

ABSTRACT

THE MANY ROLES OF HARRY LEWIS: A STUDY OF MOTIVE AND METHOD IN CREATIVE TECHNIQUE

By

David Robertson Angus

This is primarily an analysis of the vital function of role playing in Sinclair Lewis's creative technique, as shown in his first seven books, Hike and the Aeroplane, Our Mr. Wrenn, The Trail of the Hawk, The Job, The Innocents, Free Air, and Main Street. First of all, the three separate aspects of Lewis's role playing activity have been identified: his personal fondness for mimicry and acting, his habit of projecting himself into his fictional characters, and his bent for fantasies centered around occupational identity exchanges. When brought together, these actions reveal specific attitudes and behavior, characteristic not only of Lewis himself, but also built into the personalities he created in fiction. It is demonstrable that role playing and role attribution comprise Sinclair Lewis's prime method of character development in his novels.

An examination of this method back to its source in Lewis's basic orientation toward life affords some surprising new discoveries about his motivation for writing.

It must be observed that this form of criticism entails the use of a "psychological approach." Obviously, such an approach must be used with discretion; nevertheless, the tools and insights of psychological inquiry contribute greatly toward an understanding of Lewis's method, his characteristic achievement and, more particularly, his curious limitations.

Identification of Sinclair Lewis's basic personality as that of a self-defeating "moral martyr" is not therefore a procrustean operation. Much of the documentation has already been done in Mark Schorer's impressive biography and in the memoirs of Grace Hegger Casanova and Dorothy Thompson. The significant conclusions have remained to be drawn here--significant, because this representation of Sinclair Lewis illuminates some heretofore unexplained deficiencies in his writing: the episodic structure, the lack of plot, the confused point of view, and the essentially soulless quality of his characters decried by many of his critics.

"Look how the father's face / Lives in his issue," observed Jonson of another dramatic portraitist. The same may be said for Sinclair Lewis, who injected himself almost compulsively into the lives of his characters, whose fears and fantasies became their limitations, and whose inhibitions denied his creatures the full enjoyment of their successes.

Success came hugely to Sinclair Lewis after the publication of Main Street, forcing him into the new and compromising role of Celebrated Author, a posture he could not accept or reject unequivocally. Since this triumph had the effect of moving Lewis into grander and more complex (but scarcely different) dimensions of artistic productivity, it has seemed best to focus upon his early books, those published between 1912 and 1920, where the motivation and method of Sinclair Lewis's creative technique could be most clearly demonstrated.

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To
GARTHA LEE,
in thankful tribute to the depths
of her love and patience,
and to
WILLIAM and JOYCE,
for their examples of enduring faith,
this work is gratefully dedicated

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CHAPTER I

THE MANY ROLES OF HARRY LEWIS

Literary criticism in the United States still has not produced a definitive assessment of the mind and technique of America's most widely patronized novelist, Sinclair Lewis. Seeing Lewis as a novelist of surfaces, his critics have been too preoccupied with superficialities in his work, and their general conclusions have been, unhappily, correspondingly two-dimensional. Few scholars have apparently read Lewis with objective insight. That is, too many readers have been distracted by the feeling of identification which the author evokes in his vast reading audience--those reflections of themselves in attitudes of heroism or danger which audiences love to feel--when they should have exercised, rather, a sensitivity to the need which pressed Sinclair Lewis to be an artist, to find that audience, and to write some of the best and worst novels in the American language.

Sinclair Lewis, the celebrated author, the public figure, may be compared to one of those glittering, multifaceted, revolving globes which decorated the jampacked

dance pavilions of the twenties and thirties: a hollow sphere of papier mâché decked with tiers of mirrors, and spun by machinery outside of itself, while colored spotlights blazed upon it, and the band played. So in his novels Lewis gives us back ourselves in brilliant, broken bits, and scholars have tried to match the pieces into a meaningful mosaic, only to be disappointed. To know the significance of Sinclair Lewis, one must probe deeper than the shiny surfaces, to find the infrastructure, the struts and props which hold the parts together and keep the ball intact.

Sheldon Grebstein has observed that there were in effect two Lewises, a public and a private man, a confirmation of the artist-schizophrenic which critics repeatedly find in American literature. This analysis, although acute, fails to satisfy, since it suggests that the American mind understands dichotomies more readily than paradoxes, especially when one realizes that there were not merely two, but many Lewises--a whole fagot of personalities, each splinter needed for a separate role. Support for this thesis may provide bases for a new, fuller understanding of Sinclair Lewis's novels, and of the author's position as the first public victim of the twentieth-century anxiety neurosis in our literature: alienation.

Much has been written about the significance in Lewis's work of the themes of farm-to-city migration, of cultural bankruptcy and shabbiness, and of spiritual

poverty. But these are only incidental tunes of the times. The keynote in Lewis's novels is not even "character," as one might suspect; it can be found in the distinctive values which Lewis gives to words--words that can be molded to suit any need, words with a substance either sound or spurious. In the final analysis. Lewis's famed characters exist not as personalities but as speakers of words, not doers of deeds or thinkers of thoughts; one realizes that ultimately Carol Kennicott, Babbitt, Elmer Gantry, and Dodsworth are memorable not primarily as "people" but as value-systems. Further, they are value-systems based not upon an intellectual epiphany, but on an emotional, desire-and-aversion foundation.

The works of an artist, considered together, often reveal habitual favorite themes, attitudes, and mental sets which vary little throughout his opera; our familiarity with his tropes and predilections we attribute to his "style," and there, very often, analysis ends. When the artist is a painter, one notes the favored direction of his light source, pose of the limbs, the repeated arrangement in a landscape perspective, a distinctive curl of the sea-wave. If he is a novelist, one looks beyond the expectation of mere entertainment or the development of prepossessing characters toward the identification of familiar patterns of thought, or sequential clusters of emotional intensity, which become as identifiable in themselves as the author's personal habits, or his thumbprint.

Throughout the novels of Sinclair Lewis, particularly in the early ones--Hike and the Aeroplane, Our Mr. Wrenn, The Trail of the Hawk, The Job, The Innocents, Free Air, and Main Street--in the search for a unifying theme or design, one finds instead a prime technique, repeated with many ostensible variations, which at first appears to be an apprentice's old reliable mechanism for cranking out short story plots and unsophisticated characters in half-forgotten novels. Then, unexpectedly, this single technique reveals itself as the key concept, not only to Sinclair Lewis's work, but to his life as well: it is the human behavioristic technique of role playing.

Since the novelist's death in Italy in 1951, scholarly books and articles, as well as many personal reminiscences, have issued from the presses--proof that Lewis is as good literary news nowadays as he was during the Twenties and Thirties. So much has been written about him, indeed, with such a wealth of documentation and detail, with so many critical assessments and pronouncements, that at times Sinclair Lewis appears to have been a creation of the publishing industry.

To an extent, he was. Lewis had an uncanny gift for anticipating the shifting moods and tastes of the American consumer of fiction, and he helped to generate, and later capitalized upon, an aspect of the media explosion which occurred when the novel as an art form was supplanting older, established modes of mass entertainment

and idea communication: vaudeville, the chautauqua platform, the tent-revival sermon, and sentimental romances by women authors. In addition, Lewis's flair for making startling public statements, especially after he had become an international celebrity, and his propensity for exciting literary quarrels, assured that he would always be the object of public curiosity. The award to Lewis of the 1930 Nobel Prize for Literature, since it was the first to an American author, commanded world attention which he exploited assiduously in the promotion of his later novels, as well as reprints of his earlier ones, and in the cultivation of new literary and social contacts.

Sinclair Lewis had an actor's dramatic instincts and sense of timing. Professor Schorer's indispensable biography¹ is filled with accounts of Lewis's compulsion for imitations and impressions, his fascination by the stage, his love for charades and costumes, and his insistence upon being the center of attention in any gathering. But these masquerades and performances are never fully integrated into a comprehensive critical analysis of Lewis, as they might have been, and are treated in context merely as an author's eccentricities. Schorer complained in a later article that he did not believe a biographer

should write as if he were indeed a psychoanalyst. Some of my reviewers wished that I had; they wished that at some point I had said plainly, flatly, what

¹Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life (New York, 1961).

was wrong with Sinclair Lewis. It was precisely because I was unwilling to make such a statement that I made the book so long. I wanted to give the reader all the evidence that I coherently could which would permit him to say to himself what was wrong with Sinclair Lewis. . . . I do not think that the jargon of psychoanalysis would have heightened either the comedy or the pathos of that life.²

Yet the reader is somehow disappointed by what seems an abrogation of a critic's duty, and the pejorative flavor of the word "jargon," suggesting that there can be no middle way: either one must write using the psychoanalytical terminology, or else one should write hundreds of detailed pages to avoid using it, all for the purpose of not coming to the penetrating, well-informed critical appraisal that the patient reader would have desired. Schorer's best evaluations of Lewis appear when he identifies "the problem in Sinclair Lewis's life" as "simply the fact that he was, at the center of himself, beneath the gilded trappings and the expansive gestures, no larger, no more mature, no more human than [his] characters, forever trapped in a coarse and starved and empty youth."³ He is most illuminating when he submits that Lewis "did not know what self-knowledge is."

He was, of course, the kind of artist who is temperamentally unable to objectify his anxieties or even draw upon them except in the most superficial

²"The Burdens of Biography," To the Young Writer, ed. A. L. Bader (Ann Arbor, 1965), pp. 162-163.

³Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 740.

way in his own art, and the artist, after all, is not different from the man who contains him.

. . . Not many men are doomed to live with such a mixture of warring qualities as he was. Consider him at any level of conduct--his domestic habits, his social behavior, his character, his thought, his art --always there is the same extraordinary contradiction. Sloppy and compulsively tidy, absurdly gregarious and lonely, quick in enthusiasms and swiftly bored, extravagant and parsimonious, a dude and a bumpkin, a wit and a bore, given to extremities of gaiety and gloom, equally possessed of a talent for the most intensive concentration and for the maddest dishevelment of energies; sweet of temper and virulent, tolerant and abruptly intolerant, generous and selfish, kind and cruel, a great patron and a small tyrant, disliking women even when he thought he most loved them, profane and a puritan, libertine and a prude, plagued by self-doubt as he was by arrogance; rebel and conservative, polemicist and escapist, respectful of intellect and suspicious of intellectual pursuits, loving novelty and hating experiment, pathetically trusting in "culture" and narrowly denying "art"; cosmopolitan and chauvinist, sentimentalist and satirist, romanticist and realist, blessed--or damned--with an extraordinary verbal skill and no style; Carol Kennicott and Doc, her husband; Paul Riesling and George F. Babbitt; Harry Lewis and Dr. E. J. Lewis or Dr. Claude B. Lewis; Harry Lewis and even Fred the miller, who never left home.

One might list these conflicting qualities in opposite columns and suggest that there were two selves in Sinclair Lewis; but all these qualities existed together and simultaneously in him, and in their infinite, interacting combinations there must have been not two but six or eight or ten or two hundred selves and, because they never could be one, a large hole in the center.⁴

This sort of inventory, although undeniably true, is maddening: it details all the symptoms of a man who suffers a "jittery and despairing" and yet "representative" American life, but still it demurs at a diagnosis. In a

⁴Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, pp. 809-810.

supporting article Maurice Kramer notes that the concern of Schorer's biography

with minutiae is also in perfect keeping with its subject, who was (as Schorer makes absolutely clear) a master of mimicry who could not resist his gift and who in fact found it a vital substitute for self-analysis.

Without wondering why Lewis could not resist, Kramer adds that the basis for Lewis's attitude toward his surroundings is

distinctly negative. He saw his society with a terribly sharp sight, but what he saw were glossy surfaces that he knew to be surfaces. Unable to find a center in himself, he found only emptiness again in the society to which he eagerly sought to attach himself.⁵

These views echo what was said first, and in many ways best, by Thomas K. Whipple in his early, intuitive article "Sinclair Lewis," first printed in the New Republic and later in Spokesmen. Whipple, while conceding that Lewis's "knack for mimicry is unsurpassed," points out that it is "all charged with hostile criticism and all edged with satirical intent which little or nothing escapes."⁶ The hollowness Whipple finds in the author's characters:

The central vacuum at the core of these people is the secret which explains their manifestations. Having no substance in themselves, they are incapable of

⁵"Sinclair Lewis and the Hollow Center," The Twenties, Poetry and Prose: 20 Critical Essays, eds. Richard E. Langford and William E. Taylor (Deland, Florida, 1966), p. 67.

⁶Spokesmen: Modern Writers in American Life (New York, 1928), pp. 208-209.

being genuine. They are not individual persons; they have never developed personality.

The point is well made, but the question which goes begging is, What, indeed, was Lewis's concept of personality?

Whipple proceeds:

No special discernment is needed to detect a self-delineation in Lewis's novels, for after all the world he deals with is no more the world of Carol Kennicott, George F. Babbitt, Martin Arrowsmith and Elmer Gantry than it is the world of Sinclair Lewis. He belongs to it as completely as do any of his creatures.⁷

He deprecates Lewis's "poverty of invention or imagination," noting that

Closely allied to [his fondness and aptitude for mimicry] is his extreme dependence on his own experience and on his power of observation. . . . Furthermore, it is significant that his interest is in social types and classes rather than in individuals as human beings. With few exceptions, his treatment of his characters is external only; he confines himself largely to the socially representative surface, rarely exercising much insight or sympathy. He is above all a collector of specimens.⁸

The burden of Maxwell Geismar's essay is similar. While conceding that Lewis displays "wit and eloquence and artistic vitality," Geismar feels that the novelist lacks a full understanding of the writer's craftsmanship, and "operates in a sort of intellectual vacuum," and that "Lewis himself, like his most typical figures, is the Eternal Amateur of the national letters."⁹

⁷Spokesmen, pp. 214, 218.

⁸Ibid., pp. 218-219.

⁹"Sinclair Lewis: The Cosmic Bourjoyce," The Last of the Provincials (Boston, 1949), p. 147.

These views have been seconded and rephrased by critics and reviewers to the extent to becoming commonplace. It now seems obvious that students of Lewis have been so preoccupied with the diverting sounds and surfaces that it is difficult for them to discuss anything else. Apparently no one has seen the need to show that the curious inconsistencies and weaknesses and lack of "soul" in Lewis's characters may comprise the technique by which an anxious and insecure artist felt compelled to dominate and control his creations--by hobbling them with defects or by exaggerating them with ludicrous names or attributes. It can be shown, however, with a great deal of evidence, that not only did Sinclair Lewis have a fundamental need to invent fictional characters and move them about like the figures in chess (a game which became a passion of his later years), and to assume their roles in speech and action, but that role playing must be in fact the essential orientation for a study of Lewis on three levels: in his personal and social life, in his activity as an artist, and most interestingly, in the reliance of his characters upon role playing as the major device by which they achieve any degree of self-esteem or success. It can further be seen that role playing served Sinclair Lewis the double purposes of escape from painful reality and a search for an identity, or at least an image, for himself which would attract the attention and approval of those whose love he dared not hope for. If, at the center, Lewis's life and works seem

"hollow," it is because he was too much preoccupied with piecing together a personality and acting out the parts, and--like Eliot's "Prufrock"--taking time "To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet."

The details of Sinclair Lewis's early life have been related many times by reviewers and critics, by his two wives, Grace Hegger and Dorothy Thompson, and by the author himself, with varying points of view and emphases. Schorer's biography stresses the loneliness, awkwardness, sensitivity and gullibility of the young "goofy boy" in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, who invented screw-people and key-people as companions for solitary games. Young Harry did not share the interests of his older brothers Fred and Claude, and he was not well enough equipped for physical competition; consequently, he withdrew into fantasies and books. Schorer concludes, "In what was often a peculiarly empty life there were many hours that only reading could fill."¹⁰ The effect of his mother's death when Harry was six years old has been passed over too perfunctorily, however. True, the boy's father, Dr. E. J. Lewis, remarried a little more than a year later, but a sensitive six-year-old does not experience the death of his real mother without deep, if silent, shock. Her name had been Emma Kermott, "and nothing is known of the Sauk Centre life of this faint figure except for the sparse and yellowing

¹⁰Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 25.

record of her end in the files of the newspaper."¹¹

Perhaps it was a projection of this mother remembered from early childhood that Lewis later sent to assail Gopher Prairie in the guise of Carol Kennicott, the character whom he also identified with himself.¹² One puzzles over the similarity between the names Kermott and Kennicott until it becomes clear that in Lewis's handwriting the hour humps of "r-m" in the family name, evenly divided, produce the double "n" in the character's. Perhaps this similarity of last names is more evidence of Lewis's desire to identify with Carol.

However the loss of his mother may have affected Harry, there is no doubt of the lasting power over him of Dr. Lewis, a methodical and critical ex-schoolteacher turned country doctor. He was the father, as Grace Hegger Lewis wrote,

whose approval he was constantly seeking or angrily rejecting, the father who had said and never ceased to say: "Harry, why can't you do like any other boy ought to do?" I know nothing of psychoanalysis but even I can see that the influence of the father-figure at this early age may have created the neuroses from which he later suffered.¹³

And yet, "How many characteristics of his father the author son displayed!" wrote Dorothy Thompson in her touching

¹¹Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 16.

¹²Ibid., p. 286 and n.

¹³With Love From Gracie (New York, 1955), pp. 90-91.

memoir, citing Lewis's insistence on exact routines, his passion for order and detail, his punctiliousness in financial dealings, and inquiring, "Are such characteristics the result of early environment, even though one rebels against it, or are they congenital?"¹⁴

Harry's older brother Claude was the son who earned the father's praise and approval. Claude, who later became a physician also, presented unbeatable competition for Harry in sports and in his leadership of the neighborhood "gang." If the younger boy tried to join Claude and his friends, he was invariably "ditched" by the gang's "commando-chief, Charley McCadden." Long afterward Lewis wrote that "for sixty years I have tried to impress my brother Claude," and acknowledged that it "has been my chief object and my chief failure."

I had always failed to startle Claude's gang at skating, diving, shooting prairie chickens, or bobbing for fish through the ice, so I would have to overwhelm them with strictly high-class intellectual feats. All right, then I'd become a reporter, and then they'd be sorry!¹⁵

It is certain that the combined effects of his own mother's death, the disapproval of the stern father, and the lifelong rivalry with his brother Claude (whom the

¹⁴Dorothy Thompson, "The Boy and Man from Sauk Centre," Atlantic Monthly, CCVI (November, 1960), 44-45.

¹⁵"I'm an Old Newspaperman Myself," The Man from Main Street, eds. Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane (New York, 1963), pp. 76, 79.

author sought to transform into an ally in maturer years and who became a surrogate-father after E. J. Lewis died), and Harry's own ungainly appearance resulted in the "crippling process" observed by Schorer. The youth, searching for some identity which it was permissible to assume, became a play actor, a show-off, and an escapist into literary adventures. A boy could not see that men like Dr. E. J. and Claude grew up confident and unassailable behind cold walls of custom and rules made up by themselves, and other men like them, to discourage nonconformity or criticism from the outside. Such a life is secure, involving few risks, requiring little imagination.

Imagination the young Harry had in abundance; it furnished the structure of his refuge during childhood and the source of his vigor and pride in manhood. It became his excuse for being, and at last, his living. It was the paradoxical quality which both his wives found most endearing about Sinclair Lewis, and it was the weapon by which he kept them and his friends, as well as his environment, at a distance. "And yet how little I seem to know of this man with whom I had such a close relationship--or was there nothing more to know?" Grace Hegger Casanova wrote wistfully. "Didn't he--and I--live as much on the surface of life as did most of his characters, superbly as one heard and saw them but whose inwardness was unexplored?"¹⁶

¹⁶With Love From Gracie, p. 334.

In an unsent letter to Lewis, written in 1938 or 1939, Dorothy Thompson had expressed similar feelings while enduring an agony of separation and hostility from her husband.

I am not happy, because . . . I have loved a man who didn't exist. Because I am widowed of an illusion. . . . I do not "admire and respect you." I have loved you. . . . I am a woman--something you never took the trouble to realize. My sex is female. I am not insensitive. I am not stupid. I do not love you for your wit, or for "nostalgia"--my nostalgia antedates our marriage. I loved you, funnily enough, for your suffering, your sensitivity, your generosity, and your prodigious talent. . . . I do not even know you--the you of the present moment.¹⁷

It was a phenomenon of Lewis's life that his unspent aggressive rage should have made him so much of a stranger to those who loved him. The psychoanalyst Karen Horney has observed that, in addition to Freud's diagnosis of personality disturbances traced to traumata sustained during developing childhood sexuality, many individuals suffer from what she describes as the "basic neurosis," the apprehension that one's environment is essentially inimical, which causes children to adopt a defensive or hostile posture that endures for a lifetime.¹⁸ In the case of Harry Lewis, it is a safe deduction that a similar defensive orientation toward his surroundings accounts for

¹⁷Vincent Sheean, Dorothy and Red (New York, 1964), pp. 277-278.

¹⁸The Neurotic Personality of Our Time (New York, 1937).

the intense hostility which T. K. Whipple detected in Lewis's early writings.

. . . of one thing there can be no doubt: that he [Lewis] has hated his environment, with a cordial and malignant hatred. That detestation has made him a satirist, and has barbed his satire and tipped it with venom. . . . Years of malicious scrutiny have gone into the making of his last four volumes [Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry]. Such observation is but one sign of a defensive attitude. Undoubtedly, his hostility is only a reply to the hostility which he has had himself to encounter in a practical society.¹⁹

Linked to this evident hostility toward his milieu was a generous amount of aggression directed against himself, apparently a punishment for being found inexplicably lacking in commendable qualities by his father and brothers, a self-limiting penalty manifest in his sometimes deprecatory references to himself (at other times overcompensated for in inflated self-congratulation and his insistence on nothing but praise), and his habitual role as a helpless and appealing child by which he captured the affections of women. By emphasizing his obscure and unpromising boyhood, as he did repeatedly in his autobiographical sketches, Lewis could make his achievement seem incredible and gigantic, as when he purported to show how "a Harry Sinclair Lewis, son of an average doctor in a Midwestern prairie village" ever "became a writer at all," by speculating:

¹⁹Spokesmen, p. 219.

A good many psychologists have considered that in such a case, the patient has probably by literary exhibitionism been trying to get even with his schoolmates who could outfight, outswim and outlove, and in general outdo him. Of me that explanation must have been partly true, but only partly, because while I was a mediocre sportsman in Boytown, I was neither a cripple or a Sensitive Soul.²⁰

The "Sensitive Soul," in this context, suggests the effeminate, shrinking flower stereotype which Lewis repeatedly abused in his novels. Lewis usually derided the notion of "sensitivity" in himself, because with these emotional connotations it was incompatible with his basic need to present himself as a hearty man among men. He preferred to allude to it as "awareness."

Crowded out of the highroad to vigorous young manhood by others, especially Claude, who traveled it with more assurance, and shunning the ostensible alternatives of invalidism or deviation, Lewis confined himself to a course of largely vicarious living in a realm peopled by companions of his own invention, encountering situations into which he could project himself as the hero, or play all the parts--essentially the antisocial world of a covert delinquent.

Many antisocial acts, seemingly motiveless, can be understood when they are considered as not due to conscience defects, socio-economic factors or cultural influences, but rather as idiosyncratic reactions to the subject's own emotional feelings projected on to some person or some situation, and then reacted against by the subject.

²⁰"Breaking into Print," The Man from Main Street, pp. 70-71.

Projection is a primitive, narcissistically based defense mechanism. The use of such a mechanism indicates an awareness of personal separateness and individuality and of external objects, but the individual quality of such outside objects may never enter into the subject's consideration--feelings and ideas are merely projected on to an external "something." The person using such an emotional mechanism reacts only to his own ideas and feelings perceived by him as if they originated in the external person or the external situation. Ego growth and relationship capability can remain stunted at this level where the ego relates only to its own projected images, with increasing narcissistic-autistic investment. Since there is no real relationship to people in the environment as individual human beings, meaningful incorporation and introjection do not occur.²¹

In other words, people sometimes exhibit a hostility toward their surroundings which is commensurate with the powerful threat they attribute to some outside source, but which in reality generates from within themselves. The above passage, quoted from the recent literature of psychiatry, not only seems to forecast the kind of personality Harry Lewis was to become, but can also offer an explanation for the self-righteous tone of his attacks upon society, the oddly limited, juvenile emotional fabric of his most highly developed heroes, and the aura of man-eating menace accompanying many of his women.

Although Professor Schorer pointedly refers to Lewis's "reticences about sex," he does not choose to suggest that the author was afflicted by a castration anxiety which rendered him at least partially impotent.

²¹William M. Easson, "Projection An An Etiological Factor in 'Motiveless' Delinquency," Psychiatric Quarterly, XLI (April, 1967), 228-229.

His wives were not notably reticent. Grace Lewis recalled the game they used to play: "trying to make our marriage ideal."

Having separate bedrooms was another [game]--the two rooms off the bungalow living room, each with its own small bath, we knew would help preserve the romance which might be clouded if I had to see him shave and he beheld me tousled in the morning. We met at breakfast fresh and crisp, changed clothes before dinner, prided ourselves on our imagination and intelligence about the job of marriage. We did not know, I don't think we ever knew, that "the jolly little coarsenesses of life" were what drew two people comfortably together.²²

She also reported "situations in which Hal was trying to turn love or fancy on and off like a faucet and was hurt when the faucet did not function as he wished." On the painful subject of Lewis's "philandering," his first wife suggests that usually his visits to other women were for monologue-style conversational purposes, and "if the woman were very pretty and she told him that she had listened to him talk, and nothing more, he would be furious at the lost opportunity."

He seemed unable to recognize that the sexual act was not important to him, that making love was rather a nuisance, and though he was essentially masculine and abnormalities of any kind were shocking to him, he could not supply the confident and robust elements which make for success in a love affair. As he did not believe in his own capacity to evoke love, it may be that this realization of his inadequacy drove him to the solace of drink.

In his novels there are no truly passionate love scenes because he did not know how to create the truly passionate men or women to inspire them.²³

²²With Love From Gracie, p. 57.

²³Ibid., p. 325.

In a letter to Lewis at the occasion of their separation, Dorothy Thompson refers to an admission of his:

But you said to me once, half whimsically, half apologetically, "I exist mostly above the neck." Well, I understood that. So do I. . . . People like you and me build up images, sometimes, and fall in love with them.²⁴

Revelations like these, placed alongside the remark Dorothy attributes to Claude Lewis, that "Harry had a huge inferiority complex. Had it as a kid," and added to internal evidence in Lewis's first seven books, point toward an inescapable conclusion that, although not totally incapacitated sexually, Lewis was often severely inhibited by his emotional anxieties and by his imaginative compulsion for role playing. Uncertain of the role he should assume other than that of a child (both women wrote about knowing instinctively that he was a "child" and needed to be protected), Lewis masked his confusion with hostility. He accused each wife of trying to humiliate him or dominate him. When his sons were little boys, he seemed to regard them as rivals. He traveled far and often from his families, possibly to avoid the real responsibility of prolonged intimacy, although the role of traveler is in many ways enviable, affording one infinite changes of scene, varieties of faces to scrutinize, habits to watch, speech to join in and overhear, situations and plots to conjure up, games to play by oneself or with an acquaintance, new

²⁴Dorothy and Red, p. 267.

poses to take up, diverting masquerades to attribute to other unassuming travelers. All these entertainments can be bought under the pretext of doing research for the next novel. But the theme of all these activities is still "escape." As a sort of voyeur-voyageur, one experiences the illusion of not having to stay in character, of being someone else ("Bunburying," Oscar Wilde would have called it) and enjoying a delicious charade in the presence of unwitting common travelers, or, to switch the players, being a keen-eyed observer-reporter of any random group and purporting to see their secret lives of comedy, tragedy, and oddity.

Sinclair Lewis has been commended as both an observer and a reporter of the American social scene, and scarcely anyone has failed to praise his gift for mimicry of national idiom or his ear for accent or speech pattern. But it is evident that these and other Lewisian techniques were outgrowths of a more deeply fundamental, organic need for an escape-defense into role playing and projecting, and that by arbitrarily assuming a variety of characters and traits, he tried to subdue and control the people near him in real life, chiefly by some form of aggression through speech. When one probes to discover a cause for such a basically juvenile approach to living, one must conclude that Lewis's emotional development was checked midway in his youth, possibly as a consequence of his mother's death, but more probably because rivalry with his

brothers and the cool disapproval of his father denied Harry Lewis his full male role, a condition which is at the bottom of the novelist's palpable rage and hostility toward his environment, noted by Whipple.

Further inquiry would strongly suggest that Sinclair Lewis belonged to that unhappy group of self-defeating people who wish to perpetuate a childish emotional posture which both alleviates and reinforces deep inferiority feelings. Such individuals suffer lifelong feelings of helplessness and isolation, connive for the love or approbation of their usually authoritarian parents, accept mere noticing or pity as cheap substitutes for love because of self-condemnation for unworthiness, and cannot accept love when it is given. They are often thrown into confusion by success or victory, avoid self-examination that might discover a remedy for their anxieties, demand perfection from themselves and from others, will not abide criticism, and frequently have childish fantasies of solitary splendor and omnipotence in situations where authority figures, like parents, are belittled or controlled.²⁵ The occurrence of these behavioral patterns in the life of Sinclair Lewis, and their parallel incidence in the actions of characters he created, must not be overlooked. Placed in this context, Lewis's impersonations, masquerades and "stunts" can

²⁵See Samuel J. Warner, Self-Realization and Self-Defeat (New York, 1966), for an extensive discussion of this kind of behavior.

be seen to function not only as escapes from the responsibility of being oneself, but as maneuvers for punishing himself and others: himself, by presenting a pathetic or inferior or ridiculous pose to excite the attention of an audience; others, meaning those whose affection for him was vital, by implying that they were responsible for the painful straits to which he had been reduced. Thus, Lewis's typical clown-roles as waiter, chauffeur, shoe clerk, or tourist were probably more than whims to amuse his friends; they also appear to have been dramatizations of his own fear of insignificance, and a childish posture carried over from efforts to appear innocuously pleasing in the sight of his father.

The earliest recorded instance of Harry Lewis's role playing is in a recollection by a family friend that the boy announced during a visit, "I eat grass like cows!" got down on hands and knees in the yard, and actually ate a good amount of it. Another friend recalled the intensity with which Lewis played Robin Hood in boys' games. Lewis's own self-ironic memory of threatening to become a reporter in vengeful compensation for his feeble physical skill is quite revealing, in that it associates a projected role with a juvenile power play designed to dominate or impress others.

"Impress." This word has key significance in the life and works of Sinclair Lewis. It appears in the youthful Harry's notebooks, indicating his satisfaction at

attentions he received for various performances. It occurs in Lewis's interpretation of his relationship with his brother Claude, who became his surrogate father after E. J. Lewis died. It provides crucial motivation for the actions of Hike and little Mr. Wrenn in Lewis's first two books. But most strikingly the word reveals the creative pattern of an author who lacked the confidence to gain approval through normal avenues of social intercourse, and could seldom endure contact with others without a grandstand play for attention or the support of several faked personalities. Such role playing sometimes extended to the assumption of fictitious names and the wearing of false whiskers. When one remembers Allan Updegraff's observation that Lewis was the only man he knew who ever learned to be charming, it is hard to avoid suspecting that the charming gentleman was another role added to the Lewis repertoire.

Accounts of entertainment by Lewis the impersonator abound, Schorer indicates, but especially interesting are the characters and speeches, invented by Lewis for trial performances before friends, that were transcribed almost verbatim into his novels. George Jean Nathan's memoir particularly records recitations by prototypes of Babbitt and Elmer Gantry, as well as Lewis's ability to speak with a variety of dialects and accents, sometimes with one style inside another, while standing conspicuously

on a table in a bar.²⁶ While there is little doubt of Lewis's deep satisfaction at his own role playing versatility, it is most important to recognize the direct link between these performances calculated to impress friends and win their approval, and his means of earning a living. It shows the special, self-destructive intimacy between Sinclair Lewis's personal life and his most successful art: only by escaping the dreaded insignificance of Harry Lewis from Sauk Centre, pretending to be Someone Else, testing the disguise before an audience and then decking out the full character with carefully staged costume and props, did the author venture a new work for sacrifice before his critics. Professor Schorer also offers evidence that Lewis identified himself very closely with other, earlier heroes, particularly "Hawk" Ericson, the pioneering flyer from Minnesota, in The Trail of the Hawk. T. K. Whipple's criticism of Lewis's "extreme dependence on his own experience and on his power of observation" can thus be viewed not as an exhibition of scientific insistence by Lewis upon authentic detail, but primarily as habitual rigidity in his almost ritualistic role fantasies and personality inventories.

Another curious aspect of Lewis's need for roles is his fondness for aliases, particularly in his correspondence. An early letter of his to William Rose Benet

²⁶"Sinclair Lewis," The Intimate Notebooks of George Jean Nathan (New York, 1932), pp. 8-21.

in May of 1908 is signed, "Affectionately/ HSL/ variously/ Hal,/ Red/ Sink. Lewis Esq/ et al. mult/ y generalmente/ malos." To Jack London in September, 1910, he was "Sincerely,/ Sinclair Lewis/ otherwise/ Hal/ alias/ Red." To his wife Grace he was sometimes "Toby" or "H." In his extensive correspondence with Alfred Harcourt he is "s. l." or "SL" or "slewis." Of course, his first book, the juvenile Hike and the Aeroplane, was issued under a pseudonym and dedicated to his parents. A copy at Yale is ironically inscribed, "To Sinclair Lewis from the author, Tom Graham, his altered ego." It is not clear whether the alteration was performed by the publisher, A. Stokes and Company, or by the author himself, but the dedication "To Edwin and Isabel Lewis, the Author's Oldest Friends," is ambiguous in that it calls attention to his relationship in an inferior role--that of son to parents--but denies them their proper roles by relegating them to the secondary status of "friends." When Hike was published in 1912, Harry Lewis was twenty-seven years old.

Other variations in Lewis's theme of dramatic disguise must be noted. Being a traveler appealed to Lewis more than the travel itself. The role is one which lends an air of importance to mere restless searching, while one is at liberty to use and dispose of several fictitious identities, even though much time must be spent in idleness from work. Being well traveled pays dividends to the aspiring snob, who enjoys appearing knowledgeable

about foreign parts and customs, and cultivated in his tastes. Travel means danger to people who are insecure, because it suggests abandonment of one's familiar identity and a journey into unknown and possibly hostile surroundings, but although travel may seem threatening, the actual risks are few, and one can return from a trip abroad or around the country as if from a great victory. Escape from self through travel is an important theme in Sinclair Lewis's early works, not for the insights which this form of education provides for the protagonists, but for the opportunities they gain to try something new, be someone different. Both Mark Shorer and David J. Dooley²⁷ have stressed the yearning of the Lewis character for freedom, indicated by the drive to break out of a confining existence to go traveling. But ultimately for both Lewis and his characters, freedom is a terrifying condition; they content themselves with a flamboyant sortie into the dangerous existence, and return to approximately the former condition of confinement, not because they are strong, like James's Isabel Archer, but because they are weak and chastened.

Not content to play various parts in his own life, Lewis often maneuvered other people into situations where they were obliged to play roles with him or opposite him. The games he played at meals or while traveling are examples of this ploy. But more revealing were the parts

²⁷The Art of Sinclair Lewis (Lincoln, 1967).

he forced his wives to play, sometimes with himself as the target, and sometimes with the roles reversed. Grace became the idealized "playmate," the cool, intuitive, high-born maiden of romantic fantasy; Dorothy was cast as the hearty comrade and fellow traveler. Both women seem to have done duty as a mother figure as well. When they refused to continue in the characters he had devised for them, however, Lewis would angrily accuse his wives of trying to change him and wreck his career, and would attempt to "punish" them by long absences, while at the same time soothing his conscience with many letters protesting his need for their love and companionship. These actions are similar to the patterns of a neurotic, self-defeating personality filled with conflicting hostilities, directed both outward toward real or suspected threats of annihilation and inward in a drive to belittle or degrade himself.

Within this framework certain puzzling aspects of Lewis's artistic career can be seen more clearly. Lewis's preference for an episodic structure over definite plot may be an outgrowth of the endemic planlessness in his own life patterns, which were essentially negativistic in their orientation toward escape and reaction against authority and established conventions. Lack of plot organization permits an author to feel that he is creatively free, and improvising with great virtuosity; but it also has a limiting effect upon the development of characters, who

seem not to move from inner direction along definite lines of action as maturely conceived characters should, but because the omnipotent author sends them. These powers of control Lewis seemingly could not surrender.

The problem of Lewis's confused point of view, noted by Whipple and Schorer, which appears sometimes to support his protagonists and causes, then inexplicably to patronize or ridicule them, may also have an explanation. Such ambiguity or irony is a device for avoiding full responsibility for one's ideas, i.e., by withholding full approval; it is also a defense against anticipated criticism that the author was too patently sympathetic with his characters, or idealized them. Finally, the blurring properties of ambiguous point of view can be interpreted as a self-limiting factor, a built-in flaw in the artist's creativity.

The awkward handling or avoidance of sex in Lewis's novels is another interesting mode of self-limitation. If the novelist's embarrassment seems rooted in a quasi-Dickensian primness and propriety in deference to public tastes, it must also be remembered that the works of Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson and Dreiser discovered robust aspects of fiction which Lewis never explored. For Lewis's characters sex is either platonically titillating or savagely disagreeable. Lewis denied them mature, fulfilling male and female sexual roles,

curtailing their success and enjoyment of love as he seemed to ruin his own satisfaction.

Sinclair Lewis's creative shortcomings in plot deficiency, fragmented point of view, and sexual aphasia may easily be attributable to needs for self-limitation and escape from self through fantasy-role playing. There remains the problem of his method in creating and developing characters. It seems inconsistent that a novelist who prided himself on his researches for authentic detail--and who demonstrated remarkable abilities to observe and remember minutiae--did not conceive of lifelike, fleshed-out characters comparable, say, to Dreiser's Carrie Meeber, Clyde Griffiths or Frank Cowperwood. The explanation is that, although Lewis could have created such characters with his considerable inventive powers, he was not inclined to do so. He had too much hostility toward these representations of himself, and not enough compassion.

Perhaps Lewis's undue emphasis on "characters" as phenomena rather than "character" as human quality contributes to the lingering moods of superficiality and imbalance in his novels. Apparently Lewis thought it sufficient to wind up his actors, give them parts, and propel them through a series of routines. Critics have protested that Lewis's characters are caricatures, that they are "flat," "hollow," or "soulless." The truth is

that they are not permitted to evince any inner resources, lest they become independent and escape the author's control. It must be conceded, as Mary Colum pointed out, that Lewis develops his characters by tagging: "He labels the material instead of transforming it."²⁸ Evidently Lewis's conception of personality, both for himself and for his characters, was that it consisted of a largely fortuitous aggregation of facets, guises, and attitudes. One might relish the knowledge that one contained several selves, some secretly hidden and waiting for dramatic discovery or revelation, through some accident or significant symbolic act. Thus, Hike is really a capable aircraft pilot and adventurer as well as a football hero; Mr. Wrenn is really a poet and actor and traveler underneath his occupation of novelty-store clerk; Carl Ericson is a business executive who is really a pioneer aviator, and so forth. Like one who decorates an empty winebottle with varicolored candle drippings, Sinclair Lewis builds his characters by attribution, never allowing them an opportunity to discover themselves, but always insisting on discovering for them; suddenly contriving new characteristics to suit the anticipated needs of the next episode. It is, in the last analysis, an adolescent view of the Self.

The care with which Lewis selects occupational roles for his characters indicates another set of

²⁸"A Critical Credo," Scribner's Magazine, LXXIX (April, 1926), 392.

prerequisites. Lewisian characters are essentially performers, not producers. They are seldom shown at tasks where the love of a man for his work gives him satisfaction for having created objects of beauty and quality; rather, they are providers of services--managers, salesmen, lucky bright-idea men--with endless occasions for monologue and dialogue, especially for acts of aggression-by-talking. Suitable clothes they also must have, which Lewis drapes over his effigies like signs: a bowtie, tweeds, white flannels, voile dresses. His choices are particularly interesting in view of Marshall McLuhan's recent observations that clothing, as an extension of the skin, is in effect a costume which a person chooses to assume during the performance of a role; and that the automobile, with its seemingly infinite varieties of style and color, can be thought of as an item of wearing apparel.²⁹ This calls further attention to Lewis's use of objects in role definition. Possessions and gadgets are not regarded as impersonal objects, but as adjuncts of the Self, to which some emotional residue must accrue. All the facets of a fully dramatized character cannot be shown unless he is carefully fixed in a setting of lesser brilliants that reflect his tastes. Fearful or cheerful qualities are even projected upon houses or other buildings with an impressionism characteristic of Lewis's technique. These

²⁹ Marshall McLuhan, "Fashion: A 'Bore War,'" Saturday Evening Post, CCXLI (July 27, 1968), 29.

and other devices--the Significant Detail, the Dramatic Gesture, and Capital Letters--especially the novelist's celebrated fussiness about names for their denotative and connotative effects in characterization, culminate in masses of circumstantial detail which urge the assumption that Lewis's people are carefully thought out and constructed. Nevertheless, despite the barrages of talk which mask their loneliness and lack of purpose, these characters are limited by two of the author's faults: his lack of distance from them, and his tendency to press them into four basic types.

Sinclair Lewis's prime characters are evolved from four prototypes, each with its obverse: (1) the authority figure, or "parent"; (2) the brother-friend, or foil; (3) the mother-wife; and (4) some representation, either hero or heroine, of Lewis's own personality. These four character modes are treated either quite sympathetically or as fear portraits--sometimes with an ambiguity which, curiously, admits no middle ground. For example, sometimes the authority-type will be conciliated and idealized, as in Lewis's later characters of Max Gottlieb and Bruno Zechlin, and at other times the "parent" roles will be weakened and belittled, as for Mr. and Mrs. Golden in The Job or the Applebys in The Innocents. Sometimes the brother-friend is a boon companion, whom the hero can excel in the most obvious ways; then again he may be selfish and treacherous as a rival unworthy of the hero's

trust. The women are usually depicted as wives or potential wives, either passive and self-effacing or unstable and threatening to the male. The heroic roles which suggest Lewis himself--Wrenn, Hawk, Walter Babson, even Carol Kennicott--betray a shifting viewpoint, from glorification to deprecation, on the part of the author. These four basic personality patterns can be traced to Lewis's own self-limiting attitudes toward his social relationships and his work, welling out of his conflicting needs to punish himself and to escape the anguish of his existence through fantasies and role playing. Lewis's critical contemporaries often remarked that he never fulfilled his early promise of writing the truly definitive Great American Novel; that perhaps he lacked the necessary insight. If these criticisms are valid, perhaps now it is possible to suggest why.

CHAPTER II

HIKE AND THE AEROPLANE: FLIGHTS OF FANTASY

It seems somehow quite fitting that Sinclair Lewis, the notable chronicler of such American superboys as Babbitt, Arrowsmith, and Cass Timberlane, should have written a juvenile adventure as his first book for publication. The Frederick A. Stokes Company brought out Hike and the Aeroplane in August, 1912, concealing the author's identity with a fictitious "Tom Graham." Mark Schorer notes from accumulated evidence that Lewis had written Hike in three weeks during the summer of 1911, on an assignment by the publisher, while he vacationed at Provincetown, Massachusetts. In Schorer's view, the little book was an amusement which paid for Lewis's more serious preoccupation with early drafts of Our Mr. Wrenn, and it "appears to be a perfectly conventional adventure story for boys, in the manner of Tom Swift."¹ Conventional it may be, but Hike and the Aeroplane is hardly a book which

¹Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, pp. 189, 203-204.

should be brushed aside solely because it lacks literary finesse. On the contrary, this hastily written volume seems to spread out in plain view the basic emotional patterns and motivating forces of the would-be Lewis hero: the inordinate self-destructive tendencies implicit in risk taking, the hysterical compulsion to perform melodramatically before a gaping audience, utter triumph over rivals and comrades, the yearning for approval from father and brother figures, and above all, the assumption of assorted roles, carefully planned to exhibit the virtuosity or facets of the central character. Lewis's attitude toward the book seems to have been ambiguous, for although he wrote that the transaction with Stokes "was deplorable on all sides," he added, with a touch of pride in a letter to Chauncey B. Tinker, "I believe the book is now worth a lot of money."² The dedication to his parents of an inferior book like Hike may be interpreted as a gesture of defiant sarcasm ("Here is your unpromising son's first book") as well as a conciliatory appeal ("See, I offer my first one to you"). Whether or not Lewis took pride in the book is not, however, the point; the tacked-on quality of the episodes in Hike suggests that Lewis was more concerned with volume than superior writing. What matters is that Lewis saw in the airplane a literary mechanism which

²Quoted in Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 189.

enabled a young man to act out heroic fantasies and to become the spectacular focus of the groundlings' attention.

It must be emphasized that in the context of Hike and the Aeroplane the theme of flying has an identifiable emotional connotation. Flying is not treated primarily as a scientific triumph or ultimately as a mode of speedy transport as much as it is assumed to be a powerful property of the self. For Hike flying is self-fulfillment, the dramatization of a childish fantasy of omnipotence which enables him to be utterly masterful, above all others. For the author, whose breathless involvement is evidenced by the shortness of his puppet-strings, Hike's flights seem a form of retroactive triumph over unbeatable childhood companions--schemes for evening up old inequities and for making the humbled spirit soar, untouchable, over tiny and ineffectual rivals. While he is flying, the hero is completely unrestricted: physically he is capable of any maneuver, he needs few instructions, he improvises beautifully, he scarcely ever runs out of fuel, and seldom needs to pay for anything. On the ground, however, Hike is a schoolboy subject to adult authority and harrassed by self-doubt and fear of rejection by his peers. Even then, the adults bend rules to accommodate this exceptional boy and speak to him as an equal; his classmates, generally subdued with awe and admiration, feel that they must perform some traditional hazing, half apologetically, and when upperclass jealousy looms, Hike receives it gallantly as a

misdirected compliment. Hike is a Sir Galahad of the sky on a (borrowed) flying steed, who teaches manners to the peasantry, confronts villainy with fortitude, greets his superiors with a mixture of deference and disarming familiarity, and shows himself as a good sport and man of unimpeachable integrity among his equals. When one has been made unassailable, when one is the person to whom the usual rules do not apply, a show of magnanimity costs nothing.

The twenty-eight chapters of Hike and the Aero-plane recount approximately six months of hectic adventure, from July to the end of football season at a boys' military academy near Monterey, California. Each chapter is a separate scene, or facet in Hike Griffin's energetic young life, with only as much continuity between episodes as is necessary to show the several sides of the hero, without having to watch him grow appreciably. The mood throughout the book is one of a youth playing perpetual hookey, because the national interest of the United States requires it. Generally, the episodes are exploited for their wealth of melodrama, and are not employed as modes of depicting character maturation. Lewis's assumption seems to be that adventures are events which happen to a hero, who remains essentially static; he does not bring his unique resources to bear upon events and become fused with them or change them. He is the picked man, the selected victim of circumstances, sometimes the lucky guy,

sometimes the sacrificial goat about whom an author can write extended feature articles. Because his character is totally attributed, rather than distinctly formed from within, the Lewis hero always seems well rehearsed in his roles, instead of motivated by the special dynamics of his personality. In the unfolding of his story, then, the hero's character is not revealed, it is accumulated.

It should not be surprising that the central character of this boy's book is little more than a stereotype. But in an analysis of Lewis's motive and method, it is difficult to see many differences between Hike and Carl Ericson in The Trail of the Hawk, except in intensity and circumstantial detail.

In building up his concept of a principal character or hero, Lewis customarily uses a montage method, showing the same person in a cluster of tiny but typical attitudes, with plausible props, and suitably framed with some perfunctory sticks of plot. Thus, one has glimpses of Gerald ("Hike") Griffin as youthful explorer, rescuer of a loyal friend in danger, former captain of the freshman football team at Santa Benicia Military Academy, and phenomenal boy aviator who foils horse-thieves, moonshiners, industrial profiteers, newspapermen, Mexican revolutionaries, and the sinister Captain Willoughby Welch. It is as though the reader were being subjected to a snapshot album of Hike's summer and fall activities. In each episode Hike plays a slightly different role, with a suitable costume for each:

khakis for exploring, nudity for swimming in the Potomac, pajamas for romping in a Washington hotel, helmet and shin-guards for football, a Balaclava aviator's helmet, overalls and aluminoid-silk Flying Jacket for air travel, and puttees and breeches for riding horseback. Clothing changes are convincing external signs of the character's alteration of role and mood, as well as evidences of the diverse facets which somehow unite to form the mosaic of himself.

The best physical description of Hike comes early in the book:

Hike Griffin . . . was a boy of sixteen, with straight shoulders that were going to become very broad. He had a shock of the blackest hair that ever grew, and quiet, gray eyes that never seemed to worry. His mouth was strong, yet with little laughter-wrinkles at the side, as though he saw life as an interesting joke.³

The boy's friend, General Thorne of the Army Signal Corps, remembers "his lean strong young body and his courteous seriousness," but these are more attributions. Hike Griffin never rises above the class of what might be called a complimentary character.

The book's villains, P. J. Jolls, the aircraft manufacturer, and Captain Welch, corrupt military adviser to the Signal Corps on aeronautical affairs, are obliged to play the roles of hypocrites. They are characterized,

³Tom Graham [Sinclair Lewis], Hike and the Aero-plane (New York, 1912), pp. 1-2.

in part, by the occupations they had formerly held. The devious Welch was a teacher of physics, electricity, light, and heat at West Point before he became an "expert" on flying, and he had obtained a pilot's license in France during the early days of aviation. Despite his beautiful manners and impressive reputation, "Captain Welch was a man who always seemed to be sneering--and usually was" (p. 22). Mr. Jolls, with whom Welch is in collusion to secure a lucrative military airplane contract, had made millions "by selling patent medicines, shaving-soap, and fake mine-stock" (p. 24) before buying up most of the aircraft market. Later events expose Jolls as little more than a gangster, while Welch is revealed as a gambler and embezzler who flees to Mexico to become a mercenary leader of irregular revolutionists.

Hike's faithful friend, Torrington ("Poodle") Darby, is permitted a few roles as well. Although he lacks young Griffin's physical assets and much of his impetuous courage, Poodle is cheerful, witty, and "quick at the books." He shows unsuspected talent as both poet and detective, and as a campus intriguer at the academy.

The resourceful and friendly Lieutenant Jack Adeler, Hike's idol, exhibits versatility. Not only the inventor of a "hydroaeroplane" and a flight-record holder, Adeler is rich, owns a ranch in Mexico, and had graduated from Yale before joining the Signal Corps; he becomes a military instructor at the boys' academy, and eventually

the leader of a troop of Boy Scouts. He possesses "the kindest disposition that a man ever had," and was "solidly built and quick and quiet, and he liked to have Hike and Poodle with him, and never was tired of answering their questions" (p. 27).

Even the eccentric inventor of the tetrahedral aeroplane, Martin Priest, must have his hidden dimension. When the boys discover him at a secret aerodrome, Priest is clothed in a white robe and sandals; his shoulder-length hair is wild and dark, his beard long, his eyes shining. A later description of the inventor suggests a romanticized projection of Lewis himself, in the days before he met Grace Hegger. The boys return to Priest's hideaway with the skeptical Lieutenant Adeler:

When they reached the secret valley . . . the crank aviator was sitting on a soap-box, waiting for them. He had cut his hair, in a rough way, and had changed his crazy-looking white gown for overalls, a blue flannel shirt, and a greasy sweater-jacket. Poodle's opinion was that he had changed himself from a crazy prophet into a tramp, a hobo mechanic; but both Hike and Lieutenant Adeler said that he looked like an Edison, with his broad forehead, slender hands, and bright eyes (p. 28).

In a passionate confession to his new friends, Martin Priest discloses that he was a graduate of "Massachusetts Tech." who had been employed by a marine engine company; he had embezzled funds to finance "aeroplane material" and his wife's medical bills; had been convicted and sent to prison. Upon his release, the inventor spent an inheritance on world travel to witness developments in the emerging

aircraft industry, and at last retired to California to construct the unique tetrahedral. There is also a suggestion of paranoia in this creative man's personality: when the unscrupulous Welch and Jolls capture Hike in a plot to destroy the competitive Priest invention, they press the youth to write a damaging letter forsaking the inventor and his aircraft. Hike refuses, predicting that to Priest, such news would "break his heart--just when he's getting over the feeling that the whole world is conspiring against him. He's pretty fond of me. All that note will do will be to send him out into the mountains again, and probably make him give up the game entirely" (p. 138). As they pursue a plan to discredit Martin Priest, Welch and Jolls hope to release information of his criminal past to the newspapers "to make [Priest] think he's disgraced and he'll just disappear . . . he's pretty sensitive . . . " (p. 159).

These are the principal characters whom Lewis draws by the device of role-accretion--by assigning to them the personality-building components of definite emotional pattern, suitable clothes, a variety of occupations, travel to widely separated points, and distinctive speech habits. Remaining for consideration are some of the dramatic roles which the people in Hike elect to play, or are obliged to assume: the person who is stared at, the player to the grandstand, the bluffer, the man in disguise, and the actor of fantasies.

Gerald ("Hike") Griffin is properly the focus of this juvenile adventure, and yet there are moments of particular intensity when the atmosphere becomes electric, and the excited hero becomes the fascinating object of everyone's eyes. These peaks of intensity usually occur while Hike is flying, and his awareness of being a star attraction seems to have the palpable effect of changing him into an hysterical, self-destructive performer, having crossed the threshold from efficient, keen execution of his duties into irrational recklessness. The historic first flight of the tetrahedral (now christened in the boy's honor Hike's Hustle I) sets the pattern. While Martin Priest, Lieutenant Adeler and the boy soared aloft, "Hike yelled with joy, for never had he felt more comfortable, more like some big eagle, than then" (p. 38). He shouts and laughs, and is too interested to be afraid. Then the craft passes over a city of mere earth-dwellers.

As they flew over Monterey, the people rushed from the streets and gardens up to the tops of their Spanish adobe houses. They were used to ordinary Jolls bi-planes, but this great bird was different. On the fashionable drives and tennis courts of the Del Monte hotel, rich Eastern tourists gazed up till their necks ached.

Hike yelled in Martin Priest's ear, "Let me try her!" (p. 41).

The impulse to perform this sensational act of mastery, linked as it is to the boy's knowledge of his acute conspicuousness in the public eye, is as irresistible as a conquest. Furthermore, the gratuitous dividend of being able to look down upon the fashionable and rich spectators

Monterey seems to afford Hike Griffin no little satisfaction.

Similar "grandstand plays" accompany Hike's other flights. In Chapter V Hike and Poodle resolve to save the passengers and crew of a "rich guy's" yacht, which is smashing to pieces on the coast. Naturally, they will have to use the Hustle, which possesses marvelous gliding and soaring properties. After flying over the disabled ship, Hike allows the Hustle to "hover over the wreck, looking curiously down at the white faces that peered up at him from amid spray" (p. 48). Casually, the young pilot shuts off the aircraft's motor, while he studies the problem of rescue. In a preposterous sequence, Hike snatches away seventeen of the thirty helpless people in a dangling rope sling, then lands the plane on a makeshift platform constructed of planks from the wreckage, before flying the rest to safety.

In an effort to present a fair case for the Priest tetrahedral before the Army's Aviation Board, the boys fly the Hustle to Washington. They seem conscious of the spectacle they present as they speed across the country: " . . . they passed over some thousands of people, who stared up at their strange machine . . . " (p. 82). Landing in a field near the capital, the youths camp for the night. After five hours' sleep Hike awoke,

. . . and rushed down to the Potomac River, near which they were landed. A crowd of farmers had gathered,

staring at the boys as though they had dropped from Mars. Hike paid no attention to them, but, slipping behind a big plane tree, pulled off his clothes and dashed into the river (p. 83).

Again, there is occasion for performing an exhibitionistic act while one is the target of amazed glances from one's inferiors, especially when one feels that the usual social rules and restraints do not apply in his case. This assumption is further illustrated when, after flying the tetrahedral over the city, Hike lands the aircraft on the White House grounds.

During a demonstration flight for the benefit of General Thorne, commander of the Signal Corps, Hike takes his amazing craft up over Washington in a mounting cork-screw pattern to twelve thousand feet.

Once up at that magnificent height, from which he could see, through a slight mist, the capital city spread out like a dim map, he stopped the motor, and came volplaning down like a lazy butterfly, till he was within five hundred feet of the crowd atop the State, War, and Navy Building (p. 88).

Then conscious that General Thorne was "watching through a fieldglass up there on the War Building," Hike "shot her up again, shut off the motor, and took his hands off the levers" (p. 89). Flying while using no hands, while the nation's capital gapes below, must unquestionably be the apex of dramatized fantasy, a supreme act of fulfillment for the adolescent ego which craves attention and thirsts for celebrity. Still, Hike must continue to play the part of a modest young citizen who is merely doing his duty.

Hike derives a different sort of satisfaction from his virtuosity with a borrowed "Paulhin-Tatin monoplane" with which the boy appears at the academy's campus to impress his peers by taking them up for rides. Especially gratifying is the way Hike subdues his old critic, Sea Lion Rogers, by flying him through a series of suicidal stunts, while "the crowd below howled with terror" (p. 209). Hike's pleasure at seeing the Class Tease humiliated is almost sadistic:

This was quite too much triumph for Hike. He felt very sorry for Sea Lion as he circled again, and landed. He felt still sorrier as Sea Lion was lifted out, and staggered off, silent. . . .

As Hike prepared to return the borrowed plane, "He knew that there would be no more 'kidding,' and mighty little more jealousy, the rest of the year" (p. 209). Rivals can be neutralized, enemies silenced, doubters convinced by a judicious demonstration of one's superior powers and privileges; one's own rage can be cooled under cover of an altruistic afternoon treat. In any case, it is an exhibition of fantastic power.

In the final chapter of the book, Hike makes another conspicuous gesture before the eyes of a cheering crowd, at the Big Game against San Dinero Prep. The teams had not scored during the first half, and at last Hike Griffin got around end carrying the ball, with "practically a clear field before him. The Santa Benicians were ready to spring up and yell their 'hike, Hike, hike!'" (p. 271).

It is at such a moment when a boy sees his opportunity, and a vision of his destiny unfolds. But Hike hands the ball off, unnecessarily, to Left-Eared Dongan, Poodle's old enemy, who makes a touchdown to win the game. On the surface it is a highminded and generous sacrifice to permit an old rival to win the credit, and it makes thrilling copy for a boy's book. But in Hike's case the needless lateral is another indication of hysterical risk-taking, a destructive and self-threatening impulse triggered by an awareness of the crowd with countless eyes, watching, eager for spectacle, demanding performance of a role.

Thus the person who is stared at, and the player to the grandstand seem to be metamorphoses of the same person, acting in a stimulus-response process. Only Hike in the book plays these roles, and it is mainly he who plays the part of bluffer, and always as a defense against a threatening situation. Never do his bluffs fail. The experienced bluffer is an actor, a creator of plausible (but false) impressions that he is, or has, more than visible evidence would indicate. To win at bluffing, the hero needs an agile imagination, courage which approaches desperation, the willingness to take inordinate risks, a knowledge of human behavior based on experience and observation, and irresolute opponents. Beyond these requisites, habitual bluffing is as spectacularly self-destructive and threatening as Russian roulette: it suggests that the actor is not only careless of the consequences of failure,



but even hopes irrationally to lose. This background is essential for understanding the surprisingly complex behavior of Hike Griffin, and the boy's startling resemblance to the living Sinclair Lewis.

When challengers are confronted by the bluff, opposition collapses, as in a victory-in-fantasy. From the time Poodle and Hike bluff Martin Priest into dropping his dangerous iron club in Chapter II, to the occasion when Hike and Adeler frighten off a band of Mexican rebels in Chapter XXVI, Hike has single-handedly outbluffed his opponents at least a half-dozen times. In the dramatic yacht-rescue episode, Hike coaches Poodle on a method to bluff the survivors into building an emergency landing stage. Using peremptory telegraphese, the boy commands:

"Going to land on yacht. You drop off first time I circle. Here, take revolver--my back pocket. If people scared, threaten 'em. Make 'em pile planks so I can land. Make 'em get in--all of 'em--when I land. Make 'em stay quiet when I start" (pp. 51-52).

Empowered by nothing more than his friend's effrontery, Poodle takes charge, dominating even the rich owner and the skipper.

The sailing-master was a commanding figure, even in his drenched uniform. He was large and dignified and used to ordering people about. But he came up to Poodle as though that youth owned the yacht and the sea (p. 53).

Hike looks down patronizingly from on high in the Hustle: "Lean, sinewy Hike grinned--tired though he was from the struggle with the winds--to see his chum taking command."

With initiative and a working plan, one can control adults, even rich and experienced ones, and after manipulating them can accept their effusive thanks, ordering them arbitrarily to "Keep this out of the papers--don't say how you got rescued" (p. 55).

During the sensational first flight to Washington (Chapters VII-IX), Hike frightens away a determined band of cattle rustlers in Kansas with a ruse.

Suddenly the bandits turned and galloped away, as an infernal crackling, like a Gatling gun, came from the Hustle. Hike had started the engine (p. 68).

Later, over the Tennessee mountains, the boys decide to land for minor repairs. A gang of moonshiners surrounds them, but Hike stiffens their leader with an electric paralyzing wave, then bluffs the mountaineers into loading him aboard the tetrahedral, while the youth pretends to administer first aid. The mixture which they fed the stunned leader was of "lubricating oil and liquid wing-sheathing," but the act is enough to throw the moonshiners off guard, and the boys fly up aloft with their passenger. Reviving in flight, the mountaineer tries to overpower Hike. The young aviator, though armed with a revolver, outmaneuvers his adversary with words:

"My dear sir, you're perfectly correct in thinking I am bluffing, with this revolver. Don't care to shoot you. But also, you're bluffing. You know if you threw me overboard you'd never get to earth alive. Look down there. If you make one single move, I'll . . . "

. . . the mountaineer, seeing the earth rapidly swooping up at them . . . lost his steely nerve, and

begged for mercy. Never had he met a boy of sixteen who played thus with life and death.

The boys put the plane down in a pasture, and

with a very courtly gesture, Hike motioned the mountaineer to step out. With his revolver covering him all the time, Hike bade him good-by.

The man crawled out and ran, never looking back.

Watching him, Hike said, "Well, I'm ashamed of myself, now it's over . . . " (pp. 78-79).

Significantly, Hike does not allow himself to relish his triumph, although two consecutive bluffs have worked against the mountaineers, and the enemy is utterly routed. This reaction of shame instead of jubilation is to be expected in a behavioral pattern of self-defeat, like the giveaway touchdown to Left Ear during the crucial game, which is a self-effacing ploy designed to win the highest degree of acceptance and admiration.

During his captivity in Virginia by the forces of Jolls, Hike bluffs an escape through the nearby marshes in the dark. Though the attempt is doomed, the youth earns the admiration of a sympathetic guard, Bat, and scores an important psychological advantage. Bat later turns against his fellow crooks, saves Jack Adeler's life, and makes a confession implicating Jolls and his gang.

On one occasion when Hike is forced to defend himself, bluffing does not suffice, but the satisfaction of defeating the champion school wrestler more than compensates for quick victory in a showdown. At a ceremonial academy hazing, the jealous Taffy Bingham slaps Hike publicly.

Hike stood up, very quick but very quiet. "You'll fight me for that, Taffy," he said, "and you'll get good and plenty licked. . . . I'll punch you now or afterwards, whichever you want" (p. 189).

One would expect a bruising conflict; but no, Hike the agile sophomore subdues the senior wrestler with three tricky punches, much in the same fashion that frail Mr. Wrenn was to overwhelm the shipboard bully on a cattle boat to England. The apparently insuperable opponents topple like clumsy Goliaths; confrontation by the sincere and highminded Lewis hero, and their own vulnerability show these straw villains to have been bluffers who have little character or substance to support them. They are vanquished totally, like the hated enemies in adolescent fantasies.

Hike's encounters with the Welch-led insurrectionists during his foray into Mexico offer two more occasions for dramatic displays of assurance. Having landed the tetrahedral mistakenly among the revolutionists, Hike reports to the officer in command that he is "under Colonel Welch's orders," creating the impression of being on the rebels' side. The trick works long enough for Jack Adeler to prepare the plane's machine gun for action, and, of course, the enemy are scattered (pp. 233-234). Subsequently, Hike is able to bluff a reluctant Texan into providing gasoline for the Hustle on credit, saying that Adeler will pay later.

"He'll pay for it right now, or he won't get it; not at this gara-jee," began the Texan, and stopped short, for Hike was looking at him across the sight of a leveled revolver.

The Texan threw up his hands and whined . . . (p. 247).

In compensation for outbluffing the Texan's bluster, Hike receives not only aviation fuel, but also the more volatile vapors of flattery:

When the loading was finished, the Texan suddenly smiled. "I thought you was a boy," he stated, "but I take it back. You're crazy, all right--airplanes! But they grow nerve, where you come from . . . (p. 248).

Chided and treated like a boy even in his twenties, young Harry Lewis never received such words of commendation from his parents, to whom he dedicated Hike and the Aeroplane.

A variation of the theme of bluffing is the use of disguises, either deliberately intended, or attributed by error. Perhaps the most curious episode in the book is a grand tour of role playing which combines bluffing, switched identities, a disguise, an invented history of many job occupations, slang dialect, and the implication that biographical facts become outrageously garbled in the newspaper reports a celebrity reads about himself--the last, a sort of fun-house mirror image. This scene is the bizarre fake interview by the Washington reporter when the boys are recovering from their transcontinental flight. A grinning bell-boy appears at their hotel room to warn them of a persistent reporter, saying, "He t'inks he's a winner 'cause he can put down on a paper wot a guy ain't said and draw him like he don't look, both to once" (p. 99).

Hike asks Poodle to fend off the reporter by telling him that "Mr. G. J. H. [Gerald Jerry Hike] Griffin begs will he please beat it." But the boys think of a better prank to play on the obnoxious newsman: they will disguise the bell-boy in Hike's pajamas, and let the reporter interview him, to the amusement of them all. The bell-boy proves to be a liar of great virtuosity. Inventing various roles for himself, he informs the interviewer that his father was a colonel with family roots in English nobility, that he himself had been a miner, cabin-boy at sea, a hobo, a New York newsboy, a Denver bellhop, and a machinist before aspiring to be an aviator. When the reporter becomes angry at the bell-boy's impertinence, Hike appears from his hiding place under the bed to set the situation right and to promise the reporter a "real interview" later in the lobby, concluding in the English idiom with which he usually puts on his manners, "Really, I'm awf'ly sorry, old man" (p. 104). The scene is as full of counterfeit identities as a wax museum.

Lewis cannot resist using the disguise device again in Chapter XIII, when Poodle Darby turns detective in a search for Hike's abductors. Having learned from General Thorne's operatives that Mr. Jolls is at a Washington hotel, Poodle orders "a suit of clothes so's I can make up as a kind of a tough kid" (p. 129). His plan is to follow Jolls when the industrialist drives to the gang's hideaway. A "rough coat, trousers and shirt"

together with a touring car, steamer rug and motoring goggles complete the costume. When Jolls proceeds out into the countryside, Poodle directs his own chauffeur to overtake the other car and let him off beyond a hill. Then the youth "looked like a jolly country-boy, certainly not like a motorist who followed other people's cars" (p. 132). This masquerade, with further refinements of an unsaddled horse, a large straw hat and bare feet, enables Poodle to shadow Jolls to the cabin where Hike is held prisoner.

A variant technique, by which a disguise and a role of authority are attributed to Hike, occurs in Chapter XXV. Hike has flown the Hustle to Torreas, Mexico, to summon help from government troops in defending Jack Adeler's ranch at Aguas Grandes. A Lieutenant Duros and twelve soldiers are dispatched by the local commandant; Hike flies them back just in time to save the ranch from an attack by Welch's insurrectionists. After victory, Duros congratulates Adeler on "the brilliant help you get from this other officer. . . . He is perhaps a lieutenant of the Signal Corps?"

"Me? An officer?" blushed Hike. "Why, I'm a kid--a youngster; that's all just a muchacho!"

The Mexican officer smiled at what he considered a jest and bowed, with his hand on his breast. "As you weesh, sir. You shall keep your disguise! . . . "

. . . and suddenly Hike realized with a shock that the Mexican officer meant it--that he, Hike, really had been and was commander of this expedition, and that Lieutenant Duros could do nothing without his permission! (pp. 255-256)

Disguises, seemingly, make men bold, and conversely bold actions imply a disguise, so that when exposed, a man may realize more glory from a double victory: by fooling the enemy with an unassuming appearance and by thrashing him in combat. In Hike's case, the attributed disguise is accompanied by a glorious sense of power and control over men's lives.

A similar mode of ego projection for his characters is Lewis's use of "making believe" or "pretending." There is even one instance of pretending to pretend, when Hike and Poodle retire to the Willard Hotel in Washington after their appearance before the aviation board; in a clowning mood Poodle suggests, " . . . Say, Hike, let's pretend we're Boy Aviators, and that we've just come from the Pacific Coast in an aeroplane, and that a Brigadier General has been kow-towing to us" (p. 98). Lewis's most extensive staging of these play-acting scenes, however, comes in connection with the boys' activities at Santa Benicia Academy, as when the boy heroes are humorously mocked in a satirical charade, complete with fake airplane and "a fat boy with a false mustache, bearing the sign 'President Taft'" (pp. 178-179). Much of Chapter XVIII is devoted to similar schoolboy clowning during the "Great Hazing" of Hike and Poodle, a pretended roasting of these worthies in an extraordinary and honorific session. The ceremony is a mock trial at which the flyers are charged with "criminal conspiracy against the peace and

class-feeling" of the academy. After assigning the appropriate parts, Lewis records the proceedings in the manner of a play (pp. 190-191). Before they can secure pardon from their schoolmates for "having the cheek to get notorious," Hike and Poodle must construct an imaginary aircraft out of chairs, sheets, and assorted junk--the same kind of impromptu stunt which delighted Lewis himself.

It is interesting that what seemed to fascinate Lewis about football were the tricky plays and deceptions. During the memorable game against the Berkeley Etonian School, Santa Benicia scored a touchdown following recovery of an onside kick; the Etonians scored after they had "tossed on a trick"; and Hike Griffin "got around left end on a fake kick, and made a forty-yard run, while the whole school gasped, afraid to breathe." Hike found the stamina to shake off a pursuer and tally the winning goal by the most obvious strategy: "he made b'lieve--just plain made b'lieve--that he was driving the Hustle before Congress and the President; gritted his teeth, and fled toward the Etonian goal" (p. 213). Scenes of imaginary grandeur impel him toward a real victory.

The boy heroes are not the only ones permitted to pretend. The villainous Captain Welch feigns suicide by drinking liquid from a bottle marked "prussic acid," which proves merely to have contained water. The insensitive Left Eared Dongan was capable of pretending to be, consecutively, an "Updegraff monoplane," then "Colonel Church,

leading a brilliant night attack on the Yaqui Indians," and at last "Sherlock Holmes" before surprising Poodle in the latter's role of secret poet (pp. 216-218). Lewis's startlingly frequent use of these shams and fantasies--role playing, bluffing, masquerading and pretending--would appear especially calculated to please an audience of boy readers, who would relish their cheap theatricality. It becomes evident, though, that the author carried these same tricks over into his adult fiction, and used them repeatedly because of their convenience as literary technique. He could seem to discover unanticipated dimensions of personality in his created characters simply by exhibiting them fatuously posing, pretending, or projecting themselves into fantasies of heroism or escape. But these secret facets, as they purport to be, are too gratuitously bestowed to be convincing as serious character delineations; hence the critics' frequent complaint that Lewis created caricatures.

An analysis of the functional roles which the characters in Hike and the Aeroplane fulfill affords some surprising discoveries. Aside from the roles he puts on, Hike Griffin is the main hero-representation in the book. In his heroic capacity Hike shows himself quick-thinking and intelligent, courageous and enterprising. But one senses a histrionic compulsiveness in Hike's desire to be the one who is stared at, who takes outrageous risks--the schemer, the invincible winner. When he is immobilized,

and no longer the subject of general admiration, as during his capture by Jolls in Chapter XII, Hike must recapture his audience by making a reckless escape attempt. From nowhere Lewis thoughtfully produces a small vial of nitric acid, which the youth happened to be carrying, useful for burning away the rope around his wrists. When Hike's absence is noticed, and a search has begun, the hero regains the spotlight (in this case literally a portable automobile headlight "with strong reflectors") when the kidnapers find him floundering through the marsh. This immoderate desire for attention impels the hero to take such unusual risks that they appear to be gratuitous and self-destructive. Striking examples of this mode of punishment occur often enough to suggest a pattern: after an extraordinary achievement or public acknowledgement of his fame, the champion expresses a death wish. In Chapter IX, following the boys' sensational flight east from California, Poodle faints from a wound encountered in battle with the moonshiners. Hike, who has earned immense glory by beating their leader during a showdown in the sky, now humiliates himself with solicitude for his friend.

Gee, Poodle--I want to kill myself. I didn't know you were hurt. It was a crime, my keeping the game up. I wanted to get our warlike friend good and frightened before we dropped him, so he wouldn't fight afterwards. But lots of it was fool fun. . . . Gee, I'm awf'ly sorry. . . .

"I got you going now, all right!" chuckled Poodle. I'll keep you nice--and--humble, now, Cap'n . . . (p. 81).

For his part, Poodle seems to take momentary satisfaction at bringing his friend down to earth.

Again, following their successful demonstrations in defense of the Priest tetrahedral at the Army hearings, the boys are energetically sought after by newspapermen. The hotel bell-boy warns of the great number of reporters they may expect, concluding, "Oh, dere'll be a hot time for youse!" "'Oh, let me die,' mourned Hike, and stood on his head on a pillow, as though he were trying to choke himself" (p. 100). The boys suffer unusual anxiety worrying about reprisals from their schoolmates at Santa Benicia, caused by jealousy at their presumptions to national fame. In an interesting passage which over-explains these subtle consequences of celebrity, Lewis writes,

There is something about school honors that make them mean more than anything else. A fellow has been working for them ever since the day he got out of the kindergarten and put on knickers. Perhaps that's the reason. Anyway, Hike and Poodle, after having played the game hard all Freshman year, and having made good, were broken-hearted at starting the Sophomore year queered.

"Queered" they seemed to be. Every one was ready to "jolly" them. Partly, it was envy and jealousy on the part of the fellows; partly it was a feeling that these two Sophomores had broken every unwritten law of the school by making themselves so conspicuous in the newspapers. But mostly it was the joy of being able to torment such famous people (p. 176).

Envy and persecution, then, are among the consequences of fame for the hero. Whether the punishment is exacted by oneself or by one's peers, the hero must not be permitted to savor his successes unalloyed with mortification. A further illustration of this pattern crops out in

Chapter XIX, when resentment against Hike's fame has caused friction on the football team. The coach's diagnosis:

"Looks to me as if they are still jealous of you for your aviating, and trying to show they're as good as you are. Breaks up the team-play pretty badly," he remarks to Hike, and asks solicitously, "What have you got to suggest?"

"I don't know. I've been worrying over it. I'll see what I can do," said Hike gloomily.

It was two weeks after the Great Hazing and now, though all the open "kidding" had stopped, there was still trouble. Hike was afraid that he might have to resign from the team, although he would rather have cut off his head (p. 196).

Alienation from the group, even if it be due to no fault of one's own, but to excess of virtue, seems to be more fearsome than death itself. Not content with these school-boy demonstrations of grudging admiration, Hike will be appeased only by their unqualified acceptance and love. His solution to these difficulties is a curious mixture of appeasement and self-abasement, amounting to a pathetic plea for acceptance. He decides to borrow an airplane and take each boy for a ride. He flies the monoplane to Santa Benicia.

"Say, fellows," pleaded Hike, " . . . I brought up this machine for you. Won't you ride with me. I know just as well as you do that the only reason I've ever done any aviating is just because I've had the chance, and I want to get you in on it."

Over the faces of the crowd spread a look of great love for Hike, as they heard him and privately assured themselves that undoubtedly they would be great aviators, too, if they had the chance (p. 203).

What Hike says is not wholly true, but he is in the compromising position of being good at doing practically anything, yet having to declare publicly that his national fame came about by accident, and was not due to any special merit of his. Now this is a costly way to purchase approval, unless the hero's neurotic appetite for affection has made him insatiable, to the point of threatening symbolic self-destruction. Furthermore, it is ironic that Hike uses his flying experience, the original cause of his peers' jealousy and disaffection, to win them over, as if to underscore his unique abilities and superiority. Thus it seemed to be with Sinclair Lewis himself; after attaining the pinnacle of literary reputation, he appeared to invite jealousy from less fortunate writers, and his reaction was invariably to write another book.

Hike Griffin's fantastic flights exhibit his conflicting desires to dominate and control all others as if by power from above, and still to turn aside hostility and win love from those who symbolize his brother-friends and rivals. Poodly Darby represents the trusted confidant, as if in a younger-brother status next to that of Hike. Although more scholarly and ingenious than Griffin, he is smaller, less courageous and aggressive, and therefore easily dominated by Hike. His almost canine loyalty is indicated by his suitable doglike nickname. The case of Lieutenant Jack Adeler, on the other hand, is an interesting representation of Hike's surrogate father or older

brother. There is no secret of Hike's unaffected love for Adeler or his desire to imitate him. The boy's ambition is to become the lieutenant's equal. He, too, wants to be an engineer, "to know wireless and aeroplanes and steel." Hike senses gratification of these wishes during the expedition to save Adeler's ranch in Mexico, where the youth's increased familiarity with the officer puts the two on an even, first-name basis. Adeler even concedes a feeling of kinship for his young admirer, after complimenting him for risking death to find fuel for the tetrahedral.

"Oh, well," said Jack Adeler, resignedly, "I suppose there's no keeping you from getting killed. . . . Old man, I won't put it that way. If you've got the nerve to ride out and get gasoline, I'll just cut out the older brother air, and say, 'Great work, old Hike'" (pp. 248-249).

One wonders if in Harry Lewis's imagination, Adeler spoke with the voice of Claude.

Further, when Hike is erroneously identified by the Mexican as a young American lieutenant in disguise, suggesting that he carried the same rank as Adeler, the boy's ego, fully nourished, should have been satisfied. Typically, however, Hike feels compelled to deride this flattering notion with a theatrical exhibition, rolling on the ground, shouting with laughter and howling, "Say, Jack, did you get that? Me, A Santa Benician, a kid--and he thought I was an American Signal Corps officer. Say,

wouldn't that jar you?" (p. 256) Showing his maturity, the lieutenant is not impressed by this backhand modesty.

Two characters who represent authority figures play paternal roles in Hike and the Aeroplane. One is General Thorne, who is merry, kindly and humane, and dines with the British military attaché "at the most gorgeous restaurant in Washington"; the other is Major Griffin, Hike's father--a shadow in the background--cool, reserved, and distant. The Major is described as "tall, slender, gentle" and "the most polite of all men." But Hike must learn to fly without his father's knowledge or permission, because, as the boy explains it,

"the Lieutenant thinks I'm too young . . . and Father'd be scared blue if he knew I was doing it. I don't want to frighten him, and so I want to be a good, safe, crackerjack aviator before he knows" (p. 47).

When, indeed, the Major learned of the secret flights, he "had been frightened, at first, then a little angry at Hike" (p. 95). Gradually, though, as news of his son's successes arrives, the father softens and admits, "Good boy, Jerry is." At last when he was informed of the dramatic mission to Washington, " . . . why, all Major Griffin could do was to pound his son affectionately on the back and say, 'Go ahead--and don't break your neck, if it's convenient . . . '" (p. 95) and he referred to Hike as "this crazy son of mine." After this the father fades from attention, and is scarcely mentioned again. To be an absolute hero, Hike must apparently answer only to

himself; he must match his idol, subdue his rivals with violence or favors, and never be challenged by a father.

Since this is a boy's book, directed probably at twelve- to sixteen-year-olds, one would expect it to be thick with active adventure, and spare in scenes of romantic flirtation. In the latter category Hike and the Aeroplane is conspicuously ascetic. It is virtually a book without women. There is no mention of Gerald Griffin's mother, only one faint allusion to Poodle's "pretty sister," and merely anonymous women aboard the wrecked yacht or fleeing from kidnapers on the Kansas prairie. The emphasis is upon military maleness at home in the Monterey Presidio, and hearty comradeship at the Santa Benicia Academy for boys. Hike Griffin is presumably too busy struggling to grow up in a man's world to be distracted by the inscrutable stratagems of women as well. Success with women was not yet a component in Hike's heroic flights of fantasy, nor yet had it been realized by the young "Tom Graham," apparently, in 1911-1912.

Perhaps Hike is Sinclair Lewis's first unhappy hero, who yearns for the fame which floats him aloft above his peers, isolated and splendid, but who is not strong enough to dispense with their love and approval. And so he hurries back to the place where he started, begging to rejoin the group, to feel the warmth of the herd. The rescue of the passengers from the yacht, the flights to

Washington, capture by Jolls, the filibuster to Mexico are all travel-escapes, offering the hero a chance to play a different role. They are sorties--wild, daring dashes offered as proofs of manhood. A lucky chance and some well-timed bluffing can bring unexpected fame and power to control the lives of many, if one knows how to use it. Meanwhile, being a celebrity is a lonely business, and the prudent hero heads back for home again after swinging out wide. These are the consequences of success, even in one's fantasies: after flights into the chilling ether of personal eminence, one comes back to his point of origin. Symbolically this is part of the Lewis hero's pattern of self-defeat, and it is as true of Willie Wrenn in the author's next book as it is of Carol Kennicott.

CHAPTER III

OUR MR. WRENN: ESCAPE INTO ANONYMITY

If Hike Griffin is the precocious adolescent who promises to become an enterprising executive in the aircraft industry or a military engineer, the opposite is true of Mr. Wrenn, the subject of Sinclair Lewis's first novel for adult readers, who seems to represent a case of arrested emotional development. Published in February, 1914, by Harper and Brothers, Our Mr. Wrenn is a sentimental romance which examines three crucial years in the history of a novelty-company clerk, who at the outset earns nineteen dollars a week, and in the final chapter is making thirty-two. What happens in between to make Mr. Wrenn worth thirteen dollars a week more to his employer is the burden of Lewis's tale; the author undertakes his task with a combination of techniques which have already become familiar in Hike and the Aeroplane as variations of the role-playing repertoire--fantasy-building, projecting, traveling, name-changing, to recall a few. Still, it is doubtful at the novel's end whether the central character, William Wrenn, has sustained any substantive growth and development

or whether (like the novelty "Dixieland" inkwells he promotes for the "Southern trade") he is a basic commodity updated and reworked to suit a particular need.

Sheldon Grebstein identifies Our Mr. Wrenn and other early novels by Lewis as "novels of and about education" describing the rise of the "self-made man . . . an American folk hero."

The heroes and heroines are put through a learning process in which book learning has a strictly subordinate role. In this process they inevitably grow more sophisticated in their manners, improve their appearances and personal attractiveness, increase their vocational skills, become keener observers of human nature and more adept at handling people, and develop a broader world-view. In short, Lewis's characters undergo the same experiences, with the same results, that the average reader could visualize for himself. . . . [But] romantic as Lewis's early books are, they rarely reach above the limits of easy possibility. To reach too high would not permit the reader's personal projection into the hero's role.¹

To an extent this is quite true, but it is interesting now to discern whether Mr. Wrenn's cloth was cut to suit the reader, or perhaps better, the author. Grebstein's definition of the educating process represents it essentially as an enhancement of the character's role versatility; it does not, however, account for any meaningful metamorphosis of the larval hero to the adult phase, a transformation which would seem desirable if it were to "permit the reader's personal projection" into Mr. Wrenn's role. A

¹Sinclair Lewis (New York, 1962), pp. 40-41.

more likely interpretation of Our Mr. Wrenn is that Lewis was dramatizing a crisis in his own life.

On September 12, 1912, he had met Grace Livingstone Hegger in a freight elevator at 443 Fourth Avenue, the building which housed both his employer, the Stokes Company, publishers, and the offices of Vogue, where Miss Hegger worked. Lewis was already laboring on his novel, and some nine months later Our Mr. Wrenn was accepted for publication by Harper and Brothers. The following September Lewis, in great excitement, showed Miss Hegger page proofs of the novel, and she first learned that he had dedicated the book to her.

He placed a timid hand on my shoulder. "You don't mind, do you?"

I took his hand and held it against my cheek, and told him that this was the greatest compliment which he had ever paid me. He was kissing me then and suddenly everything seemed to have changed: he was a man, not a laughing companion. For the first time I felt more than a fondness for him. He saw the change in me as I broke away to look at him, and cried: "My darling, you are in love with me! Oh, the wonder of it, my book and my love together!"

My book and my love. But not together. The book came first and it always would.²

In the same month that the book was published, the couple announced their engagement, and on April 15, 1914, Sinclair Lewis and Grace Hegger were married. They moved to Port Washington, Long Island, to live in "the Little Brown Bungalow" which Lewis had called "the Wrenn House!"³

²With Love From Gracie, p. 46.

³Ibid., p. 52.

Later Lewis composed some happy verses entitled "The First Song of the Wren House" to celebrate the beatitude of married life, including:

We--we can't be married, dear!
 Why, we laugh and plot and play;
 While the grown-ups toil and fear
 We, like children, run away
 And go dancing down the road
 With blue bowls for all our load.

We who still are lad and lass,
 We who still are queen and king,
 We who dream in sunny grass
 And watch the swallows flittering--
 WE of that dull married class?
 Dear, I don't know WHAT to sing!--

(Dearheart, are you happy? I
 Am so happy I could cry!)⁴

On the surface it is clear that the publication of Our Mr. Wrenn enabled Lewis to offer his wife some prospects for financial security. The close linking of the novel's evolution with the Lewises' courtship and marriage, moreover, indicate what the book meant to Lewis. Symbolically, it was his proof of manhood, a labor for the love of his Rachel, and its theme is Success.

Mark Schorer has noted that

the novel was composed of such straws as Lewis could most readily gather from the harsh fields of his recent past: cattle boat trips to England, rather disappointing tramps in that country, steerage, the grubby life of boarding houses in lower Manhattan, poverty, his uneasy feelings about Bohemia, loneliness, friendlessness. Yet for all the oblique resemblances in character and the direct resemblances in experiences, the

⁴With Love From Gracie, p. 61.

central figure of the novel is drawn not so much from life as from the fiction of H. G. Wells.⁵

The extent of Lewis's debt to Wells may be clearly seen, and even Grace Lewis acknowledged, upon re-reading the book, that "I saw its many faults. The influence of H. G. Wells's Mr. Polly was obvious, but it was sentimental, callow, over-written."⁶ What is significant, however, is not the similarity between the Wells and Lewis works, but the fact that reading the Englishman's fiction awakened sympathetic vibrations in the American which urged him to express latent ideas and emotions of his own in an artistic pattern that was to become stylized: frustration, upheaval, excursion, disenchantment, reconciliation, and acquiescence. Like a frightened bird who deserts his branch to fly about, only to return fatalistically to another limb of the same tree, Mr. Wrenn at last accepts the odd paradox (which the young Lewis must have discovered) that Success does not depend upon one's being well-known, but rather on his remaining unknown--like any one of thousands of men wedded to Wife and Job in the hustling metropolis. Fleeing the city and his clerk's employment to act out a fantasy of travel by making an actual voyage to England, Mr. Wrenn finds only that he has stepped out of character, and he

⁵Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 210.

⁶With Love From Gracie, p. 34.

hastens to remedy the threat of lost identity in a thankful trip home and an escape into anonymity.

Mark Schorer has identified this theme of escape, and has noted the accompanying refrains of loneliness and "the need of a male friend," but he sees the basic conflict as that "between the appeal, the impossible temptations of the exotic (Europe, Istra Nash, vagabondage) and the real satisfactions of the ordinary (America, Nelly Croubel, the job)."⁷ The conflict may be more fundamental than that, however. Beyond the obvious Odyssean interpretation, Mr. Wrenn's journey is a search for self, during a temporary condition of "freedom" while he tries on new roles as if they were hats or ties. But this quest for an identity is foredoomed, primarily because Wrenn cannot leave his old self behind, and secondly because the new activities he undertakes are designed for self-defeat: it is fun to play many parts when the risks are small, but what if success will freeze a man into a role that is not naturally his? That is the real threat--that while a man goes adventuring to find a greater self, he may lose what little identity he has, and become a stranger even to himself.

Outwardly concerned with themes of success, then, Our Mr. Wrenn is actually a book about failure, or at best,

⁷Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, pp. 211-212.

compromise. The consequent ambivalence of mood Lewis betrays toward his hero results in the "patronizing tone" which Schorer has remarked upon, a tone which the author uses to keep his characters at a distance when they come dangerously close to self-revelation. An author must not discover himself either, it seems, and end his charade too soon.

Specifically, the three aspects of the success theme which Mr. Wrenn must investigate lie in his self-concept, his occupation, and in romantic love. Sheldon Grebstein enumerates the parallels between the lives of Lewis and Mr. Wrenn, and observes,

Our Mr. Wrenn is the expression of Lewis's simultaneous restlessness (a dissatisfaction with the status quo) and optimism, a conviction that going to new places somehow makes a better man, who, when he returns--as Lewis's heroes usually do--is wise and strong enough to overcome the forces which had earlier suppressed him.⁸

The assumption of a process which lies behind the "somehow" must stand up to critical scrutiny if it is to substantiate meaningful character development, but Lewis never shows exactly how that transformation is accomplished, short of enabling Mr. Wrenn to adopt new poses and meet a few poseurs. For all the revitalizing contacts that England might offer the traveler, Mr. Wrenn meets only ordinary English people: a waitress, a carter, a "bloated Cockney," a "stodgy North Countryman," a landlady, a porter, another

⁸Sinclair Lewis, p. 39.

waitress, a Salvation Army evangelist, an Essex farm wife, a bellboy--and exchanges a few perfunctory sentences with each. With other traveling Americans like himself he converses much more extensively: Harry Morton, Dr. Mittyford, Istra Nash, the poet Carson Haggerty, the Intellectuals, and even with a hardware salesman from Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, who "wouldn't take this fool country for a gift."

After an absence of one month and seventeen days, Mr. Wrenn leaves Liverpool for his return to New York. Another month after his arrival home, Wrenn is re-established in the rooming house of the abusive Mrs. Zapp, and "he was at work as though he had never in his life been farther from the Souvenir Company than Newark."⁹ So much for his daring excursion. What metamorphosis has been wrought, or is impending? Mr. Wrenn still estimates his own worth in dollars per week. The only perceptible change in his behavior is that he has learned how to use his temper, and permits himself to become angry occasionally--a remarkably late discovery for a man approaching forty. Thus for Mr. Wrenn successful development of an improved self-concept depends on a release of his underlying hostility, toward his landlady, his employer, toward real and imagined rivals. This tendency also shows itself in the clerk's new aggressiveness when making friends, or while he is at his

⁹Our Mr. Wrenn: The Romantic Adventures of A Gentle Man (New York, 1914), p. 163.

job. Still, Mr. Wrenn is not allowed to exhibit any degree of wrath without the support of thoughtful pretexts from the author. He must feel cranky from lack of sleep; he must be slandered by Mrs. Zapp; he must save his friend Charles Carpenter from drunkenness; he must think resolutely of Nelly Croubel during the crucial showdown with Mortimer R. Guilfogle; he must protect his proprietary interest in Nelly from threats, seen in the sudden visit of Istra Nash or the gallantries of a cigar salesman at a Christmas dance. In a larger context, then, it is difficult to see how Our Mr. Wrenn can be interpreted as a novel of education; if it is, the design is remedial rather than liberal.

The theme of occupational success Lewis develops in a mechanical way. "Our" Mr. Wrenn means the company's man, the sales-entry clerk and sometime correspondent for the Souvenir and Art Novelty Company on Twenty-eighth Street, New York City. His weekly wage, in April, 1910, was nineteen dollars. Wrenn is competent at his work, although he trembles before the hectoring of "old Goglefogle," the manager. Meekly he regards his forthright explanation of an erroneous order as "defiance," though the manager "hadn't seemed much impressed by his revolt."

. . . he began to dread what the manager might do to him. Suppose he lost his job; The Job! He worked unnecessarily late, hoping that the manager would learn of it. As he wavered home, drunk with weariness, his fear of losing The Job was almost equal to his desire to resign from The Job (p. 7).

These mixed feelings are only emotional defense maneuvers to counter the paralyzing routine in a small business office, where every detail of the job assumes gigantic significance, and the ego in consequence must shrivel as its dependence on employment security increases with advancing age. There are no prospects for promotion, even though the assistant bookkeeper, Charlie Carpenter, assures Wrenn that "They bank on you at the Souvenir Company. Darn' sight more than you realize, lemme tell you. Why, you do about half the stock-keeper's work 'sides your own" (p. 14). But Wrenn moves about his work cautiously, fearing plots and reprisals that any misstep might bring from "the dread Mr. Mortimer R. Guilfogle." The only escapes from astringent anxiety that a poor clerk can resort to are the moving pictures, dining on foreign food at a cheap restaurant, collecting a vast assortment of travel folders depicting exotic places, and riding the ferry to Staten Island.

Abruptly, deliverance comes in the form of a wind-fall. Mr. Wrenn receives nine hundred and forty dollars from the sale of "the flinty farm" at Parthenon, New York (left to him by his father), to the local Chautauqua Association. Freedom looms; Mr. Wrenn hesitates. Timidly he takes the landlady's daughter to a play, "The Gold Brick"--"a glorification of Yankee smartness. . . . Every one made millions, victims and all, in the last act, as a proof of the social value of being a live American business

man." Wrenn reconsiders: "He would do that Great Traveling of his in the land of Big Business!" (pp. 28-28). But circumstances force his break from the Souvenir Company. This evening's diversion causes him to be late for work; Guilfogle, already grumpy owing to unsatisfactory eggs at breakfast, threatens to let Wrenn go. Mr. Wrenn, who had "seemed weary, and not so intimidated as usual," flirts with the hazard of outbluffing the manager, and announces, "I'm real glad you can get along without me. I've just inherited a big wad of money! I think I'll resign! Right now!" (p. 31). Ignoring the startled Guilfogle's pleas to reconsider, Wrenn gives notice. In mid-June, during an elaborate farewell scene, the clerk looks upon his boss with compassion.

Mr. Guilfogle was essentially an honest fellow, harshened by The Job; a well-satisfied victim, with the imagination clean gone out of him, so that he took follow-up letters and the celerity of office-boys as the only serious things in the world. He was strong, alive, not at all a bad chap, merely efficient (p. 33).

Guifogle offers to keep a position open for Wrenn until his return. The little man declines. His departure from his office comrades is tearful.

Lewis makes it clear that Wrenn's separation from his job is quite traumatic. Lacking friendly support or a precipitating incident, Mr. Wrenn cannot decide what to do. Two weeks after his resignation he still does not find security by lying abed in the morning. He feels "enormously depressed in the soul."

He would have got up had there been anything to get up for. There was nothing, yet he felt uneasily guilty. For two weeks he had been afraid of losing, by neglect, the job he had already voluntarily given up. So there are men whom the fear of death has driven to suicide (p. 35).

Lewis's abrupt transition to the last sentence is startling. Relinquishing one's customary job is comparable to an act of self-destruction. Inured to fantasies, Wrenn does not know how to accept the reality of his chance to travel, and is unable to settle on a destination. He makes excuses to himself: the expense is too great; he pictures himself in all kinds of roles and costumes; apparently, he even tries to have himself shanghaied by skulking about the waterfront (p. 36), to avoid having to decide for himself. In an effort to shed the role of "Our Mr. Wrenn," he attends an afternoon movie, but guilt and anxiety pursue him; the actors on the screen appear distorted and unreal, and the air in the theater is stifling. Mr. Wrenn is close to hysteria. Indecision, and his shame at not being employed, are contributing toward his self-defeat.

Random chance dictates a decision. Idly scanning a newspaper, Wrenn spies an advertisement for "Free passage on cattle-boats to Liverpool feeding cattle. Low fee. Easy work. Fast boats." Mr. Wrenn's response is immediate: "Gee!" he cried, "I guess Providence has picked out my first hike for me" (p. 37). A substitute job will rinse away guilt. Some days later, Wrenn leaves Portland

aboard the Merian, employed as a cattleman and bound for England, murmuring, "Free, free, out to sea. Free, free, that's me!" (p. 48).

It is safe to say that up to this point Mr. Wrenn has shown little likelihood for achieving success in business. Obviously, he is too self-effacing, too timorous, not having formed a successful concept of himself which would lend confidence and authority to his actions. Nor does his travel through England appreciably change these conditions. Abroad, Mr. Wrenn exhibits the same symptoms of defeat and defensive withdrawal that he had during his idleness at home. When he thankfully returns to New York and applies for his old job at the Souvenir Company, Wrenn feels "like the prodigal son, with no calf in sight" (p. 149). Guilfogle scolds him for "Hiking off to Europe, leaving a good job!" putting the clerk off for a whole month before engaging him at "seventeen dollars and fifty cents a week instead of his former nineteen dollars" (p. 163).

Lewis makes Wrenn's climb to success possible only by sending down a gratuitous bright idea, almost as an afterthought.

The Souvenir Company salesmen had not been able to get from the South the business which the company deserved if right and justice were to prevail. On the steamer from England Mr. Wrenn had conceived the idea that a Dixieland Ink-well, with the Confederate and Union flags draped in graceful cast iron, would make an admirable present with which to draw the attention of the Southern trade (p. 165).

So began Mr. Wrenn's successful campaign to "bring the South into line," built around the common-sense notion of paying personal attention to the Southern representatives. A month later, Wrenn demands a raise; Guilfogle restores the nineteen dollar wage. Over a year later, when he applies for the position of assistant manager, Wrenn is earning twenty-three dollars, and merits a raise to twenty-nine fifty--"more'n enough to marry on now!" Two years later still, in October, 1913, although not yet assistant manager, Wrenn is making thirty-two dollars a week, and he has married Nelly Croubel (pp. 252-253). Persistence and attention to details presage success in business. Is love another dividend?

The modest hero's success in romantic love is probably the most gratifying theme in Our Mr. Wrenn. He has had some tentative encounters with Lee Theresa Zapp, forewoman in a factory, described as "a large young lady with a bust, much black hair, and a handsome disdainful discontented face" (p. 22). Dinner at an Armenian restaurant they had shared together, followed by attendance at a play and a late snack. After returning her home, Wrenn's "parting with Miss Theresa was intimate; he shook her hand warmly" (p. 29). Wrenn forsakes any advantage he may have had, however, in his desire to go traveling. In London he asked an "ignorant and vulgar" waitress from the St. Brasten Cocoa House to walk with him after she had been suitably aggressive:

She let him know that he was a man and she a woman, young and kindly, clear-skinned and joyous-eyed. She touched him with warm elbow and plump hip, leaning against his chair as he gave his order. To that he looked forward from meal to meal, though he never ceased harrowing over what he considered a shameful intrigue (p. 76).

But the woman failed to appear at the rendezvous:

When he finally fled home he was glad to have escaped the great mystery of life, then distressingly angry at the waitress, and desolate in the desert stillness of his room (p. 77).

No woman had yet come forward to relieve him of his innocence. The conflicting feelings of gladness and anger seem to mask an underlying fear of inadequacy--fear that when put to the test, he could not play out the bold role he had acted at the restaurant. That was all the preparation Mr. Wrenn had for the advent of Istra Nash.

Because shame does not permit his return to the St. Brasten, Wrenn takes his meals at Mrs. Cattermole's Tea House, where the next day a theatrical, slender, flaming-haired girl sits at a table opposite to his. Mr. Wrenn inspects her person with the avidity of a voyeur, noting how her gown clings to her, "showing the long beautiful sweep of her fragile thighs and long-curving breast," and realizing with horror that "the freak girl wasn't wearing corsets!" (pp. 81-82). For two days he spins fantasies about her, casting her into highborn roles and himself as a writer who "made up a whole novel about her" (p. 84). Wrenn discovers that she occupies the room next to his in the same house, observes her changes of

costume and various properties as they pass in the hall (silver toilet articles, Turkish towel), and is sensitive to sounds of her comings and goings through his wall. He contrives a meeting by asking her impulsively for directions to "a good play or something" in London, but she remains inscrutable until Wrenn confesses how his imagination had invented stories about her--she was English, or perhaps French--

"What made you think I was French? Tell me; I'm interested."

"Oh, I guess I was just--well, it was almost make-b'lieve--how you had a castle in France--just a kind of fool game" (p. 86).

This, it develops, is exactly the way to appeal to the fascinating lady, an unsuccessful art student from California named Istra Nash.

Mr. Wrenn's romantic imagination, limited as it is, forms the main bond in this odd friendship. He thinks of her as a "superior quizzical women"; she regards him as a salesman, compares him to a butler, describing Wrenn as a "phe-nomenon--little man of 35 or 40 with embryonic imagination & a virgin soul" (p. 95), calls him "caveman," and at last dubs him "Mouse." Managerially, she decides to take on Mr. Wrenn as a project.

"My dear man, I see I shall have to educate you. Shall I? I've been taken in hand by so many people--it would be a pleasure to pass on the implied slur. Shall I?"

"Please do" (p. 94).

They have tiffin together; they share tea; they visit the Tate Gallery. Miss Nash introduces him to Carson Haggerty

and the Intellectuals, and the two of them resolve to make a walking trip to Suffolk, to visit an artists' colony. Mr. Wrenn is not without inhibitions over this last plan: "I just don't want to do anything that would get people to talking about you," he protests evasively, at the prospect of passing an entire night with Istra, even on foot. He needs her reassurance that "I don't regard it as exactly wicked to walk decently along a country road" (p. 122), and he permits himself to be bullied into going immediately. The ensuing adventure with Istra Nash, comprising Chapters X and XI, supplies probably the most absorbing section of Our Mr. Wrenn, even though it ends with shattering defeat for the little hero (at the very point when he is becoming the aggressor), after the whimsical girl departs suddenly for Paris.

Lewis never really shows how Mr. Wrenn becomes successful in love. After the traveler's return to New York, he writes to Miss Nash that he has

. . . been reading quite a few books since I got back & think now I shall get on better with my reading. You told me so many things about books & so on & I do appreciate it (p. 164).

It is interesting that Lewis should show love of literature superseding Wrenn's former palpable passion. His experiences with Miss Nash, however, have taught him no lessons in courtship. The author must send him Nelly Croubel almost as a sacrificial maiden, and Wrenn wins her practically without wooing.

Following his new-found acquaintance with Tom Poppins, cigar-store salesman, and a tiff with Mrs. Zapp, Wrenn moves to Poppin's boarding house operated by Mrs. R. T. ("Arty") Ferrard. Dining at Mrs. Arty's table, the clerk discovers Nelly, whom he assesses "not unusually pretty."

Her skin was perfect; her features fine, rather Greek; her smile, quick yet sensitive, She was several inches shorter than Mr. Wrenn, and all curves. . . . she seemed indestructibly gentle, indestructibly good and believing, and just a bit shy (p. 182).

She is about twenty-five, has come to the city from a small Pennsylvania town, and works as a salesgirl at Wanamacy's. In brief, Nelly is a girl that Mr. Wrenn can dominate, if he wishes: he is taller, ten years her senior, a seasoned traveler, and only slightly less innocent than she. Furthermore, she is easily impressed by his recitation of adventures abroad; Wrenn wears the fact of his English tour like an ornament, even though it has contributed nothing of substance to his experience.

Mr. Wrenn knew that there was just one thing in the world that he wanted to do; to persuade Miss Nelly Croubel that (though he was a solid business man, indeed yes, and honorable) he was a cool one, who had chosen, in wandering o'er this world so wide, the most perilous and cattle-boaty places. He tried to think of something modest yet striking to say . . . (p. 184).

Mr. Wrenn has found a captive audience at the dinner table, and he is showing off. Lacking confidence that Nelly will accept him as he is, he hopes that an exaggerated representation will attract her. His serviceable "imagination" supports him well in further conversations with Nelly. He

even composes a playlet, "The Millionaire's Daughter" (named Nelly), which receives curt rejection from an agency, but endears him to Miss Croubel, who waits patiently for Mr. Wrenn to make up his mind.

By contriving to have Istra Nash, California-bound, share Mrs. Arty's roof with Mr. Wrenn and Nelly for a few hectic days, Lewis proposes that his hero make a choice between the two women. Wrenn wavers, but it is no contest. Again, Istra decides.

" . . . You go and forget me and enjoy yourself and be good to your pink-face--Nelly, isn't it? She seems to be terribly nice . . . You must forget me" (p. 240).

Melodramatically, she rejoins her artistic friends in Washington Square. One last visit to the red-haired goddess in her bohemian surroundings persuades Our Mr. Wrenn that Istra is beyond reach, "and that now he could offer to Nelly Croubel everything" (p. 247).

Mr. Wrenn's successes, in building a viable self-concept, in his occupation and in his own asexual kind of love are accomplished as if by mirrors, since Lewis installs these triumphs through accident or by hindsight: thus, as Nelly observes nearly a year after meeting Wrenn, "I remember when you came here you were sort of shy. But now you're 'most the star boarder!" (p. 250). But if the hero now can speak

with a quiet graciousness that was almost courtly, with a note of weariness and spiritual experience such as seldom comes into the boardinghouses to slay joy and bring wisdom and give words shyness (p. 244),

it is only because the author says so, not because the change is plausible.

One of the obstacles to an orderly continuity of theme development is the episodic structure of this novel. Each chapter must have its central incident, it is true, but each significant event has an emotional nucleus and is staged separately as a scene or set piece. Thus, Mr. Wrenn is like the cowboys he sees in cheap movies, who rock on stationary horses, while the scenery rolls by on canvas. For example, Chapter XV relates Wrenn's immense satisfaction at playing cards successfully while Nelly watches with approval. Chapter XVI concerns his delight at writing "The Millionaire's Daughter" and having it acted out, and his dismay that "At nearly forty he was just learning the drab sulkiness and churlishness and black jealousy of the lover" (p. 218). The next chapter details his distraction over the return of Istra; it is as though the two women were contending for his loyalty, and Wrenn has two separate worlds to choose between. In Chapter XVIII, still preoccupied with Istra, Wrenn tries to discuss her with Nelly, but "the shame of having emotions" prevents it; his subsequent farewell to the red-haired beauty is crowned by her impulsive hug and kiss. The final section is devoted to the success of Success, especially in the department of marriage, with coy hints of a future home in New Jersey and kiddies to play under the trees. The point is, that Mr. Wrenn is a character whom things happen to, not one who

makes things happen. A structure of sequential episodes, like a row of cherry-centered chocolates, these chapters offer only a cloying sameness--a convenience for telling tales, but an inadequate design for developing a novel.

Similarly, Lewis fails to show that a trip to England has had any more effect on his little clerk than a short stay in prison, which, in some respects, his journey resembles. Being in England is, truthfully, a gloomy business, but having been to England (when one is again safely home) is another proposition altogether; it is another facet added to one's public image, and it rarely fails to impress the local folks. For all his romantic fantasy-making about foreign places, Wrenn is a common fraud when direct experience intrudes. His hungry soul yearns for a feast of emotions and impressions, which it can relish without end, but it shrinks before the exigencies of decisive action.

Thus, any sense of development one may divine in Wrenn's character beyond that of aging three years is largely illusory. Mr. Wrenn is not only a milksop, but an emotional adolescent as well. There is no other explanation for his boyish behavior. Perhaps Lewis's early preference for writing about "little people" had the added convenience of enabling him to simplify their traits, scaling them down, as it were, in intelligence and emotional diversity, in the assumption that if they were obscure, they must somehow be defective. Added to the simplicity of

conception is relative ease of control: to the basic idea of one meek clerk may be attributed a few distinguishing features--"a small unsuccessful mustache," a landlady who plays martyr and hypochondriac roles, and a Job--but the remaining characterization may be accomplished by giving Mr. Wrenn a repertoire of roles to perform. Accordingly, Lewis twirls this basic character slowly on an axis, like a polished icosahedron, showing off all his diverting facets, and bringing him full circle back to his original position.

Systematic investigation shows how Lewis cuts these surfaces for Mr. Wrenn. Roughly, the little man plays three occupational roles--clerk, traveler, and clerk again--but within these three divisions of the book, Wrenn's activities are varied, not to show him reflecting, becoming wiser or developing internally, but to feed him bit parts to act. He intrigues for an appreciative greeting from a uniformed theater ticket-taker. At work he imagines that his confirmation of a duplicated order is an act of temerity. He invents imaginary conversations with sailors near the wharves, as if he, too, were a seaman. This technique Lewis uses repeatedly, even in Wrenn's fantasies. At the movies, for example, he "was really seeing, not cow-punchers and sage-brush, but himself, defying the office manager's surliness and revolting against the ticket-man's rudeness" (pp. 2-3). He is a traveler in Java, a

Pinkerton shooting at train robbers, an explorer of the Arctic; he dreams of being the manager of the Souvenir Company. Wrenn frets about earning more money to pay for his travels:

He would learn some Kiplingy trade that would teach him the use of astonishingly technical tools, also daring and the location of smugglers' haunts, copra islands, and whaling-stations with curious names.

He pictured himself shipping as third engineer at the Manihiki Islands or engaged for taking moving pictures of an aeroplane flight in Algiers (p. 36).

These dreams depict two concurrent role changes, in occupation and in alien location; in fantasies, it is double escape. On board ship, elated by the sight of England, Wrenn pretends he is "Colonel Armour," owner of the cattle the men have been feeding. Alone in London, he imagines himself falling in love with "the brown-eyed sweetheart he was going to meet somewhere, sometime" (p. 77). After meeting Istra Nash, he dreams "that he was a rabbit making enormously amusing jests" (p. 90). While foraging for their picnic breakfast (which he prepares camping-style near a stream), the clerk becomes Bill Wrenn the Great, and at last in a quaint note inviting Istra to a "high tea," Wrenn assumes the role of "Duke Vere de Vere."

Different names Wrenn bears also signify variations in roles. At the office, of course, he is "Our Mr. Wrenn." To Charlie Carpenter he is "Wrennski"; to the ticket-taker, "Mr. Uh." The shipping employment agent writes his name as "Ren." On the Merian he is "Wrennie"

to his enemies, "Bill Wrenn" to his friends. Istra nicknames him "Mouse," but Nelly Croubel refers to him intimately as "Billy."

Occasionally, as Wrenn slides in and out of his varied fantasies and poses, there is a suggestion of a dissociation of personality--a sense of standing rooted while watching oneself walk away, or turn out to be someone else. During a period of intense anxiety and indecision before resolving to go to England, Wrenn spends a Monday morning reading travel literature. His divergent emotions (fear of forsaking the familiar for the unknown versus desire for escape) are manifest in the following curious passage:

Midway in a paragraph he rose, threw One Hundred Ways to See California on the tumbled bed, and ran away from Our Mr. Wrenn. But Our Mr. Wrenn pursued him along the wharves, where the sun glared on oily water (p. 36).

Oily water, too, progresses through its prismatic spectrum of diverse character. Later, as the little hero again slips into a different shading of personality, it is almost as though he greets himself with a Hail and Farewell: the Merian has reached Liverpool.

As the cattlemen passed Bill Wrenn and Morton, shouting affectionate good-bys in English or courteous Yiddish, Bill commented profanely to Morton on the fact that the solid stone floor on the great shed seemed to have enough sea-motion to "make a guy sick." It was nearly his last utterance as Bill Wrenn. He became Mr. Wrenn, absolute Mr. Wrenn, on the street, as he saw a real English bobby, a real English carter, and the sign, "Cocoa House. Tea 1 d." (p. 59).

Again, when nettled by Mr. Gutch's insinuation that there might have been impropriety in Wrenn's travels with Istra on the road to Aengusmere, the little man flares angrily, threatening his adversary with a fist and deriving satisfaction from the flurry of reactions among the onlookers, who instantly identify Wrenn as an injured party.

Bill Wrenn, watching the dramatization of himself as hero, was enjoying the drama. "You apologize, then?"

"Why certainly, Mr. Wrenn. Let me explain--"

.

Do you see them?--Mr. Wrenn, self-conscious and ready to turn into a blind belligerent Bill Wrenn at the first disrespect; the talkers sitting about and assassinating all the princes and proprieties . . . (p. 137).

Lewis seems to signal Wrenn's detached observation of himself with a parallel detachment from his authorial role as narrator to a new guise as a commentator and social analyst, who addresses the reader with confidential directness. However brief Lewis's maneuver, it changes the focus of the scene, enabling Wrenn to escape for a final conversation with Istra Nash. More interesting, though, is the close personal identification with his main character that Lewis seems to betray in the double-dissociation device, showing such a lack of distance from his effigy, Wrenn, that he must break the mood by an interpolation to the reader. Furthermore, Wrenn's rage at Mr. Gutch does not seem to be all his own. Why should the little clerk be so incensed at the suggestion that he had had "quite a ro-mantic little journey" with Istra? Surely that young

lady cared not for a reputation of unspotted virtue, even if her adventure with Wrenn had been innocuous. Wrenn's indignation comes at an odd time; another man might have shrugged and smiled, and said nothing. No, the startling truth appears to be that Wrenn is defending his own virtuous reputation, quixotically, among these strangers; his rage, perversely, is akin to the anger he directed toward the flirtatious waitress from the cocoa house--rage which is actually a rebuke to himself for not having dared a moment or two of intimate passion while traveling alone with a beautiful woman. There is no real necessity for Wrenn's over-reaction among these artists and intellectuals, unless the frustrated fury was Lewis's, also.

A general pattern seems to emerge from among Mr. Wrenn's innumerable roles and ploys which indicates that Wrenn is in fact a fear-portrait of the author himself. The delights and antipathies of both Lewis and Wrenn were virtually the same. Both dreaded stifling extinction in a box of an office; both dramatized many kinds of escape, in thought and act. From the way his co-workers remember Lewis in New York during the Hike and Wrenn days, awkward, impulsive, appealing to women for emotional support, it is easy to suggest that he drew Wrenn small because he himself felt inadequate and helpless, despite his great ambition to succeed as an author, and regardless of his physical height. It is worth stating that Wrenn is little not in stature alone, but in aggressiveness, sexual vigor,

occupational horizons, and in emotional development as well. His acclaimed imagination, Wrenn's only redeeming donnée in the book, is really only an artificial bridge, conjured up by Lewis, between what is, and what might be in the clerk's wildest dreams. The dreams come true, of course, only when the author provides an unexpected inheritance or a revolutionary idea from on high. Lewis arranged as much wish fulfillment for Wrenn as he felt would satisfy his reader's appetite for romance, and his own desire for vicarious success through his fellow creature-clerk. His ambiguous handling of Wrenn, sometimes patronizing and superior, then anxiously solicitous or even defensive, seems to spring directly from Lewis's own ambivalent feelings toward himself.

Wrenn and Lewis exhibit a similar ambivalence toward Istra Nash, who fills a role as a potential mother-wife. There is little doubt that Wrenn found the girl extremely exciting, and at one time desired her above all others:

"Oh, Istra," he cried, grasping her arm, "I don't want any girl in the world--I mean--oh, I just want to be let go 'round with you when you'll let me--" (p. 138).

During an evening they had spent together while traveling, drying out before a small fire in an abandoned stable, Wrenn supported the sleeping Istra, while he ruminated, unable to decide whether he loved or feared this impetuous

woman. When she woke and judged that their "pilgrimage" hadn't been much of a success, Wrenn

. . . hated her, with her smooth politeness, after a night when she had been unbearable and human by turns. He hated her bedraggled hair and tired face. Then he could have wept, so deeply did he desire to pull her head down on his shoulder and smooth the wrinkles of weariness out of her dear face, the dearer because they had endured the weariness together (p. 133).

One cannot help noticing that Lewis created Miss Nash in his own image: she is tall and slim, has flaming red hair and "blue-gray eyes," "long hands, colored like ivory" with "quick delicate fingers"; she is capricious, moody, and easily bored. Is this another manifestation of Lewis's narcissism, to stage a flirtation between Wrenn, his dwarfed psychological and spiritual self, and Istra, his physical and temperamental representation? Is it coincidence that her name, arranged backwards, suggests the words "artsy sham?" It might be expedient to dismiss Istra Nash as one of Lewis's exotic women, but there is a melancholy fatalism about her, linked to a sense of irretrievably lost childhood when she "played" as an innocent "kiddy"--an aura of failure and resignation which makes her a distinct and sympathetic personality. Istra is, after all, the first mistress of that fantasy-boudoir later so poignantly occupied by her eventual successor, Babbitt's Fairy Child, that figment of unfulfilled desire. Let Mr. Wrenn utter the words, in the "tale of his longing"

"--but Istra, oh, gee! you're like poetry--like all them things a feller can't get but he tries to when he reads Shakespeare and all those poets" (p. 235).

To Wrenn, and apparently to Lewis, she embodied all the unattainable marks of caste, taste, and experience; she possessed the gifts for eloquence and compassionate insight into men's hearts that make a woman tantalizing in the role of a potential wife for a dreamer from the clerkly classes. Curiously, though, it is not Istra's individualism or her temperament which render her unsuitable for the novelty clerk, but Wrenn's own limitations, and, one suspects, his fear of inadequacy. Realizing the hopelessness of further pursuit, Wrenn admits during their last interview,

"I don't know about none of the things you're interested in. . . . Lord, I've missed you so! But when I try to train with your bunch, or when you spring Matisse" (he seemed peculiarly to resent the unfortunate French artist) "on me I sort of get onto myself--and now it ain't like it was in England . . . " (p. 246).

Wrenn's inadequacy is further underscored by his stumbling delivery and ungrammatical speech, which Lewis always uses to designate the loser or underdog in a confrontation where there is great emotional stress. After these mismatched companions parted at last,

He slowly clumped down the wooden treads, boiling with the amazing discoveries that he had said good-bye to Istra, that he was not sorry, and that now he could offer to Nelly Croubel everything (p. 247).

Nelly Croubel, clearly, is the "deserved" wife, the decent homemaker. She is perhaps ten or twelve years younger than Wrenn, and presumably could be easily impressed and dominated by him, although her preference for calling him "Billy," in a diminutive mode, suggests her acceptance of a mother-child alignment with the little clerk. Nelly

is as dull and steadfast as only ideal virtue can be. She typifies the small town (Upton's Grove, Pennsylvania) girl removed to the commercial city, who has won promotions at Wanamacy's after unflagging application of the old provincial values--patience, fortitude, cleanliness, and modesty. As Lewis describes her physical features, they resemble those of Grace Hegger in photographs. Nelly's history anticipates in embryo the career of Una Golden in The Job. There is little else remarkable about Nelly except that she and Mr. Wrenn so inevitably deserve each other. His roots were in the hinterland as well (Parthenon, New York), and though he had traveled abroad in body and in fantasy, these adventures have made little difference upon an essentially small-town man like Wrenn. When these two love and marry, it is with a sense of relief that they seem to escape into their romance of anonymity.

Wrenn's quest for a man to fill the role of brother-friend was only less intense than his search for a mother-wife. Lewis supplies a historical chain of male associations, largely employed for ego support, to account for Mr. Wrenn's friendships through a lifetime. First there was Cousin John in Parthenon, who stayed behind when Wrenn moved to the city. At the novelty company his particular friend was Charley Carpenter, with whom he could grouse about Guilfogle's tyrannies while they lunched at Drübel's Eating House. Charley is a sketch of the tin-horn dissident and office pessimist. While Wrenn visits

England, Charley's excessive drinking lands him in trouble with Guilfogle, who fires the assistant bookkeeper. Wrenn finds his old friend in a trash-strewn apartment, gives him a bath, a drink, breakfast and ten dollars to start Charley hunting for a new job, but after the conclusion of Chapter XII, there is no further trace of Mr. Carpenter. The scene in Charley's flat is designed to show how some men, like Mr. Wrenn, grow self-confident and compassionate after daring to do the extraordinary thing, while others like the bookkeeper break into ruins on a heap of empty bottles, because they are essentially haters. The episode is useful to show how much Wrenn has "changed," because he has been on a cattle-boat to "Europe," has met Harry Morton, and has tramped England with Istra Nash, and he now is in a position to bestow favors on the less fortunate Charley; it further suggests that Wrenn, now on his way to success, has no more use for his old friend than for the wake of the ship which returned him to New York.

Similar treatment is accorded Harry Morton. Wrenn had met Morton on the steamer bound for Portland to catch the Merian. His new friend was a railroad office clerk in New York who believed that "This socialism, and maybe even these here International Workers of the World, may pan out as a new kind of religion. . . . this comrade business--good stunt. Brotherhood of man--real brotherhood" (pp. 45-46). But despite his affirmations of an international

fraternity of workingmen, Morton insists on heading off alone, leaving Wrenn asleep in a haymow on the other side of Liverpool. The departure of this brother-friend casts Wrenn into a marked depression; he feels lonely and abandoned, as Lewis relates in Chapter VI, titled "He Is An Orphan." Suddenly the narrative distance between author and character vanishes in the intimacy of revelation:

Of that loneliness one could make many books; how it sat down with him; how he crouched in his chair, bespelled by it, till he violently rose and fled, with loneliness for companion in his flight. He was lonely. He sighed that he was "lonely as fits." Lonely--the word obsessed him. Doubtless he was a bit mad, as are all the isolated men who sit in distant lands longing for the voices of friendship (p. 69).

The reunion of these two men at Miggleton's in New York was a lugubrious occasion. Morton had never really left Liverpool after parting from Wrenn; he had merely worked in a restaurant. In spite of his high resolutions and dreams of traveling to Constantinople or St. Petersburg, Morton reveals himself as an impoverished introvert who talks a brave game, but who is afraid to leave his brother-in-law's home in Jersey City. The evening over, Wrenn escorted Morton to the ferry dock. He was "parting with his first friend."

At the ferry-house Morton pronounced his "Well, so long, old fellow" with an affection that meant finality.

Mr. Wrenn fled back. . . . On the way he was shocked to find himself relieved at having parted with Morton (p. 178).

By representing Morton as essentially a bluffer, Lewis is able to imply, by contrast, that Wrenn has grown strong enough to dispense with any support his friend could offer now.

Mr. Wrenn's need for friendship had been stanch ed briefly by an acquaintance with Dr. Mittyford, "the cultured American," a professor of rhetoric at Stanford University, who was touring Oxford. Amused by Wrenn's use of "West Sixteenth Street slang," Mittyford took him to a country inn, where, through a comfortably alcoholic mist, the clerk comes to see the pedant as "His dear friend, the Doc!" "You really have a very fine imagination of a sort, you know, but of course you're lacking in certain factual bases," the professor had conceded, adding that instead of scanning Oxford, Wrenn should "go back, master the world you understand." So, at length, Wrenn does, as far as he is able, but not before his encounter with Istra Nash, for whom the scenes with Mittyford have rehearsed him.

Tom Poppins is another player of the brother-friend role who eases several transitional situations for Wrenn after his return to New York. Tom is present at the farewell scene with Morton, the introductions to Mrs. Arty Ferrard and Nelly, the confrontation and break with the imperious Mrs. Zapp, and at the Cigar-Makers' Ball, where Wrenn first realized the proprietary feeling he had for Miss Croubel. Poppins fulfills all the function of an obli ging older brother who is gregarious and full of

advice; however, once Wrenn is sure of Nelly's devotion, for which Tom's thoughtfulness has paved the way, the plump cigar salesman fades into the background conversation, his usefulness to author and character ended.

If Tom Poppins wears the aspect of a kindly older brother, Mr. Guilfogle may be represented as the fierce father, or authority figure. Before him Wrenn reacts with fear, as in the first scene where the manager appears, when the clerk "was shot out of his chair and four feet along the corridor, in reflex response to the surly "Bur-r-r-r-" of the buzzer. Mr. Mortimer R. Guilfogle, the manager, desired to see him" (pp. 5-6). His superior is gruff, stingy, opinionated and arbitrary in his decisions, much in the manner of Dr. E. J. Lewis. Guilfogle's desk, like the old doctor's desk Grace Lewis remembered so well, was decorated with souvenirs and other glittering objects. Like the elder Lewis's, his manner is also accusatory, hectoring; a demonstration of these brow-beating qualities, in fact, spurred Wrenn's decision to quit the novelty company. Lewis recounts this "electrical interview" with Guilfogle

who spent a few minutes, which he happened to have free, in roaring "I want to know why" at Mr. Wrenn. There was no particular "why" that he wanted to know; he was merely getting scientific efficiency out of employers, a phrase which Mr. Guilfogle had taken from a business magazine that dilutes efficiency theories for inefficient employers (p. 16).

After another similar episode, Wrenn resolves to leave and gives notice. He is unmoved by Guilfogle's pleas to remain. This transitional scene, and the leave-taking sequence which follows it, have perceptible psychological overtones: for his repeated unwarranted criticisms and for presuming upon the loyalty of the hero, the father figure must be "punished," and made to regret the departure of this key member of his office family. Three factors support this interpretation of these ritual scenes--Guilfogle's abrupt changes of attitude from overbearing to entreating and solicitous; the manager's more than occupational concern for the departing Wrenn, suggested in the phrases

"I was joking about firing you. . . . You can't be thinking of leaving us! There's no end of possibilities here. . . . It strikes me you're a fool to leave a good job. . . . We like you, and when you get tired of being just a bum, why, come back. . . . Meanwhile I hope you'll have a mighty good time, old man,"

and, "Drop me a line now and then and let me know how your're getting along," which sound avuncular if not paternal; and finally, Wrenn's flash of anger and cool determination to carry off his plan, despite Guilfogle's appeals to his emotions and sense of responsibility. In short, these scenes reflect Wrenn's need to relish his employer's discomfiture, as a measure of how much the clerk was really needed and appreciated; they do not give support to Wrenn's supposed appetite for world travel, the reason he gives for leaving the novelty company.

After he rejoins the souvenir company, however, Wrenn's climb in the direction of an assistant managership coincides with his moves to subdue the authoritarian Guilfogle by seizing the initiative for the "Southern market," demanding a stenographer and other improvements, and by bluffing the manager into a series of salary increases. For his brashness, Wrenn wrings praise from his superior: "You're doing good work, old man. It's fine" (p. 167). "But you're a good man--" (p. 251). When the clerk presses for the raise that will permit him to marry Nelly (as Lewis was contemplating marriage to Miss Hegger), Guilfogle addresses him familiarly, protesting, "Now, now, now, now! Calm down; hold your horses, my boy. This ain't a melodrama, you know" (p. 251). Perhaps not. But the story could pass as a farce.

In review, an analysis of the functional roles filled by Wrenn, Istra and Nelly, the friends Carpenter, Morton and Poppins, and finally the stern-but-relenting Guilfogle, uncovers a fundamentally weak and boyish hero alone in the insensitive city. He surrounds himself with a minor galaxy of supportive characters doing service as idealized members of a family. It must be emphasized, however, that character development has little to do with the progress of Our Mr. Wrenn; the little man's rise in the novelty company may be attributed to accidents and pressures outside himself. It is not enough that Wrenn has ambition; he must also find a convincing way to direct

his yearnings, and it is the author's responsibility to show that his hero has the inner resources of character to make his advance toward success believable. This Lewis fails to do. On the contrary, he permits Wrenn to bluff and to play countless bit roles, always reacting to the stimulus provided by other players, never generating any counter-current of reaction in others by his own dynamics. Behind the disguises, William Wrenn is perhaps as colorful as an x-ray print.

A brief discussion of high-intensity passages in the novel will lend authority to these charges of passivity and fortuitous success in the career of Mr. Wrenn. First, the quasi-sexual episodes with Istra Nash are remarkable for the scarcely-suppressed passion which they excite in the hero: his first glimpse of the flaming beauty at Mrs. Cattermole's was enough to arouse ardor unsuspected in a man so mild. But three subsequent scenes of intimacy with Istra find Wrenn frozen, passive, and crouching defensively behind a thick wall of scrupulous propriety. In Chapter VIII alone, for example, she invites Wrenn into her bedroom on the flimsiest of pretexts, inducing him to set next to her on the floor:

"Come sit by me. You with your sense of the romantic, ought to appreciate sitting by the fire. You know it's always done."

He slumped down by her, clasping his knees and trying to appear the dignified American business man in his country-house.

She smiled at him intimately . . . (p. 100).

One senses Wrenn's struggle for rigid self-control, his retreat from the direct acceptance of reality into an imagined role at a fabricated setting. When he does venture to "explore with his thumb-tip the fine lines of the side of her hand," his heart palpitates, and he finds it difficult to believe what is happening.

. . . It actually was he, sitting here with a princess, and he actually did feel the softness of her hand, he pantingly assured himself (p. 101).

It follows that the woman must be removed to a lofty and romanticized state, insulated from reality as well. A similar pattern of intimacy-without-contact recurs in Chapter X, when during their bold foot-journey to Aengusmere, Istra and Wrenn sleep primly on opposite sides of a secluded straw stack. Waking first, Wrenn sublimates any possible submission to passion into an elaborately busy search for the ingredients of breakfast. He looks down at Istra still asleep, and invents reasons to rationalize his feelings of inadequacy.

. . . He looked at the auburn-framed paleness of her face, its lines of thought and ambition, unmasked, unprotected by the swift changes of expression which defended her while she was awake. He sobbed. If only he could make her happy! But he was afraid of her moods (p. 127).

What the unconventional Istra needed to defend herself against, or to what lengths Wrenn was prepared to go in an attempt to "make her happy," or why he should be "afraid" of her moods, even if they are capricious, remains inexplicable. This ominous moodiness surfaces again as a

deterrent to sexual intimacy during the scene at the ruined stable, when, rain-drenched, Wrenn and the girl find shelter and dry themselves before a fire. Again, she sleeps, with her head on his shoulder

. . . while his mind ran round in circles, considering that he loved Istra, and that he would not be entirely sorry when he was no longer the slave to her moods; that this adventure was the strangest and most romantic, also the most idiotic and useless, in history (p. 133).

The rugged outdoor meal, cooked hobo-fashion, and the ritual building of a fire are themes Lewis often used to signify proofs of virility and creativity in his heroes, especially during some stage of a courtship campaign. Having scored these marks of manhood, why does Wrenn fear Istra's humors, and why does he erect barriers to defeat himself? Why does he torture himself with yearning sensations, yet fail to make the slightest commitment which might result in a conquest, though occasions are more than opportune? There does not seem to be any hesitation attributable to moral or scruple. Then the best interpretation of Wrenn's behavior is that he fears Istra's rejection if he should commit himself (as, supposedly, the waitress at the cocoa house had scorned him), but barring a refusal, he would have to pursue his course, and this clearly Wrenn is not prepared to do. Instead, he has only contrived a self-defeating predicament for himself, a propitious opportunity undermined in advance by his dread of inadequacy and his terror of success. Istra's moods are

offered as the "reason" why Wrenn demurs; actually it is himself he seems to fear, and the anger he feels at frustration Wrenn transfers to Istra, blaming her temperament for his disaffection.

A second group of high-intensity scenes relates to Wrenn's courtship of Nelly Croubel, an innocent whom Wrenn can win virtually without opposition. Any token rivals, like Horatio Hood Teddem the "actor," or the black-mustached salesman at the Cigar-Makers' Ball, provoke Wrenn's deep, hostile jealousy. Istra Nash's arrival from Europe, and her temporary residence at Mr. Wrenn's boarding house, pose an apparent dilemma for the little clerk; there is one more bedroom scene with Istra--

Her long strong arms reached up and drew him down. It was his head that rested on her shoulder. It seemed to both of them that it was he who was to be petted, not she. He pressed his cheek against the comforting hollow of her curving shoulder and rested there . . .
(p. 239)

and one more dinner alfresco, on the Hudson Palisades, while Wrenn resumes his courtship of Nelly, but there is little doubt of the issue. Among her raffish bohemian friends in Washington Square, Istra is too alien, too flamboyant and mercurial a personality for compatibility with a novelty clerk. Wrenn reconciles himself gratefully to a life of stable domesticity with Nelly, who mothers him, and assures him of prospects for becoming manager of the souvenir company one day. The emotional intensity of these scenes with Nelly does not compare with

the episodes involving Istra. Wrenn's passionate instincts are almost overpowering, but the hero is so signally lacking in assurance, savoir faire, or a sense of timing, that Lewis must arrange to let him capture Nelly practically by forfeit.

Confrontations with Guilfogle form a third pattern of high-tension scenes in Our Mr. Wrenn. It is enough to point out that Wrenn wins concessions and raises from the manager by threatening and bluffing, tactics which depend on his playing a role or losing his temper dramatically.

In review, it is important to emphasize that Lewis's technique for drawing character in Our Mr. Wrenn consists in aggregating a variety of roles, poses, and emotional reflexes around a deliberately blank hero. The central theme of Success in self-concept, in occupation, and in romantic love provides Wrenn with three functional, external roles to perform. On another level, his reactions to other characters impel him to assume other parts, to impress them, or pretend to himself; these roles may be designated "personality disguises." A third kind of role-playing Wrenn permits himself crops out in his fantasies; these are idealized, escapist charades, in which he dreams of successes in adventure and love, or rehearses for himself the fulfillment of a wish. Istra Nash, Charley Carpenter, and Harry Morton are the only other characters who may be suspected of possessing commonplace, if not pathetic, personalities beneath a brave exterior. Lewis

is fond of insinuating that behind most confident and care-free public performances, the perceptive author may peer to discover the "real" individual--often a bluffer, a self-doubter or an ignoramus. Technically, this is one of his strongest appeals to the reader, and one of his greatest weaknesses, smacking of a journalistic, exposé-style orientation in his view of life. Probably it is also because Lewis was himself a compulsive role player, inventing plots and mimicking people with great facility, that he could not concede that anyone could simply be a real person without requiring the support of costumes, props, and masks to hide behind.

Thus, one searches throughout Our Mr. Wrenn for a "real" hero, and finds next to nothing. Or is it Lewis who lies exposed? The difficulty is that Lewis does not maintain a uniform, objective distance from his creatures, and at times he becomes over-managerial, and inhabits them. The reason for this is that, rather than being primarily a creator of fiction, Lewis is a relater of experiences; the distinction is an important one, because the latter is narrower in scope. Success was naturally the theme which preoccupied Lewis's own mind in 1913-1914, and it is hard to resist reading biographical interpretations into Our Mr. Wrenn. But even without identifying Lewis's personal emotional patterns which permeate the tale, one can detect a strong counter-theme of fear of success, and

a self-defeating refusal by the hero to grow significantly toward full manhood. William Wrenn does not come off, in the last analysis, as an emancipated person. The exercise of his freedom has merely bought him an escape into anonymity.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRAIL OF THE HAWK: THREE

FACES OF DANGER

Sinclair Lewis's second novel for adult readers, The Trail of the Hawk, was published by Harper and Brothers in September, 1915. Subtitled A Comedy of the Seriousness of Life, the book bears a dedication "To the optimistic rebels through whose talk the author watches the many-colored spectacle of life--George Soule, Harrison Smith, Allan Updegraff, F. K. Noyes, Alfred Harcourt, B. W. Huebsch." The story develops around the life of young Carl Ericson, a second-generation Norwegian-American, from his eighth year in 1892 (the same age as Lewis, Mark Schorer observes) to his thirtieth in 1915, and treats three aspects of his experience in roughly chronological order: "The Adventure of Youth," "The Adventure of Adventuring," and "The Adventure of Love." In these divisions, Schorer notes, "The necessary ingredient of the first is rebellion; of the second, freedom; of the third, a playmate. The threat to all of them is the compliance with routine; the

alternative to the third is loneliness."¹ But beneath the surface familiarity of these favorite Lewis themes may be seen the depths of the seriousness to which the subtitle draws attention. Apparently, the three divisions of The Trail of the Hawk represent the author's dramatization of three faces of danger to the ego of Hawk Ericson, his protagonist: the threat of anonymity, or living death, posed by life in a small town like Joralemon, Minnesota; the risk of violent death while flying flimsy aircraft during the early days of aviation; and the menace of failure, or success, in job and marriage.

In support of the thesis that Sinclair Lewis dramatized his own fears and emotional conflicts by trying on the roles of his fictional creatures, it is interesting to mark similarities between the lives of Carl Ericson and Lewis. Both experienced the pettiness and isolation of existence in a Minnesota village; both attended schools where formal religious atmosphere bore down heavily on student life and thought; both wandered about the country, and took sudden excursions to Panama; they are both inveterate walkers and campers; flirt with socialistic political beliefs; find office work stultifying; and fall in love with soft-fleshed, brown-haired New York girls from the Upper Middle Class who give their husbands lessons in taste and manners. Beyond these, there are further

¹Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 221.

similarities in the behavioral patterns of the two: restlessness, feelings of persecution, protective gestures toward unpopular friends; lack of assurance in sexual matters and courtship on a childlike, sentimental basis; and especially tendencies toward escapism by travel or fantasy role playing, and some suggestions of a death wish.

Elizabeth Jordan, Lewis's editor at Harper's, has written that The Trail of the Hawk "was in a way autobiographical. Hal himself was at heart a hawk, wild and untamed."² Grace Lewis conceded that the novel was

autobiographical in so far as the hero, Hawk Ericson, was born in a small Minnesota town, came to New York and found success there, and married a girl whose social background had been different from his own. . . . But the Hawk was primarily the story of the pioneer days of aviation, the suicidal fly-by-night training schools, the aero meets [and] the daring prize-competing races . . . ³

Mrs. Lewis also confessed that she was "the chief female character" (i.e., Ruth Winslow) in this book, as well as in the later Free Air (Claire Boltwood) and Main Street (the "good part" of Carol Kennicott, according to Lewis's inscription). In her copy of The Trail of the Hawk, her husband wrote:

To Grace from Hal. "Youth bubbles in every line," says the blurb on the jacket. It is true, in the sense that you are in every line, & you are youth. This is not so much a novel, dear, as a record of our games & talks & thoughts and journeys. Without you,

²Three Rousing Cheers (New York, 1938), p. 342.

³With Love From Gracie, pp. 73-74.

none of it could have been written--if it is good, it is your merit; if bad, it is my faulty effort to express us.⁴

Mark Schorer traces the parallels between author and character with thoroughness, perceptively pointing out that "the novelist splits himself up among a number of characters," and that where the scenes between Carl and Ruth are concerned, "the novel contains biographical detail beyond the significant revelation that lies in the apparent necessity to make the sexual relationship an infantile thing."⁵ Sheldon Grebstein concurs in detecting the autobiographical overtone of the book, identifying it as primarily a novel of education, and stating that "Carl Ericson is an idealized projection of the young Lewis, and his 'education' is a vehicle for Lewis's ideas."⁶ Ideas, however, are few in The Trail of the Hawk, except for Carl's earnest but vaguely defined social egalitarianism, which tallies well with the bonhomie among pioneer flyers, but is displaced in his relationship to Ruth. The "Touricar" on which Carl works for the Van Zile company is another Revolutionary Idea sent express from the author to give his hero some justifiable continuing employment, as in the case of Mr. Wrenn's special inkwells for the "southern trade."

⁴With Love From Gracie, pp. 152-153.

⁵Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, pp. 221-223.

⁶Sinclair Lewis, pp. 44-45.

The theme of danger, as implied in the risks of the three "adventures" of Carl Ericson, gives The Trail of the Hawk its psychological and emotional continuity, rather than ideas. The novel is far more visceral than cerebral. Schorer's observation regarding the threat to adventure posed by "compliance with routine" and Grebstein's assertion that Lewis used a basic "search for identity" formula in his early novels⁷ are apt criticisms; they do not, however, shed light on the motives for rebellion against compliance, or the methods employed in the search for self, either in the lives of Lewis or Hawk Ericson. An illuminating clue to Carl's motivation is evident in his yearning to be worthy, especially of women he admires. Insight into his quest for an agreeable identity is accessible through an examination of Carl's role playing on several levels. There is danger, of course, in finally becoming worthy, for then the hero faces a commitment to the woman he has struggled to deserve, and there is also the risk of success in finding oneself, of ending the romantic charade of pretending to be still a youth with dozens of role options, and having to accept oneself as he really is. That none of these problems is satisfactorily resolved at the conclusion of The Trail of the Hawk suggests the Hawk's neurotic need to continue facing danger, rather than permit

⁷Sinclair Lewis, p. 39.

success to overtake him, either in sexual relationships in in a final ego role definition.

The first aspect of danger which Carl Ericson confronts is the threat of anonymity through a planless life in rural Joralemon, Minnesota. Lewis's bias against small-town customs and social life is as obvious as his delight in the sun-flooded countryside. On the one hand, Joralemon is a "wholesome, democratic and stuffy village," whose society is patrolled by supercilious matrons like Mrs. Cowles, Gertie's mother, and whose economics is supported by the local farmers, the flour mill, the Minnesota and Dakota railroad, and by flinty skilled workmen like Carl's carpenter father.

Oscar Ericson radiated intolerance and a belief in unimaginative, unresting labor. Every evening, collarless and carpet-slippered, ruffling his broom-colored hair or stroking his large, long chin, . . . he read a Norwegian newspaper.⁸

On the other hand, Lewis's joyful appreciation of the landscape glows in the passages

The surface of the water was smooth, and tinted like a bluebell, save for one patch in the current where wavelets leaped with October madness in sparkles of diamond fire. Across the lake, woods sprinkled with gold-dust and paprika broke the sweep of sparse yellow stubble, and a red barn was softly brilliant in the caressing sunlight and lively air of the Minnesota prairie (p. 4).

The sun rolled splendidly through the dry air, over miles of wheat stubble, whose gray-yellow prickles were transmuted by distance into tawny velvet, seeming only the more spacious because of the straight,

⁸The Trail of the Hawk (New York, 1915), p. 27.

thin lines of barbed-wire fences lined with goldenrod, and solitary houses in willow groves. The dips and curves of the rolling plain drew him on; the distances satisfied his eyes (p. 30).

Both the town's social establishment, which half-excludes Carl because his father is not a professional and because the boy's vocational plans are vague, and his preference for the solitary outdoor life tend to set him apart, if not isolate him. But Carl is not in the truest sense a rebel. Normal childhood disobedience to parents does not brand a boy as a rebel, unless inordinate fear of their disapproval makes him interpret rooster-chasing or walking out of his own yard as enormous gestures of defiance. Taking pleasure in the beauty of woods and fields is not in itself characteristic of rebellion, nor does Carl's uncritical acceptance of Bone Stillman's humanitarian advice and Professor Frazer's social doctrines at Plato College convincingly bestow on him a rebel's credentials. Lewis seems ambivalent about the need for attributing this non-conformity to Carl as a motive force for his adventuring; he wishes to sketch his protagonist with a few distinctive characteristics, yet he does not wish to lose control of him. Thus, Carl earns the label of "rebel" through a few token acts of stubbornness, for example, by defending Eugene Linderbeck and Frazer in a demand for fair treatment; but Lewis accentuates this progressiveness mainly by the device of casting the remaining lump of society as

crooked, hypocritical and conformist, so that his hero who has made the morally correct choice may seem liberal.

Throughout the "Adventure of Youth" section Lewis raises the bogeys of the Middlewestern small-town value system as threats to the free and natural development of his central character.

Life at Plato was suspicious, prejudiced, provincial, as it affected the ambitious students; and for the weaker brethren it was philandering and vague. The class work was largely pure rot. . . . Few of the students realized the futility of it all . . .

The life habit justifies itself. One comes to take anything as a matter of course. . . . The Platonians raced toward their various goals of high-school teaching, or law, or marriage, or permanently escaping their parents. . . . They played out their game. But it was so tiny a game, so played to the exclusion of all other games, that it tended to dwarf its victims--and the restless children, such as Carl, instinctively resent this dwarfing. They seek to associate themselves with other rebels. Carl's unconscious rebel band was the group of rowdyish freshmen who called themselves "the Gang," and loafed about the room of their unofficial captain . . . (pp. 62-63).

Opposing academic incompetence with boredom and inactivity is scarcely the patent of a true rebel, however. Carl adopts a defiant stance only after his meeting with Professor Frazer. The effect of this friendship is remarkable in that Carl does not develop intellectually or politically in any appreciable measure, but he is impressed by the professor's manners and tastes in household decor, reading matter, conversation, music. As is often the case with Lewis heroes, an escalation in the quality of his bourgeois tastes is offered as an equivalent to character development. Carl's loyalty to the professor is that of a devoted

admirer and imitator, not of a kindred mind, who laboriously read Pre-Raphaelite poetry "by crawling from word to word as though they were ice-cakes in a cataract of emotion," during his "violent pursuit of the beautiful" (p. 69). His decision to stand publicly for "Frazer and freedom" while his teacher was denounced for socialistic views resulted in Carl's departure from Plato College. Having dramatically purified himself in ritual fasting from his noon meal and hiking moodily in the woods, Carl justifies his escape from the school after a glimpse of sunset clouds shaped like the Grand Canyon.

He had to see the Grand Canyon! He would! . . . He was slowly coming to understand that he was actually free to take youth's freedom.

He saw the vision of the America through which he might follow the trail like the pioneers whose spiritual descendant he was. How noble was the panorama that thrilled this one-generation American can be understood only by those who have smelled our brown soil . . . (pp. 121-122).

Swept along by the effusiveness of this vision, Carl bursts the confines of the Joralemon-Plato ethic and evades the menace of anonymous conformity by running away, perhaps to Europe, with \$92.75, "enough to make a mighty good start seeing the world, anyway." Behind him is the adventure of youth.

The anonymity he finds in the opening chapters of Part II, "The Adventure of Adventuring," is still more threatening, however. Depression and futility are the dominant moods of Carl's next four years of wandering--roughly from November, 1905, to November, 1909.

This period of unorganized drifting affords the author opportunities for depicting his hero in a wide variety of occupational roles, some of them almost deliberately degrading, in a number of different geographical locations. Carl is able, consequently, to react to a small spectrum of personality types whom he encounters in his travels, including the inevitable mechanic, waiter, hobo and actor, as well as an actress who rehearses him in the arts of imitation love. These random adventures are a convenient excuse for structural looseness in the center section of The Trail of the Hawk, where the author can rely on the technique of highlighting selectively the most brilliant facets of his hero's experience. Nevertheless, Chapters XVII-XXI, which detail Carl's rise from student in the Bagby School of Aviation to national hero as winner of the \$10,000 New Haven Meet, provide the most sustained reader interest in the novel. The reason is that these pages are comparatively free of the self-consciousness and moody introspection which have overshadowed Lewis's protagonist in earlier chapters; in permitting Carl to be active, mastering new technical skills and making strong friendships, the author allows him to gain autonomy and confidence.

Alas, not for long. In the last chapters of Part II, Lewis resorts to a sketchy device, while assuming the guise of "Editor" of Ericson's notes.

(Editor's Note: The following pages are extracts from a diary kept by Mr. C. O. Ericson in a desultory fashion from January, 1911, to the end of April, 1912. They are reprinted quite literally. Apparently Mr. Ericson had no very precise purpose in keeping his journal. . . .) (p. 202).

The emotional range narrows again, the "entries" are fragmented, introspective, analytical, and frequently gloomy.

"The Adventure of Adventuring" closes with reports of Carl's injury in a crash while flying to St. Louis, his shock at the sudden death of his friend Forrest Haviland, and the Hawk's escape to Europe after giving up flying. Carl had courted death long enough.

"The Adventure of Love," Part III, begins by way of a venture in business, as William Wrenn has discovered, and Carl Ericson was to learn. He returns to New York in the fall of 1912 with a mustache and a thin glaze of European sophistication--evidence of further refinement in his tastes. Carl will oversee development of his new invention

the "Touricar"--an automobile with all camping accessories, which should enable motorists to travel independent of inns, add the joy of camping to the joy of touring, and . . . add money to the purse of the inventor.

. . . Carl had got the idea of the Touricar while wandering by motor-cycle through Scandinavia and Russia (p. 225).

As head of the Touricar Company, a subsidiary of the Van Zile Corporation, Carl finds office life boring. Personally, he feels isolated, neglected; he imagines that he lacks the appeal to sustain old friendships.

Carl was a dethroned prince. . . . He was forgotten. He did not seek out the many people he had met when he was an aviator and a somebody. He believed, perhaps foolishly, that they liked him only as a personage, not as a person (p. 228).

Without his reassuring façade as the celebrated pilot, the Hawk sinks into depression. His substitute role, the "hustling, optimistic young businessman," does not console him. The national audience for his performances as a flyer has vanished; he no longer reads his name in the newspapers.

Miraculously, Lewis arranges the appearance in New York of an old Joralemon acquaintance who promises a soul-satisfying poultice of home-town love and friendship. Gertrude Cowles now lives on West 157th Street with her mother and brother Ray. But Carl requires only a short reacquaintance to realize that, as a managing woman whose tastes now seem affected and provincial, Gertie represents a threat to his freedom and to his heroic self-image. She is too forward, too desperately eager to have him. In her presence he is wooden, bored. They quarrel; he stubbornly refuses to apologize, stalks away to dine in martyrdom, alone. Almost vindictively, he contemplates flying again: "He suddenly determined to go off some place and fly an aeroplane; as suddenly knew that he was not yet ready to return to the game" (p. 253). Returning to the air would represent punishing Gertie for her man-eating attitudes, but it also suggests in this context Carl's irrational wish to scourge himself, by taking an unnecessary and

suicidal risk, for being afraid of her. But happily, an author-sent object for the immediate transfer of Carl's affections rides into view. Gazing through the restaurant window, Carl studies a stalled street-car, on which the lovely Olive Dunleavy and Ruth Winslow are seated. Hastily he shadows the girls to a party, singles out Ruth to fulfill the role of his playmate, pursues her, woos her, weds her, quarrels with her, and at last--as Argentine representative for the Van Zile Corporation--he steams with her off to Buenos Aires.

In Part III the dangers of commerce and of love are intertwined. The onset of the World War threatens to curtail demand for the Touricar. Van Zile considers withdrawing support from the company. The camping automobile is never a large success, although it attracts steady interest on the market. Carl and Ruth's marriage also sputters unevenly along, more an accommodation than a success. The novel ends inconclusively, through an escape on a liner to South America. It is as though neither Carl Ericson nor Sinclair Lewis could face resolutely the demands which success in love and business make upon the individual, without fearing exposure as a boy masquerading in a man's clothing.

Lewis's three-part organization for The Trail of the Hawk follows with a more sharply defined structure the main lines of story continuity treated in Our Mr. Wrenn,

and later applied to the narrative of Una Golden in The Job. Success in developing a self-concept, successes in business and in romantic love are hinted at, even convincingly visualized, but never conclusively demonstrated in the central character's experience. Lewis prefers to radiate impressions of success, rather than furnish proofs. In The Trail of the Hawk, the three aspects of adventure reflect sides of the hero like a vanity-mirror, or like three scenes in a triptych of the life of Lewis's martyr-hero, often referred to as a "Galahad."

At times Lewis seems undecided whether to represent Carl Ericson as a hero or not. Despite allusions to his resemblance to Galahad, Jason, Ulysses or Lochinvar, the author occasionally insists that "this is a serious study of an average young American" (p. 6), or, "Yet he was no extraordinary person" (p. 294). After having spied daringly on the Plato faculty meeting which debated Professor Frazer's liberal ideas, Carl evades capture and assumes a casual air "not at all like a melodramatic hero of a slide-by-night, but like a matter-of-fact young man going to see some one about business." The next morning, when Carl stands in support of Frazer at the chapel service, Lewis points out that

Carl was not a hero. He was frightened. In a moment now all the eyes in the room would be unwinkingly focused on him (p. 107).

In a later passage strained modesty seems to force Carl to write in his diary:

October 23: I wonder how far I'll get as an aviator? The newspapers all praise me as a hero. Hero, hell! I'm a pretty steady flier but so would plenty of chauffeurs be. This hero business is mostly bunk, it was chance my starting to fly at all (p. 216).

Even at the height of his fame, the victor dares not enjoy his meed, but feels obliged to efface himself, staving off pride like a Puritan. Finally, when Carl looks toward reconciliation with Ruth following their most bitter disagreement, Lewis apostrophizes in a most interesting passage:

During a few moments of their lives, ordinary real people, people real as a tooth-brush, do actually transcend the coarsely physical aspects of sex and feeding, and do approximate to the unwavering glow of romantic heroes. Carl was no more a romantic hero-lover than, as a celebrated aviator, he had been a hero-adventurer. He was a human being. He was not even admirable, except as all people are admirable, from the ash-man to the king. . . . Yet . . . he desired happiness for [Ruth] with a devotion great as the passion in Galahad's heart when all night he knelt before the high altar (pp. 404-405).

On this same theme, Lewis permits Ruth to dabble in some tentative role exchanging while she speaks to Carl of her social theory.

" . . . I've been reading; and I've made--to you it may seem silly to call it a discovery, but to me it's the greatest discovery I've ever made: that people are just people, all of them--that the little mousey clerk may be a hero, and the hero may be a nobody . . . " (p. 286).

Speaking from his varied experience, Carl agrees that she is right. Here is book-learned theory supported by practical observation. Then, oddly, Lewis backs away from these

affirmations with the comment, "So they talked, boy and girl, wondering together what the world really is like." "Really" suggests that neither of the characters knows, despite their agreement in idea and experience. Lewis repeatedly uses the words "real," "really," "serious," and "seriously" to imply that there is always another, hidden side to a person or idea than the aspect the reader sees. Thus, in this Comedy of the Seriousness of Life Lewis can play the emphasis both ways, hiding both the ambiguity of Carl's heroism and any forthright statement of the book's theme behind a paradox. His use of the enigmatic word "adventure" to label the novel's three parts further occludes Lewis's intended point of view toward his main character; whatever else one could say about Hawk Ericson's trail, heroic or not, it was an adventure.

Much of Lewis's indecisiveness over Carl's heroism derives from the character's inveterate role-playing and projecting, as in the numerous "he saw himself" passages, which also reflect a remarkable degree of personality dissociation. For example, while Carl endures the tyrannies of Latin, knowing that he must study it if he hopes to attend college, he contemplates escape into a natural setting.

He let the lines of his Cicero fade into a gray blur that confounded Cicero's blatant virtue and Catiline's treachery, while he pictured himself tramping with snow-shoes and mackinaw coat into the snowy solemnities of the northern Minnesota tamarack swamps (p. 31).

In the summer after his first year of college, Carl returns to Joralemon with some reputation as a track star at Plato College. He senses that he has "come home a hero," but declines to follow up any advantage he may have in his friendship with Gertie, until he is on the train, clacking toward his summer job. With her he had been restrained; now he could enjoy the safety of fantasy.

He mourned that he had not been more tender with her that week. He pictured himself kissing Gertie on the shore of Tamarack Lake, enfolded by afternoon and the mystery of sex and a protecting reverence for Gertie's loneliness. He wanted to go back--back for one more day, one more ride with Gertie. But . . .

and here Lewis contrives an important transitional coincidence, where Carl's first interest in flying, at which he will be quite successful, appears as a substitute for his confident behavior with women,

. . . he picked up a mechanics magazine, glanced at an article on gliders, read in the first paragraph a prophecy about aviation, slid down in his seat with his head bent over the magazine--and the idyl of Gertie and afternoon was gone (p. 73).

Later while impulsively spying on the secret faculty meeting at Plato during the Frazer affair, Carl recalls a similar, earlier incident which had shaped his youth.

" . . . Say! Where'd I do just this before? Oh yes!" He saw himself as little Carl, lost with Gertie in the woods, caught by Bone Stillman at the window (p. 103).

Indignant that no one has courage enough to support Frazer publicly, Carl rises in protest at chapel, as if watching himself perform an incredible act.

Then Carl was agitated to find that Carl Ericson, a back-yard boy, was going to rise and disturb all these learned people (p. 112).

During his years of wandering, Carl works for a time as assistant barkeep in a Bowery saloon, resolving to work himself up out of the social "mire." He reads a chance Sunday newspaper article on the Panama Canal's "marvels of engineering and jungle."

He saw himself in Panama, with a clean man's job, talking to cosmopolitan engineers against a background of green-and-scarlet jungle (p. 154).

A further vision of his rise in the social scale unrolls before Carl in a fantasy suggested by "The Blue Danube" waltz during a dance in his days at the Bagby School of Aviation.

The name brought back the novels of General Charles King,⁹ as he had read them in high school days; . . . a rude ballroom, a young officer dancing to the "Blue Danube's" intoxication; a hot-riding, dusty courier, hurling in with news of an Apache outbreak; a few minutes later a troop of cavalry slanting out . . . a farewell burning on the young officer's lips. . . . He was in just such an army story now!

The scent of royal climbing-roses enveloped Carl as that picture changed into others. . . . For the first time Hawk Ericson realized that he might be a Personage instead of a back-yard boy (pp. 177-178).

In his dream of success, Carl's imagined "girl with twilight eyes" smiles at him.

⁹Charles King (1844-1933) was an American Army officer and professor of military science at the University of Wisconsin. King wrote many novels and stories based on his experiences in the Reconstruction South, in the Indian wars in the West, in the Spanish-American War, and the Philippine Insurrection. One of his novels is A Trooper Galahad (Philadelphia, 1899).

In later self-dramatizations, Carl imagines himself as a "Dethroned Prince" (p. 310), rehearses a possible telephoned apology to Ruth after a disagreement (p. 328), then refuses to apologize: "He was dramatizing himself as hero in a melodrama. He did not know how the play would end" (p. 329). He sees himself "as a lout cast out of heaven" (p. 330), imagines quitting his job to "join Bagby, Jr., in his hydroaeroplane experiments. He pictured the crowd that would worship him" (p. 331). Again this impulse to resume flying exposes itself as a threatening, self-destructive form of punishment, intended to make Ruth regret her sneers at his manners and breeding.

Carl's role projections all occur when he is alone. In most of them he assumes a heroic posture, and in many of these fantasies Carl rehearses acts which will win the attention of spectators, especially women. It seems inconsistent of Lewis to characterize Hawk Ericson as a daring hero in the early days of aviation, as an active, vigorous inventor of machinery, then to show him indulging in so many compensatory daydreams, indicative of a passive, bookish and adolescent behavior pattern. One suspects that Carl's roles and fantasies are simulations of Lewis's own emotional patterns, scarcely masked at all, projected on to the hero, who is a representation of Lewis's ego substitute. The active Carl, the outdoorsman, track star and football player, the wire-stringer, mechanic and particularly the flyer, represent a male-success

repertoire superimposed upon, and inconsistent with, the anxious and narcissistic personality which Hawk Ericson is at bottom. The other possibility, that Lewis conceived Carl as a subtle and complex character who enjoys a life of remarkable richness and diversity, does not survive more than passing scrutiny. The Hawk is tethered by the narrow scope of Lewis's insight into human personality, which viewed men principally as possessors of occupational roles, and in their interrelationships essentially as bluffers behind the barricades of social status. In the end, Lewis is unwilling to give up his special kind of control over his protagonists. His novels are much more about the roles men perform than about the men themselves, to make a distinction. This explains how characters like Carl Ericson can age in a chronological sequence without growing; as mutations of the same basic emotion-based value system of Lewis's loves and antipathies, they cannot develop enough independence to leave their progenitor.

Beyond Carl's dissociative fantasies, he acts parts in other ways, mainly in different vocational capacities. In his childhood games he pretended to be a "soldier of fortune," a general, a trapper or railroad brakeman; "Carl had never made b'lieve fairies or princes," Lewis records. At sixteen he had trimmed street lamps for the local power company, frequented the billiard hall and hunted prairie chickens. Arrival of the first "horseless carriage" in Joralemon inspires Carl's resolve to go to

college to "study mechanical engineering." But following Gertie Cowles's party in Chapter IV, Carl is impressed enough by her opinion of his abilities to dream of studying law and running for public office. When he enrolls at Plato College, Carl "was convinced that he was going to become a lawyer, for her sake, but he knew that some day he would be tempted by the desire to become a civil or a mechanical engineer" (pp. 64-65). Between years at college Carl strings wire, climbing poles for a telephone company. Later, relinquishing his students' occupation, Carl tries many sorts of jobs. "For more than a year he went down, down the social scale, down to dirt and poverty and association with the utterly tough and reckless" (p. 127). He is a tutor, time-keeper for a window-cleaning company, reporter, cab driver, bookkeeper, department store packer, mechanic, chauffeur, hobo, waiter, actor, motor boat tender, saloon porter, engineer in Panama, factotum at a mine in Mexico, garage owner in Oakland, and at last, an aviator. In linking these occupational changes with a descent in social status, Lewis exposes his basic value assumption that a man's identity and worth depend almost exclusively upon his vocational standing, apart from the mass, as the following passage suggests.

Though he did not suppose that he was going to continue dwelling in a hall bedroom, yet never did he regard himself as a collegian Haroun-al-Raschid on an amusing masquerade, pretending to be no better than the men with whom he worked. Carl was no romantic hero incog. He was a workman, and he knew it. Was not his father

a carpenter? his father's best friend a tailor? Had he not been a waiter at Plato?

But not always a workman. Carl had no conception of world-wide class-consciousness; he had no pride in being a proletarian. . . . he took it for granted that he was going to be rich as soon as he could (p. 130).

Ultimately, it is this monolithic motive, which seems on some evidence to have been Lewis's also, which limits the development of Carl's character.

Sometimes Carl enacts a role within a role. In his occupation as an actor for the Great Riley tent show, he is able to try on many parts. Lewis writes, half ironically, that Carl "like every human being since Eden, with the possible exceptions of Calvin and Richard Mansfield,¹⁰ had a secret belief that he could be a powerful actor" (p. 136). He plays the "second juvenile," then more important bits, like that of the "young millionaire."

Another place which suggests the hero's concentric roles is the diary entry where Carl reflects on the workings of his imagination. This passage seems to illustrate Lewis's emotional patterns even more than the Hawk's. Stimulus for Carl's speculation generates from Istra Nash's complaint that his refusal to name his new aircraft "Babette" showed lack of imagination; one remembers the link between this provocative girl and Mr. Wrenn, an association based mainly on the strength of his celebrated

¹⁰Richard Mansfield (1857-1907) was an American actor who tried several occupations before becoming a celebrated star. He was the first producer of a G. B. Shaw play in the United States (Arms and the Man, 1894).

power of imagination. (Lewis seems to reintroduce Istra in The Trail of the Hawk for her usefulness as a personified value system and also as an echo cue to remind the reader of his earlier novel.) Carl's response:

People especially reporters are always asking me this question, do aviators have imagination? I'm not sure I know what imagination is. . . . A few years ago when I was running a car I would make believe I was different people, like a king driving through his kingdom . . . And I do like to go different places; possibly I take the imagination out that way--I guess imagination is partly wanting to be places where you aren't--well, I go when I want to, and I like that better (pp. 206-207).

It is fascinating to note the sequence of female presence-
imagination-roles-"different places," laid out almost like
a plan for evasive action. Lewis confessed to a restlessness similar to the Hawk's years later, when he wrote an editorial "Foreword" for a Readers Club selection. After speaking of the realistic characters in The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, Lewis digresses.

It is the story, in a different coat, of all of us. We may feel that the author has been spying on us, sharing our secret thoughts and weaknesses and hidden generosities. Dr. Mahony's trick of suddenly wanting to leave a decent home, for no intellectually defensible reason, at whatever cost of rent or contacts or esteem of friends, that emotional compulsion that can be quieted only by up and going, at once--I have known it more times than I would ever confess.¹¹

These are candid admissions; the "emotional compulsion" to leave home "for no intellectually defensible reason" afflicted many of his characters as well as Sinclair Lewis

¹¹Henry Handel Richardson [Henrietta R. Robertson], The Fortunes of Richard Mahony (New York, 1941), p. vi.

himself. In Carl Ericson's case, wandering about, even flying, seems to be a sublimation of his imagination; it is obviously escapist in its purpose, not primarily educational. Travel is a role-substitute, a flight from the danger of facing oneself, a self-destructive fraud to thwart the ego.

Supplementing the hero's constellation of occupational roles is his list of aliases. At home in Jerusalem, he is only "Carl," except to Bone Stillman, who, significantly, calls him "son." While he attends Plato, Mae Thurston at the boarding house calls him "Eric," and his friend, John ("Turk") Terry refers to him as "young Kerl." His room-mate, Albert ("Plain") Smith calls him simply "bub." To the patronizing dean he is "Ericson." In New York the Bowery bully, Petey McGuff, dubs Carl derisively "tissy-cat," "Sunday-school Harry," "Mamma's little rosy-cheeked boy," "Lizzie," and "Agnes." As a hobo, he had been "Slim" Ericson. Bluffing his way uninvited to the party where he has followed Ruth and Olive, Carl represents himself as "Oscar Ericson"--his father's name--and pretends to be, severally, a dramatist, a doctor, sculptor, and dentist. Miss Winslow addresses him as "O Man of Mystery." Carl's most enduring nickname, of course, is "Hawk," conferred on him by a reporter on the San Mateo Courier, who witnessed the aviator's first reckless solo. Under a picture accompanying the newspaper article was the legend, "Ericson, the New Hawk of the Birdmen."

This heroic appellation has been foreshadowed in Chapter X, during Carl's surveillance of the secret faculty meeting at Plato.

He was lone as a mateless hawk, there on the ledge, against the wall whose stones were pinchingly cold to the small of his back and his spread-eagled arms (p. 103).

The hawk image also connotes a disguise, as well as a lofty spirit and sexual aggressiveness. Carl attends a lavish costume party at Newport:

All the Newport swells came to party dressed as birds, and I had to dress as a hawk, they had the costume all ready, wonder how they got my measurements (p. 215).

Following Carl's impulsive demand to "Come for a long tramp with me, on the Palisades," Ruth frets apprehensively about the propriety of being alone with a man in the wilderness:

"I wonder if a hawk out of the windy skies can understand how daring a dove out of Ninety-second Street feels at going walking on the Palisades?" (p. 289).

Realization of his love for Ruth works a "change" in Carl that seems like a release, an escape from a trivial existence. "His soul soared, lark and hawk in one, triumphant over the matter-of-factness of daily life" (p. 308).

Paradoxes like the lark-hawk comparison and reference to Carl as a "Scotchlike Norwegian" do not clarify the focus of Lewis's intention toward his hero. Carl continues to accumulate attributes, descriptive metaphors and epithets throughout the novel. Lewis utilizes other familiar

facet-reflecting techniques in The Trail of the Hawk, where the hero reads about himself in a newspaper, attends plays and shows indicative of his cultural tastes, and performs a charade-"stunt." But the side of Carl which seems most incongruous with his heroic pretensions is the way he conducts himself with women. If Hawk Ericson is truly a fictional proxy for Sinclair Lewis, one could learn much from a study of Carl's instincts and reflexes in matters of love.

Gertie Cowles occupies the role of potential wife. Indeed, Carl's affection for Gertie seems to have glowed from the day they met in Joralemon, and wandered together in the woods. As narrator, Lewis fusses over the fact that she is two years older than Carl, a detail doubtless designed to make him seem precocious, or more mature than the ordinary boy: he is eight, she ten. He introduces this city girl to the outdoor life, and when they lose their way, Carl performs the manly ritual of building a fire, lighting it with a single match, in a grassy patch near a stream. In Lewis's early novels there are almost obligatory firelighting and camping scenes, with expressions of love and intimacy vouchsafed near creeks, rivers, or lakes. These scenes seem staged to reinforce the hero's ego concept as a male who has mastery over nature, knows the lore of the woods, and is not afraid. Gertie, for her part, introduces Carl to the functions of society in

Joralemon. He realizes painfully that he is not her equal in social status, and that his second cousin, Lena, is the Cowleses' maid. However, Carl's amatory experiences with Gertie do not develop beyond a clumsy kiss at a party game of post-office, or his fantasy of being with her at Tamarack Lake. Even so, his determination to go to college has been fueled by his yearning to be "worthy" of Gertie's admiration.

When Gertie reappears, improbably, in New York, the difference in their ages tells against her. She has become "a bland, plump woman of thirty." Carl reflects that "Gertie was set aside from the number of women who could appeal physically."

Gertie's solid flesh, the monotony of her voice, the unimaginative fixity of her round cheeks, a certain increasing slackness about her waist, even the faint, stuffy domestic scent of her--they all expressed to him her lack of humor and fancy and venturesomeness. She was crystallized in his mind as a good friend with a plain soul and sisterly tendencies (pp. 306-307).

These sentences, loaded with pejoratives, anticipate the style which was later to distinguish Lewis as the "social critic" and "caricaturist." But one may detect an undercurrent of hysteria and ferocity in this stripping away of Gertie's pretensions; the hero sniffs danger in the aggressions of this fleshly mantrap, and he recoils.

Carl stared at her, praying for a chance to escape. Then he felt an instinct prompting him to sob with her. Pity, embarrassment, disgust, mingled with his alarm. He became amazed that Gertie, easy-going Gertie Cowles, had any passion at all; and indignant that it was visited upon himself (p. 304).

Carl's harrowing confrontation with Gertie is disconcerting because he has discovered the intensity of his feelings for Ruth Winslow, whom he was slow to win, as her surname suggests. With the kind of brutality that masquerades as friendly confidence, Carl tells Gertie of his longings for Ruth, concluding, "She's sister and chum and wife and everything." Some six months later, Gertie and Mrs. Cowles return to Joralemon, their plan to snatch Carl having miscarried.

Gertie was either a chance for simple sweetness which he failed to take, or she was a peril which he had escaped, . . . but in any case he had missed--or escaped--her as a romantic hero escapes fire, flood, and plot. She meant nothing to him, never could again. Life had flowed past her as, except in novels with plots, most lives do flow past temporary and fortuitous points of interest (p. 365).

Like Mr. Wrenn, Carl has the option of "choosing" between two women. Lewis dispatches Gertie in the same manner as he had disposed of Istra Nash in his earlier novel, by dredging up damaging objections to the woman from hindsight, to reduce the luster of her original appeal to the hero. Thus, in retrospect, Istra is too moody, Gertie too frumpy, for serious consideration as a wife; Lewis makes it appear that his heroes have outgrown these women by shifting his point of view enough to describe the potential wives unflatteringly. But it is no secret that Wrenn and Hawk fear their former loves as predators.

Aggressive women people the pages of The Trail of the Hawk. Mrs. Cowles of the Joralemon days was an

imperious snob. Ruth's Aunt Emma Truegate Winslow, majestic as an iceberg, is an "electric person" who was "the general-commanding in whatsoever group she was placed by Providence (with which she had strong influence)." Carl's encounter with the actress Eve L'Ewysse, née Lena Ludwig of Newport News, was palpably terrifying, and precipitated his departure from the Great Riley Show. Alone on a hot night and thinly dressed, Eve and Carl kiss passionately. She half encourages him to proceed, but "Suddenly he could not, would not, go on."

Perhaps he was checked by provincial prejudices about chivalry. But perhaps he had learned a little self-control. In any case, he had stopped for a second to think . . . He stroked her hair and begged: "Please go, Eve. I guess I haven't got very good control over myself. Please. You make me--"

"Oh yes, yes, sure! Blame it on me! Sure! I made you let me put on a kimono! I'm leading your pure white shriveled peanut of a soul into temptation! . . . "

Eve places his hand upon her breast.

He pulled his hand free and fled to his tent.

Perhaps his fiercest gibe at himself was that he had had to play the role of virgin Galahad rejecting love, which is praised in books and ridiculed in clubs (pp. 143-144).

Carl's fear can be transmuted into rage directed at himself, once he has fled from the danger, in the same pattern William Wrenn displayed after the cocoa house waitress jilted him.

Carl's successful courtship of Ruth grows from his conviction that she will be an ideal playmate for him. Of the women in the novel, she is the least aggressive,

and she is amenable to Carl's whims and suggestions for unconventional rambles out-of-doors. By planning these unusual enterprises, Carl can circumvent Ruth's instinctive defenses by keeping her off guard and dominating their activities together. Their tramp over the Palisades, for example, allows him to have Ruth alone for nostalgic and intimate conversation, while he enjoys the role of hero "conquering the miles." So does Carl's carefully staged skiing-firelighting-and-camping ceremony in Chapter XXXIII afford him satisfaction in mastery over nature and woman.

Despite their excursions and games and the child-like roles they play at make-believe housekeeping, the concept of Ruth which develops is one of a hesitating and essentially sexless playmate. True, there appear accounts of passionate kisses, but these scenes are always checked by guilt and indecision, or vitiated by introspective analysis.

He had not known the kiss of man and woman could be so long, so stirring. . . . But her lips grew more intense against his, returning and taking the kiss; both of them giving and receiving at once.

Wondering at himself for it, Carl thought of other things. He was amazed that, while their lips were hot together, he worried as to what train Ruth ought to take . . .

Then she was drawing back, rending the kiss, crying, "You're almost smothering me!" (pp. 355-356).

What Carl desires most, however, is a supportive traveling companion; they will explore the world, and not settle down permanently. "Seriously I would keep going--if I had

the right girl to go with me. . . . I need you" (pp. 358-359). They would "be different things. We'd be Connecticut farmers one year, and run a mine in Mexico the next, and loaf in Paris the next." When at last Ruth accepts his marriage proposal, he is satisfied: "Carl knew that life's real adventure is not adventuring, but finding the playmate with whom to quest life's meaning" (p. 378).

In marriage Ruth provides most of the initiatives. The uncertainties of his Touricar venture depress Carl. She disapproves of Martin Dockerill, a mechanic from his flying days, who comes to visit often. Carl and Ruth quarrel vehemently; there has been too much disparity in their life patterns. The one joy they share, which brings about their reconciliation, is the preoccupying escape of travel together. Carl's solution to the problem of their incompatibility is that

Ruth and he had to be up and away, immediately; go any place, do anything, so long as they followed new trails, and followed them together.

. . . Ruth and he . . . had a vocation in keeping clear of vocations (p. 404).

It is plain that their eventual departure for Buenos Aires is an escape from the self, rather than a Graustarkian ending to The Trail of the Hawk.

In his role of lover, Carl bristles with jealousy at the presence of rivals. His friend Ben Rusk and Dr. Doyle, the dentist, had contended for the affection of Gertie Cowles in Joralemon, to Carl's discomfiture. Carl's

attentions to Eve L'Ewysse had to compete with the claims of actor Parker Heye. Phil Dunleavy represents the challenger for Ruth's love. Lewis disposes of the Hawk's rivals mainly by sketching them as ineffectual, straw antagonists. Token opposition suffices to enhance the hero's image, and to enlarge his claims for affection and fame; he must be alone in his glory. It is also noteworthy that Carl had no siblings at home to compete for parental attention. Ben ("Fatty") Rusk comes close to playing the role of brother in the Hawk's early days. Mark Schorer has perceptively noted Lewis's transfer of many of his own boyhood liabilities to Ben, the doctor's son who goes away to Oberlin to study medicine, while Carl participates in many activities actually performed by Claude Lewis.

Forrest Haviland fills the older-brother role for Carl much as Lieutenant Adeler did for Hike Griffin. Haviland represents the self-assured, disciplined, and cultivated American gentleman that the Hawk aspires to be, even though Carl is a "star" and "the coolest flier" at the Bagby School. It is on a visit to Haviland's home at San Spirito Presidio that Carl encounters a highly civilized style of living, and has his first romantic vision of becoming a personage. Carl's plans to take a trip to Brazil with Forrest are dashed when the lieutenant dies in an air accident. His spirit continues to hover over Carl through the rest of the book. Ruth later becomes Hawk's companion on the voyage to South America.

Authority and father figures loom in several roles. Carl's natural father, Oscar Ericson, is a dour, methodical man. The son seems to fear him, preferring to keep his distance. Several allusions to Carl's correspondence with his father remind one that Sinclair Lewis wrote faithfully to Dr. E. J. until his sire died. Pride fills Carl's attitude toward his father's pioneering achievements; "His carpenter father had come from Norway, by way of steerage and a farm in Wisconsin, changing his name from Ericson" (p. 7). The fact that his father had been born in Christiania beyond the sea gives added weight to the boy's wanderlust as a sort of pioneering-in-reverse. But a kind of retributive resentment flashes out early in Carl's sorties from home. As the boy waits to take Gertie on their oft-remembered hike through the woods, Carl was

planning the number of parrots and pieces of eight he would bring back from San Francisco. Then his father and mother would be sorry they'd talked about him in their Norwegian! (pp. 13-14).

"Punishing" one's parents by running away is implicitly a self-destructive and hostile act, paralleling the Hawk's later threats to go flying again, after his conflicts with Ruth. Oscar Ericson does seem to exude criticism and disapproval. He accuses Carl of being extravagant at Plato (p. 60); he complains that his son is not punctual at supper, that being a track star will earn him no money (p. 71). During his "adventuring," Carl writes "proudly"

to his father when enclosing a "little check," as if in a reproach.

For the first time since he had deserted college he had been able to write to his father, to answer the grim carpenter's unspoken criticisms of the son who had given up his chance for an "education" (p. 154).

The crisis of his leaving Plato had prompted Carl to write to Bone Stillman "as a man who had dared," and "to his mother--his mammy he wistfully called her. To his father he could not write" (p. 123). Carl feared the opinion of that practical man. Later, however, after Carl had enrolled in the Bagby flying school, he felt vindicated.

Then proudly he wrote to his father that the lost boy had found himself. For the first time in all his desultory writing of home-letters he did not feel impelled to defend himself (p. 166).

This desire to curry his father's good opinion, tied as it is with Carl's choice of a vocation, indicates a powerful longing for acceptance, which should not ordinarily have afflicted an only child, one without rivals for affection, as Carl purports to be. Here seems a clear instance of Lewis's transfer of his own anxieties to the emotional behavior of his protagonist, at a time when these feelings are not really consistent with the Hawk's heroic pretensions. In this case it appears that the author is doing a self-dramatization: Carl Ericson is another one of the many roles of Harry Lewis.

Rather than appeasing Oscar, Carl finds it more expedient to appeal for the regard of father-substitutes,

simply by aping their opinions and tastes. Bone Stillman and Henry Frazer are two such surrogates. If the carpenter is Carl's link to a tradition in blood and bone, Stillman and Frazer are his preceptors in an intellectual and humanitarian tradition. As Carl's spiritual father, Stillman is the first of the Populist-style prairie radicals, like Miles Bjornstam in Main Street, who crop in in Lewis's novels. From the time he first rescued Carl from wandering in the woods with Gertie, Bone had urged the boy to question the assumptions and values of a conformist society, and indoctrinated him with a rough belief in socialism. It is diverting to note that Carl, like some of Lewis's other characters, wears this socialism like another role or heroic accoutrement, a sort of red flag that he can wave to distinguish himself, apart from the crowd. But it is hardly ever more than a label; when Carl enters business and marriage, he becomes a capitalist. Lewis permits Stillman to exhibit several roles by attributing a variety of occupations to the "lone old bachelor farmer": rumor says that Bone has been a "sailor or a policeman, a college professor or a priest, a forger or an embezzler," and he assumed the place of "Carl's Froebel and Montessori" (pp. 22, 25). Later it is said that Stillman has become "some kind of a forest ranger or mine inspector" (p. 232). But these role-attributions are really superfluous. They pretend to furnish Stillman with qualifications for making oracular statements of the

rugged-individualism sort, which could as well have been uttered by Theodore Roosevelt or Andrew Carnegie.

"Don't forget this, son: nothing outside of you can ever hurt you. It can chew up your toes, but it can't reach you. Nobody but you can hurt you" (p. 25)

"Life is just a little old checker 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. . . . And anything or anybody that doesn't pack any surprises--get that?--surprises for you, is dead, and 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 in the Himalayas" (p. 50).

Lewis suggests that Stillman's treatment of Carl "as a grown-up friend was one of the most powerful of the intangible influences which were to push him toward the great world outside of Joralemon" (p. 25). These harangues are not particularly iconoclastic, but they provide a plausible rationale for Carl's periodic bursts of risk-taking, masked as righteous nonconformity and the joy of wandering.

Carl meets Professor Frazer through the offices of shy, bookish Eugene Field Linderbeck, who, as Schorer has remarked, resembles the way Lewis really was as a student. Henry Frazer has a master's degree from Yale, and is inspired "with a consuming love for his work, which was the saving of souls by teaching Lycidas and Comus. . . . It was whispered about that he believed in socialism . . . " (p. 67). Through this cultural missionary Carl is introduced to books, especially to the works of the trinity Shaw, Wells, and Ibsen. But again the hero's attachment

to his idol is far less one of congruent intelligence than it is an emotional fascination with a man who was persecuted as an outsider, next to whom Carl could appear as a martyr. Throughout his wanderings that follow Carl's resignation from Plato in sympathy for the professor, the degradation of his various occupations represents another form of pathetic martyrdom for a Cause. Lewis links Carl's intellectual fathers in a passage which affects to show that his hero was learning a socialistic type of humility.

If Carl had never stood in the bread-line, if he had never been compelled to clean a saloon gutter artistically, in order to keep from standing in that bread-line, he would surely have gone back to the commonplaceness for which every one except Bone Stillman and Henry Frazer had been assiduously training him all his life. . . . Carl did not at the time feel that he was debased (p. 152).

Why it is preferable to be commonplace in the Bowery rather than in Joralemon is not especially clear. Ex machina Lewis saves both the Hawk and Frazer for further triumphs, however. The latter earns a doctor's degree and becomes a professor of English literature at Yale, an endeavor which Lewis once seriously considered for himself.

Other incidental characters which reflect the author by name only are "Dr. St. Claire, so refined and sympathetic," whom Gertie Cowles consults for her nerves, and the actress "Miss L'Ewysse" with whom Carl learns melodramatic love. Thus, Lewis's little museum of family proxies is complete, with ego substitute, a choice of

mother-wives, father figures, brother-friends and rivals, and namesakes.

Key passages of emotional intensity, where Lewis seems to be breathing over his protagonist's shoulder, emerge where Carl plays the role of an actor for the tent show, and in the outdoor camping scenes. Hike Griffin and Mr. Wrenn were also yeomen actors and campers, as well as compulsive travelers. Like Hike's also is Carl's almost manic jubilation in first flight, and his awareness of a staring audience.

He exulted at the swiftness with which a distant group of trees shot at him, under him. . . . The machine obeyed perfectly. And the foot-bar, for steering to right and left, responded to such slight motions of his foot. He grinned exultantly. He wanted to shout.

He glanced at the barometer and discovered that he was up to two hundred feet. Why not go on?

He sailed out across San Mateo, and the sense of people below, running and waving their hands, increased his exultation (pp. 171-172).

This emotional scene is crucial. It shows how the hero, flooded with euphoria and gratification at mastery of a highly individual skill, disregards his special instructions and improvises like a daring innovator. He takes enormous risks--people are watching--and he almost kills himself: the plane engine stops, but he pilots the dead aircraft to a landing with only a minor accident. Yet he has seized glory before the eyes of his classmates and the newspaper reporters, and has won love, admiration and a new name, "an expression of fondness--Hawk Ericson, the cheeriest man in the school, and the coolest flier."

Another scene where death nudges the hero is the curious account of Carl's illness with typhoid. Structurally, this episode has little value except as a manufactured crisis to redirect attention to the hero, who has become bored with his adventure in business, and to intensify the love interest, which has grown stale. Emotionally, however, Carl's sickness represents another dramatic death threat, this time unsought, which allows the protagonist to be tragic and fussed over and loved, and which gives him psychological control over Ruth.

During convalescence Carl was so wearily gentle that she hoped the little boy she loved was coming back to dwell in him. But the Hawk's wings seemed broken. For the first time Carl was afraid of life.

. . .

One sweet drop was in their cup of iron. As woodland playmates they could never have known such intimacy as hovered about them when she rested her head lightly against his knees and they watched the Hudson . . .

He took to watching her like a solumn baby, when she moved about the room; thus she found the little boy Carl again; laughed full-throated and secretly cried over him, as his sternness passed into wistful obedience. He was not quite the same impudent boy whose naughtiness she had loved. But the good child who came in his place did trust her so, depend upon her so . . . (pp. 388-389).

When Ruth finally rejects her role as mother-wife to the boy hero with

"See here, my friend, you have been taking advantage for a long time now of the fact that you were ill. I'm not going to be your nurse indefinitely" (p. 392).

it is only a short while before Carl cracks another self-destructive whip over her head. His future in business is uncertain; the World War has begun.

He feverishly confessed that he had for many weeks wavered between hating the whole war and wanting to enlist in the British Aero Corps, to get life's supreme sensation--scouting ten thousand feet in air, while dozens of batteries fired at him . . .

Ruth fears this new, emergent personality.

The thinking Carl, the playmate Carl that Ruth knew, was masked as the foolhardy adventurer--and as one who was not merely talking, but might really do the thing he pictured (p. 398).

They disagree heatedly over future plans. Following their bitterest argument, he does not really apologize; Ruth is the one who yields, and for these distinct reasons:

" . . . Hawk, my Hawk, I lay awake nearly all last night realizing that we are one, not because of a wedding ceremony, but because we can understand each other's make-b'lieves and seriousnesses . . . " (p. 408).

Then reconciliation, and escape to South America for Galahad and his love aboard the S. S. Sangrael, or "Holy Grail."

It seems truismatic, of course, to point out that acts of bravery and heroism are intrinsically self-abnegating or suicidal. In Hawk Ericson's case, a reading of self-destructiveness appears consistent with Lewis's characterization of him as a rebel and a flyer. But such risk-taking is only part of a broader emotional configuration. The most persistent theme in The Trail of the Hawk is the stimulus-and-response of pain: escape. Lewis makes Carl go out of the way to seek pain, so that he may fashion escapes from responsibility and reality into

"adventures" of novelty and fantasy. Carl's motivating impulse seems not so much a search for identity as a wish to lose it, to eradicate the image of the back-yard boy from Joralemon, Minnesota, and to subsume it in a continuing parade of travels and roles. Role-playing is a means of disguising the hero while pretending to reveal him, in many occupations, in different locations, reflected in the faces of the men who are his friends and rivals, and in the eyes of the women who sigh for him. Carl scores quick triumphs, but he fears the success which would necessitate settling in one place or having to be one person. He fears the success of having children:

" . . . Look at all the young fathers of families, giving up everything they want to do, to support children who'll do the same thing right over again with their children. . . . There's nothing that our dear civilization punishes as it does begetting children. . . . if you have children they call it a miracle--as it is--and then they get busy and condemn you to a lifetime of being scared by the boss" (p. 407).

Furthermore, a child would be a perpetual rival for the boy hero's claims for exclusive rights to the mother's affection. Carl has not really been successful at anything. His triumphs in flying have been by chance or by default, when his competitors dropped out. His courtship with Ruth was distinguished mainly by a persistent and grim intensity. His achievement with the Touricar company was not spectacular. It seems, in conclusion, that Sinclair Lewis had no personal vision of success by which he could guide his hero, except his proficiency in

imagining the different roles a hero could portray. Carl's striving to feel worthy and his persistent cultivation of the martyr's part undermine his claims to lofty, hawklike heroism. In 1915, the hues of Lewis's "many-colored spectacle of life" were obviously somber.

The theme of flying as an ego-compensating fantasy in domination and power shines in The Trail of the Hawk as it did in Hike and the Aeroplane. Hawk Ericson is Hike Griffin almost grown up--essentially the same young businessman with one bright idea--and a little less melodramatic. But the author's ill-concealed identification with the protagonist, the essentially fragmented characterizations, and the inconclusiveness of plot and theme in The Trail of the Hawk, indicate that the basic fault of the book is Sinclair Lewis's inability to see himself as a successful, mature man. Confronted with three faces of danger, he could only think of escape.

CHAPTER V

THE JOB: IMMURED IN THE CITY

Lewis's attitudes toward society and success appear to have shifted somewhat, if the content of his next novel, The Job, is a trustworthy vector. His implicit faith in the nobility of mankind under socialism has receded, and a new apology for free-enterprise capitalism has supplanted the old idea. Perhaps it is more accurate to state that Lewis's views had more widely polarized, for while his protagonist, Una Golden, pursues success and happiness through dedication to the true American business spirit, the romantic charm of a socialist idyll hovers near like a wistful fantasy. The exigencies of his new, married life, especially the need for a frank assessment of his wage-earning future, may have prompted Lewis's relinquishment of schemes less practical than hard work.

He was already diligently at work on The Job by the time The Trail of the Hawk reached the public. Lewis had begun his third full-fledged novel in mid-summer, 1915, at Port Washington, and carried the manuscript with him during his travels south to Charleston, Savannah and St. Augustine.

During these months he supported himself by writing short stories, including "The Innocents," which he would later expand into his fourth novel. He took his early pages to Chicago while he researched the real estate business, developed more of the story on a visit to his family at Sauk Centre, and completed The Job in Duluth, in the early days of an extended trip west with Grace, a trip which would furnish many ideas for the future Free Air. Harper and Brothers received typescript of The Job early in August, 1916, and published the book on February 23 of the next year.

Always more a novelist of attitudes and reactions than one of impressive ideas, Lewis affects a feminist façade in the handling of themes now familiar in his earlier work: discontent with the prevailing environment leads at first to despair, then to experimentation with a new mode of life, and finally to a revival and rededication to the old, but on the individual's own terms, with assurances of a higher income, more cultivated tastes, and the sense of identity one derives from success in business and in love. The Job: An American Novel is dedicated to "My Wife who has made 'The Job' possible and life itself quite beautifully improbable." Grace Lewis confessed that she "had dug back into my mind for all my reactions to my own job days" while her husband wrote, and that she deplored the "unreal, unconvincing happy ending" he

permitted to stand in the book.¹ Mark Schorer records Lewis's inscription to his wife (though she omits mention of this dedication in her memoir), representing himself as the "supposed author" and her as "the real author";² this is, of course, mere courtly role-swapping, as equivocal as his use of the word "improbable" in the dedication.

The fundamental emotional contact points and organizing principles in the novel are Lewis's, however, not his wife's. It appears that the author cast his wife as a resource person, or a repository of authentic detail seen from a woman's point of view, much in the same way he was to cultivate friendships later on in his research for Arrowsmith and Elmer Gantry. She represented a rose-tinted mirror in which he could ponder his own experiences. Una Golden, for example, is another small-town yearner who suffers cultural shock after immersion in city life. Her determination to master this environment, and to develop a vigorous identity in terms of her job, rather than in spite of it, reflects Sinclair Lewis's ambition to be independent in the writing business. In Lewis's fiction it is a convention that characters become personifications of their jobs; in the end it seems that the job seeks the personality, rather than the reverse. Recognition of this assumption on Lewis's part is significant, because it

¹With Love from Gracie, p. 109.

²Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 245.

accounts for his proclivity toward the stereotyped character, and the limited scope of the jobs one can see these people actually performing in his fiction. Lewis prefers to describe occupations which require limited technical skill, but with just enough expertise and specialized jargon to confirm an impression of great individual proficiency. But his most reliable portraits are of people with jobs as talkers, as purveyors of services, and therefore, ingratiating performers for audiences--waiters, salesmen, hotel-keepers, real estate agents, actors, clerks--in short, players of roles. Consequently, to evince plausible character development in a novel, a protagonist must continue to change his role-occupation. This Lewis causes Una Golden to do in The Job. His seeming inability, however, to depict work as actual physical labor instead of word generating and role playing, was at the root of his frustration over a novel about the organized labor movement. That kind of job orientation, apparently, was not within Lewis's conceptual repertoire.

If Lewis makes any social statement in The Job, it is that the worth of a human being derives from the extent to which he is his own master in an occupation that he can tolerate. Monotonous jobs threaten loss of identity when workers accept the politics, fatigue and routine of office life. Losing one's job, though, is tantamount to extinction. Marriage as an occupation can be successful

only if one finds the proper role to play. Feminism and socialism are badges the heroine may wear occasionally, but they are qualities Lewis attributes to Una to provide ostensible motivating power for her rise in the capitalistic society, not because she is an activist or a social philosopher. Throughout The Job Una's behavior is simply courageous and pragmatic. Her desires are the same as Lewis's aspirations in 1916.

The plot of The Job follows Una Golden's lifetime from her young womanhood and the death of her father in Panama, Pennsylvania, until she achieves a responsible executive position with an expanding hotel chain. David J. Dooley sees Una as "a feminine Horatio Alger character,"³ but she is really another aspect of Harry Lewis, groping for happiness through a search for a suitable identity or role. "Feminism" is merely a way of explaining why Una acts more like men than other office girls do, so that Lewis could identify with his protagonist more easily. Little that is significant in the novel really depends upon Una's being female, and in this sense Dooley is correct. Her marriage with Eddie Schwirtz seems an inconvenient interlude in her campaign to achieve financial independence, and hints of her future relationship with Walter Babson make marriage and baby sound like avocations ancillary to the main business of life. But corresponding to the Lewis

³The Art of Sinclair Lewis, p. 41.

pattern, Una finds an identity and emotional fulfillment in jobs which require talking--to real estate clients and hotel men. Lewis also speaks and acts through Walter Babson, who bears some similarities to Martin Priest and Charley Carpenter, the novelist's earlier creations. To a certain extent he also plays the role of Eddie Schwartz. These three masks of Lewis, Una-Walter-Eddie, represent him as aspiring, artistic, and crude, as he was in real life. The best confirmation of this fact emerges in passages where Lewis lays aside his role of narrator and glides in behind the character's eyes and tongue, when there is no longer any distance between them, and the speech carries an extra measure of authority and conviction.⁴ Thus Lewis is able to play the three major parts, as if staging an argument with himself, a technique which he refined in his later novels, to exhibit a character at odds with his several selves over a decision or attitude to be adopted.

Structurally, Lewis had divided The Job into three parts: "The City," "The Office," and "Man and Woman." He had used three similar divisions in The Trail of the Hawk, but in Una's case the organization is in three concentric rings of intimacy, rather than three linear-time phases of "adventure." At the outset of The Job, Una has no clear individuality. Having been raised and educated in a small

⁴See, for examples, Una's speeches on pp. 300, 306-307; Walter's speech on pp. 104-105; and Eddie's on pp. 208-209 and 296 of The Job.

Pennsylvania town, she knows everyone there, and is known by them as Captain Golden's daughter. Since she is unmarried and unemployed, she can have no other identity. Una had tried schoolteaching and given it up, admitting that she neither "loved masses of other people's children nor had any ideals of developing the new generation."⁵ When she was twenty-four, Una's father died, leaving her in the role of wage earner for her mother and herself. She could have returned to teaching, or she could have married, but Una had no serious suitors except "old Henry Carson, the widower, with catarrh and three children," and so "crossed blessed matrimony off the list as a commercial prospect" (p. 11). Lack of success in finding other employment makes Una desperate, almost hysterical. She can not bear the prospect of being trapped in the routines of village life. Lewis injects this animus in a characteristic transition passage, where a subject's values receive new focus and assessment:

She was so frightfully bored. She suddenly hated the town, hated every evening she would have to spend there, reading newspapers and playing cards with her mother, and dreading a call from Mr. Henry Carson (p. 13).

A chance letter from acquaintances in New York provides enough motivation for escape. They will move to a flat in the great city, where Una will study stenography and "learn to be a business woman." Perhaps it is stretching

⁵ Sinclair Lewis, The Job p. 10.

credulity to show a young woman, represented as "not pretty, not noisy, not particularly articulate" and "pleasant, inconspicuous, fluffy-haired . . . undramatic as a field daisy," capable of acting on impulse to choose a new home and new occupation within minutes. But Una is "naturally able to size up people and affairs," and she is a "matter-of-fact idealist." Lewis apparently felt that these qualities sufficed to carry his heroine forward toward success, because she does not really develop any others. Una's battle is not so much against "the job" as it is against the inertia of humanity and its collective dwelling, whether town or metropolis. In The Job Lewis has dramatized Una's problem of discovering an acceptable occupational role identity while she is immured in the city and threatened with annihilation. Her sex roles are obviously of secondary importance.

Una's first occupation in New York is that of student at Whiteside and Schleusner's College of Commerce, where she pursues her courses with enthusiasm and vigor. Lewis points out that opportunity has uncovered hidden potential in his heroine, aptitude which might otherwise have been unrecognized.

Panama, Pennsylvania, had never regarded Una as a particularly capable young woman. . . . But she had been well spoken of as a marketer, a cook, a neighbor. . . . She was more practical than either Panama or herself believed. All these years she had, without knowing that she was philosophizing, without knowing

that there was a world-wide inquiry into woman's place, been trying to find work that needed her (pp. 24-25).

Unconsciously, Lewis argues, Una has become a feminist.

After graduation she finds a position in the offices of the Motor and Gas Gazette, where she encounters the talented and erratic Walter Babson, a sub-editor, and becomes his "regular stenographer." His special name for her is "Goldie," and she falls in love with his boyish enthusiasm and with his expressive hands. Abruptly, however, Walter accepts another job in Omaha, saying that for various reasons he cannot marry her. Una works briefly for the advertising manager, S. Herbert Ross, then loses her job in an economizing staff cut.

Una went through all the agony of not being wanted even in the prison she hated. No matter what the reason, being discharged is the final insult in an office, and it made her timid as she began wildly to seek a new job (p. 109).

Her next situation is that of chief stenographer for Troy Wilkins, an architect. The tedium and squalor of his office find symbolic expression in the horrid rag used to scrub floors, which hung under the wash basin in the women's room. After more than two years with Wilkins and the scrub-rag in the Septimus Building, Una leaves to join the staff of Pemberton's, "the greatest manufactory of drugs and toilet articles in the world." Lewis tries to explain her hatred of the architect's office and her unwillingness to stay longer.

In this refusal there may have been a trace of aspiration. Otherwise the whole affair was a hodge-podge of petty people and ignoble motives--of Una and Wilkins and S. Herbert Ross . . .

who is an updated Guilfogle from the days of Mr. Wrenn, the advertising executive from the Motor and Gas Gazette, soon to be Una's boss at Pemberton's . . .

of fifteen dollars a week, and everybody trying to deceive everybody else; of vague reasons for going, and vaguer reasons for letting Una go, and no reason at all for her remaining . . .

So long as her world was ruled by chance, half-training and lack of clear purpose, how could it be other than a hodge-podge? (p. 221)

Before starting work for the drug company, Una spends a two-week interval assisting with a new filing system at the Jewish business firm of Herzfeld and Cohn's, dealers in iron beds. There "Una had a glimpse of the almost beautiful thing business can be." Lewis's point is that working conditions were enjoyable under the kindly administration of these two old patriarchs, because they found it possible to be humanitarians as well as businessmen.

Pemberton's, in contrast, is a "new-fashioned, scientific, efficient business institution" housed in a "modern, glazed-brick palace." Its policies develop from strict adherence to economic principles, not from compassion for mankind, as one might expect of a drug company. Some of its products are actually harmful. Lewis, whose own face was badly blemished, writes bitterly:

It has been calculated that ninety-three million women in all parts of the world have ruined their complexions, and, therefore, their souls, by Pemberton's creams and lotions for saving the same . . . (p. 223).

Ironically Lewis hails Mr. Pemberton as "the Napoleon of patent medicines" and of "drugs used by physicians to cure the effects of patent medicine"; the "Shakespeare of ice-cream sodas, and the Edison of hot-water bags. . . . He is a modern Allah." In charge of promoting Pemberton's wares, at a salary of fifteen thousand dollars a year, is that "gorgeous fraud," S. Herbert Ross. Una Golden, now twenty-eight years old, becomes Ross's secretary.

Through her eyes, Lewis inspects the petty caste distinctions, the pressure of fear and hysteria on menial office workers, the cruelty of efficiency experts, and the flim-flam psychology of advertising in the Pemberton company. In an exposé style he derides the hypocrisy underlying this sort of commerce, but he is equally harsh with the lonely employees who acquiesce to its arbitrary management of their lives. Apparently representing Lewis's view, Una reflects that a better social age will not arrive

so long as the workers accepted the testimony of paid spokesmen like S. Herbert Ross to the effect that they were contented and happy, rather than the evidence of their own wincing nerves to the effect that they lived in a polite version of hell. . . . She was more and more certain that the workers weren't discontented enough; that they were too patient with lives insecure and tedious (p. 236).

Una feels a desire to "get to the top" herself, but "without unduly kicking the shrieking mass of slaves

beneath her, as the bright young men learned to do." But when faced with Ross's belief that "you can't change human nature," Una wavers in her resolve, and becomes at heart "a shawled Irish peasant, or a muzhik lost in the vastness of the steppes; a creature elemental and despairing" (p. 236). At last the punishment of the office environment proves unbearable, and Una glimpses an escape in marriage to Julius Edward Schwirtz, now a salesman for the Aetna Automobile Varnish and Wax Company.

As the wife of a traveling salesman, Una is able to view another facet of the business complex--the job of retail sales which depends on the competitiveness of the product and the winning personality of the salesman. Should either or both of these qualities fail, as they do for Eddie Schwirtz, there is no security for the salesman's family. When Una's relationship with Eddie has broken down completely, she secures another job, through the efforts of her friend Mamie Magen, with the real estate agency of Truax and Fein.

Una works diligently as confidential secretary to Mr. Truax. After the terrors of dependency on Schwirtz, she has revised her opinion of the opportunities to be seized in business.

Here, too, she saw nine hours of daily strain aging slim girls into skinny females. But now her whole point of view was changed. Instead of looking for the evils of the business world, she was desirous of seeing in it all the blessings she could; and, without ever losing her belief that it could be made more

friendly, she was, nevertheless, able to rise above her own personal weariness and see that the world of jobs, offices, business, had made itself creditably superior to those other muddled worlds of politics and amusement and amorous Schwirtzes (p. 280).

Finding bane or blessing in business depends greatly on one's predisposition to find it, apparently. Optimistic though this passage may be, Lewis comes perilously close to neutralizing the poignancy of his social statements in The Job, and exposing himself as a mere manipulator of attitudes, by allowing Una to conclude like Lucifer that after all, "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." Confidently she asks for a chance to sell some choice real estate to an indecisive client. Success in this venture leads to more responsibility for Una, first as a consultant with women buyers, then as a regular salesman, and a salaried executive with other women under her direction.

Una's last change of occupation, the one that reunites her with Walter Babson, is the least convincing. As a pretext for her resignation from Truax and Fein, Lewis concocts an atmosphere of strain, attributed to "Mr. Truax's unwillingness to accept women as independent workers and . . . the growing animosity of Mrs. Truax" (p. 315). Una discovers a sudden fascination for hotel management, reads periodicals about the business, and develops some remarkable revolutionary ideas about innkeeping in a short time. More astonishing is the

assurance with which she bluffs her way into the confidence of Mr. Bob Sidney, partner in the White Line hotel syndicate. With nothing more than effrontery, a businesslike appearance and some well-prepared research and statistics, Una creates a job for herself as a general manager of Sidney's company, at a salary of four thousand dollars. Thus, at the end of Chapter XXIII, Una faces the same dilemma which had confronted her years ago in Panama, Pennsylvania: will she continue to press for upward mobility by improving on the Job, or will she surrender to Love, Marriage (this time to Walter), and possibly a Child? If Grace Lewis's memoir is accurate, this job-or-family conflict is remarkably similar to Sinclair Lewis's problem in the early years of their marriage.⁶

Throughout her changes in job roles, Una remains essentially a static character endowed with a conscientious attitude toward work and a sense of fair play. The main development is in the size of her salary, submitted as incontestable proof that women can be successful in business. But events in the novel seem merely to happen to Una, a Pilgrim in her progress toward the Celestial City of Success. The death of her mother, the affection of Walter Babson, even her marriage to Eddie Schwirtz, seem like melodramatic incidents beside Una's steady push toward

⁶"My book and my love. But not together. The book came first and it always would." With Love from Gracie, p. 46.

the four thousand dollar salary. It is apparent that Lewis's close identification with Una's aims, at a time when he was struggling for financial security, made him rely heavily on the job-role mode of characterization. Further, it is surprising to realize that Una survives in the memory not primarily as a worker, but as an observer and reporter of the details of office business. In these capacities Una Golden is a representation of the plodding, workaday Lewis, far down the ladder of success.

In her roles as a lover, Una has demonstrated practicality over passion. She will not accept the widower, Henry Carson, of Panama, and she discourages J. J. Todd from the commercial school, because neither has anything to offer her. Without ever proposing, Walter Babson dismisses the possibility of marrying her because she is too conservative and too provincial, while he has not found a job that pays well enough; but from his elaborate lecturing and apologizing, it is evident that Babson is terrified by his own passion. Though she is roused by his kisses and awed by his impulses, Una is unable to marry a man who runs away to Omaha, while she must remain in New York to support her mother.

Following Mrs. Golden's sudden death from pneumonia, Una moves to a small room on Lexington Avenue, where one of the boarders, a quack bone-manipulating doctor named Fillmore J. Benson, pays her some crude attentions.

At first Una is "disgusted" by Phil Benson, but gradually allows herself to be impressed by his recitation of "Snow Bound": "She fancied that Phil's general pea-weevil aspect concealed the soul of a poet," although the landlord considered him a "human phonograph." Phil beguiles Una with compliments and talk of "higher things."

The absurd part of it was that, at least while he was talking, Mr. Phil Benson did believe what he was saying, though he had borrowed all of his sentiments from a magazine story about hobohemians which he had read the night before.⁷

He also spoke of reading good books, seeing good plays, and the lack of good influences in this wicked city.

.
She was finding in his loud impudence a twisted resemblance to Walter Babson's erratic excitability, and that won her, for love goes seeking new images of the god that is dead (pp. 145-146).

If Phil reminds Una of Walter, who already resembles Sinclair Lewis in some particulars, the little fake doctor also represents a self-deprecatory sketch of the author, in his habits and appearance: "an underbred maverick, with sharp eyes of watery blue, . . . large teeth, and no chin worth noticing" (p. 143). Phil escorts Una to a Lithuanian restaurant, presses her to drink some sherry. She had smiled condescendingly as some tourists "from the Middle West filed into the restaurant and tried to act as though they were used to cocktails," and Phil had joined her conspiratorially in some tough-guy play-acting, to impress

⁷ Lewis's short story "Hobohemia" appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, April 7, 1917.

the rubbernecks. But now Una recoils uneasily from Benson's "tactics," and flees hysterically from the table, imagining his design to make her drunk. Late that evening Phil tries to capitalize on her loneliness, luring her downstairs to a couch in the dining room, where he makes some sly advances. Now Una finds him unbearable. Sneering that he is a "gutter-rat," she escapes to her room, vowing to herself,

" . . . I'm through! No one can get me just because of curiosity about sex again. I'm free. I can fight my way through in business and still keep clean" (p. 154).

Again, practicality triumphs over the flesh.

Loneliness, and the ferocious atmosphere at Pemberton's drive Una to desperation, however. She turns to the available Eddie Schwirtz for rest and refuge in marriage, and stumbles into a labyrinth of horror. On their honeymoon, Schwirtz takes possession of her like an insensitive beast. He has no manners, no taste. His conduct is that of a braying-ass sensualist. Una is terrified.

But she tried to keep the frenzy out of her voice. The frenzy was dying, as so much of her was dying. She hadn't realized a woman can die so many times and still live. Dead had her heart been at Pemberton's, yet it had secreted enough life to suffer horribly now, when it was again being mauled to death (p. 247).

Her role as wife she maintains with mute martyrdom, reproaching herself occasionally for being over-critical of Eddie's grossness. But she discovers that her own standards of behavior have deteriorated under the influence of this man. She views her life "as a ruined

thing; her birthright to aspiring cleanness sold for a mess of quick-lunch pottage" (p. 257).

She thought of suicide, often, but too slow and sullen was her protest for the climax of suicide. . . . Oftener she thought of a divorce. Of that she had begun to think even on the second day of her married life (p. 258).

As conditions worsen, and Eddie loses his employment, Una goes back to a job, and begins her career with Truax and Fein. When she prospers in the real estate business, her friendship with Mr. Fein moves him to propose marriage.

She had refused him for two reasons--that she already had one husband somewhere or other, and the more cogent reason that . . . she did not love him, did not want to mother him, as she had always wanted to mother Walter Babson . . . (p. 313).

Now, at age thirty-four in the autumn of 1915, Una considers adopting a child, but when Walter Babson reappears as her subordinate in the hotel company, he seems to be a most satisfactory substitute. As is the case with William Wrenn, her sexual obverse in the world of business offices, Una learns that success in love must be sustained by a sense of personal worth and confidence derived from satisfaction with the Job.

Repeating the technique he had used with Mr. Wrenn and Carl Ericson, Lewis invests Una with bit roles and fantasies, to add some perspective to her essentially two-dimensional character. Many of her self-dramatizations hint of associations with men, as in Una's idealized dream of business activity in the city.

There would be no dusty winds in New York, but only mellow breezes over marble palaces of efficient business. No Henry Carsons, but slim, alert business men, young of eye and light of tongue (p. 17).

Una's acting skill, evident in the scene with Phil at the restaurant, had made her aware of the ease with which old Henry Carson could have been induced to offer marriage.

He

would propose whenever she encouraged him to. This she knew scientifically. She had only to sit beside him on the sofa, let her hand drop down beside his (p. 11).

Una does give encouragement to Eddie Schwartz, on the other hand, by playing her part faultlessly.

She dressed very carefully. She did her hair in a new way.

When Mr. Schwartz came she cried that she couldn't go to a show. She was "clean played out." She didn't know what she could do. Pemberton's was too big a threshing-machine for her. She was tired--"absolutely all in."

"Poor little sister!" he said, and smoothed her hair. . . .

She was married to Mr. Schwartz about two weeks later (pp. 244-245).

She uses similar strategy to win over Bob Sidney to her business proposition.

Una rose at six-thirty next morning, to dress the part of the great business woman, and before she went to the office she had her hair waved.

. . . Thanks to rice powder and the pride of a new hat, she looked cool and adequate. But she was thinking all the time: "I never could keep up this . . . pose with Mr. Fein or Mr. Ross. Poor Una,"

she adds, imagining her other self, dissociatively,

"with them she'd just have to blurt out that she wanted a job!" (pp. 319-320)

Other dissociations phase in and out of her thoughts, as when she spends a holiday shopping for a new dress to brighten up her sense of identity:

There were a score of mild matter-of-fact Unas on the same elevated train with her, in their black hats and black jackets and black skirts with white waists . . . faces slightly sallow or channeled with care, but eyes that longed to flare with love; . . . women who would have given their salvation for the chance to sacrifice themselves for love (p. 115).

Again, when returning from vacation in the Berkshires, she nurses the illusion that "New York and the business world simply couldn't be the same old routine, because she herself was different."

The office was different, she cried--cried to that other self who had sat in a train and hoped that the office would be different (p. 216).

But the ghastly, gray scrub-rag is still in the washroom. Nothing has changed. The sense of having been another person, far away on a holiday, is characteristic of Lewis's role-and-place transformation pattern.

" . . . Oh, Lord! I really am back here. Same old hot streets. Don't believe there are any Berkshires; just seems now as though I hadn't been away at all" (p. 217).

Una's most vivid fantasies spring up out of her relationship with Walter Babson. During her first spring in the city, she finds herself "wanting to tramp the Palisades with--with the Walter Babson who didn't even know her first name" (p. 66). Eventually, Lewis contrives a wish-fulfillment sequence. Walter escorts her to dinner at a restaurant near those Palisades, then leads Una on a

restless ramble at the base of the cliffs, near the Hudson. In the dark at the margin of the river, Walter turns to suggest, "I wish we could go swimming."

She shivered to find herself imagining the unimaginable--that she might throw off her stodgy office clothes, her dull cloth skirt and neat blouse, and go swimming beside him, revel in giving herself up to the utter frankness of cool water laving her bare flesh (p. 103).

But no, the impulse must be denied. Despite Walter's excited arguments, she reverts to "good little Una," the girl from Panama.

Earlier, she had imagined the joy of having a baby, "a boy like Walter must have been--to nurse and pet and cry over!" After Walter leaves the Gazette office forever, Una reflects tragically, "Now I sha'n't ever have a baby that would be a little image of him" (p. 108). She engineers a picnic with friends near the remebered place at the Palisades, and disappears for a time.

She sat alone by the river. Suddenly, with a feverish wrench, she bared her breast, then shook her head angrily, rearranged her blouse, went back to the group, and was unusually gay, though all the while she kept her left hand on her breast, as though it pained her (p. 108).

This theme of passion by the water echoes again during Una's holiday escape from the office. In a department store music section, a piano tune had sent her off pretending "that she had a sweetheart, that with him she was a-roving," and that "the imaginary man" was like Walter Babson. Then, in a movie theater,

Una longed for a love-scene on the motion-picture screen . . . the love scene did appear, in a picture of a lake shore with a hotel porch . . . and a young hero with wavy black hair, who dived for the lady and bore her out when she fell out of a reasonably safe boat. The actor's wet, white flannels clung tight about his massive legs; he threw back his head with masculine arrogance, then kissed the lady. Una was dizzy with that kiss. She was shrinking before Walter's lips again (pp. 118-119).

Afterwards, Una admits to herself, "It's been exciting, running away . . . " Lewis has cleverly shown how watching another person give a deliberate performance (emphasized by his use of the tag words "hero" and "actor") induces not only simple identification in the viewer, but even independent role-playing in a fantasy echo, a palpable act of "running away."

Supplementing these dramatics, which Lewis uses to add dimension to his heroine, are images which reinforce suggestions of martyrdom and sexual persecution. At the death of Mrs. Golden, Una grieves dramatically. "Her agony was a big, simple, uncontrollable emotion like the fanaticism of a crusader" (pp. 126-127). Now alone, she experiences a "half-hysterical fear of the city's power," epitomized in the phallic horror of the Subway.

Then, the train approaching, filling the tunnel, like a piston smashing into a cylinder; the shoving rush to get aboard. A crush that was ruffling and fatiguing to a man, but to a woman was horror.

Una stood with a hulking man pressing as close to her side as he dared, and a dapper clerkling squeezed against her breast. . . . Almost hysterically she resented this daily indignity, which smeared her clean, cool womanhood with a grease of noise and smell and human contact (pp. 134-135).

Later, when Una sees her husband escorting a "fluffy blonde" from the hotel opposite their flat, Lewis wraps her in a numb, almost fatalistic reaction to Eddie's cruelties: "She was spellbound in a strange apathy, as in a dream of swimming on forever in a warm and slate-hued sea" (p. 268). There is a self-destructive note in her resolution to find another job to escape the squalor of life with Eddie.

. . . she more and more invited an ambition to go back to work, to be independent and busy, no matter how weary she might become. To die, if need be, in the struggle. Certainly that death would be better than being choked in muck. . . .

Una stared at herself in the mirror over the bureau and said, aloud: "I don't believe it! It isn't you, Una Golden . . . you couldn't marry a man like that simply because the job had exhausted you. Why, you'd die at work first" (p. 271).

She sees herself in the role of a prostitute, exchanging sexual privileges for her "board and keep." These sentiments, added to her earlier thoughts of suicide (p. 258), seem somewhat incongruous for the girl who had considered herself "an Average Young Woman on a Job," and felt that she was "nothing in herself" (pp. 129-130). In her antipathy for all the values Schwirtz represents, Lewis has assumed attributes of refinement and taste in Una's character which she had not previously demonstrated, yet he denied her the insight into human nature which might have averted her tragic marriage. By being selective in the qualities he ascribes to Una, Lewis assures that her marrying will be an act of oblation.

This careful selectivity urges the conclusion that Lewis clipped and edited his characterization of Una carefully, but the appearances deceive. Lewis has taken a small-town girl, whose hopes for success are like his own, and posed her as a daughter, a student, a stenographer, a mother-wife, and a business executive. He has moved her residences many times, surrounded her in several settings with personages of lesser light, shown her reactions to the proffered affections of five different men, and revealed many of her interior roles and fantasies. But Una Golden does not speak and act for herself out of a personality that has heart, lungs, and bowels behind it. Nothing that she says or does is particularly remarkable; as a means of maintaining control Lewis relies on role-playing to decorate her banality. Even at last, when she succeeds as an executive, Una is admittedly bluffing and playing parts. Perhaps the fault is in Lewis's belief that there must be a fascinating tale in every person, if an author could amass enough facts about his subject, and probe, or reconstruct, the secret self. As he expresses it in The Job:

And indeed there was a whole novel, a story told and retold, in the girls' gossip about each of the men before whom they were so demure (p. 49).

One of these men who were talked about was Walter Babson, the adman who yearns to be a novelist and frequently resembles Harry Lewis.

Though Walter Babson appears as "a slender young man with horn-rimmed eye-glasses, curly black hair, and a trickle of black mustache," these adornments scarcely disguise that fitful fellow in his role as a representation of the creative and unstable bright-idea man, another face of Lewis.

He was twenty-seven years old when he met Una Golden. (Lewis was the same age when he met Grace Hegger in their common office building.) Babson (does his name suggest "baby son,"⁸ a recurring motif in the novel?) originates from the Midwest, and he has drifted through many states, tried an impressive number of occupational roles. The staff at the Motor and Gas Gazette regard him with mixed feelings.

He was at once a hero, clown, prodigal son, and preacher of honesty. It was variously said that he was a socialist, an anarchist, and a believer in an American monarchy . . . the quickest worker in the office, the best handy man at turning motor statistics into lively news stories (p. 50).

Babson longs to "quit and free-lance if I could break in with fiction, but a rotten bunch of log-rollers have got the inside track with all the magazines and book-publishers." He tries to bestow "some literary flavor" on their business-like trade publication, and he cheers a gloomy secretary by playing a breezy role: " . . . my name is Roosevelt, and I'm the new janitor." Lewis stipples Babson with more and

⁸See below, p. 179.

more fond detail. He is a "beloved fool," but an "eccentric waster"; he is something of a health-food nut, and reportedly drinks a great deal; in his desk drawers are assorted articles which bespeak the pathos of his bachelor existence. Most of all, Walter yearns to write, or at least "to be literary, to be a Bohemian." "His prose was clever but irregular; he wasn't always to be depended upon for grammar." Lewis treats Babson with more sympathy than ridicule, especially when reviewing his literary pretensions.

He felt that he was an author, though none of his poetry had ever been accepted, and though he had never got beyond the first chapter of any of his novels, nor the first act of any of his plays (which concerned authors who roughly resembled Walter Babson) (p. 60).

Lewis's recognition of this last literary tendency, of putting oneself into one's works as a character, suggests that he was not unaware of the extent to which Babson approximated himself. The following passage reveals this apprentice adman and author-within-an-author as not only erratic but at war with himself.

Literally, he hated himself at times; hated his own egotism, his treacherous appetite for drink and women and sloth, his imitative attempts at literature. But no one knew how bitterly he despised himself . . . To others he seemed vigorously conceited, cock-sure, noisily ready to blame the world for his own failures (p. 60).

Walter Babson is the son of a Kansas "farmer and horse-doctor." He had run away from school, traveled around the United States, to Alaska and Costa Rica, had associated with "hoboes, sailors, longshoremen, miners,

cow-punchers, lunch-room owners, and proprietors of small newspapers." At last he entered "Jonathan Edwards College, Iowa," and had adopted the habit of blaming everyone else, including his father, for whatever went badly. This rebelliousness was aggravated by his disappointment that, "at the age of twenty, his name was not appearing in large flattering capitals on the covers of magazines" (p. 63). Dismissed from the college, Walter had tried other occupational roles. "He doubted himself . . . he wanted to express himself without trying to find out what his self was." Now an outcast, he "didn't at all know what he wanted, but he wanted something stronger than himself," Lewis observes judiciously.

He was desperately lonely--a humorous figure who had dared to aspire beyond the manure-piles of his father's farm; therefore a young man to be ridiculed. And in his tragic loneliness he waited for the day when he should find any love, any labor, that should want him enough to seek him, and demand that he sacrifice himself (p. 65).

Lewis's knowing intimacy with Babson's case hints broadly at autobiographical confession. The general tone of these descriptions is one of commiseration, self-pity and narcissism, with strong overtones of hostility toward the rural origins, the father, and the self. His confident and talkative manner is clearly a bluff to conceal the essentially childish and dependent nature of his personality wedded to a defensively swollen and belligerent ego. There is no mention of possible brothers or sisters for

Walter. He shuns compliments, out of a sense of unworthiness, and describes himself as "merely a neurotic failure"; he casts Una as a "queen," and himself as a "jester," in the same manner that Sinclair Lewis "chose for himself the roles of Jacques the Jester and François the Troubadour who sang" to the Princess of Faraway, the Lady Grace, so well remembered by his first wife.⁹ Una's response to Walter is the same as Grace's to Lewis: "I knew I must give him courage, a confidence in his ability. He was a man whose talent I respected, he was also my child."¹⁰

As a lover, Walter Babson exhibits the peculiar pattern of scheming to be alone with a desirable woman, then choking himself off short of success, which characterized Mr. Wrenn and Hawk Ericson. He is self-effacing and apologetic about everything. Before asking permission to call on her, he confesses, "I'm no good; blooming waster, I told myself; and I wondered if I had any right to make you care . . . " Once having kissed Una, he directly suggests marriage, but in a way that would force her to initiate the proposal:

"Any time you'd like to marry me--I don't advise it, I guess I'd have good intentions, but be a darn poor hand at putting up shelves--but any time you'd like to marry me, or any of those nice, conventional things, just lemme know, will you? Not that it matters much" (p. 88).

⁹With Love From Gracie, p. 8.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 84.

They are "children of emotion," Lewis explains meaningfully.

Between them was the battle of desire and timidity . . . [Una] fancied sometimes that he was as much afraid as was she of debasing their shy seeking into unveiled passion. Yet his was the initiative . . . (p. 91).

Lewis shows solicitude for these "children of the city where there is no place for love-making." They must reconcile themselves to foreign-style food at various restaurants, and gallery seats at the theater. They have "real tea" together, and Walter sports a new walking-stick, perhaps as a prop to his teetering male ego. But only out in open nature, that is, the Palisades, can their passion find full expression. By themselves at the edge of the river, they know the thrill of contemplating a secret swim together, without daring to act upon it--a frustrating combination of bold proposition and triumphant virtue, both complimentary to the male who deprecates himself as a "nice little Y.M.C.A. boy." Inventing all sorts of excuses, Walter escapes from almost certain success with Una by accepting a job in Omaha. After having developed Walter Babson's character deeply and quickly by showing him as man and boy in a variety of roles and poses, Lewis whisks him away, "essentially clean and kindly" though Una's lover is, and only restores him in a patchy ending on the last three pages of The Job. Meanwhile Una, the incorporation of Lewis who strove to translate keen perceptions and new ideas into moneymaking business success, has

married Eddie Schwartz, the incarnation of commercial catastrophe.

Lewis's representation of Julius Edward Schwartz is not unsympathetic. The worst to be said of Eddie is that he has few manners, poor taste in clothing and language, and a mistakenly good opinion of himself. But the man is an illustration of what results when the good luck fades, the competition is ruthless, and when one insists on sustaining the lively life he can no longer afford. In more contemporary terms, Eddie would be called a loser. Lewis gives some of Schwartz's opinions and attitudes sympathetic handling, indicating that to a degree this salesman is a fear-portrait of Lewis as he suspected his wife may have seen him, symbolizing the nightmare of failure.

Una had met Eddie briefly at lunch while she was a student at the business school. Their intimate acquaintance began on the porch of an inn-farm in Massachusetts while they vacationed. Eddie appeared as a "heavy-shouldered, typical American business man, in derby hat and clipped mustache" with jowls, "an alert, solid man of about forty-five" (p. 189). She finds his hearty flippancy and joking manner diverting, thinks him not dull, but "the perfect summer man." As they talk, Una puts her companion under cultural scrutiny, discovers that he has some appreciation for Kipling, but that he prefers the "good old songs," or "something that's really got some

melody to it," far more than "symphony poems and all that long-haired stuff," which sounds like "a bunch of fiddles and flutes fighting out a piece by Vaugner like they was Kilkenny cats." Lewis did not appreciate opera, either, although Grace Lewis remembers his having escorted her to Tristan and Isolde. To refute the notion that salesman are "low-brows," Schwirtz counters,

"Just between you and I, I bet I knock down more good big, round, iron men every week than nine-tenths of these high-brow fiddlers--yes, and college professors and authors, too!"

Then Una prompts, idealistically,

"Yes, but you shouldn't make money your standard."

"Well, then, what are you going to make a standard?" asked Mr. Schwirtz, triumphantly (pp. 197-198).

This single-minded, practical question never receives an answer in The Job, primarily because Una adopts the money standard in her climb toward success and power.

Eddie may be sanctimonious in his opinion of what makes good, clean literature, but the story of his own life is straightforward and tinged with pathos. He had lived in the West Virginia hills as a boy, had a paper route, attended high school. His ambition to succeed had stranded him, destitute, in Columbus, Ohio, to find a job.

Mostly it was a story of dates and towns and jobs --the jobs he had held and jobs from which he had resigned, and all the crushing things he had said to the wicked bosses during those victorious resignings (p. 212).

He had married, but his wife and child died within a year of each other. His tale rouses Una's maternal impulses,

and Lewis shows her experiencing a typical shift in viewpoint which became such a serviceable technique for the novelist:

To her, now, Julius Edward Schwirtz was not a flabby-necked widower, but a man who mourned, who felt as despairingly as could Walter Babson the loss of the baby who had crowed over the bunny-book (p. 213).

Representation in the roles of struggling young businessman, husband, and father makes Eddie seem a victim of the cruelest fates. Further, the hint of self-destruction he reveals in reaction to his wife's death brings Una's sympathy rushing forth.

"My wife died a year later. I couldn't get over it; seemed like I could have killed myself when I thought of any mean thing I might have said to her . . . there wasn't anybody to write to, anybody that cared" (p. 213).

Lewis makes it clear that during these vacation scenes, both Eddie and Una are acting uncharacteristic parts. Schwirtz's patient attentiveness and deference mask his calculated stalk of the skittish prize. Una, for her role,

. . . developed feminine whims and desires. She asked Mr. Schwirtz to look for her handkerchief, and bring her a magazine, and arrange her chair cushions, and take her for a walk to "the Glade" (p. 202).

Eddie pointedly compares Una to his deceased wife--"Though you're really a lot brighter and better educated than what she was." After returning to the city, Una continues to see him. The following winter they are married, and take a wedding trip to Savannah (Lewis and his wife visited Savannah in late December, 1915, after he had said

"crushing things" to his "wicked boss" before a "victorious" resignation from the Doran Company).

Abruptly, Lewis shifts Una's point of view as she reacts with terror to the circumstances of marriage to Schwirtz.

Always she brooded about the unleashed brutality of their first night on the steamer, the strong, inescapable man-smell of his neck and shoulders, the boisterous jokes he kept telling her (p. 245).

.
[She] dreaded being alone with him; dreaded always the memory of that first cataclysmic night of their marriage; and mourned, as in secret, for year on year, thousands of women do mourn (p. 246).

The implication is that now Eddie's true and secret self has been exposed; he is a coarse-talking roughneck with a drummer's garish tastes. Now married to him, Una is sexually exploited, not chivalrously admired for beauty and intellect. Eddie had misled her about the amount of his savings; she was alarmed at his extravagances; and she "had not supposed that he drank so much."

As a salesman, apparently, Schwirtz is an accomplished role-player. On the day he is fired, Eddie stages a melodramatic homecoming.

As though he were a betrayed husband dramatically surprising her, Mr. Schwirtz opened the door, dropped a large suit-case, and stood, glaring (p. 263).

There follows a recitation of all his imagined persecutions, ending with his vow to confront the "old man" at the home office.

"Well, now I'll go down and spit the old man in the eye a couple o' times, and get canned, unless I can talk him out of his bad acting. Oh, I'll throw a big bluff. I'll be the little misunderstood boy . . . but I can't talk up the boss like I could once" (p. 265).

Then he remarks, in a self-destructive dissociation, "Well, I'm going down now and watch 'em gwillotine [sic] me" (p. 266). At times like these, cramped by his own financial mismanagement, Eddie rails against the capitalistic cut-throats, and threatens irrationally to "turn socialist." The effect of these blasts is to ridicule notions, held by malcontents and incompetents, that socialism would provide speedy remedies to the inequities of the capitalistic, competitive system, especially in view of Eddie's earlier lectures about socialists as

" . . . just a lazy bunch of bums that try and see how much trouble they can stir up. They think that just because they're too lazy to find an opening, that they got the right to take the money away from the fellas that hustle around and make good. Trouble with all these socialist guys is that they don't stop to realize that you can't change human nature" (p. 208).

Unemployed, stripped of his occupational role, Eddie is nothing but a drunken liar and sponger. Una comes to regard him as an "incubus." During their violent separation scene, when Eddie, inflated by prospects of selling out-board motors, orders Una to obey his commands, she packs her things. At last comprehending that his wife was not bluffing, Schwirtz "changed swiftly from a tyrant to a bewildered orphan" (p. 301). After leaving, Una never saw him again.

The completed portrait of Eddie Schwirtz is one of a man whose compulsions and liabilities have made failure inevitable. There is about him a scent of overripeness. But Lewis saves him from utter villainy by posing him as a pathetic victim of competitive enterprise, the man whose inferior background and training have left him most exposed to the savagery of the Job. Furthermore, Eddie's initial gallantry with Una, his appreciation of Kipling and London (who had "been a sailor and a miner and all kinds of things"), his fondness for the good old songs, his enjoyment of lively drinking companions, his existence in an atmosphere of marital combat, his extravagant spending habits--all mirror qualities of Sinclair Lewis. Eddie's criticism of the socialist troublemakers complements Mr. Fein's apology for business managers which emerges as the tonic social theme in The Job. The one factor which renders Schwirtz sinister is that which differentiated him most from Lewis (if his wives' accounts of the novelist indicate correctly)--his sexual aggressiveness and lack of fastidiousness. In these matters the author shows frank disapproval.

Mr. Schwirtz's notion of being a man was to perform all hygienic processes as publicly as the law permitted. Apparently he was proud of his God-given body . . . and wanted to inspire her not only with the artistic vision of it, but with his care for it (p. 255).

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In small-town boy-gang talks behind barns, in clerkly confidences as a young man, in the chatter of smoking-cars and provincial hotel offices, he had been trained to know only two kinds of women . . . (p. 274)

either bold or meek, but incapable of serious thought. Eddie's sexuality seems in direct proportion to his insensitivity and impoverished imagination. In the roles of salesman and companion, Schwirtz is tolerable, but as husband and lover he is boorish. As a mirror image, Schwirtz seems to be the reverse of all the attributes Lewis wished to see in himself.

Minor characters in the novel appear each time Una moves her residence or changes jobs. They are usually arranged around the central character as reflectors, or bit-part actors, providing needed orientation and status for the heroine. For example, at business college Sam Weintraub, J. J. Todd, Sanford Hunt, Miss Moynihan, Miss Ingalls, and Miss Moore provide a spectrum of friends and rivals to complete the emotional range from ebullient to anxious and stodgy. In her rooming house on Lexington Avenue, Lewis surrounds Una with Mr. Gray and his wife, the "city failure," the branch librarian from Kansas City, and Phil Benson. After moving to the Temperance and Protection Home for Girls, Una acquaints herself with the matron, Mrs. Fike; her room-mate, Mrs. Lawrence; and the Jewish Mamie Magen, Una's "teacher in ideals"; Jennie Cassavant, Rose Larsen and Mrs. Amesbury. Lewis quickly tags each character with an assigned role and a Significant Detail or distinguishing touch. The most extensive use of this jewel-setting technique appears in Chapter XIX, where Lewis surveys the offices of Truax and Fein, and Una's

specific position in relation to the rest of the hierarchy, then sketches the microcosm of the Zodiac Building with "a whole village life in the hallway" and the greatest diversity of people "to whom the Zodiac hall was Main Street," seen through Una's eyes. When one is confident of one's role, he views the human scene with compassion: in these days of upward economic mobility, Una could apprehend her surroundings with sympathy and reason, in contrast to the hysteria of her days at Pemberton's.

Aside from Una Golden's father, described as a "petty small-town-middle-class lawyer," there are scattered authority figures in The Job. The bosses, such as S. Herbert Ross, Troy Wilkins, Mr. Pemberton and his chiefs, and to an extent Mr. Truax, appear as bluffers, hypocrites and incompetents. Humanitarian employers like Herzfeld and Cohn and Mr. Fein make the Job a "joyous adventure." Lewis identified the Jewish characters in his novel with attributes of wisdom, insight, and taste which he does not permit the others, and they speak with the authority of an ethnic tradition. Mamie Magen, the lame Jewess, "was the most highly evolved person Una had ever known." She it is who transmits this humanitarian tradition to the heroine.

To Una she explained the city, made it comprehensible, made art and economics and philosophy human and tangible. . . . She preached to Una a personal kingdom, an education in brotherhood and responsible nobility, which took in Una's job as much as it did government ownership or reading poetry (p. 276).

Mamie is another of those curators of the liberal culture whom Lewis fancied, and raised to eloquence in his portrait of the dedicated Max Gottlieb. As a minor character, she is an Influence on Una, who gratefully accepts Mamie's intellectual hand-me-downs, even though she can not wear them easily. Another feminine authority figure is Beatrice Joline, daughter of a distinguished but impecunious Gramercy Park family, "whose dead father had been ambassador to Portugal and friend to Henry James and John Hay." She instructs Una in manners and costume, handing down lessons in cool, aristocratic snobbery and taste which Una imitates assiduously when she wishes to make a favorable impression on the Boutells and Mr. Sidney. Mamie and Beatrice, exemplars of the vision and taste which make Una's life on the Job bearable, are teachers of roles and attitudes, fulfilling the same functions that Bone Stillman and Henry Frazer performed for Carl Ericson.

A discussion of crucial passages in The Job will show that deeply emotional experiences supply stimulus for role re-orientation or mask-shifting among the principal characters. Walter Babson's demonstrations of passion near the Palisades, for example, are his attempts to bluff or stampede himself into a declaration of love by playing a bold role. He suggests swimming in the Hudson, leaving Una to divine that he means nude swimming; he unbuttons

the top of her blouse to kiss her neck, then fastens it again, apologizing.

"I suppose there's a million cases a year in New York of crazy young chaps making violent love to decent girls and withdrawing because they have some hidden decency in themselves. I'm ashamed that I'm one of them--me, I'm as bad as a nice little Y. M. C. A. boy--I bow to conventions, too. . . . I'm really as mid-Victorian as you are, in knowledge. . . . I'm a Middle Western farmer, and yet I regard myself about half the time as an Oxford man with a training in Paris. . . . Whatever I did, I'd spoil you . . . "

(pp. 104-105).

Several conclusions may be drawn from these outbursts.

First, Babson is afflicted with acute role conflict: he has little idea who he is of what he wants to be, but he has fantasies of great accomplishments (Oxford, Paris), countered by fears of insignificance (boy, farmer). Second, his admitted lack of sexual experience seems to be a self-reinforcing anxiety: the more he apologizes for his innocence, the more keeply he is condemned to it. Third, his wordy explanations disguise a fear that he might succeed with Una, or worse, that she might reject him at the last moment, so Walter rejects himself precipitately in the name of chivalry and decency, not wishing to "spoil" the young lady. Fourth, in dropping his pretensions to liberal ideas of sexual frankness and confessing his debt to convention, there is a hinted ploy for pity and sympathy from Una, in a maneuver to have her take the roles of aggressor and mother. Fifth, the entire affair is palpably ego-destructive. At last, Walter covers his confusion by announcing that he will seek another occupational role out

West, although Una perceives that he would be "running away from himself." Essentially, this is the same pattern of bold intimacy and retreat which Mr. Wrenn demonstrated with Istra Nash, and Carl Ericson with Evelyn L'Ewysse.

Mrs. Golden's death in a shabby New York apartment is another episode charged with emotion. From a mood of patient irritation with her mother's dependency, Una bursts swiftly into anger, penitence, alarm, agony, grief, sentimentality and blankness, as she sees Mrs. Golden lose her struggle with pneumonia. But Una's mourning is brief. She had idealized the memories of their life together:

Una evoked an image of her mother as one who had been altogether good, understanding, clever and unfortunate (p. 128).

After the funeral, however, when Una returns to the flat, she recalls Mrs. Golden's peevishness.

. . . in memory of that healthily vexed voice, it seemed less wicked to take notice of food, and after a reasonable dinner (p. 129)

Una lay on the couch to reassess her ambition to succeed in business.

So Una Golden ceased to live a small-town life in New York; so she became a genuine part of the world of offices; took thought and tried to conquer this new way of city-dwelling (p. 129).

As a token of this role-reorientation (she is no longer a daughter to a dependent mother, is no longer shackled to her past in Panama), Una moves her residence.

The terrifying honeymoon of Una and Eddie is another sharply-drawn scene, in which their relationship

is harshly redefined as a mismating of two lonely people who have merely discarded the artificial roles they had acted in courtship. By changing the narrative focus to one of deadly intimacy, Lewis dramatizes the alteration in their roles, now less harmonious than before marriage, casting Eddie as an urbanized peasant and Una as a sentimental fool. Throughout the account of the Schwirtzes' married life, seen in a viewpoint sympathetic to Una in Chapters XVI-XX, the descriptions border on the surrealistic. In the final days before their explosive separation, Una comes to see her husband as "alcohol-soaked, poor white trash" and "that mass of spoiled babyhood waiting at home for her."

Precipitating their final quarrel is the issue of who shall have the dominant role in marriage. In this bitter confrontation of wills, Eddie's ego is affronted by his wife's earning power and independence, and he insinuates that she capitalizes on her freedom to meet with other men. This is an intolerable insult to Una, who has been extremely loyal. She had felt free when she found a job with Truax and Fein, and now that she is leaving Eddie, Una exults, " . . . Oh, I'm free again. And so are you, you poor, decent man. Let's congratulate each other" (p. 301). Although Una does not immediately divorce her husband, Lewis signals her freedom to assume a new role by an increase in her salary and a change of costume (p. 301).

Another scene of meaningful intensity occurs during Mr. Fein's defense of the employer in business in Chapter XXI. Thematically, his speeches compose a coda for The Job. Pointing out that managers are not willfully heartless, Mr. Fein blames the "slackers" for the world's financial inequities--a common criticism in those days of World War I. He concedes that the capitalistic system is imperfect, as is virtually everything else men have devised, concluding philosophically,

" . . . We've got to be anthropological in our view. It's taken the human race about five hundred thousand years to get where it is, and presumably it will take quite a few thousand more to become scientific or even to understand the need of scientific conduct of everything. I'm not at all sure that there's any higher wisdom than doing a day's work . . . and then for-getting all the Weltschmerz, and going to an opera" (p. 309).

In these sentiments he seconds the views of the socialist Mamie Magen "who was determined to control and glorify business," and felt that "the capitalists with their profit-sharing and search for improved methods of production were as sincere in desiring the scientific era as were the most burning socialists" (p. 182). Una is downcast at the recitation of her employer's "drab opportunist philosophy," but she does discover, significantly, that her "new power and responsibility" as sales manager unleash her creativity and furnish new horizons for her life in the Job.

Finally, Una's rediscovery of Walter Babson in the role of her assistant for the White Line Hotels forces her to debate whether she will be a business woman or a wife

and mother. Despite the artificiality of Chapter XXIII, the situation poses a crisis. Walter refuses to continue working for her, saying, "The problem of any man working for a woman boss is hard enough. He's always wanting to give her advice and be superior, and yet he has to take her orders." He will eventually take another job in advertising, then he will marry her, and they will be

"a terribly modern couple, both on the job . . . And everybody will think they're exceptional, and not know they're really two lonely kids that curl up close to each other for comfort . . ." (pp. 326-327).

But at the close of this "feminist" novel, Una is still undecided about her final role.

The three divisions of The Job sustain well conceived themes and atmosphere, suggesting that Lewis had firm control of his seminal concept--the portrayal of a young woman's struggles to accommodate herself to the business world, while achieving success and a meaningful identity in the process. The counter-themes of failure and moral corruption Lewis also handles convincingly. The ambiguity which is apparent in his handling of the socio-economic message of The Job (here Schwirtz's "lazy bunch of bums" coincides with Mr. Fein's "slackers"), indicates that, despite a divided loyalty, Lewis was more attracted by success than by socialism.

It is in his delineation of major characters that Lewis is disappointing. His emphasis is far more upon what they do and say than on what they are, as if he assumed

that the interior person was merely a pastiche of lessons and attitudes. Una Golden is still a wind-up toy of a girl who sheds a father, mother, and husband because they are not amenable to her "unconscious" feminism. She longs helplessly after her impulsive and childish lover, waiting patiently until the author sends him back to her, scarcely changed, as her subordinate in a business firm. She moves her residence at least eight times, works for six different employers, is sought after by a half-dozen men, with one of whom she tolerates a brief marriage, and hopes for union with another. She has been daughter, lover, wife, friend, stenographer, sales manager, and executive. But behind the poses and labels, not to mention her pretendings and imaginings, who is Una Golden? She is a force without a personality, an ambition without the subtleties and nuances of a woman. Una appears as a heroine in a peep-show kinetoscope filmstrip run at slow speed, just rapid enough to show changes in attitude and blurred images, but not enough to create the illusion of lifelike animation. The defect lies not in Lewis's desire to tell a socially realistic story, but in his limited conception of character as a conveyance for emotional impressions to be staged for an audience. His prime concern seems always to have been effect, rather than fidelity. The problem is one of over-control, lest his characters escape and become autonomous. Lewis seemed undecided about permitting Una to dominate over

the theme of the novel; in a letter to Joseph Hergesheimer discussing The Job, Lewis wrote:

The central character is the young woman on the job; or perhaps the protagonist is the office itself, with its three o'clock hopelessness, and its general waste of human life. I hope it is not too propagandist.¹¹

As the embodiment of Lewis's own aspirations, however, Una's mistress is success, not social welfare.

A projection of Lewis the apprentice writer and lover, Walter Babson is neurotic, self-destructive, and sexually inhibited. Full of intense talk and inspired projects, Walter is at once diverting and pathetic. His past occupational roles and escapes to various geographical points have been numerous, yet they have evidently had no broadening effect upon his attitudes or behavior. At the novel's conclusion he is still the boy-child in search of a mother-wife, emotionally appealing but intellectually tiresome.

Eddie Schwirtz, surprisingly, shows the most development in the novel. He has worked hard at many jobs, made himself an astute enough salesman to sell Una the idea of marrying him, and is not well enough educated to be dissatisfied with his life. His role changes are dictated by fortuitous circumstances--death of his father, deaths of his son and wife, loss of crucial jobs--and by Lewis's

¹¹James J. Napier, "Letters of Sinclair Lewis to Joseph Hergesheimer, 1915-1922," American Literature, XXXVIII (May, 1966), 237.

manipulation of Una's viewpoint toward Eddie. This last factor, Una's changing attitude, is occasioned by Schwirtz's sexual aggressiveness, linked to his lack of an educated sensitivity. It is curious that this virile vulgarity is the key concept which Lewis uses to demonstrate Eddie's unsuitability as Una's husband, while Babson's frenetic puerility renders him more appealing and acceptable.

If The Job makes a significant statement, then, it is not to be found in Lewis's characterizations. There is a suggestion that the city as a brutalizer of the worker underlies much of the social Darwinism implicit in the novel. But the main themes are the obvious ones; that a person must find the resources to succeed within himself; that new clothes, a small amount of research, and a bluff will yield gratifying dividends in ego gratification and a better job. Concomitant success in love is more doubtful, however. Lewis has difficulty in depicting scenes of deep affection. For while Una wishes to "mother" Walter, and he yearns to be worthy of her, they both show evidence of passion, but not of sexuality. A portrayal of mature sexuality requires that the lover's role should be shown to derive from his fundamental character--not that depicting the role, on the contrary, should imply depths of sensitive personality. The Job further illustrates the inadequacy of Lewis's techniques of role attribution and role playing in delineating major characters.

CHAPTER VI

THE INNOCENTS: A REVERSAL OF ROLES

Although it was published in October, 1917,¹ some eight months after the appearance of The Job, The Innocents actually antedates Lewis's fourth book, at least in part. Much of this story was composed during a six-week vacation Lewis spent with his wife in St. Augustine, Florida, between January 8 and February 18, 1916. As a story it was rejected by G. H. Lorimer of the Saturday Evening Post for its fault of excessive sentimentality, according to Grace Lewis.² This editorial judgment presumably spurred Lewis's subsequent appeal to a ladies' magazine; it was accepted by the Woman's Home Companion and issued in two installments a year later, in the February and March numbers of 1917, illustrated by Worth Brehm, at the same time that The Job was reaching the public.

Mark Schorer has dubbed The Innocents "almost certainly the worst thing that Lewis ever wrote," and

¹Mark Schorer gives the month as September in Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 819.

²With Love From Gracie, p. 84.

dismissed the book with a twenty-two-line summary paragraph.³ It is not necessary to contest this view; by most literary standards the story is a clumsy patchwork of melodramatic remnants. The plot wrenches along like a disabled trolley, with Lewis the heavy-handed motorman turning on more "juice" in the flat places. The main characters, hampered by their ill-defined roles, are trundled relentlessly from one setting to another. The poignancy of its two potentially meaningful social themes --the desperate lives of the elderly poor in the city, and children's lack of concern for the dignity of parents--is blunted by Lewis's almost hysterical overmanagement, and a manner which oscillates between a spinsterlike archness and sophomoric hyperbole. Notwithstanding its lack of literary merits, however, The Innocents provides a clear view of some aspects of the author's creative motivation and method, and perhaps even the emotional skeleton beneath, without the cosmetic refinements or art or finesse.

The book's title, for instance, reads like an apology for carelessly executed character definition; the attitudes and behavior of Seth and Sarah Jane Appleby can be altered readily to suit any emergent occasion, presumably because they are puttylike and "innocent." Innocence certainly is a suitable subject for sentimental romance when addressed with warmth and compassion. But

³Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, pp. 230, 246-247.

the "Innocents" in this book are patronized, even exploited by Lewis, who misconceives their simplicity to be a naiveté which approaches feeble-mindedness, alternating with the obstinacy and petulance of spoiled children.

Like an apology, too, reads Lewis's "Dedicatory Introduction" which really neither introduces nor dedicates. Apprehensive "lest the critics search for Influences and Imitations" that he might have to live up to if the book "were a ponderous work of realism" dedicated to "the splendid assembly of young British writers," Lewis excuses The Innocents with the ambiguous tag of "flagrant excursion, a tale for people who still read Dickens and clip out spring poetry and love old people and children." He then professes "strident admiration for Compton Mackenzie, Hugh Walpole, Oliver Onions, D. H. Lawrence, J. D. Beresford, Gilbert Cannan, Patrick MacGill and their peers," and offers an "enthusiastic tribute" to H. G. Wells--probably the most bombastic non-dedication composed for an ill-deserving book that year.

On the surface, the prime theme of The Innocents seems to affirm the faith that a man who hews steadfastly to his creative ideas will at last find strength to break away from monotonous life in the large city, and realize financial success and some social eminence in a Midwestern town. Such a theme is ideal for the development of a young hero, a reversal of the "village-to-New York-and-success" pattern. Lewis, who had just left the security of regular

employment for the uncertainties of a career in fiction writing, doubtless felt impelled to dramatize his affirmation of the creative imagination which may be happily transmuted into worldly dividends. One recognizes, of course, the familiar search for identity through change of occupation. The twist is that the Applebys are in their sixties, and approaching retirement. These conditions pose the dilemma, not resolved convincingly in the novel, that although the protagonists are old in body, they must exhibit the vitality and enterprise of youth.

This problem is complicated by other themes which churn beneath the surface. These powerful undercurrents, which reek of anxiety, are fear of crushing failure, loss of identity, abandonment of manhood in regression to a childlike state, suggested and attempted suicide, and humiliation before one's inferiors--all modes of self-defeating behavior. Add to these the numerous instances of escape from self by role-playing and bluffing, and the book can be regarded truly as a chronicle of fear and hysteria, written by an author who dreaded economic ruin caused by the failure of his creative powers.

The novel tells of Mr. and Mrs. Appleby, who live in a shabby New York apartment, and call each other "Father" and "Mother." He is a clerk at the Pilkings & Son's Standard Shoe Parlor, and though sixtyish, he is treated like Bob Cratchit by the paternally Scroogelike Mr. Pilkings, who "didn't believe in vacations." Each year,

then, Father must feign a cough and take snuff that induces sneezing to claim the two-week July holiday as a sick leave. The Applebys' annual destination is the farm of "Uncle Joe" and Matilda Tubbs at West Skipsit, Cape Cod, a location symbolic of the "freedom which these two gray-haired children had longed for all their lives, and had found during two weeks of each year."⁴ In this particular year (identified repeatedly as 1915 in the serial version) a chance ride in Uncle Joe's son-in-law's automobile carries them to the threshold of a new experience.

"That car changed their entire life. Among the hills of peace there was waiting for them an adventure" (p. 22), Lewis intones portentously. On a motor trip to Cotagansuit, Father grandly leads their group to an impulsive, and expensive, stop for refreshment at a roadside tourist trap, "Ye Tea Shoppe." Stung by the unexpected bill for three dollars and sixty cents, Father carelessly estimates the tea room's profits at "something like five hundred per cent," adding to Mother,

"That strikes me as a pretty good way to earn a living, old lady. You live in a nice comfortable place in the country and don't have to do any work but slice bread and stick in chicken or cream cheese, and make five hundred per cent" (p. 27).

Easy Street is really a country road with tourists driving by.

⁴The Innocents (New York, 1917), p. 9.

Mother and Father resolve to open a tea shop of their own at Grimsby Head, Cape Cod, the next summer, and return to New York to begin saving money. Father entrusts the purchasing and shipment of the tea room furnishings and equipment to a rascally Hungarian second-hand store operator, who unloads upon the Applebys a grotesque assortment of mismatched and tasteless furniture, tea service, and provisions. Father leaves Pilkings and Son's, and the following May they prepare for business at "The T Room" on Cape Cod.

"They had purchased freedom," Lewis states Delphically. But the Applebys' venture is marked for many kinds of disaster, particularly because of the insuperable competition from Miss Mitchin's arty Old Harbor Inn at Grimsby Center, two miles away. A visit from their snobbish and managerial daughter, Lulu Hartwig, and her insignificant son Harry, does little to restore the Applebys' feeling of confidence. After an incongruous attempt to invite the socially prominent Mrs. Vance Carter of Boston to patronize the "T Room," Father must console himself instead by bribing her chauffeur with a two-dollar bill to bring the grand lady around.

Unexpectedly Mrs. Carter and daughter Margaret do alight one day, but are so savagely critical of the Applebys' establishment that Mother and Father, who have been eavesdropping, are cruelly shattered. Lewis then introduces a tempest and an off-shore shipwreck (reminiscent

of a scene in Hike and the Aeroplane) for no particular reason, and the old couple decide to surrender their "freedom" at the tea room for a visit with Lulu and her husband, Harris Hartwig, "the up-to-date druggist of Saserkopee, New York." Life under the eye and will of Lulu and the sneers of Harris becomes insufferable, however, and the Applebys quickly tire of being represented as aristocratic parents from the City. Conspiratorially they count their savings of thirty-five dollars.

"Gee! if we only had two or three times that amount we could run away and start again in New York, and not let Lulu make us over into a darned old elderly couple!" Father exulted (p. 98).

They escape Lulu's further designs by crawling out a window and jumping from a shed roof. On a train they flee toward the familiar city. Father whispers,

"Old honey, there's nothing holding us apart now no more. We're partners again, and Lord! how we'll fight! I'll go in and take Pilkings's business clean away from him. I will! Old honey, we're free again! And we're going to see--New York! Lord! I just can't believe it!"

Mother's response is almost moronic: "Yes--why--why, it's our real honeymoon!" (p. 108). Thus like victors they return from ruin to face a winter of despair in the heartless city.

There follow quickly accounts of Father's rejection by the Pilkings company, his employment at a department store at eight dollars a week, Mother's finding a job at nine dollars during the holiday season, Father's dismissal, his hopelessness, the theft of his overcoat from

a restaurant, and finally the Applebys' attempted suicide by gas in their cheap flat. Had the story ended here, at the end of Chapter XI, it might have attained some of the poignancy of O. Henry's "The Furnished Room," and the author might have been credited with a touching account of disillusionment and anonymous death in the modern metropolis.

Lewis revives the Innocents from the nadir of despair, however; the attempted suicide is, after all, only a dramatic gesture of defiance. Stirred by no more compelling thoughts than "Suicide is wicked" and the realization that he would never play his mouth-organ for Mother again, Father breaks open the gas-filled room, and the Applebys prepare themselves for a flight into health. Seth exclaims,

"Now we'll start off again, and think, honey, whatever we do will be a vict'ry--it'll be so much bigger than nothing. . . . Gee! think, we're free, no job or nothing, and we could go to San Francisco! Travel, like we've always wanted to! . . . Come on, we'll start for Japan, and see the cherry-blossoms. Come on, old partner, we're going to pioneer, like our daddies that went West" (p. 138).

The loftiness of his ideal is intended to give sanction to inanities of deed.

The train takes them as far as New Jersey, where the Applebys begin their trek west. Father fancies that he will "play the mouth-organ for pennies," but local villagers, bemused and envious of their freedom to travel, treat them like touring celebrities. One snowy March evening, they stumble into a hoboes' camp ruled by the

shady Crook McKusick. Showing unsuspected resources for social rehabilitation and reform, Mother Appleby takes charge, foils a meddling sheriff, and transforms them all into "amiable boarders at Hoboes' Home." Under the supervision of McKusick, who once trained pugilists, Father prepares for a career as a professional pedestrian.

Spring thaws bring restlessness among the hoboes; camp life disintegrates. A fortuitous and absurdly inaccurate newspaper column on their travels has made the Applebys famous. They journey to Lipsittsville, Indiana, where in a rapid sequence of events, Father capitalizes on his notoriety as a walker to purchase a one-third interest in the Pioneer Shoe Store, joins the G. A. R., is elected president of the country club, and buys a modern bungalow complete with a maid and a framed picture showing a baby playing with kittens.

The final chapter of The Innocents is reserved for relating the Applebys' elaborate scheme for confounding their lubberly son-in-law, Harris Hartwig. It is an exquisite and fantastic instance of the role player outplayed, with an artificial cast, setting, dialogue and costumes. Apparently the "Innocents" may be permitted their moment of malice, but not, curiously, to teach Harris respect for his elders; rather, to punish him by capping his ostentation at Saserkopee with a gaudier display of Lipsittsville society, toward the further view of impressing Lulu and earning her unreserved affection.

The shortcomings of this virtually plotless material make it difficult to confer upon it the dignity of "novel." Schorer correctly points out that The Innocents was conceived as a short story, and it does not escape the limitations or tricks of that genre. It may be that the tale was padded out to look length merely to fulfill a contract with Harper for one more look, as Schorer suggests.⁵ Nevertheless, the story was revised in some details--some better, some worse--and Lewis wrote three entirely new chapters and parts of another, to be grafted on to the rootstock of the Woman's Home Companion version. Specifically, the second half of Chapter XIV and all of Chapters XV, XVII, and XVIII, embracing the episode in the vagrants' camp, and the ultimate financial success and triumph over Harris-Hartwigism in Lipsittsville, were added for the book. Further, the location of that town was removed from Delaware to Indiana during the revisions.

Alterations of the Woman's Home Companion text are surprisingly extensive and detailed, and the number of words, lines, and paragraphs rewritten and inserted suggests that Lewis, not a publisher's editor, executed most of the changes. These are of three main types: (1) topical allusions which might have become stale were updated; (2) wordy or tangential passages were excised;

⁵Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 246.

and (3) many parts were thoughtfully added, to thicken the book. Revisions of the first kind are generally associated with scenes where clever conversation or haughty poses are in demand while dining at table. During supper at the Tubbses', for example, Father and Mother represent themselves as "superior star boarders from that superior city, New York, personages to whom the opera and the Vernon Castles⁶ were perfectly familiar"; allusion to the performer is altered to read "horse-show" in the Harper edition (p. 19). A subsequent cribbage game is compared in the serial to "a Forest Hills tournament," and revised to "Davis cup tournament" in the book (p. 20). Father's assumed roles as the "First Customer" in a rehearsal for Mother before the opening of the T Room include "Jack Jackson, Senator Lodge, General von Mackensen or Eva Tanguay"⁷ in the Companion; but in the book the boxer becomes "Jess Willard,"⁸ the general "von Hindenburg" and the

⁶Vernon Blythe [Castle] (1887-1918) was a dancer and aviator born in England and author of a book of instructions in dancing titled Modern Dancing; as a flying instructor, he was killed in an air collision at Ft. Worth, Texas.

⁷Jack Johnson was the first Negro to hold the world heavyweight boxing title, from 1908-1915. Field Marshal August von Mackensen (1849-1945) was a German general very successful against the Russians on the eastern front in World War I. Eva Tanguay (1878-1947) was a Canadian-born star of American vaudeville and musical comedy theatre, known as the "I Don't Care Girl" after a famous song which she introduced.

⁸World heavyweight boxing champion 1915-1919, defeated by Jack Dempsey. The author's interest in boxing

actress "Mary Pickford"--Senator Lodge still remaining very topical in 1917 (p. 44). The spinsters and club women who frequented Miss Mitchin's "to drink tea and discuss Bakst"⁹ in the magazine version later discussed Freud (p. 54). During Lulu Hartwig's approving visit to the Old Harbor Inn, the young man in an Albanian costume talked to her "about Matisse" in the earlier story; but the subject was later changed to "vorticism," which sounds more esoteric. In these and other contexts throughout The Innocents, regular meals and teatime afford the focal character opportunities for making dramatic impressions through role playing before the seated captive audience--much as Lewis himself used to perform imitations and antics at dinner parties. A variation of this pattern occurs in the case of conversation from other tables overheard, as when the Applebys listen to a funny man next to them at the Hungarian restaurant exhibit gallows humor:

"My grandfather was a great acrobat. He was an aerial dancer. But he shouldn't have stolen that horse"
(March Woman's Home Companion, p. 18).

In the later edition the joke was not improved:

may have been piqued by the accomplishments of the aggressive Jewish-American welterweight Harry Lewis (1887-1956), at the top of his form between 1908 and 1911, who went into retirement a few years later.

⁹Leon Bakst (1866-1924), born Lev Samuilovich Rosenberg in St. Petersburg, was an innovative artist and ballet scene-and-costume designer, notably for Diaghilev.

"We been going to dances a lot, but last night the wife and I wanted to be quiet, so I bought me two front seats for Grant's Tomb!" (p. 128).

Outright deletions from the serialized Innocents are rarer than subsequent embellishments, but a few merit attention. Passages which recount Father's deep attachment for the Pilkings shoe store, and his sentimental leave-taking of "his old acquaintances among the clerks" have been excised. A hint of possible privation in the early life of Seth Appleby was later discarded: after Mother's warning to Father that she won't have him "hang-ing around sayloons," Lewis confided: "She had never been quite able to convince herself that Seth Appleby merely lacked the chance to be a gay young blade." More amusing is the wise omission of a lengthy passage from Chapter XIII in which Father had regaled the Companion readers with a virtuoso exhibition of role playing and fantasy projection, while attempting to build a fire in the snowy woods, in the manner of Jack London's celebrated story (March Woman's Home Companion, p. 80). In Lewis's hands this little scene depicted a ritual test of manhood (incongruous for a man in his sixties), in which the novice camper, "panic-stricken" in the "North Woods," torturing himself with needless dread of phantasms behind the trees and lurking ferocious beasts, fancies being reduced to his last match.

It was a very melodramatic moment. Life and adventure depended on the one match that Father cautiously drew from his pocket.

He scratched it and feverishly stuck it among the leaves. It went out.

Without any precautions he scratched another match. It promptly caught the leaves, kindled the fire.

The author bursts in to assure the reader, importantly,

It might have been explained that Father had a whole handful of matches, though his make-believing soul hated to admit it; might as well not have been a jolly vagabond at all if he had to carry all these luxuries.

Mother, of course, is the audience who must be impressed, although Lewis concedes that because Sarah's feet are cold, her "interest in having the match make good was not romantic but practical."

"Oh!" Mother applauded, in awe and relief, while Father straightened and looked patronizingly at his fire. He wasn't a failure.

The last sentence is only half ironic, and it introduces a new plane of emotional intensity into this ambivalently mock-heroic scene. Who would even dream that a routine test of fire-lighting skill in New Jersey must indeed be a ceremonial trial of life's success or failure? Certainly not a sixty-year-old indigent shoe clerk. But it might to Timothy Hale-Hal Lewis who performed similar feats while picnicking with Grace Hegger in the outskirts of New York City.

The only other noteworthy deletion concerns Mother's vision of a projected trip back to West Skipsit in the coming summer, which Father's new partnership in the shoe business will enable them to take. (Presumably affluence affords as much "freedom" to travel as poverty.)

Mother mentally rehearses a dramatic scene with a new bit of costume.

"I swear to goodness, I would like to get one of those new angora mufflers embroidered with woolen flowers, like I saw in the window in Wilmington. I guess Matilda Tubbs's eyes would bulge out when she saw that."

But then, curtailing her satisfaction with a crosscurrent of self-deprecation, she adds,

"Oh, I'm just a wicked old creature thinking of vain gauds and vanities when I ought to be crying, I'm so proud of your actually signing a partnership contract" (March Woman's Home Companion, p. 83).

Both of these omissions deserve attention, because in the fire-building and muffler-wearing, Father and Mother build up disproportionate expectations of success, then thwart themselves--he by staking everything on the match that fails, she by throttling her desire for finery. This emotional pattern, of anticipated gratification blocked or muted by self-frustration and ending with inconclusive gains, recurs throughout The Innocents, as it does in much of Lewis's other work. A review of this theme of self-defeat, and the concomitant motif of escape from anxiety into role playing, will find support in the text of this novel, including the passages Lewis added for Harper and Brothers.

Once again, Lewis devises opportunities for role playing on several levels. The first is the familiar change of occupation as a change of role, already seen in The Trail of the Hawk and The Job. Seth Appleby begins as

a small shoe clerk, and of course, ends as a big shoe clerk, in a career reminiscent of Mr. Wrenn's in the novelty business. In the interim, however, Father is a tea room proprietor, a temporary leather goods salesman in a large store, noon-hour waiter at a workmen's diner, "Mr. Smith" the woodchopper, a hobo, and a "professional pedestrian." But curiously, he is not conspicuous in his roles as husband and father.

Secondly, each occupational switch is accompanied by a change in location, necessitating travel in most cases, and presenting occasions for extensive posturing and role improvisation. The temptation to pretend being someone else while traveling is, of course, a double escape--from person and from place--into the congenial realms of fantasy. In The Innocents these character-obbligatos are sometimes accompanied or suggested by handy props, like Mother's "smart new hat," Father's traveling cap, or the treasured mouth-organ. Seth becomes a masterful "man of the world" while he prepares for the journey to Cape Cod. On board ship he unfolds the mysteries of the deck chair; he is "tremendous," "immense," "admirable." He struts about in his new cap: "He rather wanted to let people see it. He was no Pilkings clerk now, but a world-galloper" (p. 10). As always, the role performer is conscious of his audience. Lewis feeds these affectations with such effusions as

He was so prosperous of aspect, so generous and proudly affectionate, that people turned to look. It was obvious that if he had anything to do with the shoe

business, he must be a manufacturer in a large way, with profit-sharing and model cottages (p. 11).

This passage illustrates a third facet of Lewis's technique for character delineation through role playing. Not only is Father exhibiting a bit-actor's virtuosity, conscious of being watched, but also the author must involve the reader as watcher and straight man who pretends to be fooled by the assumed costume and manner. Another quotation illustrates this tactic more clearly.

From the pompous manner in which Father unpacked his bag you would have been utterly beguiled, and have supposed him to be one of those high persons who have whole suites to themselves and see their consorts only at state banquets, where there are celery and olives, and the squire invited to dinner. There was nothing these partners in life more enjoyed than the one night's pretense that they were aloof. But they suddenly forgot their roles . . . (p. 12).

This kind of writing, perhaps intended to be charming and whimsical, puts a minimum of strain on the novelist, who can attribute all sorts of settings, props, roles and mannerisms to a basically amorphous character, contrive a bravura performance, and then withdraw thoughtfully, conceding that, after all, it is only for show.

Lewis's similes and metaphors offer a fourth mode of character description by role attribution. The Applebys belong to the "meek race" of "the people, descendants of shopkeepers and clerks, who often look like New-Englanders" (p. 2). Sarah Jane "was as used to loneliness as a hotel melancholiac" (p. 3). As travelers the Applebys are "like solumn white puppies venturing away from their mother"

(p. 8). On board ship, imagining that "two toughs" were annoying his wife, Father "glared at them like a sparrow robbed of a crumb" (p. 11), although he does not seem to enjoy that sparrow's other, more notorious vitality.

Nevertheless, Lewis explains, "Father was, in his unquenchable fondness for Mother, like Romeo, like golden Aucassin" (p. 18). At times the comparisons derive from the characters' imaginings, as when at the crucial visit to the Tea Shoppe, Seth experienced a Revolutionary Idea, and "they had been fated the moment Father had seen Mother and himself as delightful hosts playing with people in silk sweaters, in a general atmosphere of roses, fresh lobster, and gentility" (pp. 30-31).

On the level of literal characterization, then, Lewis follows a practice similar to candle-dipping, adding innumerable coatings of waxy roles upon his common wick-string central characters. Father and Mother Appleby have no real inner workings; they are tallow to the core. They must wait pathetically for the author to send down a Revolutionary Idea as a pretext for activity in the next episode, or to redirect the plot arbitrarily with no more elaborate transition than, "Suddenly--." The absence of robust characterization curtails the possibility for any meaningful plot, since Lewis apparently felt that if he were to sustain the fond old innocence of the Applebys, they must be feeble-minded as well.

On another level, however, that of the symbolic roles which these characters occupy, an interpretation may be suggested that provides insight into Lewis's clumsy handling of The Innocents, edited, rewritten and expanded though it was. The newly independent Sinclair Lewis, determined to be free of authoritarian restraints either in the form of office job or parental subsidy, was dramatizing his own conflicting feelings of defiant self-congratulation at having made a new beginning (thus the Applebys' emphasis on being "free" and trying several new occupations), and a paralyzing fear of failure and ruin (reflected in Father's obvious anxieties about his success and virility, and in the hinted and attempted suicides). There is more. Father and Mother Appleby are parental authority figures diminished and controlled to the point of absurdity. Father, particularly, is made to look ridiculous: he is impulsive, prodigal, irresponsible, vacillating, dependent upon Mother for support--all that did not characterize Dr. E. J. Lewis. Yet, in a dramatic reversal of roles, Sinclair Lewis the Author could manipulate and control these kewpie-doll parents, and in a gratifying power play, assume not only their parts, but those of Lulu and insignificant young Harry also.

Throughout the book Lewis insists that the Innocents behave like children, and this paradox of the old child is not wholly explained by the attribution to them of virtue and naiveté. They are yet too young to be

senile, but too near retirement to change occupations capriciously or travel like hoboes, then become prosperous citizens in a Midwestern hamlet. No, their actions read more like a history of Sinclair Lewis's hopes and fears--fears that he would reach a mindless old age without ever experiencing the joys of childhood, and of the loving acceptance by his family that he still hoped for. So Lewis fused the dreams of ingratiating innocence with the terrors of failure and obscurity (which would extend to his old age) in the creation of Seth and Sary Jane Appleby, those consummate denials of human identity.

Lewis's delineation of Lulu Hartwig, however, is an affirmation of fear. In contrast to her parents, Lulu moves quickly, is a strongly opinionated snob and a bluffer. Her tastes are expressed arbitrarily, with force and vulgarity. In fact, Lulu's most repellent characteristics, notably her officious management of household life and affairs, seem to be exaggerations of Lewis's complaints about his wife Grace, who was expert with the social snub or condescending barb. More interesting, though, are the double representations of Lewis himself, suggested in the names of Harris and Harry Hartwig, in juxtaposition to "Lulu" (one recalls Miss L'Ewysse in The Trail of the Hawk) --the husband a dolt (reflecting the way Lewis felt overshadowed by Grace's social adroitness), and the son a prankish boy (suggesting Lewis's intermittent need for a subordinate role to a self-assured and punishing female

figure). Added to these anomalies is the inconsistent behavior toward Lulu of Father Appleby, now apprehensive and repressed, as when in anticipation of her visit to Grimsby Head, the old couple "knew that they would not enjoy a single game of cribbage, nor a single recital by Signor Sethico Applebi [another role for Father] the mouth-organ virtuoso as long as she was with them" (p. 57); now defiant in denouncing her preference for Miss Mitchin's at Grimsby Center (pp. 58-59); then submissive and painfully conscious of being watched by Lulu (Chapter IX); and finally, persecuted by Lulu when she threatens to dispatch them to the Cyrus K. Ginn Old People's Home (pp. 204-205), and abruptly conciliatory at the close of the book:

. . . Father volunteered: "I actually do hope that Lulu and Harry will come to pay us a visit now. Maybe we can impress her, too. I hope so. I really would like a chance to love our daughter a little. Don't seem natural we should always have to be scared of her. . . . Why, think, maybe Lulu will let me kiss her, some day, without criticizing my necktie while I'm doing it!" (pp. 216-217).

This passage, which appears in the appended final chapter Lewis devised for the Harper edition, was probably written after the stopover Lewis and Grace made at Sauk Centre--the time when the author triumphantly impressed Dr. Lewis with the amount of money he was paid for the shorter, serial edition in the Woman's Home Companion. Thus it is fascinating to read other meanings in Father's coda-speech, since it appears to be Lewis's projection of a plausible remark by Dr. E. J. himself, wistful, slightly

forlorn, and conciliatory, hoping that Lulu (read Gracie) and Harry will come to pay a visit.

Certainly Lulu is the most forceful character in the book. The Hartwigs' marriage is woman-dominated; their life is one of poses and regimentation, their household one of rigidly controlled hysteria; did these represent Lewis's hallucination of how a settled life with Grace would be?

If the Hartwigs' pretensions seem socially absurd, the claims of Miss Mitchin and the hobohemians at the Old Harbor Inn to any artistic distinction bring down Lewis's special scorn. His sneers at the activities of the arty tea-room patrons tell of another skirmish in the author's campaign against self-proclaimed cognoscenti and pseudo-sophisticates who, he felt, were simply lazy frauds. Lewis sees them universally as insincere players of roles, mischievous poseurs who "talk about" many things knowingly and cliquishly, but who produce nothing of value.

Of little literary value itself, The Innocents is essentially a book about failure. Father and Mother Appleby are memorable for their social, economic, and spiritual destitution. Beyond that their characters are not conceived sharply enough to hold a slicing edge of social significance or satire. The triumph at Lipsittsville is too contrived to offset their more than sixty years of poverty, obscurity, and simple-mindedness. Lewis's predilection for writing about "little people" smacks of

condescension, it is true, but the emotional intensity with which he takes their part and the shifting points of view from which he examines their predicaments show more than a patronizing superiority. Very probably Lewis identified with the poor and routine-ridden people that he met in his travels and in the low-rent districts of New York--but, one feels, not with pulses of human sympathy and indignation; rather, as calculated lessons to himself warning of the disastrous anonymity that would result if his typewriter failed to turn out more stories, or if his mind ceased generating new Revolutionary Ideas. In other words, there are only a few teeth in Lewis's muck rake, and the handle is short, because he fears to go too far or too deep.

It could be argued that Lewis's penchant for writing inferior fiction, like that typified by The Innocents, is an aspect of his neurotic need for self-punishment, offering another pretext for him to hate himself, by "whoring," as he called his hack writing. Certainly this suggestion cannot be dismissed casually. The creatures in the novel seem to go out of their way to court misery: how then can the author escape? When the Applebys achieve success at last, it is by chance and bluff, and they have already paid for it in advance with meaningless lives. When Lewis won great fame with Main Street, one could wonder how he wrote so many earlier things so unworthily. It was as if Lewis had phantasms to exorcise, terrors to dramatize, anxieties to confess.

The dominant moods of The Innocents are ones of fear and insecurity, which give the novel a fatal air of tentativeness and indecision. The erratic and pointless careers of the Applebys and the segmented story line in-breed literary weaknesses in characterization and credibility to such an extent that the reader can sense only the raw emotions behind the story. Fear is most evident in the actions of Seth Appleby; one feels the constricted breathing, the narrowed field of vision, the sweating palms, and the paroxysms of showing off whenever Father has to make a decision or feels threatened by the slightest contretemps. Insecurity manifests itself in the Applebys' essential poverty, the peeling away of their material possessions and prospects for employment, their alienation from Lulu, and their penniless wanderings to Lipsittsville. Their emergence as citizens of substance in that town must be viewed as safe arrival in a secure harbor, not as a vindication of patient virtue or the triumph of sound business practices. It is most significant that Father is able to cast away fear and hazard in the end by persuading the Lipsittsville men to accept him, not as he really is--an itinerant, frightened former shoe clerk--but in his "role as public character," an eccentric world traveler, business genius, bluffer, and plain liar, who mouths chamber-of-commerce fatuities about "Progress" and "nice houses and--uh-wide-awake town."

Seth Appleby's faking and posturing illustrate the following motifs in The Innocents: role playing dispels fear and insecurity because it is basically an innocent, childlike game of make-believe, enabling one to escape from himself, and because it is amusing to watch the exaggerated reactions of other, unsuspecting people to any number of false faces one may choose, and then to jeer silently at the audience for being dupes. Lewis prepares an important transition passage in Chapter XIV in an attempt to reconcile the "new" Seth Appleby of Lipsittsville with the old one who nearly died in New York.

Quite without knowing it, Father was searching for his place in the world. . . . But he was learning something more weighty--the art of handling people, in the two aspects thereof--bluffing, and backing up the bluff with force and originality. He came to the commonplace people along the road as something novel and admirable, a man who had taken his wife and his poverty and gone seeing the world. When he smiled in a superior way and said nothing, people immediately believed that he must have been places, done brave things. He didn't so much bluff them as let them bluff themselves (pp. 156-157).

(Does the lack of distance from his subject suggest that Lewis is revealing his own discovery?) Then later: "Seth Appleby began to think for himself, to the end that he should be one of the class that rules and is unafraid" (p. 175). And finally: "In his attempt to let people bluff themselves and accept him as a person to be taken seriously, Father kept on trying to adhere to the truth. But . . . " (pp. 189-190). Deception enabled Seth to make an advantageous partnership with the proprietor of the

Lipsittsville Pioneer Shoe Store. The fact is that role playing in its various guises brings the only brightness and diversion evident in The Innocents; without this device Lewis and his characters are powerless.

The main fault of this patchy, sentimental tale is that the main characters are so inadequately conceived. They have no souls, no centers for any inner-directed activity higher than tropism. To seem "innocent" they must be childish and stupid. They appear to have been marked as vicarious bearers of Lewis's own emotional burdens--fear of failure and profound insecurity. Beyond this the Applebys represent parental authority figures debilitated and controlled by Lewis, the author-son, who is also able to express his hostility through the mask of Lulu, the punishing, ungrateful child. If there is any moral or resolution to be extracted from The Innocents, however, it must take the form of a warning that Lewis himself would have heeded: a bright idea and hasty calculations are not sufficient to insure success; lack of research brings bankruptcy, failure, and paralysis; helpless people will be safe and successful if they cleave to what they know and avoid experiments. Meanwhile, a little banana oil is efficacious as a hinge lubricant for the country club gates, and as balm for the shrunken ego.

CHAPTER VII

FREE AIR: I'M ONLY A SMALL-TOWN BOY MYSELF

"Motoring is the real test of marriage. After a week of it you either stop and get a divorce, or else . . . you discover again the girl you used to know," wrote Sinclair Lewis in 1919.¹ Earlier, in a serialized Saturday Evening Post story, he had indicated that an automobile tour might prove a reliable shakedown cruise for a courtship. The serial had been called "Free Air," and the first installment received prime billing on the magazine's cover of May 31, 1919. Three more parts followed, on June 7, 14, and 21. The public received Lewis's tale so well that he devised a two-part sequel, called "Danger--Run Slow," which appeared in the Post issues of October 18 and 25, 1919. As he had instinctively perceived a tacit fusion of characteristics between man and airplane in Hike and The Trail of the Hawk, Lewis also recognized the complex symbolism implicit in a man's relationship to his motor

¹"Adventures in Automobumming," Saturday Evening Post, CLXLII (December 20, 1919), 142.

car. Not only for the subtleties of social status, taste, and individualism evident in a man's choice of his personal car, but also for the ego satisfaction in being able to guide and control a formidable, self-moving gadget, Lewis's delight in the automobile was natural. In addition, the captive proximity of one's passengers, especially if female, could provide numberless opportunities for impressive actions, roles, shared sentimental experiences and perils, and conversations with a portable audience. As tangible support for Lewis's familiar "manly" themes of capricious roaming and camping outdoors, the automobile also contributed the supposition of male mechanical mastery, as well as hints of uncertainty and danger to be overcome during cross-country travel around 1916, when good roads and repair facilities were few. A car also doubles as a handy device for escape, when emotional temperature and pressure in a given situation may prove unbearable for the hero.

The serials were based on fact. Grace Lewis calls "Free Air" flatly "the story of our motor trip west"²--a trip from Sauk Centre to Seattle and San Francisco which the Lewises made in their new Ford touring car, from August 7, 1916, until the last days of October. Lewis's letters to Alfred Harcourt reveal his response to the latter's suggestion that the original "Free Air" be

²With Love From Gracie, p. 124.

extended to book length, in preparation for publication by the new company of Harcourt, Brace and Howe. Lewis was already immersed in early drafts of Main Street, but laid them aside in July to complete the "Free Air" sequel, which comprises the last eleven chapters in the book. Traveling east from Mankato in August, 1919, Lewis stopped in Philadelphia to visit Mr. G. H. Lorimer, editor of the Saturday Evening Post, who offered to publish these end chapters as a two-part serial the following October. Lewis could not resist the tender of ready money, so he permitted the issue of "Danger--Run Slow" with apologies to Harcourt, who obligingly deferred release of the complete book until October 23, 1919.³ In this form, the combined serials totaled 370 pages.

Free Air is a novel of contrasts and a study of cultural shock. The story relates how Milton Daggett, self-employed garage mechanic in Schoenstrom, Minnesota, impulsively pursues the cultivated Claire Boltwood of Brooklyn Heights, New York, across prairie, gorge, and mountain to Seattle, in hopes of being near enough to observe her, and perhaps worthy enough to deserve her. The American Middle West and Far West supply a generous, weathertinted background for the ensuing mechanical steeplechase between Miss Boltwood's racy Gomez-Deperdussin automobile and Milt's spunky little Teal "bug." There is

³See Harrison Smith, ed., From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930 (New York, 1952), pp. 3-20 et passim.

drama in this travel adventure, which Lewis felt was "romance with dignity and realism . . . Milt, in his garage, in his adventuring, is as true to life as though this were a drab story of manners instead of a romance."⁴ There are numerous changes of scene and role, and diverting character bit-actors pepper the pages. There are heroic themes of rescue, pathetic themes of human degradation, noble motives, snobbery and contemptuous acts, city scenes, deserted farmhouses, a ferocious bear and a tame cat, children, desperadoes, an impressive list of improbable settings and coincidences, and above all--love.

The love theme is serious but not profound, in a manner suited to light fiction. Lewis manages this motif in characteristic fashion: by alternatively abrupt and gradual role changes, or hot-and-cold emotional climates, he keeps the lovers in proximity without allowing them any clear-cut success. The hero, Milt, is perpetually at a disadvantage culturally, socially and psychologically, despite his mastery of camping and motoring. Claire, the heroine, is cool and superior, due to the fairly stereotyped conventions of the sophisticated East, and she is adroit enough to undertake a hazardous cross-country motor trip accompanied only by her aging father. The problem of the novel is to arrange a romantic accommodation between Claire and Milt, as if to make a working team out of a

⁴From Main Street to Stockholm, p. 15 (letter to Harcourt, October 6, 1919).

thoroughbred filly and a country hack. Accordingly, Lewis endeavors to "democratize" the luxury-loving lady under the influence of the pioneering prairie spirit and with periodic injections of egalitarian compassion, symbolized by the "free air" which all men must breathe. Milt, on the other hand, Lewis must show currying his natural abilities, channeling his ambition and energy into a course of self-education, and absorbing enough culture to best the Seattle snobs at their own game of condescension, in attempts to impress the lofty lady and prove his worth as her champion. Indeed, there is an almost medieval simplicity to this tale of motorized romance and derring-do, in which Milt is identified as "the Galahad of the Teal bug." At one point Milt even sees himself in the role of Robin Hood, as he recalls childhood make-believes for Claire, and she, moved by this evidence of creative imagination, wishes she could have played Maid Marian for him.⁵

It is too simple to assert merely that in Free Air Sinclair Lewis reaffirms his faith in the unaffected country virtues of friendship, honest work, and love of nature, and his belief that these would triumph over urban qualities of affectation, hypocrisy and class prejudice. Milt's attitude of apology for his small-town background does not support this view. Lewis has staked everything in the book on the assumption that Milt will become an

⁵Free Air (New York, 1919), p. 147.

engineer, and that Claire will mightily assist him in doing so. That is, by becoming a success, Milt can save Claire from a boring existence among the effete and stupid bourgeoisie of Seattle and Brooklyn; she, in turn, can save him from a purposeless life in Schoenstrom by teaching upper-class tastes to her proletarian, and by helping to transform him from a small-time mechanic into a big-time mechanic. In this context their marriage, like the marriages in Wrenn, Hawk, and The Job, is not so much a life-long affair between devoted lovers as it is a mutual rescue operation. Indeed, Milt's dogged pursuit of Claire smokes with an adolescent-crush ardor which evidences at once a farouche opportunism and a voyeuristic abridgment of privacy. The woman is more than a love object; she is potentially a means to success, a lucky resource to be exploited, a guaranteed audience. That is to say, there are cynical and calculating aspects to Milt's campaign of courtship, with each encounter between man and woman seized upon and worked for a planned effect.

In view of Grace Lewis's revelation that she had served as the model for Claire Boltwood, it is difficult to avoid identifying Milt Daggett with Lewis. It is clear that the author's visit to Sauk Centre, which preceded the storied motor trip west, was a crucial occasion in his life. Symbolically, it was a confrontation with his formidable father, a demand for recognition of the son's new marital status, implying equality with the father and

therefore full accession to the robes of manhood. Further, Lewis's ability to score two coups on the old doctor (Milt's father is described as a pioneering "Old Doctor") --the impressive sum he had earned from the serialized "Innocents" and the dramatic purchase of the Ford--signified more proofs of maturity, as well as tacit solicitations of his father's grudging approval. By taking his father for a drive, while operating the machine's controls himself, Lewis dramatized his subjugation of the dreaded authority figure, by reducing him to the ineffectual role of passenger. Thus it is fascinating to note that Milt's principal attributes of manliness are outdoor camping, already a Lewis benchmark, and familiarity with automotive machinery, while the only real authority figure in the novel, Claire's father, Mr. Boltwood, is limited and controlled as a semi-invalidated passenger in her car.

The stay in Sauk Centre also permitted Lewis to observe the cultural shock waves as his wife, a representative of the urbane East, adjusted to the homely pace and customs of the ingenuous West. On the other side he marked the town's self-conscious reception of Grace. His observations furnished important perspectives not only for Claire Boltwood's delineation, but also for the development of Carol Kennicott in *Gopher Prairie*, in a shift of protagonists from the Guy Pollock of the original "Village Virus" concept. Lewis seemed to favor depicting solitary

characters wrenched from a familiar setting and deposited in strange or hostile surroundings, and embroidering the implicit comparisons and contrasts in manners and customs. In this fashion Claire Boltwood feels threatened and insulted by the familiarities of small-town citizens, while they feel put upon by her overbearing deportment; Milt feels disadvantaged and patronized at brunch or tea parties in metropolitan Seattle, while Claire's friends regard him as a rustic adventurer.

As the central problem of the story suggests, there is little plot to Free Air. The story line development is fairly horizontal from east to west through time, with a few flashbacks to fill in details or present a fresh point of view. Interest in the tale is sustained theoretically by Milt's powerful desire for Claire Boltwood's presence (though not specifically her body or her mind), but practically by demonstrations of motoring problems to be solved, narratives of views to be appreciated, and by reliance upon manufactured incidents and expedient characters suddenly introduced and dismissed. Inevitably, Claire faces trumped-up perils on the road from which Milt, compulsively smitten by her image, is able to extricate her. The Seattle interlude is a convenience for turning the tables on Milt, to examine his adaptability to Western smart society, which, Lewis makes clear, has been grafted from the East. The hero's struggle

to adapt, the handholds he grasps to gain upward mobility, and the emotional anxiety and role conflicts he endures, form the melodramatic core of reader interest. Whether Milt will succeed is not the question posed in Free Air; how he will win the girl, subdue his rival and overcome his handicaps to realization of a successful occupational role comprises the main business of the story. Claire, as the aloof virgin unsullied, requires little development or modification beyond an increased awareness of the great diversity of human lives in America, and the ability to place her fondness for upper-class perquisites in a more realistic perspective. Underlying the improbable plot for dragging these two lovers together with automobiles is Lewis's apparent assumption that the only differences between them are details of taste and style; that if a man wishes to enhance his social status, he needs merely to observe some exemplars of the envied life-style, and mimic them in roles.

Viewed as a vicarious Harry Lewis, Milton Daggett bears noteworthy similarities to his creator. Both are doctors' sons raised in small Minnesota towns, who trace ancestry back to stock of New England origin. As youths, both enjoyed playing make-believe games alone. Both idealized the rugged arts of camping and life outdoors, and were fascinated by mechanical devices. Emotionally, both exhibit similar mercurial patterns of sanguine

optimism and corrosive self-effacement, and feel persecuted and plotted against when projected plans go awry. More particularly, the relationship of Claire to Milt as inspiration and impelling force corresponds roughly to that between Grace and Hal Lewis--he the assiduous student of manners, décor, stylish costumes and fabrics, which become increasingly important as significant symbols of characterization in his later novels.

An unresolved perplexity in Free Air is the question: Where has Milt acquired his sophisticated taste in women? Lewis records his hero's first reaction upon seeing Claire.

He saw a girl step from the car. He stopped . . . in uneasy shyness. He told himself he didn't "know just what it is about her--she isn't so darn unusually pretty and yet--gee--Certainly isn't a girl to get fresh with. . . . Like to talk to her, and yet I'd be afraid if I opened my mouth, I'd put my foot in it."

He was for the first time seeing a smart woman. This dark, slender, fine-nerved girl, in her plain, rough, closely-belted, gray suit, her small black Glengarry cocked on one side of her smooth hair, her little kid gloves, her veil, was as delicately adjusted as an aeroplane engine (pp. 58-59).

Of course, Milt's eye had first been attracted by the asexual beauties of the powerful Gomez auto (imported from France, special body), then by the foreignness of the license plate. When Claire emerges, fashionably dressed--anticipating Mr. McLuhan's identification of the car as an item of apparel--Milt's enthusiasm transfers from the machine to the girl. His initial reaction is not admiration or desire, however. It is consternation. The words

"uneasy shyness," "afraid," and Milt's instinctive sensation that she "isn't a girl to get fresh with," implying a defense against foreseeable rejection, suggest an acute awareness of Claire's femininity, with an accompanying sense of his own clumsiness and inadequacy. His immediate wish is to talk to her, but he is too upset to wait upon her in his own garage, leaving that pleasure to his assistant, Ben Sittka, while he himself skulks about, pretending not to watch her avidly.

Milt wanted to trumpet her exquisiteness to the world, so he growled to a man standing beside him, "Swell car. Nice-lookin' girl, kind of" (p. 59).

It seems more casual to note first the car, then the girl, both viewed as marvelous objects. Milt creeps toward his garage, peeps at the girl, passes her while affecting not to see her, listens in on her conversation with Ben, learning of her plan to drive toward Seattle. What is the reason for stealth? Either Milt is ashamed of his suddenly found desires, barely masked by his tame urge to converse with the girl and his ostensible admiration for her car, or he afraid of them. Claire and her father remain in Schoenstrom for eighteen minutes, only long enough to change an inner-tube. Twenty-nine minutes after their departure Milt drives his Teal out of town in frenzied pursuit. He has had time to change into a suitable traveling costume and purchase a garish plaid cap--"in his discovery of Claire Boltwood he had perceived that dressing is an art" (p. 61)--leave Ben in charge of the business, pack a

suitcase, pay his landlady and bid goodbye to friends. Accompanying him is the cat, Lady Vere de Vere. Customarily, a change of role and scene necessitates a change of costume for the Lewis hero. From being Milt the garage mechanic he has been transformed into a free traveler, a Galahad, a Good Samaritan. These are the symbolic roles which dominate his repertoire.

Milt's father, the Old Doctor, "had meant to send him to the state university," but after graduating from high school in St. Cloud, he had become a flour mill engineer before rising to be "owner, manager, bookkeeper, wrecking crew, ignition expert, thoroughly competent bill collector," and general laborer in his own Red Trail Garage. He is also the "leader" of the progressive political faction of the Schoenstrom populace, a man of whom his friend Barney confides,

" . . . he's got a nerve, that fellow. . . . He's got a great line of talk . . . Thing about him is: if he sees something wrong, he picks out some poor fellow like me, and says what he thinks" (p. 34).

His particular friends, intended to mirror Milt's catholic taste in companionship, are the rough Bill McGolwey, proprietor of the Old Home Poolroom and Restaurant, and the refined "Professor" and Mrs. James Martin Jones, with whom he talks about science, politics, and literature. The last of Milt's occupational role changes comes about after he reaches Seattle, where he becomes a student at

the university, preparing for a career as an engineer, striving to be worthy as Claire's future husband.

In his functional roles, Milt performs many services for the Boltwoods. He is their rescuer, cook, guide, guardian, driving instructor, host, and guest. Even when he is not physically with them, his presence hovers over the Boltwoods like that of an impresario. He is happy to repair their car or be a chauffeur. Intuitively Claire expects Milt to appear when the travelers are in difficulty.

In fantasies or in imaginary adventures, Milt projects himself into roles with ease. His serviceable inventiveness generates amusing talk about the cat, Vere de Vere, for Claire's benefit, in the same manner that Hawk Ericson first attracted Ruth, and Mr. Wrenn beguiled Istra Nash.

" . . . She's kind of demanding. She wanted a little car of her own, but I didn't think she could keep up with me, not on a long hike."

"A little car? With her paws on the tiny wheel? Oh--sweet! . . . " (p. 31)

He tries to impress Claire with another flight of fancy by embroidering a report about Japan heard from a missionary.

" . . . From what she says, I guess all you need in Japan is a bottle of mucilage and a couple of old newspapers and some two-by-fours. And you can have the house on a purple mountain, with cherry trees down below, and--" He put his clenched hand to his lips. His head was bowed. "And the ocean! Lord! The ocean! . . . And steamers there--just come from India! Huh! Getting pretty darn poetic here! Eggs are done" (p. 32).

A now-familiar pattern re-establishes itself. No rhapsody, no ecstasy may be long enjoyed without being cut short, deprecated, suppressed. The sublime experience must find its quick antithesis in the banal. Evocations of Japan and India reaffirm the hero's need for escape--into fantasy, into travel, into books. An exemplary fugitive scene combining projected escapes to Another Place (Minneapolis), in reading (books and magazines) and in a daydream appears in Chapter V.

He seemed to be fumbling for something about which he could deliciously think if he could but grasp it. Without quite visualizing either wall or sea, he was yet recalling old dreams of a moonlit wall by a warm stirring southern sea. If there was a girl in the dream she was intangible as the scent of the night (p. 56).

Always intangible are the women in these heroes' dreams. With such elusive ladies one can suffer no disappointment or surfeit. In these kinds of fantasies, Milt is a passive spectator, not a participant. One may wonder why, if his imagination is so fertile, Milt's role options and resources seem so limited.

Lewis seeks to broaden his hero's character with many incidental role attributions, conferred by metaphor. Milt is labeled variously as "eternal boy" (p. 22), the "engineer" of the Teal car (the cat is the "captain") (p. 24), a good "fairy" (p. 30), a "sloppy hound" and "the World's Champion Dude" in his own opinion (p. 64), a "spy" (p. 82), a "young poet" in another of his daydreams (p. 97), Claire's "perfect companion" (p. 267), an

imagined "piker" wearing a "rented soup and fish" (p. 318), a "deposed aristocrat" (p. 337), a "prairie pirate" (p. 349), and "a young viking . . . a young seaman of the crew of Eric the Red" (p. 368), as well as a "young tramp" and Claire's "one real playmate." Lewis can not represent Milt as entirely heroic, or use a consistent, tightly-disciplined scheme of metaphors to support his characterization, for several reasons: (1) the author's notion of character is too emotionally and impressionistically grounded to endure the restrictions of highly rational heroic attributes or patterns of imagery; (2) Lewis identified too closely with his protagonists to allow much distance or objectivity that might underscore their independence from his own peculiar life patterns; (3) the original short story mode of Free Air did not warrant meticulous attention to consistency in characterization or motif; and (4) in the loose, adventure-fantasy plot, the desires which impel Milt across the prairies derive from bursts of his ambition to be a successful bourgeois, alternating with troughs of gloomy self-doubt and anxiety.

These alternate periods of elation and depression compose a rough behavior pattern which does more to characterize Milt than his specific actions do. Given the proposition that Milt's "purpose in life was to know Claire," one is at first puzzled by his irresolution and feelings of inferiority--those debilitating convictions of unworthiness which seem so disharmonious with the broad,

democratic theme in Free Air that upholds the fundamental equality and worth of each individual in the human community. If Milt is humanly the Boltwoods' equal, what reason is there for all his apologizing and backsliding? By examining certain passages for evidence of self-defeating maneuvers, one may learn that Milt is oppressed by guilt originating from a basic role conflict. For example, the first indication of Milt's admitted anxiety appears in Chapter IV, as he prepares to follow Claire after camping near Gopher Prairie for the night.

To the high-well-born cat, Vere de Vere, Milt Daggett mused aloud, "Your ladyship, as Shakespeare says, the man that gets cold feet never wins the girl. And I'm scared, cat, clean scared" (p. 48).

Scared of what? Milt is not afraid of travel. Is he afraid of leaving his familiar role as Schoenstrom mechanic for an impulsive chase into upper levels of "society?" Probably. There are foolhardy risks in what Milt is doing: he hazards total rejection and ridicule by Miss Boltwood for his presumption; he may also discover that he is not adequate to make the adjustment, or to learn the roles and shibboleths of the upper class. Close behind Milt, seeming to identify deeply with the conflict of his rustic paladin, is Harry Lewis, affirming the same unspoken apology, "I'm only a small-town boy myself."

Support for this essentially serious motivation on the author's part flows from the discovery that nowhere does Lewis regard Milt's drive toward wish fulfillment as

the absurd, fortuitous and sentimental scheme that it is. Milt's intense self-doubts may spring from a sense of quasi-Christian modesty, designed to mortify Pride, or they may be ploys for reader sympathy and traps for praise. But guilt deriving from role conflict--the betrayal of home virtues and customs, with the accompanying threat of lost identity, in the attempt to assume a new and alien life style--seems to be an underlying cause of Milt's self-deprecation.

Obviously Milt is not satisfied with his situation in Schoenstrom. "I don't know just what I want to do," he confides to Bill McGolwey (p. 54). Gradually he "realized that for the past two years he had forced himself to find contentment in building up a business that had no future" (p. 85). The contrast between himself and the shining vision of Claire prompts his first expression of "something like agony."

"But, oh, what's the use? I can't ever be anything but a dub! Cleaning my nails, to make a hit with a girl that's got hands like hers! It's a long trail to Seattle, but it's a darn sight longer one to being--being--well, sophisticated . . . " (p. 65).

As he pursues Claire over the highroad, Milt tries to become a critic of life; he frets about the matter of "good taste." Then he sees himself as "a boob, chasing after a lone, cold star like Miss Boltwood" (p. 92). When Claire defensively stops her car and surprises Milt with a lofty dismissal of his unsolicited services, the young

man is deeply humiliated and hurt. He derides himself for acting like "a small boy in love with teacher," a "Yahoo" and a "Goat" (pp. 94-95). To Claire, in a later encounter, he confesses that he "wasn't bright enough" to satisfy his early ambitions, adding, "I just became a garage man" (p. 118). When they visit Yellowstone Park together, Milt assumes a wary reserve, "afraid that Claire would find him intrusive" (p. 130). While Claire dines with an affected young gentleman in riding breeches, Milt fusses in the background, imagining himself disadvantaged and inferior, in a small boy's swollen reaction to an Olympian rival. This reaction he repeats at the appearance of Jeff Saxton, Claire's old suitor, at Flathead Lake, Montana:

He was agonizing, "This Jeff person is the real thing. He's no Percy in riding-breeches. He's used to society and nastiness. . . . And I thought I could learn to mingle with Claire's own crowd! I wish I was out in the bug. I wonder if I can't escape?" (p. 187).

Later, Milt's fears at the prospect of tea with the Gilsons in Seattle follow this pattern.

"Tea--Now we're so near your Gilsons, I begin to get scared. Wouldn't know what to do. Gee, I've heard you have to balance a tea-cup and a sandwich and a hunk o' cake and a lot of conversation all at once! I'd spill the tea, and drop crumbs, and probably have the butler set on me" (p. 239).

The supreme ridicule, of course, is to endure the disapproval of menials--butlers, chauffeurs, garage attendants in uniform. Milt's whole approach to Seattle is guarded, apprehensive. He is driving the Boltwoods' Gomez into the

city, while Claire and her father have taken the train ahead, "And every minute he drove more slowly and became more uneasy" (p. 254). His first impressions of the city are distorted, hysterical. Lewis provides Milt with some irrationally peasant-like thoughts. The young man feels laughed at. "Will the whole town be onto me?" is his panicky reaction. He feels "crushed" by the multilevel parking garage, and its rows of automobiles seem to number millions; the attendants are costumed and condescending. A Seattle movie theater appears enormous. The nearby hotel is "entirely full of diplomats and marble and caviare" (pp. 256-257). In this frame of mind, when he "humbly" telephones for Claire, only to fetch a reply from the Gilsons' maid

who said "Yes?" in a tone which made it mean "No!" he ventured, "May I speak to Miss Boltwood?"

Miss Boltwood, it seemed, was out.

He was not sorry. He was relieved. He ducked out of the telephone-booth with a sensation of escape (p. 257).

Milt acts like a hunted and threatened man. His are not simply the reactions of a bumpkin overawed by the city, but the hallucinations of a frightened amateur who has bluffed himself into a high-stake game and fears that his fund of experience is inadequate. Escape seems the best maneuver.

Still, Lewis repeats,

Milt was in love with Claire; she was to him the purpose of life . . . All the way into Seattle he had brooded about her . . . But Claire had suddenly

become too big. In her were all these stores, these office buildings for clever lawyers and surgeons, these contemptuous trolley cars, these careless people in beautiful clothes. They were too much for him. Desperately he was pushing them back--back--fighting for breath. And she belonged with them (pp. 257-258).

What contributes toward this stockpile of opposition, or in what respect Claire now seems "too big" (and Milt, presumably, too little) remain mysteries. But in a grotesque and formidable way, Claire and Seattle seem fused into one hostile establishment, like maiden and keep, against which Galahad must sally with his puny lance. However much these obstacles may be products of Milt's own imagination, they seem designed to thwart any enjoyment in his pursuit of the young lady, or any promise of success in winning her.

The period of Milt's self-induced eclipse is extended. He skulks about the Gilsons', spies on Claire at a party within, feels moved to kill the young man he sees dancing with her. "With all the pleasure of martyrdom . . . he studied the other guests," Lewis relates.

It was the easy friendliness of all of them that most made Milt feel like an outsider. If a servant had come out and ordered him away, he would have gone meekly . . . he fancied (pp. 261-262).

After a series of social ordeals at tea, brunch, the opera, and at the Astoria Club, Milt satisfies himself that by imitating the manner and costume of his companions, and by bluffing the rest of his assumed role with bits of equivocal repartee, he can equal the pretenders in their own game, and win the esteem of Claire as well. The difficulty is that Milt relishes his society role, and when his

oafish friend Bill McGolwey descends on him for a drunken, Schoenstrom-style fling, the hero experiences harrowing role conflict. These brief scenes with McGolwey are significant because they labor to show how far Milt has progressed since his Minnesota days, by the expedient of depicting Bill as crudely boorish, but loyal. Momentarily, Milt sees his campaign as hopeless.

What was the use of trying to go ahead? Wasn't he, after all, merely a Bill McGolwey himself?

If he was, he wouldn't inflict himself on Claire (p. 343).

Claire, however, commends Milt for his fidelity to an old friend, although she observes, "You've grown away from him." Bored at last by the pomps and pretensions of Jeff Saxton and the Gilsons, Claire trundles them away for a visit to improbable Aunt Harriet, plain-speaking clairvoyante of the Boltwood-Gilson-Saxton families. With a few well-remembered anecdotes "Aunt Hatty" demolishes the haughty poses of the arrivistes, and the Gilsons slink away shamed. This outrageously contrived episode seems intended to show Milt that his longed-for role change from mechanic to engineering student (and potential husband to Claire Boltwood) need not stir in him any guilt feelings. The formidable leap into genteel society proves to be merely a low step, now that the Gilsons and their ancestry have been revealed as commonplace, and their style of life exposed as vulgar ostentation.

Seemingly elated by this unforeseen success, Milt declaims,

"Why, these are just folks, the same as kings and coal-heavers. There's no army we've got to fight. There's just you and me--you and I--[Milt's grammar improves, as the satisfaction of his social ambition seems imminent] and if we stick together, then we have all society, we are all society!" (p. 359).

After all, it is most agreeable to display democratic sentiments, especially when one is assured a position near the top. Claire cautions,

"Ye-es, but, Milt dear, I don't want to be an outcast."

"You won't be. In the long run, if you don't take these aristocrats seriously, they'll be all the more impressed by you" (p. 359).

In other words, the most profitable course for the parvenu is to feign indifference, and to outbluff and outsnub the "establishment," then catch them admiring him for his effrontery. This is apparently a role that Lewis, as well as his hero, was mastering, laid down as it is like a blueprint for the invasion of bourgeois society by the humble journeyman, in these days before Main Street.

It is worth tracing briefly the steps by which Milt develops the assurance that carries him toward social success. First, his public school education has been rigorous and varied. Secondly, he had read extensively. Third, he is progressive in his political and social orientation. Fourth, he is a particularly sharp and persistent observer of human behavior, and fifth, Milt is an accomplished imitator and bluffer.

From the time he first saw Claire Boltwood in Schoenstrom, up to the time he spies on her at a picnic "from the shelter of a manzanita bush" in the final chapter, Milt has been observing her every move. In their first encounter Lewis revealed that Milt, upon seeing Claire, had received an instantaneous lesson in the art of dressing (p. 61). Realizing that their meetings on the highway were too frequent to be coincidental, Claire gives Milt a curt dismissal, although she had valued his help enough earlier to present him with a gift of books. Thereafter, Milt keeps a more circumspect distance behind the Boltwoods.

That he might not fail her in need, he bought a ridiculously expensive pair of field glasses, and watched her when she stopped by the road (p. 99).

When Claire has dinner at the hotel in Yellowstone Park, Milt, having refused an invitation, watches her through a window and mimics her companion "Percy" of the riding breeches. Privately Milt wonders how quickly he could "Pick up" a line of affected manners and talk, the way he had learned "Plattdeutsch" back home. His peeping through the window at the Gilsons' party in Seattle also had the double purpose of watching Claire and conning the manners of her dancing partners.

Milt has been studying for his role change at every possible moment. Liberated on his journey from the restrictive tastes of Schoenstrom entertainment, Milt shows a nicer choice of movie fare. Avoiding the western

variety, he now chooses "films in which the leading men wore evening clothes, and no one ever did anything without being assisted by a 'man.'" This revelation is comic-pathetic, in the hero's naive assumption that he could learn savoir faire from cinema situations, which might prepare him to cope with a social life he had not yet encountered, or had no way of judging. But Lewis follows this with a transition to even more remarkable matters.

Aside from the pictures Milt's best tutors were traveling men. Though he measured every cent, and for his campfire dinners bought modest chuck steaks, he had at least one meal a day at a hotel, to watch the traveling men (p. 86).

In an intense and approving digressive passage, Lewis commends these traveling salesmen as "the missionaries of business," "martyrs," and "pioneers in spats," who,

. . . as much as the local ministers and doctors and teachers and newspapermen, were the agents in spreading knowledge and justice (p. 86).

Hence it was to the traveling men, not to supercilious tourists in limousines, that Milt turned for suggestions as to how to perform the miracle of changing from an ambitious boy into what Claire would recognize as a charming man (p. 87).

He studies the eating of oysters and salad, and imitates the drummers' tastes in shirts and socks. He buys a nail brush to scour his hands, and a rhetoric book to help polish his language; he had discovered "subtleties which he had to express." Milt labors to become more discriminating and critical of life, noting "that there was an interesting thing he remembered hearing his teachers call 'good taste'" (p. 91). Milt even resorts to inventing a

fictitious salesman named Smith, for whom he may pretend to search in each little town, while actually trying to discover where Claire's Gomez has been garaged for the night.

For her part, Claire, who is above the class of salesmen, considers them "merely commercial persons in hard-boiled suits. She identified them with the writing-up of order-slips on long littered writing-tables, and with hotels that reduced the delicate arts of dining and sleeping to gray greasiness" (p. 86). From her point of view, the salesmen aboard her Seattle-bound train are gaudily dressed sources of "satisfaction and horror," who possess "harshly pompous voices--proudly unlettered voices of the smoking compartment" (p. 244), whose small talk is of Great Propositions and legendary business successes.

In addition to observing salesmen, Milt learns new rules of dress and decorum from studying fashion brochures and imitating his "betters" like Jeff Saxton. Indicating once again that a change of costume forecasts a change in role, Lewis shows Milt in the agonies of renting just the right evening clothes for the crucial confrontation at the Gilsons' opera box.

He called it "a dress suit," and before the complications of that exotic garb, he was flabby with anxiety. To Milt and to Schoenstrom . . . the dress suit was the symbol and proof, the indication and manner, of sophisticated wealth. . . .

No; a dress-suit was what the hero wore in the movies; and the hero in the movies, when he wasn't a cowpuncher, was an ex-captain of the Yale football team, and had chambers and a valet (pp. 317-318).

At last outfitted in acceptable regalia rented from Silberfarb the Society Tailor, Milt boards a trolley "and sat as one rich and famous and very kind to the Common People," reveling in his masquerade, until he realizes that he is without a top hat. Crushed by this seemingly stupid oversight, Milt imagines being stared at for a provincial-- until he notices that Saxton is wearing a soft hat, also. Comparing himself to his rival, Milt feels reassured.

"Except that Jeff did put on white gloves, Milt couldn't see that they looked so different." He instructs himself:

"Forget you're a dub. Try to be human." . . . Milt had found that the one thing that would save him was to smile as though he knew more than he was telling. It did not, he remembered, make any difference whether or not the smile was real (pp. 326-327).

It is interesting that in formal clothes, the uniform designed to make men seem identically pruned of individualistic marks, Milt finds his pinnacle of "democratic" equality, and dares to bluff and banter with the upper-class dilettanti. He congratulates himself: "I'm not afraid of the kid-glove precinct any more. My brain's as good as theirs, give it a chance." But then, refusing to allow himself the savor of victory unqualified, Milt adds plaintively, "But oh, they're all against me" (pp. 329-330). Now role conflict and confusion overtake him, as he murmurs, "Where am I? Where am I?" The question is that of a self-alienated man who is too proud to confess that he is lonely and disoriented.

Nevertheless, Milt's performance in the opera box has answered positively his earlier question to Claire, "Can I become--the kind of man you like?" and she had replied indirectly, " . . . Don't you forget for one moment that all these people . . . that seem so aloof and amused, are secretly just plain people with enamel on, and you're to have the very best enamel, if it's worth while" (p. 298). One hears this as an echo of Istra Nash's pronouncements, as she took over William Wrenn as an amusing project. Beyond this, however, is a restatement of Sinclair Lewis's seemingly unquestioned assumption that mankind is universally the same in motives and life patterns; that differences in occupation and style are fortuitously gained, or won through cheeky virtuoso performances; and that people as common as little brass bowls could be transformed into successful bourgeoisie with the aid of some artistic cloisonné work. But they are "secretly just plain people." By believing this, and saying so in his role as an author, Harry Lewis could feel that he was evening things up a bit. A fervent avowal of radical social democracy could assure a small-town boy that he was as good as any other man--perhaps secretly, a little better, because he was purer.

The purity of Claire Boltwood, however, is of the kind guaranteed by her life of affluence and vacuity among superficial friends in the East. After presenting the heroine as a well-schooled snob with an aggressive, curious

mind, Lewis can do little else with Claire than portray her as a slowly thawing ice maiden. She has scarcely anything to do except speak and act like an arbiter of that "good taste" which Milt feverishly hopes to acquire in a few weeks.

Claire Boltwood is twenty-three, and she is as sophisticated and stylish as her upbringing in Brooklyn Heights, in close proximity to New York City, will permit her to be. She has planned the trip West to distract her father from his compulsion for overwork. Since "nervous prostration" has twice undermined his health, Claire must take charge of travel arrangements, including operation of their car and the choice of evening accommodations. These matters she feels entirely capable of managing, but it is evident that her expectations of success are unrealistic and naive. From the point of view of an author who knows his home country well, and has found a bright, inexperienced woman tracking across his preserve, Lewis scolds, instructs, and patronizes his heroine through the officiousness of Milt Daggett, his local representative. Thus, the education of Claire is not a grinding and polishing process, as it must be for Milt, but a roughening and etching one. Lewis permits Claire to play few overt roles, and to exhibit imagination only occasionally. Often her interior reflections develop into dissociative reactions--that sense of standing rooted while watching oneself perform like another person.

Specifically, Claire has no occupational role. This fact reinforces her identification with the "idle rich," and explains her lack of experience in dealing with the general populace. The democratization of Claire is keyed to her empirical discoveries about the West and its inhabitants, and her remarkable sensitivity to the exact degree of acceptance she receives from the people in any particular town. Any "change" Claire may undergo depends on relinquishment of "her own Eastern attitude that she was necessarily superior to a race she had been trained to call 'common people'" (p. 67).

Claire's first attempt at problem-solving suggests what a handicap her training has been. Mired in a slough between Schoenstrom and Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, Claire first gathers brush to thrust beneath the car wheels. When this proves fruitless, she looks for a local man to drag the Gomez out with a team, assuming blithely that "all farmers have hearts of gold" (p. 16). The real farmer in this case is the roughneck Adolph Zolzac, who had deliberately developed the mud-hole near his farm, to earn easy money from outrageous towing fees. To him Claire speaks in almost British-English:

"My car--my automobile--has been stuck in the mud. A bad driver, I'm afraid! I wonder if you would be so good as to--" (pp. 17-18).

When Milt arrives to rescue her from further embarrassment, her talk is larded with Anglicisms like "immensely grateful," "Horrid wet!" "awfully independent," and "really much

indebted." Her phrases and cadences underscore her separateness from the Minnesota natives, whose slang and idioms come across broad and flat like the prairie. Though she lacks an occupation, her language indicates Claire's chief functional role in Free Air--that of exemplar and defender of the Eastern society standard of taste and conduct. This cultivated manner, Lewis seems to imply, can be rendered much less obnoxious, if people who affect it will only concede the existence of other persons, other customs, in a spirit of social brotherhood. These concessions Claire does make--she must, to find Milt tolerable--as distinct from Jeff Saxton and Eugene Gilson, who will never abandon the façade of superiority, even when it makes them appear ridiculous. The division between the men and Claire becomes quite clear in Chapter XXXIII during their awkward visit to Milt and Bill McGolwey in the former's shabby Seattle apartment. Against the snobs, Claire sides with the egalitarians.

Claire's other functional roles of driver, tourist, and nurse to Delores Kloh are far less important than her role as teacher to Milt, who yearns to imitate her social graces. In a burst of self-effacing confession, Milt declares,

" . . . Clair dear, do you know why I came on this trip? In Schoenstrom, I heard you say you were going to Seattle. That moment, I decided I would, too, and get acquainted with you, if murder would do it. But oh, I'm clumsy."

To which she replies:

"You've seen me clumsy, in driving. You taught me to get over it. Perhaps I can teach you some things. And we'll study--together--evenings! I'm a thoroughly ignorant parasite woman. Make me become real! A real woman!" (p. 239).

There is a lack of sequential logic in Claire's aspiration, but she is apparently suggesting an exchange of services for their mutual benefit. But Claire had had an earlier vision of her mission. When her father had inquired about her attitude toward Milt, " . . . what will you do to this innocent?" she had replied,

" . . . I'm going to carve him, and paint him, and possibly spoil him. The creating of a man--of one who knows how to handle life--is so much more wonderful than creating absurd pictures or statues or stories. I'll nag him into completing college. He'll learn dignity--or perhaps lose his simplicity and be ruined; . . . I'm monkeying with destiny . . . " (p. 153).

These passages bring to light a curious feature of the novel: while Milt must rely on accidental circumstances to advance his case with Claire, drawing encouragement only from her toleration of his attempts to ingratiate himself, Claire has matters very much her way. She it is who makes the crucial decisions, who handles the machinery of the story's development; Milt only acts on his initial impulse, then follows it out ad absurdum in a fantasy of wish fulfillment. Furthermore, as Claire's experience broadens, and she becomes more tolerant, she endures few agonies of role conflict, because essentially her attitude does not change. True, she discovers the proletarians,

but in their presence she strikes the pose of the Lady Bountiful, Friend of the Poor, in which guise it becomes difficult to fault her. When she breaks with her snobbish friends, it is because they have become shallow, spiteful, and boring, and not because their attitude of social superiority seems fundamentally wrong.

What is remarkable about Lewis's characterization of Claire is the frequency with which she thinks dissociatively. Sometimes she fancies that she is unreal; sometimes she speaks of herself in the third person, in a token self-denial of identity. Examples of this phenomenon are abundant. In Chapter I, battling prairie mud on the roadway, Claire "was too appallingly busy to be frightened, or to be Miss Claire Boltwood . . . " (p. 4). Exhausted that evening, she and her father had repaired to the hotel at Gopher Prairie, and outraged by the familiar questions and stares of the townspeople, Claire's entire sensibility to her surroundings seems distorted and soured by her fatigue. The next morning, however, cold wash-water leaves Claire feeling "that she was a woman, not a dependent girl" (p. 45). The sun shines. A meadowlark sings. Excitedly, Claire decides to go on. Glad greetings from the hotel clerk and waitress, lately offensive, now spur a complete reversal of the heroine's former attitude, as if the fuming woman of the day before had indeed been someone else. Lewis shows this transformation in a crucial passage.

"Why! Claire gasped, "why, they aren't rude. They care--about people they never saw before. That's why they ask questions! I never thought--I never thought! There's people in the world who want to know us without having looked us up in the Social Register! I'm so ashamed! . . . And the people--they were being friendly, all the time."

Then she adds, in a topsy-turvy metaphor of her relationship to her father,

"Oh, Henry B., young Henry Boltwood, you and your godmother Claire have a lot to learn about the world!" (pp. 46-47).

In this lighthearted mood, she decides that "Free Air," the sign appearing at the local garage, will be the motto for their "pilgrimage."

As Claire's acquaintance with Milt grows, she begins to speculate about such imaginary projects as escorting him to the Winter Garden in New York, or to Bach recitals. Mr. Boltwood, however, discourages her ruminations "till Claire returned from youthful romance to being a sensible Boltwood . . . " (p. 125). But as the wonders of land and sky impel Claire to appreciate them with Milt, she finds such supercilious freaks as the jodhpur-clad companion at dinner too painful a reminder of her former narrow tastes. To Milt she relates,

"Then he insisted on introducing me to a woman from my own Brooklyn, who condoled with me for having to talk to Western persons while motoring. Oh, dear God, that such people should live . . . that the sniffy little Claire should once have been permitted to live!" (pp. 136-137).

Later, as Lewis describes the numbing effect of relentless driving at night, Claire experiences dissociation under pressure.

She wasn't hungry any longer. She would never reach the next town--and she didn't care. It wasn't she, but a grim spirit which had entered her dead body, that kept steering, feeding gas, watching the road (p. 195).

Following her last romantic drive with Milt and the pathetic Delores Kloh to North Yakima, Claire boards a train with her father to complete their trip to Seattle. As the memory of Milt's farewell kiss fades, Claire sees herself as having been fetched away by madness.

"I'm crazy. In-sane! Pledging myself to this boy before I know how he will turn out. . . . Will I hate him when I see him with nice people? Can I introduce him to the Gilsons? Oh, I was mad; so wrought up by that idiotic chase with Delores, and so sure I was a romantic heroine and--And I'm simply an indecisive girl in a realistic muddle!" (p. 243)

She can not bear being "eyed by the smug tourists--people as empty of her romance as they were incapable of her sharp tragedy." Fleeing to the railroad-car vestibule, "she tried to imagine that the train was carrying her away from the pursuing enemy--from her own weak self" (p. 244). Still harrassed by qualms after she reaches Seattle, Claire escapes from the quizzical gaze of her hostess: " . . . she fled inside--fled from her sputtering inquiring self" (p. 252).

Even in the final chapter, Claire can not respond to Milt's invitation, "Let's pretend we're driving across

the continent again" (indicative of his boyish wish to stage a repetition of a previous successful performance), without misgivings. She imagines that she can "be herself" with Milt beside her. She is glad to have escaped the poses Jeff Saxton would have required. Still,

"But I wonder if I am aphoristic and subtle?
I wonder if when she gets the rice-powder off, Claire
isn't a lot more like Milt than she thought?" (p. 365)

Claire asks herself. Milt, however, demands that they marry immediately. When she reveals that she has a fair sum of her own money, Milt feints a withdrawal of his proposal, saying, "That makes it impossible. Young tramp marrying lady of huge wealth--" But Claire has decided.

"No you don't! I've accepted you. Do you think I'm going to lose the one real playmate I've ever had? It was so lonely on the Boltwoods' brown stoop till Milt came along and whistled impertinently and made the solemn little girl in frills play marbles . . . " (p. 370).

Avoiding confrontation with their basic incompatibility, Claire idealizes their past relationship with third person address and juvenile metaphor.

Indeed, these childlike references to romantic love follow the pattern established in Lewis's earlier novels. As the plight of Delores Kloh was drawn Claire and Milt together, the two sit exhausted on the Klohs' back porch in North Yakima viewing a tin-can littered scene. Claire observes,

"We're like two children that have been playing too long."

"But don't want to go home!"

"Quite! Though I don't think much of your idea of a playhouse--those tin cans. But it's better than having to be a grown-up" (p. 235).

In the final scene of Free Air, when Milt contrives to separate Claire from the Gilsons' picnic and drive off with her into the hills, she exclaims excitedly, "Oh, we are two forlorn babes in the woods!" (p. 363). Milt, recalling an earlier line by Walter Babson in The Job, pleads for no delay in marrying: "Dear, can't we be crazy once, while we're youngsters?" (p. 367). Now Milt Daggett is twenty-five years old (p. 50), and Claire Boltwood is two years his junior (p. 12); the child metaphors seem inappropriate, even perhaps bizarre, occurring as they do in deadly-earnest contexts--not in scenes of hilarious irony or foolery, as might be expected. Even when one remembers the relatively prim literary conventions of the day, Lewis's lovers seem to lapse into these childish roles too complacently, as if they signal a sanctification ritual--proving indisputably that if love is exciting in a child-like way, it must also be sweet and innocent and true. But these proofs do not explain the urgent inevitability of the lovers' stylized roles. To love, why must they be represented as pre-adolescents? As Lewis uses them, these child-love references seem gratuitous and naive, until it becomes evident that the author is deploying them as a screen to remove love from physical immediacy, and to make

it remote, idyllic and immortal. The bogey of sex, denied an introduction, interposes no problems to children who have not yet heard of it. Lewis's hero-lovers must be either children or courtiers, so preoccupied with playing their roles in metaphor, that the realities of sexual love, beyond some devoted kissing, need never be acknowledged.

For Milt Daggett, then, his sudden passion for Claire in Schoenstrom marks only his departure from the boy-gang stage of development. Aside from the news that his personal notebook contains "the smudged pencil addresses of five girls in St. Cloud" and that Minnie Rauskukle preens at Milt's appearance in the general store, the hero seems quite uninformed about women for his age. The world of his acquaintance is peopled with brother-friends like Bill McGolwey, Prof Jones, and Barney the banker of St. Klopstock. As leader of the progressive political wing to Schoenstrom, moreover, Milt is leader of his own gang, a role which Harry Lewis never enjoyed as a boy, but one which devolved upon his envied brother Claude. Without rivals at home, Milt seems to encounter formidable opposition in his pursuit of Claire. His prime adversary is Geoffrey Saxton, sophisticated and slightly caddish, who has been Claire's escort in Brooklyn society for many years. But Jeff is too rich, efficient, unimaginative and paternal to do more than "disturb" the heroine. Furthermore, at thirty-nine he is obviously too old. As a foil for Milt, Jeff is merely a perfunctory menace, true to Lewis's custom

of providing a puffed-up antagonist for the hero's dramatic slaughter--a symbolic, crucial act against exaggerated opposition which establishes his full self-confidence, and gives him courage to demand his meed of affection from the waiting girl. At the conclusion of Free Air, Milt is without rival, and without friend, too, having staked everything on his campaign to win Claire. Thus untroubled by comparisons, the hero may be allowed preeminence.

Milt answers to no authority figures, either. His own idealized pioneer father, about whom he bluffed to Jeff as having belonged to "the old Puritan aristocracy" (p. 335), was dead. Only Claire's father, Henry Boltwood, reputed "one of the keenest intellects in New York whole-sale circles . . . a scholar, and . . . chiefly instrumental in the establishment of the famous Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra" (p. 334) demonstrates the manner and presence to command (Chapter XXIII), but only after he has recovered from illness. Throughout the first half of Free Air, he is plaintive and feeble, a representation of the autocratic father subdued and relegated to the passive role of passenger. Lewis underscores the subtlety of this relationship in several passages.

He was not a father, just now, but a passenger trying not to irritate the driver. He smiled in a waxy way . . . (p. 8).

Her father never drove, but she could, she insisted. His easy agreeing was pathetic. He watched her with spaniel eyes (p. 14).

Her father was easily tired, but he drowsed through the early afternoons when a none-too-digested small-town lunch was as lead within him (p. 68).

Mr. Boltwood is ineffectual in fending off the nasty hitch-hiker Claire had picked up in Chapter IX, and he must sit fearfully in the passenger's seat until Milt drives up to send the ruffian scampering. Later, in Chapter XX, Mr. Boltwood's anxiety over driving through treacherous Blewett Pass, coupled with his poor digestion, causes him to require medical attention. The situation must again be tended by Milt, who exhibits renewed qualities of leadership and authority as the "new Milt, the boss, abrupt, almost bullying." A chance companion, Pinky Parrott, knows of a Dr. Hooker Beach living nearby, and to this Harvard-educated physician they bring the ailing Mr. Boltwood. Dr. Beach is only an incidental character, but his appearance in the story affords Lewis a pretext for observations on taste and breeding. Out here in remote Washington, the Beaches ate "thin toast" from "thin china," and possessed a "talking machine" which "played the same Russian music that was popular that same moment in New York." Claire thinks of the Beaches as "genuine aristocrats, while Jeff Saxton, for all his family and his assumptions about life, was the eternal climber" (p. 212). She notes that Milt is at ease with the Beaches, whom he takes to be "just regular folks." Claire, however, confides that the Beaches' "kin are judges and senators and college Presidents, all over New England," adding, "This doctor must be the

grandson of the ambassador . . . " (p. 213). Dr. Beach is the only man in Free Air besides "Professor" Jones of Schoenstrom for whom Milt shows genuine respect as an authority figure. Beach seems to be a living echo of Milt's own dead pioneer father, the "Old Doc" with origins in Maine, who read Dickens and Byron. These men reflect Lewis's idealization of weatherbeaten New England individualists, whose culture and tastes and self-assurance were elegant, in a Spartan way, and whose roots trailed back long and deep in the rocky traditions of American democracy. Henry B. Boltwood, on the other hand, and Jeff Saxton, who is described as "too paternal," are merely lucky merchants, "obviously versed in the strategems of the great golden game" of finance, to use Pinky Parrott's phrase. These men have no tastes except expensive ones, no enthusiasms except for money and the power which accrues to it. Further, it is remarkable that rich people in Lewis's works generally spend their money idly and ostentatiously, buying dinners, automobiles or restless entertainments, while the true aristocrats (to make a distinction) have honestly lost their wealth, or pretend to have none, and find acceptance among ordinary men. Jeff Saxton cares not for unaffected men like Milt Daggett or Bill McGolwey, however. Jeff's reappearance in Seattle after several weeks in the Alaskan wilds seems to show a profound change: he appears rugged, manly, tanned, and scarred. Incredibly, now, at nearly forty, Jeff becomes

a man! But his adventures have only been intended to impress Claire; his role as the "Alaskan caveman" is spurious. For her part Claire sees Jeff still as the "Modest Christian Gentleman." As her perspective has changed, Claire's distance from Jeff has widened. In seeing the land and its many sorts of people, Claire has learned humility and compassion. Her transformation, in contrast to Jeff's, has added breadth to her roles; she still loves her "clever dinners" and elegant clothes, but she has learned to respect the ambition and enterprise of Milt Daggett, Minnesota mechanic.

The dramatic situations and literary diction of Free Air seldom struggle above melodrama. The exigencies of serial publication for a popular magazine audience, and the necessity for rapid writing may be blamed for many of the book's faults. Lewis's revisions of the Saturday Evening Post texts were neither far-reaching nor profound. There are many fussy word substitutions and many small additions. Of interest is the ending Lewis devised for the original "Free Air" serial on June 21, 1919. Boarding the train at Yakima for Seattle, Claire encounters old friends Frances Goring and Alden Stamm of Brooklyn Heights, now newly married and honeymooning to Japan. After a trivial conversation with them, however, Claire goes to a platform alone, to think. She decides to send a telegram to Milt, in care of Dr. Hooker Beach:

Hope this reaches you. Have decided not teach
 you drink tea; you teach me drink whatever we
 can get, Alaska mountains. Would hate peaceful
 evening and hand of cards. Come quick so we
 can scrap and make up. CLAIRE⁶

The democratization of Claire had succeeded so well at this point (the end of Chapter XXIII in the Harcourt, Brace and Howe edition), that a brief reintroduction to the frivolous pastimes of Brooklyn Heights society made her yearn for uncharted adventures with Milt, the plebeian. Significantly, in her telegram Claire renounces her plan to teach Milt the mysteries of acceptable social deportment--a plan which Lewis had to revive when recounting Milt's embarrassment before the Seattle snobs in the sequel.

Three crucial passages in Free Air, which indicate changes in the direction of the plot development, involve changes of role for the main characters. Two of these concern Claire's earlier acceptance of social democracy--the change in her attitude toward the well-meaning queries by citizens of Gopher Prairie (pp. 46-48), and her decision to work ruin on the Seattle pretenders by calling on Aunt Hatty to expose their family skeletons (pp. 352-357). The third passage describes Milt's confrontation with the Gilsons and Jeff Saxton at the opera, where, with both parties bluffing about their appreciation of

⁶Saturday Evening Post, CLXLI (June 21, 1919),
 146.

Il Amore dei Tre Re, Milt's responses have the advantage of being supported with common sense (pp. 327-328). The point is, that while Claire is learning a new role as an equal of the "common people," Milt is discovering how to act like an aristocrat--not like Jeff Saxton, who is after all an impossible jackass, but like Dr. Hooker Beach, with roots in the New England past. Both Claire and Milt endure the anxieties of role conflict and guilt. She is almost instantly sorry for her qualified acceptance of Milt's "proposal" in the Ellensburg train station. Will she give up her luxuries to marry a mad mechanic? Milt feels threatened and persecuted for his lack of social sophistication. Will he ever be worthy of this woman with cultivated tastes? The semblance of a resolution to these difficulties emerges at the end of Chapter XXXIV after the electrifying visit to Aunt Hatty. Claire has learned that she no longer cares for the shams of the shallow Western Easterners, and Milt discovers that his family is no more ignoble than those of Saxton or the Gilsons. Milt marvels,

" . . . Do you realize that a miracle has happened? We're no longer Miss Boltwood and a fellow named Daggett. We have been, even when we've liked each other, up to today. Always there's been a kind of fence between us. We had to explain and defend ourselves and scrap--But now--we've us, and the rest of the world has disappeared, and--"

"And nothing else matters," said Claire (p. 360).

Again, as he has shown in Wrenn, Hawk, The Job, and even in The Innocents, Lewis contrives the union of the lone hero and the uncommitted heroine in a context of role-and-job change, which point toward success in one's chosen occupation, and improvement in one's social status. In most cases, a prudent marriage is the key to upward mobility in taste and income. The hero's task is to isolate the girl from her family and from other competitive men; then he assumes a chivalric role, and in some signal, self-effacing act, hopes to impress her enough to consider him worthy of marriage. In the case of Milt Daggett, this Galahad on wheels has endured many ordeals for his lady. He is the talking frog, grown familiar to the princess, transformed into a prince by her kiss. Thus, role-playing and role change are indispensable for plot development in Free Air. While Milt squirms in and out of costumes and roles, hoping to hit upon the most ingratiating combination, one senses that his success is spurious, and that this hero is little more than a desperate actor. As for Claire, it appears that she has undergone no real change: her attitude toward people on the road has always been patronizing, and her relationship with Milt seems based on amused condescension. Essentially, she is passive before Milt's antics.

In conclusion, it must be obvious that Milt's successes are crudely rigged. The opposition of his rival, Jeff Saxton, is melodramatic and absurd. Social opposition

from the Seattle set is made ineffectual by their own inanity and by Aunt Hatty's exposure of their pretensions. Milt's fiercest battles are within himself, as he compromises his basic loyalty to the working class, the proletarians of democratic America with whom he identifies himself, yearning for the woman and the tastes and the perquisites of a class he regards as aristocratic. It does not occur to him that Claire might be a fool masquerading as an emancipated, modern woman. But his main appeal for her, aside from his candid manner and address, seems to lie in his novelty. It seems fairly certain that after guiding Milt through engineering school, Claire will have him made over the way she likes him. Thus, Milt's triumph is neither convincing nor valid: the opposition has been too perfunctory, the prize of too doubtful value. The small-town boy's quest for identity, aborted by a preoccupation with external evidences of change, is sadly inconclusive. It remains to be seen whether the same is true of Carol Kennicott's search for her prime role in Main Street.

CHAPTER VIII

MAIN STREET: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PERCY BRESNAHAN?

Less than a year before the publication of Main Street, Sinclair Lewis wrote to his publisher, Alfred Harcourt, "I'll NEVER do a novel more carefully planned and thought out and more eagerly written than Main Street . . . "¹ the work which Lewis felt "may, perhaps, be the real beginning of my career as a writer,"² and he was most anxious that his forthcoming novel must be accepted as "a realistic picture of American life," even "an unusually factual picture." Among his many suggestions to Harcourt over the handling of publicity and the soliciting of favorable comments from critics was Lewis's idea for a promotional letter, explaining that Main Street had taken almost two years to write, and that

¹Harrison Smith, ed., From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930 (New York, 1952), p. 20. Letter headed "Washington, Monday, December 15 [1919]."

²Ibid., p. 21. ("Washington, December 24.")

this is much bigger than The Job [which Lewis had considered his best work until then]--just as true and much better done. It is almost the first book which really pictures American small-town life.³

How completely Lewis had been absorbed in this novel was indicated in his admission to Harcourt,

No book and no number of short stories I've ever done have ever meant a quarter of what this does to me. I'm working on it 24 hours a day--whether I'm writing or playing.⁴

In a later correspondence Lewis asserted that he had actually begun "to plan M St 1905," a time of origin which Mark Schorer has traced in the novelist's recollections and diaries, when the novel was "not yet even a formulated literary idea," but "only an irritation."⁵ Surely his determination to set down those emotions first projected as "The Village Virus" was revived by the Lewises' visit to Sauk Centre in mid-1916. Concentrated work on the manuscript began in the fall of 1919, while the Lewises lived in Washington, D. C.

Harcourt, Brace and Howe published Main Street on October 23, 1920. Subtitled The Story of Carol Kennicott, the novel bears a dedication "To / James Branch Cabell / and / Joseph Hergesheimer," followed by an untitled introduction on the leaf preceding page one of

³From Main Street to Stockholm, p. 35. ("Kennebago Lake [Maine], August 11 [1920].")

⁴Ibid., p. 25. ("Washington, February 8 [1920].")

⁵Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, pp. 101-102.

Chapter I. The novel runs through thirty-nine chapters in 451 pages. By March 5, 1921, according to the Lewis-Harcourt correspondence, sales of Main Street had already reached 130,000.

Mark Schorer has reviewed many of the factors which contributed toward this unprecedented popularity, "the most sensational event in twentieth-century American publishing history." For one thing, the taste of the reading public was for change; for another, Lewis and Harcourt managed the publication of Main Street imaginatively --a well-wrought product cleverly promoted; further, there was a cultural tradition in American literature of reaction against the barbarisms of rural life, reinforced by a growing tendency toward national self-criticism, or "debunking" of inherited assumptions and ideals. Finally, there was the almost exposé style of the novel, which appealed to readers in towns across the United States who scanned the book for characters like themselves, as well as to urban readers, many of whose roots lay in rural America or in immigrant origins a generation back.

Main Street is a serious book with a sheaf of social messages, but it is not fundamentally a satire. What it is, from the perspective of fifty years, is an account of a few years in the adult life of Carol Kennicott, a woman locked within herself by barriers of role and fantasy--her defenses against any confrontation with the fact of her own mediocrity. Mounted before the

comparatively drab background of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, Carol's is a figure with color and movement. But any pretensions the novel may have to dimensions of tragedy or pathos depend on the fundamental proposition of this individual-vs.-environment juxtaposition; more particularly, these claims derive from Carol's assumption of her personal martyrdom in having to reside in a prairie town.

To what extent Carol's attitudes of discomfiture and disparagement reflected the real feelings of Grace Lewis on her visits to Sauk Centre, it is difficult to assess. It is apparent that in showing and explaining his birthplace to his wife, Lewis discovered new insights into his own former mode of life, and appreciated them even if he did not share Grace's outsider's judgment. Mrs. Lewis declared that she had been the model for Carol Kennicott,⁶ and to a degree this seems reasonable; Carol's tastes and values, as well as some of her charm and repartee, seem to coincide with Mrs. Lewis's. Furthermore, the authentic situation of a newcomer in unfamiliar, if not openly critical and hostile, surroundings would not have been wasted on Lewis, who had used this as a dramatic device in all of his earlier books, and had certainly experienced the anxieties of being a stranger in many inhospitable

⁶With Love From Gracie, pp. 152-153. Lewis's inscription in his wife's copy of *Main Street* reads: "To Mrs. Sinclair Lewis from Mr. Sinclair Lewis this lil masterpiece by Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair Lewis. To Gracie, who is all the good part of Carol--Hal."

places, himself. Thus, it seems best to say that, insofar as Carol resembles Grace Lewis, she represents Lewis's impression of his wife's essential predicament in Sauk Centre. But Carol's modus operandi in Gopher Prairie society, her mercurial affections and disaffections, her impulses and antipathies, as well as her social theories and naive faith in simple systems of political and economic order, are those of Harry Lewis from Sauk Centre.

Mark Schorer has discussed this melding of identities in Carol, and quotes Charles Breasted's recollection of Lewis's admission that

'Carol is "Red" Lewis: always groping for something she isn't capable of attaining, always dissatisfied, always restlessly straining to see what lies just over the horizon, intolerant of her surroundings, yet lacking any clearly defined vision of what she really wants to do or be.'⁷

Schorer suggests that Carol's origins in the blended experiences of Grace and Sinclair Lewis may be responsible for the author's ambiguous point of view toward the character, and indeed, this inconsistency of focus must present a problem to any critic of Main Street. One can not escape the fact that, artistically, the characterization of Carol is flawed. The main reason for this is that Lewis had great difficulty maintaining a judicious distance from his protagonists; the more they tended to become vehicles of expression for his own frustrations and indignations,

⁷Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 286 n.

the closer and more sympathetic was the author's partisanship; in other episodes, however, where the emotional stakes are lower and the action is of merely transitional interest, Lewis takes a more distant and patronizing view of his characters, under the pretext of exhibiting the versatility or disparate facets of his puppets' personalities. Another reason for the awkwardness of Carol seems to be that Lewis usually seemed positive about what his heroine should do and say and represent, but denied her a human psyche which would have informed her actions with dignity and purpose. As a consequence, Carol is bent on opposing for opposition's sake only, a circumstance which reduces Main Street to a novel of dilettantish impulses instead of a moving account of self-realization.

For tens of thousands of readers, nevertheless, these gestures of defiance were enough. The very imprecision of Carol's characterization which caused debate among thoughtful critics was the quality which permitted a vast audience to identify with the doctor's wife so importuned. Carol's roles as rebel and challenger of the old virtues were accepted at full value, and throngs of Americans saw in her the personification of their alienation from the manners and pace of life in country towns. The astonishing popularity of Main Street, irrespective of its conflicting interpretations by readers, had two far-reaching consequences for the author and

his craft. First, Lewis's commercial achievement forced him into a conspicuous role as a celebrity and liberal social critic, a role which he felt compelled to uphold before any future public audience. Secondly, popular approval and the critics' praise caused Lewis to overlook the limitations of his characterization of Carol, and froze his technique to a calculated formula (which Schorer describes as "the illusion of completeness"), when there might have been an opportunity for better disciplined insight and craftsmanship. In both cases, Sinclair Lewis seems to have been wrecked by success, fated forever to wear the measured epithet "caricaturist" in future discussions of the American novel.

Thematically, Main Street seems greater in stature than its predecessors The Trail of the Hawk and The Job, because of its "microcosm" dimension, a factor which Lewis only experimented with briefly in his examination of the New York office building where Una Golden toiled. But behind Lewis's protestations of the universality of the human village everywhere and the typicality of Gopher Prairie and its Main Street lies the author's unquestioned and journalistic tenet that mankind across the globe is essentially the same. He had earlier written in the short version of "The Innocents":

The greatest philosophical theory in the world is that "people are people." The Applebys, who had

mellowed among streets and shops, were very much like the Tubbses of Cape Cod.⁸

It is a convenient convention for Lewis, who sometimes fancied himself in the role of a preacher, to imply that while he was treating of the individual, he was really speaking of the many; and that what he generalized about the mass was applicable also to the man. But while this thematic framework seems to lend a noble and heroic scope to events in Gopher Prairie, it is essentially a hedge against the weakness of either the protagonist or the social import of the book. At bottom, it is a bluff. To suggest that Carol Kennicott is typical of scores of frustrated women confined in towns throughout the nation and world is to pass along her unfinished portrait to the reader with the comment, "--You know what I mean." Lewis did not make the distinction that, while men in society may be the same in their roles and functions among each other, they are unique in themselves. It is this lack of a sense of selfhood which deprives Lewis's main characters of their majesty, makes them dread loneliness, and causes them to see themselves only in relation to other people, playing roles or acting in fantasies. The same deficiency seemed to plague the author.

If one's life is shorn of meaning by the judgement that his acts are only typical of the race, what

⁸"The Innocents," Woman's Home Companion, XLIV (February, 1917), p. 8.

then is the significance attached to success and fame? To interpret this problem, Lewis introduces the character of Percy Bresnahan, Gopher Prairie's only native son to achieve a national reputation. In a curious way, Carol's shifting perspective of Bresnahan comprises a significant counter-theme in the novel. Her first inkling of the great man's existence issues from a boast by her new acquaintance, Dr. Will Kennicott, about his home town:

"Of course I may be prejudiced, but I've seen an awful lot of towns-- . . . But I never saw a town that had such up-and-coming people as Gopher Prairie. Bresnahan--you know--the famous auto manufacturer--he comes from Gopher Prairie. Born and brought up there! . . . "9

Later, after her marriage and removal to this same Gopher Prairie, she learns during a reception in her honor that Bresnahan is

" . . . president of the Velvet Motor Company of Boston, Mass.--make the Velvet Twelve--biggest automobile factory in New England. . . . Why, he's a millionaire several times over! Well, Perce comes back here for the black-bass fishing almost every summer, and he says if he could get away from business, he'd rather live here than in Boston or New York or any of those places. . . . " (p. 43)

In similar contexts, the illustrious son receives mention at the Jolly Seventeen Club (p. 123), and as a contributor to a fund for Carol's amateur dramatic association (p. 220). Finally, in Chapter XXIII Bresnahan pays a personal visit

⁹Sinclair Lewis, Main Street: The Story of Carol Kennicott, 1st ed. (New York, 1920), pp. 13-14.

to Gopher Prairie. On his way to Washington "as a dollar a year man for the government, in the aviation motor section, [to] tell them how much I don't know about carburetors," the great man will interrupt his career for the celebrated bass fishing at Red Squaw Lake. A sizeable crowd of town notables meets its hero at the railroad station.

Carol saw Bresnahan laughing down at them from the train vestibule--big, immaculate, overjawed, with the eye of an executive. In the voice of the professional Good Fellow he bellowed, "Howdy, folks!" (p. 277)

Almost instantly Carol senses in his masterful and flattering attentions toward her the possibilities for a flirtation or a precipitous affair. She imagines herself in the role of his conquest.

"Yes. He probably would make a woman fall in love with him. But it wouldn't last a week. I'd get tired of his confounded buoyancy. His hypocrisy. He's a spiritual bully. He makes me rude to him in self-defense. Oh yes, he is glad to be here. He does like us. He's so good an actor that he convinces his own self. . . . I'd hate him in Boston. . . . How I lie! His arm coaxed my shoulder and his eyes dared me not to admire him. I'd be afraid of him. I hate him! . . . Oh, the inconceivable egotistic imagination of women! All this stew of analysis about a man, a good, decent, friendly, efficient man, because he was kind to me, as Will's wife!" (pp. 278-279)

Carol tries to dismiss her confusion over his maneuvers by lying to herself. She endeavors to be fair.

Carol realized that he was not one of the sons of Gopher Prairie who, if they do not actually starve in the East, are invariably spoken of as "highly successful"; and she found behind his too incessant flattery a genuine affection for his mates (p. 280).

At last, however, Bresnahan boldly singles Carol out for a ride into the country in a borrowed automobile.

He chuckled. "Sister, you can't get away with it. I'm onto you. You consider me a big bluff. Well, maybe I am. But so are you, my dear--and pretty enough so that I'd try to make love to you, if I weren't afraid you'd slap me" (p. 283).

Having brought matters into the open with admirable assurance, Bresnahan curiously retreats from his initiative, shifting the conversation to a socio-economic disputation. Carol pours out her dissatisfactions with Gopher Prairie. The famous man observes, in one of the few pointed assessments of Carol in the novel:

" . . . My humble (not too humble!) opinion is that you like to be different. You like to think you're peculiar. Why, if you knew how many tens of thousands of women, especially in New York, say just what you do, you'd lose all the fun of thinking you're a lone genius and you'd be on the band-wagon whooping it up for Gopher Prairie and a good decent family life. There's always about a million young women just out of college who want to teach their grandmothers how to suck eggs" (pp. 284-285).

Despite Carol's protestations that his arguments against reform must have been the same which satisfied the cave man, she is subdued by his solid practicality, and unsettled by his last, game attempt at a seduction: "You'd be a darling child to play with."

Her brush with this attractive stranger has made Carol more critical of Will Kennicott. She compares her husband unfavorably to Bresnahan. But when Will alludes once more to Perce's fine opinion of the gang in Gopher Prairie, Carol snaps, "Bresnahan! I'm sick of him!"

adding, "How do we know but that in Boston, among well-bred people, he may be regarded as an absolute lout?" (p. 293)

Still, when Carol longs for a trip to the East, the adventure is linked with recollections of the magnetic industrialist.

Through all this restless July after she had tasted Bresnahan's disturbing flavor of travel and gaiety, she wanted to go, but she said nothing.

When the Kennicotts do make an impromptu rail trip to neighboring Joralemon, Carol reflects that

It was the first unusual thing, except the glance of Bresnahan, that had happened since the weaning of Hugh (p. 301).

Much later, after Carol's flight from Gopher Prairie and her establishment in Washington as a civil servant, she encounters Bresnahan at a public place, whence she had been taken by her escort, an Army officer.

She was on the Powhatan roof with the captain. At a table, somewhat vociferously buying improbable "soft drinks" for two fluffy girls, was a man with a large familiar back.

"Oh! I think I know him," she murmured.

"Who" There? Oh, Bresnahan, Percy Bresnahan."

"Yes. You've met him? What sort of a man is he?"

"He's a good-hearted idiot. I rather like him, and I believe that as a salesman of motors he's a wonder. But he's a nuisance in the aeronautic section. Tries so hard to be useful but he doesn't know anything--he doesn't know anything. Rather pathetic: rich man poking around, and trying to be useful. Do you want to speak to him?"

"No--no--I don't think so" (p. 432).

One should, presumably, understand and assent to this snub, and Carol's dismissal of a man who had formerly seemed so attractive; ostensibly, Carol's viewpoint has changed, now

that she is an urbanite. Her deference to the captain's judgment of Bresnahan over her own previous opinion, however, suggests that Carol is a shallow snob, convinced that now she is witnessing the real Percy, whereas the man who had swept through Gopher Prairie was merely staging a performance for the provincials. A last allusion to Bresnahan reinforces this ironic shift in attitude, when Carol, once again in Gopher Prairie, realizes with some bitterness that

Few people asked her about Washington. They who had most admiringly begged Percy Bresnahan for his opinions were least interested in her facts. She laughed at herself when she saw that she had expected to be at once a heretic and a returned hero; she was very reasonable and merry about it . . . (p. 448).

Contrasted with the discredited Bresnahan, Carol finds grim amusement in knowledge that the old pretender, an actor "so good that he convinces his own self," should gain more credence than she.

Several points about the Percy Bresnahan theme in Main Street are worth attention. Though not a love theme, its continuity as a motif indicates how well Lewis planned his novel in many details. Lewis deploys Bresnahan not only as another representative of the human spectrum in his prairie microcosm, and as an agent provocateur against Carol's notions of fidelity in marriage, but also as the spokesman for a value system.

He preached his gospel: love of outdoors, Playing the Game, loyalty to friends. She had the neophyte's shock of discovery that, outside of tracts, conservatives do not trample and find no answer when an iconoclast turns on them, but retort with agility and confusing statistics (p. 285).

Further, Bresnahan is the only person to utter the direct judgment that Carol is a bluffer, a pretender. More than representing the stereotyped Successful Business Man, he embodies an emotional value: the tolerance and fondness one may feel for flawed humanity, striving mightily to offer itself as a friend. If Lewis must find Bresnahan at last expendable, as a poignant symbol of the relatively of success and great reputation in a world where myriads yearn for fame and a public identity, it is only in deference to Carol's need for new perspectives in her empty life. His sacrifice seems so gratuitous, so unwarranted, that one is prompted to ask, "Whatever happened to Percy Bresnahan?" It is probable that he grew to international stature in the roles of George F. Babbitt and Sam Dodsworth of the Revelation Motor Car Company.

As a testament to the fortuity of fame apart from wealth, Percy Bresnahan's motif is actually a simple counter-statement to the entire novel's broad theme: Carol Kennicott's assumption that, in order to achieve any discernible identity, one must emphasize his differences from the rest of common humanity by masquerading with particular attitudes, opinions and tastes--in brief, by the performance of roles. That her assumption is only

halfway challenged and compromised at the conclusion of Main Street is due to Lewis's preference for an emotionally gratifying ending, over a morally or intellectually pleasing one. Still, this is a novel about a frantic search for identity, and of the individual's almost self-destructive appetite for recognition in the eyes of his fellow beings. Carol, in the last analysis, does not wish to bring about reform; she wishes to exercise omnipotence, and in a childish way she wants to control Gopher Prairie, but most of all she feels compelled to attract attention to herself. She is always sharply aware of her surroundings and of any prospective audience, conscious of her costume. Her actions, however elaborately justified, seem calculated to startle, offend, or chide the many watchers that she fancies will note every gesture or evidence of Taste. Only insofar as every man hugs his absurd illusions and rekindles old self-deceptions to warm his ego does the reader find identification with Carol Kennicott. But it would be too galling to represent her as Everyman's Wife.

The supporting themes which remain--the therapeutic blessings to be discovered in the benevolent land, the parasitism of provincial towns, the mindless conservatism of affluent men vs. the hungry radicalism of the prairie worker, the excitement of travel, even the microcosm motif, are ingredients present in Lewis's earlier novels. The sustaining interest in Main Street evolves

from the question of how Carol will solve her adolescent ego problem, since apparently either Carol must digest Gopher Prairie, or the town must absorb her. With an ending which can be seen as characteristic of his plots, Lewis never definitely tells which.

The plot of this "Story of Carol Kennicott" develops fairly chronologically. The first section of preparation for conflict occupies Chapters I and II, where details of Carol Milford's college experience, jobs in Chicago and St. Paul, and her meeting with Dr. Will Kennicott provide a sketchy history. The information that chance "supplementary reading in sociology led her to a book on village-improvement," which Carol picked up "carelessly," then read with fascination, stretches credibility, especially when one sees the immediate result.

She sighed, "That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of those prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration. . . . I'll make 'em put in a village green, and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street!" (p. 5)

Thus preoccupied, Carol does not hear the dreary voice of her professor.

She was completing the roof of a half-timbered town hall. She had found one man in the prairie village who did not appreciate her picture of winding streets and arcades, but she had assembled the town council and dramatically defeated him (p. 6).

On some such slight foreshadowing the development of this novel depends. But it indicates Lewis's dependence on the oft-used convention that casual reading matter must

influence crucial, irreversible decisions. It further shows that Carol is never daunted by doubt over the clairvoyance of her reformer's vision, but that stuffy opposition to her arbitrary designs may be anticipated, even though it may be "dramatically" overwhelmed in her fantasy.

The second section of the plot line, by far the longest, concerns the clash of wills between Carol and various representatives of the Gopher Prairie ethic, including her husband. Generally embracing Chapters III through XXXV, this section relates with great detail the shifts in mood and role which Carol exhibits during the warmings and chillings of her attitude toward the town and its inhabitants. These narratives consist of confrontation-episodes, of interviews and reactions, of acts which provoke indignation, reckless whims, and real or imagined censure by the natives. Always within the framework of Carol's viewpoint, restless and irritable criticism, these events build pressure until the heroine senses a showdown, and must initiate decisive action. Yet throughout these developments, Carol seems to search out her torture, like a would-be martyr climbing up crosses to try them for size.

The novel's third division describes Carol's reaction to crisis--disengagement and flight. One is to believe that the precipitating event, neighboring Wakamin's mob ejection of an organizer for the National

Non-partisan League (to the hearty approval of Gopher Prairie's leading citizens), is merely the latest in a long series of intolerable acts which divide Carol from the town. Her escape to Washington with her son Hugh provides the authentication of physical distance to underscore Carol's burgeoning sense of separation from the values and concerns of Gopher Prairie, and of Will Kennicott. To make the motive for departure more convincing, Lewis exaggerates the heat and viciousness of Will's distaste for political agitators:

"All these organizers, yes, and a whole lot of the German and Squarehead farmers themselves, they're seditious as the devil--disloyal, non-patriotic, pro-German pacifists, that's what they are!" (p. 419)

The usually sympathetic Will seems even boorish, as Lewis recounts how he "bayed":

" . . . we're going to take these fellows, and if they ain't patriotic, we're going to make them be patriotic. And--Lord knows I never thought I'd have to say this to my own wife--but if you go defending these fellows, then the same thing applies to you! Next thing, I suppose you'll be yapping about free speech. Free speech! There's too much free speech and free gas and free beer and free love and all the rest of your damned mouthy freedom, and if I had my way I'd make you folks live up to the established rules of decency even if I had to take you--" (p. 420).

Thus, by the familiar tactic of distorting the stated position of the established, institutional attitude, Lewis makes it easy for the rebel to make a few righteous, moderate remarks and withdraw with apparent justification. Carol observes,

" . . . I don't belong to Gopher Prairie. That isn't meant as a condemnation of Gopher Prairie, and it may be a condemnation of me. All right! I don't care! I don't belong here, and I'm going. I'm not asking permission any more. I'm simply going" (p. 420).

Resigned to martyrdom, Carol hopes to punish the town with a forgiving, generous, and self-effacing speech. Will demands to know how long she will be away. Carol replies darkly, "I don't know. Perhaps for a year. Perhaps for a lifetime." It is difficult to relate such scenes and dialogue without degenerating into melodrama, but the immediate pretext for Carol's break seems so contrived, Will's anti-freedom speech so rabid, and the heroine's attitude so bent on tragedy, that structurally this is one of the weakest transition scenes in the novel. Nevertheless, Carol has achieved her recession from the town, and Chapters XXXVI through XXXVIII describe her exile in Washington.

The final chapter of Main Street Lewis devotes to the detente between Carol and Gopher Prairie. Carol has the air of one who has withdrawn from competition to take special lessons for a time, before returning to renew the old game. In the opinion of Sam Clark, Will's loyal friend, "Mrs. Kennicott is smart, even if she is skittish . . . and these smart educated women all get funny ideas, but they get over 'em after they've had three or four kids" (pp. 446-447). In some respects, Sam is correct. The game of opposing wills continues, but the stakes are

not what they were. Carol now seems content to wait for future opportunities to score points against the smugness of Gopher Prairie. Still essentially the same Carol of old, she has learned that watchful patience, not active opposition, is the best alternative to compromise.

Opposition--this compulsion for making and taking exceptions--is the main characteristic of Carol's personality. She is the woman with "Yes, but--" perpetually on her lips. Like her precursors, Una Golden and Claire Boltwood (and to an extent Istra Nash), Carol's hopes for a better "something else" are never fully requited. But unlike them Carol can not console herself by making over a serviceable young man like Walter Babson or Milt Daggett to suit her taste; once separated from their home grounds, these men could be tamed and civilized. There in Gopher Prairie, however, Will Kennicott hulked in the ancestral den, and would not permit himself to be bullied or changed. Main Street is another example of Lewis's reversal formulas, like The Innocents: instead of a young man painfully learning to become citified, like Carl Ericson or Milt Daggett, let there be a young woman undergoing initiation into village life. Managerially, Lewis arranges Gopher Prairie as carefully as a movie set, and peoples it with a complete social spectrum of characters well worn in their roles. Then dramatically he introduces Carol.

Carol must oppose Gopher Prairie, of course, or there is no story; to expect her to blend into the town society like Mrs. McGanum, daughter of old Dr. Westlake, would be too sanguine. Certainly Carol must struggle to maintain an identity, but her motives and methods in the contest must be questioned. Behind Carol's thoughts and acts are the assurance that, since she is college-educated and has lived in cities, her tastes and style of living should prevail over those of the provincials. These assumptions, coupled with her sketchy notions about town planning and social justice, have anointed her for the roles of reformer and busybody, fated beforehand for tragic martyrdom. In hewing so stubbornly to these roles for so long, Carol seems deliberately to court censure in a self-destructive way. Essentially hysterical in response to her environment, Carol tries to mask her insecurity with acts and bluffs, which shriek their insistence that Mrs. Dr. Kennicott is an individual apart from the herd, and therefore deserving special attention. When she is not attracting notice by espousing unpopular causes or defending underdogs like Miles Bjornstam and Erik Valborg, Carol imagines the town as a rapt audience, constantly watching, avid for reports of her tastes and daily activities, to be discussed, gossiped over, marveled about. It is as if she performs for a theater-in-the-round. She has been trapped in isolation by her desire for uniqueness.

If the freshness of her viewpoint toward the prairie town, and the presumption to urban superiority are Carol's legacy from Grace Lewis, psychologically she is the representation of Harry Lewis, the dialectic rebel. Wherever two or three are gathered, the Lewis protagonist must improvise a performance or project a fantasy, just as the author could do. Carol characteristically reacts to people, instead of growing to appreciate them with human compassion, and her interpretation of their actions seems dictated by perversity or caprice, not by tolerance.

Among the occupational roles Lewis assigns to his heroine are those of student, librarian, wife, mother, and government clerk. Her functional roles she wears like a series of identification labels. She is an orphan (p. 3), a prospective town planner (p. 7), possibly a teacher; for the duration of one party she is a Bohemian (p. 10); then she is a shy lover with Will Kennicott, who believes her to be the woman "that would transform the town" of Gopher Prairie (p. 14). Once established in the town as "the bonny bride" and the "prettiest Frau in G. P.," Carol vows to be "the community sunbeam" (p. 43). At Sam Clark's welcoming party, Carol looks past her greeting host.

Beyond him in the hallway and living-room, sitting in a vast prim circle as though they were attending a funeral, she saw the guests. They were waiting so! They were waiting for her! The determination to be all one pretty flowerlet of appreciation leaked away. She begged of Sam, "I don't dare face them! They expect so much. They'll swallow me in one mouthful. . . ."

I don't dare! Faces to right of me, faces in front of me, volley and wonder!"

She sounded hysterical to herself; she fancied that to Sam Clark she sounded insane (pp. 40-41).

Titled by the attentions of the evening, Carol "gushed" at Dr. Gould and bluffed a lie about knowing how to play "bezique."

While others drifted to her group, Carol snatched up the conversation. She laughed and was frivolous and rather brittle. She could not distinguish their eyes. They were a blurry theater-audience before which she self-consciously enacted the comedy of being the Clever Little Bride of Doc Kennicott . . . and Sam Clark's party assumed a glittering lemon-yellow color of brocade panels and champagne and tulle and crystal chandeliers and sporting duchesses (pp. 45-46).

The smeared, surrealistic quality of Carol's vision during this fifteen-minute performance, and the shrillness of her dialogue, emanate from an inner hysteria and panic at the imagined threat of annihilation by her watchers. This antic mode of behavior, exhibited here for the first time in Gopher Prairie, will dominate Carol's relationship with the townspeople. At the end of the evening, after Carol had "defied decency by sitting down with the men" to share their talk, Will gently rebukes her for her forwardness.

She was silent, raw with the shameful thought that the attentive circle might have been criticizing her, laughing at her (p. 53).

Before Carol can assume her roles as a reformer, she is surprised by her first joy at being a housewife. Forgetting her earlier despair at the dismal aspect of Main Street, Carol becomes suffused with an attitude of romantic merriment.

Like a child playing Grandma in a trailing skirt, Carol paraded uptown for her marketing, crying greetings to housewives along the way. Everybody bowed to her, strangers and all, and made her feel that they wanted her, that she belonged here. In city shops she was merely A Customer. . . . Here she was Mrs. Dr. Kennicott, and her preferences in grape-fruit and manners were known and remembered and worth discussing . . . (p. 62).

She seems to draw pleasure from hearing "village noises" and from drives in the country. Like Claire Boltwood suddenly reassessing Gopher Prairie in Free Air, Carol appears now to sympathize with the rough, rural virtues.

But her new friendship with the schoolteacher Vida Sherwin stirs up Carol's appetite to exercise power for change in Gopher Prairie. Urged by Vida's flattering promises that the town "needs live creature like you to awaken it. I shall slave-drive you.!" Carol formulates vague plans for founding a literary Group and a dramatic club. Established later as a member of the Thanatopsis Club, Carol sees the other ladies as campaigners for her causes.

It was they who would carry out her aspiration. Her campaign against village sloth was actually begun! On what specific reform should she first loose her army? (p. 128)

Her plans to rebuild the city hall and school quickly disintegrate. Her notion to refurbish the rest room for farm wives comes to naught. The dramatic association becomes a reality, however, as an outgrowth from a successful evening of charades. Though chosen president and director, Carol still is unable to carry her desire to

have a Shaw play performed, and must yield to the popular taste for "The Girl from Kankakee." Elaborately self-effacing in the stage role of a maid, Carol realizes that the only convincing actor in the group is the effete shoe-clerk, Raymie Wutherspoon. In her eyes, this latest effort to instruct the tastes of Gopher Prairie has failed miserably.

Finding herself appointed to a board for the town library, Carol plots "to revolutionize the whole system." At first she is pleased to be discussing books with men who seem unimaginably well read, but eventually Carol sees her colleagues as essentially bluffers with narrow interests, who wish to run the library like a pinchpenny business. She fails in her management of a much-advertised tennis tournament. She can not even succeed in being a great influence on the weakly artistic Erik Valborg, the assistant tailor, and she is unable to accept his love, because she insists that he act out her fantasies rather than develop his own sense of purpose. Nor can Carol argue convincingly enough to rescue Fern Mullins from ruin. Carol defends the young teacher, a victim of the town's crude codes of morality, against Mrs. Bogart's hypocritical wrath and the phlegmatic judgment of the school board. Her pleas are heard respectfully, then disregarded.

Carol Kennicott fails in her coveted role of revolutionary because she does not understand the human psychology which underlies the desire for change.

Her attempts to induce reforms correspond to preaching and advertising by testimonials. Preoccupied with her illusions and roles and fantasies, Carol can not see that men doggedly resist change, and yield only when it is inevitable, and not because they have been stampeded by an opinionated woman. Vida Sherwin's accusation says it:

"What do you know about the thoughts in hearts? You just play at reforming the world. You don't know what it means to suffer" (p. 372).

Diverted by her many misdirected energies, Carol also fails as a wife.

Will Kennicott, on the other hand, does his best as a husband. Despite his reluctant philandering with Maud Dyer and the hints concerning his frisky bachelorhood, Will is tender and constant in his adoration of Carol, and evidently with few thanks from her. Lewis offers three main aspects of Will Kennicott's character. As Carol's husband he is patient to teach her the compensations of life in Gopher Prairie, and temperate in his reproofs of her foolishness until she challenges his integrity. As a university-educated doctor and man of science, Will exhibits an innate folk wisdom to balance his technical medical competence. He explains to Carol during their quarrel over Erik Valborg's flirtation:

" . . . can't you see that I'm all the science there is here? And I can stand the cold and the bumpy roads and the lonely rides at night. All I need is to have you here at home to welcome me. I don't expect you to be passionate--not any more I don't--but I do expect you to appreciate my work. I bring babies into the world,

and save lives, and make cranky husbands quit being mean to their wives. . . . " (p. 396).

The third aspect of Will is that of community goodfellow-- hunter, fisherman and poker player, a shrewd speculator in real estate, like his friends the town businessmen: Sam Clark, Harry Haydock and Dave Dyer. In this role Will is the grown-up boys'-gang male, the teller of heavy jokes, the drinker of beer, and the chauvinistic small-town booster who hates radicals and makes mistakes in his grammar. It is Lewis's achievement to have depicted these three roles and maintained a sense of Will's integrity, and a suggestion of hidden resources of wrath and selfless pity within the man.

Will's character is a well-devised contrast to Carol's, not only in the marital contests of husband and wife. Where he seems deep and unsearchable, she is obvious and brightly scattered. He enjoys the predictable routine of small-town lives and events, and looks forward to the turns of the seasons. Carol longs for the brilliant diversions of the big city scene, and escape from the dullness of Gopher Prairie. Her orientation toward life is that it should be arranged to please her, because she is Mrs. Dr. Kennicott, and deserves distinct consideration, or else she will stage a tantrum and threaten to remove herself. His humility is conspicuously different from Carol's hauteur when he journeys to Washington to petition for her return, much in the same manner that Cass Timberlane

would later entreat his errant Jinny to go back to Grand Republic. Will knows intuitively that Carol must be wooed from the beginning again.

Mark Schorer suggests that Will is a complement to Carol, that if Carol was "a large part" of Lewis, then the "other part was Will Kennicott, the downright."¹⁰ He submits that Lewis may have modelled Will after his father, and the admired-and-envied Claude, which seems very plausible. But the fact that Lewis does not maintain much authorial distance from the good doctor during scenes of emotional intensity argues that Will is Lewis's complementary projection of himself, had he been content with Sauk Centre and followed other lights. In these respects, Will appears as a fantasy fulfillment of the wistful Harry Lewis, rehearsing himself in a role which he would sometime perfect as the life of Martin Arrowsmith, the man of pure science who yet longed for escape to the North Woods. Which Kennicott, then, represents the truer part of Lewis? Certainly Carol does--melodramatic, frenetic, defensively hostile, and neurotically inducing herself into a martyr's isolation, from which she could rail that the world was brutish and insensitive. Paradoxically, Carol seems to seek out her failures, as surely as she defends unpopular causes without hope of winning. She realizes that by

¹⁰Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 286.

making an exhibition of herself, and by risking every kind of danger, she will gain more attention and power over Gopher Prairie by failing, than by succeeding as the invincible belle of the town.

Suitably, then, if Carol is a performer, she must have an audience--individual hot-and-cold reflectors against whom she may react in calculated roles. Lewis provides her with a gallery of selected human specimens. Among the women are Vida Sherwin, the browbeating conscience of reform, spinsterish despite marriage, as Carol's adviser and "older sister"; Bea Sorensen, the maid, whose simple pleasure in life Carol envies but can not duplicate; Juanita Haydock, Carol's rival as lively queen of the town's smart society; Maud Dyer, her pale and pneumatic token competition for Will's affection; and the devious Mrs. Westlake, who publicizes Carol's confidences. Apart from Will, the men who serve as Carol's subluminaries are Guy Pollock, the decayed lawyer; Miles Bjornstam, the radical laborer in the Bone Stillman tradition; Percy Bresnahan, briefly; Erik Valborg, pathetic tailor with a fever for elegance; and to an extent Sam Clark, the hardware dealer. Like bits of shattered mirror Lewis arranges them about Carol, as if by assembling the combined reactions to her dramatics that Carol reads in their faces, one could reconstruct the true, complete heroine. This conjuration is often successful, but at last Carol seems hollow, her life empty of resolution and authority.

The authoritative voice in Main Street can not be clearly identified. Even the omniscient author does not speak with firmness, suggesting that once Lewis had embroidered his fantasies with fact, he could no longer distinguish between them. Carol often harks back to her father as an authority figure, but he is an idealized memory. It is not Miles Bjornstam, defeated by the deaths of his wife and son, and by the town's animosity. It is not Percy Bresnahan, discredited as a meddling idiot. As an authority figure, even Will seems hypocritical in his intolerance of dissent. But despite Carol's many convictions on democratic freedoms, Will is the one who asks her, pointedly, "What's the reason you're so superior? Why can't you take folks as they are?" refuting her complaint about the meanness of small-town men: "You'll find these characters in all these small towns, and a pile of savvy in every single one of them, if you just dig for it," after citing a list of townsmen who had achieved distinction. However, if Will does not qualify as the unquestioned authority figure, but as a "brother-friend," then the only triumphant voice in the novel is the brooding Consensus of Main Street, first sketched in Lewis's introduction.

Among the significant passages in Main Street, these prefatory paragraphs are remarkable for several reasons. First, they comprise not so much an introduction

as a mood piece, almost as tendentious as the blurb on a dust jacket. Second, this prelude demonstrates Lewis's skill in capturing a sympathetic, if not partisan, disposition in the reader to share the author's views. Third, the introduction is an important step in creating the "universal" context for the scrutiny of life in one American town; and last, Lewis frames a complimentary role for himself, though submitted equivocally in a negative question with ironic overtones, as an "alien cynic" knowledgeable enough to speculate on the viability of "other faiths."

The first sentence seems unassuming enough, with everything democratic and fair: "This is America--" implying the real America, as Lewis is about to identify it, known from his childhood. In the second paragraph Lewis lures the reader toward a sense of common agreement by writing of "our" tale--"tale" itself a word elaborately modest and deprecatory. Proceeding, Lewis established the assumption of the universality of his microcosm (i.e., men everywhere are basically the same). Then he posits the condition of grass-roots feedback to the cities, rather than urban advancement over the provinces: what the country folk say is "the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable isles of the sea." There is also an ironic thrust at provincial resistance to change and suspicion of new ideas, couched in quasi-scriptural

"timeless" phrasing--"whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresay, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider." Though this last idea appears to be a continuation of the previous clause, it is actually a logical non-sequitur, strung on an emotional sensitivity to what the representative townsman says and thinks, and how he reacts to innovation. That is to say, by using ironic bombast, Lewis is editorially reacting against the chauvinistic sentiments he has salted in the mind of Ezra Stowbody beforehand.

The good-humored ambivalence of "Main Street is the climax of civilization" gives way to the irony of the improbable assertion that "Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture"--architecture, along with flawless grammar and enthusiasm for the theater, being one of Lewis's touchstones of Taste. That statement yields to the more disparaging, "In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor strictly moral." Of course it is highly unlikely that movies in a country town would be sophisticated in a cosmopolitan sense, or that the humor would be anything other than broad and clean; both Lewis and the reader know this, and have already tacitly agreed in a co-conspiracy to deprecate the small-town value system, which views the ancestral turf as "God's Country" and every tradition and prejudice as authorized by the Almighty.

By the time Lewis arrives at the statement, "Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith," the tone of Main Street has been set. In a skillfully mixed context of hyperbole, ironic juxtaposition and mock solemnity, Lewis has undermined the fundamental integrity of the words "tradition" and "faith," and rendered them absurd. Thus in five paragraphs Lewis has fixed the mood and atmosphere of his novel, singled out the object of his thematic concentration (Gopher Prairie's questionable distinction as an exemplar of the world community), made an ally out of his reader-audience, and set himself in a posture where he can maintain the viewpoint of an oracular critic--sometimes testy and hectoring, sometimes arch and indulgent, but always as patronizing as a citified sociologist back on his home soil. Lewis can not resist calling attention to himself as he assumes one of his favorite roles, that of the rebellious, worldly-wise outsider, prepared to endure martyrdom when misunderstood: "Would he [i.e., an author like, say, Lewis] 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?" Posed with disarming innocence, this question is involuted and negative, suggesting the possibility that Lewis himself was not sure whether he was truly an "alien cynic" or not, and wrote Main Street in an attempt to find out, hoping that an approving audience would make up his

mind for him. His introduction may signify even more: because of its didactic tone and its initial position in the book, this little essay rings like a proprietary author's special directions on how Main Street is to be read. In any case, one may detect in Lewis's irony an evasiveness, an obfuscating compound-eye's view, a muddling bluff with raillery by a novelist who seemed unable to spell out his attitudes clearly for himself.

The ritualistic flavor of Will and Carol's early love and courtship, linking these accounts to loves in earlier novels, makes this narrative worthy of attention. Like Wrenn and his Istra and Nelly, Hawk Ericson with Gertie and Ruth, Una with Walter and Eddie, and Milt Daggett with Claire, Will Kennicott is shown courting Carol with rambling walks and conversations. Characteristically, the lovers share poignant moments near flowing water, surrounded by an impressive view (in this case, the Mississippi River near the Twin Cities and at its confluence with the Minnesota River at Fort Snelling). More remarkable, Will woos Carol with photographs of Gopher Prairie, pictorial facets of rural life from which Carol must compile her own good impressions--the same kind of montage technique Lewis uses as a pattern in exhibiting his characters. Again, water:

. . . she exclaimed over the lakes: dark water reflecting wooded bluffs, a flight of ducks. . . . One winter picture of the edge of Plover Lake had the air of an etching: lustrous slide of ice, snow in the

crevices of a boggy bank, the mound of a muskrat house, reeds in thin black lines, arches of frosty grasses. It was an impression of cool clear vigor.

"How'd it be to skate there for a couple of hours, or go zinging along on a fast ice-boat, and skip back home for coffee and some hot wienies?" he demanded (p. 18).

Is it purely coincidence that in these projections of aquatic pleasures, Lewis's language should seem crypto-erotic? There follow some recollections of a camping honeymoon in Colorado, with the almost obligatory his-hand-around-my-little-hand caress of intimacy (p. 22), and Carol's bold confession at Sam Clark's party of daring Will "to strip to his B.V.D.'s and go swimming in an icy mountain stream" (p. 45).

Carol's celebrated thirty-two-minute walk around Gopher Prairie and its Main Street in Chapter IV has had two rehearsals in earlier Lewis novels. One was Una Golden's last assessment of Panama, Pennsylvania, as she walked back from the post office in The Job; the other was faintly anticipated in Claire Boltwood's fresh view of Gopher Prairie after a restful sleep, in contrast to her indignation at the town's apparent rusticity the previous night, related in Free Air. Further, the account of Bea Sorensen's awe at witnessing the wonders of Main Street, which follows Carol's "private tour," is a reworking of the same idea for ironic contrast. Glimpses of the business districts of Schoenstrom and Joralemon reinforce Carol's jaundiced apperception of Gopher Prairie's ugliness.

But the tour scene is a masterful device, despite its patent reliance on impressionism. It identifies characters important later in the story by name and status; it outlines the breadth and depth of the town's socio-economic development; it suggests the varieties of human activity, as well as the citizens' tastes in architecture and merchandise; and it advertises, through their names, the inhabitants' German, Scandinavian, and Anglo-Saxon antecedents. Thus, Lewis seems to be laying down the territorial limits and ground rules for this first autopsy of Americana, in this town of three thousand souls.

Among these many it is curious that Carol Kennicott is unable to find one enduring friend. Her unrequited search for a kindred spirit is the outcome of Carol's solipsistic approach to life, not necessarily the result of a poor selection of possible friends in Gopher Prairie. Vida Sherwin is too intense and managerial to be suffered without intermission. The lawyer Guy Pollock seems amusing at first, a man who reads seriously and thoughtfully, a possible respondent to flirtations, but their falling-out arises, improbably, from their differences on democracy and social justice, from the time Guy argued, "Democracy is all right theoretically, and I'll admit there are industrial injustices, but I'd rather have them than see the world reduced to a dead level of mediocrity."

At this second Carol realized that for all Guy's love of dead elegances his timidity was as depressing to her as the bulkiness of Sam Clark. She realized that he was not a mystery, as she had excitedly believed; not a romantic messenger from the World Outside on whom she could count for escape. He belonged to Gopher Prairie, absolutely. She was snatched back from a dream of far countries, and found herself on Main Street (p. 202).

Later in her estimation Carol demotes Pollock to "merely a pleasant voice which said things about Charles Lamb and sunset" (p. 324), and he drops from view. Guy Pollock deserved better treatment. His perceptive account of himself in Chapter XIII as a victim of the Village Virus is a touching "biography of a living dead man." He alone in the novel possesses insight into the complexity of human personality, revealed when he checks himself after a monologue on compulsive hypocrisy (itself a common form of role playing) in Gopher Prairie: "Oh, my dear, I haven't talked to anybody about myself and all our several selves for years" (p. 158).

Carol's magnanimous attitude toward Miles Bjornstam, the "Red Swede," irritates Will. Appreciation for Miles's "proletarian philosophy" is one of the liberal poses which Carol wears conspicuously, especially after the radical handyman marries Bea Sorensen, Carol's familiar housemaid. Miles represents the free, independent scoffer at social institutions that Carol likes to think she could be. He was the crusty, bumptious, first-name-greeter with red hair that Lewis himself used to enjoy as

one of his own roles. Yet even this veiled representation of Lewis is marked for persecution and martyrdom. No promised witnesses appear at the Bjornstams' wedding; no sympathetic mourners follow the bodies of Bea and little Olaf, dead from typhoid, to the cemetery. Utterly alienated, Miles departs on the train, seeking a farm in Canada "--far off from folks as I can get" (p. 323). So it seems to be with those whom Gopher Prairie has worn down or defeated, for daring to make themselves conspicuously different from the traditional norms of behavior: not only Miles, but also Fern Mullins, discredited by the rowdy Cy Bogart, and Erik Valborg the effeminate tailor, Carol's last object of her hunt for intimate companionship.

The town refers to Valborg derisively as "Elizabeth," because of his finicky manner and very modish clothes. Seeing him for the first time in church, Carol compares him to Keats and Shelley, with "curving Grecian lips and serious eyes." Contriving to meet him at the tailor shop, she soon entertains highminded thoughts of being a significant Influence on Erik, inspiring him to be a brilliant artist. Erik reveals an interest in dramatics, and betrays his self-education by mispronouncing the esthete's shibboleths badly.

Carol nodded in the manner of a lady being kind to a tradesman, and one of her selves sneered, "Our Erik is indeed a lost John Keats" (p. 337).

Nevertheless, she recognizes the youth's struggle to reveal his Hidden Self: "She knew that he was . . . trying to indicate that he was something more than a person to whom one brought trousers for pressing." Carol tries on a few attitudinizing roles opposite him; she was "seventy years old, and sexless"; she spoke "maternally"; she assumed "the air of amused woman of the world" (p. 338). At last Carol schools Erik "like a cranky teacher," and counsels him to "go East and grow up with the revolution!" As their friendship becomes more intense, Carol catches herself spinning fantasies.

. . . she was picturing herself and a young artist--an Apollo nameless and evasive--building a house . . . exuberantly buying a chair with his first check; reading poetry together, and frequently being earnest over valuable statistics about labor; tumbling out of bed early for a Sunday walk, and chattering (where Kennicott would have yawned) over bread and butter by a lake . . . and she admitted that Erik did partly make up the image of her altogether perfect artist (pp. 352-353).

But later, sensing that her formerly stylish tastes have become outmoded, Carol inspects herself in a mirror, believing that she has "become a small-town woman," a "wedded spinster." Impulsively, she smears on gaudy lipstick and rouge, and poses as a Spanish dancer with her blouse unbuttoned (as Una Golden had bared her breast near the Hudson); then she murmurs to herself: "Heavens! When I came here from the Cities, girls imitated me. Now I'm trying to imitate a city girl" (p. 355).

Carol feels that she has been thrown at Erik by Will's indifference. In a many-sided internal debate with herself, Carol represents the young tailor as "my child Erik, who needs me" (p. 367). Later, however, as the two of them lean over her sleeping son's bed, Carol sees the young man in another guise.

She did not think of Kennicott, the baby's father. What she did think was that some one rather like Erik, an older and surer Erik, ought to be Hugh's father. The three of them would play--incredible imaginative games (p. 369).

Will now seems like "an elder brother." Carol begins to feel guilty, watched. Then, "Carol was suddenly and for the first time convinced that she loved Erik" (p. 390).

One evening while Will is away, the infatuated lovers walk impulsively in the country. Erik confides his experiences in Minneapolis as a tailor, escaping into fantasies about living in an Italian chateau: "I was a marquis and collected tapestries--that was after I was wounded in Padua" (p. 391). It is a wet night, and Erik wishes "we could build a fire, and you could sit on my overcoat beside it. I'm a grand fire-builder!" The kindler of outdoor fires is a role sacred to all of Lewis's earnest hero-lovers. The walk, as a Lewis institution, represents in miniature what travel has usually signified in larger dimensions: a chance for escape from the confinement of the home and mundane anxieties, and a stimulus for fantasy-spinning and improvisational role playing.

But Kennicott drives up unexpectedly, and escorts the crestfallen pair back to Gopher Prairie, and to reality.

Reality, as Will sees it, means conceding that Erik Valborg will never be "anything but a pants-presser." He points out to Carol that "it's only just by contrast with folks like Doc McGanum or Lym Cass that this fellow seems artistic." In a masterly monologue, projecting certain failure as an artist for Erik, Will appeals to Carol's every vanity and insecurity, showing her relationship and plans for the youth as self-deceptions, and revealing unsuspected strengths of compassion and love in himself. The next day Carol receives a note from Erik declaring that he will leave for Minneapolis that evening. Four weeks later the Kennicotts depart for a "vacation" in California.

The theme of travel and change of location as a change of role recurs in this story of Carol Kennicott. Whether she sojourns to Joralemon or the Twin Cities or California, Carol feels compelled to pose and pretend. Her most remarkable adventure is the sortie to Washington, during her separation from Will. The pretext which precipitates Carol's departure is a roundhouse argument with Kennicott over civil rights, patriotism, and the place of women in society. Seeing her opportunity for escape, Carol announces that she will leave, and take Hugh with her. Will asks,

Forlornly, "Uh--Carrie, what the devil is it you want, anyway?"

"Oh, conversation! No, it's much more than that. I think it's a greatness of life--a refusal to be content with even the healthiest mud."

"Don't you know that nobody ever solved a problem by running away from it?"

"Perhaps. . . . I'm going away to be quiet and think. I'm--I'm going! I have a right to my own life" (pp. 421-422).

Conversation and a few romantic notions about utter freedom are all the Lewis protagonist desires in his escape from the suffocation of established society. This is because, in the image of their creator, they are essentially talkers and projectors of fantasies, rather than doers whose circumscribed imagination keeps them stable and steady. On the train heading East, Carol addresses her son:

"Darling, do you know what mother and you are going to find beyond the blue horizon rim?"

"What?" flatly.

"We're going to find elephants with golden howdahs from which keep young maharanees with necklaces of rubies, and a dawn sea colored like the breast of a dove, and a white and green house filled with books and silver tea-sets" (p. 424).

As a government clerk, Carol eventually shares an apartment with two other women, enjoying the graciousness and style of living in Washington. But "Carol recognized in Washington as she had in California a transplanted and guarded Main Street," and

a thousand Sam Clarks and a few widow Bogarts were to be identified in the Sunday motor procession, in theater parties, and at the dinners of State Societies, to which the emigrés from Texas or Michigan surged that they might confirm themselves in the faith that that their several Gopher Prairies were notoriously "a whole

lot peppier and chummier than this stuck-up East"
(pp. 426-427).

The pest of mediocrity seems to annoy Carol even in the capital. She hears of other hopeless towns where her many new acquaintances used to live before arriving in Washington. These new insights, however, invest Carol with perspective and "that amiable contempt called poise." The sanctimonious opinions of the citizens of Main Street, Gopher Prairie, did not seem so intimidating, by comparison.

Having sent Carol to Washington, though, Lewis seems undecided about the significance of her work or residence there. She does not really enjoy office work, and her job is mentioned only cursorily. Her new associates are represented not as autonomous individuals with charm or weaknesses, but as stimuli, or exploitable resources or "experiences" for Carol. Lewis throws her among the suffragettes, to suggest an air of militancy in her defiance of Gopher Prairie's received values. But Carol's Washington interlude is not a daring scamper into feminist freedom; it is a reactionary protest, a selfish, petulant sulk following her tantrum against Will, the man who holds power over her and who represents the unacceptable father-substitute, as well as the spirit of Gopher Prairie incarnate. Carol becomes very familiar with Washington, but she and Hugh establish no roots there. Since a protracted stay there would be pointless, it is obvious that Carol

must return to Gopher Prairie. What then does this Washington episode mean?

There seems to be a handsome measure of self-destructiveness in Carol's calculated removal of herself from the Main Street scene. Her departure would make a scandal, but she could leave that behind to punish Will and the town for their insensitivity. On the other hand Carol takes a great risk in traveling to an unfamiliar city, to lose herself among thousands of clerks in government offices. To defend herself against the terror of being a newcomer among hostile strangers, Carol employs the mechanism of imputing universal Gopher Prairie characteristics to new bodies and faces, finding those other Sam Clarks and Widow Bogarts among Washingtonians. Such stereotyping seems to satisfy both Carol and Lewis, who does not hint that people could be otherwise than basic Minnesotans dipped in different experiences. But then, if Washington is peopled with fugitives from the villages like Carol herself, there has been very little purpose in leaving Gopher Prairie at all, except as a symbolic act of self-destruction which offered Carol the chance for parading as Someone Else for a time. In this respect Carol's Washington adventure has about the same value as Hike Griffin's, or Bill Wrenn's sojourn in England, when piqued by chance conversation with the homesick American tourist from Sleepy Eye, Minnesota: Carol is now ready to be reconciled to her former life style. Lest convincing

reasons be lacking, a "generalissima of suffrage" supplies Carol with a patented rationale for returning to the "double-Puritan" Middlewest to ask impolite questions, with the aim of speeding the advent of true civilization.

With these moralistic armaments, Carol's reconciliation to Will and Main Street is not appreciably difficult. Kennicott moves in, fortified with humble understanding and photographs. Boyishly shy, he suggests a plan.

" . . . Call it a second wooing. I won't ask anything. I just want the chance to chase around with you. I guess I never appreciated how lucky I was to have a girl with imagination and lively feet to play with. So--Could you maybe run away and see the South with me? If you wanted to, you could just--you could just pretend you were my sister and--" (pp. 438-439).

Again Lewis employs his "playmates" and "brother-sister" conventions, those curious ploys of protested childish innocence which are abnegations of adult sexuality. The desired effect of these role-feints appears to be the allaying of fears from male aggression--fears seemingly shared by both parties. Thus beguiled, Carol consents to a sentimental "honeymoon." She discovers that her hostility toward Gopher Prairie has softened, her attitude mellowed. She views herself in a new role.

She fancied that her life might make a story. She knew there was nothing heroic or obviously dramatic in it, no magic of rare hours, nor valiant challenge, but it seemed to her that she was of some significance because she was commonplaceness, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting. It had not occurred to her that there was also a story of Will Kennicott, into which she entered only so

much as he entered into hers; that he had bewilderingments and concealments as intricate as her own, and soft treacherous desires for sympathy (p. 439).

This is about as deep an insight into personality as one may read in Lewis's early novels. The passage signals a threshold crossing for Carol. If it is not yet evidence of her compassion, it shows her first appreciation for the silent struggles of a specific human being outside herself, instead of classified masses of people or symbolic figures like Miles Bjornstam or old Champ Perry.

After Carol's return to Gopher Prairie, the barber-shop sages comment upon her appearance and peculiarities, as they always have about everything else. The consensus, phrased by Dr. Westlake, is "now that Mrs. Kennicott's been away, maybe she's got over some of her fool ideas. Maybe she realizes that folks simply laugh at her when she tries to tell us how to run everything" (p. 446). Gopher Prairie has not changed. Whether or not Carol's new insights into the humanity of Will and Aunt Bessie and Mrs. Bogart have prompted a basic alteration in her behavior is problematic. It appears that new perspectives have made Carol more subtle, more patient. Still she sees herself in the role of a reformer and protester.

She looked across the silent fields to the west. She was conscious of an unbroken sweep of land to the Rockies, to Alaska; a dominion which will rise to unexpected greatness when other empires have grown senile. Before that time, she knew, a hundred generations of Carols will aspire and go down in tragedy devoid of palls and solemn chanting, the humdrum inevitable tragedy of struggle against inertia (p. 450).

Her final rejoinder to Will has a peculiar, defiant ring:

" . . . I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dish-washing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith" (p. 451).

Such rhetoric could be uttered at bedtime only by a woman accustomed to sleeping alone, who had the willful desire to be a martyr. It is worth remarking further that Carol senses she can not win a victory over the barbarities of Main Street; the scope of her "aspirations" and the head-long tactlessness of her reformer's zeal have assured her failure, almost as in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Main Street presents certain implicit perplexities to the reader, which go deeper than the problem of whether Carol or Will, or perhaps their marriage or even Gopher Prairie itself should be the proper object of his sympathy. One difficulty is that Carol's conflicts with Gopher Prairie are not essentially those of manners, morals, or education; they are differences of taste, not of philosophy. Carol assumes that in being different, she is better, and that her standing as an "outsider" in Gopher Prairie somehow endows her with the credentials of an objective critic, qualified to be an agitator for reforms because her ideals seem broader, her aims higher. But compared to Sam Clark or Will, or even Percy Bresnahan, Carol is an overeducated snob whose appreciation of

democracy is primarily theoretical. Her motivation for reforms seems mainly to be that she was first to conceive the changes, and that the town should defer to her taste and judgment. Her campaigns for innovations in Gopher Prairie make as much sense as punitive adolescent power plays, which they resemble. The spuriousness of Carol's high standards for upright life on Main Street, and the arbitrary cast of her sense of justice preempt Carol from the dignity of martyrdom and render her merely opinionated, self-indulgent, and slightly absurd.

Another related difficulty may be put as a question: Why does Carol fear to be loved? She who seemed brimful of solicitude for the likes of Miles Bjornstam and Bea Sorensen and Erik Valborg could not accept the proffered love of Will Kennicott, nor the affections of Guy Pollack or Erik or Percy Bresnahan, with human sympathy or self-possession. While in Washington, presumably relishing freedom, Carol chose no man to share per passionate abandonment of home and husband. To omit showing Carol enjoying love (as distinguished from being thrilled at the threat of love) is a serious defect to Lewis's characterization of his heroine. It is not plausible to the reader that a woman represented as young, vibrant, and alive, must invest so many of her energies in tricked-up causes which have no palpable effect on her village; unless, of course, Carol has simply been a role player from the outset of her career as a busybody.

If this last condition of role performer is her true one, then it is useless to talk of character development in Carol Kennicott. Lewis reveals his heroine aging and mellowing, but not developing wisdom or insight or a significant alteration in her regulation-issue value system. Instead of growth, Lewis offers emphasis in stasis. It is true that Lewis permits Carol the perception that there might be a "story" in Will's life, as well as her own, an attribution handed down without evidence of preamble or process, like the Revolutionary Ideas sent to Mr. Wrenn or Seth Appleby. But it is evident that after her return to Gopher Prairie, Carol slips back into her old role. There Lewis's story leaves off, although strictly it does not end.

Examined fairly dispassionately, the characterization of Carol is not strong enough to have sustained by itself the high popularity of Main Street. A thorough re-reading of the novel indicates that the success of Main Street depends on prejudice generated in the reader as co-conspirator with the author, a role which Lewis forces his audience to play, from the opening paragraphs of his ironic introduction. The reader, naturally a hater of filth and ignorance and injustice, aligns himself with the critics of the prairie town where these conditions have been reported to flourish; thereupon, trapped by his own bias, he seems to find a sympathetic champion in Carol

Kennicott, a martyr who ignites her own fires at the stake where no chains bind her except those of her husband's love.

There is a pattern to the illogicality of Main Street if one views it primarily as an emotion-filled litany of all Lewis's dearest causes, and especially as the dramatization of a fantasy of retribution, which began as reprisal and ended in rapprochement. The authorial tone, which betrays an edge of irritable accusation up through Chapter XXVII, becomes less strident as Carol's behavior becomes more melodramatic. The recitation of significant detail, for which Lewis is renowned, becomes less a proof of realistic reportage and more an exercise of fault-finding.

For Lewis, however, Main Street appears to have been a necessary novel, the one in which he needed to exorcise his childhood ghosts from Sauk Centre, and bid them inhabit their Gadarene hosts in Gopher Prairie. In the process, Lewis discovered the seminal characters who were to populate, in fuller detail, his novels of the future.

Main Street is significant as a demonstration of cultural shock, a social phenomenon with which thousands of Lewis's readers could identify then, and can now, having had acquaintance with the comparative dullness of village life. But despite the accusations of oppression and insensitivity directed toward the citizens of towns, one can

not help seeing in Carol Kennicott a more fearful sort of oppressor, a more insidious strain of insensitivity; because her efforts, however strongly felt, seem fitful and perfunctory, as if her causes were put on and off like a character actor's parts. That is why, although there seems to be so much business going on in Gopher Prairie, nothing really happens. It is because, as the dramatization of a fantasy, Main Street is a novel of gesture, not of act.

CHAPTER IX

THE VITAL FUNCTION OF ROLE PLAYING IN LEWIS'S WORK

The astounding reception accorded Main Street by the public seems to have disconcerted Lewis, as he indicates in a letter to Hergesheimer, to whom with Cabell he had dedicated the novel. In a tone which equivocates between mystification and despair, Lewis seems to fumble for an appropriate pose suited to a man embarrassed and frightened by the implications of success.

Me, of course I am ruined. With the large sale of Main Street I am convinced of my essential commonplaceness. (Quite honestly!) Even once in a while some friend indignantly tells me that some bunch of young jeunes--say those at the Cafe Rotonde on the rive gauche--assert that if the damned book has sold so well, I must be rotten. But I agree with them . . .

Then he continues, with deprecatory distance, speaking of himself in the third person,

An earnest young man Yankee of physical type, comic and therefore the more humorless, writes a long book to slap the bourgeois--the bourgeois love it, eat it! It would make an excellent short story.¹

¹James J. Napier, "Letters of Sinclair Lewis to Joseph Hergesheimer, 1915-1922," American Literature, XXXVIII (May, 1966), 245-246. The letter is dated "February 14," probably in 1922.

Of course this tone does not tally with the optimism and excitement evident in Lewis's concurrent correspondence with Harcourt over the literary and commercial success of Main Street, a fact which urges the conclusion that Lewis adopted a special self-effacing and deferential role when addressing a man he felt to be his superior in the writer's craft. Yet the note of apprehension, the recognition of the awkwardness of smashing success, seem genuine. With Lewis, each audience that he faced elicited from him a tailored word choice or dramatic presentation, prompted exhibition of a selected facet of his complex personality, measured for a calculated effect to ingratiate, entertain, or to antagonize.²

These and other evidences of Lewis's lifelong habit of role playing are an aspect of the self-limitation and self-defeat he seemed compelled to work upon himself. In his own life, as well as in the accounts of protagonists in his early works, there was ambivalence toward success and a compulsion for extraordinary risk-taking. When the remarkable achievements of Main Street and later Babbitt, made Lewis a celebrity, he seemed to become careless of the damage he could do to himself--in his broken marriages, his refusal to seek psychiatric help when disintegration

²Schorer's biography is replete with examples. For one evaluation by Dr. Morris Fishbein, see Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 305.

began to interfere with his productivity, and particularly in his alcoholism. Lewis became what Orrin Klapp has identified as a "symbolic leader."

The attraction of fame is a built-in part of the American dream. Yet one of the most characteristic symptoms of having actually become a celebrity is a certain disillusionment, which sets in--after the first thrill of seeing one's name in headlines--upon discovering the obligations and inconveniences of being known by everybody everywhere. . . .

Along with loss of privacy there some pressures to live up to various public expectations that are irksome, unreasonable, and even impossible. . . . When an intellectual becomes famous, he is expected to assume a public role--to make speeches, defend his position, attend social gatherings--even if doing so is inconsistent with his own personality or an interruption of his creative work.³

In Lewis's case, becoming a public personality seemed to facilitate his escape from a private self, Harry Lewis from Sauk Centre, who had been the source of so much unhappiness. One may suggest that the same role playing abilities which brought Lewis fulfillment also destroyed him. Again, Klapp:

. . . very often a performer "finds himself" by using cues from audience responses and making himself into what people want. He may do so by painful trial and error, or he may hit it quickly. In any case, sensitivity is crucial--sensitivity to the feedback that helps him perfect his style. In thus interacting with the public, he is performing a public service; he is searching out latent functions that need to be fulfilled.⁴

³Symbolic Leaders: Public Dramas and Public Men (Chicago, 1964), pp. 14, 16.

⁴Ibid., p. 32.

It was Lewis's fate to discover that his two antithetical desires, both the achievement of fame and self-defeat, could be accomplished by the same technique of escapist role playing and projecting. That is why, in the lives of his early protagonists, one may detect the insistent theme of fascination for the martyr's role--martyrdom being the most conspicuous means to achieve both impeccable fame and extinction. That is how Lewis could seem simultaneously a savage critic of society's mediocrity and a defender of the average man: he could command attention and fame in a public role assilaing the commonplace figure he privately feared himself to be. Dr. Karen Horney's reflections on projection and a Lewis characterization are illuminating.

The psychic value of projecting one's own abusing tendencies on others is obvious. It is far more pleasant to feel a righteous indignation at others than face a problem of one's own. Moreover, hysterical persons often use accusations as a means of intimidation, or bullying the other into feeling guilty and thus letting himself be abused. Sinclair Lewis has given a brilliant description of this kind of strategy in the character of Mrs. Dodsworth.⁵

With the filmiest of disguises, Grace Lewis ("Susan") has represented how her husband ("Timothy Hale") exhibited this behavior in their marriage--she who has been identified as a possible model for Fran Dodsworth.

⁵The Neurotic Personality of Our Time (New York, 1937), p. 186.

. . . Tim's mind had developed too fast, like his body, and the proportions were all wrong. . . . Susan had once played little games to shut out the frightening thought of poverty, and later to shut in and keep warm their love for each other. Now it was Tim who was so constantly play-acting that she could not find the man she had married. He became successively the book characters he created: the hard-boiled business man, the neurotic woman, the aloof scientist. He was also what his various reading publics wanted him to be: hearty, morose; boyish, pedantic; a reg'lar feller, an Anglophile with an eyeglass; generous, penurious; realist, fantastic; curly-headed as young David, bald as an eagle. If most women complained of the dull sameness of a husband's personality, Susan longed for a less polyandrous existence. Especially since Tim showed every sign of clinging indefinitely to his latest roles: Famous Author, Misunderstood Husband, Cheated Lover. . . . If he craved fresh praise, fresh understanding, fresh love, a fresh face, there was no biological reason for their remaining together.⁶

This insistence by "Tim" that "Susan," and even their son "Roger" (Wells Lewis) were mortgages upon his freedom and creativity corresponds to that extension of projecting which, in another place, Dr. Horney calls "externalization," that

tendency to experience internal processes as if they occurred outside oneself and, as a rule, to hold these external factors responsible for one's difficulties.

. . .

When a person feels that his life for good or ill is determined by others, it is only logical that he should be preoccupied with changing them, reforming them, punishing them, protecting himself from their interference, or impressing them. In this way externalization makes for dependence on others--a dependence, however, quite different from that created by a neurotic need for affection. It also makes for overdependence upon external circumstances.⁷

⁶Grace Hegger Lewis, Half a Loaf (New York, 1931), p. 344.

⁷Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis (New York, 1945), pp. 115-117.

Such a kind of obsessive fear of external determinism may account, in both Lewis and his characters, for the pervasiveness of the strong compensatory themes of personal freedom, of breaking out, and of escape. It may also explain why, when the vicarious Lewises are free, they do not know how to utilize their liberty meaningfully, but remain in a sort of psychic bondage. Finally, it suggests a reason for Lewis's own "overdependence upon external circumstances" in character description and delineation by role playing and role attribution; in his contrivance of significant symbolic details, sets and props; and in his repeated use of the fortuitous happening (as a casually noticed newspaper or magazine article, or chance remark) as a determinant for characters' behavior.

In response to these motivating forces for projection-externalization and self-dramatization, Lewis's creative method in fiction writing seems clearly identifiable as a direct consequence. Certainly, characterization through role playing and role-and-name attribution is an authorial convenience; for Lewis it appears to have been indispensable. This technique, though admittedly superficial, offers characters who have glitter, color, movement, and a wealth of plausible, circumstantial detail. They can be moved about to several differing locations at varying speeds; they may gain new ideas, make sensational impressions, come back to their points of origin, and bow

to the applause of the reader. Particularly this style was convenient for Lewis because he could maintain tight control.

Lewis's critics have wrestled with the problem of identifying the reasons why the novelist's characters, both great and small, seem somehow spurious or meretricious, like figurines in ormolu. Michael Millgate suggests that Lewis was unable to surmount the middle-class modes which had captured him.

Lewis both mirrored and spoke to the American lower-middle-class because he was so intimately and thoroughly of that class himself and knew from experience the ambitions, frustrations and insecurities of his obscure heroes. That is his great strength. His great limitation is that he never transcended the limits of that class. Although he sometimes achieves considerable vigour of expression, it is always within a very narrow range. Although his observations of American society are often incisive, they are always made in terms of a very restricted point of view. No one has known better the obscure heroes of American commercial society and no one has described so closely the minutiae of their lives, but Lewis was not sufficiently an artist to transpose his knowledge into completely satisfying fictional terms.⁸

Millgate seems to feel that Lewis as a craftsman was less the artist and more a reporter or folk-journalist. It is difficult to deny such an assessment, except to appeal for more depth and detail to the criticism. What Millgate writes is true enough, but is it sufficiently comprehensive?

⁸"Sinclair Lewis and the Obscure Hero," Studi Americani, VIII (1962), 126-127.

Martin Light sees Lewis's characterizations primarily as effusions of the author's peculiar mimetic gifts.

The pattern of Lewis's minor characterization, which is intended to expose large numbers of types and individuals that surround a central figure and social situation, has also another function. Lewis had a great repertoire of variations on the central types, each ready to perform at a moment's notice when the action got dull or when a satiric mood was needed. He could, at such times, trot out a booster, a businessman, a preacher, an evangelist, a feminist, a clubwoman, or a college professor, and set the character to talking. And at times, particularly in his later works, Lewis deliberately fitted such episodes and speeches into his novels for virtuoso reasons. It pleased his sense of humor, of farce, to set his powers of mimicry free once again.⁹

Along a similar line of criticism, Thomas K. Whipple sees Lewis's fictional creatures as victims of their own misapprehension of their environment, doomed to paroxysms of feverish acting. These characters, Whipple notes,

. . . especially those in the early books, are always wondering what people will think, always suspecting that they are the objects of observation and comment --and in Lewis's novels they are generally right. They are constantly posing and pretending, for the benefit even of waiters and elevator-boys. They do not dare to be natural; they are self-distrustful, uncertain, and insecure. They are self-analytical and self-contemptuous for their lack of sincerity; yet they continue to pose to themselves, adopting one attitude after another. That is to say, they conceive the object of life to be to pass themselves off as something they are not. This idea the author himself seems to share; he seems to think that the solution of all problems and difficulties is to find the one right pose, the one correct attitude. . . . one would be inclined to call Lewis a man of multiple personality--save that all these personalities have the look of being assumed for effect.¹⁰

⁹"A Study of Characterization in Sinclair Lewis's Fiction," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois (Urbana, 1960), p. 125.

¹⁰Spokesmen, pp. 220-221.

To this theme of pose and pretense, Robert Cantwell adds his voice, suggesting that Lewis's characters assume roles to escape from painful reality into the relative narcosis of fantasy.

They are self-dramatists whose imaginations flower from their evasions of conflict--they are always posing before themselves and others, not in order to fulfill a consistent Byronic role, and to take the responsibility for it, but in order to conceal their true reactions and to hide the concerns that oppress them. . . . They dramatize themselves in order to endure the demands of a society that they have no hope of bettering and whose reality they cannot face, and they imagine themselves in all kinds of roles--except the ones they actually occupy--because they cannot get through their days without the help of such fantasy.¹¹

Furthermore, Lewis's deftness at dramatization and his instinct for capitalizing on the telling, symbolic detail in narrative description may indicate weakness in the author's craft, hints Morley Callaghan: Lewis seemed too eager to ingratiate himself with his audience, too anxious to manage his reader's loyalties.

. . . it seemed to me that [Lewis's] grand success was based on one of his weaknesses as an artist: he gave the reader a chance at too quick a recognition. This kind of writing always puts the writer and the reader in a comfortable relationship, neither one being required to jar himself, or get out of his groove of recognition. A writer who has this gift is always meeting his reader and reviewers on their terms, and it should be always the other way around.¹²

¹¹"Sinclair Lewis," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Mark Schorer (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), pp. 117-118.

¹²That Summer in Paris (New York, 1964), p. 63.

These, and several other critics, have remarked upon the versatility of Lewis's mimicry and role playing in real life, and have noted projections of the author into his characters, and vice versa. Some, like Whipple, have noted how the characters themselves improvise and masquerade in roles, but they have come short of recognizing two fundamental points: (1) that role playing and role projecting, in their several manifestations, constitute Lewis's prime mode of characterization in his early novels, accounting both for the impression of superficial, photo-mosaic-montage and for the "hollow center" phenomena among his fictional personalities; and (2) that in Lewis's work, as in his life, role playing, projecting, fantasy-weaving and incessant traveling are evidences of a self-abnegating and self-destructive personality. The compulsive qualities obvious in the author's marriage to two punishing women,¹³ in his irremediable quarreling with old friends, and in his alcoholism reinforce this latter view. In his novels there is a basic theme of unsuccess. The warmth and fulfillment of mature love is denied; sexual triumph is shunted aside when it is within grasp; and the protagonists'

¹³ Charles Angoff remembers a remark by H. L. Mencken: "Poor Red," repeated Mencken. "Men who marry more than one woman always make the same mistake. The only difference is the woman's name." See "A Kansan in Westchester," University Review, XXXI (Summer, 1965), 283. Of course it is not inconceivable that Lewis maneuvered his wives into their roles as his persecutors, as if into a ritualistic Punch-and-Judy game.

deep satisfaction in vocation or other accomplishments can not survive without skittering away into fantasy.

What has been particularly lacking in criticism of Lewis, however, is a plausible correlation between the antics of the novelist's characters and the behavior of Lewis himself; there has been extensive analysis of the acts and speech of both, but not enough synthesis of the processes which caused each to behave in these particular ways. It now seems reasonable to say that Lewis evolved his characters to be representational value systems, rather than prepossessing manlike beings that could sweat and chew and sneeze. That is why their codes of conduct seem so programmatic and restrictive, and their modes of behavior so reactionary and repetitive. Even the characters' exhibitions of language peculiarities, as forms of role investment, now seem as stylized and contrived as routines by Will Rogers or W. C. Fields. Vocabulary, allusions, and grammatical errors in their speech clothe Lewis's people with eccentricities, and at the same time conceal the bareness of their respective imaginations.

A review of Sinclair Lewis's major works between 1912 and 1920 points up the paradox that, as the French have it, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." From Hike and the Aeroplane through Main Street, one can see that Lewis gradually refined his creative technique--not by broadening and mellowing his insights into the comedy and pathos of the human condition in attempts to

relate them to his audience with more authority--but by collecting more varieties of experience and scene, and editing them more surely. Hike Griffin has in common with Carol Kennicott the same neurotic need to excite amazement and demand attention from a host of gawking spectators by performing reckless grandstand plays. Fame, wealth, success--all seem synonymous with capturing an audience, inspiring admiration, or reading one's name in the newspapers; these are the motivating forces in the lives of Hike, William Wrenn, Hawk Ericson, Una Golden, Seth Appleby, Milt Daggett, and Carol Kennicott. One senses in these seven books a sequential dramatization of Lewis's personal struggle to find his audience. There are qualities of urgency and insistence in them that one does not detect in the later Babbitt; as if Lewis, after having tried every possible combination of role and situation, with many a wasted word and gesture, had at last found his métier, and at the same time the throng of devoted readers he had always sought. In Babbitt the note of querulous supplication is gone. Awash in the approval that rained on Main Street, Lewis (like Hike Griffin soaring aloft for a still better trick, this time with "no hands") wrote his next great novel as a veteran performer assured of his audience; once he had them fascinated, he could regale them with many more exhibitions of his artistic versatility.

As if in the fractional distillation of his cruder personal experiences, with the more volatile spirits the

first to boil away, Lewis's first six books represent byproducts in the refinement of his creative process. As a fantasy of sensational heroic achievement, and of imperial domination over peers and betters by a boy genius, Hike and the Aeroplane seems simultaneously a farewell to the impetuous freedoms of boyhood and a compensation for the awkwardness and solitude of Lewis's youth. The story of Our Mr. Wrenn is a speculative representation of a "little man," the undistinguished office clerk that Lewis may have felt fated to be, reconciled to uxorious domesticity and modest success after an impulsive and frightening sally abroad.

Carl Ericson in The Trail of the Hawk receives much more thorough development than previous protagonists. Lewis follows the Hawk's life from young boyhood through periods of psychological and economic crisis to national fame, sputtering marriage and prospects of qualified success in big business. Although Lewis does not depict Carl's life unfolding and mellowing in consequence of dynamic interaction with his surroundings and internalized experiences, he does show his hero transformed by time and chance from a little child to a big child who still aspires to be a sort of Galahad. In The Job Lewis uses an almost identical line of development, except that, unfamiliar with the authentic circumstances of young girlhood, he omitted describing Una Golden's formative years, and began by producing her as a mature young lady with feelings of

unconscious feminism. The Job is more polished, not as uneven as The Trail of the Hawk, but the story of Una concludes at almost the same level and intensity of anxious optimism as the Hawk's story. Lewis's characterization of Una lacks sharp definition, ostensibly because the author intended her to represent a "typical" girl on the job, not one whose appearance, personality or actions were distinctive or memorable. But The Job, even when it seems the Una-Grace complement to Hawk-Lewis, represents the novelist's best planned and executed fiction before Main Street.

The Innocents, having its genesis in the days of apprehension which followed Lewis's marriage, is a fragmented story with many intriguing features. Since it appears to have been written rapidly, the number of Lewis's ideas and attitudes which it contains lie near the surface, without much artistic subtlety of camouflage. Two discoveries apparent in The Innocents seem noteworthy for a more comprehensive interpretation of Lewis and his early work. The first is the authorial intrusion cited earlier which proclaims that "The greatest philosophical theory in the world is that 'people are people.'" The second is Lewis's explanation that "In his attempt to let people bluff themselves and accept him as a person to be taken seriously, Father kept on trying to adhere to the truth." Read in context, these passages seem surprisingly like

portentous pronouncements on the conduct of life. One may wonder if these utterances, taken together, bespeak Lewis's fundamental attitudes in his relationships with other people--if the first, with its assumptions of human equality and equivalent identities, represents the rationalization of a lonely, shy, and rejected youth that he deserved equal consideration with his peers everywhere, a guarantee implicit in the socialistic democracy he often advocated so noisily; and if the second, with its implication that the credulity of strangers begs a performance, represents the behavior of an insecure and self-hating man whose mimetic gifts allowed him to perpetrate all kinds of bluffs, acts, and roles that would be accepted as authentic. After all, if a man feels scorned for being himself, he should be allowed to play Someone Else. Further, The Innocents, having been written speedily and with little refinement, offers a whole congeries of role-playing opportunities for the Applebys, and a view of Lewis's prime technique for characterization at its crudest and most obvious. When one considers the superiority of The Job over Lewis's less presentable work (like his short stories or The Innocents), it becomes apparent that, although he relied on role playing and projecting in almost every case, these techniques are not so intrusive, or so patently exploited as vehicles for swift transitions and character "development," in his better writing.

Free Air is an improvement, but not a major one, over The Innocents. For all its awkward transitions and improbable situations, Milt Daggett's pursuit of Claire Boltwood possesses gaiety and freshness which derive from frequent shifts of episode and scene, in the manner of a travelogue. As an experimental model for Carol Kennicott, Claire is too affected a mannequin, and the Gopher Prairie of Free Air, compared to that of Main Street, is barely a muddy rut. It is evident, however, that in the magazine serials which were to compose Free Air, Lewis was clearing his imagination of the last impurities which had clogged his determination to write Main Street.

John T. Flanagan has noted that the time and the opportunity were both propitious for Lewis's first great work.

The ripeness of the time was a major factor in the success of Main Street. The novel appeared at the precise hour when readers suddenly freed from the tensions of a world war and conscious of the need for self-examination were willing and almost avid to learn the truth about themselves.¹⁴

Whatever "truth" the reader might learn, however, depended mightily upon his acceptance of Lewis's exposé posture as narrator of Carol Kennicott's history. Generously casting himself as the "alien cynic" who will explode the old notions cherished by small-town chauvinists, Lewis earns

¹⁴"A Long Way to Gopher Prairie: Sinclair Lewis's Apprenticeship," Southwest Review, XXXII (Autumn, 1947), 403.

credit as a liberal critic of provincial mores through a trick of dialectics: by making his opponents seem absurd and petty, he can assume the air of an intellectual liberator, while not differing very significantly from those he accuses of Toryism. Beyond this, however, Main Street is Lewis's triumph of externalization--a hindsighted rebuke to his native town for having made Harry Lewis neurotic and eccentric, and a sneer from a recently urbanized prig that the village lacked manners and taste. One realizes that most of Carol's quarrels with Gopher Prairie are based more on disagreement over tastes than upon moral values and priorities; that Carol is not so much better informed or civilized than the Jolly Seventeen, but that she is a more stubborn and impudent bluffer.

Apparently the many readers of Main Street recognized Lewis's huff, but not Carol's effrontery. After his successful coup with dramatic role playing through Carol as symbolic spokesman of a value system, Lewis set his novelistic style to produce what his audience had told him was successful. Despite the undeniable merits of Babbitt, Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry, and Dodsworth, one can not avoid glimpsing Lewis projecting himself into each one of his protagonists, relying confidently in every case upon his peculiar descriptive talents to overwhelm the reader's incredulity with cascades of circumstantial detail, which purport to reveal Character and Taste, but can not authenticate compassion or a heartbeat.

A last look at Sinclair Lewis's first seven books supports the view that, although he found the vast audience he sought, and taught himself to write with accurate and trenchant facility, he did not remedy his most regrettable flaw. Perhaps his desire to reach many readers persuaded him to design his novels around universal types with wider appeal and merely token trappings of individuality. But Lewis's almost insistent reliance on narrative detail and role playing as prime devices for characterization tend to belabor his protagonists, rather than explain them. This seeming evasiveness begs the question, "What, then, was Lewis's concept of personality?" Both internal evidence from his early works, and external support from his well-documented life suggest that Lewis never really understood what made each man unique. If in his youth a man assumes that all men are essentially the same, and never revises his opinion because continued belief assures his status as a man, he will always remind himself that he is as good as anyone else, and that the occasional man who seems different is either lucky, unlucky, or bluffing. This appears to have been the attitude which the novelist carried throughout his life; and though he wrote a half-dozen mighty books and many inferior ones, he never doubted his assumption that his mode of characterization was authentic and realistic, or that his vision was the universal perception of mankind--so preoccupied was he with the many roles of Harry Lewis.

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