

Nobel Prize in Literature 1930



Sinclair Lewis

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1930 was awarded to Sinclair Lewis *"for his vigorous and graphic art of description and his ability to create, with wit and humour, new types of characters"*.

This year's winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature is a native of a part of America which for a long time has had Swedish contacts. He was born at Sauk Centre, a place of about two or three thousand inhabitants in the great cornland of Minnesota. He describes the place in his novel *Main Street* (1920), though there it is called Gopher Prairie.

It is the great prairie, an undulating land with lakes and oak groves, which has produced that little town and many others exactly like it. The pioneers have need of places to sell their grain, shops to purchase their supplies, banks for their mortgage loans, doctors for their bodies, and clergymen for their souls. There is cooperation between the country and the town, but at the same time there is conflict. Does the town exist for the sake of the country, or the country for the town?

The prairie makes its power felt. During the winters, long and cold as ours, terrific storms dump their snow in the wide streets, between low and shabby houses. The summer

scorches with an intense heat and the town smells, because it lacks both sewers and street cleaning. Yet the town naturally feels its superiority; it is the flower of the prairie. It has the economic threads in its hands, and it is the focus of civilization - a concentrated, proud America amidst these earth-bound thralls of foreign origin, Germans and Scandinavians.

Thus the town lives happily in its self-confidence and its belief in true democracy, which does not exclude a proper stratification of the people, its faith in a sound business morality, and the blessings of being motorized; for there are many Fords in Main Street.

To this town comes a young woman filled with rebellious emotions. She wants to reform the town, inside and out, but fails completely, almost going under in the attempt.

As a description of life in a small town, *Main Street* is certainly one of the best ever written. To be sure, the town is first and foremost American, but it could, as a spiritual milieu, be situated just as well in Europe. Like Mr. Lewis, many of us have suffered from its ugliness and bigotry. The strong satire has aroused local protests, but one need not be keensighted to see the tolerant strain in Lewis's sketch of his native town and its people.

Behind the puffed-up complacency of Gopher Prairie, however, lurks jealousy. At the edge of the plain stand cities like St. Paul and Minneapolis, already little metropolitan centres with their skyscraper windows gleaming in the sunlight or the evening's electricity. Gopher Prairie wants to be like them and finds the time ripe for a campaign of progress, based on the rising war price of wheat.

A stump orator is imported, a real rabble-rouser of the peppiest kind, and with blatant eloquence he demonstrates that nothing will be easier than for Gopher Prairie to take the lead and reach the 200,000 class.

Mr. Babbitt - George Follansbee Babbitt - is the happy citizen of such a city (*Babbitt*, 1922). It is called Zenith, but probably it cannot be found on the map under that name. This city with its enlarged horizons hereafter becomes the starting point for Mr. Lewis's critical raids into the territories of Americanism. The city is a hundred times larger than Gopher Prairie and, therefore, a hundred times richer in one hundred per cent Americanism and

one hundred times as satisfied with itself, and the enchantment of its optimism and progressive spirit is embodied in George F. Babbitt.

As a matter of fact, Babbitt probably approaches the ideal of an American popular hero of the middle class. The relativity of business morals as well as private rules of conduct is for him an accepted article of faith, and without hesitation he considers it God's purpose that man should work, increase his income, and enjoy modern improvements. He feels that he obeys these commandments and therefore lives in complete harmony with himself and society.

His profession, real estate, is the highest in existence, and his house near the city, with its trees and lawn, is standard, inside and out. The make of his car corresponds to his position, and in it he whizzes through the streets, proud as a young hero amidst the perils of the traffic. His family life also corresponds to the bourgeois average. His wife has become used to his masculine rumblings at home, and the children are impertinent, but that is what one expects.

He enjoys excellent health, is well-fed and thriving, alert and good-natured. His daily lunches at the club are feasts of instructive business conversation and stimulating anecdotes; he is sociable and winning. Babbitt is furthermore a man with the gift of speech. He has learned all the national slogans and whirls them about with his flowing tongue in his popular talks before clubs and mass meetings. Not even for the most elevated spirituality does he lack sympathy. He basks in the company of the noted poet, Cholmondeley Frink, who concentrates his genius on the composition of striking, rhymed advertisements for various firms and thereby earns a good annual income.

Thus Babbitt lives the life of the irreproachable citizen conscious of his respectability. But the jealousy of the gods broods over a mortal whose happiness grows too great. A soul such as Babbitt's is, of course, incapable of growth; it is a ready-made article from the start. Then Babbitt discovers that he has tendencies toward vice which he has neglected - although not wholly, one ought to add. As he approaches fifty, he hastens to make up for the neglect. He enters into an irregular relationship and joins a frivolous gang

of youths, in which he plays the role of a generous sugar daddy. But his deeds find him out. His lunches at the club become more and more painful through the silence and aloofness of his friends. They hint that he is spoiling this chance of future membership in the committee of progress. Here it is naturally New York and Chicago that loom before him. He succeeds in recovering his better self, and it is edifying to see him kneel in his pastor's study, where he receives absolution. And then Babbitt can once more devote himself to the Sunday school and other socially useful activities. His story ends as it began.

That it is institutions as representatives of false ideas, and not individuals, that Mr. Lewis wants to attack with his satire, he has himself indicated. It is then a triumph for his art, a triumph almost unique in literature, that he has been able to make this Babbitt, who fatalistically lives within the borders of an earth-bound but at the same time pompous utilitarianism, an almost lovable individual.

Babbitt is naive, and a believer who speaks up for his faith. At bottom there is nothing wrong with the man, and he is so festively refreshing that he almost serves as a recommendation for American snap and vitality. There are bouncers and Philistines in all countries, and one can only wish that half of them were half as amusing as Babbitt.

To the splendour of the figure, as well as to other speaking characters in the book, Mr. Lewis has added his unparalleled gift of words. Listen, for example, to the conversation of a few commercial travellers, sitting together in a compartment of the New York express. An unsuspected halo falls over the profession of selling. «To them, the Romantic Hero was no longer the knight, the wandering poet, the cowpuncher, the aviator, nor the brave young district attorney, but the great sales manager, who had an Analysis of Merchandizing Problems on his glass-topped desk, whose title of nobility was <Go-getter> and who devoted himself and all his young samurai to the cosmic purpose of Selling - not of selling anything in particular, for or to anybody in particular, but pure Selling.»

Arrowsmith (1925) is a work of a more serious nature. Lewis has there attempted to represent the medical profession and science in all its manifestations. As is well known, American research in the natural sciences, physics, chemistry, and medicine ranks with the

best of our age, and it has several times been recognized as such from this very platform. Tremendous resources have been placed at its command. Richly endowed institutions work unceasingly on its development.

That even here some speculative persons want to take advantage of their opportunities may be regarded as inevitable. Private industries are on the alert for scientific discoveries and want to profit from them before they have been tested and finally established. The bacteriologist, for instance, searches with infinite care for vaccines to cure widespread diseases, and the manufacturing chemist wants to snatch them prematurely from his hand for mass production

Under the guidance of a gifted and conscientious teacher, Martin Arrowsmith develops into one of the idealists of science. The tragedy of his life as research worker is that, after making an important discovery, he delays its announcement for constantly renewed tests until he is anticipated by a Frenchman in the Pasteur Institute.

The book contains a rich gallery of different medical types. We have the hum of the medical schools with their quarrelling and intriguing professors. Then there is the unpretentious country doctor, recalled from *Main Street*, who regards it as an honour to merge with his clientele and become their support and solace. Then we have the shrewd organizer of public health and general welfare, who works himself into popular favour and political power. Next we have the large institutes with their apparently royally independent investigators, under a management which to a certain extent must take into consideration the commercial interests of the donors and drive the staff to forced work for the honour of the institutes.

Above these types rises Arrowsmith's teacher, the exiled German Jew, Gottlieb, who is drawn with a warmth and admiration that seem to suggest a living model. He is an incorruptibly honest servant of science, but at the same time a resentful anarchist and a stand-offish misanthrope, who doubts whether the humanity whose benefactor he is amounts to as much as the animals he kills with his experiments. Further we meet the Swedish doctor, Gustaf Sondelius, a radiant Titan, who with singing and courage pursues

pests in their lairs throughout the world, exterminates poisonous rats and burns infected villages, drinks and preaches his gospel that hygiene is destined to kill the medical art.

Alongside all of this runs the personal history of Martin Arrowsmith. Lewis is much too clever to make his characters without blemish, and Martin suffers from faults which at times seem obstructive to his development, both as a man and as a scientist. As a restless and irresolute young man he gets his best help from a little woman he encountered at a hospital where she was an insignificant nurse. When he begins to drift about the country as an unsuccessful medical student, he looks her up in a little village in the Far West, and there she becomes his wife. She is a devoted and simple soul, who demands nothing and who patiently waits in her solitude when, bewitched by the siren of science, her husband loses himself in the labyrinths of his work.

Later she accompanies him and Sondelius to the plague-infected island where Arrowsmith wants to test his serum. Her death in the abandoned hut, while her husband listens distractedly to another and more earthy siren than that of science, seems like a poetically crowning final act to a life of primitive self-sacrificing femininity.

The book is full of admirable learning, certified by experts as being accurate. Though a master of light-winged words, Lewis is never superficial when it comes to the foundations of his art. His study of details is always as careful and thorough as that of such a scientist as Arrowsmith or Gottlieb. In this work he has built a monument to the profession of his own father, that of the physician, which certainly is not represented by a charlatan or a faker.

His big novel *Elmer Gantry* (1927) is like a surgical operation on one of the most delicate parts of the social body. Presumably it would not pay to search anywhere in the world for the old Puritanical virtues, but possibly one might find in some of the oldest corners of America a remnant of the sect which regarded it as a sin to remarry, once it had pleased God to make one a widower or widow, and wicked to lend money at interest. But otherwise America has no doubt had to moderate its religious rigidity. To what extent a pulpiteer like Elmer Gantry is common over there, we cannot here have the slightest idea. Neither his slapdash style of preaching with his cocky pugilistic manners («Hello, Mr.

Devil») nor his successful collecting of money and men inside the gates of the church can hide the sad fact that he is an unusually foul fish. Mr. Lewis has been neither willing nor able to give him any attractive traits. But as description the book is a feat of strength, genuine and powerful, and its full-flavoured, sombre satire has a devastating effect. It is unnecessary to point out that hypocrisy thrives a little everywhere and that any one who attacks it at such a close range places himself before a hydra with many dangerous heads.

Sinclair Lewis's latest work is called *Dodsworth* (1929). In his books we have previously caught glimpses of the family as one of the most aristocratic in Zenith - a circle where no Babbitt ever gains admission. «Most aristocratic» probably often means in America «richest», but Sam Dodsworth is both aristocratic and rich. Even after 300 years he notices the English blood in his veins and wants to know the land of his ancestors. He is an American, but not a jingo. With him travels his wife, Fran. She is already over forty, while he is fifty. She is a cool beauty, «virginal as the winter wind», though she has grown children. In the European atmosphere she blossoms as a brilliant flower of luxury, revelling in vanity, pleasure, and selfishness. She goes so far that the quiet man who loves her has to leave her to her fate.

Once alone he meditates on the problem «Europe-America», and as a real business man he wants to clear up his accounts with both. He thinks of many things, honestly and without prejudice. One of his observations is that the very soil of Europe has some of the old-time quiet, which is scorned by America, the land of restless record-hunters. But America is the land of youth and daring experiments. And when he returns there, we understand that the heart of Sinclair Lewis follows him.

Yes, Sinclair Lewis is an American. He writes the new language - American - as one of the representatives of 120,000,000 souls. He asks us to consider that this nation is not yet finished or melted down; that it is still in the turbulent years of adolescence.

The new great American literature has started with national self-criticism. It is a sign of health. Sinclair Lewis has the blessed gift of wielding his landclearing implement not

only with a firm hand but with a smile on his lips and youth in his heart. He has the manners of a new settler, who takes new land into cultivation. He is a pioneer.

Mr. Sinclair Lewis - I have spoken of you to this assembly in a language which you do not understand. I might have abused the occasion to speak ill of you. I have not done it. I have spoken of you as one of the strong, young chieftains of the great new American literature. Besides, you have a special recommendation to Swedish hearts. You were born among our countrymen in America, and you have mentioned them in friendly terms in your renowned books. We are glad to see you here today and glad that our nation has a laurel of its own to bestow on you. And now I ask you to descend with me and receive it from the hand of our King.

At the banquet, Tor Hedberg, Member of the Swedish Academy, addressed the laureate: «Finally, Mr. Lewis, in your person we greet that [American] new building on its own American ground. It has been said that the Nobel Prize in Literature has found its way across the Atlantic far too late. If so, it has not been due to any indifference on the part of the Swedish Academy, nor to any lack of knowledge, but rather to an «embarras de richesse». It has further been said that the award of a prize to your work, in which the follies of mankind - not excluding those that are perhaps special to America - have been scourged, is an expression of some kind of European or Swedish animosity against America. I dare to assert that this is a complete mistake. It is with living humour that you aim the blows of your scourge, and where there is humour, there is a heart too. It is not only the keen and lively intellect, the masterly design of human shapes and characters but also the warm, open, gaily-beating heart that we have appreciated in you». Sinclair Lewis expressed his gratitude and declared that he felt closely related to the Swedish people because of his many acquaintances among the Swedish families of Minnesota. He said that the Nobel Prize had a great significance for him, that it had in fact created a new standard which implied an obligation to improve on what he had done so far. Furthermore, he considered it a high honour to have been awarded the Nobel Prize along with the renowned scholars who received the distinction. He said that, personally, he had the



profoundest respect for the integrity of the scientist, and thought that a man of letters, himself included, should strive for the same integrity

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