



The 1920s America and Sinclair Lewis

Pavitra Poorna S R

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Deshbandhu College
University of Delhi

Abstract

Sinclair Lewis’s satirical depiction of American society through his novels, particularly those from the 1920s and 1930s—Main Street, Babbitt, and Arrowsmith—captured the attention of both readers and critics alike. He remains celebrated as one of the foremost satirists, using his writings to illuminate the American society of his era in a satirical light, with the aim of redeeming, reconstructing, and rejuvenating its declining standards, thus highlighting one of the greatest civilisations in the world. His remarkable success established him as a beloved American author and an internationally acclaimed writer. In 1930, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, recognising his substantial impact on the literary landscape. The paper “The 1920s America and Sinclair Lewis” examines the three novels mentioned to understand Lewis’s critique of American society and its values.

Keywords

1920s American society, Critique, Modernity, Satire, Sinclair Lewis

Sinclair Lewis’ writing career lasted nearly four decades, and he authored many internationally acclaimed novels. His works illuminate American society from a fresh perspective, challenging readers to see the world differently. Rather than merely depicting America as it was,

he illustrated what it could aspire to be. Essentially, he aimed to highlight the potential of American civilisation in terms of its economic strength and influence. Lewis aspired for America to achieve greater heights, and his writings reflect his dreams and hopes for the nation. Thus, even today, readers of his works grasp his love for America alongside his concerns. However, his affection for the country did not lead to uncritical admiration. While he recognised America's greatness, he highlighted numerous inherent issues in his writings.

In the 1920s, Sinclair Lewis reached the peak of his literary career, crafting novels that vividly captured the essence of America during that period. Works like *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith*, penned in the 1920s, portrayed middle-class Americans with such nuance that they struck a chord with the public, leading to their status as bestsellers. As a reflection of his time, Lewis depicted American towns in a way that influenced the mindset of his contemporaries and shaped their self-image. Essentially, Lewis played a pivotal role in moulding the American consciousness, affecting its historical and cultural narrative, and significantly impacting the lives of his readers. His profound influence enabled Americans to confront societal issues, many of which remained unrecognised. With his keen insight, Lewis identified and articulated these problems through his writing, making his work distinctively pertinent to his era. No other author at the time could capture the American experience as he did.

Reading Lewis's novels from the 1920s reveals that his goal was not just to chart a precise and thorough portrayal of contemporary America. Instead, he intended to highlight various facets of American society he found wanting, striving to initiate reform through his literature. He sought to awaken the American middle class to the genuine state of affairs and motivate them to act in ways that would foster necessary shifts in mindset amid the socio-political and cultural transformations of the time. Throughout his works, Lewis examines different elements of American life but consistently maintains his central theme: crafting a satirical representation of society to prompt reform. This thematic consistency in his writing is why James Lundquist notes that—

“Lewis was ultimately concerned with the question of how to live in American culture of the 1920s rather than with what that culture was like.” (35)

In other words, Sinclair Lewis was determined to depict America in a way that would inspire his readers to perceive the nation ideally. His writing sought to portray America as a place where people could genuinely embrace life's fullest potential. During this period, while America was rising as a significant global power economically and militarily, Lewis believed it had not

achieved remarkable advancements in civilisation. His work aimed to foster a sense of pride among Americans about their civilisation and culture. Essentially, Sinclair Lewis intended to cultivate national pride by advocating for cultural reform from within.

In three celebrated novels written by Sinclair Lewis during this era—*Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith*—Lewis examines the state of American culture while exploring how individuals can navigate the challenging landscape of America. In his book *Twentieth-Century America: The USA since the 1830s*, David Shannon highlights that “the central fact of late 19th-century American history was the shift from a predominantly agrarian society to an industrial one. With any socio-political and economic changes, many other transformations emerge—not just in people's material living conditions, but also in various psychological and cultural aspects, making civilisation distinct and unique.” This shift from an agrarian to an industrial society increased national wealth, leading to significant outcomes, such as the emergence of major cities in America. Furthermore, the ramifications of this growth included the establishment of a sizeable wage-earning class, a substantial influx of European immigrants to the New World, political changes that sparked the formation of an organised labour movement, heightened class tensions, and shifting views on society and government due to the cultural effects of industrialisation.

The changes in 1920s America had significant psychological effects. While society made material advancements, the accompanying mental development lagged. In other words, Americans did not experience a mental evolution that corresponded with the economic transformations of the early twentieth century. Sinclair Lewis found this societal condition fascinating to depict in his novels, as it compelled sensitive individuals like himself to challenge the status quo and strive for reform. Consequently, Lewis used his novels to satirise society and advocate for change. It is important to note that Lewis was not criticising the American way of life in small towns and cities for its own sake; instead, he cherished American culture and aimed to improve its conditions through his writing.

In other terms, Sinclair Lewis aimed to illustrate what was wrong with America in the 1920s. The character Babbitt exemplifies a society where a suffocating environment hinders individuals from maturing in their quest for meaningful experiences. During this time, American society was evolving through materialism, consumerism, standardisation, and conformity, relentlessly pursuing material wealth while seeking lives filled with gadgets and conveniences. In their pursuit, people began to mimic one another. As Americans engaged in these pursuits, they became preoccupied mainly and neglected to question the significance of their efforts. In such an atmosphere, where materialistic tendencies powerfully shaped society, the emergence of a figure

like Sinclair Lewis became significantly unusual and somewhat disconcerting as he posed the most challenging questions. These unsettling inquiries formed the cornerstone of his novels during the 1920s. Throughout his works from this era, Sinclair Lewis sought to delve into these topics, questioning the illusion of material success in contrast to the spiritual emptiness felt by American society.

Sinclair Lewis embodies modernism; like other modernist authors, he explores societal conditions and illustrates the psychological realities of protagonists grappling with various forms of discontent. Just as T. S. Eliot's Prufrock "measures out his life with coffee spoons," Babbitt gauges his existence by the gadgets he acquires. Nevertheless, even with the modern scientific conveniences at his disposal, he feels empty inside—a void that disturbs him and hinders his pursuit of inner contentment. This period in America was characterised by rapid development, as towns and cities became increasingly crowded and life quickened. Sinclair Lewis's novels reflect the society of his time and suggest that his works fundamentally explore the "beliefs, values, and forms of power" he observed. He is believed to have provided readers with a vivid portrayal of the forces in American civilisation during his era while simultaneously critiquing the prevailing conditions. In this regard, Sinclair Lewis promoted a positive philosophy.

Interestingly, instead of alienating those in American society, he satirised in his writings—especially the middle class and the weary businesspeople—they embraced Sinclair Lewis. As previously mentioned, he gave the American people ideas, concepts, and experiences that influenced their self-perception. Lewis deeply loved America, seeking to reform it from within so people could achieve true happiness and understand what genuine success entails. In 1920s America, as in many parts of today's world, success often equates to the material wealth one accumulates—evidenced by the size of one's home, the cars owned, and one's salary—always measured by financial earnings in life.

These schemes overlook psychological well-being, spiritual fulfilment, and the joy of living. A specific standard of living measures material success, and if a person fails to meet these criteria, they are viewed as unsuccessful, garnering little societal respect. In a world where life is evaluated purely by financial standards, the pressure to achieve material wealth is enormous, frequently leading to a dismal inner life. This theme resonates throughout the works of Lewis Sinclair from the 1920s, including *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith*.

Sinclair Lewis explores substantial geographical territory across his three novels. He sets the stage in *Main Street*, expands upon it in *Babbitt*, and wraps up with *Arrowsmith*, creating a

thematic continuity throughout his works. In *Main Street*, he portrays the character of Carol Kennicott to illustrate life in America's prairie towns during the 1920s, depicting residents who live in a bubble, unaware of the larger world beyond. They become so self-absorbed that they stagnate. Initially, the locals enthusiastically meet Carol's progressive ideas but quickly forget them as they resume their mundane lives. Their leisure activity revolves around savouring the misfortunes of others, which they find entertaining. Consequently, when Carol arrives in this town as a doctor's wife, she awkwardly grapples with her challenging new reality. Bound by societal norms, her role prevents her from pursuing work outside the home, as it is taboo for women to engage in activities beyond domestic duties.

In a society like this, Carol's energy remains untapped. Like a quixotic figure (Martin Light), she relentlessly pursues a solitary struggle, proposing one developmental idea after another for Gopher Prairie despite most people showing little interest in her efforts. They believe Gopher Prairie is already satisfactory. Under these circumstances, Carol Kennicott feels entirely out of place and experiences a sense of claustrophobia within the town's conformist mentality, which adheres to the process of Americanisation.

The individuality of people is neither respected nor valued in this society. Everyone thinks similarly, and anyone who tries to be different, such as Carol Kennicott, is highly detested by society. Sinclair Lewis presents a satirical portrayal of Gopher Prairie to reveal how small-town American society suffers from smugness that prevents actual progress. His portrayal of Gopher Prairie played a significant role in his rise to fame, as readers recognised it as a true reflection of 1920s small-town America. The issues faced by Gopher Prairie are not isolated; they serve as a symbol for many small American towns. Thus, Gopher Prairie is "not just a singled-out town; but a representative of America." Consequently, Sinclair Lewis's satirical insights target not just one town but the broader rural America, critiquing "the smugness of rural America as well as complacency and conformity to the Americanisation process."

While *Main Street* features some satire, Lewis's prowess truly peaks in *Babbitt*. In this work, Sinclair Lewis showcases his keen satirical skills, illustrating how Americans in the 1920s became absorbed in materialism, often at the expense of their spiritual health and social lives. Babbitt is characterised as a man who has attained significant material success despite his modest beginnings. He is so focused on accumulating material possessions that he has overlooked everything else—their actual value. He seeks these possessions not for his needs but to display his wealth to others. Even though he no longer smokes, he purchases a lighter to show off trendy

items. He attends the cinema not for enjoyment but because he thinks it is currently fashionable. His home resembles many other luxurious houses in America.

Babbitt is a man striving to align himself with societal trends, particularly the materialistic ones he dutifully follows, believing these will lead to his success. Unlike those born into wealth, who do not require constant validation or flaunting of their riches, newly affluent individuals are eager to assert their identities through their newfound vitality. From a modest background like many Americans of his time, Babbitt must continuously demonstrate that he has moved beyond his humble roots and achieved material success. However, despite their advancements, their mindset often reflects their origins, leading to an internal conflict that makes them uneasy. George F. Babbitt exemplifies this struggle; thus, while he may be looked down upon, the author feels sympathy for him—he is a figure deserving of pity rather than disdain.

Babbitt must align himself with society—adhering to its established standards—because if one does not meet those expectations, one risks being seen as irrelevant. Sinclair Lewis critiques this standardisation of American society. Gopher Prairie has also suffered from such conformity; Zenith is no exception. Individuals like Babbitt populate Zenith. In this regard, Babbitt serves as a type—a quintessential character representative not only of Zenith but of America as a whole—the kind who is "preoccupied with acquiring material gain without ever considering spiritual well-being or the joy of life." Sinclair Lewis aimed to critique this archetype through *Babbitt*.

The question arises: why is Babbitt a target of Lewis's satire? The answer lies in reading the novel; Babbitt appears more as a caricature than a fully developed character. Lewis emphasises this point, illustrating Babbitt as a "caricature more than a character." This portrayal nudges readers to recognise their misguided attempts at conforming to American standardisation or Americanization.

Lewis's objective is to present this aspect of American life in a manner that enables readers to comprehend their materialistic demands, which lack spiritual joy. His ultimate aim is to reform society—to shape 1920s American life so that it does not suffer from conformity to culture and permits individuals to develop according to their desires. While *Babbitt* is a caricature of the highest order, his subsequent novel *Arrowsmith* differs significantly. In *Arrowsmith*, the protagonist, Martin Arrowsmith, emerges as a fully developed character who strives to resist societal conformity to its norms. However, T. K. Whipple asserts that "Martin is primarily a type" due to a particular trait in his character that remains unchanged throughout the novel. He remains the same from beginning to end. Nevertheless, classifying Martin Arrowsmith merely as a type

undermines Sinclair Lewis's achievement in crafting a fully realised character with his follies and foibles.

In *Arrowsmith*, the author delves into the medical field, viewed as one of the highest callings, where doctors save lives in critical situations. Yet, these medical professionals also reflect society, shaping their behaviours. If society emphasises materialism and the pursuit of wealth and recognition, doctors may follow suit, seeking to profit from others' sicknesses. Martin Arrowsmith encounters this prevailing mindset and tries to resist it. He aims to stand out in a materialistic environment by rejecting the conventional role of a doctor focused solely on financial rewards. Despite his noble intentions, he struggles to succeed, as he is torn between two roles: the doctor committed to preserving life and the scientist working in a lab to discover innovations for the betterment of humanity.

Martin Arrowsmith finds himself torn between dedicating his life to saving humanity from a widespread illness and staying in the lab to uncover the truth. While he shows great promise as a scientist, he isn't driven by materialism. Sinclair Lewis portrays Martin as having a spirit similar to his grandmother's. In the pioneering days, people relentlessly sought to create a better society, a spirit that Martin embodies as he focuses on scientific discovery for the benefit of humanity, disregarding personal gain. In "*Arrowsmith*", Lewis delves into the medical profession of the 1920s, showcasing individuals like Martin who pursue pure science to combat human suffering. Conversely, some doctors prioritise financial gain, treating patients as mere customers. Lewis critiques both perspectives in the novel, but his main focus is on the materialistic doctors prioritising profit over life's greater purposes.

In his three novels centred on America, written during the 1920s, Sinclair Lewis aims to explore the multifaceted nature of American life, enabling readers to gain a deeper understanding of it. His goal was to help people recognise the mistakes made in their pursuit of a society driven solely by materialism. To do this, he creates unforgettable characters who represent different social aspects and are frequently labelled as "types." Though Carol Kennicott may come across as naive with her idealistic ambitions to reform Gopher Prairie's society, *Babbitt* seems firmly rooted in a materialistic existence, showing little regard for anything beyond it. In contrast, Martin Arrowsmith is a scientist who aims to challenge the material obsessions of his fellow doctors; however, he struggles to genuinely embrace the identity of a social doctor, eventually reducing himself to a scientist focused only on discovering the truth within the confines of his laboratory.

Sinclair Lewis's three novels from the 1920s explore different aspects of American society as a critique. A central theme in these works is the conformity to standardisation or Americanization pervasive in American culture. Amidst efforts to shape America, Lewis critiques the “so-called Americanization process,” urging readers to adopt a specific viewpoint. He illustrates how strict adherence to a uniform lifestyle ultimately leads to losing individuality. Through his work, he critically examines this loss and the idea of herd culture in America—a theme he investigates in depth across his three novels, each set in distinct contexts and involving characters from various social backgrounds.

While Carol Kennicott, George F. Babbitt, and Martin Arrowsmith are unique characters in their interactions with 1920s American society, their fates diverge sharply. Carol Kennicott, for instance, is unhappy with her life in Gopher Prairie but remains Will’s wife, adapting to her situation without genuine happiness. In a similar vein, George F. Babbitt, despite enjoying all the material comforts one could desire, feels a persistent sense of dissatisfaction and lacks the enjoyment of life. He possesses luxuries but misses true joy. Martin Arrowsmith, on the other hand, rejects societal norms entirely, finding peace in his laboratory. As an outsider, he grapples with the world's pressures, with the lab and the quest for scientific truth within that isolated space offering him his only sanctuary.

Consequently, all three characters find themselves dissatisfied after their stories. Sinclair Lewis asserts that the material and social circumstances of 1920s America hinder anyone from experiencing joy in life. Even with the potential and resources to achieve remarkable things, everyone remains unhappy. This sense of discontent sets Lewis apart from other authors of his time, as he delivered a stark and realistic depiction that resonated with the era's complexities. For him, it was crucial to portray society authentically so that readers could perceive it accurately and in its proper context. While caricatures might make people laugh and obscure deeper truths, Lewis embraced the challenge of crafting satires to shed light on 1920s America.

Additionally, it is imposing that, while presenting a realistic image, he offers a vivid portrayal of American life where the absurdities of both women and men are exaggerated. This shows fellow Americans how to navigate a time marked by considerable material achievement yet lacking mental contentment or spiritual fulfilment.

Like other modernists, Sinclair Lewis highlights his protagonists' dissatisfaction with their socio-political and economic surroundings. Writers like T. S. Eliot illustrated their characters' spiritual void due to a lack of ‘joy’ in life. Likewise, Lewis's protagonists are depicted as ‘hollow,’

attempting to live vibrantly yet missing the warmth of a ‘whimper.’ Their material success contrasts with spiritual emptiness, creating a ‘shadow’ they endlessly seek to fulfil. However, their circumstances hinder their ability to express their individuality. These hollow men struggle to comprehend their world through material successes, neglecting the reality that proper understanding requires awakening their ‘human voices’—transcending their materialistic existence in search of genuine vitality for their souls. Thus, Lewis illustrates a way of living for 1920s Americans grappling with challenging realities. His writings enlightened individuals about their material conditions, cementing Sinclair Lewis's status as a groundbreaking author of 1920s America and making him the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1930 for his literary contributions.

Works Cited and Consulted

Lewis, Sinclair. *Arrowsmith*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925.

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.

Lewis, Sinclair. *Main Street*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920.

Lingeman, Richard. *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*. New York: Random House, 2002.

Lippmann, Walter. “Sinclair Lewis.” Schorer, Mark. Ed. *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 84-94.

Lockerbie, D. Bruce. "Sinclair Lewis and William Ridgway." *American Literature* 36(1964): 68-72.

Lundquist, James. *Sinclair Lewis*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1973.

Schorer, Mark. “On *Arrowsmith*.” Griffin, Robert J. Ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Arrowsmith: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968. 40-46.

Schorer, Mark. “Sinclair Lewis: *Babbitt*.” Light, Martin, Ed. *The Merrill Studies in Babbitt*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill Publishing Company, 1971.105-116.

Schorer, Mark. Ed. *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962.

Schorer, Mark. "Sinclair Lewis and the Method of Half-Truths." Schorer, Mark. Ed. *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962. 46-61.

Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961.

Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis*. Minneapolis. U of Minnesota P 1963.

Shannon, David A. 1963. *Twentieth Century America: The USA since the 1830s*. Chicago: Rand McNally Comp. (<http://gale.tokyoprogressive.org.ok/articles/>).

Whipple, T. K. "Sinclair Lewis: *Arrowsmith*." Griffin, Robert J. Ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Arrowsmith: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968. 34-39.