Surviving Modernity: Sinclair Lewis and the 1920s

Paul-Vincent McInnes (University of Glasgow)

Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, has become something of an enigma in the American literary canon. Almost completely forgotten until recently, he appears to be having something of a literary renaissance. A gradual increase in critical and biographical output and the recognition of his influence on the work of Philip Roth and other American writers has seen his profile rise in academic circles. Lewis was a prolific writer from the beginning of the twentieth century until his death in 1951. However, it was his oeuvre of the 1920s that showed him at his literary peak. Like fellow Minnesotan F. Scott Fitzgerald, Lewis captured and recorded the huge cultural shifts taking place in the turbulent 1920s. His novels document and satirise the commercialisation and commodification of society and culture in post-war America. Lewis recognised that post-war America represented the facets of modernity – commerce, capital and technology. His novels attempt to deal with the question of surviving in a protean modern world that was the antithesis of pre-war society. Lewis and his protagonists attempt to discover a solution to the problem of surviving the modern condition. From *Main Street* (1920) to *Dodsworth* (1929) Lewis modified and developed ideologies for the individual that ranged from non-conformity and isolation to autonomous structures. This article attempts to

recognise Lewis's realisation of discovery and place him in a tradition of postmodern and post-postmodern thought. Lewis becomes important, then, as his question posed in the 1920s still resonates today: how can the individual live in a constantly evolving and complex world? We can observe three distinct phases of Lewis's development in the twenties. Both *Main Street* and *Babbitt* (1922) represent the initial stage or seed of an idea. *Arrowsmith* (1925) represents the transitional phase and appears to straddle both his initial and latter solutions. Finally, it is in *Dodsworth* that we see Lewis fully developing and discovering a system of living for the individual. Lewis's final adoption of an autonomous framework not only marks him as a truly original novelist, but also captures his prescience in matters of twenty first century intellectual cultural debate.

Lewis recognised that with modernity came the loss of culture, loss of individuality, and the loss of self. His novels can be seen as evolving systems or resolutions for the problems of surviving. Neither provincial nor progressive in his outlook, Lewis strived to find a truly individual code for living in the twentieth century. Shunning conformity and the emergence of a new literary modernism, he managed to develop a system which the individual could both be involved in and detached from. His system of survival closely resembles what is now known as decentralisation. Indeed, Lewis typifies Terry Eagleton's assertion: 'To be inside and outside a position at the same time – to occupy a territory while loitering sceptically

on the boundary – is often where the most intensely creative ideas stem from. It is a resourceful place to be, if not always a painless one'.[1]

When *Main Street* was published in 1920 it had huge success; critics and readers alike universally praised it. However, much has been made of what possible message or meaning Lewis was attempting to convey. Critics have disputed the denouement of *Main Street* for decades, with some admiring Lewis's depiction of small town conformity and others admiring the heroism of Carol Kennicott returning to confront the village that had previously held her in contempt. Paula Marantz Cohen writes that Carol will 'lead a conventional life but will not cease to exist as a creative individual'.[2] Other critics such as Stephen Conroy in his article 'Sinclair Lewis's Sociological Imagination' view Lewis's message of giving children an opportunity unavailable to oneself as essentially optimistic. Conroy believes that, although children may be seen as the culturally accepted mode of hope, it is the only solution that Lewis gives. Conroy states: 'Lewis saw this deferred and displaced gratification as the best solution to the problem facing the individualist in a culture demanding conformity…All that is left is conformity, adjustment, and a vague hope for a freer future'.[3] Conroy regards the denouement of *Babbitt* as implicitly identical to *Main Street*.

[1] Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 40.
[2] Paula Marantz Cohen, 'Return to Main Street: Sinclair Lewis and the Politics of Literary Reputation' in *Sinclair Lewis: New Essays in Criticism*, ed. by James M. Hutchisson (New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1997), p. 18.
[3] Stephen Conroy, 'Sinclair Lewis's Sociological Imagination' in *Sinclair Lewis*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 76.

Babbitt's belief that somehow his son Ted will live a free life and carry out his own choices of career allows him a little satisfaction. Indeed, both Carol in *Main Street* and Babbitt in *Babbitt* have deeply conflicting views about how their children can live and function in the new world. Both characters seem divided between conformity and non-conformity. Carol decides that her daughter 'was to become a feminist leader or marry a scientist or both, but did settle on Vassar and a tricollette suit with a small black hat for her Freshman year'.[4] Babbitt similarly wants his son to conform to middle-class aspirations and gain a university degree. At the denouement of the novel, however, he consents to Ted's chosen career of mechanics. Lewis characteristically appears to be divided in his message as, although he gives the reader the idea of a feminist leader or of a young man choosing his career, he appears to be doubtful that these options will make any significant difference. It is here that Lewis postulates that a non-conformist or unorthodox life has its own rules and codes of behaviour and ideology. Babbitt's rejection of the bohemian set in *Babbitt* is a gesture of futility and helplessness. Babbitt and Carol Kennicott, in their journey of discovery, discover that nothing has been discovered and that their exploration has been futile. Contrary to most criticism, it appears that there is a real despondency at the end of both novels as Lewis establishes that conformity and societal pressure will repress any light of individuality. In *Main Street*

[4] Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York: Bantam, 1996), p. 518.

and *Babbitt* Lewis indicates the struggle that he and others face in the transitional 1920s. It is uncertain what his solutions are in both early novels but he seems to point to the only options available to him at this stage – conformity or rebellion. It is in *Arrowsmith* and *Dodsworth*, however, that we find two possible methods of nonconformity.

Stephen Conroy writes astutely of the solutions that Lewis offers to the reader. Conroy intimates that it is with *Arrowsmith* that Lewis comes to some kind of developed resolution. At the denouement of *Arrowsmith*, Martin Arrowsmith decides to leave both his successful position at the McGurk Institute, and his wife and unborn child. Arrowsmith's only solution in order to find a scientific truth and perhaps his own identity is to retreat from society and live in a scientific commune with his friend, Terry Wickett. In his retreat, Arrowsmith is alone to work diligently and, with geographic isolation, there are no temptations or distractions. Indeed, retreat is a theme that preoccupied Lewis in the twenties. Babbitt's trip with his friend Paul Riesling into the wilderness of Maine allows him significant time to ponder his own situation and it is subsequent to this trip that Babbitt has his minor, temporary epiphany. Retreat is also the theme of *Mantrap* (1926), one of Lewis's minor novels of the twenties. The protagonist, Ralph Prescott, a New York lawyer, decides to take an adventure trip into rural Canada and there he finds his own strengths and limitations as a person. Lewis views retreat, both geographically and mentally, as a solution of

substance and Babbitt, his friend Paul, Arrowsmith, and Ralph Prescott all discover details about themselves and formulate systems of survival. Babbitt will rebel against uniformity and his fascistic contemporaries, Paul Riesling will confront his bullying wife, Arrowsmith will discover scientific truth, and Ralph Prescott will find inner strength and an inner voice in order to keep himself alive.

Conroy refers to critic Sheldon Grebstein's view that Arrowsmith's isolation is optimistic. Grebstein asserts that happiness can be found in the rural retreat that Lewis describes. Conroy, however, believes that Arrowsmith's isolation cannot be perceived as a positive solution. He explains:

> If America is defined solely as a geographic entity, then Arrowsmith does prove that happiness can be found there… But if America is defined in the larger sense of a system of "conventional social codes, mores, or patterns of behaviour", then Arrowsmith does not find happiness there.[5]

By 1925 Lewis appeared to believe that isolation could be the only solution available to man. Stephanie Browner, who feels dismayed by the denouement, substantiates Conroy's wariness of this answer. She writes that '*Arrowsmith* opens questions it cannot answer and finds closure only in an anachronistic nineteenth-century literary trope: the retreat to the wilderness'.[6] However, *Arrowsmith* is the genesis of an idea that is fully

[5] Stephen Conroy, 'Sinclair Lewis's Sociological Imagination', p. 77.
[6] Stephanie Browner, 'Backwoods Isolationism Versus Medical Imperialism in Sinclair

matured in *Dodsworth*. Many critics disregard the fact that Arrowsmith is not totally isolated. His retreat with Terry Wickett intimates that they can work together and share information between them. Indeed, the scientific protocol of sharing discoveries is initiated in Lewis's description of the McGurk Institute. What Lewis appears to admire about scientific policy is the sharing and discussions of ideas. The proposal of solitude is in fact a guise for microcosmic teamwork and a simplified structure of decentralisation. The proposal that Arrowsmith will work alone but will share his findings with Terry and vice versa is the embryo of his plan for *Dodsworth*. Their basic system of decentralisation will allow them to be detached but not totally withdrawn. The McGurk Institute is a larger version of scientific decentralisation but Lewis discredits it because of its involvement in unethical scientific practices and its commercialisation.

The use of decentralised systems continues in science today and Lewis would have been impressed with efforts such as the recent global scientific effort to combat the SARS virus. The global team of individual laboratories working together to identify the virus is an exemplar of the scientific method that Lewis would have endorsed. Indeed, forms of decentralisation have been put forward as new models for the new century. From the Internet to decentralised forms of government and security services, it has led some cultural commentators to note that decentralisation

Lewis's Arrowsmith: An Abstract', *The Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter,* Vol 7, No.1 (1998 Fall), p. 10.

will become the buzzword and code for living in our post-postmodern society. Lewis's influence can also be seen in contemporary fiction such as that by British author Hari Kunzru who uses decentralised protocol as a theme in his 2004 novel *Transmission*. He writes of a catastrophic computer virus that sabotages the world's computing systems. It results in a global attempt by many computer consultancy firms to find a solution to the problem. The protagonist's company is the first to find then share the information on the Internet. Additionally, French writer Michel Houellebecq in his *Atomised* (2001) proposes a similar situation for his protagonist Michel Djerzinski. A brilliant scientist who makes a discovery that changes the future of civilisation, he retreats into the Irish countryside and disappears. Houellebecq depicts how the scientific community work with shared information and reciprocal working methods. Djerzinski's notebooks and findings are published and lead to the preservation of humanity. Isolation and solitude are the keys here to discovery. Houellebecq and Lewis share similar themes and the solitary scientific recluse becomes something of an exemplar for living.

Stephen Conroy originated the proposal that *Dodsworth* is the novel that gives the most satisfactory of answers. Conroy elucidates that Dodsworth's detachment, and in turn his autonomy, will allow his survival and happiness. Conroy's 'autonomy' theory is innovative and incisive and we see *Dodsworth* as the paradigm for living. Conroy asserts:

> The autonomous man is not withdrawn, he is detached. He separates himself emotionally but not cognitively from the culture…Dodsworth, a good man, will return to the arms of his culture, but he will be autonomous in it…[7]

At the denouement of *Dodsworth*, the protagonist leaves his wife in America and returns to Europe to be reunited with his partner, Edith Cortright. Neither at peace in America or Europe, nor comfortable as tycoon or traveller, Dodsworth becomes his own man. As he progresses he becomes more insightful and this has led critics to label it as some form of middle-aged Bildungsroman. It is indeed a Bildungsroman and Dodsworth recognises his own place within culture and society. His realisation of his wife's falseness, his contempt for corporate capitalism and mass production, and his division between America and Europe all point to a man developing and advancing. It also alludes to Lewis's own maturation of a system or ideology of living. Conroy is correct in his belief of Lewis's system of autonomy. Dodsworth will be the detached outsider in Europe. He will always be American but will comprehend his own status within Europe. His will for discovery, innovation, and craftsmanship will set him apart from the Fordist principles that preoccupied post-war America and Europe. Indeed, Dodsworth becomes something of an enigma and personifies Lewis's dichotomy of being involved in and being outside of a culture. Dodsworth becomes the autonomous being working both inside and outside of the

[7] Stephen Conroy, 'Sinclair Lewis's Sociological Imagination', p. 78.

culture but using, adapting, and sharing information contained in it. Although Dodsworth's own plans are not fully conceived at the novel's climax, the reader has an idea that Dodsworth will feel part of both the expatriates in Europe and be a real European-American in America. He will play the affluent socialite and the reclusive tycoon. Most of all, like Arrowsmith, he will create and innovate, and his desire to change his society is as great as any other Lewis protagonist. His formation of a new architecture or design-based automobile career is a symbol of Lewis's plan for great social and cultural change and ultimately Dodsworth becomes the emblem of a new, practical modernity. James Lea in his article 'Sinclair Lewis And The Implied America' encapsulates the denouement of *Dodsworth*:

> Dodsworth at age fifty is an analogical national soul who has experienced the rigours of regional and industrial pioneering and now – like America in the 1920s – stands at the threshold of a new spiritual frontier and a new self-perception.[8]

Dodsworth represents an America that has matured and modified. His self-comprehension mirrors the awareness of a new modern America and Dodsworth's journey is as poignant as Dick Diver's in Fitzgerald's *Tender Is The Night* (1934). As Fitzgerald's novel parallels America's jazz age and subsequent fall, Lewis's novel mirrors America's awakening and understanding of itself as a new, modern and powerful nation.

[8] James Lea, 'Sinclair Lewis and the Implied America', in *Critical Essays on Sinclair Lewi*s, ed. by Martin Bucco (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), p. 193.

Lewis's autonomous man is currently incorporated in contemporary intellectual thought. Decentralisation or a system of decentralisation is in flavour with some American intellectuals such as James Surowiecki. He outlines a system for living that means decentralised structures generally are more efficient and productive than others. He favours a system that relies on autonomous ethics: that a man or system has no ultimate authority or pressure, and works by itself adapting and sharing information or products with other autonomous beings or systems. Surowiecki writes:

> In physics and biology, scientists paid increasing attention to self-organizing, decentralized systems – like ant colonies or bee-hives – which, even without a centre, proved robust and adaptable…social scientists placed renewed emphasis on the importance of social networks, which allow people to connect and coordinate with each other without a single person being in charge. Most important…the Internet…the most visible decentralised system in the world.[9]

Lewis advocates such a system and his later characters embody this ideal. Dodsworth's reluctance to sell his company to a national corporate competitor and work under an autocrat, and his own self-reliance make him sympathetic to decentralised frameworks. Dodsworth is a man whose life will revolve around such ethics. He does not believe in conglomerates and centralised power or being subsumed by another, and becomes an individual and transcends any structure of conformity or uniformity.

[9] James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (London: Little Brown, 2004), p. 70.

Lewis's earlier protagonists such as Carol Kennicott and Babbitt fail to grasp meaning in their culture or identity. The whirlwind of a new technological age overwhelms them and it is in this appearance of failure that Lewis attempted to develop a system of survival. Lewis's characters of the early 1920s can in fact be equated with Fredric Jameson's image of postmodernity 'in which people are adrift and unable to comprehend the multinational capitalist system or the explosively growing culture and commodity market in which they live'.[10] It is in this respect that we see echoes of Lewis in the works of later American social satirist Bret-Easton Ellis. Both Lewis and Ellis write of the commodification of culture and its encouragement of solipsism as a cultural code. As Lewis's earlier characters are consumed by their condition, Ellis's characters are also trapped within a cultural abyss. Whereas Lewis's oeuvre develops and discovers a positive method of living, Ellis's work details futility and the circular paradigm of contemporary society. Neither Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (1991) nor Victor Ward in *Glamorama* (1998) escape their condition and are left to begin at the beginning. Ellis's closing line of American Psycho acts as an appropriate coda: 'THIS IS NOT AN EXIT'.

Critics have pointed to Ellis's failure to reconcile himself with his culture. His characters embody Jameson's vision of a postmodern hell in which we are hopelessly disorientated. His novels give no answers or

[10] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 189.

solutions and are representative of a society that has failed to control its development. Lewis, however, although deeply satirical, can engage in his culture and posits some kind of resolution. Dodsworth's autonomy or life within a decentralised system represents a writer coming to terms with the culture he inhabits. Ellis's protagonists are withdrawn from their culture while Lewis's later characters, like him, will remain on the periphery acting and reacting: from the inside looking out and from the outside looking in.

Critics have pointed to the absence of solutions in Lewis's work. However, it is clear that he developed systems for the individual to cope with the changing events of the century. He discovered a system that resembled his own position in society – that of an outsider on the periphery of things. His status as outsider remained with Lewis for his lifetime. Constantly eclipsed by Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, and other literary giants, his position on the edge of a society and artistic scene was to be to his advantage as he recorded the events of the twenties. Discovering ideological systems, Lewis at times resembled a scientist or mathematician more than a novelist. His desire to find truth and innovation led him to become one of the most essential American novelists. If we study his novels of the twenties we can see his gradual process of discovery and enlightenment of a lifestyle strategy that is as important now as it was then. At the beginning of the decade we see Carol Kennicott and Babbitt temporarily rebelling against their culture and then returning to it. What Lewis suggests by this is that any

kind of self-perception or rebellion is valuable. *Arrowsmith* sees the progression of his theme of retreat and we see the inception of detachment from culture as a possible solution. *Dodsworth*, however, gives autonomy as an answer and Lewis formulates a system that is commensurate with current intellectual thought. That a man can function and analyse his culture whilst being simultaneously engaged and detached from it, is critical to our understanding of how one survives in a protean and complex society. Indeed, current intellectuals such as Surowiecki see a decentralised or autonomous framework as the only solution in which contemporary culture can parallel the adaptable and mercurial nature of contemporary society.

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