



Satire as Social Scalpel: Unpacking Sinclair Lewis's Critique of American Society

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide insights into some of the elements of the art of satire used by Sinclair Lewis to give social commentary through his novels "Babbitt" and "Arrowsmith". By focusing on Lewis' style of writing, this study will demonstrate how Lewis utilized ironic, ridicule, and exaggerated forms of satire when critiquing the abuses and hypocritical behavior found within American middle class culture, politics, and institutions within the context of the early part of the twentieth century. By attacking the lazy bourgeoisie, Sinclair Lewis illustrates the disconnection between American ideals and their actual existence through issues of conformity, a preference for material possessions, and the deterioration of individualism that existed during this time period. Overall, this research will argue that Lewis' satirical works serve not only as a representation of the cultural norm of that time period but also serve as a barometer for contemporary times and therefore indicate that Sinclair Lewis' works continue to provide us with commentary about the human experience.

Introduction:

In a time of great social upheaval in America at the start of the 20th century, Sinclair Lewis emerged as a writer who used literary satire to critique the horrors of society during that time. Novels such as Babbitt



(1922) and Arrowsmith (1925) provided harsh criticism of the middle class in America by exposing the contradictions and hypocrisy of this era. Lewis's work is an early example of American realism and presents a view of a society that is being transformed by the rapid changes associated with modernity, consumerism, and conformity.

The purpose of this paper is to show that Lewis's use of satire is like a scalpel used to cut deeply through an American facade of respectability in order to reveal the decay of complacency, materialism, and intellectual emptiness. Lewis used irony, ridicule, and exaggeration as tools to provide a reflection of the zeitgeist of his time and to make profound comments about the human condition; many of these comments are still highly relevant today as we have ongoing debates about identity, community, and the American Dream.

As the United States continues to grapple with issues of social inequality, cultural fragmentation, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing world, Lewis's oeuvre presents a timely reminder of the power of satire to challenge, provoke, and inspire. Through a close analysis of Lewis's novels, this paper will demonstrate that his work remains a vital contribution to the ongoing conversation about what it means to be American, and what it means to be human, in the modern age."

Kaleidoscopic view of Sinclair Lewis' famous novels:

Babbitt (1922) is a satirical novel by Sinclair Lewis, published in 1922. The story revolves around George F. Babbitt, a middle-aged real estate agent in the fictional city of Zenith, Midwest, USA. The novel is a scathing critique of the American middle class, exploring themes of conformity, materialism, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing world.

Major themes in Sinclair Lewis's novel Babbitt (1922) are:

The Conflict between Conformity and Individuality: In Sinclair Lewis's satire of modern-day America via Babbitt's character, we see how difficult it is to balance being an individual with being "one of the groups." While George F. Babbitt, a successful real estate agent, wishes to conform to the acceptable codes of society (good citizen/respectable member of Zenith's business community), he is constantly concerned about how others perceive him. He masters middle-class values; is very much an image-conscious man; and spends much time worrying about how others perceive him.

At the same time, he often experiences tension between his desire to be accepted into society and his desire for freedom and expression. He seeks out unconventional or bohemian lifestyles. The result of



these conflicting desires (conformity vs. individualism) creates a sense of restlessness, discontentment, and disconnection from his surroundings. Babbitt's character embodies a timeless and universal theme that is representative of man's internal struggle; man longs to belong to a group while attempting to maintain one's own distinctiveness. The tensions Lewis explores through Babbitt's character highlight how negative aspects of social expectations reduce self-worth, creativity and individuality by limiting the individual's right to express themselves freely through their art and/or other forms of expression.

Materialism and Consumerism: Babbitt is a critique of America's obsession with economic improvement and the expenditures connected to it. Babbitt is constantly searching for better ways to "keep up with the Joneses" and to buy the latest fashions and products, which has made his life completely dependent on external validation.

The middle class's superficial values include those placed on us already by our culture. As a result, Americans have developed a way of living that is based on their material possessions and how they appear to others.

In the novel, Babbitt has weak relationships, selfish political beliefs, and believes he is important because of what he owns. A materialistic view of life creates a lack of substance or spiritual fulfillment, ultimately leading people away from themselves and their ability to experience real-life ideas.

Lewis believes that a focus solely on obtaining wealth and status will lead to a ruin of community, friends, and personal and spiritual growth. In doing so, Lewis raises questions about what really creates happiness in our lives.

Middle-class Values: The novel is a strong criticism directed at the American middle class, exposing their vacuity in terms of both values and hopes. Through the main character, George Babbitt, Lewis highlights how the search for material possessions and social status are now defining features of what it means to be a member of this broken class.

Babbitt represents the severe restriction of individuality within the middle class, where conformity is given priority over anything remotely resembling individuality. Lewis criticizes the fixation of the middle class on propriety, and how they are such slaves to the dictates of society that they will sacrifice any hope of existing as unique individuals in order to attain some semblance of respectability. The life of Babbitt is not representative of anything other than a well-publicized and crafted image of having achieved both material success and stability, as opposed to having experienced either personal growth or



inward fulfillment. Babbitt's emphasis on wealth, friendships and status has also contributed to the perception of how the values of the middle class have been treated as physical commodities.

In addition, Lewis indicates that the excessive emphasis on/noteworthy emphasis placed on attaining personal wealth and/or social acceptance creates a spiritual as well as emotional void. The existence of Babbitt's inner being is characterized by a profound detachment from reality and/or a lack of identity since he realizes that what he has pursued during his lifetime has only led him to a bland, empty existence.

Lewis uses Babbitt's character to illustrate the flaws in the American Dream by showing how it is built on a foundation of falsehood with regard to individuality, creativity, and genuine relationships — all of which are overshadowed by superficial outward indications of achievement. The presentation of middle-class values in Babbitt is also a powerful critique of society's emphasis on image versus reality and the notion that conformity is superior to individuality.

By revealing the pressures associated with middle-class aspirations, Lewis encourages readers to think again about what they are giving up in terms of authenticity and self-awareness for the benefit of a culture that tends to value appearance over substance.

Disillusionment: In "Babbitt," Sinclair Lewis masterfully crafts a narrative of disillusionment, tracing George Babbitt's gradual awakening to the emptiness of his life. As Babbitt navigates the trappings of middle-class success, he begins to confront the stark reality that his pursuits have yielded only a hollow, superficial existence. His growing disillusionment serves as a poignant commentary on the elusiveness of the American Dream.

Through Babbitt's experiences, Lewis exposes the suffocating nature of conformity and the crushing weight of societal expectations. Babbitt's attempts to break free from these constraints are met with resistance, leaving him torn between the comfort of familiarity and the allure of individuality. As he grapples with the meaninglessness of his life, Babbitt's disillusionment deepens, underscoring the novel's central theme: the search for authenticity in a society that prizes image above all else.

Lewis's portrayal of Babbitt's disillusionment serves as a powerful critique of American society, highlighting the tension between external success and internal fulfillment. Ultimately, Babbitt's story poses a haunting question: can one find meaning in a world that values conformity over individuality?



Rebellion and Awakening: Sinclair Lewis crafts a nuanced exploration of rebellion and awakening, as George Babbitt momentarily challenges the societal norms that have defined his life. His brief foray into nonconformity, marked by his affair with Tanith Judique and his association with the bohemian crowd, represents a fleeting attempt to break free from the constraints of middle-class expectations. This rebellion sparks a glimmer of self-awareness, as Babbitt begins to question the values and aspirations that have governed his existence.

However, Babbitt's rebellion is ultimately short-lived, and he returns to the fold of conformity, illustrating the immense pressure to conform to societal norms. Lewis suggests that true rebellion is a daunting, perhaps impossible, task in a society that prizes stability and respectability above individuality. Babbitt's return to conformity underscores the tension between personal desire and societal expectation, highlighting the difficulties of sustaining a genuine awakening in a culture that resists change. Through Babbitt's failed rebellion, Lewis critiques the suffocating nature of societal expectations, posing questions about the possibilities and limitations of individual transformation.

Arrowsmith (1925): The novel is comedic commentary that observes the three relationships between science, business and society amidst a time of rapid industrialization in the USA. The story is told through Dr Arrowsmith's (the protagonist) quest to find his place as a researcher in an unstable climate of modern medicine.

The author's intent with his portrayal of Dr. Arrowsmith's story is to show how modern society's demands often conflict with the scientist's desire for scientific truth. Commercialization of science is a theme that runs through the novel – Dr. Arrowsmith is pressured to work on projects that go against what he believes is ethically correct. The author also touches on the struggle between idealism and Realism as Dr. Arrowsmith attempts to remain true to his ideals in the face of real-world problems.

The interactions and conflicts between members of the scientific community reflect the author's concerns about the influence of financial capital on scientific research. The author emphasizes that a scientist must learn how to reconcile the pursuit of truth, with the financial constraints that are inherent to the activity of conducting scientific research in a capitalist economy; as such, the differences between the values of individualism (i.e., independence of thought) and conformity (i.e., adherence to prescribed norms established by the society) are a significant factor in the author's characterization of Dr. Arrowsmith as he struggles against great external pressure to maintain his independence and uniqueness as an individual.



Ultimately, "Arrowsmith" is a powerful commentary on the role of science in society, highlighting the need for integrity, independence, and a commitment to truth in the face of competing interests. Lewis's work remains a significant contribution to the literary canon, offering insights into the complexities of scientific research and the human condition

Major themes in Sinclair Lewis's novel "Arrowsmith" (1925) are:

The Pursuit of Scientific Truth: Sinclair Lewis' "Arrowsmith" examines how the pursuit of scientific knowledge is impeded by social pressure, challenges, and other factors such as the scientist's ambitions. Arrowsmith is continually challenged in his pursuit of scientific truth because he must balance those things against his responsibilities to society and to his profession.

Lewis challenges the idea that scientists exist only for the good of mankind and instead shows that there are many competing interests, and often conflicting agendas that exist within the scientific community. Arrowsmith's experiences illustrate that it is very difficult to maintain scientific integrity when business and social forces exert enormous pressure upon scientists to follow specific paths of research.

Lewis depicts how the scientist's quest for scientific truth is negatively impacted by those external influences, thus distorting the ability of scientists to pursue the truth through science. In addition to examining how external influences shape the path of scientific research, Lewis' portrayal of the scientist's role in society emphasizes the importance of having a high degree of autonomy and independence when pursuing knowledge.

In "Arrowsmith," Lewis implies that the increasing influence of the business community on science is creating an ever-increasing gap between scientific research and the expectations that society has for it. "Arrowsmith" forces us to think critically about the nature of scientific truth and the many obstacles scientists must overcome in order to obtain knowledge in a world filled with uncertainty and hostility.

Idealism vs Compromise: Sinclair Lewis presents the conflict between idealism and compromise via Martin Arrowsmith's poignant plight to hold onto his idealistic vision of science in reality within the novel "Arrowsmith." Despite Arrowsmith's strong commitment to conducting pure research to benefit humanity, his professional, personal, and social aspirations continually conspire to test the limits of his steadfastness.



As he faces the convoluted path of discovering medically useful research, he must confront the plight of scientists making serious compromises; he often has to give up his principle of intellectual honesty in return for some measure of practical success or financial security. The criticism that Lewis puts forth through Arrowsmith is that it is impossible to sustain an idealistic view of science in an environment where modern commercial concerns impact how scientific inquiry is pursued.

Throughout his journey, Arrowsmith serves as a vehicle for Lewis to demonstrate how difficult it is to achieve a balance between being an idealist and an opportunist; the complex nature of present-day life draws substantial lines between idealism versus compromise. Lewis communicates through this novel that obtaining scientific truth typically requires negotiation with outside influences, creating doubt whether idealism can be maintained when confronted with the harshness of reality. The struggles faced by Arrowsmith offer a profound commentary on the struggles faced by all scientists to maintain their ideals while yielding to the forces of the world around them.

The Corrupting Influence of Success and WealthIn Sinclair Lewis's "Arrowsmith", the author criticizes how success and money corrupt the integrity of real science, indicating a dichotomy between commercial interest and obtaining knowledge. The protagonist Martin Arrowsmith finds out the hard way that many people who conduct research do so for profit, not because they are looking for truth, most especially in his world of medical research.

Through Martin Arrowsmith, Lewis describes how susceptible scientists are to the lure of wealth and prestige and how that lures them away from the integrity of their research and scientists' values. Martin Arrowsmith serves as an example of how the pursuit of success can lead to immoral compromises and the destruction of scientific values.

The growing role of business in scientific research is evident throughout the story, showing the conflicts between conducting a scientific investigation and commercial interests. The author implies that the unrestricted pursuit of money and success can compromise an individual's morals, even a well-meaning scientist, and that one must be vigilant about their efforts to maintain the integrity and validity of scientific research. Lewis uses Martin Arrowsmith's struggle throughout the book to illustrate the danger of allowing commercial interests to dictate the direction of scientific investigation.

The Tension between Science and Business: Sinclair Lewis's novel, "Arrowsmith," presents and critiques the growing impact and influence of business upon the field of science, demonstrating the increasing tension created through this transition in priority from the scientific community. In



"Arrowsmith", the author uses the plight of Martin Arrowsmith to illustrate how profit-driven motives are often the impetus behind scientific research as opposed to the quest for knowledge or truth.

The author cautions against permitting financial rewards to dictate the direction of scientific inquiry. Lewis exemplifies the dangers inherent in failing to preserve the integrity of science through profit-driven motivations and the potential damage that occurs to the scientific community when profit becomes the primary motivator for pursuing research and discovery.

In light of Arrowsmith's journey throughout the course of the novel, Lewis illustrates how commercial interests can dictate the outcome of scientific inquiry, raising many significant questions regarding both the role of science within society as well as the responsibilities that scientists have to themselves and to their profession in a commercially-oriented society.

Individualism and Nonconformity: In this book by Sinclair Lewis, Martin Arrowsmith faces increasing societal pressure to conform, yet he resists this pressure with remarkable determination to hold onto his own individual identity. The challenges that he faces from both professional and social expectations demonstrate the difficulty in maintaining one's individualism while still fulfilling the demands of others.

Lewis examines the struggles of Arrowsmith as a new type of "indoctrinated" individual who tries to maintain his own independence. Throughout the course of the book, Lewis highlights how vulnerable individuals can be when they are trying to resist conforming to social norms. Even though Arrowsmith tries very hard to gain acceptance into the scientific community, he must constantly battle with the tension between his own desires and the pressure created by societal conventions.

Lewis encourages readers to look at Arrowsmith through a new lens by examining the obstacles he faces in order to pursue his own talents. By doing this, Lewis establishes a basis for measuring the success of one's individuality against the expectations of others. Lewis articulates a perspective of nonconformity that demonstrates that in what is often a society that believes in and rewards conformity, there is value in being non-conformist and there are long-term benefits to accomplishing individualism.

Ultimately, Arrowsmith's experiences represent the intricate and continually changing process of achieving one's own individualism, as well as the ongoing effort required to achieve individual autonomy in a world that values authority. The central theme of the book asks some very thought-provoking questions regarding the significance of being "different" or unconventional in our current society, as well as the impact of being on our own, in an environment that values "being like everyone else".

**Conclusion:**

Sinclair Lewis masterfully used satire in both "Babbitt" and "Arrowsmith" to critique the excesses of the American middle-class culture, politics, and institutions during the early 1900s and to provide an examination of American life that is still relevant today. He also used irony, ridicule, and exaggeration to illustrate the differences between the ideals of America and what actually exists in America, demonstrating how conformity, materialism, and loss of individuality are corrosive to the fabric of American society.

This study has established that Lewis's satires are not simply a product of their time but rather a timeless commentary on the human condition. The critique he makes of the complacency of the bourgeoisie and the suppression of individualism can still relate to today's concerns about homogeneity of culture, conformity, and the decline of critical thought in today's world. In that sense, Lewis's works serve as a literary mirror for modern readers and demonstrate the ongoing struggle of individuals against societal norms, showing that Lewis's satire is still relevant as a call to awareness and resistance.

Finally, Lewis's body of work exemplifies the power of satire to serve as a social commentary and highlights the value of literary criticism in explaining the complexity of the human experience. His novels continue to offer a searing commentary on the American psyche, inviting readers to confront the uncomfortable truths about themselves and their society.

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