who have a malleable character and not very strong and authentic personal traits. This enables them to yield themselves over and live the life of a character as if it were their own.

Lewis's craving for romance made him want to become acquainted with elegance and learn how to be charming. But this

wish to emulate sophistication clashed with another drive in him. He was to a great extent a simple and plain man who had inherited a great deal of his father's practical conception of succeeding and seeking improvement by making money. By this time he was determined to become a successful commercial writer, and in 1918, when he was starting to write Main Street, he frequently told William Woodward that he would like to give up writing and go into some solid business like banking. He would have a hard time in trying to conjugate these two drives in him.

When he was sixteen years old Lewis had referred to the boarders of the Palmer House as "plebeians," and in 1915, at the age of thirty, he talked about "aristocracy" to his wife. The words are hers.

Out of curiosity, not good citizenship, Hal joined Mason Trowbridge when Mason, who had become the local J.P., was campaigning for the Town Board. They went to a floating saloon in Manhasset Bay where the vote was taken. But Hal could not stick the political shenanigans and burst in upon me with "I'm for a limited aristocracy!"<sup>62</sup>

It is not very clear what exactly he meant by saying this but we know that in this particular respect the ideas of the man have not changed from those of the boy.

On one occasion when the Trowbridges and the Lewises were playing hearts, Lewis suddenly laid down his cards and declared, "I expect to be the most talked-of writer in America."<sup>63</sup>

## 2.5. The Pattern of Lewis's Novels in His "Age of Innocence."\*

Though I have not been able to find copies of the five novels that preceded Main Street, something must be said about them as well as about the short fiction that accompanied them. I will have to depend on what the critics say and this will present no difficulty because their opinions about the books are

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\* Maxwell Geismar uses this expression in his article "Origins of a Dynasty," quoted in Schorer. Sinclair Lewis, opus.cit., p.16.

fundamentally the same.

My interest in those works which belong to Lewis's "age of innocence" is due to the fact that they are quite different from the first novels Lewis wrote during the twenties (especially Main Street and Babbitt) in a point that is very significant for my thesis. Mark Schorer says that in most of Lewis's short fiction the general pattern was that of asserting "the superiority of the 'real' (the 'genuine Amurrican') over the false, the phony - probably an artist; over the Easterner - a snob; over the rich man - a swindler." <sup>64</sup> The controlling situation in his novels was that of rebellion against the idea that Middle Westerners were inferior to sophisticated, cultured Easterners. T.K.Whipple in his critical essay Sinclair Lewis writes the following: "According to Lewis... people who have enjoyed the hereditary advantages of wealth, social position, and education are ridiculous and contemptible unless... they have the good luck to be regenerated by the Great West. His whole tendency in his first four stories is to bring a warm glow of self-satisfaction to the heart of the great American majority, to strengthen and entrench the folk of Zenith and Gopher Prairie in their complacency and also in their intolerance of every one unlike themselves." <sup>65</sup>

It is true that this is in keeping with his temperament; this represents the one side of his divided heart in which he reveals himself a provincial, a small-town Puritan who is suspicious of city ways and has respect for the simplicity inherent in small town life. But there are reasons to believe that this view did not suit his personal mood at the time it was put to paper. This is what one believes after examining the following paragraph, written in his diary in 1910.

Now, actually I prefer ice water to well water; prefer benedictine served by a waiter whose manner hints a title incogged to beer served in a country bar room smelling of farm boots mucked with Mother Earth and things. I prefer insignificant little mutts

who hap - to know chamber music to huge bearded farmers... I could be a Minnesotan keenly - being in Washington and safe. 66

And while Lewis was defending the superiority of small town virtues, the beauty of humdrum life in the innocent West, he himself lived almost exclusively in the East, showing one tendency in his writing and another one in his conduct.

Mark Schorer believes that at that time Lewis was aiming at becoming a successful writer in quest of money and applause and that therefore, when he wrote, he was concentrating upon what the audience would like to read. Although country kindliness and wisdom are depicted more favorably than the sophistication of the Easterners, the books were by no means an attack on the East. Apparently he really wanted to please the readers.

It was Alfred Harcourt\* who advised Lewis not to be preoccupied with success and with what the public wanted. He encouraged Lewis to produce something he really wanted to write, for its own sake alone. The result was Main Street, very different and very critical of the same Middle West and small town life he had been prizes earlier. Lewis had finally come to his own. There is an irony in the fact that when he wrote to please the reader he failed, and when he wrote only to please himself he succeeded in pleasing the reader and became rich and famous.

What is significant in all this is that Lewis learned that when he wrote to please himself he became "the most talked-of writer in America" as he had wished. This anticipates a novelist who will feel encouraged to proceed in like manner in his next works, giving vent to his feelings, revealing much of himself and providing the analyst with rich and abundant material.

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\*Alfred Harcourt was Sinclair Lewis's publisher from 1919 until 1930.

3. MAIN STREET

Main Street is the story of Carol Milford, a Minnesotan, who after graduating spent a year in Chicago, three in St. Paul and thereafter married Will Kennicott, a small town doctor, settling in his home town Gopher Prairie (in the synthetic Middle Western state of Winnemac, of Lewis's own creation). She is a comparatively sophisticated person, a librarian who has some experience of the East and comes from a home where she was encouraged to read Balzac, Rabelais, Thoreau and Max Mueller. Sensing the general ugliness of the place, the dullness and cultural stagnancy of its inhabitants, she becomes set on improving both with her ideas about architecture, style, social justice, art and culture and is understood neither by the town's people nor by her husband, a kind but stodgy and simple man. She makes several attempts at reform and improvement only to be defeated again and again. Rebell ing against her environment, she leaves the town and her husband and goes to Washington, taking her little son Hugh along. After spending a little over a year there she returns to Gopher Prairie and to the hearth-stone of her husband Will, this time seemingly to submit and be settled for good.

The criticism that Carol levels at the people of Gopher Prairie is directed at their intellectual deafness and rigidity which makes them loathe the very mention of any cultural innovation; she is also offended by their philistinism, near-sightedness, materialism and their latent Puritanism which makes them control and be suspicious of one another, encumbering individual freedom and enterprise. The novel is a reversal of that tradition in literature which consisted in exalting the virtues of small town life (and which, by the way, Lewis had been helping to forward in his early novels himself).

In reading popular stories and seeing plays, asserted Carol, she had found only two traditions of the American small town. The first tradition... is that the American village remains the one sure abode of

friendship and clean sweet marriageable girls... The other tradition is that the significant features of all villagers are whiskers, iron dogs upon lawns, gold bricks, checkers, jars of gilded cat-tails, and shrewd comic old men who are known as "hicks" and who ejaculate "Waal I swan." This altogether admirable tradition rules the vaudeville stage, facetious illustrators, and syndicated newspaper humor, but out of actual life it passed forty years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Carol's criticism of Gopher Prairie is often sound, and the reader will naturally agree with her in a number of points. Yet her reform program and the values that she intends to oppose to those that predominate in Gopher Prairie are even more surprising. A few quotations will help to illustrate this.

They want shouts on Main Street, and I want violins in a paneled room.<sup>2</sup>

She had taken only half an hour (in planning)\* to change a wire-fenced potato-plot into a walled rose-garden.<sup>3</sup>

But if I could put through all those reforms at once, I'd still want startling, exotic things... The civic improvements which I'd like the Thanatopsis to advocate are Strindberg plays, and classic dancers - exquisite legs beneath tulle - and (I can see him clearly) a thick, black-bearded, cynical Frenchman who would sit about and drink and sing opera and tell bawdy stories and laugh at our proprieties and quote Rabelais and not to be ashamed to kiss my hand.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the novel Lewis warns us against "her trust in rather vaguely conceived sweetness and light,"<sup>5</sup> and the quotations seem to corroborate his assertion. They also confirm - on the evidence of Lewis's life - that Carol Kennicott and Sinclair Lewis are very much alike in this respect. They are both romantic and naif in their yearning for an intenser and richer life, and are equally enchanted with exotic images of beauty. When Carol takes her son to Washington he asks her what they will find beyond the horizon. Her answer is,

We're going to find elephants with golden howdahs from which peep young maharanees with necklaces of

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\* The words within parenthesis do not belong to the text of M.S.

rubies,' and a dawn sea colored like the breast of a dove, and a white and green house filled with books and silver tea-sets.<sup>6</sup>

"Furrin," Lewis used to say to his wife when he met with extravagant and foreign things, and "furrin" is Carol's fancy. But the novelist is here in a much better situation than his character. Through her he can give free play to his odd romanticism and extravagant taste without letting on that this trait in Carol's personality is his own; and if the reader at times feels compelled to laugh at her he can even join in the laughter. The fact is not that Lewis designed Carol to poke fun at her; he liked her and took her quite seriously. In the novel itself he describes her as tender and merry; and when Main Street was being adapted to the stage, he wrote Harcourt that Carol's part required someone with brains because she was sensitive and articulate.

For Carol, romance and magic are not to be found in Gopher Prairie and one doubts if they can be found in America itself. When she lets herself daydream, the scene is often set in foreign lands and ancient times and the protagonists are exotic beings.

Instantly she was released from the homely comfort of a prairie town. She was in the world of lonely things - the flutter of twilight linnets, the aching call of gulls along a shore to which the netted foam crept out of darkness, the island of Aengus and the elder gods and the eternal glories that never were, tall kings and women girdled with crusted gold.<sup>7</sup>

Almost at the end of the story Carol goes to Washington and there her life takes on the semblance of something much more fulfilling than what she had experienced in Gopher Prairie. Her resolve to leave for that city is a sudden decision, not exactly the result of a process of idealizing the life in that place or in the East itself. Living in Gopher Prairie and hating it, it is natural that she should have in mind one or more places with which to contrast her town. But these places are seemingly not located either in the East or in any other place within her

country. When she compares Gopher Prairie, the other term of comparison lies abroad. "She wondered why the good citizens insisted on adding the chill of prejudice, why they did not make the houses of their spirits more warm and frivolous, like the wise chatterers of Stockholm and Moscow."<sup>8</sup> And once, after having been rebuffed in one of her several attempts to change the town, she becomes so disappointed that she wants to give up. "Carol forswore herself; declared that Gopher Prairie had the color of Algiers and the gaiety of Mardi Gras."<sup>9</sup>

The East (Washington) is compared with the Middle West (Gopher Prairie) when Carol moves to the former and in the contrast Gopher Prairie loses by far. But what is interesting and very revealing is the fact that even after returning to her husband and the small town life, her Eastern experience seems not to have affected her to the extent of mentioning it in her final outburst; on the contrary, she lavishes praise upon Europe.

But I have won this: I've never excused my failure by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater and more generous than Europe!<sup>10</sup>

Carol had never been in Europe and Lewis, from what we know about his two cattleboat crossings to England, can not be said to have had any European experience whatever. Yet Europe is for them definitely the model in the likeness of which many things have to be shaped: the source of beauty, romance and style; there is a passage in Main Street in which Carol pictures herself "wearing a trottoir and a summer fur, meeting an aristocratic stranger."<sup>11</sup> It is also the site of culture; when Carol makes up a list of books for the Gopher Prairie library, the thirty novels she chooses are all European. But what they know about Europe, what they think it to be, is derived entirely from the books they have read.

If on the one hand some of the characteristics of Carol

(those that have been discussed so far) represent one aspect of Lewis's divided emotions, Will Kennicott represents the other; he is a simple man whose values are more earthly and who stands for common-sense. In the novel Lewis takes pains to remain neutral and in the end he makes Will prevail over Carol. But for me it is very clear that his heart follows her, that he feels much more identified with Carol's aspirations than with her husband's.

The following quotation condenses both the faults of Gopher Prairie and also what seems the only way out of its narrow life.

Though Gopher Prairie regards itself as a part of the Great World, compares itself to Rome and Vienna, it will not acquire the scientific spirit, the international mind, which would make it great. It picks at information which will visibly procure money and social distinction. Its conception of a community ideal is not the grand manner, the noble aspiration, the fine aristocratic pride,\* but cheap labor for the kitchen and rapid increase in the price of land. 12

Lewis often pokes fun at his characters when he has them do something in a fumbling and clumsy fashion; he has the gift of focusing upon them at the exact moment they are confused, doing something awkward, using language that he deems too plain or silly for the occasion, or even when they are pursuing an activity that he considers too simple and unaristocratic. On such occasions he often turns to literary myth, to the mock heroic mode, which is the device he has conceived for enhancing ridiculousness. When he thinks that the speech of Carol and Will Kennicott during their courtship is dull and not as romantic as he thought it should be he says, "Thus in the Vale of Arcady nymph and Satyr beguiled the hours; precisely thus, and not in honeyed pentameters, discoursed Elaine and the worn Sir Launcelot in the pleached alley." 13 When Carol visits Erik Valborg, a young Swede who stands out from his milieu in Gopher

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\*The underlining is mine.

Prairie for his intense interest in literature, but who has to earn his living by pressing trousers in a tailor shop, we read this: "She faced the Greek god who, in a somewhat ungodlike way was stitching a coat on a scaly sewing machine, in a room of smutted plaster walls." <sup>14</sup>

The Thanatopsis women's club in Gopher Prairie has weekly meetings in which its members read papers on various subjects and discuss them in order to improve their culture. Among the topics Lewis selects for them there is not to be found a single native theme nor any American author. The papers are the following: English fiction and essays; Scandinavian, Russian and Polish literature; English poets. And when these subjects are treated by the Gopher Prairie women, Lewis shows the world all their stupidity and narrow-mindedness. Throughout the book he also lets other people have their say about foreign life and culture and the effect he obtains is the same.

Why, I once started a novel by this fellow Balzac that you read about, and it told how a lady wasn't living with her husband... It went into details, disgustingly. <sup>15</sup>

Don't you think that was a grand paper Mrs. Westlake read about Tolstoy? I was glad she pointed out how all his silly socialistic ideas failed. <sup>16</sup>

The pastor's wife decided that Swinburne would not be studied because "there can never be genuine beauty without the message from the heart." <sup>17</sup>

What we want in a play is humor and pep. There's where American playwrights put it all over these darn European glooms. <sup>18</sup>

If that's highbrow drama, give me a cow-puncher movie every time. <sup>19</sup>

I imagine gondolas are kind of nice to ride in, but we've got better bath-rooms. <sup>20</sup>

Lewis's insistence in harping on the same string, in pointing at the foolishness of his people, makes one suspect that he does it in great part out of a need to protect himself. After all, he is himself much what he depicts; he was born and brought up in a Gopher Prairie and it looks as though he is

ashamed of his provincial origin, afraid that someone may regard him a hay-seed. He persists in the same theme lest his readers confuse him with his characters and in order to show that he is more cultured and refined, that his experience by far outdoes that of the people in his book, he often employs foreign words, a few of them already integrated in the English vocabulary, others not, e.g., "poseur," "roués," "noblesse oblige," "cloisoné," "difficile," "lez majesty," "imprimatur," "trottoir."

If he regards provinciality as a sign of inferiority, being urban and cosmopolitan, on the other hand, is a sign of distinction and superiority. This social discrimination is so important for him that he often has to point at the provinciality of a character in order to prove his urbanity. When Carol and Will go to Minneapolis to see some plays, their experience is described in this manner:

They had all the experiences of provincials in a metropolis... and by eleven in the evening they were again so lively that they went to a Chinese restaurant that was frequented by clerks and their sweethearts on pay-days. They sat at a teak and marble table eating Eggs Foo-yung, and listened to a brassy automatic piano, and were altogether cosmopolitan. <sup>21</sup>

When Lewis does not sympathise with one of the people of his creation, he reduces him by using the same device, "She was the more rustic in her effort to appear urban." <sup>22</sup>

The foreigners in Main Street (and some of the people who were born in the United States of foreign parents) are far more virtuous, original and likeable than the American characters. Among them is Miles Bjornstam, the "Red Swede," who reads Byron, Tennyson, Stevenson and Thorstein Veblen; he is the only spiritually independent figure in the town, and for that reason, the town outcast, despised by everybody. He marries Carol's maid Bea, a Scandinavian girl, and the two become the only really happy couple in Gopher Prairie. Their son Olaf is the fairest child in town, superior to other children, "Olaf was a Norse

Chieftain: straight, sunny-haired, large-limbed, resplendently aimiable to his subjects. Hugh was a vulgarian; a bustling business man." <sup>23</sup> In narrating the story of this family Lewis employs drama, a thing that he rarely does; he makes Gopher Prairie defeat them. They are forced to drink water of dubious quality as their neighbors will not give them any of theirs. Bea and Olaf catch typhoid and eventually die; Miles leaves the town.

The Scandinavian servants are ill-treated and exploited by American wives and most of the soldiers who go to war are the sons of German and Swedish farmers who do not get recognition for it. And here is another passage in which Lewis resorts to drama:

Cy got much reputation by whipping a farmboy named Adolph Pochbauer for being "a damn hyphenated German." This was the younger Pochbauer who was killed in the Argone, while he was trying to bring the body of his Yankee captain back to the lines. At this time Cy Bogart was still dwelling in Gopher Prairie and planning to go to war. <sup>24</sup>

The American environment is also accused of spoiling the foreigners' true, traditional and original habits.

She (Carol)\* had inquired as to the effect of the dominating dullness upon foreigners. She remembered the feeble exotic quality to be found in the first-generation Scandinavians... she saw these Scandinavian women zealously exchange their spiced puddings and red jackets for fried pork chops and congealed white blouses, trading the ancient Christmas hymns of the fjords for "She's My Jazzland Cutie," being Americanized into uniformity. <sup>25</sup>

And worse than this, Lewis goes as far as asserting that societies like the one in Gopher Prairie which, according to him, are numerous ("nine tenths of the American towns are so alike that it is the completest boredom to wander from one to another." <sup>26</sup>), that America itself, with its growing propensity for uniformity, standardization, materialism and lack of tact

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\*The word within parenthesis does not belong to the text of M.S.

and taste, is a negative force seeking to change countries, bring harm to other civilizations and destroy their often millenial traditions.

It is a force seeking to dominate the earth, to drain the hills and sea of color, to set Dante at boosting Gopher Prairie, and to dress the high gods in Klassy Kollege Klothes. Sure of itself, it bullies other civilizations, as a traveling salesman in a brown derby conquers the wisdom of China and tacks advertisements of cigarettes over arches for centuries dedicated to the sayings of Confucius. <sup>27</sup>

The architecture of Gopher Prairie is planless, haphazard and tasteless. The houses of the richest people in town are marked by a cold, solid-looking squareness, but the town buildings as a whole are characterized by a "flimsy temporariness." <sup>28</sup> Lewis does not say how the buildings should be designed, but who knows whether to oppose this "flimsy temporariness," he had in mind the tenacious enduringness of European mansions and castles. He criticises the lack of originality and artificiality of Gopher Prairie structures ("the corners covered with sanded pine slabs purporting to symbolize stone," <sup>29</sup> "stucco masking wood," <sup>30</sup> "a corner building of regular and unreal blocks of artificial stone" <sup>31</sup>)\* but there is nothing in the book in terms of style in architecture to oppose this. Carol's wish to "turn a prairie town into Georgian houses and Japanese bungalows" <sup>32</sup> to provide the town with fanlights, and her dreaming about ivory castles, is even more unnatural and synthetic.

There are many references to "aristocracy" in the novel. Lewis accuses Americans of not having "the grand manner, the noble aspiration, the fine aristocratic pride," <sup>33</sup> whatever he means by it. But the people do not regard themselves as aristocratic, neither have they any aspirations to become so; it is Lewis who calls them aristocratic, thereafter to satirize them and prove they are not.

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\*The underlining is mine.

Lewis was aware of the fact that America was a relatively new country, which had not had sufficient time to create as many traditions as other and older countries had been able to. But his characters are not to blame for the fact that for the man who loved the ancient and the exotic, the relatively brief cycle of American life provided little substance upon which his romantic and extravagant taste could be nourished. The only American tradition Lewis distinguishes is that of the pioneering frontier past about which he sometimes makes vague references but which is seemingly not able to stir him very much.

Be it as it will, his characters are judged according to an imported concept. "Then in a shy avalanche arrived the entire aristocracy of Gopher Prairie; all persons engaged in a profession, or earning more than twenty-five hundred dollars a year, or possessed of grandparents born in America." <sup>34</sup> And all the while he belittles their social enterprises, again using the device of European comparison. "The Jolly Seventeen was the social cornice of Gopher Prairie. It was the country club, the diplomatic set, the St. Cecilia, the Ritz oval room, the Club de Vingt." <sup>35</sup>

There is a passage in Main Street which reminds one of Lewis having told his wife that he was for a "limited aristocracy." In it he complains that in America it is difficult to know apart a person who has learning from another one who has not, since they behave in like manner. The concept "aristocracy" in this case takes on the significance of a selection based on culture and intellectual superiority. "The boy in Arkansas displays just such flamboyant ready-made suit as is found on just such a boy in Delaware... and if one of them is in College and the other is a barber, no one may surmise which is which." <sup>36</sup>

As to Grace Hegger and Sinclair Lewis, their relationship had been changing gradually from that early phase when Lewis thought his marriage an adventurous game in which Grace was his playmate. If at the beginning he regarded her attempts to

correct him and make him adopt her manners as "furrin," the novelty of this game was soon to disappear, giving place to boredom and irritation on his part. "It is possible that Hal was bored by what he may have called my artificial maintainance of reserve, that he was hurt when my mobile face showed my distress over his gaucheries, his unconscious rudeness." <sup>37</sup>

There is a story that at a dinner in Minneapolis in 1919 Grace complained of the fashion in which Lewis was eating his peas and that Lewis reacted by rising from the table in protest and finished his meal with the plate in his lap, seated on the floor in a corner. The story hints of a child rebelling against the demands of his mother. On another occasion when, without warning, Lewis brought home a friend to dinner, Grace disliked the surprise and treated the man very coldly. "I sat so politely quiet, so offensively and loudly quiet, that very soon Lester asked when the next train was leaving and in spite of Hal's protests the two men left for the station." <sup>38</sup> The lady upon whom he had hung shining garments would often behave in a snobbish manner that vexed and humbled the bluff and easygoing Midwesterner in him.

When Main Street was published, Lewis told Grace that she stood for all the good qualities which had gone into the characterization of Carol. But whatever they are, Carol also possesses those particularities in Grace that I have just described.

For all her enthusiasms... she yet seemed gently aloof and critical. <sup>39</sup>

Carol smiled upon them (Will and his friends)\* ingratiantly. Do you dears mind if I slip up to bed? I'm rather tired. <sup>40</sup>

He's (Sam Clark, a friend of Will)\* so darn afraid you'll be offended if he smokes... You want to know why you scare him? First you deliberately fire some question at him that you know darn well he can't answer - any fool could see you were experimenting

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\* The words within parenthesis do not belong to the text of M.S.

with him. 41

He was stirred to rise from the table and hold the chair for her; and all through supper he ate his bread dry because he felt that she would think him common if he said "Will you hand me the butter?" 42

I would like to confirm how much of Lewis there is to be found in his characters, as regards the formerly discussed ideas of "self-consciousness," "posing," and "acting." He projects upon some characters - especially Carol - that sense of uneasiness he often felt socially.

"They're watching me. I mustn't let it make me self-conscious," she coaxed herself - overstimulated by the drug of thought, and offensively on the defensive. 43

But she felt insecure. Her chair was out in the open, exposed to their gaze. 44

She came out of her several conflicting poses. 45

Always she was acting,\* for the benefit of the ambushed leering eyes which she did not see. 46

There is a passage which proves that Lewis's preoccupation with such behavior is so acute that he goes as far as robbing church-going children of their spontaneity. The disease of self-consciousness has been caught by the little ones. "Abashed boys slunk into the rear pews and giggled, while milky little girls, up in front with their mothers, self-consciously kept from turning around." 47

The uneasy feeling of having been born in a small Midwestern town and of being recognized as a provincial, as well as a respect amounting to awe, for the urbanity of people living in large cities and other countries represent, to a great extent, another aspect in Lewis that he projects upon his characters. An example of this lies in how Carol feels when she goes to Minneapolis.

When a clerk in an overcoat too closely fitted at the waist stared at her, she moved nearer to Kenricott's arm. The clerk was flippant and urban. He was a

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\* The underlining is mine.

superior person, used to this tumult... In the hotel lobby she felt self-conscious. She was not used to hotels... She could not face the traveling salesmen, baronial in large leather chairs. She wanted people to believe that her husband and she were accustomed to luxury and chill elegance. 48

At the close of the story we have Lewis lecturing about America, pointing at what is wrong with small-town people who visit large cities and explaining what the life in the East is like. "It was not all the 'artist's studio' of which, because of its persistence in fiction, she had dreamed." 49 His experience in the East (he who had for a long time idealized eastern life himself) now enables him to show the way, in a patronizing tone, to those who do not know it. But despite all the knowledge he displays about the East, he still has a fictionalized and unreal vision of Europe, of foreign countries in general. They continue to exercise a mythical charm upon him, being therefore somehow richer and superior to what the American experience affords.

The McGanumms said good-bye as though they were going to Tibet instead of to the station to catch No. 7 north. 50

4. BABBITT

In Babbitt Lewis makes a satirical exposure of American commercial culture as seen in Zenith, a Gopher Prairie come of age and grown into the likeness of an eastern metropolis. He shows the standardization of thought and behavior of its people, as a result of their being wholly dedicated to the pursuit of wealth and self-advancement in their materialistic society.

Like Gopher Prairie, Zenith is impersonal; it has no individuality of its own. "A stranger suddenly dropped into the business-center of Zenith could not have told whether he was in a city of Oregon, Georgia, Ohio, or Maine, Oklahoma or Manitoba."<sup>1</sup> And the same is true of the people who are undistinguishable when they exchange their opinions about the weather, business, politics, Prohibition, labor unions, and foreigners. "Which of them said which has never been determined, and does not matter, since they all had the same ideas and expressed them always with the same ponderous and brassy assurance."<sup>2</sup>

Lewis says that the members of such a business community are incapable of being genuine and that they have no gift for thinking:

Just as he (Babbitt)\* was an Elk, a Booster, and a member of the Chamber of Commerce, just as the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined his every religious belief and the senators who controlled the Republican Party decided in little smoky rooms in Washington what he should think... so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality.<sup>3</sup>

This society represents death for the aspiring, creative and speculative spirits because it is utterly adverse to innovations, firmly rejecting anything new and different from the ethos of the community. Seneca Doane, "the radical lawyer," is a relatively learned man who has studied in Germany and has

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\*The word within parenthesis does not belong to the text.

taken part in a number of international labor conferences. When he runs for mayor, the Democrats and Republicans join against him as they deem him a candidate "on an alarming labor ticket."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Doane is defeated and Zenith elects Lucas Prout, a sound business man, a "mattress manufacturer with a perfect record for sanity."<sup>5</sup>

In Babbitt's address to the Zenith Real Estate Board, we get an idea of the predominating attitude towards education. School conditions are not evaluated as regards the qualification of a teachers' staff or the adequacy of the subjects that are taught; the evaluation is made uniquely in terms of the size and comodiousness of the buildings. "... our high schools characterized by their complete plants and the finest school-ventilating systems in the country."<sup>6</sup>

The pursuit of culture is artificial and standardized. In Zenith this word gains a connotation that makes its citizens regard it as any one of the products that are exhibited in stores, ready to be bought and consumed. And the arts are measured, not in terms of quality, but quantity and price.

In no country in the world will you find so many reproductions of the Old Masters and of well-known paintings on parlor walls as in these United States. No country has anything like our number of phonographs, with not only dance records and comic but also the best operas, such as Verdi, rendered by the world's highest-paid singers.<sup>7</sup>

One of Zenith's intellectuals is Professor Joseph K. Pumphrey who owns the Riteway College; he is instructor in Public Speaking, Business English, Scenario Writing, and Commercial Law. The other intellectual is T. Cholmondeley Frink, author of "Poemulations" that syndicate daily in sixty-seven of the leading newspapers in the United States and who has one of the largest audiences in the world. This man advocates "practical literature"<sup>8</sup> and is the creator of "Ads that Add."<sup>9</sup> He says that the greatest American genius, whose work should be preserved so that posterity may admire American thought and

originality, is the man who wrote the Prince Albert Tobacco adds.

Prince Albert is john-on-the-job—always joyously more-ish in flavor; always delightfully cool and fragrant! For a fact, you never hooked such a double-decked, copper-riveted, two-fisted smoke enjoyment!<sup>10</sup>

As to architecture, the houses in Zenith are standardized like those in Gopher Prairie, the largest ones marked by a material showiness. Their interiors are "as neat, and as negative, as a block of ice."<sup>11</sup> Many of the Zenith buildings display a complete lack of taste and originality, as is seen in the design of the Athletic Club which combines different architectural styles. "The entrance lobby of the Athletic Club was Gothic, the washroom Roman Imperial, the lounge Spanish Mission, and the reading-room Chinese Chippendale."<sup>12</sup> But what is the style in architecture that the author advocates, that he thinks most befits America? He keeps pointing at the bad taste of Zenith but he does not present a reform program. Anyhow, I guess that there is one passage in the novel that may possibly give us a hint of his taste. In an ironical tone he says that "There are but three or four old houses in Floral Heights, and in Floral Heights an old house is one which was built before 1880."<sup>13</sup> Lewis had always had great admiration for ancient and medieval structures and one wonders whether this is not what he feels lacking in Zenith.

It will not help me much to go on detailing the many follies and vices of Zenith. What interests me most is to find out what is the scale of values that Lewis opposes to the crass materialism and the inhumanity of the environment he describes. "At that moment Lloyd Mallam, the poet, owner of the Hafiz Book Shop was finishing a rondeau to show how diverting was life amid the feuds of Medieval Florence, but how dull it was in so obvious a place as Zenith."<sup>14</sup> An assertion like this one is of no avail in relieving the picture; it only serves to attest that the author was enchanted by what he had read about a foreign

mode of living in a civilization that flourished centuries ago, and that he disliked cities like Zenith. It also proves that the historical perspective of the author is narrow because he continually falls back upon comparisons in which one of the terms is the American scene and the other, Medieval life. In Main Street one reads that "the days of pioneering... are deader now than Camelot,"<sup>15</sup> and here he talks about the "feuds of Medieval Florence" as opposed to Zenith.

Lewis does not provide substantial values to oppose and replace the false ones that he presents and criticises. What one derives from his writings is that he thought his people needed to live a more fulfilling life and that for him such life should willy-nilly contain romance, adventure, mystery and contact with foreignness. Gopher Prairie did not have them, "the citizens went down to the station to see the trains go through. It was their romance; their only mystery besides Mass and the Catholic Church; and from the trains came lords of the outer world\* - traveling salesmen with piping on their waistcoats, and visiting cousins from Milwaukee."<sup>16</sup> For Gopher Prairie, artists and adventurers were the train conductors, "the conductors... were persons of distinction, men who traveled and who talked to strangers, who wore uniforms with brass buttons. They were a special caste... artists and adventurers\*."<sup>17</sup>

Zenith also lacks those predicates. The people are not able to attain the sense of romance of the author both because of their mode of living and the inappropriateness of their environment which is not equal to the task of creating that feeling in them. And besides romance, adventure, mystery and contact with foreignness, a more fulfilling life is also to be had through poetry and mediævalism.

To them the Romantic Hero was no longer the knight, the wandering poet.<sup>18</sup>

To George F. Babbitt as to most prosperous citizens of Zenith, his motor car was poetry and tragedy, love

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\*The underlining is mine.

and heroism. The office was his pirate ship but the car was his perilous excursion ashore. <sup>19</sup>

... and as he clumped down to breakfast he whistled the ballad "Oh, by gee, by gosh, by jingo" as though it were a hymn melancholy and noble. <sup>20</sup>

... he yearned for a dictaphone, for a typewriter which would add and multiply, as a poet yearns for quartos. <sup>21</sup>

In May 1921 Lewis went to England, not as a cattleboat hand this time, but as a famous novelist, traveling first-class on the Carmania and invited to the captain's table. From what is recorded of his first experiences in England, his singular romantic spirit undoubtedly found nourishment there, and much of what he had felt lacking in his country. He was amused and proud of the fact that his London publisher, Sir Ernest Hodder Williams, was a man with a title. Sir Ernest gave him the name of his tailor, "and all of Lewis's incipient dandyism was released for the London whirl." <sup>22</sup> Schorer says that he was now "able to fulfill a years-old desire not only for monocle and waistcoats but also for spats and a silver-headed cane." <sup>23</sup> An account of Grace has it that the first place they rented was a sixteenth-century farmhouse, after having gaped at an eleventh-century house at Appleton Manor, "the twelfth oldest house in all England - fancy! - surrounded by a moat, with a private chapel in which slept a crusader, his feet neatly crossed upon a lamb couchant." <sup>24</sup> She adds that in their first weeks in London they received invitations from all sources and that "If we chose a week with an earl instead of a commoner it was simply because an earl sounded more romantic." <sup>25</sup>

And talking of earls, in the novel Babbitt Lewis refers to a business aristocracy, that according to him was developing rapidly in the United States; "the aristocrats, that is, the men who were richer or had been richer for more generations." <sup>26</sup> The richest man in town, named McKelvey, is described in this way: "He was baronial; he was a peer in the rapidly crystalizing American aristocracy." <sup>27</sup> And in the bustling, hustling and

boosting city of Zenith the title of nobility is nothing but "Go-getter." The people are here again judged as regards an alien, imported, and therefore artificial standard.

In the city of Zenith, in the barbarous twentieth century, a family's motor indicated its social rank as precisely as the grades of the peerage determined the rank of an English family. 28

Lewis's major complaint about America in this respect was that he found that there was nothing that distinguished intellectually and artistically gifted people from those who were not or, more precisely, from the rich ones who regarded them as their peers or even as their inferiors, their standard of comparison being wealth, not culture. According to Babbitt,

In other countries, art and culture are left to a lot of shabby bums living in attics and feeding on booze and spaghetti, but in America the successful writer or picture-painter is undistinguishable from any other decent business man. 29

And from Lewis's insistence in characterizing citizens that have leading positions in the community as looking like barbers, butchers, bartenders and showing them uncultured and gross boors, I arrive at the conclusion that he must have thought that such people should be barred from attaining leadership, that leadership belonged and should be handed over to a cultured minority. This is in keeping with what Lewis had said to his wife years earlier, "I'm for a limited aristocracy."

There is a passage in Babbitt in which Seneca Doane and Dr. Kurt Yavitch (a foreigner living in Zenith) have established a discussion, comparing Zenith to Europe. It is a very poor discussion and it could in fact not have been different, as Lewis's knowledge of Europe was very limited as yet. Dr. Yavitch criticises the standardization of Zenith and Seneca Doane replies that this is also to be found in other countries. "Is anything more standardized than England with every house that can afford it having the same muffins at the same tea-house, and every retired general going exactly to the same gray stone church? And as for standardization - just look at the sidewalk

cafés in France and the love-making in Italy!"<sup>30</sup> It goes without saying that Doane's arguments are very naive and unsubstantial. When he says that Zenith is a better place to live in than Manchester, Glasgow, Lyons, Berlin or Turin, Dr. Yavitch answers, "It is not, and I have lift in most of them."<sup>31</sup> And this settles the discussion. Be it as it will, Europe is meant to win the contest, which it does, in great part owing to the fact that it takes a foreigner to make Zenith known abroad. Dr. Yavitch is an histologist "whose report on the destruction of epithelial cells under radium had made the name of Zenith in Munich, Prague and Rome."<sup>32</sup>

And still in relation to Europe, there is Paul Riesling, Babbitt's friend, who regards it as the very salvation from his stupid and savorless tar-roofing business and from his impertinent wife. He is a sensitive person with a knack for music and longs to live in Germany.

Lewis sees the American propensity for standardization as something of a menace for the United States, and seemingly liable to affect other countries as well, as one realizes from Babbitt's address to the Zenith Real Estate Board.

Here's the new generation of Americans: fellows with hair on their chest and smiles in their eyes and adding machines in their offices.<sup>33</sup>

That's the type of fellow that's ruling America today; in fact, it's the ideal type to which the entire world must tend.<sup>34</sup>

The American characters that Lewis has talk about foreigners agree that they belong to an inferior breed ("New York is cursed with unnumbered foreigners"<sup>35</sup>) and must be turned into "regular folks." "When we've assimilated the foreigners we got here now and learned 'em the principles of Americanism and turned 'em into regular folks, why then maybe we'll let in a few more."<sup>36</sup> The book shows a number of misconceptions that Americans have of Europe and Lewis is fond of explaining that Babbitt "was fond of explaining why it was that Europeans never bathed."<sup>37</sup>

As to the Zenith attitude towards literature (one must say foreign literature as there is no mention of a single American author), it falls into the same pattern of stupidity and coarseness. "I don't see why they give us this old-junk by Milton and Shakespeare and Wordsworth and all these has-beens"<sup>38</sup> says Babbitt's son, Theodore Roosevelt Babbitt; and T. Cholmondeley Frink, the poet, judges that "Dante showed a lot of speed for an old-timer... but to come right down to hard facts, he wouldn't stand one-two-three if he had to buckle down to practical literature."<sup>39</sup>

With the exception of Dr. Yavitch, the foreigners that live in Zenith are workmen that belong to the lower classes. Nevertheless, they display much more power of discernment, maturity, and one might even say culture, than the average well-to-do American booster. When the Zenith delegates to the real-estate convention in Monarch meet at the station to catch the midnight train, all of them wear badges and display celluloid buttons inscribed "We zoom for Zenith."<sup>40</sup> They parade up and down the platform carrying banners and shouting boosting songs that are much like school yells. But there are other people at the station as well, poor and simple folks, many of them Italian women, that look at the bustle with "unenvious wonder."<sup>41</sup> On the occasion that Babbitt addresses a group of workmen while campaigning for Lucas Prout, "the older men, the patient, bleached, stooped carpenters and mechanics cheered him; and when he worked up to the anecdote of Lincoln their eyes were wet."<sup>42</sup> But the foreigners in the audience are not taken in; they know better. "There were workmen who jeered, for the most part foreigners, Jews, Swedes, Irishmen, Italians."<sup>43</sup>

Yet there is a stranger, a business man Babbitt meets in Chicago, who is his very English counterpart; he is as empty as Babbitt and manifests the same crass opinions. "How do you Yankees get the notion that writing chaps like Bertrand Shaw and Wells represent us? The real business England, we think those

chaps are traitors." <sup>44</sup> This man who has a lifeless look, a flabby handshake, and who looks kind of insignificant has little of Babbitt's energy and determination. But he has a title; his name is Sir Gerald Doak.

This looks like a reversal of attitude on the part of the author who is used to criticising his people for not having "the grand manner, the noble aspiration, the fine aristocratic pride," and to a certain extent it is. I will try to find an explanation for it. If during the first weeks of his stay in England everything had seemed novel and exciting, Lewis was also to find out that part of the society in which he now moved had applied restrictions to him and he met with a series of disappointments. One of them happened at a dinner in which Virginia Woolf took part. Her response to his loquacity is described by Sir Osbert Sitwell.

Virginia Woolf was in one of her destructive moods. Sinclair Lewis's vigorous, buoyant, but philistine air irritated her and she was beginning, with carefully thought-out cat-and-mouse questions, to demolish him... After dinner some more Bloomsburyans came in and they promptly clustered in a corner by themselves in good suspicious Main Street fashion, where the Lewises were probably weighed in the Bloomsbury balance and found wanting. At that moment the balance in Gordon Square was to pretend that normal human actions were astonishing and unheard of. The Lewises were too normal to be interesting. <sup>45</sup>

And Lewis soon became fed up with what he called the "indecipherable twitterings" of the literary set and the English gentry. He wrote Alfred Harcourt that "England does make good Americans of us - or rather, not England but the thick English." <sup>46</sup> It is small wonder that his most intimate associate in England should be the American Frazier Hunt, a Midwesterner like himself, a bluff and hearty newspaper correspondent.

Assuming that Lewis was pro-British since he criticised his own country, the actors, writers and journalists of the Savage Club in London invited him to speak at one of their

dinners. But Lewis surprised the audience that undoubtedly expected eulogy and applause for England. By now impatient with the patronizing attitude and pretense at superiority that he had felt deep down in a number of Britishers, in addition to their extremely critical way of seeing his America, he told them that he would like to write a Main Street "about this self-satisfied and behind-the-times land."<sup>47</sup> He added that he had been moved to write Main Street "for the good of America and not to make his country the misunderstood laughing-stock of a people who were so placid and secure in their own ignorance that they seldom traveled or bothered to keep in touch with other people's points of view and accomplishments."<sup>48</sup> In another letter to Harcourt he said, "It's fun, I do get some contrasts by which I can see America more clearly!"<sup>49</sup> Grace mentions that despite the fact that they met and were accepted by people of the standing of Bernard Shaw, they had several disappointments with the English gentry and notables.

In his writings Lewis seems to have the tendency of referring to the institutions, societies and people that he considers having been responsible for disagreeable experiences, that had created situations in which he had felt himself in disadvantage, depreciated, inferior. I suggest that, owing to the fact that in actual life he was not able to face them on an equal standing, and that he could consequently not overcome his resentment against them, his writings were the only weapon he possessed to fight back and nurse his grudges. Lewis was a self-conscious man, extremely sensitive to criticism, "He would always wear his heart on his sleeve, this most vulnerable of men"<sup>50</sup> says Grace. It is therefore understandable that in order to get even with those who had made him feel diminished, he should level some or other criticism at them or make remarks meant to ridicule them.

In answer to Yale where he had been "regarded with aimiable contempt as a freak," he wrote that article in which he

exposed the conventionality of Yale; and what is Main Street but an attack on the place where he had spent his unhappy boyhood? Myra, the unobtainable Myra he had for years dreamed of and who had never paid the least attention to him, inspired him to create Myra Babbitt, a dumb woman, "as sexless as an anaemic nun." <sup>51</sup> And as to the New York Bohemians who had not taken him seriously, there is a remark that Babbitt's lover Tanis Judique makes which is aimed at ridiculing them. "Don't you love to sit on the floor? It's so Bohemian!" <sup>52</sup>

If we take all this into consideration, and also that most of the novel Babbitt was written in England (though the preliminary plans had been laid while Lewis was still in America), it is very probable that the characterization of Sir Gerald Doak has much to do with the author's rather adverse experience with the English gentry.

Before returning to America Lewis wanted to see Italy, "we shall probably have a stirring time in ancient and sun-gilded Italy... Italy! It sounds incredible... I remember still, from Vergil, when the wandering sailors awakened early and, looking out at the sea, perceiving the land had been hidden by night, cried, 'Italia! Italia!'" <sup>53</sup> He also wished to visit Paris, "Furrin langwich, café tables, snails, square beards, and - uh - there's a great bunch of newspapermen who hang out at Harry's Bar." <sup>54</sup> He is still a man in search of romance, and it can easily be inferred from what he expects to meet in Paris, romance may take on the semblance of exotic and extravagant things, "furriness."

All the while he feels himself attracted to elegant society, to the milieu of refined intellectuals (while he hates their pretense and literary "twitterings"). In this environment he generally feels himself uneasy and awkward. When a person of such standing demonstrated interest in him, when he felt himself accepted by Edith Wharton who invited him to lunch at the Pavillon Colombe, he was so honored and grateful to that "grande

dame" that he asked her if she would permit him to dedicate Babbitt to her.

In the milieu of artistic refinement he was not looked upon with favor. This had happened in Carmel and among the Bohemians. In Paris he had an encounter with James Joyce and Nora Barnacle in which Joyce did not utter a single word, and according to Grace they had a dinner with Edna St. Vincent Millay that was a flat failure. At the Café Dôme in Paris the American "expatriates" were hostile, insulting him about Main Street which they called a commercial best-seller. This was extremely painful for the man who wanted people to find art in his work, who was aware of the fact that among the intelligentsia, a book's commercial success was usually regarded as a proof of the author's commonplaceness. When he was still an obscure writer working on Main Street, he had a character in that book say, "the author who is making lots of money—poor things; I've heard them apologizing for it to the shabby bitter-enders; I've seen 'em ashamed of the sleek luggage they got from movie rights." <sup>55</sup> And Lewis was presently getting rich with the astounding sale of Main Street.

In America Lewis was not receiving the recognition that he would have liked either. An acquaintance of Lewis's named Galantière, remembers having visited him in Paris on an occasion when he was completely drunk.

Sigfried he said, had called him the American Flaubert, and with that he launched into a long tirade against American critics. Loudly and bitterly he complained that they underestimated him as an artist; oh yes, certainly, they talked about his "good ear," but they never talked about his art... he shouted that he was an artist like Flaubert, hadn't Sigfried said so, hadn't he heard what Sigfried said? He was just as good as Flaubert, he was an artist, and no American knew it. <sup>56</sup>

This reaction is understandable if we take into account that he was being attacked for his work in the very field in which he had described a possibility to excell, and which could have

represented a palliative to counterbalance the feelings of inferiority which life had been impinging upon him.

From the remarks Lewis made upon disembarking in America for the publication of Babbitt, one infers that, now that he had met British writers, his admiration for them was abating. The patronizing attitude of the English led him to say that the British writers were "'a complacent lot' without 'pep' who mingle only with others of their own kind, 'too darned literary for any use.'"<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to note that Babbitt and his fellow boosters often assume identical attitude and employ the same sort of vocabulary. Another utterance of Lewis comes as a result of his personal experience.

It is time for us to stop looking at England for anything at all... go our own way and produce the finest literature of our time.<sup>58</sup>

5. ARROWSMITH

Arrowsmith is the story of Martin Arrowsmith, a physician who wants to throw himself with heart and soul into scientific investigation in a society whose standards are those of pecuniary gain and competition. In his troubled career he meets with a number of obstacles that America puts in the way of an unselfish researcher who pursues knowledge, not so much for immediate and practical results, as for its own sake. In the end Arrowsmith abandons society, wealth and success and settles in a cabin in the wilds of Vermont, so as to be able to do his work without being disturbed.

The scientific material in the novel was supplied by Dr. De Kruif, an expert bacteriologist with whom Lewis associated. They took a trip to the West Indies, as it had been agreed that one of its islands was to provide the setting of the hero's main adventure. They left in 1923, just a few months after Lewis had returned to America, and like the precedent novel Babbitt, Arrowsmith was written in Europe: part of it in England, another in France.

Grace was left behind and she was later to join him in Europe. This had of late become a habit in the Lewis household. Impatient with his wife, and having no interest in his son Wells, Lewis often left them and lived by himself for some time; afterwards the family would join again for a short period, and he escaped again. Grace and Lewis had been gradually but steadily drifting apart. The growing tension in their relationship, which would eventually pull their marriage apart, had made it impossible for them to live permanently together by now.

I have no intention of finding out if one of them was to blame more than the other for this state of affairs; since I am studying Sinclair Lewis I will try to analyse the situation from the angle in which he must have seen it. He regarded Grace as a stuffy stylish lady whose formality, reserve and snobbery (the

very "virtues" that had first attracted him) exasperated him and made him feel small and cheap. During their courtship he had written her about "that beastly humility which does come to me when I think how wonderful you are, Silver Maid."<sup>1</sup> Now she was not his Silver Maid any more, neither was she wonderful, but the beastly humility in him had remained and made him often feel uneasy in her presence, afraid of her sometimes. And he was offended by her insistence in transforming him. "My badgering and my demanding must have taken the form of trying to fit the resentful Hal into a ceremoniousness which he regarded as a silly waste of time and effort."<sup>2</sup> There was nothing left of the "Princess Lointaine;" he saw her now exclusively as an impertinent, pretentious and demanding wife.

And such are most of the female characters in Arrowsmith. The amazing number of such women in the book gives us a hint of how much Lewis's domestic troubles upset him and of how disgusted and fed up he was with Grace.

Martin's first love at the time he was a graduate student in medical school was Madeline Fox, "a handsome, high-colored, high-spirited, opinionated girl."<sup>3</sup> Martin regards his associating with her as somehow beneficial for him; the manner in which he looks up to her reminds one of Lewis in his days of courting Grace. "He yearned for her; he regretted the casual affairs of a student and determined to be a pure and extremely industrious man, to be, in fact, worthy of her."<sup>4</sup> Madeline proves to be a selfish woman who aspires to social position and tries to turn her idealistic beau into a money-grabbing tonsil snatcher; she is also fundamentally ignorant despite her pretense at being a connoisseur of literature. Worst of all, she wants to correct the simple and easy-going Martin. "She had often reproved Martin for his inappreciation of Howells, for wearing flannel shirts, and for his failure to hand her down from street-cars in the fashion of a fiction hero."<sup>5</sup> And when he intends to earn some money during his vacation as a waiter,

she comments, "Well, I can tell you right now you haven't had my opinion of your being a waiter. For the life of me I can't understand why you don't get some gentlemanly job for vacation, instead of hustling dirty dishes. Why wouldn't you work on a newspaper, where you'd have to dress decently and meet nice people?"<sup>6</sup>

Joyce Lanyon is a "soft-voiced mistress of many servants,"<sup>7</sup> a wealthy, socially irreproachable, beautiful and sexy woman who lives in a Manhattan palace and whom Martin marries after the death of his first wife. She wants Martin to move in her social set, "make him master polo and clothes, and conversation,"<sup>8</sup> while she distracts him from his work. Lewis seems to find that the worst defect in a woman is that of being demanding, of requiring too much attention, and therefore not letting her husband act in that independent and self-centered way he himself so much cherished. "She expected him to remember her birthday, her taste in wine, her liking for flowers and her objection to viewing the process of shaving. She wanted a room to herself, she insisted that he knock before entering; and she demanded that he admire her hats."<sup>9</sup> And like Grace, she has the training in being quietly offensive and disagreeable in the presence of a friend of her husband whom she deems uninteresting.

When Martin and Joyce converse, there is no argument capable of convincing her and altering her serene sureness, her air of superiority. Sensing that he cannot fight her on her own terms, Martin loses his temper and becomes gross thereafter to be reprimanded for his ungentlemanly behavior: "she turned grande dame, so that he felt like an impertinent servant and was the more vulgar."<sup>10</sup> Eventually he becomes afraid of her.

Another one of such women is Capitola McGurk, a vain lady whose husband supports the McGurk Institute where Martin works for some time. She nags her husband, "Don't play with your fork, Ross"<sup>11</sup> and makes his life unbearable, "when he had founded the

Institute, he had had too many houses, too many servants, too much food, and no children, because Capitola considered 'that sort of thing detrimental to women with large responsibilities.' In the Institute he found each year more satisfaction, more excuse for having lived."<sup>12</sup>

And so on. There are other passages in the novel that give us a very clear idea of the author's state of mind as regards his wife or, the type of woman she represented. "Few women can for long periods keep from trying to Improve their men, and to Improve means to change a person from what he is, whatever that may be, into something else."<sup>13</sup> The theme is so fixed in Lewis's mind that he now and then manages to insert it: "he was a rich man (Gustaf Sondelius), and neither toiled in laboratories nor had a decent office and a home and a lacy wife."<sup>14</sup>

But then there is Leora, the first wife of Arrowsmith and the most sympathetic portrait in the whole range of women characters Lewis had thus far created. She is feminine, loyal and undemanding, the first woman with whom Martin had ever talked without self-consciousness. She also represents the kind of wife the author would like to have by now, if any: "her commonness was dear to the commonness in himself."<sup>15</sup> Her major virtue lies in the fact that she does not stand in her husband's way and submits to his whims. "Possibly the thing he most liked in Leora was her singular ability to be cheerfully non-existent even when she was present."<sup>16</sup> Lewis endows her with an immense power of accepting people as they are, which may be regarded as a clear reference to his wife.

Yet, she is quite unreal. It looks as though Lewis had made a list of all he disliked in Grace in order to create a woman who should be her absolute opposite. Being "cheerfully non-existent," Leora fades away before the end of the story; having no lifelikeness, she dies.

Lewis had been used to falling in love with fictional

heroines and from his wide reading had arisen the idealized version of a woman, the lady of his dreams; we know that this influenced him strongly in the choice of Grace Hegger as his wife. It is then not surprising that here again he should create another such idealized woman, much more befitting a fairy tale than a novel. In fact, she is a modern version of Cinderella. The first time Martin sees her she is scrubbing a hospital floor, dishevelled, in a soiled and worn apron; afterwards she reveals her inner and outer beauty to him. The following description, which is grossly sentimental, lends itself very much to the fairy tale theme.

He saw Leora, always, an 'odd child,' doing obediently enough the flat household tasks but keeping snug the belief that some day she would find a youngster with whom, in whatever danger or poverty she would behold the colored world. It was at the end of her hesitating effort to make him see her childhood that he cried, 'Darling, you don't have to tell me about you. I've always known you. I'm not going to let you go, no matter what. You're going to marry me.'<sup>60</sup>

For the first time in the novels we have been studying there is an American who makes his land known abroad. Martin Arrowsmith publishes an article in a scientific journal that is praised in Paris, Brussels and Cambridge. Besides this, he is a benefactor to the population of a British possession, the island of St. Hubert in the West Indies. When that island becomes infested with plague, he goes there and risks his life in order to save thousands of people by inoculating them with a vaccine of his own make.

Yet back in America there is a German Jew, Dr. Gottlieb, who goes down before the native barbarians and is apparently too good to live there. This honest and saturnine old man upholds the doctrine of pure science and opposes the commercial exploitation of medicine. He is a cultured European who had studied under Pasteur and Koch and whose book on immunology is understood by only seven men in the whole world. The story of

this man is pure drama. In Queen City his devotion to research was misunderstood and he was therefore regarded as a cranky Jew, and in the medical school he was hated by his colleagues "who were respectful to his face, uncomfortable in feeling his ironic power, but privily joyous to call him Mephisto, Diabolist, Pessimist, Destructive Critic,"<sup>18</sup> etc. And while medical quacks and business men had large houses, servants and limousines, Dr. Gottlieb lived in a cramped old cottage and rode to his laboratory on a squeaky old bicycle. Driven out of the University of Winnemac, he found a job at the Dawson Hunziker Company where he was threatened after refusing to allow an unfinished research of his to be commercially exploited. Afterwards he landed a job at the McGurk Institute in New York where he met with intrigue among his colleagues, most of them intellectual frauds and social climbers. In the meantime his wife died and when the war broke out he was regarded a suspect German Jew. The last picture of him in the book is that of a shrunken old man, sunk in an old chair, babbling nonsense; he has gone out of his senses.

This ascetic man was Martin's teacher and influenced him greatly in the choice of a scientific career. He has such personal magnetism that on a given occasion Martin tells Leora that he would black Gottlieb's boots. And the faithful Leora after having seen Gottlieb but once, without even having talked to him, becomes so impressed that she tells Martin that she would be prone to leave him and follow Gottlieb if she were asked to.

Another foreigner who is described with affection and sympathy is Gustaf Sondelius, "a Swede by birth, a German by education, a little of everything by speech."<sup>19</sup> He is a sympathetic, courageous and adventurous man who roams the world, "fighting epidemics, and founding institutions and making inconvenient speeches and trying new drinks."<sup>20</sup> He temporarily works in the McGurk Institute for no money whatever, being

subordinated to the much younger Martin and without feeling resentful for it. In addition to this he does not regard a difference of scientific opinion as an attack on his character which is the common attitude among the American scientists in the novel. He accompanies Martin to the island of St. Hubert where he fights the plague and dies from it. Lewis says that Gustaf Sondelius was "the most brilliant as well as the least pompous and therefore least appreciated warrior against epidemics that the world has known."<sup>21</sup>

One might ask oneself why it is that Lewis draws these two foreigners, a German Jew and a Swede, with such appreciation, even admiration. I do not intend to say that a novelist must necessarily like Russians and Spaniards if in his book there is a nice Russian and a Spaniard who proves to be a hero. But what about Lewis, a writer who involves himself so much with the subjects he discusses, who is capable of praising those he likes but also reserves much venom for the characters that represent people who have wronged him in actual life?

In 1921, lecturing at the Sunday Afternoon Club of the First Presbyterian Church in Evanston, Lewis criticized the anti-Semitism of Henry Ford arguing that if Ford knew more about the history of the Jewish race, he would quit warning his countrymen that America was liable to being dominated by New York Jewish millionaires. From Germany Lewis had always received favorable criticism and on the single occasion he visited Germany he was not received with that aimable contempt and veiled derision that he had so often experienced in the English and French society.

And as to Swedes, an essentially cynical spirit might suggest that Lewis was intending to please the Nobel prize committee by creating such characters as Miles Bjornstam in Main Street and Gustaf Sondelius in Arrowsmith. Incidentally, in January of 1921 he wrote Harcourt to suggest that he find Scandinavian translators for Main Street, "because, there was,

after all, the Nobel Prize, too." <sup>22</sup> And in March 1925, he again wrote Harcourt, "Any thoughts on pulling wires for Martin for Nobel prize?" <sup>23</sup>

Yet this is pure guess work and I see no reason for reducing the matter to such mechanical formula. But still, there is not to be found a single English or French character in the five novels who is described with such warmth and unmistakable approval as Dr. Gottlieb and Gustaf Sondelius.

America will not recognize the merit of either one of these foreigners; it applauds Almus Pickerbaugh who is a Babbitt of health, an articulate and energetic T. Cholmondeley Frink, and elects this "two-fisted fighting poet doc" <sup>24</sup> to Congress. The intellectual rulers of the country are all Babbitts who have no professional sense whatever; one of the professors at the Mugford Christian College manages to be at the same time a football coach, health director, professor of hygiene, chemistry, physics, French and German. And when Lewis says that a given professor of *materia medica* would have been an illustrious shopkeeper, that a certain otolaryngologist was a peddler who would have done well in oil stock, I recall what was said about "culture aristocracy" when I was treating Babbitt. It is probable that in this respect Lewis was influenced by his friend Mencken who set forth a Nietzschean doctrine of aristocratic supremacy, proclaiming that leadership should be exerted by an intellectual élite.

But now Lewis would have none of the European aristocrat. The true scientist, says Gottlieb, "takes both the American booster and the European aristocrat, and ignores all their blithering." <sup>25</sup> Lewis scoffs at the English gentry and depreciates their titles by saying that there were scientists whom "Great Britain so much valued that she gave them titles almost as high as those with which she rewarded distillers, cigarette-manufacturers, and the owners of obscene newspapers." <sup>26</sup> In Babbitt Sir Gerald Doak was shown to be

exactly like Babbitt and here another Sir, a London surgeon named Isaac Mallard, is a copy of Rippleton Holabird, himself a well-groomed, snobbish intellectual fraud.

Now and again Lewis finds occasion to poke fun at his English characters. One of them is Dr. Inchcape Jones who lives in St. Hubert; he is portrayed as a typical stubborn Englishman. Though people are dying by heaps, he insists that the island is not infested with plague, that such diseases "did not and therefore could not exist in St. Hubert, except for leprosy, which was a natural punishment for outlandish Native Races."<sup>27</sup> He seems to regard his own race as superior. Piecing this statement together with another one that appears in one of the first pages of the novel, I feel that Lewis may have intended to ridicule and demystify what he must have considered the English self-election to superiority. "Martin was a Typical Pure-Bred Anglo Saxon American, which means that he was a union of German, French, Scotch... and a great deal of English, which is itself a combination of primitive Briton, Celt, Phoenician, Roman,  
German, Dane."<sup>28</sup>

In Arrowsmith Lewis seems to settle an important matter, that of architecture: his liking of castles and palaces. In the passage that follows he talks about a certain kind of standardization in them, their common feeling of polite grandeur and their consequent tediousness. But I guess it will be an error to say that his taste has suddenly changed. It may be his resentment at the kind of people that live in such places that spurs him on to make the remarks.

Hers (Joyce's) was a palace, and palaces whether they are such very little ones as Joyce's, with its eighteen rooms, or Buckingham or vast Fontainebleau, are all alike; they are choked with the superfluities of pride, they are so complete that one does not remember small endearing charms, they are indistinguishable in their common feeling of polite and uneasy grandeur, they are therefore altogether tedious.<sup>29</sup>

We know that Lewis had great difficulty in getting along socially, that he felt uneasy in the midst of gatherings where there were to be found distinguished people. Among the many factors that contributed to make him so there was his sensitiveness about his literary reputation and his sensitiveness about his face. Grace writes of the latter: "his voice defiantly shrill until he felt himself accepted, upon which his voice lowered - it was inevitable that those meeting him for the first time should feel a second of revulsion of which he must have been conscious. Preparing himself for this unhappy reaction every day, and many times a day, must have intensified that early sense of inferiority, may have created a psychic trauma."<sup>30</sup> His physical restlessness is described by Schorer.

He seldom sat, but often slouched, long thin shanks folding and unfolding, hands always plucking at face - nose, ears, cheek, chin - much jumping up, prancing, slouching again, smoking, smoking...<sup>31</sup>

Lewis's uneasiness made him unpredictable as regards his social behavior; his conduct depended on the people he got along with, and their conduct. He would often drink excessively and behave brashly. There are a number of stories about his social gaucheries in London, at the time he was working on Arrowsmith. One of them has it that when he went to a dinner given by a lady novelist, he took along two Germans, a Russian, three Americans whom he had picked up at the American Express Company, and two drunken taxi-drivers. On another occasion, at a dinner in which Somerset Maugham, the playwright Charles McEvoy and a man named Eddie Marsh took part, Lewis took Eddie's monocle,\* stuck it in his own eye and began to parody highbrow conversation imitating McEvoy's Oxford accent. Then McEvoy suddenly interrupted him and asked him if he was an American. Lewis was surprised by the

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\*Thus the reverse swing of the pendulum is absolutely clear here if we take into account Lewis's former sympathy for monocle and gentlemanly clothing and bearing.

question and became uncertain; "Yes," he said, "that's what makes me so sick with you condescending Englishmen." <sup>31</sup>

Lewis projects his own insecurity and the torture of appearing before distinguished gatherings into Martin Arrowsmith ("their suave courtesy smothered him. Martin felt like a footman." <sup>33</sup>), and sometimes into Martin and Leora alike ("They were embarrassed by the footmen, awed by the automatic elevator, oppressed by a hallway full of vellum folios and Italian chests and a drawing-room full of water-colors and reduced to rusticity by Capitola's queenly white satin and pearls." <sup>34</sup>). And the Lewis who is uncertain about his provincial origin points at Martin's provinciality ("The provincial Arrowsmith arrived on time, therefore fifteen minutes early." <sup>35</sup>) and makes Martin feel insecure for the same reason ("While Leora listened from the back of the room, Martin addressed them, not unaware of the spectacle of little Mart Arrowsmith of Elk Mills being taken seriously by the rulers of a tropic isle headed by a Sir Somebody." <sup>36</sup>). He also makes Martin afraid of his own son because he thinks the baby will turn out to be a condescending aristocrat. "Joyce worshipped him and Martin was afraid of him, because he saw that this minuscule aristocrat, this child born to the self-approval of riches, would some day condescend to him." <sup>37</sup>

In America, before leaving for the West Indies, the Lewises had lived for some time in Hatfort and frequented its society, being afterwards frozen out of it because of Lewis's misbehavior. Thus, one may say that in America the matter of moving in society did not fare better than in Europe. This may be the reason for the fact that in Arrowsmith there are so many parties and dinners in which Lewis criticises and exposes to ridicule all those who take part in them. Beginning with a dinner at the house of Almus Pickerbaugh, another one at Irving Water's, and still another one of the Ashford Grove Set, all of them in Nautilus, Ohio, Lewis moves on to Chicago, assembling

the members of the Rouncefield Clinic. Always in an ascending social scale, there follow parties thrown by Rippleton Holabird and Capitola McGurk in New York. The last social set to be described is that of Joyce Lanyon. And the wealthier these people are, the more worthless and empty they become, having little imagination concerning what to do with their futile selves in their exhausted world. "Through both the economico-literary and the Rolls-Royce section of Joyce's set the rumor panted that there was a new diversion in an exhausted world - going out to Martin's laboratory and watching him work." <sup>38</sup> In such a milieu, Terry Wickett (an anti-social, hard-boiled research worker, friend of Martin) misbehaves. "Yes, his name is spelled G-o-t-t-l-i-e-b," he says to a quite important woman at one of Capitola's parties, "but it's pronounced Gottdamn." <sup>39</sup> It is not surprising that Lewis should approve of this man, because by doing so he is approving of himself.

Once, at the time Lewis was in Paris working on Arrowsmith, he was seen rather drunk at the Dôme, a café that was frequented by artists and American "expatriates." The story has it that he suddenly sprang up from his chair and began to proclaim that he depicted character more sharply than Flaubert and that he outdid that French writer in style. Then someone shouted, "Sit down. You're just a best-seller." <sup>40</sup> In Arrowsmith there is a young woman who lives in Nautilus where she produces a New Prose Magazine. In a clear attempt at ridiculing those who had been hostile to him in Paris, Lewis says that her only credentials for producing her magazine are her having lived for five months in the cafés of Montparnasse. And as for the aggressively enlightened, the sophisticated intellectuals who had all along been nibbling at his literary reputation, they also get their pay. Lewis describes Martin Arrowsmith as having a reasonable breadth of shoulders which "saved him from any appearance of effeminacy or of that querulous timidity which artistic young men call

Sensitiveness." <sup>41</sup>

There is no doubt that Lewis was insecure about himself as an artist, uncertain about his literary merit. In January, 1924 he corresponded with a London lady novelist named Daisy Adler Hobman who wanted to dedicate a novel to him. Though Lewis consented, he protested that he lacked the measured dignity which one should have to be an author of the sort who receives dedications. <sup>42</sup>

When Martin takes a train for the Middle West he has occasion to get off at Sauk Centre, "he stepped from the choking railroad coach and tramped the platform at Sauk Centre, he drank the icy air and looked up to the vast and solitary winter stars. He returned to the coach with the energy of that courageous land." <sup>43</sup> It is possible that the man who had written about the universal similarity of Gopher Prairies, "where dullness is made god," now thought that he had been too hard on them, after having known so many countries.

In June 1924, after the publication of Arrowsmith, and back in America again, Lewis was interviewed by reporters who heard him say:

The great harm which so many international travelers do is to deliver themselves of impressions about a country with only a few days' knowledge. There are no national characteristics - except in cartoons and on the stage. So many people form preconceived ideas about the countries they visit before they ever start traveling... The fact is that the vast majority of people are quite incapable of getting the emotions they are led to expect from travel, and they are wrong to expect them. <sup>44</sup>

6. ELMER GANTRY

Lewis was a restless man. In the period that extends from the end of 1924 until the publication of Elmer Gantry in 1927, he went twice to Europe where he would wander from country to country. In America his behavior was erratic as well; he traveled much, living in hotels and occasionally associating with the kind of "bunch" that he liked, drinking much and all the time writing. He was now rarely seen with his wife. In September 1925 he wrote her, "You have of late become extraordinarily bullying. You give me orders, grimly, as though I were a drunken private and you a colonel."<sup>1</sup> In another letter to her he charged: "you are essentially English."<sup>2</sup> In 1925 he published Mantrap, one of his worst novels according to the critics. In the same year he refused the Pulitzer Prize which he had been expecting since 1919 for Free Air. Feeling that the Pulitzer Prize Committee had done him injustice for not having awarded him the prize for Main Street or Babbitt, he declined to receive it now that it had gone to Arrowsmith.

In Elmer Gantry Lewis makes a report on the religious activity in the United States. It is the story of a semi-illiterate country boob who becomes a small-town preacher and thereafter rises to the rank of powerful clergyman, one of the country's spiritual leaders, through treachery, hypocrisy and meanness. This heartless man is made to prevail over the few people who stand for integrity and goodness in the novel. The barbarous details that Lewis assembles in the corrupt world of religion which he describes made the critic Vernon L. Parrington accuse him of "sketching in a morgue."<sup>3</sup>

In a number of points that are important for my thesis this novel is a repetition of Arrowsmith. Here again there are found people whom Lewis deems misplaced in society. The ministers assembled at a meeting are described as looking like prosperous and active business men. "A few resembled farmers, a

few stone-masons, most of them looked like retail shops."<sup>4</sup> And the leaders of public thought are tailors, accountants, osteopaths, carpet-manufacturers, advertising men, piano salesmen, etc.

There is also a character the size of Gottlieb, the German Bruno Zechlin, a Ph.D. of Bonn, a S.T.D. of Edinburgh, an authentic theological scholar. A sincere truth-seeker, he has an American disciple, Frank Shallard and both of them fall the victims to baseness and ignorance. And then there are two Germans and a Swede agreeably chattering and drinking wholesome beer "instead of the whisky and gin that America was forcing on the people,"<sup>5</sup> at a saloon owned by another German. All of them are arrested by the Reverend Elmer Gantry, who leads a police squad in his crusade against vice.

Elmer Gantry presents an Englishman named Cecil Aylston - an ex-curate in an English church, kicked out for having gotten a navvy's daughter with child - who becomes the lover and advisor of the American evangelist Sharon Falconer (another crook) and Cecil writes most of her sermons since she is too unlearned to do it herself. He is a crisp man with the superior British complexion, "A good deal of a mystic, a good deal of a ritualist, a bit of a rogue, something of a scholar, frequently a drunkard, more frequently an ascetic, always a gentleman, and always an adventurer."<sup>6</sup>

What most strikes me about him is the fact that despite being a scoundrel he stands culturally much higher than the average American in the book. He teaches Sharon to sit still and read Jowett, Swinburne, Jonathan Edwards and Sir Thomas Browne and improves the manner in which she conducts her preaching. "He really knows something," she tells Elmer Gantry, "he isn't a cast-iron statue of ignorance like you and me."<sup>7</sup> One wonders whether it is part of the artistic design of the novels, or a mere coincidence, that Gottlieb in Arrowsmith, Bruno Zechlin and Cecil Aylston in Elmer Gantry seem so much more learned and

sober than the immature Americans who fumble to keep up with them, or whether it is possible that this reflects the author's feeling that there actually existed a cultural and intellectual gap between America and Europe.

In September 1925 Lewis wrote his brother Claude giving him advice for his son Freeman J. Lewis who was coming East in order to enter Harvard. He who had so often been patronized must have been glad and proud of being able to play the patron this time by showing both his brother and nephew what the East was like. Reading the letter one notices how much of his rather unhappy experience in the East (one must say in Europe as well) he indirectly pours into it; he unwittingly provides us with evidence of the strain under which he had so often lived in this environment. It is extremely important that his nephew make an impression, a good one, on first meeting his eastern colleagues.

There is one unimportant-sounding little thing which he simply must do. I don't know whether he now has the western hair-cut - I mean the kind in which the clippers are run in front of the ears, and the hair is clipped short half way up the back of the head. If he has that kind, he must get over it before he comes East - though you see it on the nicest boys in Minneapolis, here it is seen only on toughs. Let him let his hair get even a little too long and shaggy and have it cut in New York, if he can't get just the right kind there, rather than have it too convict-like, for that would make a bad impression on first meeting the other boys, and these first impressions are sometimes dangerously important.<sup>8</sup>

Living in the East is a kind of game; if he wants to participate fully in it he will have to repress in him the Middle Western standards by which he is used to living, conceal much of his true self, and act, act.\*

Shall I help him to get evening clothes or perhaps tweeds in N.Y.? Has he golf sticks of his own? Now that he has started the game he may as well keep it\*\* up.<sup>9</sup>

And he must not let people track him down as a provincial; he has to do his level best so as not to leave any vestige of his

background because this will depreciate him in the eyes of the easterners.

Why don't you consider dropping the J. from your name? Freeman Lewis is a thoroughly distinctive name, and the more so without a middle initial. Middle initials belong to the insurance office and the corn belt. 10

The novel Elmer Gantry reflects much of this. When Lewis introduces a new character he generally gives his lineage (Frank Shallard's mother was of a "Main Line family, slightly run to seed." <sup>11</sup>), his social position ("Colonel Ruthford Snow... whose social position in Zenith was as high as that of a bank-president or a corporation-counsel." <sup>12</sup>), how he looks and his place of birth. When Lewis wants to belittle him it suffices to make him look like a barber or a bartender, or else, to say that he has come from a hick town. A person who was brought up in the midst of cornfields is kind of doomed intellectually and socially in Lewis's world. The single exception to this rule is Jim Lefferts, a keen boy, Elmer's friend during college days.

Though he came from a Prairie village, Jim had fastidiousness, a natural elegance. All the items of his wardrobe, the 'ordinary suit,' distinctly glossy at the elbows, and the dark-brown 'best suit,' were ready made, with faltering buttons, and seams that betrayed rough ends of thread, but on him they were graceful. You felt that he would belong to any set in the world which he sufficiently admired. There was a romantic flare to his upturned overcoat collar; the darned buttons of his trousers did not suggest

\* In Elmer Gantry there are a number of references to acting also, and Lewis sometimes employs theatrical terms.

Never had he so well liked his rôle; never had he acted so well. (p.264)

Sundays were to his nervous family a hell of keeping out of his way, and for himself they had the strain of a theatrical first night. (p.310)

He dressed as calculatingly as an actor. (p.306)

\*\*The underlining is mine.

poverty but a careless and amused ease, and his thoroughly commonplace ties hinted of clubs and regiments. 13

But most of such people are ashamed of their provenance. When Elmer Gantry visits Sharon's estate in Virginia he becomes impressed with her brick house with tall white pillars and a white cupola; the deft peacock that parades across the lawn in the sun; and the two negro servants: a butler with a green tail-coat and white mustache and a mammy in green calico, both bowing to him. In this atmosphere he feels very small, unworthy of Sharon, and bursts out with,

I'm just a second-rate traveling man. I came from Paris, Kansas, and I'm not even up to that hick burg, because they are hard-working and decent there, and I'm not even that. And you - you're not only a prophetess, which you sure are, the real big thing, but you're a Falconer. Family! Old servants! This old house! Oh, it's no use! You're too big for me.\* 14

But Sharon tells him that all this is pretense, that the estate is not a quarter paid for, and that she herself is not an aristocrat at all; she is but Katie Jonas from Utica, the daughter of a man who worked in a brickyard. "Oh, I'm glad you don't come from anywhere in particular!" she tells him, "Cecil Aylston - oh, I guess he does love me, but I always feel he's laughing at me." 15 And now that they have made their confessions and found consolation one in the other, they can fall into each other's arms.

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\* Interestingly, this attitude on the part of Elmer Gantry is rather strange and comes as something of a surprise. Without being self-analytical and self-conscious like the average Lewis character, Gantry is not wont to having such fits of inferiority. Throughout the novel he is depicted as a coarse, insensible and thick-skinned bully.

7.

DODSWORTH

In December 1926 Lewis's marriage had finally gone to pieces. Grace had of late been receiving the attentions of a man named Casanova, "a handsome, gallant and indigent Spaniard of distinguished lineage,"<sup>1</sup> and Lewis approved of this since he was now also set on getting rid of her. One of the events that preceded their final break was an occasion in which they were to go to a fashionable dinner party. When Grace, elegantly dressed in lustrous satin, found her husband in his underwear, sitting apathetically on the edge of his bed and refusing to go, she took Casanova in his place. According to Schorer, the end came at a dinner at home in December 1927. "Mrs. Lewis appeared, crisply gay, laughing, handsomely garbed as always, only to confront a sloppily dressed, suddenly drunken husband. It was, understandably, too much! In the presence of everyone she upbraided him sharply and bitterly about his appearance and his conduct. He said nothing. He looked at her as she spoke, then got up as she was speaking still, and, simply and wordlessly, walked out. And that was the end."<sup>2</sup>

Lewis spent the next two years largely in Europe. In 1927 he wrote The Man Who Knew Coolidge which the critic Heywood Brown classed as "The dullest writing ever to come from a first-class writing man."<sup>3</sup> In June 1927 in Paris he met an acquaintance, Ludwig Lewisohn, who reported that Lewis was in flight from himself, restless, much addicted to drinking, and often misbehaving. "He seemed to have no inner certainty, no balance, no serenity, nothing between heaven and earth to which he could withdraw for quietude and healing."<sup>4</sup> But on July 8 in Berlin, he met Dorothy Thompson, an American newswoman who lived in Europe, and his life would suddenly change.

Dorothy Thompson was handsome and brilliant, the most popular newswoman in Europe, and the least adequately photographed. Her beauty was of her self rather than of her face alone, a shining expression of her warmth and vitality and intelligence. She had candid, hazel

eyes, was fair and of imposing presence with nothing petite or mincing in her gait, impulsive and generous, of a relaxed self-confidence that held no shred of self-importance... her laughter was irrepressible, as were her opinions, which were as multitudinous as they were firm... Her tastes had been Europeanized, but she was proud of her background, which was American in a plain and spare way. 5

Not "cheerfully non-existent" as was Leora, she was nevertheless simple, direct and undemanding; very different from Grace, whose pretentiousness, snobberies and scorn had so often made him suffer from humiliating fits of inferiority. Dorothy was attracted to him and ultimately loved him in great part for the same reasons that had made Grace like him at first: the vividness of his mind, his wit, and his supplications that he needed her and that he would be utterly helpless without her. They were married in May, 1928.

Lewis began to work on Dodsworth right after meeting Dorothy Thompson and finished it after they were married. His years' experience abroad had given him enough material to write a novel dealing with Europe; and now that he had lived through the end of his marriage he felt free to create a character in the likeness of his first wife and release all his anger against her. The story deals with an American couple who go to Europe after having been married for some twenty years in Zenith. Samuel Dodsworth is a well-to-do automobile manufacturer who retires from business and accompanies his wife Fran, a beautiful but selfish woman, a pampered snob who has cultural and social pretensions and longs for a resplendent European experience. She lets Europe dazzle her and is cheated both in her social enterprises and her love affairs. Dodsworth, on the other hand, being fundamentally an observer, learns a great deal from his stay in Europe and gradually comes to realize the true nature of his wife. In the end he leaves her and marries Edith Cortright (whose characterization has much to do with the newly espoused Dorothy Thompson) and they contentedly return to America to

start life again.

Fran Dodsworth is made to resemble Grace in a number of points. She has a cool sureness that makes Dodsworth feel confused and lumbering in her presence; she has the custom of enfeebling him in public by making remarks on his coarseness, his lack of intellectual refinement and drawing-room manners. She also has the ability to be ivory smooth and amiably contemptuous in the presence of the people he chooses as his friends. In addition to this she accuses him of being essentially commonplace, a dull and uninteresting partner who is incapable of rousing her to some degree of romantic passion. This reminds me of Grace having written that "With him (Lewis) there were no exciting preliminaries which the European enjoys, no dance of the golden pheasant."<sup>6</sup>

There are other and probably unimportant-sounding resemblances between the two women that I will cite in order to prove that the source upon which Lewis drew for Fran's characterization was Grace. Fran has the habit of perfuming her right hand so that the men who kiss it may meet with a pleasant fragrance. This peculiarity was also Grace's and Lewis must have known of it. While she was in Italy with her son, she wrote an American friend that "Each night I rub my hand with rose water and glycerine, and carry around with me a little bottle of a perfume with which I rub my right hand surreptitiously throughout the day so that it may be kissed, formally but pleasurable."<sup>7</sup> In her book Grace also mentions that Lewis once arrived home with a painting of Maxwell Parrish "with the usual castle and large earthen jar and a Villon-esque youth brooding on a landscape of opalescent blues!"<sup>8</sup> She adds that she showed little enthusiasm for the painting and told him to hang it in his own bedroom. In the present novel Lewis says that Dodsworth had always liked Parrish's dream castles, "despite Fran's scoffing."<sup>9</sup> And so on.

Samuel Dodsworth, like his creator, feels much more at

ease with simple and hearty Americans than with his impertinent wife or with the gracious-mannered, gentlemanly caste of people that she gets along with. "His longing for low and intelligent company could not be denied. He went to the New York Bar. Through the correspondent of a New York newspaper whom he had known as a reporter in Zenith, Sam had met a dozen journalists there, and felt at home with them."<sup>10</sup>

I think it is not unfair to suggest that by means of this novel Lewis is able to allude to the history of his recently ended marriage in such a way that he will not have to share the blame for it. Identifying himself with the constant, loyal and home-loving Dodsworth, he appears in a very favorable perspective, that of a victim, the villain being Grace. In order to obtain this effect he draws Fran as an extremely cruel person, which I doubt his wife had been; he also projects his own restlessness and rootlessness upon her and makes her unfaithful to her husband, whereas in actual life the opposite had been true.

Lewis's early naiveness about Europe can be detected in Samuel Dodsworth and Fran displays a willingness to find a rich and more fulfilling life there; in this respect her feelings are very much akin to those the author himself had had years before. These elements are basic to Lewis's lecture about the dilemmas of the American abroad, and about Europe itself.

In what relates to Dodsworth, the story may be regarded as a Bildungsroman. At the beginning he asks his wife to give him time to keep up with her and Europe, on the grounds that he has so much to learn. In London he feels uneasy in the presence even of hotel clerks whom he tries to impress by speaking casually and by making himself traveled-looking. "He felt like a lost dog. He felt as he had on the first day of his Freshman year in College!"<sup>11</sup> His first days in Paris also show him a confused and timid man, and when Fran elopes with a German count, Kurt von Obersdorf, he feels lonely, unprotected and

confused and wanders from place to place without knowing what to do. But all the while he is learning much more than his scatter-brained wife and each time more he becomes conscious of the fact that she is not culturally superior to him as she lets on, that she is but a pretentious fake.

But to her, painting, like all "culture," was interesting only as it adorned her socially... In reality Sam's imagination was far more electrified by blue snow and golden shoulders and dynamic triangles than was Fran's. Probably he would have balked at the blurs of Impressionism and the Jazz mathematics of Cubism, but it chanced that the favorite artist just this minute was one Robinoff, who did interiors pierced with hectic sunshine hurled between the slats of Venetian blinds, or startling sun-rays striking into dusky woodlands, and at these (while Fran impatiently wanted to get to tea) Sam stared and contentedly drew in his breath as though he smelled the hot sun. <sup>12</sup>

And while she becomes each time more uncertain after the heavy set-backs she gets from the society in which she tries to move (for the most part pseudo-intellectuals, social grafters, gracious-mannered profiteers, fake artists and aristocrats who use her to advantage and thereafter shut her out), Dodsworth gains strength and daily more understanding of Europe.

If at the beginning he is described as "the never matured Sammy Dodsworth" <sup>13</sup> in the end he achieves maturity. "Sam reflected how excited he would have been as a boy\* to find these vanishing stairways, after reading in Stevenson and Walter Scott of secret passageways, of smugglers and underground chambers." <sup>14</sup> Formerly he was impressed and awkward with whatever newness, self-conscious and uncertain about little matters of decorum when in company of dignified strangers. Afterwards he reaches a condition which the heroes and heroines of the preceding novels had always striven for and had never attained; he becomes a serene and tranquil person, sure of himself in whatever company.

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\*The underlining is mine.

"He no longer minded meeting strangers or having to listen to their foreign accents. He took them as they came." <sup>15</sup> There is another passage that corroborates this, that shows the strength of the American provincial in his contact with Europe. On an occasion when he faces a French hotel manager who looks down on him with contempt, there follows this episode: "The internationalist and the provincial looked at each other furiously, and it was the assistant manager whose eyes fell, who looked embarrassed." <sup>16</sup>

One of the conclusions that Dodsworth arrives at after having been in Europe for some time is related to his wife's wish to encounter splendor and new horizons there; she is fascinated by the graces of Europe and Europeans alike since they represent the great life that she had always longed for and that she presently wants to learn and master.

He realized that Fran's thesis, halfway convincing to him when they had first planned to go to Europe, her belief that they could make more passionate lives merely by running away to a more complex and graceful civilization, had been as sophmoric as the belief of a village girl that if she could but go off to New York, she would magically become beautiful and clever, and happy. <sup>17</sup>

The paragraph must be considered the author's confession that he had been naive and wrong in having turned to Europe for the same reasons as Fran. He shows that Fran's ideals are not congenial with the pattern of her life as they depend on another culture, and that they are therefore illusory and unachievable. "Even though you are naturally something of a European, you've got to remember that this is a pretty wise and dangerous old country" <sup>18</sup> says Samuel Dodsworth to his wife Fran when they are in England. In Paris he says "this town knows a lot... Yes, it knows a lot." <sup>19</sup> And that is as deep as the novel goes into the old Henry James Europe vs. America theme. Be it as it will, Europe is not to be conquered and Lewis says that it will be utter foolishness on the part of an American to try to become a

European because he will fail. In addition to this, he will be something of a traitor to his land and his own people.

Samuel Dodsworth succeeds because he is open-minded to the extent of willing to learn from other civilizations. But basically he does not want to change and adopt their standards because he is an American and very glad of it. And if he defends his country against the criticism that some Europeans level at it, he is by no means a blind and optimistic booster for America. By bits he comes to realize the faults of his country and his own now that his stay abroad provides contrasts. These faults are an excessive commercial-mindedness, intellectual rigidity, materialism, mechanical leisure, mechanical friendship, a lack of interest in anything that happens outside America and, in short, most of what Lewis had been criticising in his novels from Main Street on. What Dodsworth likes in the English is their ability to live in themselves more, the fact that they do not need imposing houses and large automobiles to be content; the French are able to enjoy leisure, friendship and sit contentedly idle, "they would sit, not restless, playing dominoes or chattering, over nothing more beguiling than glasses of coffee."<sup>20</sup> The German business men assembled at the house of Fran's second cousin, Herr Biedner, give a demonstration that people with such a profession do not have to talk necessarily about the current price of gin, the manufacture of vacuum-cleaners and the wickedness of labor unions; they talk of "the Berlin Theater, of the opera, of Kokoschka Ausstellung, of Stressemann's speech at the League of Nations Council, of the agrarian situation in Upper Silesia."<sup>21</sup> And Edith Cortright tells him that the Italian peasant is a mystic because he loves earth and sun and wind and rain, that his strength lies in his nearness to earth whereas the American farmer strives to get away from his land and go to the cities. The Europeans as a whole show an ability to be fascinated by everything in human life, "from their own amours to soup and aeroplanes."<sup>22</sup>

Yet, if in his other novels Lewis had pointed at the many misconceptions that Americans have of Europe, in Dodsworth he demonstrates that the opposite is also true, that a great many of the Europeans have wrong ideas about America as well, and also that they can be as slanderous and backbiting as Main Streeters. As to the process of "Americanization" that one Professor Braut whom Dodsworth meets in Germany talks about and which stands for a number of things such as materialism and standardization, it "is being carried on as much by German industrialists and French exporters and English advertising men as it is by born Yankees." <sup>23</sup> It is true that in New York there are Americans who play at internationalism, "Russian Jews in London clothes going to Italian restaurants with Greek waiters and African music" <sup>24</sup> but in this respect they are not very different from the "young Frenchmen, in London clothes, driving Hispano-suizas" <sup>25</sup> in Paris.

Dodsworth also learns that in comparison with Europe, where life is generally static, ordained and prescribed, his young and energetic country - still in the agitated period of adolescence - promises adventure and numerous opportunities for the enterprising American spirit, and for Dodsworth himself who is an active man. After having become wearied with travel he tells Edith Cortright that he wants to go home and make something, "even if it's a hen-coop." <sup>26</sup> And when he asks her whether she would like to settle in Zenith after having known Europe and lived in Venice, her reply is, "Yes, if I had a place of my own there. Here, everything decays - lovely decay, but I'm tired of being autumnal. I'd like hot summer growing and spring budding for a change - even if the corn-stalks were ugly." <sup>27</sup>

As for traditions, America does not have to look for them elsewhere since it has its own, that of the courageous pioneers whose vitality and determination are the symbol of America's present energy and strength. When Dodsworth receives a letter from Fran in which she complains that American life is so thin,

so without tradition - and we know that this had been Lewis's own complaint earlier - he lays down the letter and thinks of "the tradition of pioneers pushing to the westward, across the Alleghenies, through the forests of Kentucky and Tennessee, on to the bleeding plains of Kansas, on to Oregon and California, a religious procession, sleeping always in danger, never resting, and opening a new home for a hundred million people."<sup>28</sup>

The man who had criticised American architecture in Main Street and Babbitt seems to have changed substantially his early point of view in Dodsworth. European structures have apparently lost much of that mystic charm they used to exert on him, and he goes as far as asserting that America has the most comfortable residences in the world. In describing the Sans Souci Gardens, a Zenith real-estate development, he expresses himself as follows:

Here, masked among trees and gardens, were springing up astonishing houses - considerably more desirable as residences than the gaunt fortified castles of the Rhine, the magnificent and quite untenable museums of French Châteaux. They were all imitative of course, Italian villas and Spanish patios and Tyrolean inns and Tudor manor-houses and Dutch Colonial farmhouses, so mingled and crowding one another that the observer was dizzy. They were so imitative and standardized that it was easy to laugh at them. But they were no more imitative of Munich than was Munich of Italy or than Italy of Greece, and like the rest of the great American Domestic Architecture of this era, they were probably the most comfortable residences in the world.<sup>29</sup>

As we see, there is no harm in modeling one's house after an alien architectural style because, according to Lewis, man has been doing this for centuries. But he nevertheless wants his country to create its own, authentic and unique architecture, which it is capable of doing, as shown in the example of the American skyscraper. Sam tells Edith Corthright that he intends to dedicate himself to house-building once he is back in America and she gives him this advice:

Sam! About your suburbs. 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 American domestic architecture? Our skyscrapers are the first really new thing in architecture since the Gothic cathedral, and perhaps, just as beautiful. Create something native - and not be afraid to keep in all the plumbing and vacuum-cleaners and electric-washers! Dismiss the imitation château. <sup>30</sup>

In Dodsworth Lewis has the opportunity of getting even with "that real Parisian bunch" which had always shut him out and despised him. He says that there are two classes of artists in Paris, the fake artists who are very literary, very drunk and full of theories, and the real artists who are "hidden, busy and silent." <sup>31</sup> This is very much in keeping with what he had said, back in 1924, after having observed and become annoyed with the recherché literary circles both in England and France where he was often looked down upon.

I dislike literary discussion about anything. I dislike the habit of some literary men who want to talk about book stuff. The really literary species do not talk about books; they are too busy writing them. <sup>32</sup>

And so he makes Dodsworth meet with a group of what he calls fake artists (for the most part "expatriates") at the Dôme and win a victory over them. The artistic topics that those people discuss are related to the hatefulness of all other artists, and Dodsworth finds a method of disorganizing them. He contradicts them with casualness and says the most absurd and crass things so that they become confused and eventually leave his table. And when he sees them walk away along the boulevard, Dodsworth almost repents for not having been pleasanter to them, "Of course they have to be conceited and supercilious, to keep their courage up, because they're failures." <sup>33</sup>

The people Fran gets along with in France are poseurs like herself and pretend to be intellectuals and connoisseurs of the arts. They prattle a great deal about culture besides putting on a patronizing grandeur. There is one Endicott Everett Atkins,

Dean of the American literary colony in Paris, who contrives to combine writing about Austrian peasant furniture, French novelists, Corregio and English hunting. He tells Fran that he admires her wisdom in coming to Paris because she is doing the patriotic American duty of showing Europe that there are poised and exquisite creatures in America as well.<sup>34</sup> As if fearing that this is not enough to disqualify the man in the eyes of the reader, Lewis adds that he came from South Biddlesford, Connecticut and that his father had been a hat manufacturer. And we know that in Lewis's terms this is a mortal blow. There is also a woman, Madame de Pénable, who has a knowledge of theaters and operas and is always followed by a group of gentlemen valets. But Dodsworth has no intention whatever of learning their games and asserts that "If he had to take the arts as something in which he must pass an examination, he would chuck them altogether and be content with poker."<sup>35</sup> In England the Dodsworths are invited to a dinner at the house of a woman who has the habit of inviting (among others), authors who understand about morning coats.

If we add some more names to this list, we will have the whole group of intellectual frauds that Lewis assembles in the book. In fact, there is only one true intellectual, Professor Braut, again a German, who looks insignificant but is very learned, reminding one of Gottlieb and Bruno Zechlin. This man gives Dodsworth an explanation about what he calls the European aristocratic culture. Among other things, it consists of the belief (on the part of those who belong to the select class of people who stand for this sort of culture) that the nation which has the greatest number of really great men like Einstein, Freud and Thomas Mann is therefore the noblest and deserves to be the proudest. This special class of intellectuals have the responsibility of carrying on and passing down from generation to generation the culture those great men have formed. Professor Braut says that the European aristocratic culture has nothing to

do with aristocratic families with titles of nobility and that it is not to be found among the greater part of Europeans themselves.

To be clearer, when I speak of European you must understand that I speak of a very small, select, special class, which is far nearer to the other members of that class in foreign nations than it is to most of its own countrymen... And also there are a few people born in America who belong to what I call "Europeans" - your author Mrs. Edith Wharton, I imagine, must be so.<sup>36</sup>

This short exposition by the German professor must be regarded as but an introduction to the subject "aristocracy" which has been discussed all through the dissertation and which I intend to make the last topic of the present chapter. It is my belief that "the grand manner, the noble aspiration, the fine aristocratic pride" which Lewis had felt lacking in Americans in Main Street had much more to do with what he believed the code of behavior of aristocratic gentry to be, than with the kind of culture of Professor Braut's select group. The novels that followed Main Street were crowded with professors, preachers, scientists and men with leading positions in society, all of them behaving either like bartenders or butchers; and this led me to present the expression "culture aristocracy" in order to define and give a label to what Lewis must have thought was the necessity of leadership by an intellectual élite in America. But here again, I guess it will be a mistake to say that he expected such intellectual élite to possess the attributes that Professor Braut describes as belonging to that special class of intellectuals he calls "Europeans."

The method that fits me best for the discussion of the European aristocrats that appear in Dodsworth is that of classifying them, roughly, into three categories. First of all there are the pseudo-aristocrats who are the worst: the Comtesse de Val Montique who had been born in Chicago and who was "so aristocratic that she had for friends only her servants;"<sup>37</sup>

Lady Ouston, who had been born - and her father and mother before her - in Nashville, Tennessee and who gives dinner parties during which she scoffs at America; and the Princess Maravigliarsi, only one quarter American.

Then there are the aristocrats born in Europe but who Lewis shows to have some or other deficiency or shortcoming that is enhanced as seen against the good qualities of the novel's hero Samuel Dodsworth. One of them is Sir Lord Herndon, a miniature figure with a roar, who tells libelous stories about those who rank above him in English society and government and who is very contradictory in his opinions. Another one is Sir Francis Ouston who apparently does little except give highly conversational tea-parties at his country place, to which he invites people with tawdry titles and gay manners. There is also the Count Kurt von Obersdorf, head of one of the greatest, but financially decayed Austrian families, who has to earn his living by working in a tourist agency. Though he is something of an intellectual he is described as a clown. "He had dignity enough, but he was full of laughter, and you felt that by choice he would like to be a clown." <sup>38</sup> He has none of Dodsworth's determination and is tied to his mother's apron strings. When he elopes with Fran, intending to marry her, he is called on the carpet by his mother who orders him to break with Fran; and he obeys.

And at last, the third group. From the manner in which Lewis characterizes them one realizes that they are the best of all and I will therefore call them true aristocrats. Two of them are Baron Ercole and his wife, who have a big estate in Naples and live mostly by renting the little villas of their place, as they are very poor. They are extremely simple, unaffected and hospitable. When Dodsworth and Edith Cortright call on them he is surprised to find the Baroness Ercole on her knees, polishing a floor. "And altogether unembarrassed at being caught in the crimes of poverty and work, the Baroness Ercole made him welcome

with her smile, gave him her wax-crusted hand to kiss, and invited them to dinner." <sup>39</sup> Another one of such aristocrats is the Princess Drachenthal whom the Dodsworths visit in Germany. She is a frail old lady living in a decayed old house whose interior is nevertheless "suggestive of aristocratic generations." <sup>40</sup> Like the Ercoles she is simple, unpretending, and says she is glad to meet the visiting dignitary and great American industrialist Samuel Dodsworth. "My poor stricken country needs the co-operation of America" <sup>41</sup> she tells him, treating him as if he himself were an aristocrat.

Dodsworth is in fact good enough to be ranked among a ruling intellectual élite, or that "culture aristocracy" I have often mentioned. He is an exponent of the American middle-class and seems to possess the attributes that Lewis had felt missing in American leaders. "He was none of the things which most Europeans and many Americans expect in a leader of American industry. He was not a Babbitt, not a Rotarian, not an Elk, not a deacon." <sup>42</sup> Using Lewis's own terms, he is neither lowbrow nor highbrow. He has some taste in art, etchings and architecture and "While he was bored by free verse and Cubism, he thought rather well of Dreiser and Cabell, and so much of Proust as he had rather laboriously mastered." <sup>43</sup> In his library there are found volumes on history and philosophy, but also detective stories; Dodsworth is middlebrow with nothing of the aggressively enlightened class that Lewis himself disliked.

Sam had never been such a fool as to assert that virile citizens talked only of bonds and prize-fighting and that any one who pretended to an interest in Matisse or the Ca'd'Oro was an effeminate pretender. Only, he had pled with Fran, he himself had as much right to be interested in bonds and bored by Matisse as a painter had to be interested in Matisse and bored by bonds. <sup>44</sup>

Despite being an automobile manufacturer, Dodsworth is a creator and to a certain extent an artist because he himself designs the automobiles he produces; and his work gives him a

sense of achievement, which is rare in a Lewis character. But his work is not his religion as Lewis had shown to be the case with most Americans, "in Chesterton, in Schubert, in Carot, he had been able to forget motors... and always he had chuckled over the gay anarchy of Mencken." <sup>45</sup>

Samuel Dodsworth who has "the energy and reliability of a dynamo" <sup>46</sup> is the symbol of a rising American middle-class aristocracy which promises more than the static and rather decadent European aristocracy. "I'm a builder," he tells Fran, "I don't have to depend on any title or clothes or social class or anything to be distinctive." <sup>47</sup>

The attitude that Dodsworth develops towards Europe is the result of an objective and serene judgment. He admits that Europe has its charms, but he has discernment enough not to become over-enthusiastic about it to the extent of wanting to change. It is possible to admire Europe without losing one's love of America. And so with the food.

He admitted that the serene and classic Place des Vosques with the Carnavalet Museum was perhaps more select than Pat's Chicago Bar; that caneton pressé might be a more elegant food than corn fritters at the Savannah Grill. "But," he fretted, "why can't you enjoy both - as long as you enjoy 'em?" <sup>47</sup>

This is also the tone of one of the articles Lewis wrote in London a few days before returning to America in the company of his second wife Dorothy Thompson, and with the manuscript of Dodsworth. It conveys equilibrium and a complete lack of prejudice.

And so, finishing this last article, in the friendly city of London, I look out on the Thames and feel reluctant to leave the old wisdoms of England. And yet I am glad that I am going to Paris tomorrow, glad that I shall run back to eager Berlin before I sail, if I can squeeze in the time, and gladdest of all that I am going to the dynamo of America, into the radiance of the American autumn. <sup>48</sup>

8. SUMMING UP

It is not to be doubted that Lewis had fundamentally changed, that he had become more realistic. He was now married to a woman who had little to do with his former fantasies about literary females, and the dream of becoming a distinguished author, an elegant, lounging cosmopolitan moving in a world of art and culture and belonging to "that real Parisian bunch" had been gradually vanishing as he had become wiser about the life-styles of other people in other countries.

It could not have turned out differently because the way of life he had idealized for himself - largely as a result of his reading in European literature - was artificial and against his true nature. He was at heart a simple and plain man, much more of a Babbitt than a gentlemanly cosmopolitan. He had all the time been showing signs of this, even while his criticism of Main Streeters and Babbitts was reaching its intensest points.

"Jeezus! There's something to being a famooser!"<sup>1</sup> he had exclaimed to Grace aboard the Carmania, after being recognized by the passengers as the author of Main Street and being invited at the captain's table. In 1922 he declined election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters on the grounds that it had "too many professors."<sup>2</sup> Lewis, it seems, was strongly bourgeois, "middlebrow," with a great respect for the successful business man and for money alike. On an occasion when a hotel clerk asked his name, he became angry for not having been recognized and said, "Do you realize that you are talking to a fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year-man?"<sup>3</sup> And his reaction upon reading Upton Sinclair's Money Writs is also very suggestive. This article questions Lewis's literary merit and his response to it is surprising; he measures himself up in terms of money, not in terms of literary or artistic achievement. The account is George Selde's:

"I love Upton," he said, almost weeping... "But look what he writes about me. He says I am one of those

writers spoiled by money. He says, 'Sinclair Lewis has a million dollars.' I give you my word, George, I haven't got more than \$600,000 and he calls me a millionaire." 4

It is also a fact that he had always got along best with the kind of people who could have been the very source of his caricatures.

In 1930 Lewis was at last awarded the Nobel Prize he had always desired. In the address that he delivered before the Swedish Academy in Stockholm he criticised the American Academy of Arts and Letters by saying that it was a perfect example of "the divorce in America of intellectual life from all authentic standards of importance and reality." 5 He said that the true representatives of literary America for him were Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson, James Branch Cabell, Willa Cather, Henry Mencken, Upton Sinclair, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, John dos Passos, Stephen Benét, Michael Gold and William Faulkner, who were clearing the trail from "Victorian and Howellsian timidity in American literature to honesty and boldness and passion and life." 6 He added that these writers, with a livelier conception of literature than the Academy conservatives, were putting American literature on a par with any other literature in the world.

I rejoice that they are my countrymen and countrywomen, and that I may speak of them with pride even in the Europe of Thomas Mann, H. G. Wells, Galsworthy, Knut Hamsun, Arnold Bennett, Feuchtwanger, Selma Lagerlöf, Sigrid Unsted, Werner von Heidenstam, D'Annunzio, Romain Rolland. 7

He made it clear that America had come of age; that it had to look no longer to other cultures for standards in literature. In what regards Lewis himself, this statement is a radical change from what his opinion in this respect had been years earlier.

The Self-Portrait he wrote for the Nobel Foundation is an enthusiastic exaltation of his country. In it Lewis says that his years' traveling abroad had been an uninspiring recreation,

a flight from reality, and that his America stirs him much more than any other country. It has romance, adventure and fascinating and exotic people.

During these years of novel writing since 1915, I have lived a quite unromantic and unstirring life. I have traveled much; on the surface it would seem that one who during these fifteen years has been in forty states of the United States, in Canada, Mexico, England, Scotland, France, Italy, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Greece, Switzerland, Spain, the West Indies, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Poland, and Russia must have been adventurous. That, however, would be a typical error of biography. The fact is that my foreign traveling has been a quite uninspiring recreation, a flight from reality. My real traveling has been sitting in Pullman smoking cars, in a Minnesota village, on a Vermont farm, in a hotel in Kansas City or Savannah, listening to the normal daily drone of what are to me the most fascinating people in the world - the Average Citizen of the United States, with their friendliness to strangers and their rough teasing, their passion for material advancement and their shy idealism, their interest in all the world and their boastful provincialism - the intricate complexities which an American novelist is privileged to portray.<sup>8</sup>

It is hard to believe that the man who had written Main Street should ever express himself in a manner that stands in such clear opposition to what he had said in that novel. Anyhow, he seems to have loved his country all the time that he railed at it.

What must be ascertained is whether in this long period of reassessment of experience which had little by little been opening his eyes to the actualities he had not been able to perceive earlier, he had also gradually attained maturity.

It goes without saying that maturity is a complex subjective concept. It is rather difficult to define it, let alone judge other people according to it. I see it as a state in which a person manifests qualities that are considered normal to an adult, emotionally balanced, and socially adjusted human being. Self-assurance, equilibrium, coherence, moderation, and a

relative power of accepting other people as they are, are in my opinion basic qualities that an emotionally grown or mature person must possess. And a mature writer must be able to raise himself above the subjects he treats in the sense of not becoming personally involved with them, and show himself free of prejudice against the people and institutions he deals with. Over and above, being sure of himself, he should not need to prove to the reader that he is better than the characters of his own creation. In this sense one can hardly say that Lewis had fully matured, though he had changed in the last ten years.

Dodsworth is the first Lewis character to get rid of a feeling of inferiority for being a provincial. At the end of the story he gains self-confidence and takes people as they are. And what about Lewis himself? His 1931 article The Long Arm of the Small Town suggests much the same process:

And I, who am writing this in Connecticut and shall go in mid-May to the farm which I have bought in Vermont, haven't the slightest regret that I was born and reared in a prairie village instead of in New England or New York, or Old England or the Continent of Europe, for the matter of that. 9

But the novel Dodsworth proves the contrary. As he had all the while been doing since Main Street, Lewis takes pains to make clear that he is not a provincial, that he is more sophisticated than his provincial characters. Hence I conclude that he had not overcome his feeling of inferiority as regards his provenance. When Dodsworth and Fran admire the statues of portentous armored Hohenzollerns along the Sieges Allee in Germany, Lewis comments, "neither of them had yet been told that the statues were vulgar and absurd." 10 On his first visit to Paris, Dodsworth makes an observation about it and Lewis makes it a point to show that the words are a provincial's. "'This town knows a lot,' said Samuel Dodsworth of Zenith." 11 Still in Paris, when Dodsworth sees a red-bearded man with a wide black hat, a cloak and a dog-eared paper-covered portfolio under his arm, we read "A real artist (Sam decided)." 12

There is a curious pattern in the five novels. Lewis is constantly in competition with his characters and he always beats them, becoming their superior. In order to understand this I will have to recall the fact that most of the time when he had tried to associate with refined intellectuals, literary and artistic sets, and nobility, he had had unlucky experiences. Not rarely was he looked down upon and considered a person of little account and he was often accused, both at home and abroad, of being of a journalistic cast of mind, a commercial hack, instead of an artist and an intellectual. It is not to be doubted that this affected his already shaky self-confidence as regards his literary merit and it is possible that he came to realize that he had in fact some of the shortcomings that he was accused of having. He must have felt inferior to the artistic and intellectual milieu that criticised him and borne them a grudge. This explains the fact that he always sought out and was the happiest with simple and direct people, like journalists, who did not criticise him, who did not rival him and were to a great extent inferior to him since he was after all a world-famous novelist. In their presence he felt all right because he did not have to look up to anybody.

Having been underestimated so many times since his boyhood, Lewis had always laboured hard to prove his value and he rarely met with the reward that he expected. Therefore he resorts to his novels, which are the only means he has in order to prove his excellence. They are also the instruments which he uses to defeat his critics and the people who have injured him. In his novels he does not admit of competitors, he defeats them so that in the end he may become absolute, without having to look up to anybody.

There is not a single true artist in any of the five novels and any artistic inclination that a character may show at an early stage in the novels, somehow and sooner or later ends up in smoke. In Main Street we have Erik Valborg, a young man

with a keen interest in literature who reads widely and writes some poetry. He is given no opportunity to develop his abilities and ends up as a third-rate actor in a second-rate film. Carol's attempts at poetry go no farther than "The sky is bright, the sun is warm, there ne'er will be another storm." <sup>13</sup> The poet in Babbitt is the already-mentioned T. Cholmondeley Frink who advocates "he-literature." Then there is Paul Riesling, who has a feeling for poetry and plays the fiddle, but is made to shoot his wife and ends up in prison. In Arrowsmith there is another fake poet, Almus Pickerbaugh, "the two-fisted fightin' poet doc," who is a copy of T. Cholmondeley Frink, and Eva Evaline Murphy represents the artistic spirit in Elmer Gantry. She is an author, lecturer, painter, musician, authority in floriculture and writes the following song for the Albernathy College:

We'll think of thee where'er we be,  
On plain or mountain, town or sea,  
Oh, let us sing how round us clings,  
Dear Albernathy, thooooooooooughts - of - thee. <sup>14</sup>

In Dodsworth there is a Belgian painter whose specialty is deceiving naive American women tourists. According to Lewis, the real artists are "hidden, busy, and silent" <sup>15</sup> and he has really hidden them just too well so that in the end there is but one artist left, just a single one without competitors, Sinclair Lewis.

As to professors and intellectuals, the novels are full of them and I will therefore name but three of them that appear in Dodsworth since they are all alike. There is Professor Whittle who teaches Greek and knows more about stained glass and the manufacture of Benedictine than any other American living; his wife, who took her doctorate at Bonn on the philosophy of Spinoza but really prefers fruit-ranching. <sup>16</sup> And finally, Miss Addy T. Belcher who collects material for a new lecture trip on foreign politics and finance and who, off-stage resembles a chorus girl. <sup>17</sup> And as for talents that get lost, in one of his

annual class reunions Dodsworth meets a man who at the time he studied in Yale had been the most obstinate of book-worms and who is presently the funniest comedian on Broadway.

And what about the wise scholars Gottlieb and Bruno Zechlin? Lewis kills them off so that in the end there is no scholar at all; there is only a novelist exposing the follies of American pseudo-intellectuals. He also gets rid of the uneasy presence of the cultured and condescending Englishman Cecil Aylston who is killed in a gambling den in Juarez. Within this line of thought it might be argued that Lewis should also get rid of the German scholar Professor Braut. But this is not necessary because this man lives in Germany while Lewis stays safely in America.

Now the aristocrats. Sir Gerald Doak in Babbitt is an empty and dumb creature and Sir Isaac Mallard in Arrowsmith is a fake surgeon with a knowledge of table-manners. In Dodsworth, as we have already seen, there are the pseudo-aristocrats, the bad aristocrats, and the true aristocrats. Those who belong to the latter sort are the Baron and Baroness Ercole and the German Princess Drachenthal. The Baroness Ercole is made to clean the floor of the room Dodsworth (Lewis's character, indirectly Lewis himself?) will occupy and the Princess Drachenthal asks Dodsworth to help her "poor and stricken country." The true aristocrats are poor whereas Dodsworth (and Lewis) are rich.

It is a habit with Lewis always to measure up his people as regards their place of birth, profession, social rank, and social behavior; and so do his people themselves. The social world in which they move is extremely aggressive; it is full of people snubbing and patronizing other people, the people who are being snubbed, sweating and shivering and feeling extremely uncomfortable because they sense their inferiority and are not able to catch up with those they feel inferior to. It is almost a constant that his characters feel at ease socially only when they are in some way superior or more important than those they

are getting along with, or else, when they are able to prove to those who rank higher than them that they are not such bad eggs after all. This is the case of A. B. Hurd, Dodsworth's employee in London. "His former awe of Sam and of the elegance of Fran was lost now in his superiority as one who certainly did know his England and who could help these untraveled friends."<sup>18</sup> And when a person of a lower caste feels that he is not being patronized, that he is accepted, he becomes extremely grateful and as gay as a cricket.

All this must be a reflection of the fact that social activity had always been a nerve-shattering agony for the self-conscious Lewis. It is then understandable that he should be more concerned with conduct than with character. In his books, social types, categories and practices take precedence over individuals as human beings and the latter mean less to him than his own attitude towards them. Lewis is a critic of manners in a world of manners.

It is a rule without exception in his novels that all those who are able to move smoothly in society, who are sure of themselves in it, having good manners, elegance and gracious talk, are lying, social-climbing, sneaking, power-grabbing hypocrites, would-be highbrows, frauds, profiteers, and what not. Thus it had been in Arrowsmith and it continues to be exactly so in Dodsworth. And the richest among them are people who do not know what to do with their futile selves in an "exhausted world."<sup>19</sup> Lewis's social world is almost a negation of society itself.

Jim Lefferts in Elmer Gantry is Lewis's sole character who despite coming from a prairie village has "fastidiousness, natural elegance, a careless and amused ease."<sup>20</sup> He is described with sympathy by the writer, who at the beginning of the story says, "you felt that he would belong to any set in the world that he sufficiently admired."<sup>21</sup> It is saddening, depressing and pathetic that, never having had fastidiousness,

natural elegance and a careless, amused ease himself, Lewis does not permit this man to display his attributes in any social set to his liking. He ends up a stooped, gray, shabby, depressed and discouraged man, practising law in Topeka.

The Europe-vis-à-vis America theme as regards the American artist does not apply exclusively to Sinclair Lewis, though I may have tended to make it sound like his private affair. As I said in the introductory chapter of this thesis, up until a few decades ago it had been a cultural problem that affected many other artists as well, revealing itself in the form of an emotional conflict for those whose hearts were divided between their beloved democratic America and the aristocratic culture of old Europe. Sinclair Lewis was one out of a number of Americans who partook of this cultural dilemma.

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