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American Critical Reception of the Later Novels of Sinclair Lewis, 1930-1951

Alan Eugene McFee

Loyola University Chicago

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AMERICAN CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE 
LATER NOVELS OF SINCLAIR 
LEWIS, 1930-1951

by

Alan Eugene McFee

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LIFE

Alan Eugene McFee was born in Chicago, Illinois, December 26, 1928.

He was graduated from Spalding High School, Chicago, February, 1947, and from Loyola University, February, 1951, with the degree of Bachelor of Science, cum laude.

The writer began his graduate studies at Loyola University in September, 1950, at which time he was given the position of graduate assistant, which he held for two years.
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CHAPTER I

THE POSITION OF SINCLAIR LEWIS IN 1930

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Center, Minnesota, in 1885, and died in Florence, Italy, in 1951. The years between span one of the longest writing careers in the history of American literature. Sinclair Lewis produced steadily for four decades.¹ For almost half that period he need not have written another line to reinforce his reputation as the dean of American letters. He chose to go on writing, even when there was no longer any imperative reason to do so. In a way his death in an exotic foreign city is curiously symbolic of his later career. Just as Lewis in later life turned his back on the milieu of his greatest novels, preferring instead the cultural surroundings of Europe, the critics turned their backs on his later novels, preferring instead those who experimented in newer forms. Though Lewis won the Nobel Prize he was not respected at his death as he had been in 1930. While

¹ Lewis's earliest separately published book was a juvenile, *Hike and the Aeroplane*, "by Tom Graham," New York, 1912.
his books continued to sell in huge quantities, 2 he had for years been passed over in favor of younger talents. Those critics who did pay attention to him hastened to qualify their remarks; they usually discussed his "historical importance," 3 but rarely his current output. This later disparagement is incomprehensible when we consider the glowing terms which were used to describe Lewis in 1930. Erik Axel Karlfeldt, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, in the address which he gave at the prize-giving ceremony said that Lewis

writes the new language--American--as one of the representatives of 120,000,000 souls. He asks us to consider that this nation is not yet finished or melted down; that it is still in the turbulent years of adolescence. 4

Unfortunately, the reference to "adolescence", harmless though it was, was interpreted in some quarters as typical European condescension. In fact, a few hypercritical individuals maintained that the sole purpose of giving the prize to Lewis was to humiliate America by pointing out Lewis as an horrible example of an American writer, and not, as Karlfeldt said, because the literature of America

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has started with national self-criticism. It is a sign of health. Sinclair Lewis has the blessed gift of wielding his land-clearing implement, not only with a firm hand, but with a smile on his lips and youth in his heart. He is a new builder. 5

According to the thin-skinned, America was being shown up as a nation of fools. 6 On the other hand there were those of more moderate views. As William Lyon Phelps pointed out, the committee gave Lewis the prize "because he is a creative artist and a novelist of international fame." 7 He went on to point out that Lewis created two types which are immediately recognized by Europeans and Asiatics as well as by Americans. Phelps agreed with what has been pointed out by other commentators, that it is no small achievement to have added two type-words, "Babbitt," and "Main Street," to the language, in addition to being one of the first writers to inject satire and burlesque into modern American liter-

5 Ibid.

6 "In 1929, when the jurors were met in momentous conference, all Europeans had a confused view of America, one distorted by both envy and fear . . . . The riches of America were so dazzling and its own bland assumption of supreme importance in world affairs was so infuriating that it comforted the European a little to believe the typical citizen of the blatant republic was trivial and thoughtless, debased by a shameless pursuit of shoddy values.

"Europe, forced to accept the significance of America's role in the society of nations, was determined nonetheless to think ill of her in all possible ways. The novels of Sinclair Lewis confirmed the Old World in a soothing prejudice." James Gray, On Second Thought, Minneapolis, 1946, 20-21.

nature on a large scale. 8

Why did Lewis later fall from favor? Why was he in later years ignored in large part by "serious" critics? There were, of course, unfavorable evaluations of his work even in the twenties. T.K. Whipple is an example of the critic who is inclined to underrate the prestige of Lewis's work before 1930. He calls Lewis

a master of that species of art to which belong glass flowers, imitation fruit, Mme. Tussaud's waxworks, and barnyard symphonies, which deceive the spectator into thinking that the work in question is not an artificial product but the real thing. 9

After thus praising Lewis's photographic skill, as it has been called, he closes in for the kill:

While many of his contemporaries, who have succeeded in maintaining their integrity unimpaired, impart to their readers an intenser realization of the world they live in, the net result of Lewis's work is not a truer apprehension or a deeper insight, but an increase in mutual dissatisfaction: he has made Americans more outspoken and more hostile critics of one another. . . . Lewis is the most successful critic of American society because he is himself the best proof that his charges are just. 10

Whipple, nevertheless, represented a critical minority. One can assume as a matter of course that, apart from the unfavor-
able repercussions produced by the Nobal Prize, some of the critics were not completely enthusiastic about Lewis's work in the twenties. The critical majority prior to 1930 is fairly represented by Phelps, whose attitude, we have seen, was favorable. After that date occurred a definite change in the critical reception of Lewis's work. This change has never been closely examined or explained except in generalities that convey little to the student seeking information. The purpose of this paper is not to determine the precise attitude of the critics' treatment of Lewis's novels before 1930, a treatment that is clear enough in its praise, but to trace the development of the critical attitudes toward Lewis after he received the prize.

In order to place Lewis correctly in the stream of American literature, one must, as has already been pointed out, realize the length of his career and the great extent of his writings. Like that of many other writers, Lewis's early career was checkered and erratic. His first attempts at writing of which evidence still remains are the contributions which he made to the literary magazine at Yale University; he was also its editor. However, his active mind was evidently not completely taken up by this work, for he became interested in socialism at this time, and left college to work as janitor and general handyman at Helicon Home Colony, an experimental community which had been started by Upton Sinclair. The colony was abandoned when the main building burned down. Lewis then went to New York,
where he did some free lance writing, with no success; he supported himself during this period by working as assistant editor of a magazine called *Trans-Atlantic Tales*. Tiring of this occupation, he traveled to Panama, via steerage, hoping to find work on the canal. Unable to find work there, Lewis returned to Yale, graduated in 1908, and returned to his wandering. In the next few years he was employed as a reporter for a Waterloo, Iowa, paper, a worker for a charitable organization in New York, a part-time secretary in California, a ghost writer for Jack London, an assistant editor of a magazine for teachers of the deaf, a manuscript reader in New York, and finally as editor for various publishers until 1916. Meanwhile, he had been writing steadily, and had published six stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and two novels. In 1916 he finally devoted himself to full-time writing.\(^{11}\)

The novels of this early period, 1912-1919, are the work of a hack; however, they are interesting in that they show isolated indications of what was to come from Lewis during the twenties.\(^{12}\) Three early novels which foreshadow *Main Street* are

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Our Mr. Wrenn, The Trail of the Hawk, and The Job. The first is an unimpressive little book about a man who takes one fling at adventure, then settles down to his old life, satisfied. The second is more important, introducing as it does several characters who are to appear in later novels under different names. Here can be found the preliminary sketches for Martin Arrowsmith, Miles Bjornstam, and Joyce Lanyon. Significant also is the stereotyped conversation of the secondary characters.

The Job presents two phenomena which Lewis had discovered in the two years since the previous novel. They were the social order and the woman in business. The heroine of the book is a feminist who has seen through the frustrations of the male sex in terms of her father and her elderly suitor. She goes to New York, marries a cad, divorces him, and marries the one man who really appeals to her. She keeps her job, but has a baby. This novel presents us with a shaky solution; the really successful businesswoman is she who can keep her job and have a baby at

13 Sinclair Lewis, Our Mr. Wrenn, New York, 1914.
16 Percy Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction, Chicago, 1940, 166.
17 Ibid., 166-167.
the same time.¹⁸

In a burst of enthusiasm for John Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer, Sinclair Lewis once described his conception of the ideal novel. It was superior to Manhattan Transfer, and as an ideal, finer than any of his own. The writer of this novel, Lewis said, would be accused of all sorts of low, sordid motives, because this novel would portray life in all its ugliness as well as in its glamorous aspects.¹⁹ Such an accusation greeted Main Street,²⁰ Lewis's first important work. It constitutes the first chapter of his saga of the middle classes in America. Comparing the sweep of Lewis's conception to that of Balzac, Maxwell Geismar points out that

just as Lewis was establishing his literary topography in the grand manner, he would establish his literary genealogy. The social classes and their interplay in Zenith will range from George F. Babbitt through Martin Arrowsmith, the truth-seeker, and Elmer Gantry, the false prophet of Winnemac, to Sam Dodsworth, the true aristocrat of the Middle Class Empire.²¹

The thesis of Main Street is that the small town is not the romantic haven which it has been pictured by writers from

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¹⁸ Ibid., 168.

¹⁹ Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer New York, 1926.

²⁰ Sinclair Lewis, Main Street, New York, 1920.

²¹ Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, Boston, 1947, 71.
Goldsmith in The Deserted Village, through Washington Irving in
The Sketch Book, Mrs. Gaskell in Cranford, and Booth Tarkington
in The Gentleman from Indiana. In countless stories there was
depicted the American youth who has his brush with sin in the
metropolis, only to return to the village to marry the girl next
door and live happily ever after. A parallel myth was the con-
ception that villages are full of "whiskers, iron dogs upon lawns,
gold-bricks, checkers, jars of gilded cat-tails, and shrewd, comic
old men who are known as hicks." Both of these villages had dis-
appeared in the days of Silas Lapham, to be replaced by machine
made towns. As Lewis himself said, the town is "a force seeking
to dominate the earth, to drain the hills and the seas of color.
... Its conception of a community ideal is not the grand man-
er, the noble aspiration, the fine aristocratic pride, but cheap
labor for the kitchen..." All this he satirized in Main Street,
a book which has had a great influence on later writers. Its
very title has become a synonym for provincialism, as Babbitt was
later to become the synonym for the "go-getting" businessman.

Babbitt is the next chapter in Lewis's survey of the
middle classes. In this book, set against a background which

22 Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction,
New York, 1934, 257.

23 Boynton, Fiction, 171, 172.

24 Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt, New York, 1922.
constitutes Lewis's picture of a mid-western metropolis, he achieved his most life-like, rounded character, George Folansbee Babbitt. This character is successful because, as numerous commentators have pointed out, Babbitt is not the caricature which he is sometimes said to be. His aspirations and frustrations are more involved than they seem at first glance. His early ambition is to become a lawyer, but he cannot disillusion his fiancée. He would prefer to be an honest businessman, but his partner involves him in business deals at which he must wink. He makes a feeble attempt at independence but is repulsed by the attitude of the Boosters.

The theme of Babbitt is the frustration of middle-class life. Babbitt is confronted on every side by the myriad conventions which must be followed with more than mere lip service. He makes a feeble attempt at leading his own life by having an affair with one of his real estate clients; his penalty is ostracism. One of the most poignant scenes in the book is the one in which Babbitt, thoroughly purged of his "radical" tendencies, is welcomed back into "the gang" at the club luncheon. The frustration


26 Boynton, Fiction, 174.
theme extends also to the minor characters, each of whom is prevented in some way from doing what he wants. The book manages to convey the mood of a jungle culture whose victims are trapped by all-pervading taboos.

In *Arrowsmith* Lewis continues his survey of the middle classes with his portrait of the truth-seeker. Many critics consider this work his finest. Harry Hartwick believes that here "we find a vertical depth, magnitude, purity of character, inventiveness, and mastery of form. . . . Carol Kennicott and Babbitt were unfortunately victims of their environment and 'the village virus' . . . . But *Arrowsmith* is the record of a victory."²⁸

This book is the only one of Lewis's efforts of the twenties in which there is no happy ending and no compromise.²⁹ Yet in a way the ending is happy, because there is no compromise of Arrowsmith's ideals. True, both of his marriages end unhappily and one in tragedy. But to a character with his ideals, there can be only an arrangement of life in which marriage is second to research.


This novel has received adverse criticism on two counts. The less serious is the too-obvious introduction of medical terminology into the story. It is noticeable here because Lewis was weak on scientific procedure. The other fault which has been noted is the overemphasis of the thesis, which is that all scientists are fated to be the victims of publicity-seeking individuals and research organizations, and commercially-minded pharmaceutical houses.

Though the book is said to have "a rich gallery of different medical types," another argument would have it that the novel loses impact as it shifts from depicting medical and commercial institutions to describing the victims of those institutions. It is thought that Lewis's portrayal of Martin Arrowsmith in his clumsy attempt to reform the public health service in a small town leads to a kind of contempt for public health service and the public welfare. In the opinion of Mr. Geismar contempt is generated because the position is overstated.

Mantrap, Lewis's next novel, has as its chief claim to immortality the fact that it served as a motion picture vehi-

30 Boynton, Fiction, 178.
31 Karlfeldt, Prize, 5.
32 Geismar, Provincials, 100.
33 Sinclair Lewis, Mantrap, New York, 1926.
The book is unusual in that the heroine, a manicurist, is the only one of Lewis's main characters who is a proletarian.

Elmer Gantry is perhaps the most notorious of all Lewis's books. It created a furor when it came out because it broke an unwritten law—unwritten at any rate in the domain of American popular fiction—which exempted the clergy from criticism. This book helped break down that custom. It was, however, a departure in a more important sense. It is the first of Lewis's important novels in which the thesis and the story are joined with noticeable seams. This fault is partly caused by the fact that Lewis did not know the subject at first hand, but was forced to work with material gathered from various sources. There are long dialogues sprinkled throughout the book which have much to do with the thesis but nothing to do with the plot. There is hardly any humor in this book; the characters move about like automatons, never once performing an act of disinterested kindness. In short, in the opinion of an important critic, Elmer Gantry displays a weakness of Lewis—his limited view of reality.

34 Hartwick, Foreground, 253.
35 Geismar, Provincials, 101.
36 Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry, New York, 1927.
37 Boynton, Fiction, 179.
"Just as there is really no sense of vice in Lewis's literary world, there is not true sense of virtue. Just as there is practically no sense of human love . . . there is no genuine sense of human freedom." 38

Elmer Gantry marks the first noticeable fall in the prestige of Lewis's work. It was not as successful critically as Lewis's previous major novels had been (excluding Mantrap, of course). Typical of those who were disturbed by this novel were Walter Lippmann 39 and Milton Waldman, 40 who were of the opinion that Lewis had already passed the peak of his powers.

Lewis's next book, The Man Who Knew Coolidge, 41 is a long monologue of 275 pages, consisting of six sections on topics such as prohibition, Coolidge, office supplies, travel, radios, service, golf, poker, and women. Technically it is admirable, but it has not been one of Lewis's popular books. Recently C. Carroll Hollis 42 has formulated an interesting thesis which states that this book is Lewis's best because it is in the tradition of the Theophrastan character, of which Lewis is supposed to be the modern exponent, rather than a novelist.

38 Geismar, Provincials, 108.
40 Waldman, "Lewis," Authors, ed. Squire, 92-94.
42 C. Carroll Hollis, "Sinclair Lewis: Reviver of
Dodsworth\textsuperscript{43} occupies a peculiar position in the body of Lewis's work. On the one hand, it sometimes is spoken of as the culmination of the most creative period in Lewis's career. On the other hand, it is sometimes spoken of as the first work of his decline. Both these estimates belong to the class of backward glances which are so easy to make after one has had an opportunity to consider an author's subsequent work. In any event, it has been one of his most popular works, as a novel, a play, and a movie.

Sam Dodsworth offers sharp contrast to Lewis's other characters. He is "a Babbitt undefeated, an Arrowsmith with a backbone."\textsuperscript{44} He is a successful businessman, but he does not permit his success to dominate his life. More complex and interesting than the author's previous creations, he is "the Babbitt . . . of reality."\textsuperscript{45} He is moresearchingly portrayed as a case history of human relationships. Consequently, the book is the least satirical of Lewis's major novels. It plows a middle path between the humorous novel of the American innocent amid the temptations of Europe, and what Lewis called the self-conscious colonialism of

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\textsuperscript{43} Sinclair Lewis, \textit{Dodsworth}, New York, 1929.
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\textsuperscript{44} Boynton, \textit{Fiction}, 182-183.
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\textsuperscript{45} Geismar, \textit{Provincials}, 112
\end{flushleft}
This, then, has been a brief survey of the scope of Lewis's work prior to 1930. At that time he was awarded the Nobel Prize. His prestige, already considerable, was increased immensely by the prize. True, there were people who thought that the very idea of his winning the Nobel Prize was a huge joke. But we must remember that for the choice of the Nobel committee to be questioned is not something which began with Sinclair Lewis's prize. The Prize Committee has been severely criticized from time to time for its choices. When Rene Sully-Prudhomme, who is now almost forgotten, received the first prize to be awarded in literature, the committee was denounced for not having chosen Tolstoy. By the common acclamation of critics, writers, and readers, War and Peace had been accepted as one of the great novels of all time. The people of Sweden, outraged because their idol, August Strindberg, had not received the prize, collected a sum equal to it which they presented to him. Consternation reigned in Germany when Paul von Heyse received the prize in 1910; it was awarded to Gerhart Hauptmann in 1912 to quiet the uproar.47

Obviously one cannot state unequivocally that the Nobel


Prize is a guarantee of greatness. But, even though it is true that winning the Prize does not necessarily mean that one is an immortal, still it must be conceded that one is among the handful who are at the very top of their profession. It means that the writer who has been awarded the Prize is one who is possessed of a certain modicum of ability. It means that he has been recorded critical recognition, if not critical approbation, in his own country. He has written books which have some claim to permanence. He has established a fairly solid reputation for himself.

What happened to Sinclair Lewis's reputation? Why were the reviews of his latest novel so pitying, slighting, and routine? What happened between 1930 and 1951 which could be so disastrous to Lewis's literary reputation? That is the problem of this paper. The writer will attempt to determine the causes of Sinclair Lewis's fall from critical favor. To this end a selective sampling of the reviews of each of Lewis's later books will

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be examined. The major and minor critical reactions to each book will be noted.

In this paper there will be no distinction between "critic" and "reviewer" based on such artificial distinctions as the type of publication in which the reviews appeared. One finds on examining a magazine like the Saturday Review of Literature49 that, although it is generally thought of as "critical," i.e., containing analyses of literary worth, many of its critics tend to write "reviews," i.e., discussions of the plot, characters, and theme of a book which are meant to supply information to the prospective book buyer.

This paper does not, for its purposes, pretend to analyze exhaustively the critical reception of each novel. In the first place, only well-known magazines and newspapers which originate in the larger cities have been used. The important critics do not usually write for small newspapers and magazines.50 With this limitation in mind the writer has used only that material which is indexed by the Book Review Digest. Further, in the process of research it has been found that fewer reviews of value

49 Since the title of this periodical was changed only recently, it was thought more suitable to retain the older title.

50 We do not here refer to the "little" magazines.
were necessary than had been originally anticipated. The critical reception of a novel is surprisingly uniform, at least in the case of Sinclair Lewis. This observation may not hold true for other novelists. When a writer is as well known as Lewis was, there is a certain content in all the reviews of his novels which can be called the result of an habitual attitude. Either a given critic is violently pro- or anti-Lewis, or he is influenced by the last novel from the same author's hand, and tends to evaluate the latest offering in relation to the quality or success of the previous novel by the same author.

In the discussion of the critical estimate of each book, not much will be said concerning evaluations appearing in book form. First, this paper is concerned with the immediate reaction to each novel, before the critics had an opportunity for "second-guessing." Second, there is not much material to be found between covers concerning Lewis's reputation or production after 1930. Third, critical estimates appearing in books written some time after the publication of each of the novels will be referred to (1) if they clarify a statement made previously in a periodical, or (2) if they indicate an extreme change of critical opinion.

Although an attempt will be made to distinguish between

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51 This neglect is significant in itself of a fall from fashion, but it is only a negative indication of what was happening to Lewis's reputation.
opinions and to emphasize the literary element of each critical estimate, moral and political judgments cannot be overlooked completely. The very nature of the modern novel, which has become a catch-all for discussions of politics, philosophy, religion, psychology, and sociology, demands their introduction into the critical essay. Whether the development of the social novel into a pseudo-textbook form is good or bad from an artistic standpoint is not under debate here. What is important is that we recognize the fact of its existence.
CHAPTER II

THE NOVELS OF THE DEPRESSION

In the body of Sinclair Lewis's writing the Nobel Prize provides a distinct separation between Dodsworth and Ann Vickers. Yet there is another, equally important event which comes between these two novels: it is the financial panic of 1929, with its aftermath, the depression. Though the progress of history is a gradually changing process, there are often what seem to be points of sharp division with the past. The stock market crash of 1929 would seem to be one of these sudden changes. The decade before the crash is different in mood and outlook from the decade following it. During the twenties people were reading books like Anita Loos' Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Michael Arlen's The Green Hat, and Lewis's Elmer Gantry, novels which sounded the keynote of rebellion. In the thirties the people were ready for new things; they wanted a change. Rebellion had ceased to be a novelty, yet the people were more tolerant of those who were outspoken on matters of sex and critical of entrenched ideas.¹

¹ Frank Luther Mott, Golden Multitudes, New York, 1947, 253-254
More important was the change in the attitudes of the intellectuals. They had got a religion of social consciousness. Writers "no longer set such store as formerly upon art as art. They wanted . . . to illuminate the social scene, to bring its darkest places clearly into view." This change in attitude was common also to the critics; it is important to remember this fact in connection with Sinclair Lewis, for he was definitely not among those who busied themselves with the writing and criticism of novels whose heroes represented "the masses." This mood pervaded the ranks of American writers during the thirties. A partial list of socially-conscious writers would include John Dos Passos, Erskine Caldwell, Ernest Hemingway, James T. Farrell, Albert Halper, Robert Cantwell, John Steinbeck, Fielding Burke, and Grace Lumpkin.

The result of all this "social evangelism" was, of course, to make the interesting issues of the twenties seem impossibly dated. What had seemed of great moment in the twenties was now connotative of the utmost frivolity.

Main Street was being repaved by the WPA. . . . Babbitt, his real-estate business shot to hell, no longer orated at lunch; Elmer Gantry found the revival racket stale and unprofitable; Dodsworth banished thoughts of castles

2 Frederick L. Allen, Since Yesterday. New York, 1940, 252.

3 Ibid., 258.

4 Ibid., 252.
on the Rhine. . . . /T/he man who "knew Coolidge" had almost forgotten that quaint fact. Ann Vickers, the driving social worker, now took Sinclair Lewis's spotlight, while in the background loomed the shape of a demagogue rehearsing for a fascism that might "happen here."5

Such was the state of mind which prevailed in the thirties. Even Sinclair Lewis was momentarily swayed by it. It was rumored that he was working on a long novel which, in chronicling three generations of an American family, would also trace the development of the labor movement. The proposed novel never got past the planning stage. The only published record of it which we have is a pamphlet describing labor conditions in a mill town.6 The most likely reason for the failure of the project is that Lewis could not visualize the historical settings.7 Instead, he wrote the story of a social worker, Ann Vickers.8

Ann Vickers is the only child of the superintendent of schools in a small Illinois town. The first idea of social service is implanted in her by Oscar Klebs, a shoemaker with socialist beliefs. At college Ann majors in sociology. For ten years after graduating she holds a variety of jobs. She studies nurs-

6 Sinclair Lewis, Cheap and Contented Labor, /New York?/, 1929.
7 It is a critical convention that Lewis is a "literary photographer," who could not write about what he had not seen.
8 Sinclair Lewis, Ann Vickers, Garden City, 1933.
ing for a year. Then she is an organizer for the women's suffrage movement, a settlement worker, and finally head of a settlement house. In the meantime she has an abortion, the outcome of which is a sentimental remorse.

Tiring of her job as head of the settlement house, Ann takes a position with a female philanthropist who turns out to be a publicity seeker. Disgusted, she turns to penology. After harrowing experiences she finally becomes head of a model prison in New York. By 1928 she is an honorary Ph.D. She is also married unhappily to a professional social worker.

Her greatest happiness comes when she bears the baby of a New York state politician named Barney Dolphin, who is her great love. Barney is married to an old-fashioned wife who won't give him a divorce. Consequently, he and Ann go off to live together, after Barney serves a short sentence for corrupt judicial practices.

The advertisement which appeared in Publisher's Weekly called the publication of this novel in thirteen countries "a world event." Certainly few novels have ever been released to a more expectant public, at least in the United States. It is important that we keep in mind this expectancy, for it may have had a good deal of influence on the critical reaction. The

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9 Publisher's Weekly, CXXIII, January 7, 1933, 5.
critics could have been influenced in two ways. (1) They might have expected too much, and consequently have been disappointed. (2) They might have been prepared to write glowing reviews on the strength of the Lewis reputation.

As it turned out, the reviews ranged from unqualified praise to bitter denunciation. This in itself is not unusual. It is always possible to find two almost diametrically opposed critical opinions; it is important to notice the majority opinion. The most favorable extreme is represented by the review of Burton Rascoe, who says, "Mr. Lewis's new novel is beautiful and terrible and compassionate and true. It is almost overwhelmingly true to the life we know." Such a statement precludes the possibility of anything more than appreciative criticism, which only praises, instead of coolly analyzing. That is what this review does; it finds no fault; it lavishes praise. "Mr. Lewis's depiction of prisons, settlement houses, and feminist organizations brings into his fiction something new in milieu. He has lost nothing of his cunning in creating scenes and situations with lively verisimilitude." Mr. Rascoe, in addition to approving of Lewis's technique, also praised the ideas in the book, saying that it was more thoughtful and philosophical than any other, with the exception of Arrowsmith, but he does not cite specific examples of what he praises.10
William Boskin, while also favorable in his reaction, was not quite so unrestrained as Mr. Rascoe. In his opinion *Ann Vickers* is "an excellent indictment of the American prison system and a cutting satire on the various reform movements of Lewis's own generation." Another favorable and enthusiastically written review is that of Karl Schriftgiesser, who raises several interesting points which are worthy of note because they were later used to condemn Lewis. Mr. Schriftgiesser calls Lewis "our most accomplished novelist writing in the traditional form."

However, Mr. Schriftgiesser admits that "after the horrors of Faulkner," Lewis's technique "proves itself inadequate to turn our stomachs at the viciousness which he unearths." Mr. Schriftgiesser likes what he calls the panorama of the previous three decades of the history of the United States.

With regard to the morality of the novel, he feels that the argument for single women having babies is eugenically sound. The latter opinion is an example of critical poaching; this critic does not pretend to be a moralist, yet he has the temerity to pass on moral questions, while admitting that the church will object. 12

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12 *Boston Transcript*, January 28, 1933, Book Section.
The next reviewer to be considered takes the challenge and makes an attempt to rank *Ann Vickers* in relation to Lewis's other work. Henry Hazlitt considers this book inferior to *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith*, but superior to *Dodsworth*; as Mr. Hazlitt expresses it, the book is "safely in the upper half of Mr. Lewis's work." In his opinion, this book is a cogent piece of propaganda, a powerful social document. It serves, he thinks, the good purpose of rousing the indignation of people who would never read an official report on prison reform. However, he does not consider the novel to be "'literature' in the narrower sense." The writing, in his opinion, "as such, is no better than competent journalese." Inasmuch as Mr. Hazlitt has stated that the book is in the upper half of Lewis's work, we must draw the conclusion that he considers none of Lewis's books to be literature. His opinion would have greater value had he defined "literature" more precisely.

The opinion of Mary Ross is that the importance of the book lies in favor of the flesh and blood person which Lewis created in it. She calls this novel a book which should not be ignored, but she does not say why. A more vigorous opinion is that of J. Donald Adams. Calling *Ann Vickers* one of "the major

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14 Mary Ross, "Portrait of a Modern Woman," *Survey*
creations of Sinclair Lewis," he describes it as "a book fully representative of the qualities for which he has come to stand in American literature," and a novel which "could not be the work of any other author." In Mr. Adams opinion, the thesis of the novel is that "the career can never be an adequate substitute for a more fundamental need, even when that need demands the subordination of self." 15

Helen MacAfee called the book a deft, clever attack "that turns a scene and all its works immediately inside out. Here is the same gift for caricature-- ... " 16 Miss MacAfee says more in the same vein. She is obviously one of those who are immediately captivated by Lewis's satirical technique, for she mentions very little else in connection with Ann Vickers.

A less lenient analysis than the immediately preceding is that of Robert Cantwell, who evaluates the book in relation to Lewis's other writing. He admits that Ann Vickers moves rapidly and is realistic in its evocation of the physical characteristics of a scene. But he draws attention to what he calls "the changing character of Lewis's writing." Mr. Cantwell points out that Lewis's most important books had been satires, notably Main Street and Babbitt: since then,

Graphic, XXII, February, 1933, 125.

16 Helen MacAfee, "The Library of the Quarter," Yale
Lewis has chosen progressively less formidable opponents. As his prestige and influence have grown, as his technical skill has increased, he has devoted himself to satirizing less important and less firmly established social institutions; he is becoming a satirist who specializes in dead issues. 17

This is a serious charge. Sinclair Lewis's importance, we see here, derives almost wholly from two things. He is a marvellous mimic, and his themes are important. If he fails to maintain either standard, then his importance diminishes.

Another critic, Harry Hansen, berates Lewis for not having moved with the times. Of the later Lewis he says the following:

If Sinclair Lewis stands practically where he did when Main Street made a national figure, then he has not moved with the times. For the novel is moving beyond him. The denunciation of human stupidity for itself alone is no longer received with shouts; the younger novelists have been trying to place the blame for it. The search for infantile influences and psychological factors is giving way before the search for the responsibility in society itself. If people are as Mr. Lewis describes them, then there must be a reason for their condition. Mr. Lewis's latest novel does not indicate that he is moving toward any such balanced inquiry. 18

This review is important because it is a good expression of the critical fashion which dominated the thirties. The "search for the responsibility in society itself," which Mr. Hansen mentions...
as being the goal of the young writers, is in other words, the depiction of the class struggle. He goes on to say that the proletarian novel is becoming popular in the early thirties. This statement is an implicit accusation of Lewis. Mr. Hansen winds up his argument by indicating that the newer novels are enjoying "increasing popularity with the public."19

A slightly different appraisal is that of Malcolm Cowley though it is equally unfavorable. He does not discuss Lewis in relation to other novelists, but rather points out defects within the novel itself. It is his opinion that the book fails because of the choice of subject. As he says, "everything in the book depends on the heroine, toward whom the author's attitude is uncertain. Ann is a feminist and Lewis is really hostile towards feminism. Ann is a reformer and Lewis has learned to distrust reformers. Ann is a liberal; so is Lewis himself, but he is beginning to be irritated by his own class."20 This criticism is interesting, but Mr. Cowley asserts without citing instances which would tend to support his statement. His estimate is one of the few truly literary evaluations of the book which appeared, and had he amplified his statements further, much more insight could

19 Ibid., 155.

have been obtained from them. However, even this brief statement is illuminating. It is indicative of the fact that Mr. Cowley is highly class-conscious.

Two extremely unfavorable reviews were those of Joseph McSorley, C.S.P. 21 and Herschel Brickell. Father McSorley's review is concerned chiefly with moral issues. While the discussion of Lewis's moral attitudes is just, it is not literary, and it is too polemic in nature to be a persuasive argument. Mr. Brickell repeats one of the standard arguments, that Lewis is "journalistic" in his technique:

The work of some men, such as DeFoe, who were primarily journalists, has survived, and so may the work of Lewis, but it is simply stupid to think of him as a literary artist, and it may even be foolish to accept his ideals as the ideals of the present period, although the sort of moral anarchy for which he seems to argue does seem to grow in popularity with the general loss of standards. 22

This, then, was the critical reception of Ann Vickers. What is the major reaction to this book? It is not, in the opinion of this writer, clear-cut. The reviewers, for the most part, seem afraid to commit themselves to a definite stand. Most of them seem uncertain as to the drift of critical sentiment concerning Sinclair Lewis, and are waiting to determine the majority opinion.


22 Herschel Brickell, "Mr. Lewis's New Book," North American, CCGXXV, April, 1933, 383.
In any event, though the critics may not have been able to make up their minds, their compatriots, the readers, were quick to decide in favor of the book. Published in January, the book sold 90,233 copies by March 4. It was the number one best-seller for February, March, and April, 1933, and the number two best-seller for May, 1933.23

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Sinclair Lewis's next novel, *Work of Art*,24 is a book about the hotel business. It chronicles the rise of Myron Weagle and the business to which he was devoted; Lewis traces the rise of the American hotel from the simple inns of the nineties to the gigantic organizations of the thirties.

The story begins in 1897, in Black Thread Center, Connecticut. The town's only hotel is run by the Weagle family. Myron, the teen-age son of the house, does a man's share of the work, for his father is a drunkard, and his brother Ora fancies himself a poet whose soul might be bruised by manual labor. On being graduated from high school, Myron decides to try his luck in the hotel business. He works himself up from the kitchen to the manager's office, always in hotels of increasing splendor and

23 *Publisher's Weekly*, CXXIII, March 4, March 11, April 15, May 13, June 10, 1933, 850, 946, 1281, 1583, 1895.

and complexity. Myron gradually develops the idea of The Perfect Inn, which should provide comfort without ostentation. Meanwhile Ora becomes a fairly successful, though somewhat alcoholic writer; he visits Myron only when he needs money.

Myron's private life is subordinated to his career. His project, The Perfect Inn, is always before him. He fills dozens of notebooks with ideas. Finally he decides to undertake the labor of financing and building his Perfect Inn. Everything goes fairly well until the night of its opening, when there is a suicide-murder which rebounds across the country and ruins the inn's patronage. Myron is forced to sell the inn. He gets a job as manager in a small hotel, but loses the job when he is unfairly implicated in an embezzlement. Ora, meanwhile, has earned a certain amount of cheap success in radio work and in the writing of cheap religious trash. Myron is still undefeated, however. He buys a small hotel, and as we leave him he is making plans for a series of tourist courts.

The reactions to Work of Art fall into three categories. The majority of the critics was unqualified in its dislike of the book. A small group liked it. Between these two extremes were several people who were evidently making a strong effort to be kind.

The majority estimate of this novel was outspoken, harsh, and unequivocal. Comments which might have been implied
in the reviews of Lewis's previous books are here plainly and
unmistakenly stated. Herschel Brickell, in the vanguard of the
reviewers who were to proclaim loudly that they had never been
fooled by this Lewis fellow, made a sweeping statement about the
body of Lewis's work:

I do not think our winner of the Nobel Prize is a first-
rate creative writer, nor could ever be. Certain vir-
tues he has, and some of them are to be found in 'Work
of Art,' but not all.\textsuperscript{25}

In the discussion of this novel he is very brusque. "Its charac-
terization is absolutely in the flat and its thesis merely whim-
sical, without any value as a typical contrast between the artis-
tic business man and the wastrel artist."\textsuperscript{26}

T. S. Mathews points out that it is not so important
that this novel as a novel is bad; after all, he says, every
author who writes such a great number of books as Lewis has is
bound to make a few mistakes. What Mr. Mathews thinks is impor-
tant is Lewis's thesis. Though he tries to indicate in this novel
that there is no substitute for honest labor, "what he has suc-
ceeded in saying is that Babbitt is right. He has been writing
about Babbitt so long that he is suffering from the effects of

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\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}
Like Mr. Brickell, Mr. Mathews is quick to inform his readers that he always thought that Sinclair Lewis's reputation was "a great American joke."27

Another opinion is that of Florence Codman, who says that "too many pages of 'Work of Art' read like either a trade manual or a trade report, and too few read like a novel."28 What is more interesting is her appraisal of Lewis's work as a whole. In her opinion, the novels fall into two groups, satires and biographical romances; this fact, she says, has been obvious since the publication of Arrowsmith. Miss Codman also notes the absence of Lewis's characteristic dialogue.

The most unfavorable pole of critical opinion is represented by the review of Joseph McSorley, C.S.P. 29 He was bored, repelled, and depressed by this novel; he did not say why in explicit terms.

There were others, however, who were not so severe with Work of Art. Their criticism, while favorable, lacks that spark of enthusiasm which makes the critic's opinion convincing. These estimates fall into the category of "kind" reviews. A typical kind review is the following:

'Work of Art' satirizes no definite American type, is less angry and purposeful than most of Lewis's novels. Nevertheless it is an excellent and engrossing story, rich in the kind of detail that Sinclair Lewis best knows how to give.30

This verbal tightrope work is a specialty of J. Donald Adams. It is often difficult to determine whether or not he likes a book. For example, of Work of Art he says, "Sinclair Lewis's new book is at once renewed evidence of vitality and of his essential shortcomings as a truly first-rate creative writer."31 Mr. Adams would seem to be saying here that he is turning his thumb down. But then he says that Work of Art is a much better book than Ann Vickers, that Lewis has assimilated the material better here than in Arrowsmith, and that the narrative never breaks down under the accumulated information, but surges on to a dramatic climax.

Sincere but slightly more negative than the preceding was the review of Helen MacAfee, who excused the dullness of the character of Myron Weagle by saying that it was possible that "the author's feelings are too neutral towards this man—he doesn't either despise him enough or like him enough to make him

World, CXXXVIII, February, 1934, 627-628.


come alive as he did Babbitt, whom he both liked and despised."32

Elmer Davis excuses himself from evaluating this book by saying that a "man who has written two books as good as 'Babbitt' and 'Arrowsmith' need never write anything else; ... he still has the right to be judged only by his best."33 Mr. Davis expresses thanks that the book contains no "message."34

Completely favorable reviews were those of Henry Seidel Canby, Isabel Paterson, and Karl Schriftgiesser. "It is enough to say that Mr. Lewis has endowed both /the brothers/ with reality,"35 according to Mr. Schriftgiesser. Mr. Canby and Miss Paterson recall Lewis's earliest novels for suitable parallels to Work of Art. Miss Paterson calls this book "a surprising and rather touching return of the native to the elementary American position, which might be defined as belief in work ..."36 Mr. Canby calls the book "a piece of virtuosity." He says that "Lewis, with his uncanny sense for new significances in current living, has dramatized an institution as characteristic of American life as the circus, and much like one, and has with infinite

32 Helen MacAfee, "The Library of the Quarter," Yale Review, New Series, XXIII, Spring, 1934, viii-x.


34 Ibid., 437.

35 Boston Transcript, January 24, 1934, sec.4, p.2.

pains reduced a vast body of expert observation and research into
a work of art."

Such was the critical reaction to *Work of Art*. The

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critics were almost unanimous in their dislike. The public,
however, was most gratifying in its response. *Work of Art* had

four printings totaling 100,000 copies by the middle of February,
1934. It never reached the top of the best-seller list, however,
possibly because its publication coincided with that of *Anthony
Adverse*. At any rate, it was in second place in February and

March, and in sixth place in April. 38

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Lewis's next novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, 39 was prob-
ably his most exciting and popular in its topicality. It is the

fictitious history of the coming of fascism to the United States.

The rise of the American dictatorship is seen through

the eyes of the hero, Doremus Jessup, a New England newspaper

editor. The dictatorship comes about as the result of the elec-

tion to the presidency of Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip, a demagogue

who is elected on a platform of $5,000 a year for everyone in the

country. He is aided and abetted by such notables as Bishop


38 *Publisher's Weekly*, CXV, February 17, 1934, March 10, 1934, April 14, May 12, 773, 1051, 1457, 1786.

Peter Paul Prang, and former reporter Lee Sarasan, who is the power behind the throne. Soon after coming to power, Windrip and company slyly organize the country by means of the Minute men, an organization modelled on the Gestapo. Martial law is declared. Doremus Jessup's former hired hand becomes a "county commissioner." Inflation grips the country. Walt Trowbridge, the defeated candidate, escapes to Canada, where he is free to make arrangements for others to escape also. Doremus gets into trouble with the government over his editorials—secretly he publishes anti-administration pamphlets. Finally he escapes to Canada, after being subjected to assorted petty and not-so-petty tyrannies, such as having his newspaper office wrecked.

Evaluation of the critical reception of this novel is particularly difficult. For one thing, there were many reviews of this book by people who were much more concerned with politics than with literature. But they were not the only ones concerned with the discussion of political questions. The regular book reviewers and critics were human, too, and they joined in. They discussed politics too. This mingling of political and literary discussion tends to makes for a confusing picture in the reviews of this novel.

Of one thing one can be sure, that the impact of this novel on all of the reviewers was tremendous, whether they liked it as literature or not. It Can't Happen Here is one of those
Lewis books which stir people up, even if while reading it they disagree with it, or find fault with its construction.

The predominating reaction of the critics was that, although *Can't Happen Here* is a stirring book in many respects because of the nature of its theme, it cannot be called a piece of significant literature. Calling it "a weapon of the intellect rather than a novel," R.P. Blackmur stated that "there is hardly a rule for the good conduct of novels that it does not break." He points out that it is the urgency of the theme and the emotions of the author which make it so successful. But Mr. Blackmur does admit that the violence of the book can be matched by real incidents, such as those of the "Scottsboro boys, Tom Mooney, and the West Coast longshoremen."40

A more specific charge was that made by Geoffrey Stone. Calling the story merely the German revolution transported to an American locale, he makes the serious charge that the novel displays "a crude lack of imagination . . . that must disturb even Mr. Lewis's most fervent admirers. . . . By lack of imagination . . . I mean inability to see into the actual issues concerned . . ."41 As a novel, Mr. Stone says, this book is a


hastily assembled piece, one of the worst books to come from the pen of Sinclair Lewis. In his opinion, it is distinctly not a satire, but a political tract.

However, according to R. M. Lovett, the political thought of this novel is of "large importance," even though, as Mr. Lovett admits, there is a certain deficiency to the book. Though he feels that Lewis has not portrayed the breakdown of government which in his opinion is the inevitable prelude to tyranny, Mr. Lovett believes that Lewis has ample precedent for using a novel for propaganda. However, C. B. Palmer thinks that the device is remarkable only in that Sinclair Lewis is using it. He agrees with Mr. Lovett that the novel, as it is written, will lead readers to agree with the title, because it is so unbelievable.

One of the few critics who did not patronize Lewis at this time was Lewis Gannett, who made a penetrating observation

42 Ibid., 108.
43 Ibid., 107.
concerning the unconvincing quality of parts of this book:

The neurotic worlds of Faulkner, Caldwell, and O'Hara are not for Sinclair Lewis. His own attitude is always that of the thoroughly normal American onlooker, and he is least convincing when he strays from parish morality to give to his Fascist leaders the familiar homosexual characteristics of the Germans, or has Doremus Jessup's daughter advise her father to be bold with Lorinda Pike.47

Robert Cantwell states flatly that the book seems exaggerated. In his opinion, "you would have to be pretty far gone not to be opposed to the kind of fascism that Lewis pictures; and it can be taken for granted that American fascists are not going to wear their swastikas on their sleeves."48 Herschel Brickell, whom the reader will remember as a staunch anti-Lewis man, calls It Can't Happen Here "unadulterated Sinclair Lewis, and it represents him perfectly as the essential journalist he has always been."49 The actual operations of the dictatorship are merely reworkings of the many books which have described Nazi Germany, according to Mr. Brickell; the important feature of the work is, he thinks, its restatement of the principles which stem from Lewis's generation of liberals.50

50 Ibid., 543-544.
In substantial agreement with Mr. Cantwell and Mr. Brickell is J. Donald Adams. He objects to the similarity of Lewis's dictatorship with those of Germany and Russia. One feels "that though it might happen here, it could not happen in so completely the same way..." according to Mr. Adams.

All the critics did not agree so wholeheartedly about the quality of this novel. Benjamin Stolberg, while admitting that the ideology supplied to Lewis's characters is not too imaginatively projected, and that the women in the book, as is so often true in Lewis novels, do not figure very strongly, states that It Can't Happen Here is important. In discussing Lewis's dismissal by both the critics who laud individuality and those who pay tribute to the socially conscious, Mr. Stolberg says:

Plainly, the question is not whether Lewis is merely a sociological novelist, or a sound revolutionary propagandist, but whether his panorama of American life is true or false. The question is not whether he is just a reporter, but whether his reportage is significantly creative in its satirization of our social types, whether his selective imagination illumines the nature of the American Leviathan. There is nothing artistically invidious in the obvious fact that Sinclair Lewis is a master in creating social stereotypes and not a master in individual psychology.

To have deepened his characters Lewis would have

had to falsify them. Babbitt's predicament lies in his conditioned superficiality; and Lewis's genius for superficiality which so displeases the highfalutin critics, is a conditioned reflex of Babbitt's world. 52

This critic has been quoted at some length because he has hit squarely upon one of the shibboleths of the criticism of the past couple of decades. For some years now it has been the fashion to abhor the flat or type character. Of course, satire depends to a great degree on the use of flat and type characters. As E. M. Forster 53 points out, there is essentially nothing wrong with the type character. It has been successfully employed by many novelists, among them, Dickens. This aspect of Lewis's work has been a bete noir for the critics; though they may not say so, many of those quoted in this paper disapprove of his work merely on that ground, though they may reason that it is on other grounds that they disapprove.

Edward Weeks was favorably impressed by the ideas expressed in the book, though he did think that the novel was perhaps a bit too long to make the best effect. He particularly liked the first hundred and fifty pages. "The account of the Democratic convention, the quotations from Windrip's Zero Hour.


have Mr. Lewis at his brilliant best."\(^{54}\) On the other hand, C. B. Palmer thought that the first third of the book "will seem dull /sic/ and wordy."\(^{55}\) Incidentally, this is the same Mr. Palmer (Cf. footnote \# 46), but with a considerably more favorable point of view on October 23 than on October 19. In the later review he speaks of Lewis's "distinguished rage," his beautiful expression of "the qualities of human liberty," in sharp contrast to his earlier opinion.

John Chamberlain,\(^{56}\) a reviewer with a frankly nonliterary approach to this novel, takes issue with those who think that the book is incredible. As proof of the possibility of its events, he cites the cloak-and-dagger air of the Ku Klux Klan and the more innocent, but equally colorful, Shriners. Mr. Chamberlain is substantially echoed by E. H. Walton\(^{57}\) and Elmer Davis,\(^{58}\) although Mr. Davis is slightly more literary in his treatment of the novel.


The last critic to be included in the survey of the critical reception of this novel serves rather as an example of what this investigator has tried to avoid than as an example of reliable criticism. It is a perfect specimen of the gushing review, by Fanny Butcher.

Whether 'It Can't Happen Here' is Sinclair Lewis's greatest novel or not I cannot say. It is too powerful a blow . . . . /T/he reader feels such a terrific impact that he doesn't stop to analyze what has his him. It was written at white heat. . . . The result has the passion of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' with vitriol instead of tears for its life blood.59

The major reaction to this book was, in the writer's opinion, favorable, with serious qualifications. The critics thought the work a good piece of propaganda, but a poor piece of literature. According to the copyright page of the first edition, 50,000 copies were first printed. The book lived up to the publisher's expectations. It was number 8 on the list of best sellers in October, 1935, number 1 in November, number 2 in December, number 1 in January, 1936, and number 3 in February.60

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59 Chicago Daily Tribune, October 19, 1935, sec. 1, p.16.
The next book to come from the pen of Sinclair Lewis was *The Prodigal Parents*. It is the story of Fred Cornplow and his conflict with his children, Howard and Sara. They become friendly with Eugene Silva, a radical labor organizer. At his suggestion, they begin a radical magazine, *Protest and Progress*. Fred knows that his children take him for granted. He rebels and decides to retire from the automobile business. Meanwhile, Howard elopes with a girl from a wealthy family. Fred hires him because nobody else will. Then he has to help Sara and Eugene Silva escape the wrath of the police for allegedly inciting the workers at the local factory to riot. Howard continues to live beyond his means; Sara wants to be an interior decorator. Fred talks of throwing over the traces. His daughter takes him to a psychiatrist. Completely disgusted, Fred and his wife go to Europe. After staying there only a short time, they come home, because Howard has to be rescued again, this time from alcoholism. Fred makes his son understand that he must be independent; on this note of hope the novel ends.

The critical reaction to this novel was utterly damning. Few indeed were the critics who came to Lewis's defence. Though perhaps no worse than *Work of Art*, this novel came out at a time when Sinclair Lewis's reputation was quite shaky. Right

years is a long time to remember the Nobel Prize, and not one of the novels which Lewis produced during that time helped to bolster his reputation. Added to this was the fact that Lewis had not followed the trend of the literature of the thirties which demanded novels of social protest, preferably with a pro-communist bias. Lewis was not one of those, nor had he ever been, who thought that communism was a panacea. In *It Can't Happen Here* he had taken several nasty swipes at the martyr complex which is often a part of the fellow traveler's personality. To compound his insult, he depicted a completely venal labor organizer, Eugene Silva, in this novel. Naturally, he would not be in the favor of those critics who happened to hold heavy sympathies with the communists.

To demonstrate just what happens to a normally even-tempered, judicial person who happens to be prejudiced by political sympathies, let us examine at some length a review by Malcolm Cowley, one of the more important critics of contemporary American literature.

Sinclair Lewis's new novel is flat, obvious, and full of horseplay that wouldn't raise a laugh at an Elks convention. From the first page to the last there isn't a character that rises above the level of a good comic strip (say "Little Orphan Annie").

But this new book is not merely a botched copy of 'Babbit': it is also 'Babbitt' turned upside down. In the earlier novel--the best he ever wrote--Lewis was portraying the stupidity and the sheep-likeness of American
business men. He hadn't much to say about the working class, but still, when he described a strike in Zenith he left no doubt of his sympathy with the strikers. In the new book, however, his attitude toward the workers—any workers—is one of almost hysterical fear and hostility. They are insolent and lazy and they squirt only a quarter enough grease. . . . If they are finally discharged for the best of reasons, the government takes charge of them and supports them in luxury on the proceeds of taxes levied against their hard-working employers. 62

The incident which Mr. Cowley describes dealt with a group of individuals—shiftless cousins of the Cornplow family—who obtain jobs through sheer brazen means. They do not, to this writer, function as symbols of the working class. This kind of critical response is merely the record of the surprise, chagrin, and frustration of a radical who finds a viper in his bosom. Lewis's characters were the kind of poor relations who continually beg from their more industrious kin. For the critic of the thirties, however, all workers are by definition thrifty, honest and industrious, while all employers are hardhearted, grasping and without conscience.

A similar, but more temperate estimate was that of J. Donald Adams. The one thing which he specifically mentions is "Mr. Lewis's excursion into the Eugene Silva episode." He thinks that "the utterly sappy and trivial absorption, for so brief a time, of these youngsters in the Workers' International

Cohesion (the Coheeze) and in the monthly *Protest and Progress*, is not a fair reflection of . . . the college . . . attitude toward social and economic problems." In other words, Lewis is being rapped on the knuckles for daring to question the wisdom of the fellow traveler. Mr. Adams is more cogent in pointing out that the thesis of the children's treatment of their parents and the wooden consistency of the son mitigate against the novel's impact.

Edward Weeks draws attention to what he calls a transition in technique in Lewis's later novels. "It is as if the author had grown less interested in people and more interested in ideas." As Mr. Weeks points out, in this novel, Lewis is campaigning against selfishness and irresponsibility, but "these he has exaggerated beyond belief." Both he and Clara Marburg Kirk agree that the characterization is thin, the characters unbelievable, and the dilemmas obvious and stagey.

Louis Kronenberger calls this book "reactionary in its political implications" and "anti-intellectual in its whole view

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of life," but his argument is weakened by his too-obvious insistence upon the political significance of the work. A more reliable opinion is that of Elmer Davis, who is usually quite favorable towards Lewis's books, and who agrees wholeheartedly with the philosophy of this novel. But, says Mr. Davis, although "the philosophy . . . is good sense . . . the novel that embodies it, as a novel is pretty poor."

Unfortunately, the favorable reviews of *The Prodigal Parents* were equally biased by political arguments. William Soskin said that the book "takes so lusty a sock at dilettante radicalism and professional 'Communism,' and does it with such chuckling good humor, that the book may well create a popular attitude of mind."

One favorable review which did not seem to follow any particular "line" was that of Olga Owens, who liked the book without being either very political or very profound about her preference. She did, however, make a point about Lewis's realism; some people, she says, feel that it is distorted, because it makes the reader feel that the only people who exist are those

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in the book. She feels that this accusation is a tribute to Lewis because he makes the reader feel that "his individuals are at the moment of reading all there are. His realism is often repellent, but honesty will often reveal this feeling to be reluctantly recognized familiarity." 

The reviews of *The Prodigal Parents* were the most unjust of those of the first four of Sinclair Lewis's later novels. They were unjust, not because they were unfavorable, but because they berated the author for his political sympathies. Lewis was castigated, not only for being a poor writer, but for being a poor politician. For once, the public seemed to agree with the critics. This novel was on the best-seller list for only three months. In January, 1938, it was number 8; in February, number 4; in March, number 8. 

The critical reactions to the novels of this first period are characterized by two predominant tendencies. On the one hand, the critics are not too awed by the fact that Sinclair Lewis won the Nobel Prize, although, in the opinion of this writer, there was some indication, especially in the estimates of *Ann Vickers*, that some of the critics permitted their judgment to

69 *Boston Transcript*, January 22, 1938, sec. 4, p.1.

70 *Publisher's Weekly*, CXXXIII, February 12, 1938, March 12, 1938, April 9, 1938, 854, 1214, 1557.
be swayed by the glamor of the prize. On the other hand, even those critics who were most severe with Lewis unconsciously assented to his importance by their very severity. That is, had they not assumed that Lewis was one of the most important figures in American literature, they would not have been so harsh in their criticism. Had Lewis's books been published under another name, they would in all probability have been received much more favorably. (Of course, a less prominent name would receive less coverage.) Whatever the possibilities, the fact remains that Lewis was not "damned by faint praise." Rather, he was praised by loud damnation. In short, the critics were still interested in what Sinclair Lewis had to say, even though they nearly always disagreed with what he said and the way in which he said it. How long did this attitude persist? Did the critics eventually ignore Lewis, and if so, when did this occur? Let us see.
CHAPTER III

THE NOVELS OF THE '30s YEARS

The three novels which will be discussed in this chapter were written in an era as different from that of the depression as that was from the era of the boom. True, this period of our history contained a boom, of sorts. The new war threat conveniently removed the problem of unemployment. The nation's economy was again out of the doldrums. Babbitt was back in business; but his business was not as carefree as it had been in the cutthroat days of the twenties. Taxes and government regulations were higher and more irksome than ever before; and the labor unions were not far behind the government in the race to see who could harass the employer most. Though money was freer, tensions mounted higher as the country entered the war.

Sinclair Lewis, never the most serene of men, seemed to have grown more and more restless. During the thirties he went through a period of infatuation for the stage, during which he acted, directed, and produced plays, among them *It Can't Happen Here* and *Jayhawker*, with Sidney Howard. The result of this stage of his development was *Bethel Merriday*. Then we hear of him
teaching for a time at the University of Wisconsin—he quit after two months, because, it is said, the faculty shunned him, fearing that he would satirize them in his next book.¹ Eventually he worked for a while as literary critic for Esquire.² From time to time various stories about Lewis would appear in print; most of them were of a scurrilous nature. None of this information is pertinent to this study in itself. However, it seems to indicate a definite pattern in Lewis's attitude toward his writing at this time. He seems to have lost interest in writing as such. The novels of this period are curious throwbacks to his early manner; the critics accused him of rehashing old material.

The new tensions of the period did not intensify the criticism of Lewis's novels. Strangely enough, exactly the opposite change took place. The critic seems to become more accommodating, less stringent in the judgment of these novels. This change in attitude seems especially marked in the reaction to Bethel Merriday.³ Perhaps the story had something to do with the novel's reception. It is the tale of a young girl who wants to

¹ "'Professor' Lewis," Time, XXXVI, November 18, 1940, 56.
² Publisher's Weekly, CXLVII, February 10, 1945, 745.
³ Sinclair Lewis, Bethel Merriday, New York, 1940.

This novel belongs with the war-time books because the time of its publication was closer in spirit to the war than to the depression.
Bethel Merriday, a typical Lewis character, is the product of a small town. She first realizes her ambition when a sleazy touring company comes to town to play *The Silver Cord*. At college she joins the drama club and stars in *A Doll's House*. After graduation she spends a summer with The Nutmeg Players, a summer theatre group. During that summer she is introduced to the hard working, glamorless aspects of backstage life, and finds that her idols are mere mortals after all. When the theatre closes for the winter she goes to New York looking for a job. Finally she gets a small part in a road company of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the opportunity to understudy its star, the alcoholic Mrs. Lumley Boyle. Eventually Bethel has the opportunity to play Juliet, one night when Mrs. Boyle is too drunk to go on. But Bethel is a failure as Juliet; but then, neither is the tour, which comes to a halt in the middle of the wilds of Kansas. As the book ends a somewhat chastened but still ambitious Bethel is married to an actor and cheerfully awaiting her next opportunity.

Critical reaction to this novel was in the main favorable, but not in the sense that the critics felt that Bethel Merriday was comparable in scope, intent, or achievement to *Babbitt* or *Main Street*. Rather, the reaction is heavily connotative of quiet resignation. The critics do not here exhibit a reverent compulsion to pay homage to the Nobel Prize, nor are they sur-
prised and irritated by the level on which the novel is written. In short, they are by this time completely unruffled by the thought that perhaps Sinclair Lewis is not writing as well as he used to. Then, too, after the bitter language used to review The Prodigal Parents, no language could seem anything but milder.

At any rate, whatever the causes, the major reaction to Bethel Merriday was favorable. Absent in the reviews of this book is the aridity, the acrimony which accompanied the reception of the preceding novel. Clifton Fadiman, for example, admits that the novel is not profound, but then, he points out, the theatre is not a profound subject. No one can protest, he says, that the book tries to be anything but "a cheerful, superficial narrative." Mr. Fadiman points out that Lewis avoids delving into either the essential reasons for Bethel's desire to become an actress, or the problem of "the complex exhibitionist psychology which will produce actors."4 In the opinion of another reviewer, Lewis was wise to forgo the bitterly satirical style of Main Street and Babbitt in order to approach his subject with "humorously tender sympathy,"5 because the stage-struck girl and the summer stock atmosphere are all too easy to satirize.

4 Clifton Fadiman, "Mr. Lewis and the Stage-Catalogue, New Yorker, XVI, March 23, 1940, 71.
5 Katharine Bregy, "Bethel Merriday," Catholic World, CLI, May, 1940, 250.
A clue to the surprisingly mild reception which this book, published on the eve of war, received, can perhaps be obtained from the closing remarks of Miss Bregy. She says that "it is with gratitude to the author for giving us—in our days of problems and the perpetual discussion of problems—so honest and human and cheerful a piece of realism." This streak of escapism in critical ranks can also be found in the review of Harry Lorin Binsee, who, while he admits that Bethel Merriday is lacking in the range of experience which one expects in a Lewis novel, praises its lack of bitterness and scorn, and calls it "a pleasant book." A similar point of view is that of Ann Springer, who admits that the book has certain deficiencies, such as unrounded characters, implausibilities, and sentimentalities. Yet she explains Lewis's gentle treatment of actors as love of the stage, admiration of honest effort and the willingness to make sacrifices, and command of a subject which of its nature leads to illusion. She echoes the escapist mood in pointing out that Lewis's book says that the theatre "in a world so full of degrading sham and vice may be the last refuge of the honest." Mary Ross, perhaps even more stage struck, says that the real

6 Ibid.
8 Boston Transcript, March 23, 1940, sec.5, p.8.
heroine is not Bethel Merriday, but "the theatrical profession and its hold upon those who are wedded to it for better or worse."9

A slightly less starry-eyed verdict is that of Edgar Johnson, who assures the reader that the book will appeal to "a large Saturday Evening Post audience." But he thinks the story interesting and well written, in spite of certain failings in technique. Lewis's real skill, he says, is in combining realism and sentimentalism in one novel. He does not let Bethel the understudy sweep to victory when the leading lady becomes incapacitated. Lewis is realistic in describing her failure. But at the end of the book he presents her to the reader as a seasoned trouper after only one season. In this he is sentimental, according to Johnson.10

Another of the favorable reviews notes that Bethel Merriday is often maudlin, that Lewis's comments on the renaissance of the Fabulous Invalid are often glib and enthusiastic rather than thoughtful, that half the characters are stock. Yet the reviewer was favorable, noting that this novel does not embody "the sour and rickety work of an old self-imitator but a

9 New York Herald Tribune Books, March 24, 1940, p.3.
buoyant tale with neither claims nor pretensions to being a profound work of art."11 This opinion is echoed by another reviewer who calls Bethel Merriday a lighthearted novel with no pretensions to being a work of Nobel Prize standards.12

Even the disapproving comment on this novel is curiously tepid. For example, one reviewer says of the heroine that she is "such a completely virtuous young lady and so dully and wholeheartedly devoted to her art that she turns out to be the least interesting person in the book."13 This comment, together with a desultory discussion of the superficiality of the minor characters, is all that he has to offer.

A thoroughly unfavorable attitude, however, is that of Ben Ray Redman, whose opinion it is that the author is as stage struck as the heroine. Mr. Redman considered this the worst of Lewis's books. "Mr. Lewis has glibly recorded . . . theatrical life; . . . but he has written without benefit of credible characters, and on the literary level of the fiction . . . in . . . women's magazines."14

11 "Road Work," Time, XXV, March 25, 1940, 97.
Credible or not, this novel had a much different effect on the readers than on the critics. Usually, when the critics are unfavorable, the public buys Lewis's novels by the carload. This time, the critics were favorable, though tepid. The public echoed the latter sentiment, but not the former. Bethel Merriday was in seventh place on the best-seller list for one month, April and that was all. Can we perhaps draw a tentative conclusion from this fact? It would seem that Lewis's books sell well only when they have a good deal of sensationalism in their makeup.

* * *

Three years elapsed between the publication of Bethel Merriday and Lewis's next book, Gideon Planish. This novel is a curious throwback to the themes and style of the books Lewis wrote before 1930. It is the story of the people who operate the philanthropy racket.

The hero, Gideon Planish, is one of these professional "do-gooders." As a college student he had wanted to be a senator or a popular minister, or anything which would give him an opportunity to spell-bind an audience. While in college, he somewhat

15 Publisher's Weekly, CXXXVII, May 11, 1940, 1855.
16 Sinclair Lewis, Gideon Planish, New York, 1943.
minimized his ambition. When next we meet him he is a Ph.D. in a small Iowa college. At this point he meets Peony Jackson, one of the students, whom he marries, after jilting his mistress. His wife has big plans for him. She gets him a job on the county censorship board which leads to offers of directorships on several philanthropic letterheads. With the publicity he now has he begins to earn extra money by lecturing. Lecturing in turn leads to article writing, which in turn gives way to the editorship of a small magazine. However, this last position is not as well-paying as Gideon thought it would be, and he is forced to do more lecturing. His first real step upwards comes when he is offered a job as the director of a foundation for the improvement of rural schools. Unfortunately, he does his job too well, and is fired by the lawyer who is the real director. After a short stay with a fraudulent Help the Eskimo organization, he ghostwrites a book for a philanthropist. From there he goes to a series of jobs in increasingly dishonest organizations, until finally he becomes the director of the Every Man a Priest Fraternity, at six thousand dollars a year. But Gideon does not reach the heights of philanthropy until he becomes associated with Col. Marduc, who wants to be President of the United States. To promote this end there is founded the Dynamos of Democratic Direction. Unfortunately, the war tends to interfere with this scheme. But Gideon struggles on precariously, knowing that he may lose his job because of someone else's whim. Finally he
realizes the futility of his life. He is offered the presidency of his old college, but he is unable to take it; the position does not happen to coincide with his wife's plans for the future. He is trapped in a way of life which he despises.

The reaction to Gideon Planish was in sharp contrast to that which greeted Bethel Merriday. The predominating opinion was a harsh indictment of Lewis. It emphasized one point, that the book is dated, in addition to being exaggerated and stilted. Diana Trilling called it "unimportant, sloppy, and even dull."¹⁷ She compares Gideon Planish to Elmer Gantry rather than to Babbitt, who became a part of "our national mythology."¹⁸ But more important than this observation is what Mrs. Trilling has to say about the critical reception of Lewis's later books, a comment which may help to explain the surprisingly easygoing estimates of Bethel Merriday, for example.

There is something personally endearing about Mr. Lewis as a writer that checks a completely objective estimate of his recent work—a sweetness of temper, or the boyish idealism of which he is so boyishly ashamed. Or perhaps it is merely because his fictional creations seem so clearly to be aspects of his own many-faceted personality that one feels that to turn and attack him is to take unfair advantage of what he has been naive enough to tell us about himself. For obviously Mr.

¹⁸ Ibid., 676.
Lewis is all the leading characters in his novels.\textsuperscript{19}

Mrs. Trilling's thesis is interesting and provocative; however, inasmuch as she does not amplify her statement, one cannot accept it without reservations. Yet in reference to this particular work she makes a particularly knowing observation, when she says that Lewis "will sacrifice any characterization or situation for some good satiric fun, and consequently 'Gideon Planish' is full of abstractions . . . of people . . . and . . . of situations."\textsuperscript{20}

Another attack is that which accuses Lewis of being old-fashioned. Howard Mumford Jones calls this book "the kind of travesty that passed for boldness and even for insight in the days when the \textit{American Mercury} was new and James Branch Cabell the last word in sophistication. . . a throwback to a manner that is dated."\textsuperscript{21} Another reviewer, after calling \textit{Gideon Planish} "enough to make H. L. Mencken turn over in his literary grave,"\textsuperscript{22} echoes Mrs. Trilling in saying that the book is in the tradition of \textit{Elmer Gantry}, with overtones of \textit{It Can't Happen Here}. The last quoted, incidentally, is a member of the little group which

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 675.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, 676.
\textsuperscript{22} George Mayberry, "Too Late for Herpicide," \textit{New Republic}, CVIII, April 26, 1943, 570.
is quick to state that it was never impressed by Lewis at all. Much the same attitude is expressed by the reviewer in the Catholic World. 23

Slightly more positive in tone is the review which states that, although the subject matter is empty and unreal (the reviewer thought that Lewis should have concentrated on lobbyists), the story was one which held the reader's interest. More important, this reviewer points out Peony Flannish as a striking addition to Lewis's collection of literary portraits. "The very fact that you cannot sum up her character in a few words, yet that when you have read of her you know you have met her, have seen her . . . indicates that here the author has given us a sample of his best handiwork, his deepest insight into the often shabby human heart." 24 This opinion is also that of Clifton Fadiman, who nevertheless declines to say whether or not this book is good. He evades the objective judgment by saying that it is "by far his most effective book since 'It Can't Happen Here,'" and its "vigor, invention, and atmosphere . . . are the qualities of a fiery young man." 25

25 Clifton Fadiman, "Return of Mr. Lewis," New Yorker, XIX, April 24, 1943, 76.
An interesting review of *Gideon Planish*, although it does not add anything new to the estimates of this book, is that of William Du Bois. He admits that Lewis has a tendency to exaggerate in this book. Nevertheless, he goes on to compare Lewis to Balzac. Balzac is notorious for the uneven quality of his writing, Mr. Du Bois points out, and so is Lewis. But Lewis's characters "shake their fists at destiny as Balzac's never dared."26

This novel did considerably better in the book stores than the previous one did. It was number 7 in April, number 5 in May, number 4 in June (at which time 60,000 copies were in print), and number 8 in July.27 Evidently the unfavorable review produces curiosity in the reader. Notice, however, that the sales never approach the top of the list. In this phenomenon there seems to be some correlation between the reviews, which were unfavorable, but not extremely unfavorable as a group, and the sales which gave the book only a moderate success.

* * *

The last novel of the war years was, like *Gideon Planish*, reminiscent of Lewis's early work. It contained a notable

innovation in the structure of the Lewis novel. Previously all of Lewis's books had been cast into a strict chronological mold, in which the main character is followed from birth to death. The experimental procedures which others had used were not for Lewis. In this novel he was to vary his technique slightly by introducing into the narrative vignettes which paralleled the main action with little connection with the plot.

Cass Timberlane is the story of a man who falls in love with a woman young enough to be his daughter. Judge Cass Timberlane, of Grand Republic, Minnesota, is a man who is trying to forget the painful circumstances of his recent divorce. He is vaguely troubled until he meets Miss Jinny Marshland. He introduces her to his friends, the middle-class aristocracy of the town. The are amused by the judge's choice. Cass himself is not sure whether or not Jinny is suitable for him, but he marries her to avoid gossip. He notices that his friends are no longer amused. Most shocked is Cass's old friend, Christabel Grau. The marriage goes smoothly at first; then Jinny begins to show signs of boredom. Cass tries to keep her occupied, first by buying a new house, then by taking her on a trip to New York. She develops diabetes; then she has a stillborn baby. During the recuperation period she becomes friendly with Cass's friend, Bradd Cri-
ley. There is a quarrel, and Jinny leaves Cass and goes to New York. While there, she falls into a diabetic coma. Cass goes after her, brings her home, and makes peace with her.

The critical reaction to *Cass Timberlane* was mixed. Opinion was fairly evenly divided between favorable, neutral, and unfavorable reviews. An extremely favorable review was that of Edmund Wilson, who admitted that he had never been an avid admirer of Sinclair Lewis. But, he says in this review, on reading this novel he discovered new values in Lewis's work which he had overlooked before. He had just returned from Europe; this trip brought out the fact that there were qualities in Americans which he had never before realized: "they were much larger than Europeans, enormous; their faces seemed lacking in focus and their personalities devoid of flavor; and most of the things that they were doing seemed to be done in a boring way." These qualities Mr. Wilson finds in the work of Lewis. He notes that this book is different from others Lewis has written—he loves Grand Republic. Reading the book made Mr. Wilson realize "that Sinclair Lewis, in spite of all his notorious faults, is one of the people in the literary field who do create interest and value, that he has still gone on working at this when many others have broken down or quit, and that he is, in fact, at his best--... one of
the national poets." 29 Mr. Wilson thinks the overall effect of Cass Timberlane successful, though he believes the best part of the book to be the description of the change which the judge's concepts of justice and individual rights produce in his behavior with his wife and his treacherous friend. 30

Similar in it enthusiastic reception was the review written by Edward Weeks, whose opinion it was that "Sinclair Lewis has done it again," combining "gusto with irony," and exposing "a cross-section more worm-eaten than we like to suppose." 31 He calls Cass Timberlane "evidence that Mr. Lewis is still with us, and watching." However, he notes certain drawbacks to this novel. He thinks the Professional Youth in their early twenties who are portrayed here are unreal, dated, and out of Lewis's reach. Jinny, he thinks, is not well portrayed, and the last stages of the judge's first marriage are left unexplained. 32

According to Charles Duffy, Lewis in this novel shows the same keen perception of American life that he always did. In

29 Edmund Wilson, "Salute to an Old Landmark: Sinclair Lewis," New Yorker, XXI, October 13, 1945, 94.

30 Ibid., 97.


32 Ibid., 141.
his opinion, Lewis's "wit and satire are as pungent as ever; yet underneath the raillery one hears something of the sad strain which sounded in 'Arrowsmith' . . . . Sinclair Lewis continues in possession of a formidable supply of ammunition . . . . He has made up with the midland burghers, . . . but his reconciliation has not been bought at the price of capitulation." 33

Typical of a mixed review is that of Mary Colum, who discusses the novel in relation to Lewis's work as a whole. As she points out, he books never dug profoundly into life. Instead, they told readers "things about other people that they could understand." These things were always exterior; his characters never had an interior life, according to this critic. In her opinion, the characters in Cass Timberlane have "exaggerated biological instincts," 34 and die like animals, with not the faintest suggestion of religious feeling. The novel is ably written, she thinks, even though "the characters live on a lower level than that on which ordinary human beings could survive and function." 35 She calls it an "able and even a brilliant book."


but she says that it does not seem to represent any characteristic American life.

Charles Poore makes the interesting observation that the book is perfect—it is merely twenty years out of date. For him the pleasure to be had from this novel is the pleasure of the long-familiar—remembered people and landscapes.

A negative, unsympathetic review is that of Diana Trilling. She states flatly that there is a complete lack of real human affection in Lewis's work which is strongly reminiscent of the same weakness in Dos Passos. "The victim, so to speak, of his own divided heart, Mr. Lewis cannot help victimizing his fictional creations—and if not by satire, then by robbing them of some of their due share of life." She raises the question of whether the Timberlanes' marriage is to be considered the exception or the rule. And she points out that to her, all of Lewis's observations seem cliches.

Marjorie Farber dismisses the book in two sentences:

Anonymously, it could have been submitted to any serial contest in the Ladies Home Journal, but I doubt if it would have won a prize. The ladies, who have been men-

37 Diana Trilling, "Fiction in Review," Nation, CLXI, October 13, 1945, 382.
38 Ibid., 381.
tioning adultery for some years now, might find its male archness stuffy, if not downright corny. 39

The reviewer in the Catholic World dismissed the book as being of no importance whatsoever. 40

A more reasonable negative verdict is that of Orville Prescott, 41 who says that the point which Lewis is making does not arise naturally from the theme and the characters. He rather spoils his argument, however, by bringing in the old objection that Lewis's characters are types. His conclusion, the usual one to follow this charge, is that Lewis is not a truly creative writer.

(Lewis may not have been truly creative in this novel, but he was thought to have been somewhat autobiographical. It was rumored that at the time this novel was being written he was going around with a Miss Powers, a literary agent who was several years his junior. This element in his private life might well have had something to do with the writing of Cass Timberlane, for it is a critical convention that he preferred to write from his


immediate experience. 42

All things considered, this novel was much more favorably received than any of the three books whose critical estimates have been discussed in this chapter. The sales, which, as we have already noted, ran over 850,000, reflect in some degree the critical estimate, thus destroying our earlier hypothesis that a favorable estimate tends to curb the sales of a Lewis book. However, our hypothesis is not too badly damaged when we note a publishing phenomenon of the forties. In this period, fewer and fewer books began to run up larger and larger sales; the influence of the book clubs was only partially responsible for this fact. 43 At any rate, the sales of this book were quite good. It was number 3 on the best seller list in October, 1945; number 2 in November; number 3 in December; and number 7 in January, 1946. 44

In general, the critical reactions to the books of this period were connotative of, for lack of a better term, quiet resignation. Gone is the acrimony which accompanied the receptions of some of the other books which Lewis wrote after receiv-

42 "Laureate of the Booboisie," *Time*, XLVI, October 8, 1945, 100-108.


ing the Nobel Prize. One can say only that what happened was that the critics lowered their standards, or that Lewis began to write much better novels.
CHAPTER IV

THE LAST NOVELS

The last three novels which Sinclair Lewis wrote constitute the saddest chapter of his literary career. With the exception of *Kingsblood Royal*, which won a certain notoriety comparable to that of *It Can't Happen Here*, Lewis's last novels were ignored by critics and public alike. This neglect was partially the result of Lewis's excursion into a form, the historical romance, which was already represented by too many mediocre contenders. To some extent it was the result of a decline in the quality of Lewis's writing which in this period became noticeable to everyone, even to the ordinary reader who is usually not too fussy about literary quality. The most important reason for this final neglect, however, was the fact that Lewis had lost the vitality, the exuberance which had made his books interesting and valuable even when they were of uneven quality.

The first novel of this group, *Kingsblood Royal*, was the one which provoked the most attention. Its theme was one which was much in the news at the time of its publication— that of

race relations. The choice of theme at least belies those people who have asserted that Lewis was not moving with the times.

This novel is about a white Protestant banker, Neil Kingsblood, who discovers that his great-great-great-grandfather was a Negro. The discovery stuns him. His first impulse is to destroy the records. He tells his shocked family. Then he decides to investigate "his people." He goes to the Negro section of town, makes friends with the Negroes there, and decides to become one of them. His decision to reveal himself is precipitated when the Negro race is attacked at an exclusive club banquet. Neil jumbles the whole story together in an impassioned speech which he makes to the club members. They are, of course, horrified. Gradually the Kingsblood family is ostracized. They refuse to move from the select neighborhood in which they live. Neil loses his job at the bank. Finally they are hauled off to jail on a trumped up charge.

The critical estimate of this novel was almost unanimous. While they agreed almost to a man that the book was an excellent piece of propaganda, nearly all the critics said that as a novel it had serious faults. About half of them thought that the book had no literary value at all, and the other half were of the opinion that it had definite literary values which were not, however, outweighed by its flaws.

Rex Stout, after praising the forcefulness with which
the message is put across, asks whether this novel will rank at the top of Lewis's work. His answer is no. He points out that Lewis's books have always portrayed people with problems, but previously he had been interested in "not the problem but the people." In this book Mr. Stout thinks that Lewis is too concerned with ideas, and not sufficiently concerned with the individual. Another reviewer, protected by anonymity, calls it "a novel chiefly in the sense that it contains some of the most artificial fiction, dressed in the worst prose... ... In essence it is a cut-and-slash pamphlet." This view is echoed by Orville Prescott, who calls the book "crude, superficial, mechanical, and unconvincing as a story about believable persons." though he admits that it is good propaganda. Harry Hansen points out that the hero is not convincing, partly because he is made to carry too heavy a load. As Mr. Hansen so aptly put it, Neil Kingsblood "might be termed a white-baiter."

Another reviewer lauds the construction of the novel, saying that it does not move too fast, but runs along precisely laid tracks of dramatic exposition. However, this reviewer, though he admits that the only thing about the book really worth discussing is its impact as a social document, doubts whether it is potentially valuable as propaganda. The judgment that the book is "a good bit better than the recent Lewis output, but hardly ... with his best." is that of Bucklin Moon, who calls the book honest, even though he criticizes it severely.

Margaret Marshall carefully catalogues the faults of the book, rather than merely dismissing them. First, she points out that the devices in the book seem arbitrary, as for example the family legend that there is royal blood in the Kingsblood line. Second, Lewis's attitude toward his characters, as is usual in his later novels, is ambivalent. Third, the evocation of the Negro world seems to her somewhat stagey. On the credit side, she says that the dialogue of the weak-willed whites is good. She is more favorable than most reviewers when she says


that *Kingsblood Royal* is "not a good novel, but it is the work, however imperfect, of a genuinely creative talent—and it leaves one with the exhilarated sense of having had an actual and purging experience." 8

Clifton Fadiman also had a good word to say about this novel, but one suspects, from the tone of his review, as well as from the tone of the previous reviews which he wrote, that he was a personal friend of Sinclair Lewis. Though he seems to agree with the general opinion that the book is not a good novel, he evades a direct statement of this judgment by saying that there is plenty of the old Lewis zing and cleaning acridity and restless invention—and a certain amount, too, of not-too-believable dialogue, shaky motivation, and blunt-instrument irony over which a *New Yorker* editor would shake his head regretfully. 9

Does Mr. Fadiman here imply that he would agree with the *New Yorker* editor, or that he would not? It is difficult to say.

One of the more penetrating analyses of this book is that of Malcolm Cowley, who admits the difficulty of judging a work of this type. He thinks the story "convincing, in that one feels it could happen . . . north of the Ohio." But, he points


out, though the story might happen, one doubts that it could happen as Lewis paints it. In the first place, the character of Neil Kingsblood is so well painted in the opening chapters as that of a died-in-the-wool conformist, that one is extremely doubtful when Neil decides to become a member of the colored race, "as if it were a church that could save his soul." ¹⁰ Psychologically, there is something which simply does not ring true about all of the characters, in Mr. Cowley's opinion.

More important is Mr. Cowley's evaluation of Lewis's technique. As he points out, Lewis learned many tricks of the trade since he began to write in 1914; ¹¹ but he would have been wiser to forget a few of them. In this novel, as in most of Lewis's works, there is a certain recurrence of characters and situations. The book contains a mass of factual information; in itself, this is acceptable. But, as Cowley points out, the setting is from Cass Timberlane, the characters for the most part are from It Can't Happen Here, and the plot of the businessman in revolt is essentially that of Babbitt. ¹²

Perhaps the one statement which sums up the critical attitude towards this book is that of Edward Weeks:

¹¹ Actually, Lewis began to write before this. Cf. Ch. I.
¹² Ibid., 101.
This book is a social document rather than a work of art, a thesis which acquires life because of the case histories which have gone into it, and despite a number of rigged and stagey effects. 13

To be fair, one must quote from a review which constitutes a vociferous minority of one. Vincent Sheean thought this book to be the equal of Lewis's best novels. He enthusiastically describes Lewis as one who

composes on a huge scale, with great, heavy lines, extreme foreshortenings and distortions of perspective; he is thus thought, as it says in the article on him in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, to exhibit a "lack of art;" in reality, it seems to me, he has an art which is altogether his own. Its vital power is shown in two phenomena characteristic of the giants: first, it is so personal that it bears the stamp in every part and thus defies imitation or rivalry; second, it transcends language itself and is felt with equal intensity in all parts of the world through the veils of translation. 14

Thus, with but one exception, the critics felt that this novel was not a satisfactory piece of literature; however, because of its sensational theme, it ran up a total of 1,497,000 sales in a few months. It was number 2 on the list for June, 1947; number 1 in July; number 4 in August; number 6 in September. 15 It was to be the last best seller by Sinclair Lewis. It


15 Publisher's Weekly, CLII, July 19, 1947, 255; August 16, 1947, 657; September 13, 1947, 1195; October 18, 1947, 2015.
was also the last novel by Sinclair Lewis to receive anything close to a cordial welcome from the critics.

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One wishes one could dismiss Lewis's last two novels from this survey. His other novels may have been bad at times, but they at least had a certain vigor. These are weak as well as bad. It is a weakness indicative of rapidly failing powers. It is a thing one would like to conceal, at least for the sake of charity.

The God-Seeker is the only historical novel Sinclair Lewis published. It is the story of Aaron Gadd, an itinerant preacher in the nineteenth century. A carpenter by trade, he becomes a missionary to the Sioux in 1848. He falls in love with Selene Lanark, a girl he meets at the missionary house. She is a half-breed Indian whose father is a wealthy trader. Aaron comes to know and fear her father, falls half in love with another woman, argues with a Catholic missionary, becomes friendly with Black Wolf, an Oberlin-educated Indian who is trying to convert the whites to the beliefs of the Indians. Finally Aaron flees

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with Selene from the wrath of her father, becomes a prosperous builder in St. Paul, encourages his workmen to strike against him, persuades the workers to take a fugitive Negro bricklayer in as an equal, and is voted an honorary member of the union.

The response to this book was a curious mixture composed partly of surprise that the author of *Elmer Gantry* could produce such a completely different novel, and an historical novel to boot, and partly of chagrin that even Sinclair Lewis, who at this time had something of a reputation for turning out poor books, could write anything this bad. In the words of one critic this novel was "not only colossally bad," it was "colossal, with Indians."17

The force of the remarks about this book brings to mind the reviews of *The Prodigal Parents*. The reviews of that book, the reader may recall, contained some blistering expressions of distaste. The severity of those remarks, however, was linked with political bias. The crux of the matter was the disappointment of those radicals who discovered that Lewis was a filthy conservative. In the same way, those critics whose own sympathies were anti-clerical found in Lewis a champion, but they were rudely shaken by this novel.

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However, the preceding explanation does not account for all of the critical censure of this book. True, many of the most acrid criticism mentions the "number of intrusive remarks directed against modern radicals." David Daiches, the critic who made this observation, says that the book seems like the kind of thing an ordinarily industrious young novelist, with a desire to make the best-seller list might turn out; it has the standard ingredients of the best-selling novel, an historical setting, and "a fine, middle-of-the-road, affirmative faith."

Mr. Daiches, not the first one to do so, wonders just what it is that happened to Sinclair Lewis. It was not, this critic thinks, merely that Lewis had been "punishing himself for his early satires." He says that Lewis's failing was one of "technique, . . . not a failure of sensibility." Lewis had an "eye for the ludicrous act or gesture," but not "of the deeper movements of the human personality, though he may recognize and admire them."\(^{18}\)

This book is lumped with the previous five by the reviewer who calls them monotonously bad, a soggy mishmash of sentimentality and half-digested social consciousness, through which one looks in vain for the robust rancor, . . . and the broad but often lethal satire that won Lewis the 1930

Nobel Prize.\textsuperscript{19}

Another reviewer concedes that Lewis has "advanced the quality of his recent production one notch--to the mediocre."\textsuperscript{20}

One notices, however, that even this novel elicited, if not profound praise, at least respect for a man who, at the age of sixty-four, could be capable of writing, in all gravity, the study of an idealistic minister who is presented as a sympathetic character. As one critic pointed out, it is even more unusual that Aaron's struggle for grace and his hope of salvation have not been ridiculed. Yet this small point does not prevent the critic from saying that the book seems more like a rough draft for a novel. The most serious fault, he thinks, is the failure of the book to convey the feeling of the period.\textsuperscript{21} Howard Mumford Jones concurs in this opinion, and also mentions Lewis's combination of admiration for the heroism of the missionaries with ridicule of their naive ideas. One can never be sure of the attitude which the reader is expected to take.\textsuperscript{22}

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is the most obvious flaw in the book is also the opinion of Edward Weeks. Margaret Marshall thought that Lewis lost interest about half-way through the book. Lloyd Morris said that the book is spoiled by sentimentality, an imperfectly characterized heroine, and irritating comment by the author. Mr. Morris thinks, however, that the book rises to the nobility of its theme. A different comment is that of the critic who thought that the theme was dissipated by the "vague religiosity of the author."26

The sales of this book were very poor. It was on the best-seller list for only two months. In March, 1949, it was number 9; in April, 1949, it was number 9 again. Although it sold 52,894 copies in its first month, it was not, by the standards of the forties, a successful book.27

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27 Publisher's Weekly, CLV, April 9, 1949, 1625; April 16, 1949, 1685; May 14, 1949, 2009.
Sinclair Lewis's last novel, published a few weeks after his death, is reminiscent of his major novels in plot, setting, and characters. It is a nebulous carbon copy of *Dodsworth*. *World So Wide*\(^\text{28}\) is the story of Hayden Chart, a young architect, who goes to Italy to escape the confining atmosphere of Newlife, Colorado, after the death of his wife in a motor accident for which he holds himself responsible. In Florence he meets Olivia Lomond, Ph.D.; they fall in love. Then Olivia becomes involved with Lorenzo Lundsgard, a cad. Hayden is caught on the rebound by Roxanna Eldritch, a newspaper reporter from his home town. They marry.

The evaluation of the critical reception of this novel offers peculiar difficulties. Some of the critics used the review of this book as a springboard for a discussion of the late writer's work as a whole. Some of these articles barely mention the book. Still others were painfully patronizing. Many of the critics made obvious efforts to be kind to Lewis's memory. Whatever the approach, the critics were agreed on one thing: this novel was one of the worst to come from Lewis's pen.

As Howard Mumford Jones points out, this book comes in three layers. The beginning of the book is taken up with a narrative of rapid action, the kind of thing at which Lewis

always excelled. The middle chapters, those which deal with Hayden's discovery of Florence and his courtship of Olivia, are narrated on a plane of seriousness; the last section is "ripping farce-melodrama." In Mr. Jones' opinion, the novel is ruined by Lewis's own conception of himself as "a preacher in comic prose." Such an attitude would naturally account for the superficial psychology, the broad strokes of characterization, and the burlesque attitude.

Charles Rollo thought the book dated. Though set in 1950, it belongs to the era of Babbitt and Dodsworth, according to this critic. He called it an "egregiously ingenuous story," which is "unconvincing and embarrassingly earnest about what have long been portentous commonplaces—a comedy belonging to another era and datelined 1950." Even worse, in the opinion of another, is the way in which the characters speak with "the go-getter accents of the twenties."

Fanny Butcher points out that technically the book fails to approximate the standard expected of a writer of Lewis's caliber. "It might have been written by an extremely promising


but inexperienced writer, ... a writer who populates a sensitive recording of places with men and women who are more ideas of human beings than living, breathing humans."32 This view is seconded by another reviewer who calls the book "awkward, rambling ... often close to a caricature of Lewis at his best."33

Anthony West is one of those who consider World So Wide in relation to Lewis's other work. Although he considers it a "sad work," he does not think it typical Lewis work, nor does he think that it will seriously affect Lewis's reputation one way or another. Mr. West reminds the reader that the work of every writer is liable to seem very dated in the period immediately following his death:

for a year or two, all that is dated, outmoded, and temporal about it comes to the surface and obscures its merit. ... His last, declining work is freshest in people's memory and bulks larger than the work of the creative years.34

Mr. West is bored by this last book, but he explains his boredom. That is not the case with some others, who are brusque, contemptuous, and disrespectful of Lewis's memory. One of these, at least, explains his lack of interest, and shows why he is not

33 "Valedictory," Time, LVII, March 26, 1951, 106.
interested, but another is one of those for whom Lewis and his work are dead issues.

The rest of the reviews of this novel were those which were devoted to a resume of Lewis's work, with only passing reference to his last novel. One of these was that of Lewis Gannett, who was kind but non-committal about the book, merely stating that the last half seemed hurried. Serge Hughes discussed Babbitt, and pointed out that Lewis's only successful novels were those which had no solution. Malcolm Cowley called World So Wide one of Lewis's weakest novels, but was quick to deny that it is one of his worst. He makes this distinction because

there is little in 'World So Wide' that is actively bad in the fashion of 'The Prodigal Parents,' or in the different fashion of 'The Man Who Knew Coolidge.' It is a pleasant and trifling story of which the chief fault is that as a novel it was never really written and doesn't quite exist.

Thus ended one of the most distinguished literary


38 Serge Hughes, "From Main Street to the World So Wide," Commonweal, LIII, April 6, 1951, 648-650.

careers in American literature. For the first time in decades a Lewis book did not even make the best-seller list. Yet if we are to judge from the words of Mr. Cowley, it was an ending which was hopeful for the future reputation of Sinclair Lewis. When we look back from this point, we see a career which, unlike those of many major authors, did not spend itself in one brief burst of genius, never to be heard from again. Instead we see a career which, beginning in the second decade of the century, rises slowly to a period of peak production around 1925, then slowly declines, in an evenly spaced succession of novels, for the next quarter of a century. Had he not died, Sinclair Lewis would have continued to produce new work. He was working on a new book when he died.40
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

By virtue of having received the first Nobel Prize for literature ever awarded an American, Sinclair Lewis in 1930 was dean of American letters. In 1930 he was the "new builder," the "distinguished man of letters."\(^1\) Surely, one would have said in 1930, succeeding comment on this man will be strewn with encomiums. Unfortunately, however, Lewis's reputation did not remain untarnished. The novels which he wrote after receiving the award added nothing to his reputation. If anything, they detracted from it.

By reason of their reception, the novels of the depression fall into two groups. Two of them, Ann Vickers and It Can't Happen Here, constitute one group. They were received, if not as well as Babbitt, at least cordially. The other two, Work of Art and The Prodigal Parents, suffered extremely chilly greetings.

Of the first two, Ann Vickers fared better. This

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1 Karlfeldt, Prize, 8.

novel's reception admits of two explanations: (1) perhaps it was actually a better piece of literature than *It Can't Happen Here*; (2) perhaps it was handled gently by most critics because few of them cared to commit themselves to a possibly awkward critical position. That is, if the novels which Lewis produced after 1933 had been of very high quality, the luckless critic who rashly damned this novel would be caught out on a limb. That is why, in the opinion of this writer, there is no clear-cut division of critical opinion in the reaction to this novel. Instead, there is a variety of opinions ranging from the honeyed praise of Burton Rascoe ("Mr. Lewis's novel is beautiful and terrible . . . and true"), to the vitriolic estimate of Herschell Brickell ("it is simply stupid to think of him as a literary artist").

In *It Can't Happen Here* we have the most popular of Lewis's novels of the depression. It was, however, not as popular with the critics as with the public, and its critical popularity was based on its value as a political pamphlet. It was called "a weapon of the intellect," with "a terrific impact," but the main impression which it left with the critics was that

3 *Cf.* supra, 25.

4 *Cf.* supra, 31.

5 *Cf.* supra, 40.

6 *Cf.* supra, 46.
it was not of high literary calibre. If one discounts the praise heaped upon this novel as a political document, as one should if one is to appraise its literary value, one must conclude that this novel is not one of Sinclair Lewis's best books.

The critical reception of the other two books was extremely negative. The majority of the critics thought that Work of Art was very poor. They called it "merely whimsical,"7 "a trade manual,"8 and unmistakable proof that Lewis's reputation was "a great American joke."9 Those who did not denounce the book made feeble attempts to find merit in it. It was, in the opinion of the latter group, "rich in the kind of detail Sinclair Lewis best knows how to give."10 This book, coming only four years after Lewis had reached the pinnacle of his prestige, elicited extremely disparaging comment about the whole of Lewis's work. Yet many of the critics still considered this book an unfortunate work from a great artist.

The last novel of the depression period, The Prodigal Parents, is one of the contenders for the title of "Worst Book by Sinclair Lewis." The critics were nearly unanimous in damning it.

7 Cf. supra, 34.
8 Cf. supra, 35.
9 Cf. supra, 35.
10 Cf. supra, 36.
Yet, if we examine the appraisals of the book closely, it becomes clear that the poor reception which it received was given to it as much because of political animosity as because of literary faults. Were they to reread some of the comments which they made about this book, many of the critics would have just cause to wince. The outrageous political blather which this novel provoked in otherwise respectable critics leads one to question the validity of all the criticism of Lewis's later novels. The anti-Lewis faction indulged in raucous defamation, calling Lewis's attitude toward labor (which he never actually revealed in this book) "one of almost hysterical fear and hostility."\textsuperscript{11} He was called "reactionary," and "anti-intellectual." Obviously, Lewis was not moving with the times, for in this novel he exposed himself as a non-Communist. For all his conservatism, though, he did not fare much better at the hands of the anti-Communist critics. They were, in their own way, just as bad as the others, as critics of literature; busying themselves with the book's "good sense," and its "sock at dilettante radicalism and professional 'Communism,'"\textsuperscript{12} they overlooked, with certain exceptions, of course, the consideration of the novel as an artistic work. If The Prodigal Parents were to be considered apart from the criticism of

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. supra, 49.

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. supra, 51.
Lewis's other later novels, one would conclude that the later reputation of Sinclair Lewis was an example of political martyrdom.

The novels of the first period, then, received fairly harsh treatment as literary works with the exception of *Ann Vickers*, whose immediate critical reception was the most favorable of the four. The novels of the war years, on the other hand, fared somewhat better as a group. The previous four novels had all elicited criticism which was somewhat spirited, whatever else it had been. These novels, however, earned a reception which was, on the whole, much less intense.

This sudden shift of pressure was most noticeable in the critical reaction to the first novel of the group, *Bethel Merriday*. The reaction to this novel seemed to imply that the critics were resigned to the fact that Lewis was producing material which was not of first rank. Then, too, we must remember that the "never, never quality" of this book, appearing as it did on the eve of war, probably exerted some extra charm on the critics by virtue of its escapist quality. Whatever the causes, the critics called it a "cheerful . . . piece of realism,""13 "a buoyant tale,""14 treating it well, if perhaps patronizingly.

13 Cf. supra, 58.
14 Cf. supra, 60.
The other two books of this period received more serious treatment, perhaps because they are curious throwbacks to the style and themes which Lewis had employed two decades earlier. The first, *Gideon Planish*, a novel like *Elmer Gantry* in theme, was called "a throwback to a manner that is dated." Yet the critics admitted that in this novel Lewis created one of his finest women, Peony Planish. But this virtue did not rescue the book from the critics' veto.

The second novel, *Cass Timberlane*, enjoyed in some measure a reception comparable to that of Lewis's works during his most creative period; one critic said that it would have been a more famous book had it been published twenty years earlier. On the whole, this novel was received as favorably as any since *Dodsworth*. Perhaps its more favorable reception was due to its nostalgic evocation of locale. At any rate, it marks the high point of Lewis's later career. None of the three books which Lewis produced after this one earned anything comparable in the way of critical approbation, although *Kingsblood Royal* was highly

15 Cf. supra, 64.
praised as a political pamphlet. The latter novel was written at a time when novels burdened with the problems of minority groups were popular. This novel attracted attention in the same way as *It Can't Happen Here*. It was called good propaganda, but the majority of the critics pointed out that it could not be called a piece of literature because of its "not-too-believable dialogue, shaky motivation, and blunt-instrument irony."

The last two novels which Lewis wrote fell far below the standard of his later novels, to say nothing of the books which he had written in the twenties. The poor quality of *The God-Seeker* surprised even those who knew the worst of Lewis's books; they were astounded that Lewis should try to write an historical novel after so many years of attention to contemporary problems. The expressions of dislike which this novel evoked were pitying, as were those which greeted his posthumous novel, *World So Wide*. The latter was either ignored by those who took the opportunity to discuss Lewis's work as a whole, or quietly buried by those who wished to tender the least injury to Lewis's

16 The appearance of this novel at this time would seem to belie the generally accepted thesis that Lewis was not moving with the times. This novel was only one of a group on similar topics which appeared in the same postwar period. Others were Gwethalyn Graham's *Earth and High Heaven*, Laura Z. Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*. Hart, *The Popular Book*, 278.

17 Cf. supra, 79.
memory. The reviews of this novel, however, by the very fact that the critics tried so hard to be kind, displayed the critics' real attitude. They usually spoke of this work as being that of a man who had seen better days, but they were quick to add that they thought that Lewis's reputation would not be much harmed by the last work to come from him.

What then, are we to conclude about the critical reception of Sinclair Lewis's later novels? Was it a just appraisal of his work? Were the criteria which the critics used suitable for the evaluation of works of literature? To Lewis's credit it must be said that many of the criteria used were unfair. Take, for example, the political discussions which centered about several of the novels. Some of the books were unfairly criticized because they contained, in the opinion of some critics, political attitudes which did not agree with those of the critic. Such was the case of the estimate of The Prodigal Parents.

On the other hand, the discussion of a novel on political grounds sometimes worked in Lewis's favor, as in the reception of It Can't Happen Here, and Kingsblood Royal, in which the propaganda element constitutes the major impact which the novels produced. Almost every commentator remarked that, as literature, these novels did not rank very high in the body of Lewis's work.

Coupled with the fact that Lewis's political sympathies were conservative during a period when it was fashionable for intellectuals to veer toward the left, is the phenomenon of his
continued preoccupation with the men and women of the middle classes at a time when the proletarian novel was in its heyday.

Such is the case in favor of Lewis. What are the valid criteria against his work? In the first place, Lewis's types lost interest as types. In his most creative period, the types which he created were clear-cut satirical images, as all such figures must be. His townspeople in Main Street, for example, have a universal quality which is equally recognizable in New York or Calcutta. But the figures in his later books did not have this universal quality. For one thing, Lewis chose as subjects more obvious, less controversial topics. He began to satirize individuals, rather than kinds of people. In It Can't Happen Here, the obvious target is Huey Long, the late governor of Louisiana.

In the second place, Lewis's point of view began to waver. He began to vacillate; often, as in Ann Vickers, one does not know just how far he condones the actions of his principal character. His whole attitude toward the middle classes changed. In books like The Prodigal Parents he reversed the stand he had taken in Babbitt.

Finally, his realistic method, so highly touted in the twenties, degenerated into fantasy in It Can't Happen Here and melodrama in Kingsblood Royal. His photographic eye did not desert him, however; in books like Work of Art he was able still to give a concrete, detailed, intricate picture of a place. But
this ability is not the same as a realistic technique. In the realistic approach to literature, something more than mere cataloging of background details is needed. Though Lewis's backgrounds remained as realistic as ever, his people became unreal, wooden figures. Hence, it can be safely said that the critics did have a valid basis for disapproving, in part, Lewis's later novels. However, the critics often failed to approve of a Lewis book because they thought it did not measure up to purely non-literary criteria.

The position of Sinclair Lewis in 1951 was much lower than his position in 1930--evidence of this apart from the reviews of his later novels was the paucity of the obituaries, and the general lack of attention paid him at his death. However, his lasting fame was attested even by those who damned his later books. The opinion of these critics is the one shared by this writer, that as soon as Lewis's later books have had an opportunity to disappear quietly, he will then take his rightful place in the literary history of America.
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The thesis submitted by Alan Eugene McFee has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

20 October, 1952

Date

Signature of Adviser