SINCLAIR LEWIS AND THE OBSCURE HERO

Early in J. P. Marquand's novel *So Little Time*, first published in 1940, there is a comment on the fading of the epic hero in the popular imagination:

> In the past twenty years, the United States has been most fickle in its selection of types for hero-worship. It is difficult to realise, in the light of the present, that Bankers and Business Executives once were heroes, in the Twenties. Jeffrey Wilson could remember when the circulation of periodicals such as the *American Magazine* was built largely on the heroic backlog of Big Business. Pages were filled with photographs of bankers at play, and with inspiring interviews with men like the late Messrs. Schway and Vanderlip, telling the youth of America how they, too, could succeed. This, of course, was before Bankers and Executives were swept away into the Limbo of disrepute when the dam of the depression broke, and before some wag at the Senate hearing placed that midget on the knee of Mr. Morgan[1].

Marquand goes on to say that the new type of hero was first « the Man in White... that quiet, nerveless soldier fighting his lonely battle on the murky frontier of Science, strangling microbes, manufacturing artificial hearts, so that America might live », and then, in the mid-thirties, the foreign correspondent[2]. These last observations represent, perhaps, only part of the truth, but Marquand's observations on the disappearance of the bankers and business executives seem substantially accurate. The authors of a study into « Values in Mass Periodical Fiction, 1921-1940 » show convincingly that there was marked decrease in the number of big business

1. *So Little Time,* Boston, 1943, pp. 24-25.
2. *ibid.*, p. 25.

heroes in magazine fiction during the thirties as compared with the twenties. After studying changing success themes in the *Saturday Evening Post,* one of the most important vehicles of popular image-making in America, they conclude that during the thirties there was « a shift in emphasis away from the "titan" success theme, in which the hero is exalted for his own genius over and above other group values, to the "little man" success theme, in which the reward symbol is due to the hero as the bearer of specific group virtues » [3].

What is true of mass-periodical fiction is not necessarily true of serious fiction: the evidence, indeed, is rather to the contrary. There seems little doubt, however, that the American social novelists of the twenties and thirties had different preoccupations from those of the first two decades of the century and that they naturally inclined to different types of hero. Certainly the big businessman appeared less and less, either as hero or as villain, and was often replaced by the small businessman, nominally his own master but in fact hedged about by all kinds of economic and social pressures, or by the minor employee of a large organization, nominally a free individual but in fact subtly shaped and conditioned by the circumstances of his job. Dreiser's presentation of the American failure in *An American Tragedy* (1925) ten years after his presentation of the American success in *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914) is only the most famous instance of this transition.

James had seen that the businessman might be an obscure hero as well as an epic one [4], but before the nineteen-twenties American novelists had rarely presented him in such a role. The inversion of the success theme that we find in *American Tragedy* appears much earlier, in a rural setting, in E. W.

3. PATRICK JOHNS-HEINE and HANS H. GERTH, *Value in Mass Periodical Fiction, 1921-1940,* in BERNARD ROSENBERG and DAVID MANNING WHITE (eds.), *Mass Culture,* Glencoe, Ill., [1957].

4. Cf. « The Question of the Opportunities », in LEON EDEL (ed.), *The American Essays of Henry James,* New York, 1956, pp. 202-203.

Howe's *The Story of a Country Town* (1882) and Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), while the anonymity and powerlessness of the employee are touched upon in the work of Henry Blake Fuller, especially *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893), and of William Dean Howells, as in the scene in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) when March, about to be visited in his office by his employer, has « a disagreeable feeling of being owned and of being about to be inspected by his proprietor » [5]. These, however, are exceptions to a general neglect of the themes by American social novelists at the end of the last century and the beginning of this.

The epic hero is a more obvious subject for fictional treatment than the obscure hero and, superficially at least, a more attractive one. Yet « the romance of fact » which James saw as surrounding the big businessman represented in the early years of this century a direct challenge which few American novelists were capable of meeting. The question was, first, whether any fictional character could convincingly match the careers and personalities of such men as Rockefeller, Carnegie and Ford, and, secondly, whether any novelist could hope to impose upon the popular imagination any image as powerful as the images of real-life businessmen which were being built up year after year by mass-circulation newspapers and magazines and by cheap « inspirational » literature of the Horatio Alger type. It is rightly considered a measure of Dreiser's strength that in Frank Cowperwood, hero of *The Financier* and *The Titan*, he did come near to creating such an image. Yet to observe that Sinclair Lewis created in George F. Babbitt an image of far greater currency and permanency is not to prove that Lewis is a superior novelist. It is rather to underline the obvious fact that whereas the epic folk-heroes of modern society tend to come from real life the obscure folk-heroes, almost by definition, can hardly do so: they must be created by the cinema, as in the films

5. *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, New York, 1952, p. 234.

of Charlie Chaplin, by the theatre, as in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, or by the novel, as in *Babbitt* (1922).

The most surprising thing about *Babbitt* is its dedication to Edith Wharton, for whatever literary tradition Sinclair Lewis may belong to, it seems unlikely to be one that will embrace Edith Wharton as well. However profoundly she may have treated of American material in certain of her novels, Edith Wharton remains by temperament and training unmistakably a « paleface » — to use Philip Rahv's terminology — while Lewis is an uncompromising « redskin ». It is, in fact, hard to detect any direct literary influences upon Lewis, whose style is not that of a man who has gone to school to other writers, but it is clear that Twain and Dreiser stand firmly behind him. There is also a possible affinity between Lewis and Frank Norris. Although Norris was a far more self-conscious and « literary » writer than Lewis he had a similar appetite for the excitement and romance of the domestic American experience. Lewis would surely have endorsed almost every word of *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (1903). His novels, indeed, exemplify many of its precepts more faithfully than Norris's own, and his observations on writing often read like Norris brought up-to-date:

> And industrialism itself — more dramatic than the universities, more impressive and more terrible than any army with banners, a topic for a Shakespeare and a Zola combined, single organisations with 200,000 employees engaged in the most active and cunning war with half a dozen like armies — who of our young people longing for Greenwich village or Paris so that they may « find something to write about » has been able to see, or has dared to attempt, this authentically epic theme? Is Waterloo a more gigantic spectacle than the Ford plant at River Rouge? Is the conquest of an Indian kingdom by an English proconsul more adventurous than the General Motors' invasion of the German motor world? He that hath eyes to see, let him see! [6].

6. *The American Scene in Fiction*, in Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane (eds.), *The Man From Main Street*, London, 1954, p. 124.

This is strongly reminiscent of Norris's enthusiastic outbursts about the romance of commerce[7] and of his attempt in *The Octopus* (1901) to write the « neglected epic » of the West. Where Lewis and Norris differ, however, is that Norris actually wrote his epic — and if it is a failure, it is an extremely impressive one — while Lewis, who lived much longer, only suggested the possibility of doing so.

The comparison with Norris is intended, not to suggest that all novelists should attempt « epics », but to underline a fundamental limitation in Lewis's work. There is no attempt, in a single novel, or in a series of related novels, at anything like a comprehensive treatment of society. Each novel presents a fragment of society, usually in terms of a single dominating character — as Lewis's fondness for using characters' names for titles suggests — and of a single thematic idea. His general habit, especially in the later novels, is to take an idea, work it up, and then write it out: in the process he is likely first to inflate and then to exhaust it. The « idea » of *Work of Art* (1934) is simply that a dedicated businessman may be more of an « artist » than an insincere writer; the « idea » of *The Prodigal Parents* (1938) is sufficiently summarised in its title; *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* (1926), though an amusing *tour de force*, scarcely has an « idea » at all. These are weak foundations on which to erect the superstructures of full-length novels.

George Jean Nathan once observed that Sinclair Lewis's novels originated in his « gift of protracted and inane oratory »:

> One could always tell a new novel coming on when the oratorical mood in any one, single, thematic direction assailed our friend. *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* was nothing more than a series of such orations gathered together, with not a word changed ... *Dodsworth,* a year later, was heralded both before and after our friend's European material-seeking trip by innumerable vaudeville perfor-

7. Cf. *The Responsibilities of the Novelist,* London, 1903, pp. 74-75.

mances in the British dialect, aided and abetted by a monocle that Red had purchased for the further embellishment of his histrionic talents [8].

The method — if we are to believe Nathan that this was in fact Lewis's method — is not necessarily to be criticised: Mark Twain seems to have worked in much the same way at times. But to sustain such a method through many books calls for almost instinctive mastery of a wide range of fully absorbed material. And this Lewis did not have. Although, as a fully professional writer, he was extremely adept at working up a new subject, a new area of material, we find him returning again and again to a small group of themes, characters and scenes. *Gideon Planish* (1943) for example, is an obvious attempt to re-work the theme of *Elmer Gantry* (1927) in a slightly different setting. *Dodsworth* (1929) is a return, at a more sophisticated level, to the basic idea of *Our Mr. Wrenn* (1914), and the theme appears again in *The Prodigal Parents.* Characters from one book frequently turn up in another: George F. Babbitt makes appearances in *Arrowsmith* (1925) and in *Elmer Gantry*, for example, and Elmer Gantry is often mentioned in *Gideon Planish*.

In almost every Lewis novel there is at least one character, and he is often the hero, who acts and talks exactly like George F. Babbitt, or for it is almost the same thing, like Lowell Schmaltz of *The Man Who Knew Coolidge.* The leading citizens of Gopher Prairie speak in much that way, so do Elmer Gantry, Gideon Planish, and Mr. Edward Schwartz in *The Job,* while the hero of *Our Mr. Wren* speaks a New York version that is scarcely distinguishable. What is put into the mouths of these characters, it seems clear, is a caricature of Middle Western « booster » speech, not an accurate rendering, such as we find in Twain, or in Ring Lardner, of any actual speech-pattern. Often, no doubt, it is Lewis's

8. *Esquire*, Vol. L, No. 4 (October 1958), pp. 150-151.

indulging on paper his « gift of protracted and inane oratory ». It is interesting that Nathan should say that *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* was a direct transcription of such orations: the first section of that book is Lewis's most sustained and most successful passage of speech caricature, and it is possible to argue that almost everything that is stylistically original and interesting in his work is contained in essence in those few pages. This is the basic theme, and most of the other novels enact variations upon it.

Lewis has, of course, a larger dimension than this, and it is particularly evident in *Arrowsmith*, where the dilemmas confronting Martin Arrowsmith at the time of the plague are, though over-simplified, dramatically convincing and morally exacting. In this novel, and in *Main Street* and *Elmer Gantry*, Lewis displays a certain talent for the creation and exploitation of dramatic, often melodramatic, situations. It is this, above all, that makes parts of *Elmer Gantry* extremely funny. The novel as a whole has an arresting, if simple, theme consistently worked out, and though hardly an impressive novel, it is at least capable of being re-read with pleasure. It is probably the last of Lewis's books, however, of which that can be said. By 1927 Lewis had virtually exhausted his « natural » material in *Main Street* and *Babbitt* and then gone on to write, in *Arrowsmith* and *Elmer Gantry*, his two basic versions of the American « success » theme. These four are the only books which hold promise of lasting value.

Lewis, of course, cannot be ignored. He is not without insight into society and occasionally into character, and even if *Babbitt*, for example, were a much worse book it would be necessary to take account of its sociological importance, of the widespread acceptance of Babbitt himself as a culture-symbol. What Lewis demonstrates in novel after novel is the pervasiveness in American society, as he sees it, of « Babbittry », of what might be called the petty-business ethic. *Babbitt* itself belongs clearly not to the crests but to the groundswell of American life. Lewis has marked out a different ter-

ritory from Dreiser, and even from Tarkington, and it is as the most vigorous of the obscure business heroes that George F. Babbitt has been absorbed into American folklore. The novel, of course, is concerned very largely with selling, rather than with the wider aspects of business. Babbitt, himself a realtor, a seller of real-estate, joins his friends of the smoking-compartment in a discussion of the subject:

> They went profoundly into the science of business, and indicated that the purpose of manufacturing a plough or a brick was so that it might be sold. To them, the Romantic Hero was no longer the knight, the wandering poet, the cowpuncher, the aviator, nor the brave young district attorney, but the great sales-manager, who had an Analysis of Merchandizing Problems on his glass-topped desk, whose title of nobility was « Go-getter », and who devoted himself and all his young samurai to the cosmic purpose of Selling — not of selling anything in particular, for or to anybody in particular, but pure Selling [9].

Babbitt has, in passages such as this, some claims to be regarded as a guide to the folkways of America's commercial civilization. Lewis, indeed, seems to have intended it as such, for in a sketch for a projected introduction to *Babbitt* he wrote:

> Though this is the individual romance of one G. T. Pumphrey [subsequently George F. Babbitt] and not the breviary of his community, that community enters his every moment, for it is himself, created in his varnished image. Monarch City is every « progressive, go-ahead, forward-looking, live, up-to-date » city of more than eighty thousand in the United States and Western Canada, with 8 or 10 venerable exceptions [10].

Babbitt undoubtedly does have a fundamental fidelity to its material, or it would not have so caught the popular

9. *Babbitt*, London, 1945, p. 143.
10. *The Man From Main Street*, p. 24.

imagination. At the same time there is throughout the novel a persistent heightening of contrasts, an exaggeration tending to caricature, that stamps it as finally unserious. A certain ambiguity of intention is also discernible. This is perhaps due simply to carelessness, to a *lack* of intention. It is certainly emphasised by Lewis's habitual extravagance of writing and by his willingness to jeopardise overall strategy for the sake of scoring a minor tactical point — a verbal joke, for example, or an irrelevant sideswipe at some revered institution. His satire, indiscriminate as grapeshot, is completely lacking in precision of language or of aim. It is often ambiguous to the extent of our being uncertain as to whether it is satire at all. Here, for example, are Babbitt's views on business ethics:

> He serenely believed that the one purpose of the real-estate business was to make money for George F. Babbitt. True, it was a good advertisement at Boosters' Club luncheons, and all the varieties of Annual Banquets to which Good Fellows were invited, to speak sonorously of Unselfish Public Service, the Brokers' Obligations to Keep Inviolate the Trust of His Clients, and a thing called Ethics, whose nature was confusing but if you had it you were a High-class Realtor and if you hadn't you were a shyster, a piker, and a fly-by-night. These virtues awakened Confidence, and enabled you to handle Bigger Propositions. But they didn't imply that you were to be unpractical and refuse to take twice the value of a house if a buyer was such an idiot that he didn't force you down on the asking-price [11].

This is funny enough, but if we are vaguely uneasy with it that is largely because it is nowhere made clear against what standards Babbitt is being measured. It was perhaps of passages such as this that Scott Fitzgerald was thinking when he wrote in 1926: « Finally the novel of business will be cudgeled into being satire by the questionable but constantly

11. *Babbitt*, p. 49.

reiterated implication that the author and his readers don't partake of the American commercial instinct and aren't a little jealous »[12].

There can be little doubt about Lewis's intentions in *Dodsworth*, his other major portrait of a businessman. Henry Steele Commager, in picking out Sam Dodsworth and Tarkingston's Earl Tinker as « after Silas Lapham, almost the only respectable businessmen in American fiction », finds them both « dubious » characters[13]. Earl Tinker, hero of *The Plutocrat* (1927), is certainly « dubious », but it is not clear that Sam Dodsworth merits the description. *Dodsworth* is a long and repetitious book, but its meanderings finally converge in reasonably coherent fashion, and Sam Dodsworth emerges, as Lewis plainly intended him to emerge, as beyond question a sympathetic figure. If *Dodsworth* sometimes suggests a recantation of *Babbitt* it is a recantation with an important difference: we are no longer in the petty-business world but in a world of big business, with a hero who is not obscure and who is primarily an inventor, a creator, and only secondarily a businessman. The theme of the « creative » businessman appears again in the person of Myron Weagle, the « artist » of hotel-keeping, in *Work of Art*: in that novel, a very poor one, the theme is merely ludicrous, but in *Dodsworth* it compels a certain respect. When Sam Dodsworth consoles himself for not being a « savant » — the term seems unfairly « loaded » — the reader's sympathy must, to some extent, be with him:

> Suddenly he felt better about it. Was it possible that in some involved, unelucidated way, he himself was a savant in fields not admitted by the academicians as scholarship? He told himself that in the American motor-world he was certainly not known merely as

12. *How to Waste Material*, in ARTHUR MIZENER (ed.), *Afternoon of an Author*, Princeton, 1957, p. 118.

13. *The American Mind*, New Haven, 1950, p. 274.

a pedler and as a financial acrobat, but as the authority on automobile-designing, as the first man to advocate four-wheel brakes. Hm. *Did* that constitute him a scholar, or...

Or possibly an artist? He had created something! He had no pictures in the academies, no books to be bound in levant, no arias nor flimsy furniture named after him, but every one of the twenty million motors on the roads of America had been influenced by his vision, a quarter of a century ago, of long, clean streamlines! [14].

Similarly we find him regretting his son's decision to sell bonds because it is not a way to « build things », to be creative [15]. Because Sam Dodsworth transcends obscurity without ceasing to be a sympathetic character he is an obvious exception to the generalisations that might otherwise be made about Lewis's treatment of the American « success » theme which, although it is not an obsession with him as it is with Dreiser, is nevertheless a constant preoccupation. Even Sam Dodsworth, however, realises that his success is largely to blame for the failure of his marriage and that it has impoverished him in other ways. Early in the book he pleads for time in which to grow accustomed to the idea of having leisure: « I'm a good citizen. I've learned that Life is real and Life is earnest and the presidency of a corporation is its goal. What would I be doing with anything so degenerate as enjoying myself? » [16].

In most of Lewis's novels « success » is rejected, and with that rejection is associated an affirmation of individualism and personal integrity. In the world of these novels success can only be achieved at the cost of integrity: this, in effect, is the « statement » of *Elmer Gantry*, of *Gideon Planish* and of *Arrowsmith*. It is a recurrent idea in *Arrowsmith* that the scientist, if he is to remain a true scientist, a dedicated

14. *Dodsworth*, New York, 1947, pp. 246-247.
15. *ibid.*, p. 176.
16. *ibid.*, p. 32.

man, must actually be protected against success. Dr. Gottlieb tells Martin Arrowsmith:

> But once again always remember that not all the men who work at science are scientists. So few! The rest — secretaries, press-agents, camp-followers! To be a scientist is like being a Goethe: it is born in you. Sometimes I t'ink you have a liddle of it born in you. If you haf, there is only one t'ing — no, there is two t'ings you must do: work twice as hard as you can, and keep people from using you. I will try to protect you from Success. It is all I can do [17].

Obscurity, it would seem, offers a certain protection against corruption. Similarly, the most scathing passages in *Elmer Gantry* are reserved for the careerists of religion, as in this description of Gantry himself at the Methodist Annual Conference:

> But moving through these masses, easily noticeable, the inevitable successes: the district superintendents, the pastors of large city congregations, the conceivable candidates for college presidencies, mission-boards, boards of pubblication, bishoprics.
>
> Most notable among the aristocrats were a certain number of large, suave, deep-voiced, inescapably cordial clerical gentlemen who would have looked well in Shakespearean productions or as floorwalkers. And with them was presently to be found the Reverend Elmer Gantry.
>
> He was a new-comer, he was merely hoping to have the Conference recognize his credentials and accept him as a member, and he had only a tiny church, yet from somewhere crept the rumour that he was a man to be watched, to be enrolled in one's own political machine; and he was called 'Brother' by a pastor whose sacred rating was said to be not less than ten thousand a year. They observed him; they conversed with him not only on the sacraments but on automobiles and the use of pledge envelopes; and as they felt the warmth of his handshake, as they heard the amiable

17. *Arrowsmith*, New York, [1958], p. 291.

bimbom of his voice, saw his manly eyes, untroubled by doubts or scruples, and noted that he wore his morning clothes as well as any spiritual magnate among them, they greeted him and sought him out and recognized him as a future captain of the hosts of the Almighty [18].

The organization, through the temptation of the wealth and power it represents, inevitably corrupts. As Frank Shallard discovers, it can also oppress. Even in such an early novel as *Our Mr. Wren* the organization is something to be escaped from and in *The Job* Lewis gives the first of several more or less frightening portraits of organizations at work. Una Golden, the eroine of *The Job*, is often referred to by sociologists: her distinction, in their eyes, is that she is the first full-length portrait of an office-girl in American fiction. Office-girls and « typewriters » had appeared as minor characters from the time of Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), but Una Golden is the first of her kind to take the centre of a novel's stage, the prototype of the obscure heroine who appears in such novels as Tarkington's *Alice Adams* (1921) and Christopher Morley's *Kitty Foyle* (1940). From the sociologist's point of view, indeed, the whole novel is of great interest. Here, for example, is Lewis's careful definition of the exact place which Una occupies in the office hierarchy of Pemberton's, « the greatest manufactory of drugs and toilet articles in the worl » [19].

Una's caste, made up of private secretaries to the chiefs, was not above the buzzer. She had to leap to the rattlesnake tattoo, when Mr. Ross summoned her, as quickly as did the nearest Jewish stenographer. But hers was a staff corps, small and exclusive and out of the general line. On the one hand she could not associate with the chiefs; on the other, it was expected of her, in her capacity as daily confidante to one of the gods, that she should not be friendly, in coat-room or rest-room or elevator, with the unreco-

18. *Elmer Gantry*, London, 1927, pp. 335-336.
19. *The Job*, London, 1933, p. 217.

gnized horde of girls who merely copied or took their bright young men's dictation of letters to drug-stores.

These girls of the common herd were expected to call the secretaries « Miss », no matter what street-corner impertinences they used to one another [20].

« Caste at Pemberton's », writes Lewis, « was as clearly defined as ranks in an army » [21]. And his meticulous analysis of each rank of this business bureacracy represents social observation of most valuable and original kind. In *The Job,* however, as in so many of his novels, this observation is at once diversified and compromised by the persistent intrusion of « romance ». In rhetorical vein, and in words directly reminiscent of Frank Norris, Lewis exclaims:

Not as priest or soldier or judge does youth seek honour to-day, but as a man of offices. The business subaltern, charming and gallant as the jungle-gallopers of Kipling, drills files, not of troops, but of correspondence. The artist plays the keys, not of pianos, but of typewriters. Desks, not decks; courts of office-buildings, not of palaces — these are the stuff of our latter-day drama. Not through wolf-haunted forests nor purple canons, but through tiled passages and elevators move our heroes of to-day.

And our heroine is important not because she is an Amazon or a Romona, but because she is representative of some millions of women in business, and because, in a vague but undiscouraged way, she keeps on inquiring what women in business can do to make human their existence of loveless routine [22].

The explicitness of the passage suggests how artificially the « romance » has been imposed upon the observation, and *The Job* is not, in fact, a good novel. But it looks forward to later and better novels of Lewis's in which he is concerned with this central theme of the obscure hero in an organizational setting. Lewis is at his best in portraying the anxieties and

20. *ibid.*, p. 230-231.
21. *ibid.*, p. 228.
22. *ibid.*, p. 51.

frustrations of the « small man » who feels himself borne down by forces too powerful for him to resist and too shadowy for him fully to comprehend. The way in which Babbitt is brought to hell after his brief flirtation with « liberal » ideas is perhaps the most striking example of this, but in many of the novels the pressures are brought to bear not by a social group or class but by a specific organization. Lewis repeatedly uses the word « factory » to describe the mechanical, inhuman character of great institutions — it is applied to both a medical clinic [23] and a state university [24] in *Arrowsmith* — and there is a reference in *Babbitt* to « that great department-store, the State University » [25]. In *Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry, Gideon Planish* and *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) the organization becomes quite specifically something to be fought.

There is little doubt that the idea of such opposition was of great emotional importance to Lewis. It seems unlikely, however, that he had, except in the special case of *It Can't Happen Here,* any political intention or even any clear conception that American society might be growing increasingly institutionalised. His attitude remains, in this respect, essentially the attitude of Carol Kennicott towards the end of *Main Street*:

> And why, she began to ask, did she rage at individuals? Not individuals but institutions are the enemies, and they most afflict the disciples who the most generously serve them. They insinuate their tyranny under a hundred guises and pompous names, such as Polite Society, the Family, the Church, Sound Business, the Party, the Country, the Superior White Race; and the only defence against them, Carol beheld, is unembittered laughter [26].

The weight of approval in *Main Street* is by no means entirely on Carol Kennicott's side, but in important respects

23. *Arrowsmith*, p. 281.
24. *ibid.*, p. 9.
25. *Babbitt*, p. 74.
26. *Main Street*, London, 1950, p. 486.

she speaks for Lewis himself, she *is* Lewis. Her whole career gives expression to Lewis's view at that time that « the ghetto-like confinement of small towns could be — not always was, but so easily could be — a respectable form of hell » [27]. Her personality reflects, if only mildly, Lewis's own, with its persistent restlessness and discontent. If Carol Kennicott's realisation that « the institution is the enemy » expresses an attitude that persists throughout almost all of Lewis's novels that does not seem to be because Lewis was obsessed with institutions as such, or even with the predicaments of American society. The reason is rather that Carol is the type of the village rebel, and that Lewis himself remained essentially a village rebel all his life.

In an autobiographical essay, « Breaking into Print », Lewis writes:

> And how did a Harry Sinclair Lewis, son of an average doctor in a Mid-Western prairie village who never — but never! — heard at table any conversation except « Is Mrs. Harmon feeling any better ? » and « Butter's gone up again » and « Mrs. Whipple told me that Mrs. Simonton told her that the Kellses have got a cousin from Minneapolis staying with them » — a youth who till he was ready to enter university had never seen any professional writer except the local country editors — how came it that at eleven he had already decided to become a short-story writer (an ambition, incidentally, that he never adequately carried out), and that at fourteen he sent off to *Harper's Magazine* what he believed to be a poem? [28].

It isn't a question which he, or we, can answer. But, given Lewis's impulse to write, it is easy to see where much of his early material came from. Lewis both mirrored and spoke to the American lower-middle-class because he was so intimately and thoroughly of that class himself and knew from

27. *The Man From Main Street*, p. 202.
28. *ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

experience the ambitions, frustrations and insecurities of his obscure heroes. That is his great strength. His great limitation is that he never transcended the limits of that class. Although he sometimes achieves considerable vigour of expression, it is always within a very narrow range. Although his observations of American society are often incisive, they are always made in terms of a very restricted point of view. No one has known better the obscure heroes of American commercial society and no one has described so closely the minutiae of their lives, but Lewis was not sufficiently an artist to transpose his knowledge into completely satisfying fictional terms.

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