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From Romance to Realism: A Study of Sinclair Lewis's Early Novels Culminating in Main Street

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FROM ROMANCE TO REALISM: A STUDY OF SINCLAIR LEWIS'S

EARLY NOVELS CULMINATING IN MAIN STREET

(TITLE)

BY

Sylvia Walborn

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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In the early 1900's the words "Main Street" meant little besides a local address. There probably were some to whom the words meant smallness and mediocrity, but most felt that the midwestern American small town had nothing wrong with it. Then in 1920 the publication of Sinclair Lewis's Main Street made the title a symbol of the dullness and provincialism of small towns. But what people, then and now, do not realize is that Main Street was not Sinclair Lewis's first revelation of the "Village Virus." His first picture of Main Street with its accompanying dullness was given in Our Mr. Wrenn as Lewis showed this meek man searching for identity and rebelling against the drabness of his life. The search was treated more seriously in The Trail of the Hawk. To Una Golden in The Job there was little to keep her in the village of Panama, Pennsylvania. "To Una there was no romance in the sick mansion, no kindly democracy in the village street, no bare freedom in the hills beyond. She was not much to blame; she was a creature of action to whom this constricted town had denied all action except sweeping."¹ Although the Applebys in The Innocents were native New Yorkers, they also knew the pains of the Village Virus; for it was "to this meek race, doing the city's work and forgotten by the city they have built, belonged the Applebys."² Free Air had no one specific small-town setting, but from Schoenstrom, Minnesota, to Seattle, both Milt Daggett and Claire Boltwood were plagued by the desire for an adventure in life to escape the pangs of the Village Virus.

In order for the reader to more fully understand his concepts, Lewis defined the Village Virus in The Trail of the Hawk by having Bone Stillman

¹Sinclair Lewis, The Job (New York, 1917), p. 16.

²Sinclair Lewis, The Innocents (New York, 1917), p. 2.

explain to Carl why he should not attend the small college at Plato.

Proper! Refining! Son, son, are you going to get Joralemonized? If you want what the French folks call the grand manner, if you're going to be a tip-top, A Number 1, genuine grand senyor, or however they pronounce it, why, all right, go to it; that's one way of playing a big game. But when it comes down to a short-bit, fresh-water sewing-circle like Plato College, where an imitation scholar teaches you imitation translations of useless classics, and amble-footed girls teach you imitation party manners that'd make you just as plumb ridic'ulous in a real salon as they would in a lumber-camp, . . . Son, I've learned this in my life and I've done quite some hiking at that, even if I didn't have the book-l'arin' and the git-up-and-git to make anything out of my experience. It's a thing I ain't big enough to follow up, but I know it's there. Life is just a little old ohecker game played by the alfalfa contingent at the country store unless you've got an ambition that's too big to ever quite lasso it. You want to know that there's something ahead that's bigger and more beautiful than anything you've ever seen, and never stop till--well, till you can't follow the road any more. And anything or anybody that doesn't pack any surprises--get that?--surprises for you, is dead, and you want to slough it like a snake does its skin. You want to keep on remembering that Chicago's beyond Joralemon, and Paris beyond Chicago, and beyond Paris--well, maybe there's some big peak of the Himalayas.

In Main Street Guy Pollock explained the same thing in more detail when Carol asked him why he remained in Copher Prairie.

The Village Virus is the germ which--it's extraordinarily like the hook-worm--it infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces. You'll find it epidemic among lawyers and doctors and ministers and college-bred merchants--all these people who have had a glimpse of the world that thinks and laughs, but have returned to their swamp. I'm a perfect example. But I sh'n't pester you with my dolors. . . I decided to leave here. Stern resolution. Grasp the world. Then I found that the Village Virus had me, absolute! I didn't want to face new streets and younger men--real competition. It was too easy to go on making out conveyances and arguing ditching cases. So . . .

Certainly not all of Lewis's characters felt suffocated by the sameness of the small town. Captain Lew Golden felt that "Panama, Pennsylvania, was good enough for anybody."⁵ However, his daughter Una did not have this deep

³ Sinclair Lewis, The Trail of the Hawk (New York, 1915), pp. 49, 50.

⁴ Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York, 1920), pp. 153, 154.

⁵ Lewis, The Job, p. 4.

devotion for her home town. Even after marriage and life in the city she "now and then doubted, and looked up from the pile of her husband's white-footed black-cotton socks to question whether life need be confined to Panama and Pomberton and Schwartz."⁶

The farm wife in The Innocents expressed the same impression of life as she looked worshipfully at the wandering Applebys and said, "I wish my old man and I could do that. Gawd! I wouldn't care how cold we got. Just get away for a month! Then I'd be willing to come back here and go on cooking up messes. He goes into town almost every day in winter--he's there now--but I stay here and just work."⁷

In Free Air the Village Virus affected several, but Milt Daggett was upset by small-town complacency long before he left his home town. When he had suggested the town buy a dynamo with a gas engine to have electric lights "The hicks almost died of nervousness. . . ."⁸ And then when some of the local citizens of Schoenstrom, Minnesota, thought the Gomez-Deperdussin looked too heavy, Milt's comment was "Trouble with you fellows is you're always scared of anything that's new."⁹

The Virus affected Professor Frazer in The Trail of the Hawk by forcing him to leave the village of Plato when he could no longer withstand the gossip about him and his teachings. In the same book Carl Eriksen seemed pleased when Gertie broke the small-town boredom of Joraleason by working diligently with the Village Improvement Committee and planning a Sunday school picnic.

⁶Ibid., p. 256.

⁷Lewis, The Innocents, p. 144.

⁸Sinclair Lewis, Free Air (New York, 1919), p. 54.

⁹Ibid., p. 58.

The Village Virus reached its apex in Main Street, Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. Lewis wrote episode after episode describing the narrowness and cruelty of small-town life. Fern Mullins was forced to resign from her teaching position just as Professor Frazer had been in The Trail of the Hawk. And like Fern Mullins, Carol Kennicott, left Gopher Prairie after deciding that it was not the rusticity which drove people from small towns, but it was

. . . an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment. . . the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-sought and self-defended. It is dullness made God.

A savorless people, gueping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, cootless and thoughtless, in rocking-chairs prickly with cane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.¹⁰

Lewis's heroes consistently searched for a method of combating the Virus effectively. In the early novels it was travel and romance which strengthened them.¹¹

Mr. Wrenn, in the earliest novel, wanted to travel. He spent much time planning and saving, but it was the inheritance which gave him the means to leave his dull, dreary job. Then he tried to persuade a fellow searcher, Horton, to accompany him. When he refused, Mr. Wrenn found Istra Nash. She proved to be his first romantic love. Due largely to her influence, he returned to the United States as amore content, stronger man than he had been when he left.

The Trail of the Hawk is much more vigorous. Carl had more of a flair for adventure than did Mr. Wrenn.¹² Instead of reading travel folders

¹⁰ Lewis, Main Street, pp. 257, 258.

¹¹ Sheldon Norman Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis (New York, 1962), p. 39.

¹² Percy Boynton, More Contemporary Americans (Chicago, 1929), p. 182.

when he wanted to travel, Carl would hire a racing car and drive a hundred miles in the snow. Plato College did not offer many solutions, nor did his flying all over the country during the early days of aviation. His childhood sweetheart, Gertie, was not the answer either. The Virus never completely left him until he met Ruth Winslow who was also searching as evidenced in this passage:

'I'm afraid I'm nothing so interesting,' he said; 'but I have wanted to see new places and new things--and I've more or less seen 'em. When I've got tired of one town, I've simply up and beat it, and when I got there--wherever there was--I've looked for a job. And--Well, I haven't lost anything by it.'

Ruth answered.

'Have you really? That's the most wonderful thing to do in the world. My travels have been Cook's tours, with our own little Thomas Cook and Son right in the family--I've never even had the mad freedom of choosing between a tour of the Irish bogs and an educational pilgrimage to the shrines of celebrated brewers. My people have always chosen for me. But I've wanted-- One doesn't merely go without having an objective, or an excuse for going, I suppose.'¹³

Some characters never searched deeply, for the Village Virus was not so agonizing to them as to others. In The Job Mrs. Golden believed she could have been a romantic person if she had not married Mr. Golden. She questioned enough to be vaguely discontented but did not try to acquire understanding or knowledge.

In the same book, another character, Walter Babson, was willing to work to escape the boredom and routine of his father's farm yard. He had sufficient strength to leave Una when she refused to give him a position in her affections above that of her mother.

As soon as her father died and Una had to make decisions, she decided to leave her home town. The Virus quite often caught up with her in the city, but her ambition to succeed in business drove all else from her mind. Even her

¹³ Lewis, The Trail, p. 268.

desire to adopt a child was submerged before the desire to be a successful business woman. Schwirtz's love did not strengthen her, but Walter Babson's gave promise of so doing.

The Virus was not limited to the young. The elderly Mr. and Mrs. Appleby in The Innocents were eager to get away from the sickness surrounding their tedious lives. Their searching was not without fear, for when traveling by water Mr. Appleby tried to convince himself that he was not afraid. He kept telling himself that "It wasn't genuine fear. It was the growing pain of freedom."¹⁴ It was difficult for them to break completely with their former habits and surroundings. Even after they decided to leave a steady income to buy a tea room, they clung to such habits as arranging the furniture as it had been in their flat in New York. Mrs. Appleby especially was strengthened by the vagabond trip. The consciousness of their love for each other assisted them to hold their heads high and maintain their independence of their daughter Iulu.

In Free Air it was primarily Milt Daggett who felt the stuffiness of the tiresome people and events in his home town. Until Claire met Milt, she had not realized how confined she had been by society's niceties.

Because the auto trip across the United States at this time was an exciting adventure, Claire grew in her understanding. Love added to this gave her strength to oppose her family who felt Milt was beneath her on the social ladder. This love also gave Milt the encouragement he needed to better himself by attending college.

The optimism about the possibility of new places making for a better person is not much evident in Main Street. Unlike the earlier novels, the

¹⁴ Lewis, The Innocents, p. 14.

the focus in Main Street is more on the environment than on the individual. In the novels from Our Mr. Wrenn to Free Air, environment had been subordinate.¹⁵

It was primarily Carol who searched in Main Street. The others in Gopher Prairie, including Will, were fairly content with things as they found them. They accepted things as they happened, but they never searched. Carol wanted to reform, to rebuild, to rearrange in order to fight the Village Virus. The vacation to California and her stay in Washington helped in her adjustment, but there were no long adventures in Main Street to compare with Mr. Wrenn's trip to England in Our Mr. Wrenn. There was no active business world for Carol as there was for Una in The Job. There was no wandering aimlessly as in The Innocents. There was no cross-country auto trip as in Free Air.

Even though characters in all the early novels traveled in quest of something, Lewis always brought his heroes back to their beginnings wiser and better able to cope with the forces that had previously defeated them.¹⁶

Only in The Trail of the Hawk did the hero rise above his village origin to attain a national reputation. The others only rose slightly. Mr. Wrenn was still a clerk at the end of the story. He might have been a more contented clerk, but he was still a clerk. Seth Appleby began as a clerk in a shoe store. He ended as co-owner of a small-town shoe store. Una Golden progressed in the business world from an office girl to a minor executive in a hotel chain. Milt Daggett sold his garage in order to study engineering. Carol first entered Gopher Prairie as a happy bride with illusions of what her life was to be. She returned as a matron with one child, expecting another; but she no longer had any false perceptions of her future life with Will.

¹⁵Grebstein, p. 68.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 39.

Loneliness sometimes resulted from the searching. Mr. Wrenn felt that he was never a part of Istra's way of life, and when she left him in Caravanserai he "tried to think for the rest of the night of how deeply he was missing Morton of the cattle-beat now that---now that he had no friend in all the hostile world."¹⁷ Even as Carl Ericson grew in popularity and met many new and interesting people as he flew across the country, he felt that if he "didn't have old Martin trailing along, smoking his corn-cob pipe and saying what he thinks, I'd die of loneliness sometimes on the hike from meet to meet."¹⁸ Una Golden thought of herself as "a woman desperately hungry for life. . . a prisoner of affection and conscience . . . a woman of sterile sorrow."¹⁹ Mr. and Mrs. Appleby felt lonely in their daughter's house, surrounded by people, "they make us old, and we begging for a chance to be young and sitting here and sitting here. . . ."²⁰

It was in Main Street, however, that Lewis permitted so many people to suffer from such deep loneliness that there seemed to be no possible gratification. Miles Bjornstam accepted the town's rejection of him before his marriage, but afterwards he could not accept their obvious refusal to acknowledge his and his wife's respectability. Erik Volberg, who seemed somewhat effeminate and foppish to the townspeople, deserted Carol, his only close friend, when he realized her husband knew of his advances to her. Besides Carol there had been no one in the town who understood his frustration in not being able to exercise his talents. Even his attempt to organize a tennis tournament ended in a failure with his being excluded from the social circle.

¹⁷Sinclair Lewis, Our Mr. Wrenn (New York, 1914), p. 134.

¹⁸Lewis, The Trail of the Hawk, p. 216.

¹⁹Lewis, The Job, p. 117.

²⁰Lewis, The Innocents, p. 99.

But it was Will Kennicott who expressed the deepest loneliness as he explained to Carol why he was not going to ask her to leave Washington and return to Gopher Prairie.

It's been a whale of a fight. But I guess I've got myself to see that you won't ever stand G.P. unless you want to come back to it. I needn't say I'm crazy to have you. But I won't ask you. I just want you to know how I wait for you. Every mail I look for a letter, and when I get one I'm kind of scared to open it, I'm hoping so much that you're coming back. Evenings -----You know I didn't open the cottage down at the lake at all, this past summer. Simply couldn't stand all the others laughing and swimming, and you not there. I used to sit on the porch in town, and I----I couldn't get over the feeling that you'd simply run up to the drug store and would be right back, and till after it got dark I'd catch myself watching, looking up the street, and you never came, and the house was so empty and still that I didn't like to go in. And sometimes I fell asleep there, in my chair, and didn't wake up till after midnight, and the house--Oh, the devil! Please get me, Carrie. I just want you to know how welcome you'll be if you ever do come. But I'm not asking you to.²¹

The dominant characteristic of the five early novels is that they are all romances.²² These idyllic romances presented a picture of American middle-class success. His early heroes did set out on new adventures, did gain poise and knowledge, but they never forgot who they were. They all began and ended as simple and lowly people, with the exception of Carl Ericson who for a short time gained the attention of the entire country.²³

In all five of the early novels the characters were content when the story ended. Mr. Wrenn was satisfied with his thirty-two dollar a week salary and playing draughts with Nelly. Ruth and Carl were happy going to Buenos Aires, with no definite long-range plans. Una Golden felt she would be content to continue as a career woman after marrying Walter Babson, but would feel more fulfillment if they had a baby. The Applebys were proud in their newly found

²¹Lewis, Main Street, p. 420.

²²Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life (New York, 1961), p. 15.

²³Grabstein, p. 64.

small-town haven. Milt and Claire believed their story was only beginning.

But in Main Street all did not end so happily. Even though Carol returned to Will and to Gopher Prairie, she still would not admit defeat.

Though she should return, she said, she would not be utterly defeated. She was glad of her rebellion. The prairie was no longer empty land in the sun-glare; it was the living tawny beast which she had fought and made beautiful by fighting; and in the village streets were shadows of her desires and the sound of her marching and the seeds of mystery and greatness.²⁴

When she returned home, Will admitted he liked his privacy as well as she did; therefore he did not invite her to share his room. The story ended with Will thinking about the trivial, every-day things in their lives. This endless concern for the commonplace things was one of the things which had originally given Carol reason to rebel.

The dominant theme of Lewis's early romantic novels was education--improvement, progress, finding the proper set of ideals and making them reality.²⁵ In these books, book learning is subordinate to learning about manners, appearances, practical or vocational skills, becoming keener observers of human nature and better able to handle people. But the characters never reach so high that the reader cannot identify with them.²⁶

This formal education theme was evident in Our Mr. Wrenn when Dr. Mittyford did not censure Mr. Wrenn for his lack of literary knowledge. But travel interested Mr. Wrenn more and occupied more of his time. It was largely Istra's teachings which made him able to return to his job and be once a successful man. In The Trail of the Hawk Carl Eriksen sought a college education until his fellow-thinker, Professor Frazer, was dismissed for his heresies. Then Carl

²⁴Lewis, Main Street, p. 424.

²⁵Grebstein, p. 64.

²⁶Ibid., p. 40.

left also. Travel replaced college. Carl had wanted a college education because he believed a formal education was necessary if he was ever to be worthy of Gertie. He felt clumsy beside her and her friends. But not all the students at Plate College took school seriously. They called Genie Linderbeck queer because he was "interested in Greek books quite outside of the course, fond of drinking tea, and devoid of merit in the three manly arts--athletics, flirting, and breaking rules by smoking."²⁷ Learning to fly and meeting Ruth made Carl realize "that life's real adventure is not adventuring, but finding the play-mate with whom to quest life's meaning."²⁸ He was learning of life beyond the school walls.

The farm woman in Free Air was proud that her children had gone to public school and learned to speak socially approved English:

Oh, miss, I don't know vot I should do. My boys go on the public school, and thay apeak American just so goot as you. Oh, I want man lets me luff America. But papa he says it is an Unsinny; you got the money, he says, nobody should care if you are American or Old Country people. I should wish I could ride one in an automobile! But--I am so 'shamed, so 'shamed that I must sit and see my Mann make this. Forty years I been married to him, and pretty soon I die---²⁹

Apparently her husband did not feel the same way. In the same novel Milt attended engineering school, but he realized that a formal education was not sufficient. He also took lessons in tennis, dancing, and bridge in order that he could better fit into the society that Claire knew.

The Applebys in The Innocents had trouble developing a practical skill in order to earn a livelihood. When they did, it also gave them the knowledge of how to handle their daughter Lulu.

²⁷Lewis, The Trail of the Hawk, p. 65.

²⁸Ibid., p. 378.

²⁹Lewis, Free Air, p. 19.

Not much was written about formal education in Main Street. Both Will and Carol appreciated their schooling, but did not brag about it. Without it Will could never have become the respected doctor that he was, and Carol might not have felt that she had the necessary knowledge to improve the town. Neither Miles, Erik, Fern, or Carol are able to accept what they see nor creatively promote any progress or improvement.

Quite often a character's reading material revealed as much about him as his words or actions. Istra Nash made Mr. Wrenn feel that his knowledge of Kipling and Shakespeare was meager compared to her knowledge of Nietzsche. Dr. Mittyford overwhelmed him with his talk of Walter Pater, Shelley, The Rubaiyat, and Aeschylus. At times Una Golden was serious in her reading, but usually it was only when she had a definite purpose in mind, such as succeeding in the business world. During her marriage to Schwirtz when her career seemed ended, she read light novels which acted as a drug. In keeping with his character, Schwirtz sought escape in reading detective stories after he was dismissed. Old Mr. Appleby read to pass the time when he had no work. Milt's reading was rather haphazard until he met Ruth. Then he became more systematic and even bought a rhetoric to study. It was in Main Street that Lewis caused people's reading habits to become of even greater importance. Carol's low opinion of Gopher Prairie's natural habits was substantiated by the shallow reading habits of some citizens as revealed at the first party:

. . .Chet Dashaway leaned over and said asthmatically, 'Say, uh, have you been reading this serial 'Two Out' in Tingling Tales? Corking yarn! Gosh, the fellow that wrote it certainly can sling baseball slang!'

The others tried to look literary. Harry Haydock offered 'Juanita is a great hand for reading high-class stuff, like 'Mid of the Magnolias' by this Sara Hetwiggin Butts, and 'Riders of Ranch Reckless'. Books. But no, he glanced about importantly, as one convinced that no other here had ever been in so strange a plight, 'I'm so darn busy I don't have much time to read.'

'I never read anything I can't check against,' said Sam Clark. Thus ended the literary portion of the conversation. . . .³⁰

Will failed to understand why Carol wanted to buy books when the library already had so many:

The authors whom she read were most of them frightfully annoyed by the Vida Sherwins. They were young American sociologists, young English realists, Russian horrorists; Anatole France, Rolland, ~~Remo~~, Wells, Shaw, Key, Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Henry Mencken, and all the other subversive philosophers and artists whom women were consulting everywhere, in batik-curtained studios in New York, in Kansas farmhouses, San Francisco drawing-rooms, Alabama schools for Negroes. From them she got the same confused desire which the million other women felt; the same determination to be class-conscious without discovering the class of which she was to be conscious.³¹

Carol was surprised, however, when she discovered that not all the people read superficially. Some, such as Dr. Westlake and Lyman Cass, had read and were able to quote books that even her father had never read.

Lewis's concern with the common place went beyond such details as people's reading habits. As a romanticist Lewis was concerned with the regeneration of character.³² Mr. Wrenn accomplished this to a certain extent as he became more masterful to his employer, Mr. Guilfogle, and as he helped Charley Carpenter to quit drinking. Una Golden changed after her mother's death as she bravely sold the old furniture which had been a part of her entire life and moved into a rooming house among strangers. Her move into an apartment with Mrs. Lawrence demanded an even greater adjustment. However, it was the Applebys who made the most drastic change. These elderly heroes left the physical comfort of their home in order to start a business of their own. Again they left comfort when they left their daughter's home to become travelers. It is

³⁰Lewis, Main Street, p. 54.

³¹Ibid., p. 256.

³²Grebstein, p. 52.

especially noteworthy that Mother, who had always been submissive, was able to browbeat an entire sheriff's posse. Perhaps equally heroic was Father's bluff of an entire town into thinking he was an experienced traveler capable of being an executive.

With the possible exception of Will, there was no dramatic regeneration of characters in Main Street. Most of the townspeople were content to go on as they had in the past. The Scandinavian hired girls and others who were dissatisfied with conditions left. In the beginning Carol disliked what she saw in Gopher Prairie, and she had not changed her outlook when the book ended.

In the early novels Lewis's concern with the commonplace is quite evident, but his concern is with a surface realism, or a realistic description of the physical environment.³³ And because Lewis was a romanticist, he was homesy and folksy and opposed people whom he suspected of thinking of themselves as being superior.³⁴ He went into great detail to describe Wrenn's selling the Dixieland Inkwell. It added little to the plot but tended to cast a halo of romance about the whole process of selling. The description of Mrs. Arty's boarding house tended to make it all much more glamorous than it was:

Several persons (they seemed dozens, in their liveliness) were singing and shouting to piano music, in the midst of a general redness and brightness of furnishings—red paper and worn red carpet and a high ceiling with circular mouldings tinted in pink. Hand-painted pictures of old mills and ladies breeding over salmon sunsets, and an especially hand-painted Christmas scene with snow of inlaid mother-of-pearl, animated the walls. On a golden-oak center-table was a large lamp with a mosaic shade, and through its mingled bits of green and red and pearl glass stormed the brilliance of a mantle-light.

The room was crowded with tufted plush and imitation-leather chairs, side-tables and corner brackets, a couch and a 'lady's

³³ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁴ Scherer, p. 81.

desk.' Green and red and yellow vases adorned with figures of youthful lovers crammed the top of the piano at the farther end of the room and the polished black marble mantel of the fireplace. The glaring gas raced the hearth-fire for snap and glare and excitement. The profusion of furniture was like a tumult; the redness and oakness and polishedness of furniture was a dizzying activity; and it was all overwhelmingly magnified by the laughter and singing about the piano.³⁵

In his next novel, The Trail of the Hawk, Lewis wrote in great detail of Carl's plane race to New Haven. Carl noted that

The sun was ever brighter; the horizon ever wider, rimming the saucer-shaped earth. When he flew near the Sound he saw that the fog had almost passed. The water was gentle and colored like pearl, lapping the sands, smoking toward the radiant sky. He passed over summer cottages, vacant and asleep, with fantastic holiday roofs of red and green. Gulls soared like flying sickles of silver over the opal sea. Even for the racer there was peace.³⁶

The particulars of the Appleby's newly furnished tea room were even more carefully given. Mr. Appleby was so concerned about not over-burdening his wife that he did all the purchasing. He bought

Tea-cups and saucers gilded like shaving-mugs and equally thick. Golden-oak chairs of mid-Chautauquan patterns, with backs of saw-mill Heppelwhite; chairs of cane and rattan with fussy scrolls and curls of wicker, the backs set askew. Reed tables with gollops of wicker; plain black wooden tables that were like kitchen tables once removed; folding-tables that may have been suitable to cardplaying, if you didn't play anything more exciting than casino. Flat silver that was heavily plated except where it was likely to wear. Tea-pots of mottled glaze, and cream-jugs with knobs of gilt, and square china ash-trays on which one instinctively expected to find the legend 'Souvenir of Niagara Falls.' Too many cake-baskets and too few sugar-bowls. Dark blue plates with warts on the edges and melancholy landscapes painted in the centers. Chintzes and wall-papers of patterns fashionable in 1890. Tea-cartons that had the most inspiring labels; cocoa that was bitter and pepper that was mild; preserves that were generous with hayseed and glucose.³⁷

Even the menu had gilt edges with embossed forget-me-nots.

³⁵ Lewis, Our Mr. Wrenn, p. 169.

³⁶ Lewis, The Trail of the Hawk, p. 196.

³⁷ Lewis, The Innocents, p. 37.

long, and all lovely marble; and on it there was a great big lamp with the biggest shade you ever saw--all different kinds colored glass stuck together; and the soda spouts, they were silver, and they came right out of the bottom of the lampstand. . .

Bea stood on the corner of Main Street and Washington Avenue. The roar of the city began to frighten her. There were five automobiles on the street all at the same time. . .⁴⁰

What Lewis was saying was that what you see depends on what you are.⁴¹

In the romances Lewis sometimes became sentimental,⁴² but this was largely confined to the first five novels. Mr. Wrenn's farewell to Istra was much more sentimental than Carol's farewell to Will. Istra spoke of future plans and then called to Mr. Wrenn by her pet name, "O, Mouse, wait just a moment,"⁴³ Then she kissed him farewell and ran upstairs. Carol's leave-taking was not so tender. After Will declared that Carol was his whole life, she abruptly asked, "You have a right to me if you can keep me. Can you?"⁴⁴ He did not answer, and she left in a month, remembering momentarily that she could not have gone if Will had not given her money. But she went anyway.

In Free Air it was Lady Vere de Veres, Milt's cat, which caused him to act sentimentally. When she was killed by a bear, Milt said, "She's--she's dead."⁴⁵ He was crying. Claire's response was quite touching. "Oh Milt--Last night you said Vere was all the family you had. You have the Boltwoods now!"⁴⁶ Pinky's death in the same novel did not arouse nearly as much feeling in either Milt or Claire.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 42, 43.

⁴¹Schorer, p. 81.

⁴²Ibid., p. 79.

⁴³Lewis, Our Mr. Wrenn, p. 232.

⁴⁴Lewis, Main Street, p. 405.

⁴⁵Lewis, Free Air, p. 151.

⁴⁶Ibid.

The Job had much more actual realism in it than the two previous novels.⁴⁷ It was only when Una's mother died that Lewis permitted her to indulge in any genuine tender feelings about her mother. As she lay on the floor beside the bed where her dead mother rested, she spoke with sincere feelings:

Mother. . .Mother. . .Don't you hear me? It's Una calling. Can't you answer me this one last time? Oh, mother, think, mother dear, I can't ever hear your voice again if you don't speak to me now. . . Don't you remember how we went home to Panama, our last vacation? Don't you remember how happy we were down at the lake? Little mother, you haven't forgotten, have you? Even if you don't answer, you know I'm watching by you, don't you? See, I'm kissing your hand. Oh, you did want me to sleep near you again, this last night--Oh, my God! oh, my God! the last night I shall ever spend with her, the very last, last night.⁴⁸

The Innocents has the greatest display of sentimentality.⁴⁹ For example, when wealthy Mrs. Carter and her daughter finally patronized the Appleby's tea room, their conversation was over-heard by Father who was dismayed to hear them speak haughtily of the room he had so carefully and lovingly decorated. When they left him four dimes as a tip, he threw them in the fire-place. Later he retrieved them because "Mother would need all the money he could get for her in the coming wintry days of failure--failure he himself had brought upon her."⁵⁰ As fewer and fewer customers came to the tea room, the Applebys would sit "in the rose-arbor as though they were soon to lose it. The roses were dead now, but a bank of purple asters grew by the laurel-bushes, and in the garden plucky pansies withstood the chill. They tried to keep up a pretense of happiness, but always they were listening--listening."⁵¹

After the Applebys gave up the tea room and returned to New York, it

⁴⁷Grebstein, p. 53.

⁴⁸Lewis, The Job, p. 127.

⁴⁹Grebstein, p. 53.

⁵⁰Lewis, The Innocents, p. 82.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 87.

was not easy for them to secure jobs. Mr. Appleby's old employer had died, and his son would not give the old man the job he had once had. Both Mother and Father saved in order to buy the other a Christmas gift. She bought him a second-hand coat for three dollars, and by hoarding his pennies he saved seven dollars for her. Their festivity was short-lived, however. After celebrating by eating in a restaurant, Father was dismayed to find that his overcoat had been stolen. To add to their grief, the seven dollars had been in one of the coat pockets. As conditions grew worse, they made elaborate plans for suicide. Father could not go through with the attempt, for his thoughts kept returning to his wife. "I must play to Mother again! Where is she? She needs me. She's way off somewhere; she's helpless; she's calling for me--my poor little girl."⁵² He reached for a plate, threw it through a window permitting fresh air to enter; and they discovered that they could again make plans for the future.

Each of the early novels had some satire, but it was usually directed at characters instead of institutions. Because it was scattered and without a definite frame of reference, it usually lacked the impact it might have exerted.⁵³ For example, Dr. Mittyford in Our Mr. Wrenn was shown as a stuffy and pompous academic professor. In The Trail of the Hawk another college personage, President Wood of Plato College, urged the students not to attend the University of Chicago because in the science department they were teaching evolution. The satire was not directed at learning but at the way it was being misdirected.

Papa Gouraff, another victim of Lewis's satire, impressed Mr. Wrenn. "Papa Gouraff was a Russian Jew who had been a police spy in Poland and a hotel

⁵²Lewis, The Innocents, p. 136.

⁵³Grebstein, p. 54.

proprietor in Mogador, where he called himself Turkish and married a renegade Armenian. He had a nose like a sickle and a neck like a blue-gum nigger. He hoped that the place would degenerate into a Bohemian restaurant where liberal clergymen would think they were slumming, and barbers would think they were entertaining society, so he always wore a fez and talked bad Arabic."⁵⁴

In The Trail of the Hawk it was the young married woman called Tottykins whom Lewis described thus:

Tottykins the fair; Tottykins the modern; Tottykins who had read Three Weeks and nearly all of a wicked novel in French, and wore a large gold cross; Tottykins who worked so hard in her little flat that she had to rest all of every afternoon and morning; Tottykins the advanced and liberal—yet without any of the extremes of socialists and artists and vegetarians and other ill-conditioned persons who do not attend St. Orgul's; Tottykins the firmly domestic, whose husband grew more worried every year; Tottykins the intensely cultured and inquisitive about life, the primitively free and pervasively original, who announced in public places that she wanted always to live like the spirit of the Dancing Bacchante statue, but had the assistant rector of St. Orgul's in for coffee, every fourth Monday evening.⁵⁵

The social system came under criticism in The Trail of the Hawk as Professor Frazer spoke:

. . . Do you realize that I am not suggesting that there might possibly some day be a revolution in America, but rather that now I am stating that there is, this minute, and for some years has been, an actual state of warfare between capital and labor? Do you know that daily more people are saying openly and violently that we starve our poor, we stuff our own children with useless bookishness, and work the children of others in mills and let them sell papers on the streets in red-light districts at night, and thereby prove our state nothing short of insane? If you tell me that there is no revolution because there are no barricades, I point to actual battles at Homestead, Pullman, and the rest. If you say that there has been no declaration of war, open war, I shall read you editorials from The Appeal to Reason.⁵⁶

In the same novel Lewis became more of a realist and critic than he had

⁵⁴ Lewis, Our Mr. Wrenn, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Lewis, The Trail of the Hawk, p. 243.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 191.

been in the earlier novel as evidenced by his description of the East Side of New York:

The East Side of New York. A whirlwind of noise and smell and hovering shadows. The jargon of Jewish matrons in brown shawls and orthodox wigs, chaffering for cabbages and black cotton stockings and gray woolen undershirts with amiable push-cart proprietors who had beards so prophetic that it was startling to see a frivolous cigarette amid the reverend mass. The scent of fried fish and decaying bits of kosher meat, and hallways as damnably rotten of floor as they were profitable to New York's nicest circles. The tall gloom of six-story tenements that made a prison wall of dulled yellow, bristling with bedding-piled fire-escapes and the curious heads of frowzy women. A potpourri of Russian signs, Yiddish newspapers, synagogues with six-pointed gilt stars, bakeries with piles of rye bread crawling with caraway-seeds, shops for renting wedding finery that looked as if it could never fit any one, second-hand furniture-shops with folding iron beds, a filthy baby holding a baby slightly younger and filthier, many cats slinking from pile to pile of rubbish, and a withered geranium in a tin can whose label was hanging loose and showed rust-stains amid the dry paste on its back. Everywhere crowds of voluble Jews in dark clothes, and noisily playing children that catapulted into your legs. The lunger-blocks in which we train the victims of Russian tyranny to appreciate our freedom. A whirlwind of alien ugliness and foul smells and incessant roar and the deathless ambition of young Jews to know Ibsen and syndicalism. It swamped the courage of Hungry Carl as he roamed through Rivington Street and Essex and Hester, vainly seeking jobs from shopkeepers too poor to be able to bathe.⁵⁷

In The Job Lewis became even more of a realist.⁵⁸ The opening showed the effects of the small-town environment on various characters; and as the story proceeded, the widowed mother was shown clutching desperately to her only daughter. Lewis did not show the business world as a thing of beauty. Instead, it was something ugly and often lonely. He spoke out against injustice in comments such as the following: "The engineers had done their work well, made a great thought in steel and cement. And then the businessmen and bureaucrats had made the great thought a curse."⁵⁹

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 148.

⁵⁸Grebstein, p. 56.

⁵⁹Lewis, The Job, p. 134.

Because Lulu in The Innocents thought herself superior to her parents, Lewis ridiculed her, even her taste in furniture:

The Hartwigs' modest residence was the last word in cement and small useless side-tables and all modern inconveniences. The furnace heat made you sneeze, and the chairs, which were large and tufted, creaked. In the dining-room was an electrolier made of seven kinds of inimical colored glass, and a plate-rack from which were hung department-store steins. On the parlor table was a kodak album with views of Harry in every stage of absurdity. . . .⁶⁰

In Free Air Lewis did not seem to be aggressively fighting anything or anyone. He upset Claire slightly by the farmer whose horses were cleaner and better fed than his wife and whose new red barn made the small unpainted house seem even more crude by comparison. It was through Cousin Hattie that he attacked the social caste system as she explained to Milt that

This aristocracy west of Pittsburgh is just twice as bad as the snobbery in Boston or New York, because back there, the families have had their wealth long enough--some of 'em got it by stealing real estate in 1820, and some by selling Jamaica rum and niggers way back before the Revolutionary War--they've been respectable so long that they know mighty well and good that nobody except a Briisher is going to question their blue blood--and oh my, what good blueing third-generation money does make. But out here in God's country, the m rquises of milling and the barons of beef are still uneasy. Even their pretty women, after going to the best hair-dressers and patronising the best charities, sometimes get scared lest somebody think they haven't either brains or breeding.⁶¹

The realism and satire that had been suggested in Lewis's earlier novels became predominant in Main Street. He explained what his theme and purpose was to be in the foreword:

This is America--a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.

The town is, in our tale, called 'Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.' But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.

⁶⁰Lewis, The Innocents, p. 194.

⁶¹Lewis, Free Air, p. 355.

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.

Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark's annual hardware turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God's Country. In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor strictly moral.

Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith. Would he not betray himself an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths?⁶²

The romance was gone. Lewis's chief concern was with satire and realism. The theme of the book is disillusionment.⁶³ Carol first experienced it when she arrived in Gopher Prairie expecting it to be different from the other small towns through which they had just passed. The ugliness seemed to be everywhere. Then gradually she discovered that the people did not desire change. In fact, they resented anyone trying to promote it. They felt comfortable with things as they had always known them. Carol's first attempt to change the type of entertainment by having a Chinese party seemed in vain for "The week after, the Chet Dashaways gave a party. The circle of mourners kept its place all evening, and Dave Dyer did the 'stunt' of the Norwegian and the hen."⁶⁴ Even the refreshments and conversation topics remained unchanged.

It was the narrowness and pettiness of the people which most impressed Carol. The Jolly Seventeen Club was a vehicle to spread gossip and maintain the status quo. The Club defended the town against Carol's accusations and spoke out against the Scandinavians even though it was upon their purchases that the town depended.

⁶²Lewis, Main Street, p. 6.

⁶³Grebstein, p. 64.

⁶⁴Lewis, Main Street, p. 71.

Carol was even more distressed when she learned from Vida Sherwin that the town was castigating her and ridiculing her actions. Lewis emphasized the cruelty of gossip by having Carol overhear two teenagers discussing her:

Say, jever notice how Mrs. Kennicott fusses around the house? Other evening when I was coming over here, she'd forgot to pull down the curtain, and I watched her for ten minutes. Jeeze, you'd 'a' died laughing. She was there all alone, and she must 'a' spent five minutes getting a picture straight. It was funny as hell the way she'd stick out her finger to straighten the picture-- doodle-dee, see my tunnin' 'ittle finger, oh my, ain't I cute, what a fine long tail my cat's got!

But say, Ear, she's some good-looker, just the same, and O Ignatz! the glad rags she must of bought for her wedding. Jever notice these low-cut dresses and these thin shimmy-shirts she wears? I had a good squint at 'em when they were gut on the line with the wash. And some ankles she's got, heh?⁶⁵

Carol saw a chance to reform the town through its chief cultural force, the Thanatopsis Club, which included the most prominent women in Gopher Prairie. But private interests opposed her everywhere. The minister's wife wanted a new church, and the school superintendent's wife wanted a new school building.

Since Main Street is chiefly a satire on the conventions of the small-town middle class, the Scandinavian immigrants were largely exempt from Lewis's satire. Most of them were farmers, with the exception of the grocers Axel Egg and Ole Jenson, who were discriminated against by the townspeople. Carol rebelled at this, but was astonished to realize that her treatment of hired girls was not much better than that of her friends. She paid her girls better than her friends did, but the sleeping room provided was quite unattractive and drab.

However, not all the Scandinavians escaped criticism. Lewis showed Erik Volberg's father as being vulgar and profane. He was not willing to

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 105.

blame himself in any way for his son's leaving the farm. He blamed Carol entirely.

The ending is not the work of either a romancer or a satirist, but a realist. Carol did return to her husband and his much-loved Main Street, but she no longer had any false perceptions of the town nor was she regenerated.

Just as Lewis wrote about ordinary things and happenings, so he wrote of ordinary people.⁶⁶ He seldom told the reader why his characters acted as they did. We see them only from without. Of the five early novels, *Istra Nash* was Lewis's most complex person. She caused pain, but she never pretended to be anything but what she was. Seldom did the people step out of character. Una Golden's move into an apartment with Mrs. Lawrence showed an adventuresome trait not known before, but the complacency of others, such as the Jolly Seventeen and Thanatopsis Club members, continued without any apparent possibility of change.

Una Golden, in her rebellion, was a forerunner of Carol, just as Bone Stillman, the village atheist in The Trail of the Hawk, was a preliminary sketch of Miles Bjorsten in Main Street. Both had read of such controversial figures as Robert Ingersoll and Karl Marx. Carol sought Mile's advice because she knew it was honest. When he left the home-talent play after the first act, she knew the play was a failure. Eric also knew Bone's advice was good when he told him to not live in books but "live in life."⁶⁷

Eddie Schwartz seemed to be more of a projection of Lewis's hatred of the opinionated business man than any other character. His speech with its catch phrases, cliches, and slang is indicative of how Lewis regarded him.⁶⁸

⁶⁶Schorer, p. 182.

⁶⁷Lewis, The Trail of the Hawk, p. 49.

⁶⁸Grebstein, p. 56.

Everything about him, even his rejection of realistic literature for love stories, seemed to show his contempt for self improvement. His speech on womanhood is an example:

Not that I want to knock the Sex, y' understand, but you know yourself, bein' a shemale, that there's an awful lot of cats among the ladies--God bless 'em--that wouldn't admit another lady was beautiful, not if she was as good-looking as Lillian Russell, corking figger and the swallest dresser in town.⁶⁹

Lewis's portrayal of S. Herbert Ross, a successful businessman in The Job is a stereotype of other self-important businessmen, such as Percy Bresnahan in Main Street.

Geoffrey Saxton in Free Air and Erik Balberg in Main Street resembled each other. Geoffrey's roughing it seemed as superficial as Erik's studying art. Both said they were in love, Erik with Carol and Geoffrey with Claire; yet each left the girl when someone opposed them.

Characters in all of Lewis's early novels tended to be flat and subordinate to the theme.⁷⁰ Carol was more realistically drawn than the earlier protagonists. Lewis consistently showed her as an inconsistent woman. Sometimes she seemed silly and vague as she sought to change the entire town. At other times she seemed sensible in her criticisms. By comparison with other men's characters, Will often seemed weak. He did not appear the vital leader like Carl Eriksen or helpful and understanding as Milt Daggett.

Lewis employed socialism as a dynamic force in his first three novels. Mr. Morton acted as Mr. Wrenn's teacher, Professor Frazer told Carl about utopian socialism after Bone Stillman had already suggested its qualities to him. Una had a longer lesson because she had two teachers, Walter Babson and Hamie Nagen. Her husband Schwirtz talked about becoming a socialist,

⁶⁹Lewis, The Job, p. 194.

⁷⁰Grebstein, p. 68.

especially after he got fired and they discussed money.

The socialist Miles Bjornstan softened his views after his marriage, but gave up trying to be respectable after the town refused to accept or help his wife. He expressed praise only for the foreman at the flour mill who was a socialist.

Even though Lewis mentioned socialists' writings and teachings, his belief in the capitalistic system is evident in that his characters did succeed, for the most part, in improving themselves, financially or otherwise. He defended the system and the employer openly in the closing of The Job.⁷¹

Lewis's comments on religion or such controversial topics as bohemianism and birth control are scattered throughout his six early books. He never let any of his characters become very deeply involved in religion.

Mr. Wrenn felt uncomfortable in a cathedral, Una's father's entire theology was compounded from the Bible, which he never opened, and the Methodist God who gave you what you wanted if you were good. She thought of becoming a Catholic after attending mass with Mrs. Lawrence but forgot it after one day. Mr. Appleby briefly thought about his salvation after he had turned on the gas jet and decided that to take one's life was wicked.

In Free Air religion never bothered the main characters; however, Claire did note a type of religious expression that she had not known when

With Milt for guide, Claire discovered a Christianity that was not of candles and shifting lights and insinuating music, nor of carpets and large pews and sound oratory, but of hoboes blinking in rows, and girls in gospel bonnets, and little silver and crimson placards of Bible texts. They stopped on a corner to listen to a Pentecostal brother, to an I.W.W. speaker, to a magnificent negro who boomed in an operatic baritone that the Day of Judgment was coming on April 11, 1923, at three in the morning.⁷²

⁷¹Ibid., p. 57.

⁷²Lewis, Free Air, p. 297.

Main Street, Gopher Prairie, was not any more concerned about religion than any of Lewis's other Main Streets. Carol and Will sometimes attended the Baptist church, but Hugh was the only Kennicott who voiced his views with sincere-sounding conviction. As he and his mother discussed Mrs. Bogart on the train when leaving Gopher Prairie, Hugh spoke about Mrs. Bogart and his religious feelings:

She gives me cookies and she tells me about the Dear Lord. You never tell me about the Dear Lord. Why don't you tell me about the Dear Lord? Auntie Bogart says I'm going to be a preacher. Can I be a preacher? Can I preach about the Dear Lord?⁷³

Mrs. Bogart's religious outpourings seemed empty when compared to her gossip and cruelty to Fern Mullins.

Istra Nash was Lewis's first Bohemian character. To Mr. Wrenn she represented passion, adventure, learning, and romance. But she caused him pain because of her extreme desire for freedom. Bohemians were nothing new to Mamie Mogen, for she grew up knowing about them. Schwirtz thought he and Una were being Bohemians as they drank liquor, played poker, and went to road-houses to sing and dance. Miss Michin's collection of Bohemians was resented by the Applebys. Carol went to a Bohemian party while living in Chicago, but it disgusted her.

It was through Percy Breshnahan that Lewis expressed his most intense dislike for Bohemians by having him remind Carol that it would have to be the steady, hard-thinking worker to accomplish what she wanted.

It was not until his third novel, The Job, that Lewis spoke of birth control. "Una had reason to suppose her husband was damaged goods. She crept to an old family doctor and had a fainting joy to find that she had escaped contamination."⁷⁴ The doctor advised her to not have a baby by Schwirtz,

⁷³ Lewis, Main Street, p. 406.

⁷⁴ Lewis, The Job, p. 257.

but there was no fear there. "She knew the ways of not having children. The practical Mr. Schwirtz had seen to that. Strangely enough, he did not object to birth-control. . . ." ⁷⁵

The subject was not mentioned again until Main Street. For a long time after their marriage, Will did not want any children, but his motives were quite different from Una's, and Carol herself reflected:

Children, yes, she wanted them, but---She was not quite ready. She had been embarrassed by Kennicott's frankness but she agreed with him that in the insane condition of civilization, which made the rearing of citizens more costly and perilous than any other crime, it was inadvisable to have children till he had made more money. She was sorry---Perhaps he had made all the mystery of love a mechanical cautiousness but---She fled from the thought with a dubious 'Some Day.'⁷⁶

Lewis's power of writing authentic dialogue was consistent from the first novel through Main Street. Mr. Wrenn spoke as the uneducated man he was. The men on the cattle boat appropriately used slangy English. Carl's vocabulary was necessarily different from Milt's in order to exaggerate the differences in their backgrounds. But it was in Main Street that much of the personality development was revealed in the dialogue. The differences among Carol Kennicott, Miles Bjornstam, Erik Balberg, Mrs. Bogart, Percy Bresnahan, Bea Sorenson, Fern Mullins, Whittier and Bessie Small, and Vida Sherwin were quite obvious when they spoke.

All of Lewis's five novels before Main Street contain adventure, romance, colorful characters, problems to be solved, plot variations, and personality struggles; but none are as convincing as Main Street. In the early books there are only occasional glimpses of Lewis as a realist and satirist. Such struggles as those of Carl's during the early days of aviation are now outdated and seem dull by comparison with modern flights into outer space.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Lewis, Main Street, p. 86.

Such trips as Claire's and Milt's are unchallenging today when transportation has been so accelerated. But Carol's conflict with the Village Virus of Gopher Prairie and her conflict with Will are still to be found in Main Streets all across the United States.

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