

ern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Sinclair Lewis's Arrowsmith



Modern Critical Interpretations

Sinclair Lewis's
Arrowsmith

Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom
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Chelsea House Publishers ♦ 1988

NEW YORK ♦ NEW HAVEN ♦ PHILADELPHIA

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Sinclair Lewis's Arrowsmith / edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom.

p. cm.—(Modern critical interpretations)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

Summary: A selection of critical essays on Lewis's novel
scrutinizing the medical profession.

ISBN 1-55546-046-1 (alk. paper): \$19.95

1. Lewis, Sinclair, 1885-1951. Arrowsmith. [1. Lewis,
Sinclair, 1885-1951. Arrowsmith. 2. American literature—
History and criticism.] I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.

PS3523.E94A86 1988

87-30680

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best critical interpretations of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Arrowsmith*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Anna Carew and Carol Clay for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction reads *Arrowsmith* as a romance of science with allegorical overtones, but finds an unintentional irony in the novel's concluding tone. Frederic I. Carpenter begins the chronological sequence of criticism with an overview of Lewis's work as an involuntary saga of idealism's defeat by American reality.

In Charles E. Rosenberg's discussion, *Arrowsmith*'s fate is seen as being overdetermined both by "Lewis's desire to depict greatness and his inability to conceive of its being allowed to exist within American society."

Marilyn Morgan Helleberg rather severely questions the strength of Lewis's characterizations, while Lyon N. Richardson studies the genesis of the novel and the process of revision that it then underwent. A sympathetic analysis by Martin Light finds the weaknesses of *Arrowsmith* to be the result of Lewis's own deep ambivalences towards the literary mode of romance.

Mary G. Land compares Lewis to Theodore Dreiser, reading both *Arrowsmith* and *An American Tragedy* by the after-illumination provided by Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*. In this volume's closing essay, Robert L. Coard studies the role of Sherlock Holmes in Lewis's depiction of Max Gottlieb, Martin Arrowsmith's scientific ego ideal and role model.

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Introduction

I

It cannot be said, thirty-five years after his death, that Sinclair Lewis is forgotten or ignored, yet clearly his reputation has declined considerably. *Arrowsmith* (1925) is still a widely read novel, particularly among the young, but *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922) seem to be best known for their titles, while *Elmer Gantry* (1927) and *Dodsworth* (1929) are remembered in their movie versions. Rereading *Main Street* and *Elmer Gantry* has disappointed me, but *Babbitt* and *Dodsworth*, both good novels, deserve more readers than they now seem to have. Lewis is of very nearly no interest whatsoever to American literary critics of my own generation and younger, so that it seems likely his decline in renown will continue.

A Nobel prizewinner, like John Steinbeck, Lewis resembles Steinbeck only in that regard, and is now being eclipsed by Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and such older contemporaries as Cather and Dreiser. Lewis venerated Dickens, but the critical age when Lewis's achievement could be compared to that of Dickens or of Balzac is long ago over. Hamlin Garland, an actual precursor, is necessarily far more comparable to Lewis than Dickens or Balzac are. If, as Baudelaire may have remarked, every janitor in Balzac is a genius, then every genius in Lewis is something of a janitor. Essentially a satirist with a camera-eye, Lewis was a master neither of narrative nor of characterization. And his satire, curiously affectionate at its base (quite loving towards *Babbitt*), has no edge in the contemporary United States, where reality is frequently too outrageous for any literary satire to be possible.

Lewis has considerable historical interest, aside from the winning qualities of *Babbitt* and the surprising *Dodsworth*, but he is likely to survive because of his least characteristic, most idealistic novel, *Arrowsmith*. A morality tale, with a medical research scientist as hero, *Arrow-*

smith has enough mythic force to compel a young reader to an idealism of her or his own. Critics have found in *Arrowsmith* Lewis's version of the idealism of Emerson and Thoreau, pitched lower in Lewis, who had no transcendental yearnings. The native strain in our literature that emanated out from Emerson into Whitman and Thoreau appears also in *Arrowsmith*, and helps account for the novel's continued relevance as American myth.

II

H. L. Mencken, who greatly admired *Arrowsmith*, upon expectedly ideological grounds, still caught the flaw in the hero and the aesthetic virtue in the splendid villain, Pickerbaugh:

Pickerbaugh exists everywhere, in almost every American town. He is the quack who flings himself melodramatically upon measles, chicken pox, whooping cough—the organizer of Health Weeks and author of prophylactic, Kiwanian slogans—the hero of clean-up campaigns—the scientific beau ideal of newspaper reporters, Y.M.C.A. secretaries, and the pastors of suburban churches. He has been leering at the novelists of America for years, and yet Lewis and De Kruif were the first to see and hail him. They have made an almost epic figure of him. He is the Babbit of this book—far more charming than *Arrowsmith* himself, and far more real. *Arrowsmith* fails in one important particular: he is not typical, he is not a good American. I daresay that many a reader, following his struggles with the seekers for “practical” results, will sympathize frankly with the latter. After all, it is not American to prefer honor to honors; no man, pursuing that folly, could ever hope to be president of the United States. Pickerbaugh will cause no such lifting of eyebrows. Like Babbitt, he will be recognized instantly and enjoyed innocently. Within six weeks, I suspect, every health officer in America will be receiving letters denouncing him as a Pickerbaugh. Thus nature imitates art.

Mencken's irony has been denuded by time; *Arrowsmith* is indeed not typical, not a good American, not a persuasive representation of a person. Neither is anyone else in the novel a convincing mimesis of actuality; that was hardly Lewis's strength, which resided in satiric

caricature. *Arrowsmith* ought to be more a satire than a novel, but unfortunately its hero is an idealized self-portrait of Sinclair Lewis. Idealization of science, and of the pure scientist—Arrowsmith and his mentor, Gottlieb—is what most dates the novel. I myself first read it in 1945, when I was a student at the Bronx High School of Science, then an abominable institution of the highest and most narrow academic standards. As a nonscientist, I found myself surrounded by a swarm of hostile and aggressive fellow-students, most of whom have become successful Babbitts of medicine, physics, and related disciplines. *Arrowsmith*, with its naive exaltation of science as a pure quest for truth, had a kind of biblical status in that high school, and so I read it with subdued loathing. Rereading it now, I find a puzzled affection to be my principal reaction, but I doubt the aesthetic basis for my current attitude.

Though sadly dated, *Arrowsmith* is too eccentric a work to be judged a period piece. It is a romance, with allegorical overtones, but a romance in which everything is literalized, a romance of science, as it were, rather than a science fiction. Its hero, much battered, does not learn much; he simply becomes increasingly more abrupt and stubborn, and votes with his feet whenever marriages, institutions, and other societal forms begin to menace his pure quest for scientific research. In the romance's pastoral conclusion, Arrowsmith retreats to the woods, a Thoreau pursuing the exact mechanism of the action of quinine derivatives. Romance depends upon a curious blend of wholeheartedness and sophistication in its author, and Sinclair Lewis was not Edmund Spenser:

His mathematics and physical chemistry were now as sound as Terry's, his indifference to publicity and to flowery hangings as great, his industry as fanatical, his ingenuity in devising new apparatus at least comparable, and his imagination far more swift. He had less ease but more passion. He hurled out hypotheses like sparks. He began, incredulously, to comprehend his freedom. He would yet determine the essential nature of phage; and as he became stronger and surer—and no doubt less human—he saw ahead of him innumerable inquiries into chemotherapy and immunity; enough adventures to keep him busy for decades.

It seemed to him that this was the first spring he had ever seen and tasted. He learned to dive into the lake, though the

first plunge was an agony of fiery cold. They fished before breakfast, they supped at a table under the oaks, they tramped twenty miles on end, they had bluejays and squirrels for interested neighbors; and when they had worked all night, they came out to find serene dawn lifting across the sleeping lake.

Martin felt sun-soaked and deep of chest, and always he hummed.

I do not believe that this could sustain commentary of any kind. It is competent romance writing, of the Boy's Own Book variety, but cries out for the corrected American version as carried through by Nathanael West in *A Cool Million* and in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. West's Shrike would be capable of annihilating salvation through back to nature and pure research by promising: "You feel sun-soaked, and deep of chest, and always you hum."

Arrowsmith was published in the same year as *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Tragedy*, which was hardly Lewis's fault, but now seems his lasting misfortune. *Babbitt* came out the same year as *Ulysses*, while *Dodsworth* confronted *The Sound and the Fury*. None of this is fair, but the agonistic element in literature is immemorial. *Arrowsmith* is memorable now because it is a monument to another American lost illusion, the idealism of pure science, or the search for a truth that could transcend the pragmatics of American existence. It is a fitting irony that the satirist Sinclair Lewis should be remembered now for this idealizing romance.

Sinclair Lewis and the Fortress of Reality

Frederic I. Carpenter

During the decade of the 1920s the novels of Sinclair Lewis achieved an acclaim unequalled in the history of American literature. First *Main Street*, then *Babbitt* and *Arrowsmith* appealed to popular imagination and to critical judgment alike, each selling hundreds of thousands of copies. By general agreement Sinclair Lewis became spokesman of a new renaissance in American writing, and finally won world recognition with the first award to an American of the Nobel Prize for literature, in 1930. No such immediate success, combining the popular and the critical, the national and the international, has fallen to the lot of any American, before or since. As recently as August 5, 1944, the distinguished contributors to the *Saturday Review of Literature* for the past twenty years voted *Arrowsmith* the most important novel of the period.

But following the award of the Nobel Prize in 1930, the reputation of Sinclair Lewis steadily declined. By popular and critical agreement, his novels written after then became progressively worse. As literary fashions shifted from realism to symbolism, and popular attitudes from individualism to conservatism, critics began to ask: "How Good Is Sinclair Lewis?" In 1948 Warren Beck denounced the 1930 award of the Nobel Prize as "outrageous." And Bernard DeVoto accused Lewis of defaming the American character, calling the conception of *Arrowsmith* itself "romantic, sentimental, and, above all, trivial." Increasingly, even Lewis's admirers began to wonder: Why

From *College English* 16, no. 7 (April 1955). © 1955 by the National Council of Teachers of English.

had his later novels become so bad? Had his earlier novels ever really been so good? Once again they saw illustrated in his career the fate of "the artist in America." For, beyond any possible question, Sinclair Lewis had been the representative American artist of his era.

In his Stockholm address on receiving the Nobel Prize, Lewis had described "the American novelist" as working "alone, in confusion, unassisted save by his own integrity." And the words accurately described Lewis himself. The confusion of values in which he worked may explain both his successes and his failures. When he was able to describe this confusion objectively, as in *Babbitt*, or to project his own integrity in a character such as that of *Arrowsmith*, he approached greatness. But as he grew older he found himself progressively involved in the confusion. The representative American artist progressively failed to understand, and so to transcend the confusion of his society.

The confusion of values which Lewis imputed to American society, and which he himself shared, is suggested by a sentence from one of his last (and worst) novels. *The God-Seeker*, published in 1949, told of a young missionary to the Sioux Indians in 1850, who finally decided to abandon his search for God in the wilderness in order to lead his new bride "back in the fortress of reality," to St. Paul. Safe there from the insecurity of the frontier, this early "God-Seeker" became a successful contractor, and the fictional ancestor of George F. Babbitt. Like his creator, this Lewisian hero early sought God in the "Free Air" of the Western wilderness, and regarded the stodgy business men with a satiric eye. But like his creator, he later went "back in the fortress of reality," and regarded his early idealism as romantic and unreal.

Like many Americans and most realists, Lewis conceived of Reality in two ways. The first Reality included all the facts of life—both the material and the ideal, the ugly and the beautiful, the dull and the romantic. But the second "reality" included only the status quo of existing society—usually materialistic, and ugly, and unromantic. Following the tradition of nineteenth-century "realism," the early Lewis described existing society as materialistic and ugly, in order to urge the reform of the narrow "reality." But the later Lewis increasingly identified this partial "reality" with total Reality, and therefore rejected as unreal that idealism which would reform society and that romance which would escape its existing conventions.

As late as 1935, Lewis could retrospectively describe the years 1885-1935 as "This Golden Half-Century," when "there was romance everywhere, and life, instead of being a dusty routine, was

exciting with hope and courage and adventure." For Lewis had been born a romantic and a liberal idealist. "For all his modernity," wrote Vernon Parrington, "Sinclair Lewis is still an echo of Jean Jacques and the golden hopes of the enlightenment." In his youth he had attended the Utopian "Helicon Hall" of Upton Sinclair. And always his heart had sympathized with the rebellious Carol Kennicott, the romantic Babbitt, and the God-seeking scientist, Martin Arrowsmith. The greatness of these earlier novels lay in the romance and idealism which he described as implicit even in the ugly "reality" of Main Street and Zenith.

But progressively as he grew older, Lewis praised those unromantic social realities which he had earlier satirized—although, to be sure, he had always valued them grudgingly. For even in celebrating the youthful freedom of Carol Kennicott, he had valued the unromantic realism of her doctor-husband. And even in sympathizing with the romantic dreams of George F. Babbitt, he had realistically returned him to the fortress of his family at last. Only with his ideal Martin Arrowsmith had he dared to pursue individual freedom to a cabin in the wilderness, and there, like Thoreau, his ideal hero suffered exile from social "reality." But after *Arrowsmith*, Lewis described all his idealistic heroes as either returning abjectly to "the fortress of reality," or miserably failing. So Dodsworth and his wife sought romance in Europe, but found it empty and alien. Ann Vickers sought to reform society, but finally married the realistic judge whom she had earlier sought to indict. And *Work of Art* celebrated a work-a-day hero who abandoned his earlier ideal of creating the perfect hotel in order to make a living for his family in the real world.

All Lewis's novels described the conflict of men's ideals or dreams with the "reality" of things as they are. Some of his earlier novels achieved a measure of greatness by describing these conflicts vividly, and showing why the dreams failed or how the ideals sometimes achieved success. But all the later novels failed by denying the value, or the "reality," of those earlier ideals. By deporting romance to Europe and idealism to Utopia, they made "reality" safe for America. But in so doing, they themselves became unreal.

Disillusionment with the romantic idealism of the nineteenth century has been typical of the realism of the twentieth. But just as the earlier idealism was sometimes confused, so the disillusion has been. For sometimes the earlier idealism was pragmatic, and directed towards the reform or control of "reality": the ideals of the pioneer and the aviator, of the scientist and the doctor, were all realistic. But some-

times the earlier idealism was merely romantic, and directed toward escape from "reality": the dreams of the great lover and the world traveler, of the esthete and the perfectionist, were all unrealistic. When modern realism had described the falsity of the merely romantic ideals of escape, it has been valid. But when it has described all ideals as false, it has become confused and empty.

Lewis's first adult novel described the romantic idealism of *Our Mr. Wrenn*, who dreamed of world travel and free love, and sought them in Europe. But there he met the bohemian Istra Nash, who explained: "When a person is Free, you know, he is never free to be anything but Free." So Mr. Wrenn returned to America, a sadder but wiser man: although his idealism was romantically false, he had learned from it.

Lewis's second adult novel, *The Trail of the Hawk*, described the ideal of the aviator in the modern world. And an early, juvenile novel, *Hike and the Aeroplane*, had also celebrated the romance of flight. But characteristically, *The Hawk* described its hero as an opportunist who failed to realize the pragmatic ideal of man's conquest of the air, and soon lost sight of all his early idealism.

In later years, Lewis compared *The Trail of the Hawk* to the true life-story of Charles Lindbergh, described recently in *The Spirit of St. Louis*. But their differences are more important than their resemblances. The fictional Carl Ericson, the "hawk" of Joralemon, Minnesota, was a farm boy of Scandinavian ancestry like the actual Lindbergh, who, like him, turned mechanic, flew in barnstorming exhibitions, and felt and communicated to others the romance of flight. The first part of *The Trail of the Hawk* vividly prophesies the true story of "the lone eagle." But where Lindbergh focused his energies on his historic conquest of the Atlantic and became an authentic American hero, the fictional Carl Ericson, lacking any focus or heroism, puttered away his life, leaving even aviation at last and ending as a minor promoter. Not only does the second half of *The Trail of the Hawk* fail to realize the promise of its title, but it fails to realize the actual heroism of American reality embodied in "the lone eagle." In long retrospect, the failure of *The Hawk* seems ominous.

The Job is one of the most interesting of Lewis's early novels. The heroine escapes from her Main Street to achieve freedom in the great world, and focuses her energies on her "Job" to achieve success as manager of a chain of hotels. But her name, Una Golden, is probably symbolic: her single-minded concern with the "reality" of business and money largely excludes love, and to her romance is incidental.

Nevertheless she realizes more freedom than the later *Ann Vickers*, and more effective work than the later *Work of Art*—novels which deal more specifically with the freedom of woman, and the dedication of work.

With *Main Street* Lewis achieved fame. And *Main Street* begins with romantic idealism. Dedicated to “James Branch Cabell and Joseph Hergesheimer,” its heroine is introduced “on a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas camped two generations ago,” standing with a “quality of suspended freedom.” This fictional granddaughter of the pioneer “God-Seeker” of 1850 now questions the “comfortable faith” of Main Street, but after failing to convert her “dull neighbors” or to find romance with her unimaginative husband, she flees to New York and Washington in search of culture and freedom. But this freedom proves empty, and when Will Kennicott comes to woo her back, she returns. “It’s so much more complicated than I knew when I put on Ground Grippers and started out to reform the world,” she admits. She has failed, and returns to reality: “But I have won in this: I’ve never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations.” *Main Street* ends with the defeat of romantic idealism, but with the reaffirmation of ideals.

Babbitt achieved greater fame than *Main Street* and was a better novel. It enlarged the scope of the American society which it studied, but its scope does not explain its importance. In *Babbitt*, Lewis almost achieved the realist’s ideal of allowing the story to tell itself without apparent interference of author. Where Lewis had obviously sympathized with Carol Kennicott, and later almost identified himself with Martin Arrowsmith, *Babbitt* is neither hero nor villain, but seems to exist in his own right—the natural product of his society. And through him America seems to reveal itself to the reader.

The archetypal American, George F. Babbitt, accepts the standards of his community without question, and when he revolts from them, does so blindly, as an individual or “natural” man. The natural friend of the sensitive Paul Riesling, he resents the crucifixion of Paul by society. With natural decency, he revolts against the political graft which society seems to take for granted. Seeking freedom from the narrow intolerance of his social group, he dares briefly defend the radical leader of the opposition party. Longing for romance, he indulges in a bohemian love affair. But recognizing that he owes both his past success and his present livelihood to the approval of his society, he finally conforms, returns to “reality,” and renounces his former rebellions against the standards of his community.