

## 32 CRITICS DISCUSS

Sinclair Lewis

(1885-1951)

“The texture of the prose written by Mr. Lewis gives one but faint joy and one cannot escape the conviction that for some reason Lewis has himself found little joy, either in life among us or in his own effort to channel his reactions to our life into prose. There can be no doubt that this man, with his sharp journalistic nose for news of the outer surface of our lives, has found out a lot of things about us and the way we live in our towns and cities, but I am very sure that in the life of every man, woman, and child in the country there are forces at work that seem to have escaped the notice of Mr. Lewis.”

Sherwood Anderson  
*New Republic*  
(11 October 1922) 172

“My dear Lewis-- I want to write praise. *Babbitt* is one of the greatest novels I have read for a long time. He is what we call a ‘creation’ but what we really mean is that he is a completely individualized realization of a hitherto elusive type. He is the common American prosperous business man *got*. You have got him. No one has been anywhere near getting him before. He lives & breathes another atmosphere! He moves about. His baseness, his vile gregariousness, his vulgarity &--what is the hope of America—his suffering & struggling intimations of beauty, are all wonderfully done. You never seem to strain. Your ease is perfect. In every way I think *Babbitt* knocks *Main Street* (which is a very good book you know) into a cocked hat....I wish I could have written *Babbitt*.”

H. G. Wells  
Letter to Lewis (1922)

“I think in many ways it is a much better book than *Main Street*. It seems to me a more complete and rounded work of art; of course I read it with interest and amusement...I cannot imagine that such a ruthless depiction of a certain type and a certain class has ever been attempted; and the objectivity, so cold and merciless, with which you have written gives one a very curious sensation; except that people never recognize themselves I should say that you must be on a high road to being one of the most disliked men in America. I read *Babbitt* with sweating palms at the thought of how shy all those people would make me if I met them in real life....I hope the book will have as great a success as *Main Street*...You are a very lucky young man.”

W. Somerset Maugham  
Letter to Lewis (1922)

“Sinclair Lewis is the drummer of ideas, the sales executive of the new American literature. He has made the Revolt of the Younger Generation a paying proposition, operating an exclusive territory on a royalty basis, and presenting an unusual household specialty, burlesque made up to look like satire. Every home a prospect; its simplicity sells it. If you are interested in building a repeat business for the future. Mr. Sinclair Lewis can demonstrate his product; attractive book combinations that get orders; unlimited possibilities, with large royalties.”

Ernest Boyd  
*Portraits: Real and Imaginary*  
(Doran 1924) 183-84

“Sinclair Lewis is the bad boy of American letters whose thoughts are on bent-pins while the deacon is laboring in prayer. His irrepressible satire belongs to a new and irritatingly effective school. He has studied the techniques of the realists...He is maliciously severe on all respectable dignities....Yet the picture is extraordinarily lifelike. All the unlovely details of fat stomach and flabby muscles are sharply revealed.... The method is immensely clever; it is the last word in the technique of despoiling one’s victim of adventitious dignity, without which life becomes a mean, bleak affair; but it is scarcely charitable....He

provokes respectable people on principle, and he has laid a devilish plan to work systematically through our sacred American decalogue, smashing one commandment after another....

His calculating wickedness returns him a fattening bank account. His impudent satires sell like bargain-counter silk stockings. We pay handsomely to see ourselves most unhandsomely depicted....The goodly United States of America are peopled by a mighty herd, which like those earlier herds that rumbled about the plains, drives foolishly in whatever direction their noses point—a herd endowed with tremendous blind power, with big bull leaders, but with minds rarely above their bellies...In this land of material abundance the good life is reduced to being measured in commissions and percentages; civilization comes to flower in the broker; the mahogany desk is the altar at which we sacrifice in a land of triumphant materialism...A people that worships the great god Bunk shall have its reward!'

He talks easily with Main Street in its own vernacular....So slashing an attack upon our common creed and practice has naturally aroused vigorous protest. Human nature does not like to have its idols assailed....The Puritan strain is fortunately still the American strain, and we owe much to those excellent origins that Mr. Lewis scoffs at without understanding....If Sinclair Lewis is unimpressed by such arguments it is because he is quite disillusioned with the current ideal of material progress. His dreams do not find their satisfaction in good roads and cheap gasoline. He would seem to be an incorrigible idealist who has been bred up on the vigorous Utopianism of the late nineteenth century. In the golden days before the deluge he had gone blithely to school to all the current idealisms that flourished in the land—to Jeffersonian democracy and to Marxian socialism; and in the well-stocked pharmacopoeias of hopeful young liberals he professed to discover specifics for all our social ills. But the war destroyed his faith in nostrums and removed his Utopia to a dim and foggy future....

For all his modernity and the disillusion learned from Pullman-car philosophers, Sinclair Lewis is still and echo of Jean Jacques [Rousseau] and the golden hopes of the Enlightenment—thin and far off, no doubt, but still an authentic echo....The optimistic dreams of middle-class capitalism are not so golden as they seemed to us before the war [WWI]; and these pudgy novels are slashing attacks on a world that in mouthing empty shibboleths is only whistling to keep up its courage. The faith of America is dead. These brisk pages are filled with the doings of automata—not living men but the simulacra of men, done with astonishing verisimilitude, speaking an amazingly realistic language, professing a surprising lifelikeness; yet nevertheless only shells from which the life has departed, without faith or hope or creative energy, not even aware that they are dead....An empty soul, [Lewis] is the symbol of our common emptiness."

Vernon L. Parrington  
*Main Currents in American Thought III*  
(Harcourt 1927) 360-69

"Isn't it fine about Mencken....That last is the Sinclair Lewis influence. That's the way his characters talk. You can write this book you're working on at random without even keeping track or remembering which characters are whom and still not be in danger of any competition from the other boys....[To F. Scott Fitzgerald, 31 March 1927]...The good stuff [of Ezra Pound] sentence by sentence certainly deserves a hell of a lot more Nobel prize than Dr. [Sinclair] Lewis. That was a hell of a blow to me because I'd always thought of the Nobel prize as something that you got when your beard was long and white...the only difference between the Nobel Prize and all the other prizes, is that it's just more money....[To Archibald MacLeish, 22 November 1930] It is certainly a filthy business for them to give the Nobel prize to Mr. [Sinclair] Lewis when they could have given it to Ezra, or to the author of *Ulysses*. Or is it that the Nobel prize is supposed to represent the best aspects of Swedish life in America, or anywhere, and that is why they gave it to Lewis?...Of the two bad writers Dreiser certainly deserves it a hell of a lot more than Lewis. [To Guy Hickok, 5 December 1930]

I'll never forget Sinclair Lewis calling [Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*] a 'thin screaming of only 67,000 words!' May have the number of words wrong. He himself writes a horse scream of never less than 120,000. But if I wrote as sloppily and shily as that freckled prick I could write five thousand words a day year in and year out....[To his editor Maxwell Perkins, 4 or 11 February 1940; then Hemingway and Lewis met in Key West and in Cuba in December 1940] Sinclair Lewis wrote me a damn nice letter and I truly

appreciate the honor, but I had promised Marty we would take this trip. [To Max Perkins, 15 November 1941]

Did I write you about Sinclair Lewis the author? Probably did. He was living with the mother of his ex-mistress Marcella Powers. The mother very neat and well washed and always calling him Mister Lewis. They had the regal suite at the Gritti. He would go down to the bar and have three or four double whiskies in the evening and then write. Sometimes he would write in the mornings too. But mostly at night. The rest of the time he would go out with Mrs. Powers and peer at whatever was 3 starred in Baedaker. When I was in the hospital in Padova he nailed Mary on a three hour diatribe, 'I love Ernest BUT.' ...I had never written a line about his books although he had delivered a gold medal address about me. (How the hell could I write about his books. Only kind thing is silence.)...Mary ended up paying for all his drinks. I told the bartender that if he ever showed again to give him a Mickey Finn which he promised to do. The headwaiter...really loathed him. Said he was a real jerk. Thought you bought loyalty with a thin dime instead of with understanding, consideration, good taste and good manners. And the poor Baedaker peering bastard with his Mistress's (who left him) mother defiling Venice with his pock-marked curiosity and lack of understanding. [To his publisher Charles Scribner, 22 July 1949] In case anybody is worried that I would pull that [Sinclair] Lewis publicity stunt and not accept the prize...." [To Wallace Meyer, Cuba, 6 May 1953]

Ernest Hemingway  
*Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961*  
(Scribner's 1981) 249, 331-32, 501, 528-29, 531, 660, 822  
Carlos Baker, ed.

"Besides his mastery of the realistic approach, Mr. Lewis has other literary virtues which have helped to establish his eminence among modern novelists. He has a keen, if rather sardonic, sense of humor, he has notable insight into the confused emotions of the ordinary man and woman; and he has brilliant descriptive powers.... And in addition to all these virtues Mr. Lewis has still one more—the virtue of having boldly chosen the whole of American civilization as the subject of his novels."

Edgar Holt  
*Bookman (London)*  
(January 1931) 234

"An artist of Mr. Galsworthy's own caliber, whose general subject is virtually the same—philistinism in contemporary life. Mr. [Sinclair] Lewis may not write, typically, with the sympathetic insight into the sentiments of nice people, nor with the moderation and restraint, of Mr. Galsworthy. He altogether eschews the mild elegancies and prettinesses of the English writer. His satire is of a drier, purer brand. But for that very reason his art is more sharp-edged; his effects stand out in bolder relief.

His *Babbitt* (1922) is at least as significant a social document as *The Man of Property*, and at least as 'real.' On the side of composition it bears some resemblance to Mr. Galsworthy's work, in that the dramatic or scenical method has been put aside for what we might call the incremental. It is a portrait of a typical philistine business man, built up with many little strokes of the brush. What gives it its massive power is, for one thing, the almost unbroken maintenance of George F. Babbitt as the center of action and point of reference. Almost nothing is related of which he is not at least a witness, whether or not realizing the full implications of what he sees. So that the thing grows steadily in force and momentum.

There is even less plot than in Galsworthy. In place of plot, we have a significant evolution in the attitude of Babbitt toward the social order of which he forms a part. There is a long block of chapters, say from XII to XXII, which trace his steady rise to popularity and a kind of affluence through his shrewd and energetic playing of the game—subscribing heartily to all the loud vulgarities, the social superstitions and hypocrisies which constitute the creed of his class. But there is something in Babbitt which makes him restless under the oppression of this philistinism. It is partly conscience and open-mindedness; it is partly the dreariness of his home life and the desire of the 'old Adam' in him to have his fling. So that we may distinguish another long block of letters, XXIII to XXXIV, which trace Babbitt's revolt. He is of course not strong enough to carry through his rebellion against the organized and dominant forces of the Boosters' Club and the Good Citizens League. He finds that his wife means more to him than the furtive pleasures of

Bohemia. And the story ends with a sort of cringing submission to an order of things which is too strong for him.

It is this continuity of theme and issue which, taken together with the single center of interest and the consistency of tone, give to *Babbitt* its bold and simple outlines—its effect of composition. Under the ideal head of continuity, it should be remarked, further, that Mr. Lewis is capable of devoting one quarter of the whole book, the first seven chapters, to a single typical day in the life of his central character—something unparalleled, so far as I know, in the work of Galsworthy. It may of course be urged, on the other hand, that Lewis's work lacks the live effect given by the variation of coloring, the nuances of Galsworthy's method. And I do not pretend that Lewis's is the ideal way of presenting human nature; that it has, for example, the depth and intimacy of Thomas Mann or Emile Zola. There is too often the note of burlesque. There is too much generalizing of the subject by the author. The characters and incidents too often have the effect of cleverly chosen documents or exhibits. One feels this most strongly perhaps in *Arrowsmith* (1925), where the author's scorn for ballyhoo in science and his deep-felt admiration for the true scientist call for a treatment less 'smart' and topical, and more in the key of imaginative writing. But one cannot deny the truth, the representative importance of these documents; nor can one deny Mr. Lewis's skill in arranging his material so as to have the fullest effect in the forum of public opinion."

Joseph Warren Beach  
*The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique*  
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 264-66

"The pastels, the chiaroscuro of personality are quite beyond him. He made his way through the American scene with a naivete, a simplicity of point of view, a limpidity, and even a shallowness which it is now time to pronounce invincible. And yet these qualities have enhanced his satire. Simplicity enables him to concentrate his super-human energy; insensitiveness to chiaroscuro prevents the doubt that would be fatal. He becomes a flaming hate, and out of that hate he has written the most vigorous sociological fiction of our times, in America or anywhere else."

Bernard De Voto  
*Saturday Review*  
(28 January 1933) 398

"The style is the story, the story's well-paved road, the story's rapid vehicle. It runs but does not fly. It is precise but not exquisite, sensitive but not fastidious, direct but seldom breath-taking, rich in its fullness not in its adornment. Its best music is plain-song, without complicating harmony...The poetry of the style appears almost wholly as exuberance. Above the essential irony of the actions there is a continuous play of laughter, pointing at whatever calls for ridicule or sympathy."

Carl Van Doren  
*Sinclair Lewis*  
(Doubleday 1933) 65-66

"Sinclair Lewis does love the essential humanness of people. He can be savagely against the ideas they may hold; just as he can scourge and has scourged America, for many things. But when he said, as he did recently, that he loved this country, he said the truth. He is fundamentally an American. No other soil could have grown him. And he is a better thing than a humanist, he is a human-beingist."

William Rose Benet  
*Saturday Review*  
(30 January 1934) 422

"He is more aware of the monstrous extent of the stables that must be cleaned than he is of the possibility of any Hercules ever cleaning them; and when he pictures people who are pitted against their environments he usually shows them struggling without much hope of victory, without allies, and often with ingrown doubts as to whether or not they are on the right side...For Lewis is the historian of America's catastrophic going-to-pieces—or at least of the going-to-pieces of her middle class—with no remedy to offer for the decline of that he records; and he has dramatized the process of disintegration, as

well as his own dilemma, in the outlines of his novels, in the progress of his characters, and sometimes, and most painfully, in the lapses of taste and precision that periodically weaken the structure of his prose.”

Robert Cantwell  
*New Republic*  
(21 October 1936) 301

“Erratic and uneven as the works may be, forming a bold and lunging kind of satire which misses its target almost as often as it hits the mark, the all-around contribution of Sinclair Lewis to the writing of his generation is of such high excellence that American literature could never do without it, for in many respects Lewis has been the foremost reporter of American life and thought in the 1920’s. His delineation of the small midwestern town in *Main Street* and his portrayal of the average American businessman in *Babbitt* have done more than give to the world outside America, for better or for worse, its stock conception of American small towns and American businessmen; they have actually contributed two names in the English language which bid fair to abide. Few thoughtful critics, therefore, have dissented from the judgment of the committee which awarded him the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1930....

It must be said here that his short stories are derivative and unimpressive...It was with *Main Street* (1920)...that Sinclair Lewis rocketed into prominence....The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Lewis was a fitting tribute to his talent; but it ironically rang down the curtain on most of the author’s dynamic achievement. The novels which followed...show a great decline. They are written with less skill and less suppleness; their humor is less spontaneous; and their characterization more vague and fuzzy. Indeed, *The Prodigal Parents* has been termed by some critics an outright reversal of *Babbitt*, which is generally considered Lewis’ best work....

His early work, which was, on the whole, brilliant, remains his best. Its surface realism, at least, is unapproached in American letters. Lewis always held a great admiration for Theodore Dreiser, which implies that he had been influenced by Dreiser. But while Dreiser is a psychological student in his realism, Lewis is more successful as the photographer of a psychological behaviorism. His effects, indeed, are likely to be most useful when they remain scenic effects. As a philosopher of human conduct he does not cut a distinguished figure. And he has probably written with too much detail and too many words. But as a reporter he had courage, skill, infernal cleverness at mimicry, and—best of all—power; and that power, whatever his detractors may say, was not all destructive. He has, to be sure, been attacked, as vitriolically as H. L. Mencken, with whom he had a great deal in common...His criticism, especially in its more destructive aspects, struck home....

...Sinclair Lewis neatly wrapped up American life in its raw, physical, and ineffably smug bourgeois state and placed it in a pigeonhole, where future social historians will undoubtedly find it an invaluable ingredient for their chronicle of twentieth-century American civilization.”

George K. Anderson & Eda Lou Walton, eds.  
*This Generation:  
A Selection of British and American Literature from 1914 to the Present*  
(Scott, Foresman 1939, 1949) 333-35

“Neither socialism nor Bohemianism satisfied him....Lewis had been more than any other American writer the voice of the liberal decade before 1929. He gave it nation-wide slogans, told it world-wide stories. The depression was confusion for him as well as for his countrymen....*Main Street* had been against fascism in the village, *Babbitt* against fascism in business, *Arrowsmith* against fascism in medicine, *Elmer Gantry* against fascism in the ministry. In *It Can’t Happen Here* he focused his attention on a possible future in American politics. Countless readers to whom fascism was only a foreign word came to visualize the thing in a native form, ugly and deadly....

He had become a classic figure in American fiction, and *Arrowsmith* and *Dodsworth* promised to be read by a long posterity. As to the rest of his work, it seemed likely to undergo the same process of selection by time as Mark Twain’s had already undergone...Lewis’s chief work carried on the kind of

examination of the present which Mark Twain began in his *Gilded Age* but did not continue....The living issues of one age have a way of living on into another. There can be no question that his books are landmarks in the history of American opinions through two crucial decades.”

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 304, 312-14

“Lewis is an ingenious satirist of the American middle class, mimicking its speech and actions with what seems to be photographic realism but is actually more or less good-humored caricature. Critics have accused him of romanticism in overstressing his effects, and often declared that he was himself proof that his charges against American culture were just. *It Can't Happen Here* [1935] shows his shift from large-scale social analysis to a more immediate political concern, with a bias seemingly in favor of middle-class liberalism.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“His early years as a publisher’s assistant and writer showed no more promise than a gift for clever journalism. But in 1920 his *Main Street* astonished, where it did not outrage, reading America. In 1922 his *Babbitt* gave a name and a local habitation to an American type, which, despite frantic denials, was recognized, both here and abroad, as having as much truth as satire requires. In 1925 he published *Arrowsmith*, the best, if not the first novel of science, where materialism versus idealism supplies the theme. It is also satiric, frequently unfair, but packed, like the best social history, with authentic information. In 1930, having refused domestic honors, he was chosen as the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for...literature. Already he was the most publicized American novelist of the decade.

The Middle West of Sinclair Lewis is the Middle West of Willa Cather, but with the often heroic period of pioneering on the land further in the background. His characters have come to town. The land is conquered, and no longer concerns them except as income or profit. They are bourgeois, not agrarian. Complacency, meanness, and boasting have cheapened their way of life, which was true of the small-town folk who provide the irritant in Miss Cather's stories. *Main Street* in Gopher Prairie and the city, *Zenith*, are both confident that they represent the best of the new world to come.

And yet Sinclair Lewis, no more than Ellen Glasgow or Willa Cather, was a rebel against the advertised ideals of the nineteenth century, whose deplorable end in crassness he was to depict. The morals of Protestantism, the ideals of progress, the scruples of a Christian, and the manners of a liberal gentleman, are all implicit in his reforms. It was a decadence of spirit and a hypocrisy of morals in the midst of abounding energy which provoked him to distress and anger. The energy itself and the things, the gadgets, which it had created, fascinated him, and he was furious because they had been captured by a predatory materialism, where money and size were the only standards of success....

Discarding the historical, the romantic, the sentimental, the symbolic, and the analytical approach, adopting that very familiarity which Flaubert condemned, choosing the new journalism which dealt with behavior as his guide...Lewis took aspects of himself, a representative man, rather than a saint or an artist or great lover, as the subject of his story, and so began his series of novels....For the rough task of faithfully representing the kind of society which his Middle West was making, irony was too delicate a weapon. He chose satire and sarcasm, for which he had more talent, and carried them to the edge of caricature. He was a novelist not writing *of* a situation, as Miss Cather had recommended, but *from* the inside of a situation of which he himself was part, and thus more eager to point than to prophesy, and more concerned with behavior, with which he was intimate, than with final interpretation....

The best social history of the ‘white collar’ class of the United States at the high tide of its success is provided by these novels of Sinclair Lewis because of their almost naïve honesty and their accurate focus upon typical experience. That all of Lewis’ important books deal directly or indirectly with the Mississippi Valley does not lessen their scope, for that is the heart of America, and his satire of *Zenith* needed only qualification to be true for Los Angeles or New York....

The best [of his novels] is probably *Dodsworth* (1929), in which a far more sensitive and intelligent Babbitt escapes from a more sophisticated and ruthless Carol Kennicott who is determined to subdue a man's soul to what she thinks is culture. The most abusive is *Elmer Gantry* (1927), which fluttered parsonages all over the United States. Here the go-getting clergyman, Elmer, carries Zenith's religion of success into the church itself. Gantry makes his deal with Mammon instead of the traction company, and exploits his God. In *Cass Timberlane* Lewis learned to strip his narrative to essentials and to substitute, without loss of unity, vignettes of parallel experiences for the digressive fullness of earlier stories. In *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) he chose the most sensational theme in America, the Negro question, and made a story which avoids all subtlety."

Henry Seidel Canby  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1222-24, 1228-29

"A tolerable and beautiful life for everyone was the old American dream....Beginning with *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis' most important novels were to expose with savage humor those facets of American society which contradicted this ideal. But his moral scorn often obscured for readers the fact that their pitiless indictment of failure was dictated by passionate faith. He believed in the genuine possibility of a personal kingdom, an education in brotherhood and responsible nobility. He became, as it were, a nostalgic gadfly tormenting the nation—himself tormented by its repudiations of his exalted youthful ideals."

Lloyd Morris  
*Postscripts to Yesterday*  
(Random House 1947) 137

"In his novels of the 1920s, Sinclair Lewis offered every available perspective upon the middle class. He was its critic and judge, its satirist and parodist, minister to its victims, Balzacian commentator upon its many-sided life, and 'liberal' guardian of its political activities. *Main Street* (1920) treated the Midwestern metaphor of the small town, trying to discover, as Lewis said, how 'much of Gopher Prairie's eleven miles of cement walks' was made out of the tombstones of John Keatses.' With *Babbitt* (1922) he began a full-scale investigation of the small Midwestern city, the 'Zenith' city with 250,000 to 300,000 inhabitants, and growing steadily. He searched indefatigably for every kind of venality, corruption, stupidity, and demagoguery, every tendency toward fascism in middle-class society, every pressure upon the 'man of good will' to abandon his rights as a democratic citizen. He was so successful in accumulating evidence, so fond of echoing and parodying the grandiose absurdities of his subject, that his novels became (or threatened to become) fantasies woven from the kinds of fact that Mencken reported in his 'Americana'."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*  
(1949; Viking/Crowell-Collier 1962) 408

"'Good Lord,' I thought, 'here's a revivalist minister on the loose.' I stayed silent in awe and admiration. For the first time in my life I was aware that I was listening to a man who violently and passionately cared about the same kind of things that had been vaguely concerning me, that here was a man dangerously aroused, brilliant. Part of my own awakening had come from reading Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells. I thought of Lewis as a beardless, younger Shaw, or another Wells perhaps, and suddenly I knew that I had met my first genius. I had never liked to use that banal word, but then and later I attached it in my mind without embarrassment to Sinclair Lewis."

Harrison Smith  
*Saturday Review*  
(27 January 1951) 8

"The youngsters whom Henry L. Mencken admired were Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, James Branch Cabell, and Joseph Hergesheimer...He was more interested in what he saw as Lewis's kindred talent for mockery and burlesque. He was also fond of the literature which suffered persecution from the successors of Comstock and other leaders of what he called in 1917 'militant Puritanism'...Closest to Mencken in the 1920's was Sinclair Lewis. To both, the behavior of the middle class had appeared to be, superficially at

least, an endlessly amusing spectacle. In the case of Lewis, the successes of the 1920's combined the merits of both style and subject-matter. Lewis found at least one part of his subject in *Main Street* (1920); with that his career got its real start, mainly because the work of Mencken and his like had made the public eager and ready for this kind of novel. It was ready to accept Carol Kennicott not for Lewis's art but for the precision of effect with which she came to them as a familiar person.

As *Main Street* became the standard exposition of the small town, so *Babbitt*, which followed in 1922, provided the all-sufficient portrait of the hustling, growing small city, with all of the folklore and folksay and mythology of the modern middle-class world. No American novel of this period enjoyed so widespread an esteem, and no novelist had ever discovered so happily or exploited so thoroughly this rich source of popular appeal. The natural consequence was that he continued to exploit it. So *Arrowsmith* (1925) contained some of *Main Street* and some of *Babbitt*, as well as a number of other things; *Elmer Gantry* (1927) was *Babbitt* with its collar turned; *The Man Who Knew Coolidge* (1928) was a succession of monologues in which all of the most compelling of middle-class views, clichés, and illusions were richly displayed; and it was only in *Dodsworth* (1929) that Lewis's opinions began to suggest clearly his genuine attitude toward his hero. In this last novel, Sam Dodsworth wins both the affection and the respect of his readers simply through the homely frankness and the refreshing naivete of his point of view. Lewis could keep his audience when he openly showed his admiration of Dodsworth as well as when he had reveled in the patent absurdities of *Babbitt*....

Lewis's work was not mere journalism. He made as much of an art of his portrayal as it was within his capacity to do. This art consisted partly of sensitivity to every one of the clichés of sentiment and public attitude which Mencken so enthusiastically collected for the 'Americana' section of the *Mercury*. Put together and dramatized as they were in *Babbitt* and its successors, they provided a parody-fantasy of the American middle class: an unreal world made up of fragments of the socially real, a montage of editorials, speeches, and advertisements. This is the greatest contribution Lewis made to the postwar novel, and it is what will give *Babbitt* a place in literature long after Mencken's 'Americana' are forgotten....While Mencken had wanted his researches into American stupidity to document a thesis which he believed in with an intense mock-seriousness, Lewis's work was not documentation at all, but a variety of the fictional art....in his Zenith, state of Winnemac, the growingest, zippiest, hustlingest burg in the grand old Republican U.S.A.

The vigor of Lewis's writing was equal to the energy of his imaginary synthesis of American hustle. In his skill in integrating the character of *Babbitt* with the world of Zenith, Lewis scored a minor triumph. But he was not pure parodist; he was also a skeptic and a liberal—that is, he shared vaguely that strangely defeatist liberalism of the 1920's that, shaken, had survived the destruction of Upton Sinclair's Helicon Hall. And he was middle class; some of his best friends were *Babbitts*. His intelligence prevented him from making the unhappy mistake which vitiates almost all of the leftist satires of the 1930's....

But the progress of his middle-class hero from *Babbitt* to *Dodsworth* was not convincing because too earnestly gullible in the very manner that the creatures of his best novels were gullible. *Babbitt* moved in this sequence from Zenith, not in Mark Twain's Washington but to Gary Cooper's Hollywood. The clichés, if they still did not seem true after *Dodsworth*, were at least defended warmly, with an apologetic strength of affection which demonstrated that Lewis hadn't really meant *Babbitt* at all—or, rather, that he had genuinely preferred the tender, fearful *Babbitt*...to the confident *Babbitt* of the after-dinner speeches and the conventions....

*It Can't Happen Here* (1935) showed Lewis at his most sentimentally 'liberal,' applauding the homespun political tradition which in the end counter-attacked the Zenith state of mind and preserved America from its worst implications...The novels which follow, show a continuous decline of powers and an irritable indecision concerning the meaning of what he is doing. At its best, Lewis's writing shows a remarkable concentration upon the singleness of effect: the caricature of manners and scenes is eminently appropriate and right."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Modern Novel in America*  
(Regnery/Gateway 1951) 120-25

“Where Sinclair Lewis will eventually stand in the hierarchy of American letters is not for this generation to decide, but there is no doubt that *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and, I think, *Arrowsmith* will survive, if only as genre pictures. It is my own belief that future generations will find in them a good deal more, but that may be a prejudiced view because I believe that the American philosophy of life is going to have a long run. We are not ready for quietism. We still believe that when something is wrong, something can be done about it; and a raucous voice bawling out the wrong is not yet for us mere sound and fury, but a trumpet blast summoning the mighty men of valor to stand to their arms.”

Gerald W. Johnson  
*New Republic*  
(29 January 1951) 15

“Though Lewis had to a remarkable degree mastered his method, that method is a good deal like the one so successfully employed in the writing of many present-day best-sellers—the method, I mean, which produces books that are not so much naturalistic novels as ‘documentaries,’ pseudo-fiction in which everything is recognizable as true but with the fidelity of a waxwork and no suggestion of any sort of autonomous life....The literary gift that he developed to an extraordinary degree was, of course, the gift for mimicry which is as definitely something more than mere naturalistic reproduction as it is definitely something less than imaginative recreation....The typical fact or the typical gesture is one step above the merely authentic. But it is also one step below the symbolic.”

Joseph Wood Krutch  
*Nation*  
(24 February 1951) 180

“Lewis was a born story-teller. When he had no memorable story to tell, he told one that wasn’t memorable. The urge to tell some kind of story was so strong that it kept him always at work. In this he differed sharply from American writers of his day who were far more self-consciously artists and had far more to say, as the expression is. Lewis, with his unappeasable itch to tell stories and his conviction that the most important characteristic of a writer was the ability to apply the seat of his pants to the seat of a chair, went right along pouring out stories when a writer of a different cast of mind would have brooded and hesitated and struggled with thought and form.”

C. Hartley Grattan  
*New Republic*  
(2 April 1951) 19

“I think one of the most tragic facets of his nature was his disbelief in his own capacity to evoke love from others. He hurt others, very often out of this frustration. He was unquestionably one of the most ‘difficult’ human beings who ever lived. But it was impossible ever to be really angry with him, in his case, the old parental saw was really true, ‘this hurts me more than it does you.’ He *was* incorruptible!”

Dorothy Thompson  
*Atlantic Monthly*  
(June 1951) 73

“Lewis was never a revolutionary writer. Aesthetically and morally, he stayed close to the center of the stream; and he resembles both [Booth] Tarkington and Mrs. Wharton (whom he greatly admired and to whom he dedicated *Babbitt*) much more than, upon first consideration, he may appear to do so. Both Stuart Sherman and Regis Michaud compared *Main Street* to *Madame Bovary*....His affinities to Dickens and to Mark Twain are readily apparent...Confusion has been created...by his tremendous surface reality, his marvelous gift for describing gadgets, and his Hemingway-like capacity for setting down dialogue which seems accurate recording but which is really...very highly selective....

He is intensely topical also: probably no other novelist ever referred in print to so quite so many of his contemporaries...The clue to the Lewis method lies in his annoying and illusion-shattering use of obviously ‘phony’ names, which he mixes up, quite arbitrarily with the real names he employs....What I am really talking about is the larger-than-life quality which seems less closely related to folklore in Lewis

than it does in Dickens only because Lewis's trappings are more modern and his tone somewhat 'hard-boiled.' Babbitt is not merely a booster: he is a composite portrait of all the boosters who have ever lived....I am not forgetting that Lewis documented with great care, but documentation never yet produced true realism....Strangely enough, nothing can produce realism except imagination...James Branch Cabell...finds Lewis's characters 'superb monsters, now and then a bit suggestive of human beings,' portrayed 'with loving abhorrence.' The pleasure of reading about them he compares, on the one hand, to that derivable from the comic strip...and the radio program 'Amos and Andy,' and, on the other, to that which emanates from the great classical satirists...

Another widespread error about Lewis is the idea that he regarded Babbitt as the typical American and that he hated him. On the contrary, Lewis always insisted both that the Zenith booster merely represented 'one type of American' and that 'Actually, I like the Babbitts.'...The conflict between satire and sympathy runs all through his work: Carol's last view of Main Street is both mystic and loving, and it was as early as 1928 that Lewis declared that his own utopia would not differ notably from that of the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post*, and that he did not wish to do away with the Babbitts but only wished that they might learn 'to talk of the quest for God oftener than of the quest for the best carpenter.' As time goes on, sympathy deepens and satire declines. In *It Can't Happen Here* Lewis mistrusts all panaceas and rejects all revolutions, and by the time he reached *The Prodigal Parents* he was ready to plump for the Babbitts as themselves responsible for all the achievements of civilization....

His most specific commitment is...to the scientific method: he once stated that he had enjoyed writing more than he could have enjoyed any other career except working in a research laboratory. It may seem odd that, like H. G. Wells, though himself an artist, he should have been more inclined to believe in science than in art....Lewis mistrusted 'intellectuals' and was uneasy in their society...He had heeded Bernard Shaw's advice to beware of all artists except the very great artists....Lewis's general failure to create spiritually adult human beings seems to have been rooted in something deeper than choice of method, however...Religiously, Lewis probably considered himself an atheist, but it is easy to agree with Dorothy Thompson that God was never taken in by that.

In the last analysis, Lewis was an American liberal who believed in the free life....Perhaps Lewis himself, like many other Americans, did not really understand how much the American tradition meant to him until it was threatened, from without and, far more seriously, from within....Lewis pricked the bubble of American complacency when we most needed a gadfly to sting us, and he called us back to the tradition of American independence."

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:  
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*  
(Holt 1952) 354-67

"What Lewis loved so passionately about America was its potentiality for and constant expression of a wide, casually human freedom, the individual life lived in honest and perhaps eccentric effort (all the better), the social life lived in a spirit that first of all tolerates variety. And what he hated about America, what made him scold it, sometimes so shrilly, was everything that militated against such a free life: social timidity, economic system, intellectual rigidity, theological dogma, legal repression, class convention. These two, the individual impulse to freedom and the social impulse to restrict it, provide the bases of his plots."

Mark Schorer  
*New Republic*  
(6 April 1953) 19

"He was as lean and as tough-looking as a long string of jerked beef and...He had long talon-ended pale hands and high-doming forehead and quick though cracked lips and swift eyes that seemed to notice everything....My eyes fastened on his face. And the face I saw was a face to haunt one in dreams. It was a face that looked as if it were being slowly ravaged by a fire, by an emotional fire, by a fire that was already fading a little and that was leaving a slowly contracting lump of gray-red cinder."

Frederick F. Manfred  
*American Scholar*  
(Spring 1954) 165-66

“Sinclair Lewis was the leading satirist of his generation. He ‘reported’ American life, always on the lookout for a ‘good story’—a story of immediate topical value. What he sacrificed by this approach was philosophical depth and perspective. Yet he was a writer of high ideals and courage. Much of his criticism was leveled at abuses badly in need of correction. He gave us such ineradicable terms of opprobrium as ‘rotarian,’ ‘main street,’ and ‘babbitry.’

*Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922) opened his attack upon what he saw as the root of failure and corruption in our society. This was the inherent materialism that brought us, in Oscar Wilde’s phrase, ‘To know the price of everything and the value of nothing’...to take comfort in our genius for inventing all sorts of satisfactions for needs that we did not have, while neglecting to recognize, let alone to satisfy, the needs of the human spirit. Readers today disagree sharply as to the justice of these criticisms, but in 1920 Lewis sprang at once into a position of authority with American readers, while Europeans took him so seriously that he was chosen in 190 as the first American writer to receive the Nobel Prize....

Sinclair Lewis was a liberating force upon the literature of the 1920’s; with an inventive and courageous critical mind, he was a stalwart crusader against the encroaching materialism which tolerated moral slackness, vulgarity, ignorance, and narrow bigotry in conformity with a pattern of superficial success cheaply won. He remained throughout life one of the most high-minded and respected of our authors. But it seems that his literary reputation may ultimately be determined by only four of his many books—*Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Dodsworth*—the volumes in which, no matter how misguided the characters may be, they are endowed with three-dimensional reality and with the quality in lost creatures that evokes our pity as much as our contempt.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.  
*The American Tradition in Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Norton 1956-67) 1164-66

“His model world was the Utopia of [H. G.] Wells and many of his heroes were devoted to the building of a world of the future. Typical of these was Gottlieb, the hero of *Arrowsmith*, the lonely seeker of truth, a hater of all forms of greed and fraud, the type for which Lewis cared most. All his heroes were working in some fashion or other for the kind of enlightened society that Shaw, Wells, Rolland and Veblen variously dreamed of....At a moment of national self-scrutiny, it was almost the mission of Lewis to devote his great gifts as a satirist to the scourging of this world, to the scarification of American society and the purging of all that was evil in it...But Lewis also found admirable types in these settings,—lawyers and business men, Samuel Dodsworth, the captain of industry who was not a Babbitt, and honest and courageous judge, Cass Tamberlane....

In his temperamental zeal for reform, Lewis suggested Dickens, while he resembled Mark Twain in his high animal spirits, his pity for the underdog, his hot head and his warm heart, his passionate, impulsive, mercurial quixoticism. There was a touch of the philistine too in Lewis’s relative disregard of the treatment and style of his novels compared with the subject. For Lewis, indeed, the treatment was secondary, while he devoted all his care to the documentation of the all-important subject. Each of his novels had a major theme, a type and phase of American life...While some of them were weak, their total effect was a panorama of American civilization.”

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann  
*Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America*  
(Dutton 1956) 225-26

“It is interesting that the cultural lag in Lewis’s work should be so marked. Just as the real social forces of his time are placed for the most part quite outside of his literary scene, so the real social changes of his time are reflected cursorily and late. The ordinary mark of a first-rate author is that his writing is generally in some degree ahead of its time. The typical characteristic of Lewis’s writing is that it is generally, to a

marked degree, behind its time. Very likely this is the final key to Lewis's achievement—the key which opens the secret chamber in this otherwise absolutely uninspiring middle-class mansion. For it would appear that Lewis's whole literary world...*is* in the end haunted by the sense of its own unreality.”

Maxwell Geismar  
*American Moderns*  
(Hill & Wang 1958) 113-14

“Sinclair Lewis...is both a naturalistic chronicler of American life and a satirist whose barbs have been directed at practically every element of modern society. In the first sense his work comprises a pattern of American culture somewhat in the manner of Balzac's *Human Comedy*...He has analyzed suburban life, small-town society, the medical profession, organized religion, big business, and a host of other aspects of life in the twentieth century, and to each of these treatments he has brought the copious documentation, the careful selectivity, and the precise attention to detail of the naturalistic school. At the same time he aims the scorn and wit of a born satirist at everything he considers unworthy of America: hypocrisy, materialism, the monotony of small-town life, bigotry, vulgarity, and anti-intellectualism.

His satire has earned him, not only the violent hatred of certain groups and individuals in America who found themselves only too recognizable in his novels, but, what is more unfair, a reputation as a misanthrope, an atheist, and an enemy of the ‘American way of life.’ Lewis is none of these things. He has a warm feeling of affection, even of kinship, for the characters whose weaknesses he describes. His sympathies are by no means entirely on the side of the sophisticated Carol Kennicott of *Main Street*; in the end Carol is wrong, and even Main Street finds some justification in the reader's mind. Lewis is far from pitiless toward George Babbitt, the materialistic booster whose name has become a dictionary synonym for suburban materialism; Lewis himself was born in a small middle-western town, and he retained many middle-class elements in his own character. At the bottom his satire is based on understanding; he hits the mark because he sees his characters from the inside out. His natural gift for caricature is so devastating, however, that he cannot help probing at weaknesses; his X-ray pictures of American life could not fail to elicit outraged protests from clergymen, capitalists, suburban patriots, and sentimentalists.

After *Main Street* (1920) Lewis seems to have had the idea of painting a complete cross-section of American life. He seldom repeated a theme; in this respect the originality and resources of his imagination are impressive. He satirized successfully suburban life (*Babbitt*), the medical profession (*Arrowsmith*), and organized religion (*Elmer Gantry*); he then went on to less satirical, but equally penetrating treatments of big business (*Dodsworth*), social welfare (*Ann Vickers*), the hotel business (*Work of Art*), American proto-fascism (*It Can't Happen Here*), the theatre (*Bethel Merriday*), organized philanthropy (*Gideon Planish*), marriage (*Cass Tamberlane*), and the Negro problem (*Kingsblood Royal*). Each time he began his work with a careful and detailed study of the field to be covered. Where the technical details lay beyond his competence, as in *Arrowsmith*, he enlisted the aid of experts. These studies, however, are not the objective documents or mere journalistic chronicles; they are works of art in which accuracy, in the last analysis, comes second to effect.

Lewis in his artistic method is a caricaturist. His characters are not completely rounded humans but ‘types,’ just as Balzac portrayed the miser, the ambitious youth, the neglected father, so does Lewis create the suburban booster, the small-town intellectual, the medical saint, and the hypocrite. He conveys these caricatures not through external description but through internal detail: nuances of speech, mannerisms, and characteristic actions. Because of this method some of Lewis' characters suffer from a two-dimensional flatness. His clergymen are often so bumbling we cannot believe they would be entrusted with important parishes, and Dodsworth, as H. S. Canby has pointed out, is hardly the sort of man who would have risen to become head of a large corporation. Carol Kennicott, flighty, naïve, and impractical, is an inadequate symbol of culture to oppose to the sterility of Main Street. Lewis is at his best drawing convincingly sympathetic heroes. Only the consecrated and idealistic Arrowsmith impresses us as a truly admirable hero. Lewis could not totally scorn anything he found in America, but he found difficulty in totally admiring anything as well.”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4

“Almost all Lewis's books were based either on painstaking research into the subject (as his work with Paul de Kruif in preparation for *Arrowsmith*, his study of real estate for *Babbitt*, and his visits to ministers and churches for *Elmer Gantry*) or on situations or places with which Lewis himself was well acquainted. Thus his boyhood in Sauk Center provided the background for *Main Street*; his travels in Europe contributed to *Dodsworth* and *World So Wide*; his experience as an actor and playwright, to *Bethel Merriday*. There is much disguised biography in Lewis' work, and many suggestions of Lewis himself in some of his characters. Searching for 'the reality' of America,' he found the oppression of freedom and value by rigid provincialism; for the innocence of the American ideal, the corruption of a money-oriented civilization.

A romancer as well as a realist and satirist, he loved the Babbitts and Main Streets of America even as he deplored them; gifted with an amazing ability for mimicry, he could impersonate his characters or deliver a Babbitt-like Rotarian speech at will, as the accuracy of tone and verisimilitude of his novels demonstrate; yet his writing is rough and his style can best be described as reportorial. Critics have noted Lewis' resemblance to Dickens in his caricatures, his range and variety of human types, and occasionally his humor. Mencken's influence is apparent particularly in...*Main Street*.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“Lewis remained as loyally committed to the best representatives of the middle class as William Dean Howells, a writer he dismissed as a 'pious old maid' but to whom he was more closely linked than he perhaps realized....His radicalism had never been deep or abiding—a short exposure to Upton Sinclair's socialism, a quick look at the happy anarchists in Greenwich Village before World War I; it never went beyond a kind of outraged humanitarianism. He preferred lowbrows or middlebrows to highbrows, but he was apparently unaware or uninterested in the niceties of class distinction. The language of the people he admires hardly differs from the language of the people he debunks....

Between 1914, when his first novel appeared, and 1920, he had catalogued the sights and sounds of the American scene, listened carefully to the rhythms of Middle-Western talk, and familiarized himself with colloquialisms, slang, and advertising jargon. Although he was not then, or ever, a sensitive literary craftsman, he had learned to write swiftly and competently. Finally, he had acquired a knowledge of the literary market place and of advertising and selling possessed by few of his contemporaries; like Mark Twain he was almost as much interested in the technique of promoting his books as he was in the art of writing them....

Mencken's raucousness and exaggeration, his violent social antipathies, find their analogies in Lewis' pages. Both men, moreover, based their virulent and sardonic portraits of persons and places on facts, and yet neither, strictly speaking, was a realist. Perhaps their willful distortions of an America filled with boobs and Philistines and blustering bigots was the most effective answer to the brayings of the 'Boosters,' the 100 percent he-men, the 'Regular Guys' who spoke for the America of Harding and Coolidge....

Lewis' reputation has steadily fallen since the 1920's for reasons that are fairly obvious. At the outset of his career, he possessed an astonishing vitality, an inexhaustible capacity for work. His curiosity, his sense of the ludicrous, his sharp eye and sensitive ear, made him an excellent reporter of North American babeties and barbarities, equaled, perhaps, only by the more embittered humorist, Ring Lardner. He thoroughly enjoyed his life, and he had an audience with whom he was in close rapport.

But his writing, his style, his ideas did not develop. He kept repeating himself, turning out novels on medical research, social work, race relations, and the like without sufficiently engaging himself with the materials he mechanically collected. In a self-portrait written as early as 1927, Lewis presented himself as a master of talk 'in certain of its minor and more flippant and hysterical phases,' but he confessed that when his audience knew him well, they found him repeating these parlor tricks over and over again, as childishly

as the village clowns described in his own *Main Street*. He may have been judging himself too harshly, but his diagnosis was prophetic: Lewis the parodist ended by parodying himself.

*Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Elmer Gantry*—his three best novels, in my opinion—are marred by the faults that disfigure the books that followed them, but they are the works of the Red Indian, fiercely alert and stalking his quarry. Lewis justly prided himself on his ‘real, fiery, almost reckless hatred of hypocrisy’ even while suspecting himself at the same time of ignoring the virtues of his victims ‘and picking out the few vices into which they have been betrayed by custom and economic necessity.’

In *Main Street*, Lewis’ anger and good nature, his rancor and his magnanimity are blended; the ‘harmless jackasses,’ to borrow the words of Mencken, have not yet gradually converted themselves ‘into loathsome scoundrels,’ as they occasionally do in his later books. He castigates his beloved middle class unmercifully, exaggerates its unlovely features, but he does not withhold his confidence in its better instincts. *Babbitt*, as Edith Wharton wrote to him, has ‘more life and glow and abundance,’ than *Main Street* but Babbitt himself is an unreflective caricature, so immersed in Zenith that Lewis was ‘obliged to do the seeing and comparing for him.’”

Daniel Aaron  
“Sinclair Lewis: *Main Street*”  
*The American Novel*  
(Basic Books 1965) 174-75, 166-67, 170, 177-78  
ed. Wallace Stegner

“Satirists give us new vocabularies for showing how ideals degenerate into follies. Sinclair Lewis performed that service for the 1920s. The titles of his two major novels, *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, came quickly to summarize for his generation the mediocrity and narrowness of small-town life—its corruption of the American dream through an infatuation with boosterism and a worship of material wealth, as well as its betrayal of individualism through an intolerant fear of behavior that departed from accepted norms. As much as any writer of his time, Lewis extended into direct encounter with the culture of the 1920s the view of stultifying small-town life that we associate with Sarah Orne Jewett and Sherwood Anderson....

Lewis’s major themes reach back through Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology* to the ‘Whilomville’ stories of Stephen Crane and the novels of William Dean Howells. In Mark Twain’s ‘The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,’ the Dawson’s Landing setting of *Puddn’head Wilson*, and the river town described in *Huckleberry Finn*, we can locate the literary origins of similarly satiric views of village life. But it was in Lewis’s novels, even more than Mencken’s essays on American ‘boobery,’ that lifted these themes to prominence immediately after World War I. In *Main Street*, Lewis presents a character who embodies some of the best and combats some of the worst qualities of ‘middletown’ America. In *Babbitt*, he presents a character who embodies some of the worst forms of boosterism, materialism, and intolerance yet retains deeper needs and desires that he struggles to express.

If Sinclair Lewis set out to deflate myths—by satirizing evangelical preachers on the make, shrewd yet limited businessmen, hypocritical doctors and teachers, and racial bigots—he also tried to create myths of his own. This tendency is most evident in *Arrowsmith*, in which an idealistic young doctor devoted to research is pitted against people who want to exploit his contributions for profit. Satire lends itself to good/bad, either/or conflicts, and Lewis liked to pit knights of idealism against dragons of cynical materialism. As a result, the fiction that won Lewis acclaim and helped change American literature also brought him vilification. To some readers, his works offered revelations of the unfulfilled dreams and the rising discontent of people who find little sense of shared happiness in the organizations they join, fleeting pleasure in the gadgets they buy, and limited fulfillment in the values they boost; to others, his works represented unfair depictions or even bitter denunciations of the American way of life.

Both *Main Street* and *Babbitt* draw heavily on the qualities that most clearly marked Lewis’s dominant frame of mind during his youth and apprenticeship: his uneasy estrangement and his restless longings. In addition, however, these novels depend heavily on his capacity for close attention to the local and the immediate. The clothes and manners, the mores and gadgets, the foibles and hypocrisies, the emptiness and aspirations of ‘middletown’ America form the center of his best fiction. Inseparable from his capacity for

close observation is the characteristic ambivalence he acquired early and cultivated throughout his life—of estrangement and kinship, judgment and affection. In his crude yet telling art, close familiarity and a detached, even bitter perspective mingle with youthful yearning. As a result, his fiction combines satire, realism, and romance in shifting and sometimes strained combinations.

In some respects, he was as much a journalist of the muckraking tradition of the generation that immediately preceded him (producing, for example, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*) as he was a novelist. Like the muckrakers, he was skilled at satirizing his victims. His portrayals of Babbitt and Dodsworth, however, allowed Lewis to show compassion for his small-town go-getters; he recognized the basic pathos of their mistaken devotion to the idols of the marketplace—which William James called 'the bitch-goddess success.' When Lewis set out directly to celebrate idealistic young devotees of freedom or simply to debunk village philistines and corporate crooks, his work lost its edge. It possessed staying power only when his need to flail his misguided fools was balanced by his sense of compassion for them. In *Arrowsmith* and *Elmer Gantry*, and above all in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, he exposes the sometimes pathetic and sometimes terrible inadequacies of the commonplace."

David Minter  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 1200-02

Michael Hollister (2015)