

ANALYSIS

Elmer Gantry (1927)

Sinclair Lewis

(1885-1951)

“Gantry is a half-educated, vulgar clergyman who is as much a villain in his profession as Arrowsmith is a hero in his. American fiction had seldom been anti-clerical. When clergymen appeared in it they were likely to be gentle village pastors or robust circuit riders on the frontier or worried ministers with worldly congregations. But the iconoclastic H. L. Mencken, to whom *Elmer Gantry* was dedicated, had for years been pointing out that many settled clergymen were ignorant and intolerant, and that there had grown up a tribe of roving evangelists who were noisy and greedy and sometimes vicious. Lewis studied the type, and other kinds of clergymen, like an anthropologist doing field work.

In his life-story of Gantry as a student in a small denominational college, as a traveling salesman, as manager and lover of a woman evangelist, as ordained minister first in the Baptist then in the Methodist church, driving ahead with unscrupulous ambition to larger and richer charges, Lewis presented his shoddy hero in a full knowledge of the details of such a life. Gantry is a bully, a sneak, a liar, a lecher, a drunkard, and an ignoramus. Lewis was accused of attacking religion, of implying that all clergymen are like Gantry. He was only telling the story of a false priest who himself committed the sins he scourged in others. The book was harsh because Lewis hated the falseness. Nothing decent in Gantry relieves his disgusting story. Without sympathy for him, Lewis gave him a character that was almost all caricature, with sensational and melodramatic coloring.”

Carl Van Doren

The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 309-10

“The brushwork is much coarser...in the portrait of the Fundamentalist scoundrel *Elmer Gantry* (1927). One of the most vivid and amusing of Lewis’s books, *Gantry* is also the most controversial, and not all the attacks upon it have been made by church-men. Walter Lippmann denounced it as ‘witch-burning to make an atheist’s holiday’ and an appalling illustration of ‘the bigotry of the antireligious.’ A novelist who pretends to be writing in behalf of a civilized life,’ declared Lippmann, ‘ought not himself to behave like a barbarian.’ That *Elmer Gantry* is caricature I do not see how anyone could deny, though I admit that no two uninformed readers would agree just where the exaggeration lies. The Village Atheist tradition has always been a minor but persistent note in the American symphony, and sometimes the unbeliever has exemplified the moral idealism of Christianity and its reverence for the individual better than those who have professed the Christian creed.

In any event, Mr. Lippmann’s are not the fundamental objections that can be made to this book. Gantry is a swine, but it is not quite adequate to call him a hypocrite; in a way, he is perfectly sincere in his response if not to the religious, at least to the ecclesiastical, life. But he can neither control his passions nor keep his mind off the main chance, and the grossness of his nature obviates the possibility of the struggle and suffering which might make the study of such a temperament in a better or more sensitive man really moving. As he kneels in prayer, on the last page of the book, when he is welcomed back by his congregation, after having been ‘cleared’ of the accusation brought against him by a woman, his heart fills with gratitude. In the same moment, he notices a new singer in the choir—‘a girl with charming ankles and lively eyes, with whom he would certainly have to become acquainted’.”

Edward Wagenknecht

*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 359-60

Michael Hollister (2015)