

Chapter III
THE LIFE OF SINCLAIR LEWIS
AND HIS WORKS

III.1. Sinclair Lewis' Life

The novels of Sinclair Lewis give a detailed picture of life in the American Middle West. Although Lewis often wrote about likable characters, his books were usually satires of society he described. In 1930, Lewis became the first American to receive the Nobel Prize for literature.

Here is the biography of Sinclair Lewis, the author of Main Street, which has been summarized and taken by the writer from certain references, such as: The American Peoples Encyclopedia Volume 12, Funk and Wagnalls Standard Reference Encyclopedia Volume 15, and The New - Book of Knowledge Volume 11.

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, on February 7, 1885. He was the son of a doctor. His father, Edwin J. Lewis, was a country doctor. Dr. Lewis named his son at birth in honor of a friend, Dr. Sinclair, a Wisconsin dentist. In adult life Lewis was known to his few friends as 'Red'. Dr. E.J. Lewis and his mother, Emma Kermott, died when Harry was six years old.

Lewis made few friends as he grew up in the small town Sauk Centre. Later he often returned to the town - to get material for his stories. As a boy, Lewis read everything. However, he was no bookworm. In high school, he improved, taking part in debating and other forms of public speaking. In 1903, he was in the academy of Oberlin College preparing for Yale. In the same year, 1903, Lewis entered Yale University. He was actually a misfit at Yale. By that time he knew that he wanted to be a writer, and he became the editor of the 'Yale Literary Magazine' and worked on New Haven newspapers. After more - than a year of temporary jobs, which included editing, - writing children's verses for magazine, Lewis finally - graduated and received his degree from Yale University - in 1908.

After graduation, Lewis travelled and worked as a free-lance journalist. In 1910 he moved to New York City to support himself by writing fiction and working in publishing. During the next four years he held positions as editor, reporter, manuscript reader, advertising manager, and reviewer. His first novel was actually Hike and the Aeroplane, published under the pseudonym of Tom Graham, in 1912. However, people know Sinclair Lewis' first novel was Our Mr. Wrenn published in 1914, the year of his first marriage to Grace Livingstone Hegger.

Sinclair Lewis reached a high level in 1920 with the appearance of Main Street. This novel was the most -

successful novel of Lewis. It was followed with Babbitt (1922), for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1930, Arrowsmith (1925), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, but he refused to accept it, and Dodsworth (1929). The novels which are mentioned above are generally considered Lewis' best.

In the 1920's Sinclair Lewis was using material familiar to him. Gopher Prairie in Main Street is actually his birthplace, Sauk Centre, Minnesota. His father, - Dr. Edwin J. Lewis, was a country doctor, as were Will - Kennicott in Main Street and Martin Arrowsmith in Arrowsmith. The town Sauk Centre itself had given him the - bad image of it. Lewis had been an incompetent, unhappy, and lonely young man in that environment. Most of what - he can see about the town were the smell, dirt, dust, mud, and the ugliness of the town, and also the provincial - type of its inhabitants. He was accustomed with those - conditions. When he left the town for a brief college - preparatory term at Oberlin and then for college at Yale and he visited it, nothing much improved and changed. Vi - siting it again with his young New York wife in 1916, he recalled all his own frustrations and saw all of the bad conditions as he had been experienced it by himself long time ago.

Lewis married twice. The first woman he married in 1914 was Grace Livingstone Hegger. The year 1917 mark - ed the birth of his first son, Wells, who was killed -

then by a sniper during World War II in 1944. Lewis was divorced from Grace Hegger in 1928. In the same year he married Dorothy Thompson, a well-known journalist and a newspaper columnist. Lewis' second son, Michael, was born in 1930. In 1942 Lewis and Dorothy were divorced, after a separation of nearly five years. Lewis later became involved in an affair with a young actress named Marcella Powers.

Sinclair Lewis continued to write novels attacking parts of American life which were unfair for him. However, his later novels were less effective than those of the 1920's. Lewis wrote steadily, averaging a book every two years for over thirty years. Besides novels, he also wrote some plays and short stories. In 1945, Lewis declined in popularity, although the process was slow. Sinclair Lewis died on January 10, 1951, in Rome, Italy. He died a month before his sixty-sixth birthday. The immediate cause of the death was paralysis of the heart, the culmination of a long series of heart and lung ailments.

Most of his later years were spent in Europe, except for a visit to the United States in 1949. He finished his last novel, World So Wide, in Florence in March - 1950. Lewis wrote of the expatriate hero of his last novel. After three months of travel, illness forced him to settle in Rome, where he worked intensively until his death. It was Lewis' own request that his ashes were re-

turned to Sauk Centre, Minnesota, after his death. It shows how much Sinclair Lewis loved his hometown.

III.2. Sinclair Lewis' Works

Sinclair Lewis had written twenty-two novels during his lifetime. His first novel Our Mr. Wrenn was published in 1914, while his last one World So Wide was published in 1950. It was a year before he died. Among the novels by Sinclair Lewis, Main Street is considered as the most successful novel of Lewis.

Here are the general discussion about some of the most significant Lewis' works to this thesis. Some of them are completed with the similarities and the differences among them.

Lewis' earliest novels, Our Mr. Wrenn (1914) and The Trail of the Hawk (1915), were conventional and undistinguished. He first showed real literary power in his novel The Job (1917), a realistic story of New York City.

In Main Street (1920) Lewis first developed the theme which was to characterize most of his succeeding works, that is the dullness, monotony, and lack of spiritual and intellectual values in various types of American middle-class life, especially the life in the Middle-western small town.

His Babbitt (1922) is a satire of the middle-class

American businessman who conforms to the materialistic - social and practices of his environment. It is the story of the small town bussinessman, of the tired bussiness - man, and of the American ruler. It is about the American businessman who gives American life its peculiar coloration and quality. Babbitt, its main character, is the same with Dr. Kennicott in Main Street. He is a weak figure, lacking the saving touch of heroism and poetry. The satire in Main Street is emphasizing the life in small - town, while the events in Babbitt take place in the growing metropolis.

Arrowsmith (1925) for which Lewis won the Pulitzer Prize is still giving the picture of American society, like Main Street and Babbitt. However, it has an additional quality, that is the sense of facing the issues of life and death. In this novel Lewis exposed the lack of scientific idealism sometimes found in the medical - proffession. Like Dr. Kennicott, its hero is a physician with a bent toward research, but unlike lonely yearners such as Carol Kennicott and Babbitt, Arrowsmith has company in his effort against the disinterested men in science in society.

In Dodsworth (1929) Lewis satirizes the egotistic and selfish married woman sometimes found in American upper-middle-class circles. Fran, Dodsworth's wife, is an odious counterpart of Carol Kennicott, with not a thought in the world but her own ego, her own conquests

and satisfaction. Dodsworth himself is a businessman like Babbitt. Later Dodsworth was made into a motion picture.

Elmer Gantry (1927) was a violent attack on a - type of hypocritical and mercenary religious leader. While Ann Vickers (1933) deals with a woman social reformer. Lewis attacked fascism in It Can't Happen Here (1935). It is a story of a future revolution leading to Fascist control of the United States. In Kingsblood Royal (1947) - Lewis took up the problem of discrimination against the Negro. It is a novel on racial intolerance.

Lewis was also a playwright. Among his plays are Hobohemia (1919), a dramatization of Dodsworth (with Sydney Coe Howard, 1934), and Jayhawker (with Lloyd - Lewis, 1934).

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS