

Sinclair Lewis  
Biographical Paper for the Novel Club  
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*Red, Among Geniuses and Kings*  
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“You boys will always be able to make a living. But poor Harry, there’s nothing he can do.” -Dr. E.J. Lewis, father of Sinclair Lewis, to his two elder sons (Lingeman 7).

Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, was in 1885 born Harry Sinclair Lewis, the third and final child of Edwin J. and Emma Kermott Lewis of Sauk Center, Minnesota. Family lore cast Harry as a temperamental child, given to daydreams and tantrums. His mother, who was devoted to all of her children, died of consumption when he was just 6 years old, and slightly more than a year later, Dr. E. J. – as he was known by his community – married Isabel Warner, a woman from just outside of Chicago. The second Mrs. Lewis quickly became notably involved in many cultural and civic projects of the little prairie town in which she found herself. Later, Sinclair Lewis remembered her as a loving but firm stepmother with whom he formed a close – if complicated - bond. Her interest in improving the town’s quality of daily life may have been remembered by the young Harry as a mark of character type – the prairie town wife of social status who ambitiously pursues good works in order to improve Main Street.

As he moved through his childhood, Lewis was still known as a sensitive introvert who lived in his own world. He often spent time producing narrative theater in the barn behind his house, using his collection of old keys as characters: he called them “the Key People.” He was quite bored with school in his teen years; once while “monkeying around,” he set fire to equipment in the school chemistry lab, and he repeatedly violated his father’s curfews (Lingeman 11). He had a single teen friend – a serious student by the name of Irving Fisher. Despite an undistinguished student record, during his last year of high school, Lewis became fascinated by poetry, and as he developed literary ambitions, began to take his studies seriously. Before he graduated, he had done volunteer work in two of the local newspapers to “learn the trade of printing,” and had submitted a stream of his poetry to local and national magazines (none of

these were accepted) (Schorer 34). His class standing having improved during his senior year, he had hopes of attending Harvard College, but his father did not support this plan. Dr. E. J. did, however, support his son in preparing for and taking the entrance exams for Yale University. When Lewis passed the preliminary exams for Yale, his father sent him to Oberlin Academy to prepare for the advanced tests that would be required. Lewis studied conscientiously for these exams, and passed them, heading for New Haven and what he hoped would be a more comfortable social and cultural fit than Sauk Center had been.

At Yale, Lewis at first continued to be an outsider, repelling by cutting a provincial figure that disrupted the customs and expectations of his more sophisticated and socially conservative classmates. His literary ambitions provided a path, nonetheless, leading to his social niche at Yale. During his freshman year, he was in the top fifth of his class, and his poem, "Launcelot," was published in the prestigious *Yale Literary Magazine*. Lewis majored in Literature, and his professors and associates among the Yale literati observed his hunger to take up ideas – atheism, socialism, capitalism – pursuing them ever into liberalism, even radicalism. According to one of his professors, "The conventions and restrictions of good society ... were offensive to him, ...His abiding temptation was to undermine them and blow them at the moon" (Lingeman 22).

The boredom of summer spent back in Sauk Center following his sophomore year focused his critical views: his diary notes, "'The village virus' – I shall have to write a book of how it getteth into the veins of good men & true. 'God made the country & man made the town – but the devil made the village'" (Lingeman 24). Within his literary ambitions a parallel subject had come into focus. In an essay for *The Lit*, he openly questioned Yale's narrow social stratifications, identifying in the broader human community a common band of social value and noting, "This has been one great theme in realism" (Lingeman 25).

Lewis graduated from Yale in 1908, having dropped out of college in 1906 to live and work at Helicon Hall, Upton Sinclair's cooperative commonwealth in New Jersey. That time away from school also brought him more experience in literary publishing when he worked on the magazine, *Transatlantic Tales*, translating and reviewing new German books. During this college

hiatus, he also found his first literary agent, Flora May Holly, who began to get his stories into mass-circulation magazines.

It was during this period, too, that Lewis departed on a Bohemian odyssey, connecting with old literary friends from Yale and Helicon Hall, and acquiring new ones, stopping in a Carmel-by-the-Sea artists' colony, making a side trip to Panama, then staying in San Francisco to work at the *Bulletin*, and then on to Washington and ultimately to New York's Greenwich Village, looking for suitable publishing work, a sustaining job, inspiring peers, and writing fulfillment. In the Village, he met Theodore Dreiser, Emma Goldman, and Eugene Debs. He wasn't in Sauk Center anymore. Among all of the ideas that were constantly discussed in the Village's "Little Renaissance" period, Lewis refined a list that resonated for him. Feminists and socialist reformers were on it; Marx and Freud did not make the cut. He was acquiring a critique of materialism and capitalism, and flirted heavily with Bolshevism, a useful ideology that honed the increasingly sociologic lens through which he viewed his creative purposes.

Lewis began to create commissioned work for publishers' projects - paying hack work - until he found a place as editorial assistant at the Frederick A. Stokes Company. His work there somewhat slowed his creative production, so he was typically ambivalent about having at last found secure work in the industry. He began drafting *Our Mr. Wrenn* during this time, a narrative about a "meek little bachelor" who slaved in an office all week, dreaming of world travel. Perhaps seeing himself on the page, he took the summer of 1912 as a residency in Provincetown, Massachusetts, to complete a first draft of this novel. The tensions between the economic necessity of his editorial work, his attachment to the modern ideas expounded by his Bohemian friends, and his writerly ambitions absorbed a lot of his particular manic energy, and he was feeling the need of a more dedicated and supportive companion when he met an assistant editor at *Vogue*, Grace Livingstone Hegger, who became his first wife in 1914, a few months following the publication by Harper and Brothers of *Our Mr. Wrenn*.

Lewis had entered into what was probably the happiest period of his life. His relationship with his wife fulfilled his need for love, companionship, and a dedicated in-house critic of his literary work. Despite his many nicknames, of which he preferred Red because of his red hair and his leftist sympathies, Grace decided to call her husband Hal. The pair enjoyed travel, living for

parts of each year in various places across America, depending on Lewis' prospects of working for publishers, the needs of his creative research, or the couple's pursuit of old and new friends. No matter where they were, Hal and Gracie – as he called his wife – entertained often, and Lewis worked constantly, both in a new position as editor-in-chief at Doran and Company, and on completing in 1915 *The Trail of the Hawk*, his second novel, about a young man from Minnesota who becomes involved in the beginnings of American aviation. This novel was followed by *The Job*, a proto-feminist narrative of a woman office worker, written in found cracks in the seemingly solid wall of office time that Lewis was constrained to spend in order to support himself and his now pregnant wife. Their son, Wells, was born in 1917, at the beginning of America's entrance into the Great War. At this crossroads for American men, Lewis, essentially a pacifist, had his mind firmly on his purpose: "No I'm damned if I'll go to war. I want to write a novel about the flat hungriness of the Middle West" (Lingeman 100). The welcoming critical reception of each of his first three novels advanced his reputation as a writer in the tradition of literary realism, bringing to life the struggles, achievements, and societal ironies of emblematic American characters living in typical American towns. Before writing *The Job*, Lewis wrote a serialized novel called *The Innocents* that Harper published as a book, also in 1917. A sentimental love story, this novel was kindly treated by the commercial reviewers, but the intellectual community found it "facile" and flimsy. Lewis wrote it solely in order to earn the money he now needed for his growing domestic responsibilities; he agreed with his critics, however, and later prevented its republication (Lingeman 101). At this time both his need for money and his high writerly ambition impelled him to take on commissions alongside of his novel, but his mind was solely occupied with his design for *Main Street*. Along with many commissioned stories for *The Saturday Evening Post*, to which Lewis contributed regularly, and wanderings into midwestern byways to research his next novel, Lewis wrote a play – *Hobohemia* – and another serialized novel – *Free Air* – in 1919, while he pursued his satire of the frustrating provincialism of small-town life in America. The play was panned by theater critics but embraced by the public; the novel "was the ideal *Post* serial," according to Lewis' editor there (Lingeman 124). These works (and other commissions for short

fiction) earned him enough money to devote his time to finishing his research and writing: *Main Street* was finally published by the newly established Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, in 1920.

To sell *Main Street*, Harcourt exploited the support that reviewers gave to Lewis' early publications, despite the author's concern that the high number of references to his previous titles would distract the reading public from what he hoped would be received as the Great American Novel. He was wrong about Harcourt's publication strategy, and *Main Street* was, in fact, reviewed as the G. A. N. by Franklin P. Adams, in his editorial review column of the *New York Tribune*, "The Conning Tower":

For a prominent position on the all-American team we nominate Sinclair Lewis, author of 'Main Street,' a high achievement. ... Mr. Lewis' pictures of Gopher Prairie, ... is (sic) a fine piece of imaginative poetry, and his recording of the commonplace conversation is perfection of satirical reporting." In a subsequent mention of the book, he also claimed that it was "the best book I have read in as long as I can recall." (Lingeman 150)

A colleague on the *Tribune*, Heywood Broun, was similarly impressed by Lewis' novel, but found fault with what he read as a naïve quality in Carol Kennicott. Floyd Dell, who had just published *Moon-Calf*, another novel of small-town life, entered the conversation, both defending Lewis' heroine and critiquing Broun's critique, and a fracas ensued. This obviously worried Lewis, but Harcourt again used the dialogic momentum to sell more copies of the book. Dell and Lewis later patched it up: when Dell wrote a conciliatory note to Lewis, Lewis responded, honoring Dell's radical politics, "... we've done, I think, good books. ... I pray (to the spirit of Lenin, perhaps) we may do great ones" (Schorer 277).

The intellectual press and critical journals agreed that the novel was a "pioneering work," "mercilessly" satirizing the suffocating provinciality of small-town folk (Lingeman 151). Upton Sinclair, Fannie Hurst, Edna Ferber, and Vachel Lindsay, and others among Lewis' friends and supporters, sent extravagant praise in personal letters. Writers and peers also honored Lewis. James Branch Cabell, to whom the novel was dedicated, wrote, "You have done an eminently solid and fine thing." F. Scott Fitzgerald claimed that, in his personal canon, *Main Street* had replaced *The Damnation of Theron Ware* as "the best American novel." H. G. Wells, for whom Lewis' son had been named, sent him accolades, as did John Galsworthy, who praised him as a

“poignant and just and stimulating ... diagnostician” of small-town cultures the world over. Lewis valued most the letter from H.L. Mencken, who shared the opinion that *Main Street* was “a sound and excellent piece of work – the best of its sort that has been done so far” (Lingeman 152-3). The novel continued to sell widely, and its industry buzz extended across the country. European readers were also gobbling up Lewis’ new novel. Sir John Foster Frazier, a newspaper reporter in London who had met Lewis in Mankato, claimed, “It was the eternal topic of conversation over the doughnuts and coffee” (Lingeman 154). Lee Shubert was interested in producing a play version in his Broadway theater. Sales rose exponentially, making both Lewis and Harcourt richer. All told, *Main Street* is said to have made its writer the 2018 equivalent of 4 million dollars.

The novel’s value proposition was closely examined and argued by other writers and critics. Ernest Brace (brother of Harcourt’s partner, Donald Brace) credited its appeal to people’s love of scandal. Critic Henry Seidel Canby stressed the opportune post-war timing of its publication: “By 1920, the restless minds of the writers of new books were getting a response from restless men and women who had been figuratively or literally grabbed out of their Main Streets” (Lingeman 158). A large demographic of younger readers was defensive about having hailed from America’s small towns and was understood by the critics to read it in order to counter negative perceptions about the culture of their origins. In a 1915 book, Thorstein Veblen had foreshadowed *Main Street*’s central agon: “the country town originates as an enterprise of speculation in land values; ... the businessmen who take up the local traffic in merchandising, litigation, church enterprise, and the like, commonly begin with some share of this speculation. ... This affords a common bond and a common ground of pecuniary interest, which commonly masquerades under the name of local patriotism, public spirit, civic pride and the like” (Lingeman 160). From the moralist perspective, not as much was heard as was expected, though the Right Reverend Charles H. Brent did object to the primacy of materialist values in the novel, and to the absence of a spiritual ballast.

The conversation about Carol’s sexuality as it is bracketed between her husband, Will, and her friend, Erik, featured some male opinions that Carol should have been seduced by Erik, and some female views – such as those of novelist Mary Austin – that Carol was not capable of

finding a spiritual dimension in sex that might have resulted a successful seduction. Many female readers of *Main Street* found the novel to speak directly to the disappointments of modern marriage. A reader said that she had “lived every page of *Main Street* for fifteen years” (Lingeman 161).

As sweeping as was the wide effect of Lewis’ *Main Street* on American readers, the author found himself fearful of the weight of its surprisingly outsized success. He confided his fears to Washington friends: “This will change us. This will change me. This will change *everything!*” (Lingeman 163). He felt that he could never again climb such a high summit, that he would live for the rest of his life with the burden on his career and on his life of trying to equal or surpass *Main Street*’s impact on the reading public. Another effect of his new fame that he may not consciously have noticed was that the social and professional rocket ship he had boarded often left Gracie trailing behind by a kite string.

And change everything did: over the next four years, Lewis produced *Babbitt* in ‘22 and *Arrowsmith* in ‘25. Considered Lewis’ finest artistic achievement in blending realism and satire, *Babbitt* did not catch fire with readers as *Main Street* had done. It was, however, on the top 10 bestseller list for ‘22 and ‘23. *Arrowsmith* was offered the Pulitzer Prize, but because the offer had earlier been extended and then retracted for *Main Street*, Lewis declined the award. With Wells in boarding school, Hal and Gracie hopscotched from one city to another, across the country and the continents, Lewis now in pursuit of *Arrowsmith*. He put in crushing work stints in one or the other location, bookended by research travel and hard partying, sometimes with Gracie in tow, sometimes not. He had always drunk his share of the alcohol on offer, but Lewis was observed at this time by his wife and friends to be drinking more than he had in the past. He had also done a consistent amount of party flirting in the past; now this practice began to be more visible to all at the Prohibition bashes that they were attending. Gracie, too, was the object of male attention and welcomed it. Always confidants, the couple began to share their romantic adventures with each other. It was inevitable that they would separate permanently, which they did in the fall 1925.

Lewis’ next novel was *Mantrap*, about a city man in search of the restorative powers of the wilderness, published in 1926. Though not considered a success by critics, a film adaptation

came out quickly, and later, a renamed remake. Nonetheless, Lewis was honest about having written it for money. He had a more important pot boiling now, which was his blockbuster novel, *Elmer Gantry*, published in 1927. He worked furiously on this book, researching in many sites across the country and putting away silos of time on drafting and editing the narrative of his cynical preacher figure. This hard spate of creative effort was, as had become usual, intertwined with hard spates of drinking, both social and solitary. At the end of '26, a year that taxed his creative capacities and had included the death of his father, Lewis had dried out in a New York sanitarium, but lasting sobriety eluded him.

After publishing another, generally disregarded book in 1928, *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*, Lewis produced *Dodsworth* in 1929. A narrative of a successful businessman who pursues an expatriate life, it was noted by Martin R. Ausmus in "Sinclair Lewis, *Dodsworth*, and the Fallacy of Reputation" as Lewis' "most sympathetic yet most savage, ... picture of the middle class of America ..." (Wikipedia, *Sinclair Lewis* 12/27/2020). It, too, was adapted to stage and screen. The previous year, he had also married Dorothy Thompson, the influential American journalist. Between Dorothy's frequent trips abroad to cover Hitler's rise to power and Lewis' wanderlust, their marriage also featured travel, but they bought a country home in Vermont to somewhat anchor their domestic life. They had one son, Michael Lewis.

In 1930, Lewis became the first American winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Lewis' Nobel Lecture observed that America's extreme patriotism often resulted in a resistance to the social criticism made by its artists, thus blocking the artists' creative visions and any social benefit to be gained by the reading public. He stated honestly that he saw his country as "the most contradictory, the most depressing, the most stirring, of any land in the world today" (Wikipedia, *Sinclair Lewis* 1/27/21).

While Dorothy was becoming the leading voice of anti-Facism in America, Lewis published *Ann Vickers*, a 1933 satire about a woman social reformer whose life is an example of her politics. He then hit the ball out of the park once more with *It Can't Happen Here*. Published in 1935, it dramatized the political process leading to an America under totalitarian government. The analysis of Nazi Germany that Dorothy wrote after interviewing Hitler in 1931, may have given Lewis a roadmap, of sorts:



Imagine that in America, an orator with the tongue of the late Mr. Bryan and the histrionic powers of Aimee Semple McPherson combined with the publicity gifts of Edward Bernay and Ivy Lee” [unites farmers, white-collar unemployed, people who had lost their savings, plus the American Legion, the DAR, the KKK, Henry Ford, and so on], “and you will have some idea of what the Hitler movement in Germany means.” (Lingeman 399)

Needless to say, the book did not so much get a critical reception as spark a wildfire of broad and engaged public response.

Two years following *It Can't Happen Here*, Lewis' second marriage collapsed – for her because of his ever-worsening alcoholism; for him because of the increasing amount of travel that her career demanded and what he regarded as her “domineering” way with him in trying to support his sobriety. He left her in 1937, and they divorced in 1942.

Lewis dried out again at the Austin Riggs Foundation in Massachusetts. He bought another property near there, called Thorvale Farm, and working there to stay sober, quickly produced a book dramatizing the struggle between radical and conservative political ideas played out between generations, called *The Prodigal Parents*, in 1938. It garnered the disappointment of critics and the lowest sales of any of his novels to that point. Fearing that he had written his last novel, he began to write plays and at the 1939 summer stock season of the Provincetown Theater, he met Rosemary Marcella, the last of his serious love affairs. Though this May-December romance was mostly unrequited, the two stayed close over the declining years of Lewis' life. He was inspired by her youth and ambition in writing *Bethel Merriday* in 1940, a novel about a traveling theater troupe. It succeeded *The Prodigal Parents* as his lowest selling novel.

Lewis' two following publications were *Gideon Planish*, about a social climber who exploits philanthropic fundraising for his own career advancement, and *Harri*, the story of a widow who tries to dominate a small Minnesota town. Both were published in 1943 to mixed reviews and disappointing sales. Without a daily companion, Lewis became closer to his children. Wells had become a writer, producing *They Still Say No*, a novel about the experience of his own generation, which was praised by the critics. Michael, who had been an emotional, volatile child, matured into an actor on stage and television. Lewis mentored both of them in their

career development and valued his close ties with both. In 1944, Wells was killed serving in France during the Second World War; Michael Lewis died at age 44 of Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Lewis' 1945 novel, *Cass Timberlane*, about the flaws of the American institution of marriage, was popular, but again, received mixed reviews. His 1947 novel, *Kingsblood Royal*, however, was a success, catalyzing controversial public discussion and high sales. Dramatizing the story of a man who "passes" from white to black, the book was pronounced the most important novel of the year by *Ebony Magazine*, while white supremacist groups wanted book copies seized and Lewis charged with sedition. Still fighting for his sobriety, Lewis next wrote *The God-Seeker*, published in 1949. It was based on the history of evangelical missions with the Dakota Sioux in Minnesota, which Lewis connected with America's systemic racism and classism. The critics were negative about this book, which resulted in a new low in sales. Worse, in the industry, Lewis was believed to be losing his ability to write the successful and truthful satires of American life for which he had become famous. Lewis did not wait to withstand these perspectives in print: he left for Italy upon completing his manuscript.

His health, both mental and physical, declined there, even as he worked to complete a final novel called *World So Wide*, about a Coloradan architect in Europe, fleeing his guilt over the death of his wife in an accident while he was driving their car. It was published posthumously in 1951. In Rome, Lewis came under the care of Dr. Lapicciarella, who treated the full range of his disorders. The doctor observed sympathetically of Lewis, "Only geniuses and kings are as lonely as Red Lewis" (Lingeman 538). After suffering several small heart attacks, he had one final, fatal cardiac event on January 10, 1951. He was cremated in Rome, and at the request of his brother Claude, his ashes were flown to Sauk Center for his funeral.

To American writers and readers, Sinclair Lewis left his passionate ambivalence towards American society. As he told Perry Miller, "I love America, but I don't like it. ..." His first biographer, Mark Schorer, summed him up ten years after his death: "He was one of the worst writers in modern American literature, but ... without his writing, we can hardly imagine ourselves" (Lingeman 547, 552). His more recent biographer, Richard Lingeman, points out his influence on Kurt Vonnegut's social satire, John Updike's *Rabbit* series, and Tom Wolfe, who considered *Elmer Gantry* to be the G.A.N. (553) His critical reputation has been revived by

current scholarly perspectives on the contemporary relevance of his work. The novels of Sinclair Lewis comprise a critical yet nostalgic paean to the American Midwest and to his own past, aimed at Americans everywhere for their own good.

Biographies consulted:

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