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PREFACE

This is the first of two issues that *Midwestern Miscellany* is devoting to the work of Sinclair Lewis. This issue includes essays which are notable for applying a variety of theoretical paradigms to Lewis novels, as well as the first two scholarly essays on *Hike and the Aeroplane* Lewis's only adolescent novel. Sinclair Lewis, America's first Nobel Prize winner in literature, provided insight into American society and explored issues of race, gender, and class. His critical reputation has suffered since 1961 with the publication of Mark Schorer's *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, which held Lewis's novels accountable only to a Formalist paradigm.

However, Sinclair Lewis studies have been undergoing a revolution of sorts over the last 15 years, ever since the centennial conference in 1985 which brought together Lewis scholars from all over the country to St. Cloud State University and Sauk Centre in order to exchange ideas and encourage educators to rediscover Lewis as a writer with much to say to contemporary readers. With the establishment of the Sinclair Lewis Society in 1992, Lewis studies gained momentum with the publication of the semiannual *Sinclair Lewis Society Newsletter*. The Society has sponsored a session on Lewis every year since then at the American Literature Association, and has also held two conferences on Lewis in Sauk Centre in connection with the Sinclair Lewis Foundation, one in 1997 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Babbitt* and one in 2000 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the publication of *Arrowsmith*.

The five essays collected here all provide insight into different ways to read Sinclair Lewis. The first one, "Deconstructing Culture in *Kingsblood Royal*," uses Bakhtinian theory to critique American discourses, especially, in this case, the discourse of race. The appearance of this essay is particularly timely since the Modern Library is bringing *Kingsblood Royal* back into print in April 2001. The next two essays, "Constructing Masculinity in *Hike and the*

Aeroplane” and ‘war is a horrible thing’: Looking at Lewis’s Political Philosophy through *Hike and the Aeroplane*,” show the beginning of Lewis’s aesthetics in a juvenile novel written under the pseudonym of Tom Graham. These are followed by two essays on *Babbitt*: “‘Snowy talker father’: Nativism and the Modern Family in *Babbitt*,” which looks at the Babbitt family in terms of family and cultural dynamics, while “*Babbitt*: The Literary Dimension” is exploration of an aspect of Lewis’s dense realism.

I hope these essays will join with Richard Lingeman’s new biography of Lewis, to be published by Random House in Fall 2001, in revitalizing interest in Lewis’s career.

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DECONSTRUCTING CULTURE IN *KINGSBLOOD ROYAL*

ROBERT L. McLAUGHLIN

The power of Sinclair Lewis's novels comes, I think, from their awareness of the interconnection among knowledge, ideology, and language—the things that make up what we mean by the word *culture*. Readers have always found the humor that comes from Lewis's parodies of various American discourses: the language of business, politics, religion, and so on. But his aesthetic achievement goes beyond using humor to critique American life. By parodying the discourses in which Americans speak and write, Lewis draws attention to those discourses, making them, in effect, what his novels are about. Such attention provides practical examples of what people like Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin have theorized: that in any given culture, at any given time, knowledge is the result of the languages available for speaking about and understanding the world; that discourses imply the ideological worldviews of the speakers; that the dialogic interaction of a culture's discourses—especially the interaction between the officially sanctioned discourses that support the status quo and the unofficial discourses that seek to subvert it—manifest the distribution of and conflicting claims to power in a society.¹

These issues are especially relevant to *Kingsblood Royal*, Lewis's finest post-1920s novel, inexplicably out of print until recently. The focus here is on race, and as usual Lewis caught the wave of *Zeitgeist*. In 1947, the year of publication, America was beginning to face the explosive issues connected with race as a result of World War II. Because of the man shortage (read white-man shortage), African Americans were hired to do defense work, employed by companies that previously had not hired blacks; having proved

they could do these jobs, the black workers rightfully resisted returning to menial, poorly paying jobs. Moreover, thousands of African Americans served in the military during the war; these returning veterans and many black social organizations insisted that the price for this service was improved conditions at home. This social ferment would lead in 1954, seven years after the novel's publication, to the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education* ruling and, the next year, to the Montgomery bus boycott, essentially the beginning of the contemporary civil rights movement.² Lewis's novel anticipates all this, not to mention the violence that filled American cities in the 1960s, but it's not stuck in the past. Much of the novel is still surprisingly and disturbingly relevant: anticipating political correctness debates, Lewis's characters fret over what one can call African Americans without offending them, while privately calling them every vile name they can think of; and anticipating affirmative action conflicts, white characters gripe about black professionals taking jobs away from more qualified white men, not recognizing their assumption that white men will always be more qualified.

But *Kingsblood Royal* is not interested simply in these issues. Rather, it is interested in the language in which the intellectual positions about these issues are expressed, in the language that makes these positions possible. In fact, the novel seems to argue that race in America is not a matter of skin color or ethnic background; it is a matter of language, the intellectual positions language implies, and the power structures these intellectual positions support. When Neil Kingsblood, veteran and comfortable middle-class banker, discovers through genealogical research that he is descended from a black voyageur, Xavier Pic, and is thus one-thirty-second black, he immediately, and oddly, begins to think of himself as black and to explore the means of expressing this new identity. Later, after Neil announces to the community at large that he has some black blood, his friends, neighbors, and business associates, people who have known him most of his life, again oddly, treat him as a stranger. As the novel develops these two reactions to Neil's discovery, it explores the binary opposition *white/black* and the societal power it supports, revealing in the process the factitious and absurd nature of the opposition and inviting the reader to reject it.

The Neil we meet at the beginning of the novel is one of the Grand Republic's blessed. He has a nice house, a beautiful, up-scal

wife, a good job in a bank, and a clear career path. But he is also not especially bright or skilled and, since a war injury to his leg, not able to pursue the physical activities—tennis and camping—at which he excelled. Even he at times senses that his life is dull, as when he researches his father’s family tree and concludes that the Kingsbloods are “an industrious, sober, and dreary lot” (47). But in researching his mother’s family, Neil discovers Xavier Pic, who, a Minnesota Historical Society official tells him, was a “full-blooded Negro” (64). The official goes on, “Of course you know that in most Southern states and a few Northern ones, a ‘Negro’ is defined, by statute, as a person having even ‘one drop of Negro blood,’ and according to that barbaric psychology, your soldier friend [actually Neil himself] and any children he may have, no matter how white they look, are legally one-hundred-percent Negroes” (65). Surprisingly, despite the official’s poof-pooing of this theory, Neil discards a lifetime of thinking of himself as white and immediately begins to think of himself as black, wondering if the lunchroom in which he sits is “too elegant to serve us niggers” (65). Later, when he comes out at the Federal Club gathering, he dismisses the relevance of his small percentage of black blood: “according to the general Southern myth... that makes me one hundred per cent Negro. All right! I accept it!” (229). And when his lawyer suggests that he can save his house in court “on the ground in that in this state, as small a number of Negro genes as you have don’t legally constitute you a Negro” (336), Neil refuses. This is interesting because earlier, when he learned that he might have Native American ancestors, he was unhappy about his white blood being tainted and began looking for Indian-like qualities in himself and his daughter Bidly, but he didn’t throw off his identity as a white man and become an Indian. Neil is responding to the social power of the black/white dichotomy; he knows that the two are mutually exclusive categories, each defined by its opposition to the other. He must be one or the other; he can’t be both or a mixture; if he were, then the opposition makes no sense. His confusion is clear in his consideration of the effect his new knowledge has on his identity:

He found a streak of humor in the astonishing collapse of everything that had been Neil Kingsblood; in noting that a black boy himself could never conceivably be a banker, a gold-club member, an army captain, husband of the secure and placid Vestal, son of a Scotch-porridge dentist, intimate of the arrogant Major Rodney Aldwick.

Suddenly he was nothing that he was, only he still was, and what he was, he did not know. (72)

But when faced with this identity crisis and with the certainty that he must be black *or* white, not both, why does Neil, without any apparent careful consideration, decide he is black? He has led the comfortable and privileged life of a white man and except for a little uncharacteristic curiosity would have continued to, unconscious of any reason why he shouldn't think of himself as white. No one has ever suggested that he is anything but what he seems to be. Why not put this one-thirty-second of black blood out of his mind and go back to his life? The answer, I think, is the Neil is so committed to the black/white opposition that he sees the black side of the equation as completely Other, completely different—dangerous, exotic, erotic and exciting.³ Bored with the life that's been planned out for him by his parents and wife and in-laws, Neil thinks that being black, despite the potential hardships, offers something new. As he thinks shortly after his discovery, "It couldn't be, could it, that what I needed, what Grand Republic needs, is a good dash of sun-warmed black blood?" (72). And a little later, "I think God turned me black to save my soul if I have any beyond ledgers and college yells" (74).

But as part of his education, he learns how wrong his expectations about blacks as Other are. When he goes to a black church to start to learn something about "his people," he is disappointed in Evar Brewster's scholarly sermon. He complains, "If I *am* going to be a Negro, I want my sermons hot. I might as well enjoy getting away from certifying checks and playing bridge, and roll the bones in the jook" (99). After the service, he wrangles an invitation into the home of an old schoolmate, but is surprised at what he finds there:

There was no reason why a man of average perception should have been astonished that the house of middle-class Negroes with ordinary good taste and neatness should be exactly like the house of any other middle-class Americans with ordinary taste and neatness. What, Neil taxed himself, did he expect? A voodoo altar? Drums and a leopard skin? A crap-game and a demijohn of corn liquor? Or an Eldzie Cortor painting and signed photographs of Haile Selassie, Walter White and Pushkin? Yes, probably he *had* expected something freakish. (107).

When Neil goes with some friends to Borus Bugdoll's notorious nightclub, he's let down: "The Jumpin' Jive was noisy enough and tin

seled enough, but it was not as evil as the romantic heart of Neil had hoped” (175). Later, after he comes out as black, Neil is surprised to find out that some blacks are prejudiced against whites and even other blacks. When he explains this to his friend, the black chemist, Dr. Ash Davis, Ash replies, “You’re a promising ethnologist. The only thing you’ve missed is the whole point. We’ve told you right along there isn’t any difference” (289). Neil learns that indeed blacks are not so different from the white people he knows; they are not Other at all.

Connected with this realization is another long-in-coming lesson: the black/white opposition is not based in any real difference but is an artificial social construct. Shortly after learning about Xavier Pic, when in despair Neil catalogs all the awful things he knows about blacks, knowledge based in prejudice and stereotyping, he remembers his daughter Biddy and thinks, “All right. If Bid is a Negro, then everything I’ve ever heard about the Negroes—yes, and maybe everything I’ve heard about the Jews and the Japs and the Russians, about religion and politics— all of that may be a lie, too” (67). In the black church, where Neil gets past his prejudices and really sees blacks as people for the first time, we’re told, “Neil saw dimly what a piece of impertinence it had been for the Caucasians to set up their own anemic dryness as the correct standard of beauty” (97). He begins to suspect that white society’s ideas about blacks, ideas that have resulted in blacks’ second-class-citizen social positions, are not based in anything real about blacks but are created by whites to support their own social power and to justify denying blacks power. This point is made to Neil by both blacks and whites. Clem Brazenstar, a field agent for the Urban League, tells Neil:

“in this democratic town, they don’t lynch Negroes—not often—but they tell us every day that we’re all diseased and filthy and criminal. And do they believe it? Hell, no! But they make themselves believe it and then they make other people believe it and so they get rid of us as rivals for the good jobs that they’d like themselves” (142-43).

And Wilbur Feathering, A Southern businessman transplanted to Great Republic, argues:

“Me, I have never in my whole life called any colored person Mister, Missus, or Miss, and I never shall, so help me God! Here’s what you might call the philosophy of it. The minute you call one of the bastards Mister, you’re admitting that they’re as good as you are, and bang goes the whole God-damn White Supremacy racket!” (200).

So while Neil learns that his society's ideas about race are artificial, that, as he puts it, "social fences" are "shadows" (256), he must still learn that these shadows have power: they do not disappear simply because someone throws a light on them.

This is where the attitudes of Neil's white friends and neighbors toward blacks and toward Neil once he declares himself black become important. The novel marks Neil's progress from a position of ignorance dependent on received knowledge through first-hand experience to a new knowledge and social commitment. Neil's white friends and neighbors are willing to make no such intellectual pilgrimage. Rather, they accept as absolute truth the ideas about race that have been transmitted to them by their society's authorities, even when evidence or personal experience challenges them. Lewis makes this point in the "Little Woman of the Ages" chapter, quite near the end of the novel:

She was the Little Woman of the Ages, very pleasant and kind helpful to the ambitions of her husband and the boys, and many of them were very bad ambitions....She believed everything that her minister, her congressman and the secret anarchist who invents the fashions in shoes and cosmetics told her, and it is she who has licensed and justified all the ravenous armies, all the pompous churches and courts and universities and good society, all the wars and misery since time was.

"I am the Little Woman of the Ages, and...nations shall not assemble nor men and women love nor labor save by such bonds and ceremonies and complexions as are approved in the holy laws that I learned from my father, who was a wonderful man, and if he were alive today, he simply would not stand for all this nonsense that a lot of irresponsible people seem to be spreading around, and who learned the laws from his mother who had them from her pastor who had them from his bishop who had them from his mother who had them from her spiritualist medium to whom they were handed during a trance in which the medium talked with God in person.

"You can say what you like, but Italians are tricky and Okies are shiftless and Negroes are lazy and Jews are too smart...." (313-14)

Lewis illustrates here how ideas gain their status as truth through repetition and through a projected origin in some imagined absolute authority. Thus stories achieve the status of facts. It is significant that

any attempt to question or moderate the received knowledge about the absolute difference between whites and blacks in the novel is met with a variety of rhetorical strategies to enforce intellectual conformity. In one chapter Lewis presents in summary the four basic rhetorical strategies:

[1] No person has the right to judge or even talk about Negroes except a born Southerner or a Northerner who owns a winter home in the South. But all Southerners, whether they be professors at Chapel Hill or pious widows in Blackjack Hollow, are authorities upon all phases of Negro psychology, biology and history. but the term "all Southerners" does not include any southern Negroes....

[2] Persons who maintain that, psychologically, socially, industrially, Negroes are exactly like whites are technically called "trouble-makers," and their heresies are "a lot of confused, half-baked ideas...."

[3] Even if these cranks that go around criticizing the white attitude toward the darkies are partly right, they don't provide any Solution, and I make it a rule to never pay any attention to these cynics that don't Furnish a Practical Solution to the Whole Problem. "You're very smart," I always tell them, "but what do you expect *me* to do?..."

[4] It ain't a question of prejudice; it's a matter of freedom to choose your own associates; and let me ask you this: would you like your daughter, sister or aunt to marry a colored man, now answer me honestly. (194-95)

By these means, all, excepting the self-confident and strong-willed—which in Grand Republic leaves just about everybody—can be beaten back from even the most tentative questioning of racism or support of Neil.

It is because of this narratively transmitted and rhetorically enforced conformity in knowledge about blacks that Neil's white friends and neighbors, people who have known him for years, are able to disregard everything they have previously thought about him and see him as a brand new person. Shortly after Neil comes out as black, Mr Topman, a neighbor whom, we are told, "he had known for only thirty-one years" (241), stops Neil on the street to ask him about blacks: he expects Neil suddenly to know all other blacks, to be able

to speak for all blacks, and to have access to all sorts of esoteric information—he asks,” How much do these top-notch colored orchestra leaders, say like Duke Ellington—how much do they make a year, net?” (241). Similarly, when Neil and Vestal are invited to dinner at Webb Wargate’s, the host is unnerved: “He had played bridge with Vestal’s father for centuries, but he seemed to be saying, ‘I know so little about you colored people...’ (291). At one point even Vestal complains, “Sometimes I begin to see the Negro in you—I hope I’ll forget it again, but I see you shambling and grinning foolishly” (223). Like Neil at the beginning of the novel, the Grand Republic whites have bought into the black/white dichotomy: they believe that each race is defined in opposition to the other and that a person can be in only one of the categories. If, then, Neil is black, all the received knowledge about blacks—Grand Republic’s officially sanctioned knowledge about blacks—must apply to him, regardless of what he looks like, how he acts, or what they have previously known about him. To conclude otherwise would be to reconsider and see, as Neil has, that the officially sanctioned knowledge about blacks is lies.

And this, finally, is why the Grand Republic power elite sees Neil as a threat. That this official knowledge about blacks is connected to issues of power, especially economic power, is signaled in the novel, when still-innocent Neil wonders, “Won’t it be a hell of a joke on the returned heroes if all the subject peoples that we fought to free, *get* free, and grab our jobs?” (13). As Rodney Aldwick’s speech to the Federal Club—the speech that prompts Neil to come out as black—makes clear, the strategy devised by the wealthiest and most powerful men in Grand Republic, Aldwick and the Wargates and the Beehouses, to maintain the economic and political status quo in the postwar years requires that the white population view the black population as Other, as the negative of all that is positive in being white, as threatening. With that mind-set creating anger, resentment, and fear, blacks can be pushed out of jobs so that returning white servicemen will not be out of work, blacks can be forced out of their homes, which real-estate agents can turn over to great profit, and middle-and-lower-class whites can be made to think that blacks, and not bankers and lawyers and politicians, are their enemies. Lewis makes clear that money and power are what is really at stake in the White Supremacy racket.

This, then, is why the power elite has to try to destroy Neil. It’s not simply because he’s black. His mother, whom Neil outs when he

comes out himself, lives in the same restricted neighborhood as Neil and Vestal, yet no one tries to force her to move. It's that he's what they call a "Negro agitator" (335): he looks white, lives in a white neighborhood, is married to the princess of one of Grand Republic's leading families, and yet he insists that he is black and, moreover, that he is proud of being black. By his very public stance, Neil becomes a deconstructive principle, threatening to teach all of Grand Republic the lessons he's learned about the artificial construction of their ideas of race, threatening the logic of white/black dichotomy and with it, the economic and political power structures it supports.

The power of *Kingsblood Royal*, like that of all of Lewis's novels, comes, I think, from its potential effect on the reader. The questions we began with—why, under these circumstances, does Neil think of himself as black? and how can people who have known him for years suddenly see him as someone new?—can strike the reader at first as absurd. But as they are developed in the novel, the reader, the white reader anyway, is put into the position of the whites in Grand Republic. If Neil is the same person, how can calling him colored or Negro or black make him different? Why should it make anyone think of him differently? How absurd is the white/black binary opposition and how much human, economic, and social misery does it cause? At one point, Neil's father asks what being black would make Biddy, Neil's daughter. Neil responds, "she'd be just what she is now. She won't change; it's your ideas that have to change" (209). That many readers rejected the opportunity to change offered by *Kingsblood Royal* is evidenced by the many vituperative letters Lewis received, now in the Lewis Collection at the Beinecke Library. Nevertheless, by exploring the connections among the language of race, ideas about race, and larger ideological systems, *Kingsblood Royal* offers its readers, even now, fifty years later, the chance to change their ideas, their lives and their society.

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NOTES

1. See especially Foucault's *The Order of Things* and Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*.
2. For more detailed discussions of African Americans' situations at the end of World War II, see Myrdal (as Lewis did) and Kirby.
3. See Kristeva's theory of abjection: the self must maintain boundaries against the temptation of the return to lack of difference; we desire what is Other, outside our boundaries, so we must repress this desire through the maintenance of strict boundaries, including strict rhetorical distinctions between opposing terms like *black* and *white*.

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CONSTRUCTING MASCULINITY IN
HIKE AND THE AEROPLANE

CAREN J. TOWN

When Sinclair Lewis sat down to write his “perfectly conventional story for boys,” as Mark Schorer calls it, he intended merely to buy himself some time to write his first “real” novel, *Our Mr. Wrenn*.¹ In many ways a predictable potboiler (although still fun to read nearly a century later), *Hike and the Aeroplane* clearly rests upon assumptions about gender and the world that would have been familiar and comforting to its early 20th-century young male readers.² Published in 1912 under the pseudonym Tom Graham, the novel can be seen as response to Theodore Roosevelt’s call in “The Strenuous Life” to “boldly face the life of strife, resolute to do our duty well and manfully.”³ Its two main characters fly airplanes, rescue drowning yachtsmen, calm distressed maidens, put down insurrections, reveal corruption at the highest levels, and play cracker-jack football. The young heroes are bold, resolute, brave, and clever, and dedicated to their military school, their fathers, the Army, and the nation.

In spite of its celebration of militaristic masculinity, however, the novel also shows occasional glimpses of future Lewis concerns; it demonstrates an awareness of the complexity of gender roles, a concern about empty patriotic rhetoric, and a fear of the dangers of imperialism. This is not to say that *Hike* offers a profound or extended meditation on any of these topics, but it does, in an oblique way, raise questions about early 20th-century American notions of masculinity and political hegemony. As Sally Parry puts it so well in her introduction to the new YaleBooks edition of the novel:

Most of the action is standard boys' adventure, although there are some Lewis twists. He has a number of people killed, and has Hike realize that "war is a horrible thing, to be prevented as far as possible" [...] The baneful influence of corporate interests also foreshadows Lewis's interest, in novels like *Babbitt* (1922) and *Dodsworth* (1929), in how capitalism can be harmful to society and perpetuate existing malevolent power structures.

Even in his first novel, Lewis is working toward the social critique offered by his later works.

These "Lewis twists" on commonly-held beliefs, especially about male societal roles, are also consistent with the contemporary critical view of gender construction as "a continual, dynamic process" (Bederman 7), rather than a natural or fixed cultural identity. In *Manliness and Civilization*, for example, historian Gail Bederman says that:

[I]deologies of gender are not totalizing. Like all ideologies, they are internally contradictory. Because of these internal contradictions, and because ideologies come into conflict with other ideologies, men and women are able to influence the ongoing ideological processes of gender, even though they cannot escape them. Men and women cannot invent completely new formations of gender, but they can adapt old ones. (10)

Gender, in this view, is subject to societal and individual transformations, and Lewis's novel is perfectly poised—historically and ideologically—to reflect these emerging changes.

At the time *Hike and the Aeroplane* was published, the primary gender conflict for men, Bederman and others assert, was between a 19th-century vision of manliness, which stressed self restraint and independence, and an emerging 20th-century masculinity, which emphasized physical strength, strenuous endeavor, and aggressive militarism.⁴ These changes grew in part from the growing alienation of men's labor. As Michael Kimmell says, "the celebration of the military spirit" was "a virulent reaction against the perceived feminization of American manhood by the deadening routine of office work or the loss of autonomy and other craft values among the growing proletariat" (112). In other words, men became more "masculine" in their behavior as they became less "manly" in their work.

This emphasis on the physical and martial was reinforced by literary works, in particular adventure stories, which Mark Moss calls “[o]ne of the most potent conveyors of the values and messages of manliness” (12). He continues:

Deeply ingrained within the narrative is conquest, attrition, and heroic endeavor. In both fiction and non-fiction form, tales of battles and great victory are most often focused around the stalwart hero, the epitome of manliness, the incarnation of all that a country valued. (12)⁵

Clearly, *Hike and the Aeroplane* fits this model of he-man literature. It heartily endorses military values and constructs a masculinity based on Roosevelt’s enthusiastic embrace of wilderness adventure, physical challenge, and global domination.⁶ However, it also reflects the inherent contradictions of gender construction and celebrates 19th-century male values: independence, self-control, and pacifism. Perhaps particular to Lewis, the novel looks forward as well to late-20th-century transgression of gender boundaries and allows occasional feminine impulses to surface in its brave and “stalwart” young heroes. Most importantly, *Hike* repeatedly reminds the reader of the ways in which the masculine is constructed or performed, rather than embodied.

For those not familiar with the novel (and there are probably many),⁷ the following is as brief a summary as the action-packed plot will allow. Gerald ‘Hike’ Griffin is a 16-year-old Army brat, whose father is “commander of the Army Signal Corps at the Monterey Presidio” (21). His best friend is Torrington “Poodle” Darby, who is spending the summer with Hike as the novel opens. They have both completed their freshman year at Santa Benicia Military Academy, where Hike is on the football and track teams and Poodle is the class poet and wit. The novel opens with a camp-out along the north central California coast, during which Poodle and his horse nearly fall into a canyon, only to be rescued by Hike.

On the trip they come upon the eccentric airplane designer Martin Priest, a kind of Edison figure, who has just created the “tetrahedral aeroplane,” made to be lighter and faster than traditional planes. Priest wants to sell it to the Army, which is locked into a contract deal with the scurrilous contractor P.J. Jolls, who is making insider deals with the

unctuous and deceitful Captain Willoughby Welch. Hike convinces the upstanding Lt. Jack Adeler to have a look at the plane (which they name the *Hustle*); Adeler expresses his approval of the plane and supports it with an engine and lumber for an "aerodrome." The boys try to convince Welch, who will be making a recommendation to the aviation board in a month, to look at the *Hustle*, but he refuses.

In the meantime, Hike and Poodle use the plane to rescue people from a sinking yacht and then decide to take the plane to Washington D.C. On the way, they foil thieves and kidnappers, and outwit moonshiners. Although Poodle is slightly wounded on their trip, the boys show the *Hustle* to the aviation board, take off back to California with a member of the board, pick up Martin Priest, and return to Washington, where the board decides to order the tetrahedral. When Poodle and Hike return to Washington, however, Hike is kidnapped by Welch's thugs, who want him to write a letter disavowing the plane and Priest. Poodle finds him and sets him free, with the help of Gen. Thorne and Adeler. Welch is implicated and arrested, but he escapes.

After these adventures, Hike and Poodle return to school, where they are ridiculed for calling so much attention to themselves, but they take the heat off by participating in an elaborate humiliation ritual and taking their classmates up in the plane. Not surprisingly Welch turns up again, this time in Mexico, making trouble at Adeler's ranch. Hike leaves school to help Adeler fight "the poor greasers, and a couple of Americans" (236).⁸ Welch is finally wounded and captured, and 40 men are killed. Adeler asks them to "pray that we never fight except to bring peace, as we did here" (257). Hike returns to Santa Benicia and plays in the big game (where he wins, of course) and the novel ends.

As this summary reveals, the values of the book are a mixture of 19th- and 20th-century views of masculinity: honesty, industry, modesty are combined with bravery, athleticism, and imperialism. The boys fly back and forth across the country, but they are sometimes scared and childish; football prowess and warrior culture are glorified, but group loyalty is satirized and military aggression condemned. And while the world of this novel is strictly masculine (the only women are endangered victims), Poodle's poetry writing and physical softness, Hike's sentimental love for his friends and father

and Adeler's hatred of violence stretch both gender boundaries and political commonplaces.

The first description of Hike in the novel—on horseback—shows him to be the very image of the detached and self-contained 19th-century cowboy hero, combined with the physical prowess and (nascent) broad shoulders of an early 20th-century Rough Rider:

Hike [Gerald] Griffin, who rode ahead, 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. (1-2)

Hike is riding ahead (of course); he has the blackest hair and quietest eyes, a strong mouth and an ability to laugh at life. He is physically masculine in the Teddy Roosevelt style and emotionally manly in the 19th-century pioneer manner.

His best friend, Torrington "Poodle" Darby, is another matter:

You would have known he couldn't have been [called Torrington], if you had seen him—round, sleek as a dove, always grinning all over his happy face, and usually drawling songs he made up himself; very lazy and very cheerful. Just the same he always got his lessons. In fact, he was much quicker at the books than was Hike. (3)

Round, sleek, lazy and cheerful (and "quicker at the books"), Poodle Darby represents a clear alternative to Hike's budding Marlboro Man/Rambo. In fact, Hike's rescue of Poodle parallels the male hero's rescue of the damsel in distress, and although the chubby, cheerful sidekick is a convention of boys' adventure stories, Poodle looks forward to an image of maleness not quite so dominated by either self-control or physical strength. He represents an entirely different—but still positive—picture of what it means to be a boy—and eventually a man.

Poodle continues to demonstrate an alternative masculinity as his unconventional character is developed throughout the novel. He is smart, as Hike realizes, ("there were many times when he did not think so quickly as jolly Mr. Poodle"), but he is also fearless ("Poodle had never seemed really afraid of *anything*" (33). He is a poet, as well, who "had once had a poem in the Santa Benicia school paper,

and no one knew but that he might break out that way again" (59). Being in danger of "breaking out" into poetry at any moment is not usually associated with heroes in boys' adventure novels, but it is part of Poodle's allure. Poodle is also not particularly competitive, and "like[s] people who could do things better than he" (130). To top it off, he is emotionally sensitive. When Hike escapes from the kidnapppers, Poodle is frightened and realizes that "never had he loved and admired Hike so much as he did then" (142). Clearly, Hike's sidekick is less conventionally masculine than he is, but he *is* braver and smarter, and no less Hike's friend—or positive character in the novel—for his lapses into poetry and sentimentality.

The adult characters add to the definition of masculinity presented in the novel, both by positive and negative example. Many of the men in *Hike* merely represent quiet strength and authority (like Hike's father) or wickedness (like the kidnapppers), but Captain Welch, Lieutenant Adeler, and Martin Priest are more complicated. Welch is clearly a negative example:

Captain Welch was a man who always seemed to be sneering—and usually was. No one liked him, yet his manners were beautiful, and his reputation as a Signal Corps expert so great, that Hike couldn't help looking up to him and admiring him at times—though he never thought, for one single minute, of *loving* him, as he did the splendid Lieutenant Jack Adeler. (22)

Love is reserved for the dignified Adeler and the cheerful Poodle, not for the sneering and well-mannered Welch, whom Poodle nicknames "Wibbelty-Wobbety." Enough of an earlier definition of manliness remains in Lewis's novel to raise suspicions about manners that seem insincere and attitudes that are more scornful than straightforward. Even Welch's movements betray him as somewhat less than a "true man. At one point he "yawned like a nice tabby cat, smoothed his neat little mustache, smiled, and started to go into the house" (27). With his smooth mustache and cat-like movements, Welch is the prototypical 19th-century villain, who ties orphan girls to railroad tracks and forecloses on the farm.

Lt. Jack Adeler, on the other hand, is:

the son of a quiet old gentleman who had left him five hundred thousand dollars, a ranch in Mexico, and the kindest disposition that a man ever had. He had graduated from Yale, then entered the army,

and was devoting a great deal of his own private fortune to aviation. He had never made such showy flights as had Captain Welch, and he never advertised his knowledge of aviation as did the Captain, but Hike had the feeling that he really knew about ten times as much about it. He 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. (27)

Clearly, Welch is despised in part because his cat-like grace and indirect manner are more typically feminine, while Adeler's quickness and quietness mark him as quintessentially male. These masculine attributes could also be seen as class-based traits, however. Adeler, with his Yale background and private fortune can afford to be quick and quiet, patient with his inferiors, and not "advertise his knowledge of aviation." Perhaps what Hike admires, as Lewis appeared to as well, is the quiet authority of the rich Yale alum. According to Poodle, Adeler is, unlike "Wilbbelty-Wobblety," the "slickest chap that ever woggled a saber" (181). Male role models in this novel, it appears, must be able to woggle their sabers with confidence and skill but not lapse into smoothness and sneering.

The complex masculine ideal represented by Hike, Poodle, and Adeler (and through the negative example of Welch) is developed further in the character of Martin Priest, who first appears in the novel in a "crazy-looking white gown," which he changes for the meeting with Adeler for "overalls, a blue flannel shirt, and a greasy sweater-jacket," a nice transition from the feminine (gown) to the masculine (overalls). Poodle thinks he has "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" (28). The visionary inventor, in overalls and a flannel shirt, is a model for masculine behavior that looks back to the independent artisan of 19th-century images of manliness, and his "broad forehead, slender hands and bright eyes" seem in conflict with the emerging view of masculinity as the muscle-bound, unreflective man of action. Still, by comparing Priest to Edison, on whom he is clearly modeled, it is possible to see in him the combination of the gifted tinkerer and the technological wizard. In his 19th-century laboratories, after all, Edison invented the 20th-century.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to a static notion of masculinity is the fact that both the main characters are not yet men.

Alternating between childhood and adulthood, their identities are not yet fixed, and these adolescent boys provide the clearest view of what it might mean to create a flexible masculine identity. For example, when the boys wake up in Washington after their very brave and grown-up adventure, they start a tickling fight: “Poodle, having waked up first, had Hike in his power, for he had crawled on Hike’s chest and was keeping Hike powerless by pitilessly tickling him under the chin” (98). Minutes before their adult presentation to the board, the boys are acting like, well, boys.

In fact, a’running theme throughout the rest of the novel (and a common topos in many adolescent novels) is the conflict between the boys and the men, between clever children and more powerful (but sometimes less resourceful) adults.⁹ When Hike is kidnapped, for example, he is powerless to resist the superior force of the larger, stronger men:

Stiffening his lean, sinewy legs, Hike hit out with tangled fists and elbows. He was stifling and his head was all in darkness, but he made out that he had caught his stocky companion a good one in the chest. But strong hands were holding his ankles; others were binding the cloak about him with tight rope; then someone was tying his thighs, his ankles, and jerking the cloak ever tighter about him. (111)

Here Hike is like a swaddled baby—restricted in his movements and unable to control his fate. Metaphorically, he is restricted by the needs and desires of adults around him, and his only hope is physical escape. He can turn his perceived helplessness (and the resulting lapse in vigilance) to his advantage, however, as when he decides to escape into the marsh:

Hike had swiftly decided that the one thing the men would *not* expect a youngster to do was keep on going into a marsh. They would be sure to think that he would either reach the road, or stay on the edge of the marsh. (122)

Clearly, adults who foolishly assume children are helpless and frightened can be defeated.

When Hike is safe, the boys continue their childish ways, treating their rescue, at least on the surface, like a fraternity prank:

“Poodle, my son, you are a jackass,” were Hike’s first words to his rescuer.

“Hike, my child, you are a goat,” was Poodle’s retort; after which they solemnly shook hands again, stopped being boys for a while, and Poodle hastily led the way to the Lieutenant and his soldiers, where Hike was to wait and join the charge on the cabin. (155)

Although it is fun (and sometimes effective) to act like children, Hike and Poodle recognize that they must “stop being boys for a while” if they are going to continue their adventures and their journey toward manhood. They may still play at being boys, but they are also learning how to play at being *men*.

Back at school, the boys learn new lessons about the performative nature of masculinity. Having called too much attention to themselves through their exploits, they have, paradoxically, become *too* competitive, *too* masculine to fit in with the group. Hike and Poodle have been “queered” by all the publicity, which leaves them “broken-hearted.” They escape being “queered” by a ritualized torment on the school grounds that ends in a fight. Hike is somewhat embarrassed by the fight, especially when he thinks about men he admires who “get along by keeping their tempers,” which makes his fight seem “awfully kiddish” to him. Still, although he’s “not goody-goody about the foolishness of fighting, “he thinks it better...to wade into football” (195). Hike has adopted the pacifistic model represented by Adeler and combined it with the sports model of modern masculinity. At this point, Poodle surprises Hike by revealing that he had them hazed, that he in fact planned the entire spectacle, so even the fight becomes part of the trick, and not a real fight at all. Through their exploits, the boys have inadvertently created an image of themselves that places them outside of traditionally accepted models of behavior, and so they must create another, more acceptable version of themselves.

The boys seal their re-acceptance into the fold by taking their classmates up in the aeroplane. Hike speculates about why this maneuver worked so well:

Perhaps it was because they were so surprised and delighted to get back alive, after roaring through the air, bumping on air-currents, and seeing houses look like dice beneath them, that they loved Hike exceedingly when they landed; or perhaps it was because they felt he wanted them to share in his glory, or because they respected him to the limit when they saw how he could run the dragon through the air as though he were riding a bicycle. Perhaps it was all three. (205-06)

To put it another way, in this world, the reasons men respect other men are complicated. It may have to do with inspiring fear in others (the he-man model of masculinity), or with creating camaraderie (the sportsman model), or, perhaps, making something difficult look easy (the restrained model). Or perhaps it was “all three.” Whatever the case, much of the bond rests on a convincing *performance* of masculinity. As Amy Kaplan puts it, “Rather than bedrock reality underlying the veneer for corporate civilization, the male body becomes a layering of veneers” (665). Hike and Poodle’s performance at the hazing and their performance in the plane add to the “layering of veneers” that will constitute their eventual adult male identities.

The boys’ successful performance is soon challenged, however, when Left Ear Donagan discovers Poodle reciting poetry. He is in the process of mocking Poodle when Hike tells him, in rather elaborate language, to lay off. Donagan responds:

“All right. If Poodle’s such a big baby that he can’t stand for a little kidding, why we’ll give him a milk-bottle and let him sneak out here and have a good time with himself. And talk about butting-in—I’d like to know what else *you’re* doing—coming here and talking like you was a big brother, or a faculty member. ‘Especially if he wants to sport his oak.’ You must think you’re in Oxford. I suppose you think you’re aviating with—You and your baby brother, here. Oh, piffle!” (221)

Poetry is associated with babyhood, and with femininity (the milk-bottle) and kidding with a tradition of male bonding. Hike is criticized for talking like a “big brother, or a faculty member,” or worse, like someone from Oxford. Here, the model of the educated upper-class gentleman (as Adeler is seen earlier embodying) is first scorned (by Donagan) and then endorsed (by Hike). Hike doesn’t respond by fighting Donagan, but instead by criticizing him for spying on them and correcting his grammar, as would any good Oxford don (or Yale professor).

Indeed the future looks like a genteel and pacifistic one, with Lt. Adeler providing moral leadership and asserting that the Army will soon be too busy with engineering projects to make war. Hike agrees:

He hoped, some day before long, to be an engineer, in good, stout laced leather boots and a sombrero, building a fine big steel bridge across some dangerous pass in the high Sierras, with the good open air and the deep woods about him. He planned to know wireless and

aeroplanes and steel—and he hoped that every new thing he did, every fine bridge or aeroplane that he built, would be one step toward making a more civilized world, which would not want war; which would prefer happiness and peace and the good brave mountain woods to fighting like clay-grimed savages. (237)

This harkens back to an earlier vision of masculinity: the self-contained artisan building a more civilized world—a man with the knowledge of a Priest combined with the dignity of an Adeler, an engineer, not a warrior. It presents, as well, the image of a robust and brave man who would span “some dangerous pass” and prefer “the good open air and the deep woods” to the cities. It also looks to the future—to a world where the developed and developing worlds would mix (“stout laced leather boots and a sombrero”) and where to be “civilized” one would need to know all about emerging technologies (“wireless, aeroplanes, and steel”).

In spite of this peaceful, strenuous, and multicultural vision, Hike soon finds himself at war again, this time with Mexican bandits led by the evil Welch, who has escaped over the border. Before they can fight, however, the legitimacy of the “war” must first be established by the Mexican Lt. Duros, whose “English was excellent, though with a quaint little softening of the words”:

“These revolutionists—they are not revolutionists,” [Duros] cried. “We must wipe them out. I, I was with Madero, I was a *real* revolutionist. Me, I send many pesos the year to Russia, for the revolutionists there. I love freedom. But these men, they are robbers. We must wipe them out.” (252)

In this particular case, it seems, it is fine for Hike to fight instead of build, as the men he is fighting are “robbers,” and his allies the real, if quaint, “revolutionists.” Hike acquits himself well in the battle (of course), which causes Duros to think he is a “grown” man, a soldier. Hike is embarrassed—and amused—by the misapprehension and the praise implied by it:

“He is perhaps a lieutenant of the Signal corps? [Duros asks Adeler.] I am still amaze [sic] to find him looking so young—I would like he is a-a-almost not a young man yet, if I have not seen him run the aeroplane.”

“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!" (255)

At this point in the novel, as the hazing incident and the tickling fight in Washington anticipate, Hike's boyishness has become merely a "disguise" for the man his actions have made evident. Lt. Adeler acknowledges the hidden truth of the apparent mistake:

For once Lieutenant Adeler did not see a joke. "Why," he said quite seriously, "of course you do look awfully young, but from the way you handled the *Hustle*—and the federal troops—you might just as well be an officer, and a mighty good one. There were eighteen-year-old *colonels*, in the Civil War. And I know several men older than I who don't *look much* older than" (256)

Lt. Adeler is, of course, deliberately not finishing his sentence with the word "boys," which at this point would be an insult to Hike, who has, in Adeler's eyes, clearly earned his manhood through his expertise and bravery. In the context of the entire novel, however, this scene serves to reinforce the conflicts inherent in the ideology of masculinity in the early 20th century. To be a man, Hike must fight fiercely, but he must also demonstrate coolness under fire and be ready for when his services as a warrior will no longer be needed—or even valued—in the future. To be a man, he must also learn to adopt the various appropriate disguises of masculinity.

Although he has apparently become a man on the battlefield, Hike nevertheless must return to his boyhood, in particular the football fields of Santa Benicia. He is a different player than he was before, however: "He had never played so well, though he did not try for any spectacular runs. He was making sure that Santa Benicia, rather than Hike Griffin, should win" (271). In spite of his heroic exploits, both in the air and on the ground, Hike has learned, finally, to be a team player. As a result of his team spirit, Hike is asked to be on the football team for the following year and to "win the game for us." His response is characteristically abashed, if optimistic: "Aw..." was all Hike could say, in astonished protest. But he looked forward to a great spring, with the track-team, and great fall to come" (274). Hike looks to be on his way to becoming a 20th-century corporate man, a team player, and an optimist, but, one would hope, not quite a Babbitt. The manly self-possession of Adeler, the iconoclastic

genius of Priest, and the creative sensibility of Poodle provide him with alternatives to Boosterism and small mindedness.

At the end of *Hike and the Aeroplane*, things look good for our hero. He has managed to assimilate both the masculine warrior ethos of the sports and battle fields and the independent spirit of earlier generations. He has managed, as Bederman says, to adapt old forms of masculinity into new and more productive ones, both for the “great fall to come” and the new century. He will, however, as will other young men of his generation, soon face a challenge greater than all the corrupt politicians, unwieldy aeroplanes, and Mexican robbers combined—the Great War, which will have Hike and others of his generation longing for happiness and peace of the “good brave mountain woods.” It is to Lewis’s credit that in some small ways *Hike and the Aeroplane* anticipates the physical dangers and psychological difficulties of heeding the call to the “strenuous life,” while at the same time imagining a future when such a conflicted model of masculinity would no longer be necessary or desirable.

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NOTES

1. Schorer quotes a letter from Lewis to his Yale English teacher Chauncy Tinker (1938):

You’re damn right I wrote *Hike and the Aeroplane*, for the sole and not very commendable purpose of getting from the firm of Frederick A. Stokes & Company, who paid outright for the book at salary rates, a long vacation to do a few words on my first novel, “*Our Mr. Wren*.” The transaction was deplorable on all sides, and I believe the book is now worth a lot of money. (189)

2. By 1912, boys adventure books, especially in series form, would have been readily available and widely popular with both young and adult readers. As Peter Soderburgh puts it, the production of novels such as the *Tom Swift*, *Motor Boys*, and *Airplane Boys* series, “reached its frantic apex between 1900 and 1920” (81). These books featured similar new-fangled machines, death-defying adventures, and brave protagonists, with aviation being by far the most popular subgenre. (See Molson and Vaughan for discussions of aviation series and Bishop for a comprehensive description of series fiction from 1900-1980).
3. A more complete passage from the speech, given at The Hamilton Club in Chicago, April 10, 1899, is as follows:

I preach to you, then, my countrymen, that our country calls not for the life of ease, but for the life of strenuous endeavor. The twentieth century looms before us with the fat of many nations. If we stand idly by, if we seek merely swollen, slothful ease and ignoble peace, if we shrink from the hard contests where men must win at hazard of their lives and at the risk of all they hold dear, then the bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and will win for themselves the domination of the world. Let us therefore boldly face the life of strife, resolute to do our duty well and manfully: resolute to uphold righteousness by deed and by work; resolute to be both honest and brave, to serve high ideals, yet to use practical methods. Above all, let us shrink from no strife, moral or physical within or without the nation, provided we are certain that the

strife is justified, for it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness. (189)

4. Amy Kaplan describes this situation well:

The culture at large was in the process of redefining white middle-class masculinity from a republican quality of character based on self-control and social responsibility to a corporeal essence identified with the vigor and prowess of the individual male body. Imperialist discourse drew on and reinforced this process... (662)

Or as Michael Kimmell puts it, "Rapid industrialization, technological transformation, capital concentration, urbanization, and immigration" combined to create "a new sense of an oppressively crowded, depersonalized, and often emasculated life" (83).

5. For additional information about the relationship between literature and the military spirit, see Kimmell, 112.
6. For many historians, Roosevelt "epitomized manly zest for the imperial nation" (Leverenz 763). For more on Roosevelt and masculinity see Bederman, Kimmell, and Kaplan.
7. The novel had been virtually out of print, except for a 1979 library edition, since its original publication, and scholarship has been non-existent. It is hoped that the recent publication of the YaleBooks edition of the novel may stimulate critical interest.
8. This unselfconscious racism, a common by-product of the construction of early 20th-century masculinity, is present throughout the novel. For example, when Hike and Poodle are on their camping trip at the beginning of the novel, Poodle says, "This is *great*—feels like we were the first white men in America" (5). During the kidnapping, Hike imagines beating up one of his captors: "He'd just as soon bash the head of Mr. Snaffin if his name were O'Flannagan or Moskowski or Li Hung Chang; and as soon do it at noon as at two A.M." (119). The implication is that someone who would resort to kidnapping would likely as not be a recent immigrant and not a "true" American. For more on the relationship between early 20th-century masculinity and racism, see Kimmell, Bederman, and Harrison. Holsinger and Johnson specifically mention the unreflective racism in series novels at the turn of the 20th-century.
9. Having adult characters confounded by adolescents is probably the most common plot device in young adult fiction, after the absent parent, which essentially accomplishes the same thing—moving the adolescent hero to center stage. Examples of young people confounding adult expectations range from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to contemporary YA novels like Cynthia Voigt's *Homecoming*.

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“WAR IS A HORRIBLE THING”:
LOOKING AT LEWIS’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
THROUGH *HIKE AND THE AEROPLANE*

SALLY E. PARRY

Boys’ fiction in the early part of the twentieth century was in many ways very predictable. These books usually featured adolescents such as the Battleship Boys, the Motor Boys, and the Aviator Boys who engaged in masculine adventures such as flying airplanes, driving cars, inventing fabulous machines, and fighting in wars. As Caren Town has pointed out, these characters participated in the sort of masculine ideology that was popularized by President Theodore Roosevelt and encouraged for the average boy through organizations like the Boy Scouts. Given this background, it seems as though it would have been more appropriate for Ernest Hemingway or Jack London to have written *Hike and the Aeroplane* rather than Sinclair Lewis. However, there are intimations of the author that Lewis would become, even in this boys’ book which he wrote under the pseudonym of Tom Graham so that he wouldn’t sully his real name when he wrote “serious” literature.¹

One element that stood out for me in a careful rereading of *Hike* was its underlying political philosophy. Most boys’ fiction at the time was imperialist, evoking the spread of American values to more benighted parts of the world. There was a self-satisfied sense that the capitalist way was the best way, and if this idea had to be spread with a little muscle, then that was all right. Even Upton Sinclair, an early mentor of Lewis for his socialist and utopian views, contributed to this sort of writing. Sinclair put himself through graduate school at Columbia University in the late 1890s by writing boys’ fiction, including a series focusing on the adventures of a cadet at West Point and another about a midshipman at Annapolis.² After the *Maine* was

blown up in 1898, Sinclair wrote a number of adventure stories where his heroes “were mainly occupied in ‘killing Spaniards’” (Harris 34).

At first glance *Hike and the Aeroplane* seems to be very much following this same theme of boisterous American values of commerce and belligerency. After all there is money to be made with the sale of airplanes to the American army, as well as moonshiners to fight, Mexican bandits to defeat, and plain old fashioned thugs who have to be outwitted by Hike and Poodle with the help of Lieutenant Adeler. However, there is something more interesting going on than just early twentieth-century jingoism. The political philosophy that undergirds the novel is much more ambivalent towards a free market economy and the portrayal of nonCaucasian people than many juvenile books of the time. As will become apparent, Lewis’s political ideas operate below the surface of this adolescent fiction tale and make the story not only more complex, but also more progressive than similar boys fiction.

Although Lewis’s political ideas underwent some slight changes throughout his life, he was, as Sheldon Norman Grebstein has noted, “a product of the Progressive Movement” which was demonstrated through his “deeply felt but irregular socialism, his distrust of big business and banking interests, his sense of outrage at the predicament of the farmers, the ambivalence of his attitude toward the American social structure—part optimistic acceptance, part suspicious denial” (96).³ Lewis’s political ideas, especially in the period prior to writing *Hike*, were also formed by his brief (15 months) membership in the Socialist Party in 1911-1912 and his short stay in Upton Sinclair’s utopian community, Helicon Hall, in 1906.⁴ These activities, together with his reading of such social critics as Shaw, Wells, and Veblen, contributed to his political education.

Initially, Gerald “Hike” Griffin, the hero of *Hike and the Aeroplane*, seems to be part of the establishment and groomed to become a member of the military-industrial elite when he grows up. He is captain of the freshman football team at Santa Benicia Military Academy, an all-boys school in California, and his father is a major in the army and in command of the Signal Corps at Monterey Presidio. Hike’s best friend, Torrington Darby, or Poodle as he is known, also attends Santa Benicia, and although not as athletic as Hike, is intelligent and rich. He even uses gold coins to pay for things when he travels with Hike. His father and Hike’s are good friends, a relationship that supports the notion that the men who are running the

country all seem to have connections with each other. And when the eccentric inventor Martin Priest complains that there is a conspiracy in the government that is preventing his new aeroplane from being appreciated by the army, Hike defends the status quo. “‘Sir,’ said Hike, ‘you are speaking of my father and my friends. They are gentlemen, and they love the army. The army needs good aeroplanes. If yours is good, they would even forgive your talking the way you have!’” (13).

What Hike learns is that although there are good people in the army like his father, Lieutenant Adeler, and General Thorne, there is indeed a conspiracy and that Priest was not quite as far off base as he seemed. And the corruption is in the form of someone who seems to be part of the military establishment, Captain Willoughby Welch. Welch has an upper-class first name similar to Poodle’s name of Torrington and seemingly impeccable credentials. He has taught physics at West Point, is a brilliant flyer, and has become famous as the inventor of several improvements for aeroplanes. He has also been chosen by the War Department to investigate aeroplanes for the army to purchase. A reader would think that he would be Hike’s hero. However, he condescends to 16-year-old Hike, tends to sneer, and has manners that are almost too good for a “real” man (Town 6-7). Hike’s true hero, Lieutenant Jack Adeler, is also a son of privilege, having graduated from Yale (like Lewis), and, although in the army, has a ranch in Mexico and a private fortune of half a million dollars which he is quietly devoting to aviation. He is a splendid aviator, although not as ostentatious about it as Captain Welch. He likes having Hike and Poodle around and believes them when they tell him about how wonderful Martin Priest’s aeroplane, the tetrahedral, is.⁵

Representing the corrupting capitalists is P.J. Jolls, a sort of early evil and far richer version of Babbitt. Lewis’s socialist leanings certainly come into play when he describes this robber baron.

Mr. P.J. Jolls was a plump person, with rolls of fat at the back of his neck, which stuck out over his collar like layers of sausage. He has a loud voice and, as Poodle said, “was allus a-actin’ like he thought he owned the universe and was comin’ ‘round to collect rent from you for bein’ on his old earth!” Mr. P.J. Jolls had never been up in an aeroplane, and he had never invented one single bolt or wire. But he was very clever at money-making. After collecting several millions by selling patent medicines, shaving-soap, and fake mine-stock, he had cornered the aeroplane-market. Nearly every model of American monoplane or

biplane, with all patents, was now owned by him. He had hired inventors to combine the best things about all the different sorts of machines in one Jolls monoplane and one Jolls biplane. (18-19)

Jolls seems like the John D. Rockefeller of aeroplanes, contributing nothing specific to the world, but making lots of money from all of his enterprises.

Lewis implied the eventual decline of capitalism, especially the sort of capitalism that Jolls represents, in a survey of socially conscious novels in 1914 with an essay called “Relation of the Novel to the Present Social Unrest: The Passing of Capitalism” for the *Bookman*. Although his essay seems to be reporting, rather than taking a stand, on some politically aware novels of the time, including ones by H. G. Wells, Frank Norris, and Susan Glaspell, he does conclude that “practically every thoughtful writer of today sees behind the individual dramas of his characters a background of coming struggle which shall threaten the very existence of this status called capitalism” (338). Lewis was not yet a major writer and would not be for another six years, but one can assume that he would consider himself in the category of thoughtful writer.

Jolls represents the sort of capitalist that Wells and Shaw would attack in their writing. For him the acquisition of money is the ultimate aim. He assumes that everyone else is operating from the same mindset. After Hike and Poodle have flown the tetrahedral from California to Washington, D.C., they are able to demonstrate to General Thorns and the Army board that Welch is lying about the Jolls plane being the best on the market. They show so convincingly that Martin Priest’s plane is better, that Jolls kidnaps Hike in the hope that he can scare him into disavowing the tetrahedral. He at first flatters Hike by telling him he wants him in his business and offering him money. “Why, I want you to be one of my chief aviators, my boy. At a great salary” (103). Hike says he’s not interested. Jolls then expressed admiration for Hike’s father and appeals to his honor by telling him that Priest has stolen patents in order to create the plane. And although it’s true that Priest has served time in prison, it was for embezzling money when his wife was ill (27) and he has since paid his debt to society. When lying doesn’t help, Jolls finally offers Hike a thousand dollars to write a note saying he’s no longer interested in the plane. Jolls’s threats at this point make him seem as much like a gangster as a businessman. He snarls, “You ought to know, by this

time, after the way you were brought here, and the way you're guarded, that I can do whatever I want to with you. I might as well admit that I won't stop short of anything, to land this contract for aeroplanes. I'm going to have it, and if you think a brat like you can put any hindrances in my way, you might just as well get over that idea right *now!*" (104-05).

Hike of course is incorruptible, unlike Captain Welch. Unbeknown to Hike, Welch has also embezzled money, but rather than for the laudable purpose of trying to save his sick wife, he has to pay off his extensive gambling debts. Jolls has offered Welch \$75,000 to recommend only Jolls's aeroplane to the government. Welch reveals his corrupted character when he realizes that his honor will be lost if he is found out, but then agrees to continue with the scheme, even after Jolls's men have kidnapped Hike, if Jolls will double his bribe to make this loss of his honor worthwhile. Jolls agrees to this Faustian bargain and in doing so, completes the corruption of Captain Welch.

It seems as though the novel is arguing for a social dimension to having money. Money is certainly important, but the key to who deserves it and who doesn't depends on the uses to which the money is put. Lieutenant Adeler, for example, is using his fortune to explore ways to improve aviation. Even the yacht owner whom Hike and Poodle rescue toward the beginning of the book offers to invest in the tetrahedral. Jolls, on the other hand, is a member of the undeserving rich because he has neither done anything useful to earn his money, nor has he any plans to use the money except to make more. Welch is in the middle, because he's someone who has been corrupted by his need for money and after he escapes capture, goes on to do other terrible things.

In the second half of the novel Welch reappears as the organizer of a motley group of desperadoes, "Mexicans, Indians, and rascally Americans. They are simply robbing and plundering, and calling it a "revolution." (172). Boy readers of the time would have recognized the situation as a common one in which red-blooded Caucasian heroes put down a group of outlaws, who are assumed to be inferior because of the "known" debasing of race-mixing (MacDonald 535). Because of the "race-consciousness, xenophobia, and imperialism" (MacDonald 534) endemic in the culture, readers would expect that the bad guys would not only be bad, but morally inferior. Lieutenant

Adeler asks for Hike’s help with the tetrahedral because Welch and his gang are planning to attack his ranch. To help convince Hike of the seriousness of the situation, Adeler also tells him that “there’s a real tribe of cannibal Indians” (172) nearby. Linking non-white people with socially unacceptable behavior, i.e. cannibalism, supports the prejudice that whites are morally superior and must put an end to such behavior.

Since Adeler’s ranch is in Mexico, most of the villains are Mexican. Adeler implies that the Mexican authorities are cowardly because they are so frightened by Welch and his gang that they will probably not provide much help. In general juvenile series fiction portrayed Mexicans as unpleasant people, “usually linked with filth, thievery, laziness, and general disorder” (MacDonald 540). And there is language in the novel which participates in this common juvenile discourse of the time. Hike refers to one of Adeler’s guards at the ranch as a “greaser” (181) and notes derogatorily that Adeler had said that “these greasers thought they’d be generals or presidents if the revolution succeeded” (181).

However, this sort of attitude is not kept up through the end of this episode. It’s as though Lewis, once he had given the nod to expected language and attitudes, goes on to a more progressive view of the Mexicans. Hike flies for help to the nearest company of the Mexican army. The commander is described as “excitable” (189) because he’s Mexican, and there is some use of dialect to represent the language of the Mexican troops, but beyond that the Mexican army behaves in a brave and admirable fashion. Lieutenant Duros, who flies with Hike and a dozen men to the siege of the ranch, speaks “excellent” English “with a quaint little softening of the words” (190). He is portrayed as a good leader, a fine shot with the machine gun, and interestingly, a dedicated lover of revolution. Unlike other boys’ fiction of the time where people who espoused this sort of philosophy would either be dismissed as cranks or trouble-makers, Duros proudly says that he was with Madero, “a *real* revolutionist. Me, I send many pesos the year to Russia, for the revolutionists there. I love freedom. But these men, they are robbers. We must wipe them out” (190). No one mocks this statement, and the subtle implication is that the language of revolution has been co-opted by all sorts of thieves and robbers and confused the idea of revolution with crime. Lewis, through the interchange that Hike has with Lieutenant Duros, makes this clear, as he does the idea that freedom is worth fighting

for, but not when it's connected with petty grabs at power. Even one of the Mexicans who betrayed Lieutenant Adeler and is earlier described as a "greaser" is mourned by Hike. "He felt that Pedro's death had been necessary, but it gave him a feeling of cold horror, just the same.... Pedro had been such a cheerful handsome Mexican, so much alive, waving his hands, laughing with dark, beautiful eyes, twisting his neat mustache, just a few hours earlier" (184).

There is a more complicated political philosophy at work in this novel than in other boys' fiction where fighting is done basically against anyone who is trying to "undermine the interests of the United States" (Holsinger 179). Even before the major battle at the ranch, Hike seems strangely ambivalent. He enjoys the "glorious excitement of a game on the athletic field at Santa Benicia, where they fought their best, but did not try to kill each other, to leave a mass of dead flesh on the field" (178-79). His first short encounter with the *insurrectos*, where Lieutenant Adeler has to fire a machine gun from the platform of the tetrahedral so that they can escape, results in a number of men being wounded. Adeler tells Hike, "I shot low, and I don't think any got killed—though there's a lot of men that won't walk—and go plundering innocent rancheros—for a while" (178). It's after this that

Hike really understood that war is a horrible thing, to be prevented as far as possible. He remembered a friend of his father's, a brave, high-ranking officer and a good commander, who had often said that war was a crime, which the Army ought to prevent, instead of trying to bring it on. He was glad, as he lay there thinking, that he was with a man like Lieutenant Adeler, who also hated war, and who was coming down here not to make war, but to prevent the treacherous fighting of Welch. (179)⁶

One can see in this statement that this book was not written by a typical boys' fiction writer. The decade between the end of the Spanish-American War and the beginning of World War I was filled with series about boys, including Boy Scouts, who "took on spies, enemy agents, thugs and murderers of all kinds, and, with relative ease, overcame them all in the name of...the American Way" (Holsinger 178). Although Hike certainly is patriotic and brave, he wants to be an engineer, building bridges and aeroplanes, "instead of preparing for fighting" (179). After seeing just a few men "writhing on the ground, mowed down by the machine-gun, bloody and in agonized pain, Hike prayed, simply and sincerely, for the end of all war"

(179). Lewis’s political philosophy is most obviously evident here, for he was a man who spoke strongly against the prejudice exhibited toward German-Americans in World War I and belonged to American First for awhile in the 1930s because he was convinced that wars were not the best way to deal with injustices.

After the major confrontation between Welch’s men and the Mexican army, Hike learns that even military men of other nations can feel ambivalent about war. Lieutenant Duros says that it was a “glorious fight” but looked very sick. “I am as sorry for every man I have to kill like he was my own brother.... Poor devils—they were just lead by bad men” (192). His sentiments are echoed by Lieutenant Adeler, “Let’s pray that we never fight except to bring peace, as we did here” (194). Both men imply that it is mostly poor and weak men who are doing the fighting, but led by a few determined and corrupt people like Captain Welch.

The novel concludes with the kind of battle Hike prefers, a football game, where fighting can be done, but no one gets injured. This is a fitting end to a book that sends a somewhat subversive message to adolescent boys. Capitalism is shown to be corrupting, especially when the goal of making money is to make more money, and the most prominent capitalist is in reality a thug. And although many of the elements of masculine behavior in the first part of the twentieth century are exhibited, including riding horses, flying planes, and playing football, what white Americans might have considered the ultimate masculine action—fighting in a war, especially against dark-skinned peoples—is exposed as awful and not heroic behavior. Sometimes fighting must be done, but it must be for a good cause and to prevent future violence, because as Hike discovered, “war is a horrible thing” (179).

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NOTES

1. See Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis* 189 and Pastore’s Preface for more information on Lewis’s later embarrassment about writing *Hike*.
2. See MacDonald and Holsinger for more information on imperialist trends in juvenile fiction in the early twentieth century. See Harris 33-34 for more information on Sinclair’s writing of juvenile fiction.
3. This interest in Progressive issues was still evident in 1924 when Lewis wrote a three-part series on the presidential election, interviewing some of his characters including George Babbitt and Paul Riesling about the candidates. The more liberal of his characters supported LaFollette, but surprisingly so did Charlie McKelvey, president of the Dodsworth-

- McKelvey Construction Company. These articles, collectively known as "Be Brisk with Babbitt," were recently posted on the *Nation's* website at www.thenation.com/historic/19241015babbitt1.shtml, www.thenation.com/historic/19241022babbitt.shtml, and www.thenation.com/historic/19241029babbitt.shtml.
4. Many critics have spoken in passing about Lewis's political ideas, but usually to dismiss them as rather vague and ill-formed, especially in connection with *It Can't Happen Here*. For examples see Blackmur; Cohen; Dooley, especially 175-205; Grebstein 96-97 and 145-46; and Schorer. Dorothy Thompson, after Lewis's death, said that she thought he was apolitical (qtd. in Dooley 14).
 5. The term "tetrahedral" was synonymous with "man-carrying kite" as early as 1906. See Kingseed for more information about early aviation.
 6. The thoughtfulness that Hike and Lieutenant Adeler have about fighting and war set them apart from the perceived wisdom about turn-of-the century soldiers. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., in an 1895 speech called "The Soldier's Faith," praised the faith [that] is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to an accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics which he does not see the use" (qtd. in Rotundo 237).

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“SNOWY TALKER FATHER”: NATIVISM AND THE MODERN FAMILY IN *BABBITT*

ELLEN DUPREE

During the 1920s, it was widely believed that the middle-class family was threatened by what was called “modernization,” a term that referred to one or more of the following phenomena: the influence of modern technology and inventions such as the automobile, radio, and phonograph, the emergence of consumerism in connection with the recent economic boom and rise in the standard of living, the appearance of large-scale advertising and popular publishing, the rise of an ethic of pleasure-seeking in place of moral and religious ideals, and the expanded legal rights and employment opportunities for women. By far the most disturbing symptom was the appearance of a youth culture with seemingly little interest in or loyalty to the family. Whereas as late as in the 1890s individuals of all ages had mingled in family and even community social events, by the 1920s the generations were perceived to have become increasingly distinct and distanced from one another. In the novel *Babbitt*, published in 1922, Sinclair Lewis dramatizes this anxiety about the family, which he connects to anxiety about another kind of family: the nativist movement’s fear that white communities made up of descendants from “the good old American stock” were threatened by contamination by outsiders. But like the many twenties writers cited by Walter Benn Michaels as participating in nativism, Lewis concludes that both the American family and the American community will continue to thrive not by resisting modern and “foreign” contaminants, but by providing support for all members in their efforts to achieve personal fulfillment.

Just two years after *Babbitt*’s appearance, Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd moved to Muncie, Indiana (like Lewis’s Floral

Heights, a community comprised almost entirely of native-born white Americans) to conduct the first exhaustive study of an American city. Their book, *Middletown*, published in 1929, supported the perception that the American family was in a state of transition, exhibiting "at almost every point either some change or some stress arising from failure to change" (499). They noted that "Middletown parents are wont to speak of many of their 'problems' as new to this generation, situations for which the formulae of their parents are inadequate" (133). Parents complained that they were no longer the supreme authority figures in their children's lives as they were forced to compete with numerous other influences. By the time children reached adolescence they had sophisticated social lives as members of several clubs and other peer groups. A stylish wardrobe was invariably required, becoming a major source of conflict in many households; a number of working-class parents in fact reported that their children had left high-school because they could not dress as the middle-class students did. It had become usual for middle-class boys to have the use of the family car for dates, lessening parent's control of "courting": and providing dangerous new opportunities for sexual experimentation. The darkness of the movie theater, too, encouraged "cuddling" and "spooning." The Lynds soberly observed that "at no point is parental influence more sharply challenged than by these junior adults, so mature in their demands and wholly or partially dependent upon their parents economically but not easily submitting to their authority" (142).

Upon completing their study, the Lynds concluded that modernization was affecting Middletown unevenly: "A man may get his living by operating a twentieth-century machine and at the same time hunt for a job under a laissez-faire individualism which dates back more than a century; a mother may accept community responsibility for the education of her children but not for the care of their health; she may be living in one era in the way she cleans her house or does her washing and in another in the care of her children or in her marital relations" (498-99). They observed that the community was indeed experiencing stress in dealing with change, but they also saw it healthily developing a variety of ways of coping. More conservative social critics warned that the family had already weakened, and would need substantial governmental support in order to survive.

Lewis's depiction of the Babbitt family confirms that he observed many of the social changes that would shortly be recorded by the

Lynds. For example, in the novel's first chapter, Babbitt is dismayed by the mounting evidence that he lacks a traditional father's authority. He appears to be experiencing the masculinity crisis Joe Dubbert sees to have been a widespread phenomenon from the 1880s through the 20s: "that such signs [of the male's loss of authority] existed at the turn of the century cannot be doubted given the concern shown by many men at the quickening tempo of the women's rights movement, the debate about educated women, and the growing number of 'home in peril' articles" (306). On the typical day of Babbitt's life with which the novel begins, his family forgets to save him a clean towel for his morning bath; his older daughter, Verona, has ignored his request that they continue to use his favorite brand of toothpaste; son Ted demands to use the family car on school nights and even has the temerity to ask if he can complete high school through a correspondence school; wife Myra responds automatically to his criticism and insists over his protests that he wear a dinner jacket to a neighbor's party. Only ten-year-old Tinka gives him anything approaching the respect he feels he deserves.

Family life in Zenith, like that in Middletown, increasingly revolves around the automobile (251-63). Although advertisements presented the car as a new source of family entertainment, Lewis, like many Americans, saw its influence as negative. The Babbitts' breakfast conversation on the first morning quickly deteriorates into an argument over who will use the car that evening: "They glared, and Verona hurled," "Ted, you're a pig about the car!" To which Ted responds, "Course you're not! Not a-tall!... You just want to grab it off, right after dinner, and leave it in front of some skirt's house all evening while you sit and gass about lite'ature and the highbrows you're going to marry—if only they propose!" (15). The evening meal promises to be more harmonious after Babbitt hints he may be replacing the family car in the near future. Family unity vanishes, however, when it becomes apparent that he has not as yet set a date for the purchase. "Ted lamented, 'Oh, punk! The old boat looks as if it'd had fleas and been scratching its varnish off' Mrs. Babbitt said abstractedly, 'Snowway talkcher father'" (66).

The two older Babbitt children, too, are typical of twenties youth in having their own social groups, whose company they prefer to that of their parents. John and Virginia Demos note that as early as the nineteenth century Americans had expressed "a deep concern...about the growth of peer-group contacts" (637), and by the

twenties, this concern had intensified. Lewis notes that “for two weeks together, Babbitt was no more conscious of his children than of the buttons on his coat sleeves” (224), at least partly because they are seldom home. When not at work, Bryn Mawr graduate Verona seeks the company of women friends who share her “radical” intellectual and cultural interests. Lewis implies that while Verona is ostensibly a liberal, in fact she represents the revered American custom of rejecting one’s family when they become a social embarrassment. (While Babbitt complains about Verona’s attitude of superiority, he himself treats his own mother and brother similarly, seeing them as provincial and out of date.) Only when Verona acquires a boyfriend, Ken Escott, does she spend more time at home; however, Babbitt and Myra rarely interact with the couple as they are intimidated by their cerebral conversations.

As a popular member of a high-school fraternity, seventeen-year-old Ted has similarly relegated his parents to the fringes of his life, although he depends upon them for money, clothes, and frequent use of the car his continual socializing requires. He and his fraternity brothers, members of the rebellious youth generation described by Fitzgerald, are caught up in the much-publicized search for pleasure and adventure: they appear to be “men and women of the world, very supercilious men and women, the boys condescended to Babbitt, they wore evening-clothes, and with hauteur they accepted cigarettes from silver cases” (203). Their power is perhaps most evident in their barely disguised consumption of alcohol in the presence of adult chaperones, who fear to object lest their child be excluded from the group. To Babbitt and Myra, it seems “like the children of to-day have just slipped away from all control” (77). Even ten-year-old Tinka reveals she is going the way of her older siblings in her demands to be allowed to go to the movies three times a week, “like all the girls” in her elementary school.

Lewis’s depiction of the Babbitts demonstrates that modern family life is often unfulfilling, not because it has fallen away from a traditional standard¹ but because the larger society’s emphasis on money and social status has had the effect of depersonalizing relationships. Throughout the novel, Lewis distinguishes between the automatic chase for money and possessions and the pursuit of self-knowledge and happiness he advocates. Although it was common in the twenties to view the youth culture as rebelling against the values of their parents, he indicates that the children are simply imitating

their parents, who are equally caught up in social climbing and consumerism. Thus, although Myra Babbitt has a circle of friends she enjoys, she dreams of ascending to the level of the prominent banker Charles McKelvey. And Babbitt similarly hopes that his political work will increase his visibility in the community, enabling him to socialize with the town's best people. If Ted and Verona often see their father simply as the provider of the car and other of life's necessities, Babbitt in turn expects them to contribute to his community standing by attending college and getting the right jobs. Despite Babbitt's complaints about the family spending, money and possessions are extremely important to him as evidenced by his love of his car with its silver-plated cigar lighter, and the suburban house that looks like every other one in the neighborhood. And while he pities himself because his children ignore him, he himself takes little interest in his own mother and brother.

While the Babbitts represent a typical, middle-class marriage, two other couples, Paul and Zilla Riesling and Verona Babbitt and Ken Escott, illustrate extreme positions. Paul and Zilla are a grotesque representation of the modern couple for whom traditional marriage no longer works. Because their marriage provides neither of them any fulfillment, it has deteriorated to become a hell of abuse, deception, and infidelity, from which only extraordinary violence ultimately releases them. George's and Myra's problems are less visible but nonetheless recognizable in Paul's and Zilla's, and when the Rieslings' final argument ends with Paul shooting Zilla, it seems likely that the Babbitt marriage, too, will smash.

Verona and Ken, though a generation younger than the Rieslings, represent a slightly older type of marriage: the partnership of social activists, popularized during the Progressive Era. At first their relationship appears to be the obverse of Paul's and Zilla's, for as "radicals," they deny self in their enthusiasm for social reform, she through her interest in working-class children² and he through progressive journalism. For the most part, their dates are spent not at jazz dances or movies, but, reminiscent of nineteenth-century courtships, in the Babbitt living room, where they discuss current events and reform projects (305). Even sexual attraction appears to have been subsumed by idealism, and their relationship plods tediously along. Although such a relationship might be presumed to be the antidote to the selfishness of the 1920s family, Lewis ruthlessly exposes it as one more form of middle-class hypocrisy. Verona continually puts off doing

any actual reform while she pursues a conventional career as a secretary. Similarly, when a commission-house offers Ken a high-paying job in order to prevent him from exposing them further, he quickly accepts it.

Lewis also rejects the prevalent view that the solution to the problem of the family is to move back to the nineteenth-century patriarchal model: because the traditional family demands the sacrifice of personal desire, it is the source of much unhappiness and frustration. For example, Babbitt unintentionally becomes engaged to Myra when he yields to an impulse to kiss her because a nice girl kisses no one but her fiancé. Later, he gives up the political career he has long wanted because it involves risks a family man should not take. Throughout his marriage, he dutifully represses his own desires in fulfilling the role of the middle-class husband, ensuring that his family enjoys a comfortable standard of living. Myra, too, feels dissatisfied in her role as the traditional housewife in whom "no one, save perhaps Tinka her ten-year-old, was at all interested...or entirely aware that she was alive" (6); at one point she desperately seeks "inspiration" in the lectures of Mrs. Opal Emerson Mudge and others on topics such as "Cultivating the Sun Spirit" (314).

Lewis's harshest criticism of the traditional family, however, is conveyed in his depiction of the Good Citizen's League, a vigilante group comprised of Zenith Boosters that bears a strong resemblance to the Ku Klux Klan. The League, which functions very like a traditional family, represents the highly conservative, nativist political stance of many white Americans during the 1920s. They press Babbitt to join them, chiefly to test his politics, but also for the opportunity to express disapproval of his recent violations of propriety, his affair with Tanis Judique and bouts of heavy drinking with her set, "the bunch." With the League, Lewis suggests that the nativist community, like the traditional family, is engaged in strenuously repressing forms of modernization it finds threatening. Like the parents of Middletown, the League believes that "a 'good' home secures the maximum conformity; a 'bad' home fails to achieve it" (Lynd 132). When Babbitt resists the League's authority, it punishes him by denying him his place in the "Clan of Good Fellows." Walter Benn Michaels observes that during the twenties the family was a common metaphor for the native-born white community which saw itself threatened by outsiders; an explicit con-

nection exists in the 1920s eugenics movement's assertion that the smaller, pleasure-oriented American family was responsible for the dramatic decrease in the birthrate of old-stock Americans.³

Despite Lewis's criticism of both the modern and traditional families, he concludes that the family remains necessary in the twentieth century because of its ability to provide essential affection and support to its members, increasingly unavailable elsewhere. The Babbitts do at times realize that they care for and depend upon each other. Babbitt is devoted to young Tinka, whom he at one point considers his "only real friend" (334), and he "loved his son and warmed to his companionship and would have sacrificed everything for him—if he could have been sure of proper credit" (202), even while his traditional conception of fatherhood leads him continually to criticize the boy. At the end of the novel, when Myra becomes dangerously ill, both Babbitt and the children finally discover that a family member is not, like the family car, replaceable, and that they care for her more than they have realized.

Confronting the possibility of Myra's death when she undergoes an emergency appendectomy shows Babbitt that he wants, after all, to preserve his marriage and his family. Lewis's statement that George and Myra "found each other" (341) as a result of her illness is not ironic. The problem is that because Babbitt's marriage is an inflexibly conventional one, he cannot commit himself to Myra except by accepting the conservative values of the community (and the Good Citizens' League), which means the end of his efforts to escape monotony and conformity. After it becomes clear that he intends to stand by Myra, the League members return to being kind and congenial neighbors, but their recent hostility has made it clear that their friendship is "mechanical" and conventional. At this point, the family appears to be hopelessly inflexible, incapable of adapting to modern conditions.

It is at the end of the novel, in Babbitt's surprisingly understanding response to Ted's elopement with neighbor girl Eunice Littlefield, that Lewis finally offers hope that the American family and American society can be liberalized. When Ted reveals that he intends to take a factory job rather than continuing to pursue the college degree prized by Babbitt and the community, his father completely accepts his decision although it will mean a loss of status for the family. Babbitt has reached the point of realizing that maintaining healthy relationships with his children is more important than

asserting his patriarchal authority and acting solely for the benefit of the family group. Significantly, Babbitt's loving response to Ted contrasts dramatically with the League's recent punishing of himself: he has been able to resist the temptation to empower himself through punishing Ted, to treat his son as he has been treated by his booster family. In the context of the middle-class culture of the twenties, his response is refreshingly liberal.⁴ By contrast, the Lynds noted that when Middletown parents were confronted by what they considered social problems they typically pursued a remedy in "a logical extension of the old categories to the new situation, or an emotional defense of the earlier situation with a renewed insistence upon traditional verbal and other symbols, or a stricter enforcement or further elaboration of existing institutional devices" (503). Although Babbitt's extended family, gathered to deal with the crisis of Ted's elopement, is engaged in precisely such a defense at the novels' end, filling the living room with "a crackling shower of phrases" (353), Babbitt himself has finally resisted conformity, overcome his fear of the modern, and committed himself to a new, more flexible model of the American family.

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NOTES

1. In "The Long Ordeal of Modernization Theory," Dwight Hoover notes that before the 1950s, social critics assumed that Western traditional society was monolithic; since then it has become apparent that it encompasses a variety of traditions and institutions, making it more accurate to refer to "traditional societies: (412-13).
2. By connecting Verona with Progressive-Era social work's mission of saving the working-class family, Lewis appears to point to the middle-class hypocrisy of assuming that problems exist solely at social levels beneath one's own.
3. See, for example, Royal S. Copeland's article, "Alarming Decrease in American Babies," in the July 1922 *Ladies Home Journal*, in which he castigates modern couples for wanting to spend their lives "in a round of movies, theaters, card parties, and dances" rather than in the home with a large family.
4. Here, Lewis allies himself with contemporary sociologists, who in contrast to the social reformers saw the family as resilient rather than weak. Although before the twenties, George Elliott Howard and others had predicted that the family of the future would emphasize individual members' rights, William I. Thomas's and Florian Znaniecki's study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1927) would come closest to Lewis's position: "Family reorganization can take place, but only on a new basis that recognizes individual desires and consciously harmonizes them with other family members' desires for the pursuit of common family goals" (Howard 53).

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BABBITT: THE LITERARY DIMENSION

MARTIN BUCCO

I

One way in which Sinclair Lewis routinely typifies his major—and often minor—characters is by displaying their literary and subliterary postures. The idea of literary perfection as an end is beyond the comprehension of middle-class realtor George F. Babbitt, a Solid Citizen of Zenith. Furthermore, the world's great literature, unlike *Modern Alliances* and the *Popular Arts*, is beyond his appreciation. Because he received a bachelor of arts from the University of Winnemac twenty-four years ago, he wants his motor-mad son, Theodore Roosevelt Babbitt, to take up law at the university. Having himself aspired to a career in law and politics, he feels that too much time is spent in the prestigious College of Arts and Sciences on unprofitable things like French and poetry. Ted, however, needs no cautionary tales, for he teases his highbrow sister, Verona, a Bryn Mawr graduate, for liking to “gas about lit'ature” (18), and he disparages his high-school Latin teacher for sitting up all night “reading a lot of greasy books and...spieling about the ‘value of languages’...” (77). Babbitt, who holds that higher education should not be left in the hands of bookworms, informs millionaire contractor Charles McKelvey at their class dinner: “It isn't the books you study in college but the friendships you make that counts...” (194). Doubting, double-thinking, bluffing, Babbitt, however, wants his son (smitten with descriptions of exotic correspondence courses) to understand the value of a B.A. from the university—of casually letting out that you have put “an awful crimp” in the style of “somebody shooting off his mouth about economics or literature...” (86).

Good art for Babbitt is standardized art. High-class poetry for him is Rudyard Kipling's “If” and Ella Wheeler Wilcox's

The Man Worthwhile." Suspect are the "small volumes of poetry in a foreign language" that a fellow booster carries around (70), the "yellow paper-bound book" which he sees creamy Lucile McKelvey reading (162), and "bum fiction" about plots to suppress individual freedoms and to bully people into conformity (375). Of course, a Regular Guy with a taste for literature might spend part of his evenings reading "a chapter or two of some good lively Western novel..." (181). In George F. Babbitt's hotel-like bedroom, however, reside neither Westerns, nor thrillers, nor even his wife's "nice love stories about New York millionaires and Wyoming cowpunchers" (389). Lying in state instead is a standard, illustrated bedside book no one ever opens. And precisely arranged on the mahogany table in the living room rest three sizable literary symbols, gift-books which only the Babbitts' younger daughter, little Tinka, has read. Indeed, her father (who can recall *Hetty, a Humble Heroine* and *Josephus, a Lad of Palestine* from his Sunday-school days in the upstate village of Catawba) does not need the stimulus of expensive, illustrated fairy tales to dream of his slim fairy girl or to encounter her various incarnations in his mechanical existence. The realtor's secret fairy girl, in fact, strikes a mythical note more resonant than the novel's incident allusions to Cupid, Terpsichore, Minerva, and Medusa.

One evening, when a fidgety Babbitt is alone in the house, he hems and haws for something to read among his older daughter's books—"citified extravagances," according to Babbitt's country-bumpkin half-brother (233). In Verona's room, the *paterfamilias* encounters Vachel Lindsay's "quite irregular" poetry, Joseph Conrad's *The Rescue*, James Branch Cabell's "strangely named" *Figures of Earth*, and H.L. Mencken's "improper" essays—books which throw the Zip City realtor's literary taste off balance. Even the first page of Joseph Hergesheimer's novel with its promising adventure-mystery title —*The Three Black Pennys*—reveals "discontent with the good common ways" (271). Nothing in the iridescent Hergesheimer, the irreverent Mencken, the allusive Cabell, the implicit Conrad, the mystical Lindsay—authors whom Lewis often touted—reinforces tired Babbitt's escapist literary creed. He likes none of Verona's rebellious books. The only book in the entire novel that provides Babbitt with imaginative and emotional release is the one he has borrowed from Doc Patten, a book (Babbitt informs his dinner guests) for which "racy isn't the word," a book about South Sea customs, a book "you can't buy" (117).

One that you can buy—or often be given—is the Holy Bible, which Babbitt respectfully and conventionally accepts as Great Literature. He even vows to “read some of it again, one of these days” (210). Attuned to the religion of business and the business of religion, Babbitt preaches to the Zenith Real Estate Board that the tidings of property, like the Good News in the Bible, never become tedious. As a member of the Sunday School Advisory Committee, he also boosts the Busy Folks’ Bible Class. Discovering the magnitude of the Bible industry, Babbitt is gratified to learn that selling the Good Book is a hustling, competitive concern. When reporter Kenneth Escott complains about the Reverend Dr. John Jennison Drew’s ploys to drum up publicity for his sermons on short skirts and the Pentateuch, Babbitt, proud of his own “strictly moral life” (88), quotes a bit of scripture on diligence in the Lord’s business, as earlier Babbitt reminds his closest friend, Paul Riesling, of diligence in a husband’s duty—and not just because the Bible commands it. The novel’s paradoxical juxtapositions—cabbage odors and the Family Bible in the flat of classmate-failure Ed Overbrook, religious tracts and the Holy Bible near the deathbed of a G.A.R. veteran, the Word of God and Mike Monday’s counterattack on the Hun criticism of “wooly-whiskered book-lice” (99)—suggest the puissance and the impotence of Holy Writ. When Lewis notes that the lecturer at the League of Higher Illumination, Opal Emerson Mudge, falls “short of a prophetic aspect,” his barb is aimed at New Thought, a debased form of Emersonian Transcendentalism (356). Babbitt sees through Mrs. Mudge, but less perceptive is his later view of the liberal lawyer Seneca Doane reading on a train what Babbitt takes to be a religious book. The realtor wonders if the radical has turned “decent and patriotic” (302). The book that Doane is reading, one of Lewis’s favorite novels, is in fact, Samuel Butler’s disaffected *The Way of All Flesh*.

II

What Babbitt does try, at least, to read religiously is the *Advocate-Times*, the *Evening Advocate*, and the *Bulletin of the Chamber of Commerce*. Lighting up the first cigar of the day, he tastes “the exhilarating drug” of the headlines and encounters his favorite literature and his favorite art, preferably uncrumpled and perused without interruption (18). In his pocket-notebook, Babbitt keeps selected editorials and moral verses from the highly syndicated “Poemulations,” a daily recreational feature of the *Advocate*, which

gives Zenith's celebrated adman-bard, T. Cholmondeley Frink—in the spirit of Edgar A. Guest—one of the largest audiences of any unctuous poetaster in the world. Away from home, Babbitt finds solace in keeping up with events via the nation's standardized newspapers, or, as the folksy Frink couches it: "for in the States where'er you roam, you never leave your home sweet home" (186). Only occasionally, when Babbitt is nervous or intoxicated, does the newspaper hold no charm for him. As a member of the Sunday School Committee, Babbitt the Presbyterian comes up with the idea of hiring a part-time press agent, "some newspaper fellow" who can write "nice juicy bits" and get in "a fine moral" with a "trick headline" (216). Once out of the newspaper game and engaged to Verona Babbitt, however, ex-press agent Ken Escott takes to denouncing irresponsible newspapermen. Customarily, after her husband has finished reading the newspaper, Myra Babbitt glances at the headlines, society column, and advertisements—all of which Sinclair Lewis duly parodies. On the morning of his wife's still undiagnosed malady, Babbitt hankers for (but heroically refrains from) newsprint.

Wholesome family magazines also claim Babbitt's attention—when he does not feel anxious for a cigar. Four such periodicals lie alongside the living-room giftbooks. The *American Magazine* that Babbitt solemnly reads is not the muckraking publication of an earlier day, but the mass-circulating enterprise aimed at the American family and featuring optimistic stories about folks who overcome handicaps and achieve success. Even Seneca Doane, eschewer of standardized thought, confesses to a friend, a revolutionary histologist, how he once became homesick in England after seeing a picture of a typical American suburb in a *Saturday Evening Post* toothpaste ad. At the Babbitt dinner party—arranged by Myra in the best style of women's magazine art" (115)—T. Cholmondeley Frink admits that on tour he'd like to read the hicks some of his better poetry—the magazine stuff! On the long-wished for fishing trip to Maine with Paul, Babbitt listens to one of the Real Good Mixers in the Pullman smoker holding forth on the virtues of house organs and bulletins; and in line with his churchly committee duties, Babbitt discovers in a religious bookstore a world of practical journals, "Sort of Christianity Incorporated. From Sunday-school periodicals, fiction magazines, and journals of opinion flow Ted's assortment of grandiloquent announcements about exciting courses and fabulous careers. For bored housewives, magazines are an escape, a substitute for the

movies. Dumpy Myra Babbitt looks enviously at lingerie ads, while Zilla Riesling, acting in public like an imperious *demi-verge*, sits at home in a dirty negligée amid boxes of candy and cheap romance magazines. Ted's girlfriend, movie-stricken Eunice Littlefield, pours over all the silver-screen claptrap; gorgeous illustrations of formerly untalented manicurists now untalented actresses...interviews with young men "suspiciously beautiful" but blank...directions for becoming a Celebrated Scenario Author overnight...and plot-outlines of films "about pure prostitutes and kind-hearted train robbers" (225).

III

Fulfilling one of his notions of the Ideal Citizen, Babbitt takes his wife and little daughter to the movies at least once a week. Although certain screening techniques of the silent film came out of Charles Dickens's novels, the popular and painless films of Babbitt's day did little to promote literacy, unless the mere act of seeing a film prompted most to read the captions and some, as is the case today, to read the book—assuming that the film was based on a book and that the book was worth reading. As for scenario writing, even Professor Joseph K. Pumphrey of the Riteway Business College offers a course. Early in the novel, Babbitt learns that Ted, like Eunice, wants to become a movie star—later that he wants to take a mail-order course in motion-picture writing. Eunice, who knows the ages and salaries of all the stars, sees every new feature film. As Orville Jones perfectly notes, Yapville has a weekly change of bill, but Zenith has a dozen choices every evening—reason enough for little Tinka Babbitt to want go to the movies thrice a week, "like all the girls" (233).

Her father, who favors the vast and velvety Chateau movie house, puts a premium on white-arched theater entrances and nine-foot billboard goddesses. While Myra likes high-society novels and films, Babbitt likes looking at bathing beauties, cops, cowboys, and fat comedians...chuckling at puppies, kittens, and babies...and weeping at deathbeds and old mothers in mortgaged cottages—images aimed at the divine-average twelve-year-old mind of *boobus Americanus*. During the four-hour New York stopover on their trip to Maine, Babbitt and Paul take a look at the Pennsylvania Hotel and then Babbitt suggests killing the rest of the time at a movie, but "Paulibus"

opts for seeing an ocean liner. Much later, in Chicago, Babbitt runs into the British capitalist Sir Gerald Doak. Versifier Frink has foreseen it all, of course, in his line about "*that first-class hotel, that to the drummers love to cater, across from some big film theater*" (185). After taking in a "Jolly" Bill Hart bandit picture (245), the odd couple partakes of whisky in Sir Gerald's hotel room, where the English boob tells the American boob that sound British businessmen regard "writing chaps" like Bernard Shaw (Doak calls him "Bertrand Shaw") and H.G. Wells ("this Wells") as "traitors," a term that underscores the novel's motifs of rebellion, defection, and treason (247).

Back in Zenith, the Babbitts and the Rieslings attend the movies "festively" (256), though early in the novel a frustrated Paul details for Babbitt the ruckus that Zilla had stirred up in a theater lobby. After Paul's trial and incarceration for shooting his wife, so unlike a "storybook" drama (268), Babbitt intensifies his mechanical movie-going. Maimed and reformed, Zilla now sees the theater as the House of Satan, while Babbitt, like a bored housewife, sometimes escapes from his office to attend a matinee. At the Swanson's supper-party, Babbitt contemplates slim Louetta Swanson as she describes the plot, leading man, and setting of a new movie; and on his second Maine vacation, in quest of Paul's spirit, Babbitt romanticizes himself as a backwoods he-man—as simple and strong as guide Joe Paradise or as grim and wordless as a trapper in a North Canada movie. Vergil Gunch's crude joking about the realtor and the lady usher after he spots Babbitt coming out of a movie theater alone at noon foreshadows Orville Jones's actually observing Babbitt emerging from a motion-picture theater with his chic client Tanis Judique. Like her party-loving "Bunch", this dancing widow, too, is wise to the ways of roadhouses and movie theaters. After Myra's return from nursing her ailing sister, Babbitt, in the darkness of a movie-house, broods on how he has retied himself to his wife. Before her own illness, Myra reminisces about their good time together, "the supper-parties and the movies and all—" (370).

On his first return home from Maine, Babbitt resolves to develop "interests"—in reading, in public affairs, in the stage—beyond musical comedy. Hung over in the opening of the novel from Vergil Gunch's beer-and-poker party the night before, Babbitt in his dimity B.V. D. undershirt resembles a small boy in "a cheesecloth tabard at a civic pageant" (8)—a felicitous parallel to the champagne-illuminated people in evening clothes and sleek limousine returning from

an all-night rehearsal of a Little Theater play. Later that day Babbitt hears echoing in the Athletic Club washroom the dramaturgic wisdom of his Clan—that “those two nuts at the Climax Vaudeville Theater this week certainly are a slick pair of actors” (59). At the moribund Overbrook dinner, Mrs. Overbrook awkwardly supposes that when Mr. Babbitt is in Chicago he takes in “all the theaters” (201). In truth, when George invites Ted to Chicago with him, the Babbitt men take in a musical comedy and nudge each other at the matrimonial and Prohibition jokes. Meanwhile, long-engaged Verona and Ken, though they agree that *vers libre* is tommyrot, worry about the minimum wage and the Drama League. One of the Boosters’ Club’s distinguished guests upon whom Babbitt gazes, at any rate, is the leading man of the “Bird of Paradise” company, now playing at Zenith’s Dodsworth Theater. After complimenting the celebrated Thespian on his “high-class” performance, President Gunch urges the boosters to patronize the play: the company’s treasurer, after all, is a fellow booster (259). Finally, while Babbitt’s own face during Myra’s crisis wears the “mask of tragedy” (384) her two physicians initially appear to him—for Babbitt projects the popular culture he absorbs—like a pair of bearded medicos in —what else? “a musical comedy” (385).

IV

Another entrance into Babbitt’s universe is via the oral tradition of good—i.e., racy— story telling. Whatever else goes on at the Athletic Club—the reading room is in Chinese Chippendale—it is where members swap stories. On the first trip to Maine, the Clan of Good Fellows in the Pullman smoker settle down to reciting jokes, limericks, and droll tales until two in the morning. One peppy Good Mixer alludes to Washington Irving’s venerable icon of “Rest in Peace” when he informs his fellow smokers about the rotten service at Chicago’s Rippleton Hotel: “Well, the clerk wakes up a nice young bellhop—fine lad—not a day over seventy-nine years old—fought at the Battle of Gettysburg...and Rip Van Winkle took me up to something...” (142). Again, in *Monarch*, George and the other conventioners drink, smoke, and tell stories. For those who lack Babbitt’s speechcraft, Professor W.F. Peet (foremost figure in practical literature, psychology, and oratory...author of books, poetry, etc.) rides to the rescue. Lewis’s parody of the professor’s home-study advertisement—“Power and Prosperity in Public Speaking”—is itself in nar-

rative form. Its subtitle—*A Yarn Told at the Club*—reveals how a mouse of a shipping clerk becomes a confident assistant supervisor simply because for a few hours each evening he took to heart the professor's short-cut course in eight easy lessons. One of the ten secrets of successful public speaking is knowing how to tell dialect stories. Though no disciple of Professor Peet, spellbinder Babbitt expatiates to the Zenith Estate Board how he once met a Rotarian who "boosted the tenets of one-hundred-per-cent pep in a burr that smacked o' bonny Scutlond and all ye bonny braes o' Bobby Burns," an idiom that doubtless would have pleased Babbitt's maternal grandmother (183). At his church's men's club, the realtor regales his audience with Irish, Jewish, and Chinese stories, but at the threadbare Overbrook flat, even Babbitt's best Irish story sinks "like a soggy cake" (201).

Although his notion of the true Romantic Hero is a sales manager, Babbitt can embrace a literary artist if he is indistinguishable from other tradesmen, is nothing like the "shabby bums" of Europe but is instead a "decent business man" with "the rare skill to season his message with interesting reading matter and who shows both purpose and pep in handling his literary wares" (182). Clubwomen who invite poets to dinner do not invite Babbitt. But because T. Cholmondeley Frink is widely known as an optimistic lecturer as well as the creator of "Ads that Add"—the kind of "genius" George F. Babbitt can appreciate—the realtor can proudly entertain the poet at Floral Heights. This literary shark, known from coast to coast as "Chum," makes an excellent living, Babbitt explains to Myra, "on nothing but a poem or so every day and just writing a few advertisements" (103). Two hours before the Babbitt's dinner party, Chum, who enjoys bootleg whisky winds up a bit of high-minded pro-Prohibition verse. Set in the form of prose (because it gives "a neat air of pleasantry"), Chum's kitsch begins:

I sat alone and groused and thunk, and scratched my head and sighed and wunk, and groaned, 'There still are boobs, alack, who'd like the old-time gin-mill back; that den that makes a sage a loon, the vile and smelly old saloon!' I'll never miss their poison booze, whilst I the bubbling spring can use, that leaves my head at merry morn as clear as any babe new-born! (113)

Turning out-high-class poems, Chum tells the other guests, is a cinch compared to coming up with first-rate advertisements. For him,