

ANALYSIS

Dodsworth (1929)

Sinclair Lewis

(1885-1951)

“In *Dodsworth* (1929) Lewis was only incidentally satirical. Here more profoundly than in any of his novels he studied the ins and outs of a heart through a crucial chapter of a human life. *Dodsworth* is a Zenith magnate who retires from business. ‘He would certainly (so the observer assumed) produce excellent motor cars; but he would never love passionately, lose tragically, nor sit in contented idleness upon tropic shores.’ His story begins as if he were to be another *Innocent Abroad*, an American taking his humorous ease in Europe. Though *Dodsworth* values his own country, and often defends it against any kind of censure, he is no brash frontiersman like the *Innocents* of Mark Twain. That older kind of traveler had passed with the provincial republic of the mid-nineteenth century.

But *Dodsworth*’s travels are complicated by his wife, a pampered woman desperately holding on to her youth, fascinated by what seem to her the superior graces of European society, and susceptible to its men. In her bitter discontent she becomes a poisonous shrew, then deserts her husband for a lover. Long in love with her, *Dodsworth* cannot break off either his affection or his sense of responsibility. She is in his blood. The history of his recovery is like a convalescence of a spirit, and it is told with feeling and insight. Externally, *Dodsworth* is the essence of modern America on its grand tour, neither cocksure like Mark Twain’s travelers in Europe, nor quivering and colonial like Henry James’s. Himself simple, fair-minded, unhappy, he comes in contact with the more extravagant varieties of Americans abroad.

The book is a gallery of expatriates. Without either the traditional comedy or the traditional nostalgia of American international novels, *Dodsworth* is a striking study in contrasts. Yet the essence of the book is almost pure drama. Made into a play by Sidney Howard it had a brilliant run on the stage and was equally effective on the screen. After ten years it was the general favorite among Lewis’s novels.... He had become a classic figure in American fiction, and *Arrowsmith* and *Dodsworth* promised to be read by a long posterity.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 310-11, 313

“Samuel *Dodsworth*, automobile manufacturer of the Midwestern city of Zenith, retires to devote himself to cultural pursuits and a trip to Europe. During 23 years of married life, he has adored his frivolous, pampered wife Fran, but he is soon disillusioned after abandoning his absorption in business. On the transatlantic ship she assumes an air of worldliness and flirts with an Englishman, Major Clyde Lockert; in Paris she joins the extravagant set of Renee de Penable and has an affair with Arnold Israel. Sam quickly tires of this life and returns alone to America, but, fearing that Fran may be harmed by Israel, he rejoins her in Europe.

Fran breaks with her lover and visits Germany with Sam, where she falls in love with an impoverished aristocrat, Kurt von Obersdorf. She asks Sam for a divorce, and he spends lonely months touring southern Europe. He is happy again only after he meets Edith Cortright, an American widow, in whose mature tolerance he finds companionship. Through Edith he learns to appreciate European traditions and art, and she encourages his plans for a building enterprise in Zenith. They intend to marry, but when Kurt’s mother forbids him to marry Fran, Sam is persuaded to return to America with his wife. During the voyage he finds Fran still childish and egotistical, and he cables Edith that he will return to her by the next ship.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature
(Oxford 1941-83) 206-07

“With *Dodsworth* (1929), the first and the most important period of Lewis’s work ends. Dr. Canby has rightly remarked that this picture of the American businessman abroad is more like Howells than it is like Dickens. *Dodsworth* is specifically ‘not a Babbitt,’ and he thinks ‘rather well of Dreiser, Cabell, and so much of Proust as he had rather laboriously mastered....’ But he certainly does not behave or talk like an intellectual; Mr. DeVoto even doubts that he could have managed a corporation, a doubt which may recall the questions many readers have asked of some of James’s American businessmen abroad. *Dodsworth* is dragged about Europe by a worthless wife of whom his final repudiation probably gives the male reader the same sadistic pleasure which Margaret Mitchell was later to afford him at the end of *Gone With the Wind*. All in all, he is one of the most convincing Lewis characters, and he has his being in a book in which the Europe vs. America antithesis, seems, for once, fairly stated.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 360

“*Dodsworth* is a study of the personal and domestic problems of a successful American business-man. Samuel Dodsworth, the protagonist, is a graduate of Yale and M.I.T. who knows machinery thoroughly; around 1903 he becomes interested in the then new field of automobile manufacturing. Soon he is an associate and stockholder in the Revelation Automobile Company, and through his ideas the company expands rapidly. Meanwhile he meets and marries Fran Voelker, a girl who has superficial interest but who is actually more interested in social climbing. Sam enjoys the excitement of his success in the business world, but Fran is bored with her existence; she convinces Sam that there must be more to life than making automobiles and enjoying the pleasures of one’s home.

Sam, who is in his forties, begins to wonder whether he isn’t missing something, and he allows Fran to take him off to Europe to try to find it. The middle of the novel mainly concerns Fran’s effort to make him into the type of cultured European snob she admires. Sam is at first amenable; he goes about politely meeting a succession of rude, egotistical, and superficial Europeans and does his best to assume a semblance of sophistication. When Fran decides that the finer life involves taking a lover, however, Sam balks. Divorce proceedings are begun, and Sam finds consolation in the company of Edith Cortwright, a sympathetic woman who accepts him for what he really is. Although Fran relents and seeks to recapture him, he rejects her and determines to build a new life on more sound moral principles.

Lewis criticizes several aspects of modern society in his novel. First, European ‘high society’ is shown as superficial and snobbish, although European culture in the broader sense is by no means condemned. Second, the novel offers an interesting character study of a well-to-do wife with social aspirations. Fran, sexually cold, makes no effort to provide Sam with physical satisfaction. Neither does she accept him for what he is and offer him a genuine understanding; she is scornful toward the business which interests him so much and which provides both of them with their comfortable standard of living. Her aim is to make Sam resemble the fashionable social parasites she finds in Europe. She is highly cultured, but only on the surface; at heart she is interested only in social manners.

Sam, however, remains the central figure of the novel. Through him Lewis analyzes the problem of the American self-made man who wins wealth through his honest effort and talent and then finds he has no idea how to spend the money he has acquired. The swallowing up of the individual by big business is also portrayed; Sam’s company is eventually bought out by the U.A.C., a large industrial combine, and Sam begins to feel like a nonentity amid the intricacies of higher finance. American business avails itself of individual talent and then, when it is done with the individual, casts him aside or swallows him in the web of bureaucratic organization.

Dodsworth, somewhat provincial and a little bull-headed, is nevertheless one of Lewis’ more admirable characters. He talks intelligently instead of using the adolescent slang of Babbitt and Elmer Gantry; he is interested in literature and the arts, and is by no means unperceptive. Lewis admires the talented and hard-working industrial executive more than he does the narrow suburban booster of the type of Babbitt.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 118-20

“Dodsworth, a ‘captain of industry’ from Babbitt’s metropolis of Zenith, is persuaded by his frivolous wife Fran to make a tour of Europe. She has several love affairs, and at last breaks off with Dodsworth. He in turn, after months of loneliness, falls in love with the widowed Mrs. Cortright, who persuades him to take a more social view of industry and inspires him with plans to build a truly American suburb in Zenith. Fran is case off by her lover’s family, and she induces Dodsworth to take her back home.

But their reconciliation comes too late. There is a decided difference between Babbitt and Dodsworth, but the book, as Leo Gurko points out, ‘did little to disturb the faith of most Americans in things as they were, and served to introduce the Lewis who in the 30’s, was to descend fretfully into weak apologetics for the very Main Streets he had once so aggressively denounced.’ Yet Lewis’s contrasting pictures of American and European civilization exhibit him, as Philip Rahv points out, as ‘making full use of his gift for reproducing national patterns of behavior with wonderful accuracy and efficiency.’ The playwright Sidney Howard made a strong play out of the novel (1934), and the play was successfully transferred to the screen (1936).”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 267-68

Michael Hollister (2015)