

ANALYSIS

Arrowsmith (1925)

Sinclair Lewis

(1885-1951)

“The public expected that after a village and a town Lewis would next write about a large city. He chose not a place but a profession. Grandson, son, nephew, and brother of doctors, he knew the lives of medical families and may have felt, as the sons of American country doctors commonly do, some guilt over not choosing that career himself. There was no current argument about the profession of medicine in which *Arrowsmith* (1925) might take sides. It was the life story of a hero who was successively country doctor, public health official, pathologist in a fashionable clinic, bacteriologist in an institute for medical research, and commissioner sent to fight a plague in the West Indies.

The book covers much territory, and it does for an American profession what no other novel has ever done. Carol had been often foolish, Babbitt feeble. *Arrowsmith* has a more genuine heroism in his passion for scientific integrity. He demandingly looks for it in one grade of his profession after another; when he has despaired of finding it he retires to be a hermit of science, in a lonely laboratory in Vermont. There is something Faustian, not to say literary, in *Arrowsmith*'s prayer: ‘God give me a quiet and relentless anger against all pretense and all pretentious work and all work left slack and unfinished.... God give me strength not to trust in God!’ There is something true to an honored American tradition in *Arrowsmith*'s retirement. He turns his back on what seem to him worldly confusions and short-sighted compromises, to do his true work in the wilderness, as Daniel Boone and Leatherstocking in the eighteenth century had turned away from the settlements which they thought crowded and corrupt.

This heroic spirit in *Arrowsmith* gave fire to his story. But the story itself was far from traditional. It was studied from the most contemporary facts, observed by Lewis himself or derived from the first-hand knowledge of Paul De Kruif, who accompanied Lewis on a cruise to the West Indies for material on tropical conditions. *Arrowsmith* is more than a simple hero of science. He is very much an individual, divided in will, specific in emotions, generous, charming, and irritating. Leora his first wife is the most convincing and affecting of all Lewis's women, and Gottlieb, *Arrowsmith*'s great teacher, seems actually to be great. The book has memorable episodes, as diverse as the roaring burlesque of the Pickerbaugh campaigns and the pathetic death of Leora. Partly with the help of an admirable presentation on the screen, the story of *Arrowsmith* became one of the best known of modern American stories, known for its characters and incidents rather than for any such brilliant epithets as *Main Street* and *Babbitt*.”

Carl Van Doren

The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 308-09

“Martin *Arrowsmith* attends the University of Winnemac, in a Midwestern state, where he is influenced by Max Gottlieb, a sincere though sardonic bacteriologist. At college he marries Leora Tozer, a nursing student. They settle in Wheatsylvania, N.D., but his medical practice there is so small that he is forced to accept a post in the health department of Nautilus, Iowa. Disillusioned by the charlatany of his superior, Dr. Almus Pickerbaugh, Martin leaves this post to enter a fashionable Chicago clinic. After further disappointment, he joins Gottlieb at the McGurk Institute in New York, hoping to find in altruistic research the relief he desires from publicity-seeking and money-grabbing commercial medicine. Martin is now tolerably happy, disturbed only by the patronizing visits of Capitola McGurk, wife of the founder, and by the demand that he turn out results to make newspaper copy.

His actual discovery of an ‘X Principle,’ an organism that preys on bacteria, is not publicized until a Frenchman has announced a similar discovery. When an epidemic breaks out on the West Indian island of St. Hubert, Gottlieb urges Martin to seize this opportunity to test the efficacy of his ‘bacteriophage.’ With

Leora and Gustaf Sondelius, a titanic Swedish scientist, he goes to the stricken settlement. Leora and Sondelius die of the plague, after which Martin, instead of maintaining rigid scientific controls, administers the serum indiscriminately, thus destroying the results of his experiment. He returns to New York to marry a rich widow, whose social life interferes with his work. Finally, with Terry Wickett, an uncouth but conscientious chemist, he leaves the McGurk Institute and his wife, establishing himself on a Vermont farm to manufacture serum and pursue his research.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Martin Arrowsmith is much closer than Babbitt to Lewis himself. His early environment is shoddy and materialistic, but he gets some real education and has more self-knowledge at the beginning of his career than Babbitt ever acquired. He chooses the hard way of science, and in his muddled and inconsistent course, fights through the shams and compromises, the temptations and false values, and finally the commercialized idealism of the vested interests of the medical profession. Babbitt intended to be a lawyer and to defend the rights of the poor. Martin does become the scientist he wished to be, learning on the way what real service to the community means, and the price that has to be paid by a searcher for the truth.

In *Arrowsmith* appears the first really likable woman in Lewis’ novels. His women are usually mischief makers, or are possessive, like Martin’s second wife from whom he escapes into the happiness of pure research, or negligible, like Mrs. Babbitt. Leora, Martin’s first wife, never wavers in faith in her husband and the protection of his personality. Her values as a wife are sound and genuine. She plays her man’s game—is indifferent to anything else. For Sinclair Lewis was no feminist. Indeed, a much later book, *Cass Timberlane* (1945), contains some of the most violent attacks on women ever written in America, and the thesis that American men are afraid of their wives. Yet it is also a setting for Jinny Timberlane, one of his most engaging characters.

Arrowsmith is Lewis’ most informative book, and in it he again showed that his scope was broader, if his searching less deep, than that of his contemporaries. He was so fascinated with America that he could not stop with its values but rushed on to get the whole vast panorama, as he saw it, down on paper. He gorged his reader on dramatic fact. The problem of *Arrowsmith* was how to stay on the side of the angels. But Lewis did no cheek-turning. He could not endure what he regarded as moral cowardice or hypocrisy. This made him, sometimes, unjust and unfair. He was the most powerful novelist of the decade when American fiction in general matured in scope and in art. He was not so powerful as the pioneer Dreiser, but was more accomplished in craftsmanship... Nor had he the evocative quality of perfected art in which Willa Cather was a master.”

Henry Seidel Canby
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-83) 1227

“*Arrowsmith*, written after arduous specialized study and travel, with Paul de Kruif as technical adviser, has less wistfulness and more affirmation, for Lewis sincerely believed in the ‘values’ of science, that is to say in ‘truth’ established by an experimental process which can be checked by other investigators. So *Arrowsmith* prays: ‘God give me unclouded eyes and freedom from haste. God give me a quiet and relentless anger against all pretense...’ *Arrowsmith* stands with *Dodsworth* and *Cass Timberlane* as marking Lewis’s closest approach to the realistic method, but every type of medical chicanery is pilloried somewhere in its pages.”

Edward Wagenknecht
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 358-59

“*Arrowsmith* presents a more positive idealism than any other work of Lewis. The author’s father, a grandfather, an uncle, and a brother were all doctors. Encountering the profession in early life as he did, he retained a permanent respect for medicine and viewed it as one of the few fields in which true devotion and

sincerity were possible. In *Arrowsmith* he portrays a hero who embodies his own personal ideal more than any of his other characters.

Martin Arrowsmith, the protagonist, is fascinated with medicine from boyhood. He struggles to educate himself and is eventually admitted to medical school. There he meets his first disillusionment; he finds that few of his fellow students and almost none of the doctors on the staff share his idealistic devotion to pure medicine. He begins to realize he will have to make a choice between a profitable, complacent career as a fashionable physician and a consecrated life as a research scientist. The rest of the novel follows the conflict between Arrowsmith's sincere idealism and the cynicism, selfishness, and muddled incompetency of most of the other doctors he meets. At first, influenced by Dr. Max Gottlieb, a brilliant European researcher, he determines to choose the path of pure science. He shows talent as a laboratory man, but meanwhile a personal problem intervenes. He has been courting a frivolous young graduate student; now he meets and falls in love with Leora Tozer, a nurse whose family live in a small town in North Dakota. When Leora goes home for the Christmas holidays Martin follows her, determined to make her his bride. In the small wheat town he tangles with Leora's relatives, who are narrowminded and resent the intrusion of the outsider. A prolonged conflict takes place, but eventually he marries Leora.

Now that he is a family man, Martin decides he must choose some form of medicine more lucrative than pure research. He practices for a time in North Dakota, then becomes a public health inspector in Nautilus, Iowa. When his pompous and incompetent superior Pickerbaugh is elected to Congress, Martin finds himself Director of Public Health. But his idealism and sincerity spoil his chances of becoming a popular public servant; his efforts to clean up unhealthy conditions only make him enemies among the powerful. He resigns and works for a brief period as a member of the staff of the fashionable Rouncefield Clinic in Chicago, but the cynicism of his fellow physicians disgusts him. Disillusioned by the...commercialism of the clinic, he leaves for New York and becomes an assistant in Gottlieb's laboratory. There, under the guidance of the sincere old European scientist, he begins to find himself for the first time.

The climax of his career is a struggle against a bubonic plague epidemic in the West Indies; Leora and Martin's friend Sondelius succumb to the disease, and Martin is able to conquer the epidemic only by disobeying orders from the authorities. Deprived now of his family, he consecrates himself entirely to medicine; after a desultory and ill-fated second marriage he settles down to a life of pure research on a Vermont farm. The chief theme of *Arrowsmith* is the contrast between the idealism of the true scientist and the sordid avarice of many members of the medical profession. The description of Martin's enthusiasm is related in a serious manner contrasting sharply with the satirical descriptions of other doctors, civic officials, small-town bigots, and nincompoops.

Every aspect of the medical profession is criticized: medical schools, small-town practice, public health, fashionable clinics, and even research centers, which are shown to be continually harassed by the wealthy ignoramuses who pay for them. The sincerity of Martin, Gottlieb, and Sondelius relieves this otherwise sordid picture and shows the high idealism possible in the world of science. Much of the technical detail of this novel was supplied by the science writer Paul de Kruif."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 117-18

"His impulse to write a 'heroic' novel may have arisen from a not uncommon criticism of *Main Street*—criticism that would be intensified by *Babbitt*—that Sinclair Lewis was without 'spiritual gifts'.... The novel opens with a fourteen-year-old boy in a small-town doctor's office: that is young Lewis himself in a somewhat more disorderly office than his father's. It proceeds to the medical school of the University of Winnemac, and the technical experience there could be largely his brother's, while the rather unpersuasive social experience—the fraternity life, the engagement to Madeline Fox, the Digamma Ball—are inventions in an area of experience that Lewis himself did not enter when he was at college.

From Winnemac, Martin goes to Wheatsylvania, Dakota, to take up a country medical practice. Again, this material could derive entirely from his father's experience, and the general social environment is identical with that which Lewis had already so fully explored in *Main Street*, five years before. From

Wheatsylvania, Martin proceeds to the medium-sized city of Nautilus, Iowa; and Lewis, with perfect tidiness, proceeds with him into the world of his next novel, *Babbitt*, the world of small-time hucksterdom. In Nautilus, Martin becomes involved, rather peripherally, in problems of public health, and with this material Paul de Kruif was no doubt of use, although it is hardly detailed enough to have demanded expert assistance. It carries Martin on, however, into an area of medical experience beyond simple practice, where external pressures are even more threatening to scientific purpose than they are to the physician.

It is only in Martin's next move, well after the middle of the novel, to the Rouncefield Clinic in Chicago, where he is employed as a pathologist, that the real story begins and that De Kruif became indispensable. The real story involves the conflict between an ideal of scientific research and the crass threats of commercial compromise with that ideal. The ideal had formed early in Martin's medical training at Winnemac and was consolidated when he became the assistant there to the great research scientist, Max Gottlieb. He had been deflected from his purpose into general medical practice through an unfortunate temperamental explosion of Gottlieb's and his own rash if happy marriage to Leora Tozer. (Leora, Lewis's most engaging heroine, was thought by his publishers to represent Lewis's idea of De Kruif's idea of his new wife; De Kruif had been married only a few days before they began their cruise, and his wife was with him in England while the novel was being written.)

While at the Rouncefield Clinic, operated by fashionable surgeons working for fashionable fees, Martin publishes a paper in a scientific journal that is seen by Gottlieb, now the great prima donna in the McGurk Institute of Biology in New York, and Gottlieb, after their long period of disaffection, summons Martin to him. With this reunion, Martin's ambition to become a pure scientist is consolidated and he undergoes what is nearly a ritual initiation into that pure world....

The remainder of the novel has to do, of course, with the internal politics of the McGurk Institute and the struggle of Gottlieb and Martin to preserve their ideals; the journey to the plague-stricken island and the death of Leora; Martin's triumphant return and his marriage to the wealthy and fashionable Joyce Lanyon; his rupture with the Institute and his separation from his wife and new child; his flight out of New York and out of society with one rough and ready but true friend who holds Martin's own ideals: the two of them in the Vermont wilderness where, unmolested, they will pursue their lonely truths. It is a little fantastic, that ending, and quite unpersuasive. It comes out of Sinclair Lewis's own sentimental notions about the heroic life of untrammelled nature, of nature's noblemen....

Except for the ending, *Arrowsmith* is probably Sinclair Lewis's most firmly plotted novel. His fiction is not notable for its plotting. Both *Main Street* and *Babbitt* are loosely chronicled works with only the most wavering line of plot; their importance adheres in the observed details that the novelist can shore up against that line but that do not always have very much to do with it. In *Arrowsmith*, Lewis made a conscientious effort to give some dramatic coherence to his chronologically extensive materials. It is to be observed that the great majority of the important characters are involved in the relatively early Winnemac experience, and then that one by one these characters reappear in the later action, not always very persuasively, but at least reminding us, after Martin has moved so far, that way back there was Winnemac. And one might observe, too, the final section of the novel, which attempts a kind of reprise, or, more than that, a quick casting back over all the various scenes of which the plot has been played. If this device is in some ways mechanical, it nevertheless effects a loose knot-tying of what would otherwise be many flying strings....

Martin Arrowsmith was a new hero, scientific idealism a new subject, and scientific individualism a new (and rather unscientific) perspective. And a Lewis novel was once again in the vanguard.... The variations in the pattern made this novel seem almost to present a new Lewis: Arrowsmith *was* a hero, as earlier central figures had not been; the hero, after his human fumbling, acts on a platform of clearly defined affirmation; the hero can both love and give up love; the woman whom the hero loves is a heroine, one whom contemporary readers could themselves love and admire. Leora seemed to Lewis's readers to be a 'realized' character, as no woman in his previous fiction had been, and she commanded their nearly universal respect....

Lewis was the first novelist to exploit science as a tribal symbol... Attacking materialism, he doubled his bank account.... Not only was *Arrowsmith* based on a 'spiritual idea'—selfless dedication to truth-

seeking—it also permitted its chief character to realize his ‘spiritual’ ambition, to transcend the strain and the sordid struggle that, in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, had defeated the chief characters. Sinclair Lewis had recognized at last the best as well as the worst in the American experience, and he was the most American of American novelists. Since *Arrowsmith* is still the most widely read of his novels, there may well have been more than a little substance in this enthusiastic acclaim.”

Mark Schorer
Afterword, *Arrowsmith*
(New American Library/Signet 1961) 431, 433-38

“This satiric picture of the scientist in the midst of industrialists, newspapermen, and rich women stirred up a great controversy. Lewis follows the career of Dr. Martin Arrowsmith from a small-town practice, through the health department of a small city, an ‘institute’ sponsored by a rich man and his wife, to an isolated West Indian island and an equally isolated Vermont farm. Arrowsmith encounters meanness, corruption, misunderstanding, willful obstruction, jealousy, sensationalism, race prejudice, also a modicum of nobility and idealism. Arrowsmith’s quest is in a measure a religious one—the truth of pure science. He is often frustrated, and his greatest failure comes when he himself refuses to carry to the logical extreme his test of a new serum because it means some people will die whom he might otherwise have saved. But there is frequent satire, too, as good as in *Babbitt*. By general agreement, moreover, Leora, Arrowsmith’s first wife, is the only likable woman character Lewis created.

Some of the medical lore for *Arrowsmith* came from Lewis’ observations of his own father, a physician, and perhaps from his mother, the daughter of a physician. But he depended for many of the technical details on Paul De Kruif, whose *Microbe Hunters* appeared the year after *Arrowsmith* was published. Jacques Loeb, the famous biologist, obviously suggested the character of Max Gottlieb.”

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

Michael Hollister (2015)