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WIVES VERSUS CAREER WOMEN IN ELEVEN
NOVELS OF SINCLAIR LEWIS: A STUDY OF
TWENTIETH - CENTURY MARRIAGE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Joyce Burnett Clites
June 1965

APPROVAL SHEET

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Presented to
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This study was undertaken in an effort to provide answers to two questions brought up by a thoughtful reading of some of Lewis's novels. How does Lewis feel about marriage? What is Lewis's attitude toward women and their role in twentieth-century society? In his novels Lewis presents many different types of women in different situations, who react differently to their situations. The eleven novels chosen for this study are: The Job, Lewis's earliest full treatment of a career woman; Main Street, the story of a rebellious wife; Babbitt, the tale of an American business man and his frumpy wife; Arrowsmith, a story about a dedicated doctor and his loving wife; Elmer Gantry, a controversial book about a preacher who has an affair with a conspicuous career woman and then marries an inconspicuous wife; Dodsworth, a tale about a mean, vicious wife; Ann Vickers, a full study of a career woman; Bethel Merriday, the story of an actress; Gideon Planish, another story of a domineering wife; Cass Timberlane, subtitled "A Story of a Marriage;" and World So Wide, Lewis's last book, which is another study of marriage. These novels span Lewis's writing career from 1917 to 1951, the year he died, and

they show the interest he had in the subject of women and marriage in our society.

Lewis's conclusions about women and their role in our times are ambivalent. His answers to these questions show that he sees both sides of the situation, from the male and from the female point of view. He is too intelligent to place the blame for failure of a marriage solely on either sex. Lewis feels that marriage is one of the most important institutions in our society, and that if the two sexes cannot learn to get along together successfully in a marital relationship, then nations full of people can never learn to cooperate in a broader relationship. Idealistically, Lewis believes that good marriages are possible, because he shows one in Arrowsmith. Realistically, however, he realizes that there are very few good marriages, and this realization is also reflected in his novels.

The responsibility for this state of affairs rests with both men and women. Even though Lewis feels that woman's role in our modern society is difficult and varied, he also seems to feel that it can be challenging, rewarding and happy.

PREFACE

I would like to thank Dr. Orlan Sawey for his time, advice, and encouragement which he freely gave to me on this project. He has been more than kind even when he, himself, was extremely busy.

My thanks also go to Dr. Cratis Williams and to my husband for their help in my moments of despair over my own role in twentieth-century society.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sinclair Lewis wrote twenty-two novels, from The Trail of the Hawk to World So Wide, about almost every phase of twentieth-century America. He was a bitter satirist who left untouched no aspect of American civilization, including the institution of marriage. Many of his novels became best sellers, the best known being Babbitt and Main Street.

In Main Street he presented his most famous female character, Carol Kennicott; her plight as a young wife in rebellion against the mores of the small town, with its intellectually stifling atmosphere, while at the same time she was attempting to adjust to marriage, attracted the sympathy of many American women. Somehow they saw Lewis as a champion of women, although Lewis himself might have been amused at their conclusion.

The purpose of this study is to explore this idea further--to examine several of Lewis's heroines and their problems in order to understand his feelings about the American woman in our twentieth-century society. Is Lewis really a champion of women's rights? Does he understand women and their problems? Since he himself had two unhappy

marriages, can he present marriage objectively in his books? How does Lewis present the woman who combines two occupations, marriage and a job in the business world, as opposed to the wife who remains at home or the career woman who does not marry?

The answers to these questions were sought in eleven of Lewis's novels and fourteen female characters. Possibly this study will provide some insight into the American woman and her problems peculiar to our times, as seen from the masculine point of view by a foremost American writer.

CHAPTER II

THE CRITICS

Although Sinclair Lewis was the first American writer to win the Nobel prize,¹ surprisingly few books have been written about him in the years since 1930. Fewer still have been written about the characters in his novels, and not one about the women in his novels. The reason for this silence in regard to most of Lewis's characters is that the majority of critics feel that Lewis's people "Tend to be flat and to be subordinated to theme--they become puppets rather than performers."² Even Babbitt, probably the most famous of all Lewis's creations, is said to be "a parody, a type, a symbol."³

In the eleven novels read for this study, there appear ten wives and four career women as major characters. In four of these books, Lewis presents the females as protagonists: Carol Kennicott in Main Street, Una Golden in The Job, Ann Vickers in Ann Vickers, and Bethel Merriday in Bethel Merriday. While some of his novels do not present

¹Sheldon Norman Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis (New York, 1962), p. 117.

²Ibid., p. 68.

³Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties (New York, 1955), p. 369.

women sympathetically, Lewis usually does endeavor to show the feminine point of view. It is this feminine point of view that we are concerned with. Generally these women are faced with two alternatives as they emerge into their twenties: they can either marry, or they can get a job--or, putting it more nicely, "have a career." Most of the women in Lewis's novels who choose marriage sooner or later become dissatisfied and make both themselves and their husbands unhappy. The four who choose careers from the beginning--Ann, Una, Bethel, and Sharon Falconer still do not feel completely happy alone, and three eventually marry.

Maxwell Geismar calls Una Golden "the first full-length portrait in the series of Lewis's American women that will extend from the Carol Kennicott of 1920 to the Bethel Merriday of 1940." He also feels that Una is "both the white-collar office worker and the emancipated woman; she has both more of a past and more of a future."⁴

Other reviewers seem to have mixed feelings about Una. One of these is Percy H. Boynton, who says in an article for The English Journal that Una is not a strong enough character to dominate the story of the novel. He

⁴Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials (Boston, 1947), p. 76.

describes her as follows:

. . . singularly colorless even in her success, though as a type she is significant as one of an endless procession of women marching down the Main Streets, expressing their discontent with life as they find it and vaguely asserting their right to make life something vaguely different from what it is.⁵

Elsewhere, Boynton calls The Job "a novel with a solution; for the Woman-in-Business comes into her own when life allows her to retain her job and gives her a baby to boot" ⁶ Perhaps a more interesting comment on Una is Geoffrey Moore's, who calls her "an office worker with the soul of a blue stocking."⁷ An understanding view is taken by Sheldon Grebstein, who compares Una to Hamlin Garland's Rose of Dutcher's Coolly.

Although the two heroines differ in their abilities and ambitions, they face the same problems: the difficult role of women in a changing society, the resistance to the development and fulfillment of the woman as a personality, the pressures of life outside domesticity, the . . . unsatisfactory status of the wife.⁸

⁵Percy Boynton, "Sinclair Lewis," The English Journal, XVI (April, 1927), 253.

⁶Percy Boynton, More Contemporary Americans (Chicago, 1927), p. 184.

⁷Geoffrey Moore, "Sinclair Lewis: A Lost Romantic," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 158.

⁸Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 59.

Although Una's story was written nearly fifty years ago, many of Lewis's observations on Una's problems are still appropriate, as Dorothy Yost Deegan points out:

"Lewis's commentaries on the woman in business are pointed and, in many respects, still timely. Una first takes marriage to escape 'the job'; later she gladly takes 'the job' to escape marriage."⁹ The particular section of the book in which Una leaves her husband, Julius Schwirtz, in order to return to her job¹⁰ reminds one of the similar passage in Sister Carrie in which Carrie does the same to Hurstwood.¹¹ The pictures of both men moping around in dreary rooms while waiting for their women are enough alike to make one wonder how much Lewis was influenced by Dreiser's work.

At the end of her story Una meets her former lover, Walter Babson, and this coincidence causes Maxwell Geismar to remark, with tongue in cheek, that she "meets and marries the now successful Walter Babson, and simultaneously conquers Job and Home."¹²

⁹Dorothy Yost Deegan, The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels (New York, 1951), p. 155.

¹⁰Sinclair Lewis, The Job (New York, 1917), p. 277.

¹¹Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (New York, 1927), pp. 478-481.

¹²Maxwell Geismar, "Origins of a Dynasty," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 13.

In The Last of the Provincials, Geismar mentions Lewis's "fascination" with hotel life, and the fact that Una "found her salvation in running the White Line Chain,"¹³ a group of family hotels. Another critic covers The Job in one sentence by saying that Una is "an ordinary girl little better than ordinarily treated."¹⁴

Discussions of Lewis's treatment of his characters sometimes seem unnecessarily vehement, especially since one of Lewis's main male creations, Babbitt, has become a household word in the language. William Lyon Phelps charges: "In not one of Mr. Lewis's novels is there a single character, male or female, who resembles at least any of thirty thousand individuals with whom I am well acquainted."¹⁵ That seems an extremely strong statement in view of the fact that Una is such an ordinary character, and since there actually are many women like her. Perhaps Phelps does not know many ordinary people.

A different charge is made by the very man who does complain that Una is "ordinary." Thomas Horton says, "There

¹³Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 133.

¹⁴Thomas D. Horton, "Sinclair Lewis: The Symbol of an Era," North American Review, CCXLVIII (December, 1939), 378.

¹⁵William Lyon Phelps, "As I Like It," Scribner's Magazine, XCIII (April, 1933), 256.

is not one full-bodied, living, breathing man or woman in all his books thus far. His people are caricatures, sentimental abstractions, or mouthpieces for his own ideas . . .¹⁶

The foregoing passage is dated December, 1939, after all Lewis's best and most famous books were written. One wonders how Horton can make such a blanket indictment of all Lewis's best-known characters. Granted, many of Lewis's people are merely types, but, excluding the males, a good argument can be made for Fran Dodsworth's living, breathing meanness. And Myra Babbitt is a plain, middle-aged woman who convinces the reader of her reality by her kinship to frumpy, middle-aged women one meets in everyday life. There must be literally millions of Myra Babbitts in America and more in the rest of the world. Mrs. Khrushchev comes to mind immediately as a perfect example of Myra Babbitt.

Leora Arrowsmith, who seems to be considered Lewis's best creation of reality, strikes some readers as too good to be true. Mark Schorer remarks that "Heywood Broun's eulogy of the characterization of Leora was so extreme

¹⁶Horton, op. cit., p. 392.

that it brought an angry retort from a female reader who found Leora worthless and unreal"17 James Branch Cabell, however, is quoted as describing Lewis's characters as "superb monsters, now and then a bit suggestive of human beings," and as saying that Lewis writes of them "with loving abhorrence."¹⁸

And Mark Schorer believes the following:

. . . the Lewis character cannot separate itself from the Lewis society; and this, in the dynamics of fiction, means that the Lewis character has no character apart from the society in which it is embedded, and that therefore the Lewis society is not a society at all, but a machine.¹⁹

This remark causes one to wonder if any human being, aside from the "dynamics of fiction," can really separate himself from the society in which he lives; and if he cannot, how does this inability make the society a machine?

Alfred Kazin is kinder to Lewis's characters, even though he does believe that some of them are types: "Lewis's characters have often been criticized as 'types', and they

¹⁷Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life (New York, 1961), p. 420.

¹⁸Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York, 1952), p. 365.

¹⁹Mark Schorer, "Sinclair Lewis and the Method of Half-Truths," Society and Self in the Novel (New York, 1956), p. 141.

are, partly because he memorialized some of them as such"20

One of Lewis's most famous characters is Carol Kennicott, the protagonist of Main Street, Lewis's next novel to follow The Job. Many readers identify with Carol because her feelings are similar to those of many young women who feel stifled by married life in a small, dull town. Coming only three years after The Job, Main Street's heroine is often compared to Una as "a foil and complement."²¹

Carol is also compared to Lewis himself. In his book on Lewis, Sheldon Grebstein states:

Lewis admitted to Charles Breasted in 1922 that he had portrayed his father as Will Kennicott and himself as Carol . . . always groping for something she isn't capable of attaining, always dissatisfied, always restlessly straining to see what lies just over the horizon, intolerant of her surroundings, yet lacking any clearly defined vision of what she really wants to do or be.²²

Mark Schorer also compares Carol to Lewis, but to Lewis as an adolescent:

Carol Kennicott's vaporous values are the equivalent of that deeply sentimental strain

²⁰Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York, 1942), p. 223.

²¹Percy Boynton, More Contemporary Americans, p. 188.

²²Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 71.

in the author that led him as a young man to write in imitation of early Tennyson . . .²³

Most of the reviewers criticize Carol, and probably justly, for being "just a little silly with her passion for uplift."²⁴

Robert Cantwell says that Carol's "sensibilities were outraged by Gopher Prairie," and that the "enemies she faced were largely passive--inertia, sluggishness, and sullenness, the dominance of petrified prejudice."²⁵ Also speaking of Carol's opposition to the status quo in Gopher Prairie, Edward Wagenknecht describes her as "unsure in her aims," and "naive and flighty in temperament," saying that she could not have won her fight. But he adds that Carol "holds her creator's sympathy and that of the reader also."²⁶

But Schorer quotes Meredith Nicholson, who feels that Carol is "a superficial creature . . . without true vision in any direction . . ."²⁷ And Henry Seidel Canby believes that Lewis's method of criticizing Gopher Prairie from

²³Mark Schorer, "Sinclair Lewis and the Method of Half-Truths," Society and Self in the Novel, p. 128.

²⁴Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, p. 221.

²⁵Robert Cantwell, "Sinclair Lewis," After the Genteel Tradition, ed. by Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1936), pp. 119-120.

²⁶Edward Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 356.

²⁷Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 272.

Carol's viewpoint detracts from the book:

Main Street's chief woman character was a rather brittle intellectual, and the criticism sifted through her personality became itself brittle and supercilious.²⁸

Another unfavorable comment is made by two critics who agree in calling Carol "a super-jay," whatever that may be, whose

repeated efforts to maintain a full personality against the tribal fear of personality Mr. Lewis fails to encircle because he gives these efforts a sociological twist.²⁹

Thomas D. Horton says that Lewis first pictures Carol "as a heroine out of all proportion to her size," and that later in the book, she is shown as a "logic-molded traitor to all the ideals of her former heroism." He also charges that Carol is "a peg upon which Mr. Lewis hangs many long speeches."³⁰ A nicer word than "peg" is used by R. L. Duffus, who refers to Carol as Lewis's "spokeswoman" who is "by turns . . . pathetic, courageous, absurd."³¹

The reader must agree, in all honesty, with Maxwell Geismar, who writes that "Carol deserves the 'hidden

²⁸Henry Seidel Canby, quoted by Annie Russell Marble, The Nobel Prize Winners in Literature, 1901-1931 (New York, 1932), p. 372.

²⁹Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and John Rees Moore, ed., The Idea of an American Novel (New York, 1961), pp. 299-300.

³⁰Horton, op. cit., 381.

³¹R. L. Duffus, "Main Street Thirty-five Years Later," New York Times Magazine (August 7, 1955), 24.

derision' that she feels everywhere about her in Gopher Prairie" because "her dreams are as naive as her methods are blundering."³² Other readers and critics see a certain similarity between Carol and Emma Bovary:

Lewis may have dipped into Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary for his Main Street heroine, Carol Kennicott . . . Carol is like Emma Bovary in that she is of the immense legion of dissatisfied women who press their faces against the window, looking out, yearning, hoping something will happen to remove their boredom . . .³³

There were more readers "who knew that if Carol Kennicott was not as great a creation as Emma Bovary, she certainly was more real to them, and lived next door."³⁴ The public was "ready to accept Carol Kennicott not for Lewis's art, but for the precision of effect with which she came to them as a familiar person."³⁵

H. L. Mencken points out one important fact often overlooked by critics and readers alike, that "Lewis is too intelligent to take the side of Carol, as nine novelists out of ten would have done." Mencken feels that Lewis

³²Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 86.

³³John Cournos and Sybil Norton, Famous Modern American Novelists (New York, 1952), p. 32.

³⁴Alfred Kazin, op. cit., p. 209.

³⁵Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America: 1900-1950 (Chicago, 1951), p. 112.

shows that Carol's "superior culture is, after all, chiefly bogus" ³⁶ And Lewis himself protests that he "had not, as his critics assumed, intended to present the rather priggishly self-conscious Carol Kennicott as a model of elegant intellectuality" ³⁷

Carol's often silly ideas do not conquer Gopher Prairie, either. When, at the end of the story, she returns to Will and Gopher Prairie, she does so on their terms, not hers. Mencken mentions that "she comes back under the old rules, and is presently nursing a baby." ³⁸ One female critic goes so far as to say that Carol "returns to Will because of morning sickness." ³⁹ When she does return, Carol is still rebellious, "though somewhat tamed, and her attitude lets us continue to like and respect her because she has not sold out, and because she does not praise what she has formerly battled." ⁴⁰ Grebstein also thinks Carol has

³⁶H. L. Mencken, "Consolation," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 18.

³⁷Joseph Wood Krutch, "Sinclair Lewis," Nation, CLXXII (February 24, 1951), 179.

³⁸H. L. Mencken, op. cit., p. 19.

³⁹A Female Admirer, "Sinclair Lewis: A Comparison," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXVII (February, 1946), 159.

⁴⁰Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 70.

learned "poise, objectivity, and what Lewis tells us is the best weapon against all imperfect institutions--laughter."⁴¹

As the story closes, the reader knows, says Philip Wylie, that "until they both died, he would be the boss and Carol would be the yielding wife."⁴² Grebstein believes Lewis's tone "definitely mellows" when the emphasis shifts from "Carol's conflict with the town to that with her husband," and that this mellowing weakens the "tonic effect" of the book.⁴³

Nevertheless, in telling Carol's story, however silly she may be, Lewis shows that he does recognize the feelings inside such a female, and that these feelings are shared by some feminine readers in all parts of the country.

The next female Lewis character we shall look at is Myra Babbitt, the middle-aged wife of George F. Babbitt, perhaps Lewis's most famous creation. Although there are many middle-aged women who may read about Myra, not many will identify with her, because she is not very attractive.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁴²Philip Wylie, "Sinclair Lewis," American Mercury, LXI (November, 1943), 631.

⁴³Grebstein, op. cit., p. 69.

Even the critics have almost ignored her. John Cournos and Sybil Norton feel that Babbitt's "wife is ordinary, unlike Carol in that she has not the slightest interest in social or cultural uplift."⁴⁴ But Annie Russell Marble says of her: "Mrs. Babbitt is true to extremists of her type, trying to find the Inner Key in the League of the Higher Illumination."⁴⁵ Perhaps "extremist" is too strong a word to use in describing the mild-mannered Myra. She impresses Maxwell Geismar as "the loyal, industrious Myra who has passed from a feeble disgust for their closer marital relations to a bored acquiescence." Earlier he says "there is probably only one thing wrong with Babbitt's wife,"⁴⁶ but he does not elaborate; apparently, he means that her one fault is her very "bored acquiescence."

Lewis Mumford writes, "Mr. Lewis created the most fully realized figure in his whole gallery--Leora, Arrow-smith's wife."⁴⁷ This statement echoes the reaction of most critics to Leora, the model wife of the dedicated

⁴⁴John Cournos and Sybil Norton, op. cit., p. 33.

⁴⁵Annie Russell Marble, A Study of the Modern Novel (New York, 1933), p. 380.

⁴⁶Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 88.

⁴⁷Lewis Mumford, "The America of Sinclair Lewis," Current History, XXXIII (January, 1931), 531.

scientist. T. K. Whipple concurs: "Leora, Martin's first wife, is by general consent Lewis's masterpiece in the creation of character." Whipple goes on to say that "few other characters in American fiction equal her in absolutely final reality."⁴⁸

Leora is also described by Grebstein as

the prototype of Lewis's good women: quiet, long-suffering, plain, utterly loyal, a little dumb, totally and selflessly dedicated to her husband's fulfillment. She represents personal integrity.⁴⁹

Another reviewer, R. D. Townsend, says of Leora, "For the first time, barring some possible exceptions in his pre-Main Street novels, Mr. Lewis has depicted a woman the reader thoroughly likes."⁵⁰

Maxwell Geismar writes that Leora is "vulgar, jocular, unreticent . . . but also full of laughter, and capable of . . . loyalty." He calls her, too, "Lewis's full-fledged heroine."⁵¹ Only one critic finds that "Leora Arrowsmith is emotionally undeveloped."⁵²

⁴⁸T. K. Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 81.

⁴⁹Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 89.

⁵⁰R. D. Townsend, Outlook, (March 25, 1925), 457, cited in Book Review Digest (New York, 1926), p. 406.

⁵¹Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 98.

⁵²Bernard DeVoto, The Literary Fallacy (Boston, 1944), p. 100.

Oliver Harrison says that Leora is "inarticulate, but strangely wise."⁵³ Because Leora is so admirable, many readers have tried to determine the model Lewis used for her. Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Harcourt, among others, think Leora is "Sinclair Lewis's idea of Paul de Kruif's idea of his [de Kruif's] wife in the first year of their marriage."⁵⁴ T. K. Whipple finds Leora the only woman among all Lewis's people who is free from self-consciousness.⁵⁵

Martin Arrowsmith's second wife, Joyce Lanyon, "symbolizes the demands of Society and Success." She is also felt to be "rich, cultured, sophisticated, sexually alluring," and a "direct forebear of Fran Dodsworth."⁵⁶

Sharon Falconer, the woman evangelist of Elmer Gantry, has been somewhat overshadowed by Elmer himself and the furor over the book, but the consensus seems to be that Sharon is a highly unreal character. Dr. Straton, who may be considered biased, since he is thought by many to be one

⁵³Oliver Harrison, Sinclair Lewis, p. 25, cited by Annie Russell Marble, Nobel Prize Winners in Literature, p. 375.

⁵⁴Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis, An American Life, p. 420.

⁵⁵T. K. Whipple, op. cit., p. 78.

⁵⁶Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 89.

of the models Lewis used in creating Elmer, flatly declares, "There never has been an Elmer Gantry or a Sharon Falconer. Both characters are preposterously impossible, not only religiously, but psychologically, as well." In the same article, Sharon is described as "a beautiful evangelist compounded of religious sentiment and erotic impulse."⁵⁷ Maxwell Geismar thinks Sharon is

a symbol of the primitive human impulses that survive in even the most respectable of all respectable worlds . . . Sharon herself--this self-made enchantress and messianic evangelist --is even more brazen and unscrupulous/than Elmer/.⁵⁸

It is also felt by Geismar that "Sharon herself takes on the role of an ancient fertility goddess" in the main love scene of the book.⁵⁹

Edward Wagenknecht refers to Sharon as "the egomaniac woman evangelist . . . who hates the little vices and loves the big ones . . . Sharon is nevertheless, a considerably less convincing figure than Elmer."⁶⁰

Two feminine reviewers have interesting insights into

⁵⁷ Dr. John Roach Straton, quoted in "The Storm over Elmer Gantry," Literary Digest, XCIII (April, 1927), 29.

⁵⁸ Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, pp. 102-103.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 102.

⁶⁰ Edward Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 360.

Sharon's character. Dorothy Yost Deegan writes that Sharon

imagines herself to be the reincarnation of Catherine of Siena, and there are times when she appears to be sincere in her burning desire to save souls . . . But . . . she is not able to distinguish clearly between the things of the spirit and the things of the flesh . . . Sharon Falconer must be observed as a far from worthy character.⁶¹

Rebecca West thinks Sharon actually believes everything she is saying herself, as the perfectly sincere person does, and that she will be as disappointed as everyone else if her words are proved to be false.⁶² At least one critic feels that Sharon is "so commanding a figure that the author had to invoke a holocaust to get her out of the story."⁶³

Elmer Gantry's wife, Cleo, is so pale a figure in comparison to Sharon, that the critics understandably do not mention her.

While many readers feel that Sharon is an obvious representation of Aimee Semple MacPherson, one writer does mention another female evangelist with the unlikely name of Uldine Utley, who preached at Dr. John Roach Straten's

⁶¹Dorothy Yost Deegan, op. cit., p. 160.

⁶²Rebecca West, "Sinclair Lewis Introduces Elmer Gantry," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 40.

⁶³Percy H. Boynton, America In Contemporary Fiction (New York, 1963), p. 179.

Calvary Baptist Church in New York City in 1925 or 1926, as a possible model for Sharon.⁶⁴ Whoever the model, Sharon as a literary figure is not nearly as memorable as his next major female characterization, Fran Dodsworth.

In Dodsworth, Lewis draws one of his most devastating portraits of an American wife--Fran, married to the bumbling, but good-natured Sam. Geismar writes,

Just as the Leora Tozer of Arrowsmith was the first full-portrait of the frank and sensuous western heroine, so the Fran Voelker of Dodsworth is the sharpest study of that longing for eastern sophistication and 'culture' which has marked a whole line of Lewis's ladies.⁶⁵

Practicing what seems to be a favorite pastime, readers and reviewers promptly tried to find the prototype of Fran, and most of them seem to agree that Fran is intended as a portrait of Lewis's first wife, Grace Hegger Lewis.⁶⁶

According to Grebstein, Lewis "indicates that Fran is not representational of all American women."⁶⁷ She is

⁶⁴James Benedict Moore, "The Sources of Elmer Gantry," New Republic, CXLIII (August 8, 1960), 18.

⁶⁵Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, pp. 112-113.

⁶⁶"Books," Newsweek, XXIX (May 26, 1947), 101; and Benjamin Stolberg, "Sinclair Lewis," American Mercury, LIII (October, 1941), 457.

⁶⁷Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 112.

"attractive and coquettish, light-brained and selfish."⁶⁸

Lewis Mumford says she is "an odious counterpart of Carol Kennicott, with not a thought in the world but her own conquests and satisfactions."⁶⁹ If Carol is modelled partly on Lewis, Mumford's interpretation would make Fran a combination of both Lewis and his first wife.

Agreement is practically unanimous that Fran is the kind of wife a man does not want. F. F. Van de Water says flatly in his review of the book, ". . . a wife like Fran is a scourge."⁷⁰

Clifton Fadiman's description of her is as follows:

Fran, the babied adult, the well-groomed female American monster, with no business on which to exercise her prehensibility, a 'success' --that is to say, a sulky-eyed, sulky-mouthed emotional virgin, immature in the home, the salon, the bed. You may see ten thousand Frans on Park Avenue in New York City any day of the year.⁷¹

One commentator, Thomas D. Horton, feels that Fran's

⁶⁸Annie Russell Marble, Nobel Prize Winners in Literature, p. 378.

⁶⁹Lewis Mumford, "The America of Sinclair Lewis," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 105.

⁷⁰F. F. Van de Water, New York Evening Post, (March 23, 1929), 10, cited in the Book Review Digest (New York, 1930), p. 264.

⁷¹Clifton Fadiman, quoted by Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life (New York, 1961), p. 517.

committing adultery is inconsistent with her sexual frigidity. He has this to say: "Fran Dodsworth at the most would have attempted some stealthy flirtations, but hardly out and out adulteries."⁷² Maxwell Geismar seems to think that Fran's sexual frigidity is directed solely at Sam, and would probably not affect her relationship with other men. "Is Fran's sexual frigidity part of her entire contempt for Sam's world and his way of life? While Fran wants all that Sam can get her,--and a little more--she has very little use for the way he gets it." Her coldness is the "flaw" Geismar refers to "in all the grace and polish of this mid-western brewer's daughter . . . she is an 'angel of ice.'"⁷³

According to Grebstein, Lewis handles this facet of Fran's nature so well that it explains her behavior in other respects:

Part of the novel's realism is its restrained but accurate suggestion of sexual incompatibility and of Fran's frigidity. . . . She makes her husband feel clumsy, unsure, confused, ashamed of his natural urges toward her. Skillfully, Lewis demonstrates how Fran's physical coldness expresses itself in her

⁷²Thomas D. Horton, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

⁷³Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 113.

personality: her insatiable wants and desires, her need to know the right people, her social consciousness, her flirtatiousness. She can respond only to men she knows will be transient in her life, not to anyone who threatens to possess her emotionally.⁷⁴

This is probably a complete, if concise, summation of Fran's character. She, too, seems real, even if her type is not as commonly seen, perhaps, as the office girl, Una Golden, or the small town wife, Carol Kennicott.

Grebstein comments, too, on the effectiveness of Lewis's technique in handling Fran:

Once the reader has marked Fran's frigidity, infidelity, and the mode of her castration of her husband, he can appreciate the sharpness of Lewis's irony in giving her the role of spokesman for the doctrine of liberty.⁷⁵

John Cournos and Sybil Norton agree with Clifton Fadiman that there are many women like her--"Fran is a type of dissatisfied woman who abounds in the United States. She has pretensions to culture which she does not possess; she is a snob . . . and acts condescendingly to those whom she regards as her inferiors."⁷⁶ Louis Auchincloss remarks on the high proportion of frigid women in Lewis's novels, but he does not name the feminine characters he would

⁷⁴Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 111.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶John Cournos and Sybil Norton, op. cit., p. 35.

include in this category along with Fran.⁷⁷

Fran's weaknesses are many: she has a "smallness of spirit";⁷⁸ she is the "coquette, the snob, and the spoiled darling";⁷⁹ she is "discontented, vaguely culture-starved."⁸⁰ Allan Angoff declares that "as a study of a selfish, conceited, superficial woman, completely contented by masculine flattery, the easy prey of philanderers and adventurers, Fran is admirable."⁸¹

But Grebstein once again hits the nail squarely on the head: "Fran's very weakness is her strength; her dependence is her freedom. To a good man like Sam, nothing can be more enslaving than the sense that someone needs him . . ."⁸² John Cournos and Sybil Norton also remark that Sam liked Fran's very childishness.⁸³ Allan Angoff agrees:

⁷⁷Louis Auchincloss, "The Master Journalist of American Fiction," Harper's, CCXXIII (November, 1961), 127.

⁷⁸Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 113.

⁷⁹Allan Angoff, American Writing Today (New York, 1957), p. 369.

⁸⁰John Cournos and Sybil Norton, op. cit., p. 36.

⁸¹Allan Angoff, op. cit., p. 369.

⁸²Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 111.

⁸³John Cournos and Sybil Norton, op. cit., p. 35.

"At every rebuff due to her own foolishness, she comes crying like a child to be comforted by . . . Sam."⁸⁴

Geoffrey Moore gives his impressions of Fran:

In her one sees the familiar divorce of life and ideals do not arise out of the pattern of her life; they come from another culture entirely. It is European pretentiousness that she longs for and that she gets, disastrously, in the end . . . at the end her selfishness drives him [Sam] off.⁸⁵

While most of the critics agree that Lewis does a fully realized portrait of the nagging, domineering, upper-middle-class American wife in Fran, they do not appear to agree about Ann Vickers, the heroine of his novel Ann Vickers. If Fran is supposed to be a thinly disguised Grace Hegger Lewis, Ann is understood by many readers to be a not-so-thinly disguised Dorothy Thompson.⁸⁶

Contrary to Fran, Ann Vickers is anything but frigid, and the critics react in varying degrees to the emphasis Lewis puts on her sexual life. Geoffrey Moore discussed it in the evaluation of the book:

In Ann Vickers Lewis deals with the life of an emancipated woman who has an illegitimate

⁸⁴Allan Angoff, op. cit., p. 369.

⁸⁵Geoffrey Moore, "Sinclair Lewis: A Lost Romantic," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 160.

⁸⁶Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 31.

child, and learns from her experience. He seems to be letting himself go in this book. It is, in fact, as if he were beginning to find out something about life and emotions.⁸⁷

On the other hand, Edward Wagenknecht describes the passages about Ann's sexual experiences as "rather disgusting erotic interludes."⁸⁸ Although Grebstein admits that sex is not usually an important element in a Lewis novel, he writes that in Ann Vickers "it rarely becomes indecorous," and "while it completely avoids the erotic, sexuality is important to both the novel's story and message."⁸⁹ A woman observer, Dorothy Yost Deegan, feels that although Ann "becomes one of the most successful women in fiction, as success is intrinsically measured," she "is by no means an admirable woman."⁹⁰ J. D. Adams, writing in the New York Times, expresses the opinion that Ann is "one of his [Lewis's] most fully realized characters; further than that, she is the most deeply studied of all the women in his work, beyond all doubt the best drawn of any."⁹¹

⁸⁷Geoffrey Moore, op. cit., p. 160.

⁸⁸Edward Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 361.

⁸⁹Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 126.

⁹⁰Dorothy Yost Deegan, op. cit., p. 160.

⁹¹J. D. Adams, New York Times, (January 29, 1933), 1; cited in Book Review Digest (New York, 1934), p. 562.

While some readers may not be quite that enthusiastic about Ann, most believe that she is an interesting character, and Maxwell Geismar claims she is "intended to portray the emotional emancipation of the new Lewis woman."⁹² He also compares her to Sam Dodsworth, as the feminine "counterpart of his most fully realized western man."⁹³ As well as Ann's emotional emancipation, Geismar mentions her intellectual emancipation. "Ann . . . has also indulged in . . . abstract thinking and is one of the few Lewis heroines to read with any seriousness of purpose, or maybe even to read at all--."⁹⁴

A London reviewer writes that Ann's attitude toward Lufe Resnick, her lover, is "purely--or anyway, conventionally--feminine to the last degree."⁹⁵ Thomas D. Horton, however, finds Ann "an unhappy, earnest, and somewhat comical social worker"⁹⁶

Maxwell Geismar describes her as "independent, capable, and decent," and says she "is a very different person from

⁹²Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 117.

⁹³Ibid., p. 115.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 116.

⁹⁵London Times Literary Supplement, (January 26, 1933), 56; cited in Book Review Digest (New York, 1934), p. 562.

⁹⁶Thomas D. Horton, op. cit., p. 376.

the ambitious Fran Dodsworth or the scatter-brained Carol Kennicott."⁹⁷

Ann, according to Grebstein, "finds that a career is not enough for a woman. She suffers loneliness; she even regrets her own talents and accomplishments because they frighten men away."⁹⁸ Summing up his opinion of Ann, Mark Schorer writes that she is "a woman who is trying to find herself as a woman, not only as a Great Woman."⁹⁹ Apparently, Lewis's effort to write the biography of a successful career woman who is also an imperfect human being is worthwhile, as far as the critics are concerned.

Unfortunately, this is not true of Bethel Merriday, whose heroine is a professional actress who makes a living at her job, but barely. Only two critics consider Bethel important enough as a character to attempt an analysis of her. Sheldon Grebstein kindly remarks:

Bethel is another of Lewis's sympathetically portrayed heroines (although by far the dullest) with a quest . . . she fulfills her ambitions. In fact, she overfills them because, as the novel closes, she can look forward not only to a career on the stage, but also to a compatible marriage.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, pp. 115-116.

⁹⁸Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 127.

⁹⁹Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 134.

He says later, and no doubt correctly, that Bethel's story is "harmless enough," but "insubstantial."¹⁰¹

Maxwell Geismar agrees that "Bethel Merriday is by far the poorest of Lewis's late novels."¹⁰² In the same article, Geismar cuttingly analyzes Bethel's inner feelings: "Probably Bethel's deepest fear--that she will remain an eternal amateur, that she will only 'play at playing'--is based on her only genuine insight."¹⁰³

At the time he was finishing the story about Bethel, the young, aspiring actress, Lewis was interested in Marcella Powers, an attractive would-be actress nearly thirty years his junior.¹⁰⁴ It is probable that Bethel is intended to be a tribute to Marcella, or at least to girls like her in the theater.

Peony Planish, wife of the protagonist of Gideon Planish, is somewhat similar to Fran Dodsworth, although she is a little more likeable. Most of the critics seem to feel favorably inclined toward her, with the exception

¹⁰¹Ibid., pp. 134-135.

¹⁰²Maxwell Geismar, "The Land of Faery," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 130.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 656.

of Edmund Wilson, who calls Peony "a frank female caricature."¹⁰⁵ Evidently Geismar rather likes her:

The Peony Jackson of Gideon Planish . . . with her infantile morals, her adolescent values, and her mature body, is one of Lewis's most engaging if not altogether commendable heroines. What Peony wants out of life may not be very interesting, but the way she gets it is. As her wiles first entice and then trap poor, pompous Professor Planish, you may realize, almost for the first time in Lewis's work, the charms, as well as the ironical tortures of the flesh.¹⁰⁶

Edward Wagenknecht refers to her as Gideon's "faithful and ambitious wife, the selfish, thirsty, and sexually attractive Peony . . ."¹⁰⁷ Comparing Peony to another Lewis wife, Clifton Fadiman sees "in the simultaneously attractive and repulsive figure of Peony Planish" Lewis's "best female character since the unforgettable Leora of Arrowsmith."¹⁰⁸ A comparison of Fran Dodsworth seems more appropriate from the following description of Peony given by Grebstein:

¹⁰⁵ Edmund Wilson, "Salute to an Old Landmark: Sinclair Lewis," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 141.

¹⁰⁶ Maxwell Geismar, "The Land of Faery," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 130.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 362.

¹⁰⁸ Clifton Fadiman, The New Yorker, XIX, (April 24, 1943), 76, cited in Book Review Digest (New York, 1944), p. 493.

Lewis demonstrates in . . . Peony . . . that . . . the female is deadlier than the male; she is smarter, tougher, and more efficient at getting her way. Especially terrifying is her ability to use the male's strength 'against him' and 'for her own ends.'¹⁰⁹

Maxwell Geismar has the last word. He believes that "The sensuous appeal of Peony is matched by her insatiable desire to 'get ahead,' and her ambition . . . is matched only by her extravagance and bad taste."¹¹⁰

Like Peony, another wife of a professional man is Jinny Timberlane, wife of the Judge in Lewis's 1945 novel, Cass Timberlane. Jinny is most frequently compared to Carol Kennicott because, as Philip Wylie points out, their stories are similar.¹¹¹ Mark Schorer remarks, too, that the main difference in the two women's stories lies in the endings: Carol "loses" to Will by coming back on his terms, but Jinny "wins" because she comes back to Cass on her terms.¹¹²

Lewis's friend, H. L. Mencken, mentions Jinny's obvious similarity to Fran in a letter to Lewis--"It has the same

¹⁰⁹Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 158.

¹¹⁰Maxwell Geismar, "The Land of Faery," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 131.

¹¹¹Philip Wylie, op. cit., p. 629.

¹¹²Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 739.

defect Dodsworth had: the woman is such a bitch that it is hard to imagine a sensible man falling for her."¹¹³ Grebstein compares Jinny's story to both Main Street and Dodsworth because "it utilizes some of their situations and conflicts."¹¹⁴ These conflicts concern the struggles within the marriages as to which partner will dominate and which will be dominated. As Sam is afraid of Fran, and Will is in awe of Carol, so Cass dreads Jinny's "capacity to make him suffer."¹¹⁵ Edward Wagenknecht is definitely in the minority when he declares that Lewis's portrait of Jinny "might even be called sentimental."¹¹⁶

An attempt to probe Jinny's character a little deeper is made by Edmund Wilson:

What is new in Sinclair Lewis's picture is an attempt . . . to deal with a typical bright young woman of the forties, so different from the emancipated woman of the earlier decades of the century . . . that heroine who dared to get herself a job or be a social or political worker or desert her conventional husband for the unconventional man she loved. The new type of liberated young woman wants to compete with the man without learning any trade, is rebellious

¹¹³H. L. Mencken, cited in Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, by Mark Schorer, p. 741.

¹¹⁴Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 148.

¹¹⁵Philip Wylie, op. cit., p. 631.

¹¹⁶Edward Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 362.

against marriage but does not want a job,
leaves her husband but does not stick to her
lover.¹¹⁷

Wilson also has the impression that, although Lewis tries to make Jinny attractive, "her relentless cuteness and cleverness always sound off key and self-conscious."¹¹⁸ He even concludes, perhaps justly, that Lewis himself "does not like Jinny" and "is too old-fashioned . . . to sympathize with her."¹¹⁹

While some reviewers take the "happy" ending, with Jinny's return to Cass, at face value as "Lewis's now firmly established conviction that love--married love--conquers all,"¹²⁰ at least one calls the story "the most sinister of all the Lewis books," and he charges that Lewis uses it "to make a lethal hole in America's love myth."¹²¹ Wilson wonders whether Jinny would return to Cass if she were not ill with diabetes and therefore

¹¹⁷Edmund Wilson, op. cit., p. 141.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Maxwell Geismar, "The Land of Faery," Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 133.

¹²¹Philip Wylie, op. cit., p. 632.

"scorned by her seducer."¹²²

Perhaps there is some connection between Mark Schorer's comparison of Jinny and Cass to Marcella Powers and Lewis,¹²³ and one critic's assumption that Lewis wants to believe that "Jinny, having had her fling, will stick to Timberlane."¹²⁴ In the words of Philip Wylie, Jinny returns to Cass, but we leave them "doomed to more suspicion and frustration, despair and detestation, disapproval and misunderstanding, quarrel and provocation, niggling and gnawing and cross-chipping and bile and meanness and folly."¹²⁵ In this case, he may be right.

Lewis's last novel, World So Wide, has three women--Caprice Chart, wife of the main character; Olivia, an unfaithful lady professor; and Roxanna, a career girl working as a newspaper correspondent in Europe. Caprice is shown in the first few pages to be another shrill, nagging Fran

¹²²Edmund Wilson, op. cit., p. 142.

¹²³Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 738.

¹²⁴S. J. Woolf, "Sinclair Lewis Is Back on Main Street," New York Times Magazine (October 28, 1945), 41.

¹²⁵Philip Wylie, op. cit., p. 632.

Dodsworth. She is killed in an automobile accident which occurs while her husband is driving.¹²⁶ The wreck itself seems too contrived, and Geoffrey Moore remarks that "a man kills his wife rather conveniently by accident, and then goes off to get an education in Italy."¹²⁷ The two women Hayden meets in Italy, Roxanna and Olivia, are opposites. They are described by one critic as "the true and the false, the earthy and the pretentious."¹²⁸ Roxanna, the "true" career girl, is also called "a red-headed American gamin--the kind of girl Lewis really loved all his life. So our friend marries the gamin and gets to hell off home"¹²⁹

Even though the aloof Olivia is obviously wrong for Hayden, at least one of the reviewers who deigns to mention the book feels that Hayden's decision to marry Roxanna is unrealistic. Mark Schorer has this to say: "When Hayden Chart turns to Roxanna Eldritch, Lewis must necessarily force his plot into sentimental melodrama to bring about the turn at all."¹³⁰

¹²⁶Sinclair Lewis, World So Wide (New York, 1950), p. 11.

¹²⁷Geoffrey Moore, op. cit., p. 160.

¹²⁸Sheldon Grebstein, op. cit., p. 160.

¹²⁹C. Hartley Grattan, "Sinclair Lewis: The Work of a Lifetime," New Republic, CXXIV (April 2, 1951), 20.

¹³⁰Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, p. 798.

These last three female characterizations created by Lewis are admittedly weak, and perhaps the silence of most of the serious critics speaks more eloquently than their words ever could.

CHAPTER III

WIVES

Carol Kennicott is the first wife to whom Lewis devotes a whole book. Even in college, Carol Milford shows signs of her restless nature which will plague Will Kennicott later. Lewis says she is "a born hero-worshipper," that she does "question and examine unceasingly," and that she will "never be static."¹

When Carol marries Dr. Will Kennicott and goes home with him to Gopher Prairie, she immediately has second thoughts about her commitment to him, especially when she sees the ugly, stodgy little towns through which they pass on the train.² When they arrive at Kennicott's house, Carol is really horrified. "I hate it!" she shrieks, when Will is not there to hear her.³ From the beginning, Carol does not fit in well with the ladies of the town. At her first card party, she is pounced upon by the other women for paying high wages to her hired girl, but Carol defends herself and goes home to cry quietly in the guest

¹Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York, 1920), p. 9.

²Ibid., pp. 26-27.

³Ibid., p. 35.

room.⁴ When Vida Sherwin, the local spinster, confides to Carol all the gossiping that people have been doing about her, she is upset. She feels that the townspeople have "frozen, sneering, horrible hearts."⁵

But Carol is "a born reformer," just as Vida Sherwin tells her,⁶ and she can't resist trying to change things. She tries reading poetry to Will, but when he tells her she "can elocute just as well as Ella Stowbody," whom Carol loathes, she desists.⁷

However, when Carol is invited to join the Thanatopsis Club, the local female culture group, she is enthusiastic: "These are the real people. When the housewives, who bear the burdens, are interested in poetry, it means something. I'll work with them--for them--anything!" She decides to "use the Thanatopsis as the tool with which to liberalize the town." Carol is a little taken aback, though, when she finds that the club intends to study all the English poets in one afternoon!⁸ In describing this ladies'

⁴Ibid., pp. 92-94.

⁵Ibid., p. 98.

⁶Ibid., p. 96.

⁷Ibid., p. 121.

⁸Ibid., p. 124.

club meeting, Lewis outdoes himself. Any woman in any small town who has ever attended such a meeting will recognize the truth of Lewis's portrayal. Although Carol is Lewis's spokeswoman specifically, she speaks also for all women who have ever squirmed uncomfortably through such a meeting, while realizing how ridiculous it is.

Carol's next endeavor, after charming the ladies of the Thanatopsis Club, is to enlist their help through their "several husbands," in remodelling the town. She fancies Georgian architecture, and she designs a Georgian city hall complete with "court-room, . . . public library, a collection of excellent prints, rest-room and model kitchen for farmwives, theater, lecture room, free community ballroom, farm bureau, gymnasium."⁹ Armed with her ideas, Carol sets out to inform the officers of the Thanatopsis of the wonders they can do. Her plans are squelched almost immediately.¹⁰

Occasionally, Carol goes on country calls with Dr. Will. She admires him when she sees how respectfully the farmers follow his advice.¹¹ Carol's life with Will is pleasantly dull. The dullness is shattered when she goes to see a new couple in town and they are not at home. Guy Pollock,

⁹Ibid., p. 130

¹¹Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 131-132.

the local bachelor, hears her knock and invites her in for a cup of coffee, which she accepts. On the way home she is shocked to find that she is attracted to Guy. She reflects

"The amazing thing is that I'm not more amazed at myself. I, the virtuous young matron. Am I to be trusted? . . . They say that marriage is a magic change. But I'm not changed No! I wouldn't want to fall in love, even if the Prince did come. I wouldn't want to hurt Will. I am fond of Will He doesn't stir me, not any longer. But I depend on him."¹²

To make it up to Will for her unwifely thoughts, Carol redecorates the waiting room of his office and convinces herself that she is gloriously content in her career as doctor's wife.¹³

Nevertheless, Carol is not really happy, but when she tries to talk to Will about her vague dissatisfactions, he laughs at her. Carol actually begins to fear that she may succumb to the "Village Virus" and become like Will:

Will Kennicott, asleep there, trusting me, thinking he holds me. And I'm leaving him. All of me left him when he laughed at me. It wasn't enough that I admired him; I must change myself and grow like him. He takes advantage. No more. It's finished. I will go on.¹⁴

¹²Ibid., p. 159.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 196.

¹³Ibid., pp. 179-180.

Carol discusses her feeling with Guy Pollock, but they cannot quite pinpoint the problem exactly. Lewis lets Carol speak for young and old wives and working women all over the country when she says:

"We're all in it, ten million women, young married women with good prosperous husbands, and business women in linen collars, and grandmothers that gad out to teas, and wives of underpaid miners, and farmwives who really like to make butter and go to church. What is it we want--and need? Will Kennicott there would say that we need lots of children and hard work. But it isn't that. There's the same discontent in women with eight children and one more coming--always one more coming! And you find it in stenographers and wives who scrub, just as much as in girl college-graduates who wonder how they can escape their kind parents. What do we want?"¹⁵

Later Carol answers her own question when she says, "We want everything. We sha'n't get it. So we sha'n't ever be content."¹⁶

Carol's summers are spent in reflective peace in their summer cottage on the lake, with Will coming out after his final rounds. Every day he asks her if she is enjoying herself, and every day he does not listen to her answer. Time presses on Carol. She realizes that nothing is changed, and that there is "no reason to believe that there ever would be change."¹⁷

When Carol discovers that she is pregnant, she feels

¹⁵Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁶Ibid.

that life finally promises "to be interesting in the peril of the great change."¹⁸ She hates all the sly comments from Gopher Prairie matrons that now she will "get over all these ideas" and "settle down." To one over-solicitous neighbor, Carol remarks:

"I do not look lovely, Mrs. Bogart. My complexion is rotten, and my hair is coming out, and I look like a potato-bag, and I think my arches are falling, and he isn't a pledge of love, and I'm afraid he will look like us, and I don't believe in mother-devotion, and the whole business is a confounded nuisance of a biological process."¹⁹

This accurately sums up the attitude toward pregnancy of most women who have been through it. It is especially true of the last few weeks of any normal pregnancy, when the hapless mother-to-be begins to wonder if this is to be her permanent state. Whether Lewis discovered this by empathy, or whether someone told him, he minces no words in describing the situation. But he further says that Carol's baby, called Hugh, becomes her "reason for living, promise of accomplishment in the future, shrine of adoration--and a diverting toy."²⁰ Though Carol loves Hugh, even his arrival is not enough to keep her happy for long. When he is old enough to toddle about and ask questions, she is gratified. She feels that he makes

¹⁸Ibid., p. 234.

²⁰Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 235.

"life more than full," and she is "altogether reconciled . . . for an hour."²¹

Sooner or later, it seems, Carol is going to be attracted to another man, and the other man finally appears in the person of Erik Valberg, a young and handsome, if slightly effeminate, tailor. With Erik she talks about her dislike for the town and its people and its attitudes. But they are observed, of course, wherever they go, and however innocently they talk. Even stolid Will notices her friendliness with Erik. When Carol, alarmed at herself, wants to go away alone for a while, Kennicott refuses to let her. She rationalizes that she is "too honest" and possesses what she calls the "faithfulness of unfaith." But she does admit to herself that she doesn't "care in the least for Erik. Nor for any man. I want to be let alone, in a woman's world--a world without Main Street, or politicians, or business men, or men with that sudden beastly hungry look, that glistening unfrank expression that wives know--."²² Apparently, Carol is one of Lewis's frigid heroines, because when her opportunity to be physically unfaithful to Will actually arrives, she cannot commit adultery. Will is out on a country call, and Carol takes Erik up to her own room.

²¹Ibid., p. 265.

²²Ibid., p. 354.

As soon as he kisses her, though, Carol realizes an affair is impossible. She begs Erik not to "spoil everything" and to be her "friend." When he insists that she does love him, she denies it: "I do not! . . . Everything crushes in on me so, all the gaping dull people, and I look for a way out--please go. I can't stand any more."²³ She tells herself she will not see him again, but she does, and then Will decides it is time to call a halt. They discuss their marriage and their attitudes toward each other in a thoroughly serious talk. Carol admits to Will she probably could not bring herself to leave him. She declares that marriage "weaves people together. It's not easy to break, even when it ought to be broken."²⁴ And so she stays with Will in Gopher Prairie after Erik has left. But their marriage is no better than it was before, and eventually the whole subject arises again when Carol continues to criticize the town. This time the argument is more heated, and Carol affirms that she does not belong to Gopher Prairie and she will leave "to find out" what her "work" is. Will retorts that lack of work is her problem, and that if she "had five kids and no hired girl," then she "wouldn't be so discontented."²⁵ Carol's answer to that is, "Oh, we're

²³Ibid., p. 356.

²⁵Ibid., p. 404.

²⁴Ibid., p. 383.

hopeless, we dissatisfied women! Then why do you want to have us about the place, to fret you?"²⁶

Carol and Hugh leave for Washington on the train, and Lewis is truthful about Carol's triumph. She realizes that she could not go if Will hadn't given her the money, and her freedom is "empty." For thirteen months Carol remains in Washington alone, until Kennicott arrives for a visit. Will wants her to return to him, but he is smart enough not to beg her. He takes her on a second honeymoon, and then Will returns to Gopher Prairie alone.²⁷

For five months more, Carol puts off her decision, but at the end of that time she finds that she is pregnant again and that her hatred of the small prairie town has run its course. After almost two years in Washington, Carol "gives in" and returns to Gopher Prairie.²⁸

After her return, Carol is the talk of the town for a few days, but when the "boys" down at the barber shop decide she is harmless after a fifteen minute "conference" on her appearance and her affairs, the talk recedes.²⁹

²⁶Ibid., p. 405.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 416-420.

²⁸Ibid., p. 425.

²⁹Ibid., p. 428.

Married life returns to its old pattern, as Will remarks to Carol, "Don't you ever get tired of fretting and stewing and experimenting?" And Carol's curt reply is "I haven't even started."³⁰

Myra Babbitt, the wife of Lewis's famous businessman, is not the dissatisfied, intelligent girl that Carol Kennicott is. Myra, as Lewis puts it, is "definitely mature."³¹ She is fat and bulgy, and she no longer has "reticences before her husband," and this fact no longer bothers her. Myra is "so dully habituated to married life that in her full matronliness" she is "as sexless as an anemic nun." Although she is a "good woman, a kind woman, a diligent woman," no one is particularly interested in Myra except her ten-year-old daughter, Linka. Mrs. Babbitt is the average middle-aged American matron in her looks, her attitudes and her morals. She feels that there are passages in Shakespeare's plays that aren't "at all nice."³² She tells George that it is time he told their son Ted about "Things!" and blushes as she says it.³³

Myra has been a "Good Wife" to George. Even George

³⁰Ibid., p. 431.

³³Ibid., p. 87.

³¹Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt (New York, 1922), p. 7.

³²Ibid., p. 76.

admits that she has been "loyal, industrious, and at rare times, merry." During their marriage, she has "passed from a feeble disgust at their closer relations into what promised to be ardent affection, but it drooped into bored routine."³⁴ How many thousands of American matrons are like Myra Babbitt? Most of her conversations with her husband consist of nodding agreements to his unfinished sentences. When she and George give a dinner party, she nags him about picking up the ice cream on his way home from work, and about changing into a dinner jacket for the evening.³⁵

Later, she is hurt when George wants to go on a vacation by himself. "Don't you want me to go along?" she begs. But after she understands that George is thoroughly worn out, she becomes protective and understanding, insisting that he and Paul Reisling go fishing alone.³⁶

Myra is realistic in her attitude toward age. Lewis contrasts her to Zilla, Paul's wife, to show that she is "placid and puffy and mature," while Zilla is "bleached and tight-corseted."³⁷ This comparison to Zilla also emphasizes Myra's good points simply by exaggerating

³⁴Ibid., p. 90.

³⁵Ibid., p. 105.

³⁶Ibid., p. 131.

³⁷Ibid., p. 134.

Zilla's evil qualities. Zilla not only nags, she shrieks. She creates scenes, and she enjoys being the center of such scenes. Nevertheless, when George and Paul both berate Zilla, Myra is loyal to her sex and defends her.³⁸

Lewis's unerring picture of Myra's middle-class dullness is painfully life like. Her reaction to Paul Riesling's shooting of Zilla is "This is what comes of his chasing after other women instead of bearing his cross in a Christian way."³⁹

As a hostess, Myra is not much of a success. A dinner party for the upper set of Zenith is an embarrassing failure, and Myra weeps because she knows they will not receive a return invitation.⁴⁰

George himself accepts Myra and depends on her. But at times he dreads being alone with her because she will "patiently expect him to be ardent."⁴¹ The few times that Babbitt does talk seriously to her are passed off by Myra with maddening little comments on everyday matters: "I know you don't mean a word of it. Time to trot up to bed now. Have you enough covers for tonight?"⁴²

³⁸Ibid., p. 137.

³⁹Ibid., p. 267.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 197.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 294.

⁴²Ibid., p. 319.

Lewis's picture of Myra is filtered through George and his feelings for her. While George is having an affair with Janis Judique, a lovely widow, he fears that Myra will find out, not because he really fears her wrath, but because he dreads hurting her. George is "distressed by the sight of his wife's slack plumpness, by her puffs and billows of flesh, by the tattered petticoat which she was always meaning and always forgetting to throw away." But he also knows that she is aware of "all his repulsions."⁴³

Even though Myra merely tolerates his physical attentions, she is "hurt by any slackening in his irritable periodic interest."⁴⁴ Myra never definitely lets it be known that she knows of George's affair, but she does complain that he can "run around with anybody," but she is supposed to "just stay home."⁴⁵ This is the American woman's age-old complaint of the double standard for moral behavior. For that matter, it is probably not restricted to American women. By shaming him, Myra talks George into going with her to hear Mrs. Opal Emerson Mudge, the "field-lecturer for the American New Thought

⁴³Ibid., p. 333.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 355.

⁴⁴Ibid.

League" who "is going to speak on 'Cultivating the Sun Spirit' before the League of the Higher Illumination."⁴⁶ When George complains afterwards that the talk meant nothing to him, Myra says, "I do think you ought to have got something out of it."⁴⁷

Myra's habitual, almost pitiful dependence on George is strikingly shown by Lewis when he sends Myra off to the hospital for an appendectomy near the end of the book. Myra begs George,

"Will you stay with me? Darling, you don't have to go to the office now, do you? Could you just go down to the hospital with me? . . . I was wondering if anybody really needed me. Or wanted me. I was wondering what was the use of my living. I've been getting so stupid and ugly--"⁴⁸

The reader is left with a feeling of pity for Myra Babbitt until she fades completely out of mind.

Leora Arrowsmith is Lewis's most memorable characterization of a wife. She elopes with Martin Arrowsmith while he is still in medical school, in spite of her family's dislike for Martin.⁴⁹ She constantly encourages

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 359.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 386.

⁴⁹Sinclair Lewis, Arrowsmith (New York, 1945), p. 107.

Martin. When he finishes school and decides to open his first practice in her home town, Leora borrows one thousand dollars from her relatives to set up his office.⁵⁰ The relationship between Martin and Leora is almost ideal, even in the face of grief. Their first baby is born dead, and Leora is stricken, but she says to Martin, "If I can't have a real baby, I'll have to bring you up. Make you a great man that everybody will wonder at" ⁵¹ Leora even does one thing that many wives find difficult; she encourages him to go alone to see his old friend and teacher, Sondelius, because she realizes that they will want to talk.⁵²

Eventually Martin decides he can stand Wheatsylvania no longer, and Leora's reaction is "You're too good for them here. We'll find some big place where they'll appreciate your work."⁵³

But Leora does not blindly worship Martin. She can become angry with him, especially when he makes her jealous by flirting with the daughter of his supervisor:

"I'll have no more of these high jinks with that Orchid girl! Practically hugging her

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 149-150.

⁵²Ibid., p. 187.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 180.

⁵³Ibid., p. 196.

when you came downstairs and then mooning at her all evening! . . . You're mine, and I won't have any trespassers. I'm a cavewoman, and you'd better learn it"54

There are other times, however, when Leora seems too wise, too philosophical to be true. At one point she punctures Martin's ego to prevent his becoming a pompous fool like Almus Pickerbaugh. She tells him she won't help him "fool" himself because he is a "lie-hunter" rather than a "booster."⁵⁵

At least Lewis does not make her beautiful in addition to making her wise and loving. Occasionally Martin criticizes her appearance, infuriating Leora:

"Do you want me to become a harem beauty? I could. I could be a floosey. But I've never taken the trouble . . . Either I'm the foolish sloppy wife that I am, or I'm nothing. What do you want?"⁵⁶

She even has humor enough to sympathize with Martin when Orchid leaves, provided he isn't "ever going to see her again."⁵⁷

Most men seem to approve of Leora wholeheartedly. Possibly this favorable male attitude is caused by Leora's complete concern with her husband. Outside Martin and his

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 215.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 228.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 256-257.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 264.

career, she has no hobbies, no interests, no separate life of her own. Her whole existence centers around Martin. At various low points in his career, she is always there to encourage him: "You're not a failure . . . time for us to be moving on, anyway--I hate staying in one place."⁵⁸

Leora's only bad trait seems to be her sloppiness, which is mentioned several times. But she does try to improve her appearance, and she even studies current topics so that she can carry on interesting conversations at dinner parties. She ruefully admits that she usually can't maneuver the conversation around to the topic she studied, though.⁵⁹

Although Leora has no outside interests, she refuses to let Martin feel sorry for her during his periodical phases of deciding that he has neglected her. She says:

"Maybe I'm lazy. I'd rather just snoop around than have to work at being well-dressed and popular and all those jobs. I fuss over the flat . . . and I make believe read my French books, and go out for a walk, and look in the windows, and eat an ice cream soda, and the day slides by . . ."⁶⁰

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 275.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 285.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 372.

Leora's death is touching, and it is logically due to her habitual sloppiness. She forgets to give herself a phage injection while Martin is away studying the plague. She also carelessly smokes a cigarette left in the laboratory by Martin, which is filled with plague germs. Until the very end, she believes Martin will come to comfort her. But he, believing she is safe, does not arrive until it is too late.⁶¹

Martin genuinely loved Leora, but after her death he is lonely, and he marries again. His second wife, Joyce Lanyan, is not cast in the same mold as Leora. She is, perhaps, a forerunner of Fran Dodsworth and Jinny Timberlane. Joyce decides that Leora has spoiled Martin, and she is "not timorous about telling him so."⁶² She also expects Martin to remember her likes and dislikes; she demands her own room and she does not intend to become "merely convenient furniture."⁶³

She manipulates Martin, rather than encouraging him as Leora had done. When he wants to leave McGurk Institute in protest, she tells him she is pregnant in order to hold him.⁶⁴ She also becomes angry when Martin misses

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 403-405.

⁶²Ibid., p. 428.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 437-438.

engagements because he is in the laboratory. Although she tries to feign interest in science and asks Martin questions about his experiments, she doesn't listen to his answers.⁶⁵ Martin's pet name for Joyce is "The Arranger," which really fits her personality as Lewis presents her.⁶⁶

Finally their incompatibility becomes obvious to both of them. Martin leaves Joyce to join Terry Wickett in an isolated laboratory in Vermont. When she goes to see him, she is more interested in his reaction to her "wildernessy tweeds." She also wants to build a house near the laboratory, but Martin promptly discourages that idea. Joyce leaves in a huff, but she remarks to a friend that Martin is "never going to see how egotistical it is to think he's the only man living who's always right!"⁶⁷ She is undecided whether or not to divorce Martin, but the reader is almost glad to end the book in order to be rid of Joyce. Her type will be treated more fully later in the study of Fran Dodsworth and Jinny Timberlane.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 449-450.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 452.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 464.

Cleo Gantry is the pale, long-suffering wife of the illustrious Elmer Gantry, Lewis's most famous and controversial hypocrite. Elmer is first attracted to Cleo because she is lovely:

She was younger than himself, yet she suggested a serene maturity, a gracious pride. She was slender, but her bosom was full, and someday she might be portly. Her face was lovely, her forehead wide, her brown eyes trusting, and smooth her chestnut hair.⁶⁸ Virginal, stately, kind, most generous.

Cleo's education includes "Piano, organ, French, English literature, strictly expurgated, and study of the Bible." Her friends tell her she will make a wonderful preacher's wife, which is in agreement with her ideas of what she wants to do with her life. "Marriage must be a sacrament; she must be the helpmate of some one who was 'doing a tremendous amount of good in the world.'"⁶⁹ Elmer notes that "she'd make a great wife and mother--a great wife for a preacher--a great wife for a bishop."⁷⁰ They are married, but on her wedding night, Cleo's being frightened infuriates Elmer. She becomes a "pale acquiescence" and she flushes "unhappily" when he makes fun of

⁶⁸Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry (New York, 1954), p. 278.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 279.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 285.

the "old-fashioned, long-sleeved nightgown" which she timidly puts on in the "indifferent privacy of the bathroom."⁷¹ Still, even after this unhappy beginning to their marriage, Cleo continues to worship Elmer as a real man of God: "You were wonderful at the funeral today! I've never seen you so sure of immortality."⁷²

Cleo is a definite asset to Elmer in his career. Her "graciousness" adds "to his prestige." And her "obvious admiration" of Elmer even convinces some of the "better clerical politicians of his domestic safeness."⁷³

After the birth of their first child Elmer sleeps in the guest room. Cleo, while she certainly is not passionate, does try to enjoy the sexual side of marriage, but apparently Elmer's inept approach to her on their wedding night has affected her permanently. When he complains of her frigidity, she reproaches him, "If you'd only been more tender and patient with me at the very first, I might have learned--"⁷⁴

Cleo is an excellent manager, and she knows how to furnish a home comfortably; but she never gets over being shocked at Elmer's occasional mention of a drink, nor

⁷¹Ibid., pp. 303-305.

⁷²Ibid., p. 309.

⁷³Ibid., p. 312.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 316.

his use of profanity.⁷⁵ Every time he says "damn," she looks hurt and murmurs, "Oh, Elmer, how can you?"⁷⁶ One can imagine how her pious attitude affects Elmer. But she supports him wholeheartedly in his vice crusades, worshipfully adoring him and putting sticking plaster on his cuts suffered on the line of battle.⁷⁷

Either Cleo is stupid, or she willfully chooses to close her eyes to Elmer's affairs with other women. Even Elmer's own mother realizes what is going on when she visits them, but Cleo does not complain. She suffers silently.⁷⁸ Perhaps her martyr-like suffering is what annoys the reader. At any rate, one wonders how she can possibly live with Elmer as she does and still not understand what he is doing. The high point of their marriage, and perhaps the low point in Cleo's gullibility, is reached when Elmer's affairs create sensational headlines in the newspapers. Cleo's reaction is "Oh, what a wicked, wicked lie--darling, you know I'll stand back of you!" Elmer's own mother, who knows him well, asks: "Just how much of this is true, Elmy?"⁷⁹ After Elmer manages to

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 329.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 347.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 370.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 435.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 445.

vindicate himself through a judicious use of blackmail, Cleo is "so glad and proud."⁸⁰ The reader feels almost guilty to close the book and leave Cleo with Elmer. But there is a nagging little feeling in the back of one's mind that perhaps Cleo deserves Elmer's treatment of her if she is too weak-willed to protest it.

Fran Dodsworth is a wife of an entirely different type. Rather than being subjugated to her husband, as Cleo is, Fran subjugates Sam to her. In this case the reader loses patience with Sam because he absorbs Fran's continual abuses and remains faithful. Lewis's picture of Fran is skillful, thorough, and realistic. Lewis must have known such a person in order to have drawn her as realistically as he does.

Lewis describes Fran early in *Dodsworth* in a scene in which she makes Sam feel foolish:

She had a high art of deflating him, of enfeebling him, with one quick, innocent-sounding phrase. By the most careless comment on his bulky new overcoat she could make him feel like a lout in it The easy self-confidence which weeks of industrial triumphs had built up in him she could flatten in five seconds. She was, in fact, a genius at planting in him an assurance of his inferiority.⁸¹

Fran and Sam have been married for twenty years, and Fran craves a fling in Europe to make her feel young again.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Sinclair Lewis, *Dodsworth* (New York, 1962), p. 29.

She tells Sam, "In Europe, a woman at forty is just getting to the age where important men take a serious interest in her I only have five or ten more years to continue being young in And I won't waste it!"⁸²

Sam agrees to go to Europe, and he even introduces one of his acquaintances to her on the boat going over. Major Lockert and Fran immediately begin a flirtation which lasts for several months.⁸³

In England Fran's temper does not change for the better. She is furious because Sam has forgotten to make reservations at the Berkeley Hotel and they have to take second-rate accommodations at the Ritz. "I suppose that I'm expected to spend my entire time in London packing and unpacking and moving and unpacking all over again! This awful room! Oh, I do think you might have remembered --." ⁸⁴

Sam begins to feel older and older, while Fran seems younger and younger in comparison to him. At night Fran often retires "into the mysteriousness which had hidden her essential self ever since the night when he had first

⁸²Ibid., p. 37.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 58.

⁸³Ibid., pp. 47-48.

made love to her" She says, "without saying it," that he is "not to touch her body, her sacred, proud, passionately cared-for body, save in a fleeting good-night kiss." To Sam, it is "inconceivable that he had lived with her for over twenty years," and it is "impossible that she should be the mother of his two children."⁸⁵

To Sam's embarrassment, Fran is icily rude to a friend of his who invites them out to lunch. Fran feels that her rudeness is justified because Mr. Hurd is uncouth. As she puts it, "Never mind. We'll be meeting some decent people soon. No, don't--don't tell me that Hurd is decent. Probably he is Only damn it, damn it, to think of wasting time--." ⁸⁶ Fran is definitely interested in meeting the "right" people while they are in Europe.

Eventually Sam begins to understand what is happening between Fran and Major Lockert and he accuses her: "You're letting Lockert be a whole lot too flirtatious."⁸⁷ Fran's virtue is outraged by his accusation, and she retorts heatedly:

"Do you mean to insinuate that I'd let Major Lockert, or anybody else, make the slightest improper advances toward me? I

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 64.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 89.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 72.

that never tolerated loose dancing at home, that have never in my life so much as held hands in a taxi? I that--oh, it's too beautifully ironical!--(I) that you've practically accused, time and again, of being too sexless to suit your manly ardors."⁸⁸

When it comes to sight-seeing, Fran doesn't want to be an ordinary tourist. She tells Sam, "We're not trippers! I hate these post-card places. Nobody who really belongs ever goes to them."⁸⁹

The quarrels between Fran and Sam become more and more numerous and more serious as their marriage deteriorates. Fran is, it seems, authentically shocked when Major Lockert makes advances to her, even though she has encouraged him, as Sam charges. But her sad little recitation of the horrid event to Sam certainly glosses over her own part in it. Sam becomes disgusted with her and admits, "I don't entirely blame Lockert. You were flirting with him--you were doing it down at Lord Herndon's --even on the steamer you acted as if he was running the whole show for you. And he had some excuse for thinking he could grab you off."⁹⁰

Fran denies that she led Lockert on, and she adds several other items to her argument until her last charge

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 96.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 115.

against Sam is that he hasn't "the mistiest notion of what European civilization is, basically--of how the tradition of leisure, honor, gallantry, inherent cultivation, differs from American materialism."⁹¹ So ends their discussion about Major Lockert.

In France Fran finds the "right" person in Madame de Penable, who specializes in "knowing everybody of influence in every land." She speaks several languages fluently and fancies Fran as an addition to her circle because she is different from European women, and her difference makes her "more novel and attractive to the innumerable European men De Penable always had about her."⁹²

Another domestic quarrel between Sam and Fran is set off when Sam says that Madame de Penable and her group are a "bunch of wasters," and that "all they do is just dance and chatter and show off their clothes." Fran reminds him that she "may be a little better equipped to understand really smart, cosmopolitan people" than he is. She also reminds him that "Renee de Penable is the intimate friend of the most exclusive aristocracy of the ancien regime"⁹³

⁹¹Ibid., p. 118.

⁹²Ibid., pp. 151-152.

⁹³Ibid., p. 162.

Lewis paints Fran most vividly by having her voice her own sentiments, showing her in all her snobbishness and vanity.

In a letter to Sam after he has returned to Zenith for the summer and has left Fran with Madame de Penable, she writes:

"I do appreciate what you say about Brent and Emily's having really grown up and hardly needing us. Madly though I adore them and long to see them, I'm almost afraid to, they'd make me feel so old, whereas now if you could see me in white blouse, shamelessly crimson skirt, white shoes and stockings, you would say I'm a flapper" ⁹⁴

During this summer while Sam is away, Fran also begins an affair with Arnold Israel, an American Jew living abroad. She casually mentions him in her letters to Sam as having "the most terrific cannon-ball in tennis," and reading "Shelley aloud, like a twenty-year-old Vassar girl!" She concludes by saying "What a man!" ⁹⁵ One can imagine the effect of this letter on Sam. He promptly makes plans to return to Europe and asks Fran to meet him in Paris. When he sees her waiting for him in the station, he is startled to know "how much lovelier" she is than he has remembered. He asks, "Did I remember to write you that I adore you?"

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 220.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 219.

She replies, "Why, no, I don't believe you did. Do you? That's very nice, I'm sure." Lewis describes her tone as "light and smooth and passionless," her laugh "as distant as the banter of an actress in a drawingroom comedy."⁹⁶

Their luncheon reunion becomes a series of charges and counter-charges about Arnold Israel. Fran acknowledges his presence in Paris, but in answer to Sam's blunt question, "How far did you go with this Israel?" Fran becomes hysterical. Her outburst is typical of her many emotional explosions directed at Sam:

" . . . have you any idea how angry I'm going to be if you continue to act like a barroom bully--which is what you are, essentially! I've concealed it from myself, for years, but I knew all the time--The great Sam Dodsworth, the football player, the celebrated bruiser, the renowned bully! Why, you belong in the kitchen, with the corner policeman, not among civilized--And I most certainly do not intend to answer! It's an insult to be expected--And it's an insult to Mr. Israel! He is a gentleman You wouldn't dare to talk to me as you've been talking, if he were here. He's quite as powerful as you are, my dear Samuel--and he has brains and breeding and manners as well."⁹⁷

Even for the most lenient, understanding reader, it is hard to like Fran at this point. She does not honestly

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 229.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 233.

admit that she has fallen in love with Arnold and wants to divorce Sam in order to marry him, if such behavior can be called honest. Instead, it becomes apparent that she wants to "have her cake and eat it, too"; she wants both Sam and Arnold. When her intentions become clear to Sam, he says he will not be "the complaisant husband who's going to sit around and watch his wife entertain her lover, as you've planned to, this fall--." ⁹⁸ Sam goes on to tell her flatly that she may go on with him and forget Arnold Israel entirely, or he will divorce her for adultery. With this ultimatum ringing in her ears, Fran leaves with Sam the next day to continue their travels in Spain. ⁹⁹

Again the Dodsworths become companions, and occasionally they are happy together. But Sam notices that they are becoming self-conscious in their relationship and that Fran is "straining to be friendly." He also becomes "testily aware of certain childishness in her which he had ignored." In money matters, for example, Fran is "a brat":

She talked, always, of her thoughtfulness about economy; of jewing down a milliner from a thousand francs to seven hundred, of doing

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 237.

⁹⁹Ibid., pp. 237-238.

without a personal maid. But she took it for granted that they should have the best suite in the best hotel in every town, and she so used the floor maid and the hairdresser and so had to tip them that a personal maid would have been cheaper She never suggested that an ordinary room would do them as well as the royal suite, and if she made any comment at all it was only on the inferiority of that suite.¹⁰⁰

Fran's childishness is evident in other aspects of her behavior, too. She preens herself "over every attractive man who looked interestedly at her." Her attitude of "putting on airs" before new acquaintances also irks Sam. Fran is "like a child boasting to a playmate of her father's wealth."¹⁰¹

In Berlin they meet Kurt von Obersdorf, a German of good family who has lost his fortune. During a party at which Kurt is present, a discussion comparing European marriages to American marriages is underway. But Kurt makes the mistake of saying that America is "the paradise of women." At this remark, Fran speaks up:

"Oh, that is the one most idiotic fallacy about America--and it's just as much mouthed by women as by men--and deep down they don't believe a word of it! It's my profound conviction that there's no woman living, no real normal woman, who doesn't want a husband who can beat her Mind you, I don't say

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 249.

she wants to be beaten, but she wants a man who can beat her! He must be a man who [sic] she respects! She must feel that his work, or his beautiful lack of work, is more important than she is Do you know why the American husband gives his wife so much freedom? Because he doesn't care what she does To the American man--a wife is only a convenience"102

Sam is rather surprised at this retort, since Fran has complained often that he was more interested in his Revelation Motor Car Company than in her. And when Sam does show that he cares what she does, she calls him a bully. Fran's opinion of the European husband is equally interesting:

". . . the European husband, if I understand it, feels that his wife is part of him--or at least of his family honor--and he would no more permit her this fake 'freedom' than he would permit one of his legs to go wandering off cheerfully without the other! He likes women! . . . Any real woman is quite willing, no matter how clever she is, to give up her own chances of fame for her husband, providing he is doing something she can admire. She can understand sacrificing herself for . . . civilized aristocracy . . . she can sacrifice for a great poet or soldier or scholar; but she isn't willing to give up all her own capabilities for the ideal of industrial America--which is to manufacture more vacuum-cleaners this year than we did last!"103

Of course, Sam substitutes "motor cars" for vacuum-cleaners and gets the point.

102 Ibid., p. 280.

103 Ibid., p. 281.

Fran's obsession with her own youth and its passing is emphasized perfectly by Lewis's plot when he has Fran become a grandmother. Sam innocently announces to her after reading a cable from their son-in-law, "We're granddaddy and grandmammy!" Fran's face tightens at Sam's announced intention of calling all their European friends and announcing the glad news. She wails:

"But, Sam, don't you realize that Kurt-- oh, I don't mean Kurt individually, of course; I mean all our friends in Europe--They think of me as young. Young! And I am, oh, I am! And if they know I'm a grandmother--God! A grandmother! . . . It's horrible! It's the end for me! Oh, please, please, please try to understand! . . . I was so young when I married. It isn't fair for me to be a grandmother now, at under forty . . . I have my own life, too! You mustn't tell Kurt!"¹⁰⁴

Her anxious pleading that Kurt should not be told convinces Sam that she is having another affair. He is further convinced when she refuses to go off to Paris with him to meet the Pearsons from Zenith. Fran considers them vulgar.¹⁰⁵

Their love-making has not improved either. Although Fran is attractive to Sam, she has "become to him a nun, taboo, and any passion toward her was forbidden." Fran

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 301.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., pp. 305-306.

herself is "relieved" by this situation, but Sam feels irritable and hopeless.¹⁰⁶

While Sam is in Paris, Fran is out with Kurt, dancing until half-past two. He returns to their empty suite and waits up for her, hears her kissing Kurt good-night. In her typical fashion, Fran feels that Sam has insulted her by spying on her, rather than feeling that she has wronged him by dating Kurt. She flares at him: "I love Kurt, and Kurt loves me, and I'm going to marry him!"¹⁰⁷ In the shock following this disclosure, Fran rubs salt in Sam's wound by saying, "Oh, Sam, if I could only make you see that it was your ignorance, your impotence, and not my fault--."¹⁰⁸

On their last day together before Sam's departure, Fran is "courteous, brisk, and harder than enamel." In dividing their baggage, she is "efficient" and "horribly kind."¹⁰⁹ In the cold reality of their parting at the railway station, Fran becomes human again. "Sam, darling, you and I can't get along together. And I do love Kurt. I stand by that! But we have been partners, good partners, in this funny business of life" As

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 307.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 341.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 343.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 347.

the train leaves, Fran stands alone. She seems "so slim and young and defenseless, so alone in the gray city." She cries.¹¹⁰ For several months, Fran is apparently happy with Kurt, and she begins proceedings to divorce Sam on the grounds of desertion.¹¹¹

Just as Sam is beginning to forget Fran and her demands on him, she writes a letter, begging him to take her back. Kurt's mother has objected to Fran because she is American, divorced, and too old to bear him children. Even Fran's begging has a touch of condescension in it:

"If you still care to bend your Olympian head and forgive the probably wicked and unforgivable Magdalene or however it's spelled, I should be glad to join you again, anyway I've stopped divorce proceedings. Of course I realize that in saying this so honestly without efforts to protect myself as most women would, I risk another humiliation at your hands such as I had from Kurt."¹¹²

Poor, stupid Sam takes her back. Almost immediately, he sees that she is the same Fran who plagued him before. She describes Kurt's mother as the "most awful old country frump." When Sam touches her, she pleads, "Oh, Sam, don't--Oh, don't be ardent! Not yet. I must get used--

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 350.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 401.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 405.

. . . You don't mind, do you? Nighty-night." She begins a shipboard flirtation with Tom Allen, a young polo player, whom she describes as "a dear boy."¹¹³ In almost the same breath she warns Sam to "be careful with the Ballards," because she is afraid he "bored them last evening, talking about Italian motors." Fran also remarks that they should eat dinner in the grill because there is "such a common, stupid commercial crowd in the salon."¹¹⁴

Finally to the cheers and joy of the reader, Sam has enough. He tells her he is leaving. Fran asks fearfully, "And what is to become of me?" Resisting the obvious answer to this, Sam simply replies, "I don't know."¹¹⁵

There is no doubt that Fran is real, nor is there any doubt that she is one of the most disgusting women in fiction. One is glad to leave her.

Peony Planish, wife of Gideon Planish, is neither overly pious like Cleo Gantry, nor hypercritical of her husband, like Fran Dodsworth. She is however, materialistic like Fran. She marries Gideon while she is a freshman

¹¹³Ibid., p. 405.

¹¹⁴Ibid., pp. 413-414.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 415.

and he is a professor at Kinnikinick College.¹¹⁶ Since she promptly begins spending more money than Gideon makes, after three or four years of marriage, they are still in debt.¹¹⁷ Peony's explanation of her urge to buy things is "I hate to spend, and I hate to be in debt--I just hate it. It's simply that I like to have things, don't you see?"¹¹⁸

There is never any doubt about who manages the Planish family. Peony maneuvers Gideon into positions which she feels will advance his career. The first of these positions is chairman of the County Censorship Board.¹¹⁹ Of course, the Censorship Board must have something to censor; and Lewis's irrepressible humor comes into view when he has Peony choose The Tattooed Countess, an actual book by Carl Van Vechten, as the one to be censored. To make sure that Gideon's denunciation is well publicized, Peony invites some reporters to hear his speech.¹²⁰ Next, Peony decides that Gideon does not belong to the right church, and she has him converted to the Episcopal faith.¹²¹

¹¹⁶Sinclair Lewis, Gideon Planish (New York, 1943), p. 106.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 124.

¹²⁰Ibid., pp. 132-133.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 127.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 141.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

Peony's role as a wife is completely behind the scenes, managing her husband's career in order to assure herself the success and money she wants. Although Peony is certainly aggressive, she does not give the same brittle, icy impression that Fran gives. On the contrary, Peony gets her way by being warm and lovable. She constantly urges Gideon onward and upward. She is thrilled at each new advancement, even if it is only a paper one, as when he is invited to become a "national director" of the "Sympathizers with the Pacificistic Purposes of the New Democratic Turkey."¹²²

Even though Peony is not cold like Fran, she does bend Gideon to her will much as Fran handled Sam. And many of Peony's comments and characteristics are like Fran's. She even flirts with George Riot, one of Gideon's friends, but she stops short of an affair, unlike Fran.¹²³ Some of her managerial tactics are masterful. For example, in order to get Austin Bull to support Gideon for a position with the Heskett Rural School Foundation in Chicago, she starts a rumor that Gideon is interested in Bull's job as president of Kinnikinick College. Her strategy works, and Gideon gets the job.¹²⁴

¹²²Ibid., p. 143.

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 184.

¹²³Ibid., p. 200.

Peony is always willing to put her husband to work for more money. Once she suggests that he write an article for Rural Adult magazine, which he does. Another time she plans, publicizes and books a lecture tour for him, even suggesting a topic for one of his talks:

"Don't Be A Singe Cat."¹²⁵

Gideon is the same kind of husband Sam Dodsworth is. He is not happy in his work because Peony has forced him into jobs he does not like. But the same question arises in the reader's mind that arose in reference to Dodsworth --why does he stand for it? Their cost of living continually spirals ahead of his income, and when Gideon does complain about the expensive "circle" they associate with, Peony replies that she cannot be expected to "associate with a bunch of farmers" after all her struggles to get ahead, and that "people degenerate" when they begin to worry about expenses.¹²⁶

In Washington, Peony enjoys being friendly with the wives of several congressmen, but Gideon and their daughter, Carrie, are miserable.¹²⁷ She is the kind of woman most people consider strong. At one point she even fires an employee when Gideon lacks the courage to do it.¹²⁸

¹²⁵Ibid., pp. 155, 146.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 371.

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 274.

¹²⁸Ibid., pp. 199-200.

Another time, Peony becomes furiously angry because Gideon takes a new job without consulting her first. Her anger precipitates a serious quarrel. After their reconciliation, Gideon realizes that he is her slave, doing only what Peony wishes him to do. Her attitude seems to be that Gideon's obedience to her is only his duty.¹²⁹

Peony's ambition seems to be to live in New York and move in the correct social circles. In this respect, the only difference between Peony and Fran Dodsworth is that Fran aspired to live in Europe instead of New York. Finally Peony's wish is granted when Gideon is promoted to a better position in New York. Once they are settled in an expensive flat, she confides to "Gid" that she will be willing to settle eventually for a "spending reservoir of forty thousand dollars a year."¹³⁰ While living in the metropolitan area, Peony is "in hobohemia up to her neck," and she enjoys herself. She meets "actors and rather astonishing old men" who tickle. She attends many parties, pays too much for evening dresses, and becomes a snob.¹³¹

¹²⁹Ibid., p. 287.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 234.

¹³¹Ibid., p. 273.

A major crisis in Peony's role as a wife occurs because Gideon is invited back to Kinnikinick College to become its president. He really wants to accept the presidency, but Peony acts as if he has betrayed her. She refuses to go with him to "give teas for all the old maids on the college faculty!"¹³² And she feels she is right to refuse, because she has struggled to push Gideon to his present high position:

"You might just as well get ready to take a tumble to yourself! For years and years I've done nothing but toil and sacrifice and stay home twenty-four hours a day, devoting myself to your comfort and welfare, but the day passed twenty years ago when women were nothing but slaves!"¹³³

Perhaps Gideon's thoughts as her husband best describe Peony's character. He reflects that "Providence had used his loyalty to her . . . to destroy him."¹³⁴

One understands fully that Peony Planish should be classed with Fran Dodsworth and Joyce Arrowsmith as wives who control their husbands, or attempt to control them, although Lewis shows clearly that the process of gaining this control warps the feminine characters and

¹³²Ibid., p. 437.

¹³³Ibid., p. 431.

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 422.

destroys the masculine personalities. The fault for this state of affairs apparently lies with both the wife who is domineering and with the husband who is meek and submissive. Therefore, it is difficult for the reader to decide whether Peony is to be blamed for being overly aggressive or whether Lewis is also ridiculing Gideon for allowing Peony to rule him.

Jinny Timberlane is another in Lewis's long line of dissatisfied wives. Like Fran and Peony and Carol and Joyce, she is attractive. And, like the four of them, she marries a man who is often stolidly dull. All five of these wives seem immature. They are looking for excitement, and Jinny is no exception. Perhaps her marriage begins badly, because she only agrees to marry Judge Cass Timberlane after she has lost her job.¹³⁵ Her wedding night is also disappointing, because both Jinny and Cass are nervous and afraid.¹³⁶ Lewis is extremely skillful at describing nervous and shy individuals, and he causes the reader to understand and sympathize with both of them in this case.

Like Fran, Jinny has a gift for saying the wrong thing. A few weeks after her marriage, she hears about

¹³⁵Sinclair Lewis, Cass Timberlane (New York, 1945), p. 129.

¹³⁶Ibid., pp. 140-141.

the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, and she moans to Cass that she will be left at home with the "old women."

"And with me, my dear," he reminds her.

"Yes," sardonically, "with you!" Cass meditates that "It certainly does hurt to have her talk as though I were senile."¹³⁷

Jinny knows that she is attractive, and she dresses to enhance her appearance. Cass, noting this, reflects:

Might as well get used to it. When we get back, probably every friend I have . . . will try to make her. Not a chance, gentlemen. There's no malice, no treachery, no intrigue in my Jinny. Going to be none of this 'modern, civilized, urbane' sleeping around and getting complicated in our house.¹³⁸

On another occasion, Cass wonders if Jinny knows "how fetching, how conspicuously womanly" she is in a tight sweater. Then he decides she does, because "all women know things like that. Their capital is modesty, but they do squander it."¹³⁹

After only a few months of married life, Jinny begins flirting with two of Cass's friends. Cass overhears her telling one of them to stop, but only after he has already hugged and kissed her.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷Ibid., p. 144.

¹³⁸Ibid., p. 155.

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 200.

Apparently Jinny's boredom has something to do with her flirtations. She married Cass in December, and "before summer," Jinny is "bored to the danger point."¹⁴¹ She becomes more and more interested in Jay Laverick, who has the reputation of being promiscuous. Cass, of course, sees what is happening, and he wants "to beg Jay please not to seduce his wife." Like Sam Dodsworth, he is afraid to say anything to his wife.¹⁴² Finally Cass does reproach Jinny; her first reaction is anger, but she does agree to end the flirtation. She does it coldly, by embarrassing Jay publicly at a yacht club dance. Even Cass is surprised and shocked by her cruelty.¹⁴³

On a vacation trip to New York, Jinny's becoming pregnant makes them both happy. However, after they return home and Cass becomes busy with his job again, Bradd Criley, another of his friends, begins entertaining Jinny while Cass is away.¹⁴⁴ Jinny seems to crave male admiration just as Fran does.

After her baby is born dead, Jinny turns to Cass for comfort; they become closer than they have ever been.

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁴²Ibid., pp. 212-213.

¹⁴³Ibid., pp. 215-216.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. 257.

She has diabetes, and she follows her diet carefully. Cass feels that she is becoming morose, and he suggests that she take a job. Her reply to this is "I hate these strident, ambitious women who are always clawing at notoriety."¹⁴⁵ But she does take a job doing volunteer work for the Red Cross. Unknown to Cass, she often leaves work early to meet Bradd Criley. Once, coming in late, she lets the information slip out that she has had a drink with Bradd. A quarrel over this incident elicits a bitter comment from Jinny: "Frankly, my friend, I don't have much fun living with you." Cass tells her she is trying to destroy him.¹⁴⁶ Gossip among their friends about Bradd and Jinny becomes worse and worse, until Cass confronts Bradd, just as Sam confronts Fran's lovers. Bradd merely says Cass cannot prove that anything has happened and leaves. Once more Jinny agrees to end the affair, and she, like Fran, is impressed by her husband's authoritativeness. She whispers, "You're so superior to that fellow! I knew it all along, but I was just being stubborn. I do love you, and he's--he's yellow."¹⁴⁷

Lewis remarks now that things are "normal and beauti-

¹⁴⁵Ibid., p. 274.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 304-306.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 280-284.

ful with this happy young couple, the Timberlanes," and that there is "obviously no reason why their heavenly bliss should not last forever." But it does not, of course. Life becomes dull and boring for both of them. Cass asks Jinny one day if she is happy, and she snaps, "Of course I am. Why shouldn't I be?"¹⁴⁸ Cass takes her to New York a second time for a vacation. He also tries to make her happy by looking for a job as a law partner in New York; but while he is being interviewed, she is out having cocktails with Bradd Criley, who is living in New York.¹⁴⁹ At last Jinny tells Cass, "My dear, it's no go. I love Bradd--I love him! I thought I could run away from him, but I'm going back to him" Cass refuses to give her a divorce, however, and Jinny shrieks angrily, "I knew it! So old-fashioned! I thought you realized domestic tyrants had gone out. Are you really going to try and handcuff me?"¹⁵⁰

Jinny does leave and go to Bradd, leaving Cass moping about the house alone. Since this is really Cass's story, Lewis describes his feelings during this crisis, rather than Jinny's. In this novel, Lewis uses the symbolic

¹⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 311-313.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 331-332.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p. 322.

device of a cat to dramatize the ups and downs of the Timberlane's marriage. When Jinny is having an affair, the cat becomes morose and unhappy. On the other hand, when the marriage is running smoothly, the cat is contented.¹⁵¹ While Jinny is gone, Cass meditates about their difficulties, and he concludes that a husband has "to think of what a wife wants for herself."¹⁵² Cass and the cat comfort each other.

Several months pass before Cass finds that Jinny's diabetes is worse. He goes to Darien to see her, but she has fallen into a diabetic coma. Bradd Criley has left her in the care of his sister, who is not very happy with her responsibility. Cass is outraged with the situation; he immediately calls an ambulance to take her home. Jinny says, upon awakening, "I kept wondering when you would come and take me back"¹⁵³ Once they are back home, Jinny murmurs, "We've found each other again, sweet! I don't know how I ever strayed. How could I? Now I am sorry, I am repentant, I do love you."¹⁵⁴ Lewis makes no final comment on Jinny's marriage. Her usual tendency seems to be to rely on Cass when she is ill or

¹⁵¹Ibid., p. 365.

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 377.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 380.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 387.

depressed, and to fall into an affair with someone else when she is well. Lewis leaves the decision up to the reader--will Jinny and Cass succeed this time, or will Jinny begin another affair when she recovers?

Caprice Chart is aptly named. She appears as Hayden Chart's first wife in World So Wide, Lewis's last novel. She is cast in the same mold as Fran, and one begins to hate her right away. In the very first scene she is nagging her husband. He is thinking that she is "a simpleton" who does not deserve hatred any more than a "noisy child."¹⁵⁵ She criticizes his bridge game: ". . . were you ever terrible tonight! You played worse than Mary Eliza. You got no more card sense than a zebra." As if that isn't criticism enough, she goes on to accuse him of "sniffing around after women":

"What had me sunk was the way you kept sneaking in a look at Roxanna's ankles and Alice's buz-zoom and Jane's god-awful lipstick. You'd be the most ridiculous tail-waving cat out on the tiles, if it wasn't that you're such a coward!"¹⁵⁶

At this moment, their automobile crashes into a tree. From somewhere within the wreckage, Caprice asks, Why

¹⁵⁵Sinclair Lewis, World So Wide (New York, 1951), p. 3.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 5-6.

don't you do something? Get out and get some help, not sit there and wait for somebody to find us . . . never, never think about what I may want or need or anything!"¹⁵⁷ She does not ask whether he is hurt or not. Since Hayden is trapped in the smashed car, he cannot get help, and he lies there, thinking over their marriage. There are no children to worry about, because Caprice had not wanted any. When he regains consciousness, he is told that Caprice is dead.¹⁵⁸ Once the initial shock wears off, no one misses her. Even after so short an acquaintance, the reader does not mourn her.

After travelling over the "world so wide," Hayden again meets Roxanna Eldritch, who had known Caprice. Roxanna is "pert-nosed and freckled and red-headed." To Hayden, she represents "a chunk of Home miraculously set down before him."¹⁵⁹ Roxy has been a newspaperwoman, and she occasionally becomes excited about ideas she has for feature articles. On one such occasion, Hayden begs her, "Roxy, darling, don't get too enterprising again. I like you more when you're gentle." To himself, he thinks, "Is this young woman nothing more than Caprice with a

¹⁵⁷Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., p. 205.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 11.

passport?"¹⁶⁰ It takes some time for Hayden to realize he is in love with Roxanna, but she admits she has loved him for many years. But before they are married he warns her that his first marriage was not a success, and that he feels he has helped ruin Caprice. Roxanna does not become discouraged easily. She tells him that he had let Caprice "use you and tyrannize over you." She adds, "No woman that ever lived can stand that much privilege." She even says honestly that she is "likely to try it," too.¹⁶¹ Hayden and Roxanna continue their travels after their marriage. During their sightseeing tours, Hayden notices that Roxanna's favorite expression is "Such fun!" That seems to characterize her completely. In a few scant paragraphs, Lewis manages to convey Roxanna's warmth. She is more like Leora than the other wives, although she is not as fully drawn as Leora. Caprice is another Fran, and Lewis conveniently has her killed. In his last book, he again creates an ideal wife for his last hero. Since it is doubtful that Lewis knew World So Wide would be his last novel, one cannot say that he intended Roxanna to be his last comment on the American wife. But at least Roxanna is a more cheerful and optimistic artistic creation than most of Lewis's

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 247.

wives. Although only a short part of her marriage is discussed, it does have a better beginning than many of the others had, and she seems capable of becoming as successful a wife as Leora Arrowsmith is.

CHAPTER IV

CAREER WOMEN

Lewis also deals with the career woman in his novels. The question of woman's place in the world of business has become increasingly important in the twentieth-century. Lewis recognizes the problem, pictures it, and at times attempts a solution.

Una Golden, the heroine of The Job, has five possible ways to earn a living after her father's death. She can teach dancing, but she doesn't dance well. She can marry, but her only immediate prospect is the widower, Henry Carson, with "catarrh and three children."¹ She can study, but she doesn't have the money to go away to school. She can take a job selling drygoods, but her mother feels that would be a dreadful loss of caste. The last possibility is an office job, but none is available in Panama, Pennsylvania.² "If I were only a boy," sighs Una, "I could go to work in the hardware store or on the railroad or anywhere, and not lose respectability. Oh, I hate being a woman."³

¹Sinclair Lewis, The Job (New York, 1917), p. 11.

²Ibid., pp. 10-12.

³Ibid., p. 12.

Una eventually decides to go to New York to become "stenographer, a secretary to a corporation president, a rich woman, free, responsible."⁴ But even in 1905, finding a job in the big city is not easy, and Una enrolls in "Whiteside and Schleusner's College of Commerce," where she studies "shorthand, typing, English grammar, spelling and letter-writing."⁵ In January, 1906, Una is graduated from the school and ten days later she starts work for the Motor and Gas Gazette office, which publishes a weekly magazine for the automobile industry.⁶ The job is considerably more ordinary than the one she had hoped to find.

At this point, Lewis gives a vivid description of Una's world that is still pertinent to the office girl of today:

A world . . . whose noblest vista is composed of desks and typewriters, filing-cases and insurance calendars, telephones and the bald heads of men who believe dreams to be idiotic . . . The shifting of a water cooler may be an epochal event to a girl copyist . . . because she must now pass the office-manager's desk for a glass of water . . . The office is filled with thrills of love and distrust and ambition. Each alley between desks quivers with secret romance as ceaselessly as a battle-trench or a lane in Normandy.⁷

⁴Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁶Ibid., p. 41.

⁵Ibid., pp. 21-23.

⁷Ibid., p. 43.

Una becomes acquainted with the office routine, with the machines she has to use, and with her fellow-workers.⁸ One of her fellow-workers is Walter Babson, a junior editor, who tells Una that she will be a "queen" in business some day because ". . . you're willing to wait in one corner until it's time to jump."⁹

A few times Walter and Una see each other outside the office, but when Walter kisses her one night and Una kisses him back, she is ashamed of her fiery response to him and swears she will "not give all her heart to love."¹⁰

This decision causes Lewis's heroine to become a "career woman," rather than merely a working girl biding her time until she can find a husband. "Like sickness and war, the office grind absorbs all personal desires."¹¹ Gradually the feeling of mutual interest between Una and Walter dies because of propinquity at the office and Una's widowed mother at home, who relies heavily on Una as her raison d'etre.¹² When Walter leaves to take a better job in Omaha, Una hears from him twice and then no more.¹³

⁸Ibid., pp. 45-46.

⁹Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 88.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., pp. 96-100.

¹³Ibid., p. 107.

In 1907, Una takes a better job in the office of architect Troy Wilkins, who pays her thirteen dollars per week. At twenty-six, ". . . she had her mother and, always, her job."¹⁴

Riding home on the elevated train in the evenings, Una is surrounded by her own mild reflection from the women near her "in their black hats, and black jackets and black skirts and white waists, with one hint of coquetry in a white lace jabot" ¹⁵ Una looks into faces like her own, "faces slightly sallow or channeled with care, but eyes that longed to flare with love."¹⁶ Here, and in similar passages, Lewis shows his amazing understanding of human beings, and female human beings in particular, who are caught up in ordinary lives, doing ordinary things day after miserable day. Although the styles have changed and the elevated train has gone underground, these same women may still be seen in droves at office-closing time in the big cities. The description of a day in Una's life fits many days in the lives of many working women today:

¹⁴Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁶Ibid.

Unwilling dressing, lonely breakfast, the Subway, dull work, lunch, sleepiness after lunch, the hopelessness of three o'clock, the boss's ill-temper, then the Subway again, and a lonely flat, with no love, no creative work; and at last a long sleep so that she might be fresh, for such another round of delight.¹⁷

When Una's mother dies, she is alone completely, and she moves to another flat. But since she cannot kill her mother's canary or take it with her, she releases it in the street.¹⁸ Perhaps the author intends the canary to be a symbol of the last ties with her old life. She is not willing to kill it, but she is willing to move away from it on her own. From this point on, all the decisions Una makes are hers alone. Her decisions not to marry, to change jobs, to move to another flat, to buy a new dress are made with no one to consider but herself. Whether she is happy or unhappy also depends on herself alone.

Una is human. Occasionally she remembers Walter Babson with longing, as probably all women (and perhaps men, too) remember their first loves with a pleasant little heartache. One such time of regret occurs when a male boarder at Una's new lodgings offers her a drink and tries to make love to her. She rebuffs him, then feels

¹⁷Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 139-140.

sorry for him, and finally discovers that the man has a reputation as a lecher.¹⁹

The life of a working girl as seen through Lewis's eyes sounds extremely drab and tedious to the modern reader, but it also sounds familiar:

The three-quarters of Una employed in the office of Mr. Troy Wilkins was going through one of those periods of unchanging routine when all past drama seems unreal, when nothing novel happens nor apparently ever will happen--the greater part of our lives.²⁰

At the office eight or nine hours a day, never exercising (but thinking she should) and looking forward to Saturdays because she can sleep late on Sunday mornings, Una plods through her life.²¹ The most enjoyable thing about her job is that she sometimes has the opportunity to talk a reluctant "prospect" into buying a piece of property when Mr. Wilkins leaves her in charge of the office.²²

Her days become more interesting when Una moves into the "Temperance and Protection Home for Girls" as the roommate of an unattached female, Mrs. Lawrence, who is older and more experienced with men than Una.²³ Most of

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 150-154.

²⁰Ibid., p. 155.

²¹Ibid., pp. 162-163.

²²Ibid., p. 159.

²³Ibid., pp. 168-172.

the conversations and discussions in the home center around men versus women in marriage and in jobs. Lewis points out the eternal conflict between men and women in these conversations. Career women, who have chosen to live their lives without men, seem especially pre-occupied with men as a topic. Mrs. Lawrence says of the East Side, where she grew up,

" . . . always it was work and work and watch all the pretty girls in our block get T. B. in garment factories, or marry fellows that weren't any good and have a baby every year, and get so thin and worn out . . ." ²⁴

Mrs. Lawrence also voices the hope of the modern woman: "And now I am in an office . . . and I have a chance to do anything a man can do." ²⁵ The only drawback to this hope is that the woman is paid less, then and now, for the same job:

. . . and I get eighteen plunks per for doing statistics that they couldn't get a real college male in trousers to do for less than thirty-five . . . ²⁶

The sacredness of marriage vows is questioned by Una, because she observes her roommate's need for men and the definite absence of a Mr. Lawrence. She comes to believe

²⁴Ibid., p. 177.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

that "life is too sacred to be taken in war and filthy industries and dull education; that most forms and organizations and inherited castes are not sacred at all."²⁷

During her summer vacation Una meets Mr. Julius Schwirtz of the Lowry Paint Company, whom she has first met years before. "Eddie," as he prefers to be called, is now a widower, and he and Una become friendly.²⁸ Against her better judgment Una gives him her New York address and agrees to let him visit her later.²⁹

Back in New York, Una changes jobs again. The new job is with Pemberton's, a drug and pharmaceutical firm, and she is paid more than she has made before; therefore the reader may assume that she is progressing up the ladder of success.³⁰

Pemberton's has many large machines, and Lewis takes this opportunity to make some remarks about automation, through Una:

She knew that the machines were supposed to save work. But she was aware that the girls worked just as hard and long and hopelessly after their introduction as before; and she suspected

²⁷Ibid., p. 185.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 190-193.

²⁹Ibid., p. 215.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 218-220.

that there was something wrong with a social system in which time-saving devices didn't save time for anybody but the owners . . . 31

Una also has difficulty in imagining a future for the women who run the machines "except the accidents of marriage or death--or a revolution in the attitude toward them."³² Again the contrast is made between the male office workers and the female office workers, when Una reflects that the average men "sooner or later, if they were but faithful and lived long enough, had opportunities, responsibility, forced upon them."³³ But Una also sees that the women have no opportunities for advancement nor responsibility, and she "endeavored to picture a future in which women . . . would have some way out besides being married off or killed off."³⁴

Ironically, Una herself has no other way out, because Mr. Pemberton has a temper tantrum at the office and so frightens Una that she locks herself in the ladies' room. Within two weeks, she has agreed to marry Julius "Eddie" Schwirtz.³⁵ As with many of Sinclair Lewis's characters, Mr. Schwirtz's name gives the reader a good

³¹Ibid., p. 235.

³⁴Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³³Ibid.

idea about his personality. For two years, Una and Eddie live in decaying family hotels, united in a marriage that is miserable for both of them. Una practices her typing and shorthand to keep from being bored,³⁶ and when Eddie loses his job, and it becomes obvious that he is not going to be able to hold one again for a while, she finds one for herself. She is rewarded with twenty dollars a week and "a chance to really climb!"³⁷ Where before Una has left her job for the safety of marriage, she now leaves her marriage for the safety of a job. At thirty-one, Mrs. Schwirtz begins her ascent to success again, as "confidential secretary to Mr. Truax, of Truax and Fein."³⁸ Mr. Schwirtz at home is promptly forgotten, except that now and then Una feels proud because he, a big strong man, has to ask her for money.³⁹ No mention is made of how Eddie feels about it, but when he does find a new job, Una takes her opportunity to leave him; she moves into a pleasant room, with a raise to twenty-five dollars a week.⁴⁰ Her first chance as a saleswoman is successful when she sells a piece of property to some

³⁶Ibid., p. 261.

³⁷Ibid., p. 277.

³⁸Ibid., p. 279.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 281-282.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 297-301.

difficult clients. For this feat, Mr. Fein raises her another five dollars a week.⁴¹ Una is now the Successful Career Woman.

One of her idols in Truax and Fein is another Successful Career Woman, Miss Beatrice Joline. She is a freelance saleswoman, and in describing her, Lewis describes the "original" career woman. Bernice is well-groomed, polite, impersonal. She has apparently never been interested enough in men to marry one (or perhaps one never asked her), but she takes an interest in Una to the extent of giving her pointers on how to dress well economically for the office, as well as for parties and on how to impress clients favorably.⁴² Mr. Fein is impressed favorably, too, and he proposes to Una, but she turns him down because Eddie Schwirtz is still alive somewhere.⁴³

Una's ambition really asserts itself now in her longing to be her own boss.⁴⁴ She visits the White Line Hotels in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana to look them over and make suggestions for improvement. Since these hotels cater to travelling salesmen, Una's idea is to

⁴¹Ibid., p. 305.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 291-293.

⁴³Ibid., p. 313.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 315.

make them more home like. She, very businesslike, draws up a list of improvements to be made and tackles the owner, Bob Sidney. He is impressed--enough to hire her at four thousand dollars a year, eight hundred more than she makes at Truax and Fein.⁴⁵ A note of poignancy is touched here when Una realizes that she has no one with whom to share her good news.⁴⁶

Had Una's story ended here, it would be far more realistic. But there is more. By an incredible coincidence, the publicity man for the hotel line is none other than Walter Babson, Una's first love. Almost immediately Una and Walter renew their old relationship--fortunately, Walter is still a bachelor--and Una agrees to divorce Eddie and marry Walter, provided she can keep her job. Walter approves, and they are married.⁴⁷ Una is determined to conquer the business world, as the book closes, and also to conquer marriage: "I am a woman, and I do need love. I want Walter, and I want his child, my own baby and his."⁴⁸ Lewis leaves the reader to wonder whether she will succeed at both jobs.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 316-320.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 327.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 323-324.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 324-326.

Lewis's next full-scale novel about a career woman is Ann Vickers, published in 1933. From the moment that she is graduated from college in 1912, Ann is caught up in her interest in women's rights. She studies nursing "as a basis for social work, which was to lead to politics on the inevitable day when women should have the vote."⁴⁹ After finishing her nursing course, Ann becomes "an organizer in the New York Headquarters" of the suffrage movement.⁵⁰ Ann lives in an old mansion converted into a dormitory for all the girls working as organizers. Lewis emphasizes that "Their private life . . . was never free from the itching topic of Woman and women; Woman's rights and Woman's duties and Woman's superiority to man both in constructive mentality . . . and in physical endurance of weariness and pain."⁵¹

In pursuing her duties as an organizer, Ann is arrested for participating in a riot and hitting a policeman. She is sentenced, along with several of her co-workers, to two weeks in jail.⁵² While in jail, Ann helps clean the cells and observes the other prisoners. She notices that

⁴⁹Sinclair Lewis, Ann Vickers (New York, 1933), p. 103.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 111.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 144 and 149.

they are "not so different from herself."⁵³ She also begins to understand how futile our prison system is. She observes that there is "nothing quite so senseless as imprisonment as a cure for crime."⁵⁴ This understanding and her memories of those two weeks in jail later direct Ann into her career of prison reform, and cause her to remain in it, although at times she longs "to escape . . ."⁵⁵

Ann's career soars. For two years, she is the "head of a settlement house in Rochester." At the end of her successful two years there, Ann receives an honorary Master's degree from the University of Rochester. She also places "sixth on the Rochester Times - Register's annual list of 'The Ten Most Useful Women in Rochester.'" At this time, Ann is only twenty-nine years old.⁵⁶

While working at the settlement house, Ann meets Ardence Benescoten, a wealthy woman famous for her charity work. Ann is impressed, and when Ardence asks her to work for her, Ann accepts. In Lewis's words, she becomes "almoner to this modern Grand Duchess."⁵⁷ Just three days

⁵³Ibid., p. 145.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 235.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 152.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 241.

⁵⁵Ibid.

later, Ann discovers that Miss Benescoten is a fraud. Her only reason for hiring Ann at all is "to get journalistic publicity . . . apropos of her uncharitable charities."⁵⁸

After leaving this job, Ann goes for a year as the educational director to the Green Valley Refuge for Women, located in New England.⁵⁹ Here, in a relatively modern women's prison, Ann finds herself wondering how much good she is doing. She longs to right wrongs she hears about in the women's prisons in the South. Consequently, she signs on for her next job at the Women's Division at Copperhead Gap, "in a state whose patron saint was William Jennings Bryan."⁶⁰ Ann arrives at Copperhead Gap with a dream of idealistic reforms, but after she examines the place and observes the prisoners and their keepers, she wonders if she can bear to stay. "But if you can stick this for one year, then maybe you can help blow up every prison in the world!"⁶¹ Her few minor reforms--better food, helping some of the more sensitive prisoners with small luxuries such as books and cigarettes--seem useless in "an aged building supervised by people like Mrs. Bitlick

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 245.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 268.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 276.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 304.

and Captain Waldo."⁶² Captain Waldo is a modern Simon Legree, and Mrs. Bitlick, the head women's warden, is his female counterpart. When Ann notices homosexuality being practiced in the prison and reports it to Mrs. Bitlick, she accuses Ann of having a "dirty mind" for even thinking of such a thing, and nothing is done.⁶³

Having heard many rumors about the "hole" in the sub-basement of the building where prisoners who break major rules are sent, Ann tries to obtain permission to see it, but permission is denied. She sneaks down to look at it without Mrs. Bitlick's knowledge, and is found by the guard. Dr. Codella, the alcoholic old prison doctor, tries to protect Ann by saying he let her go.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, for Mrs. Bitlick and Captain Waldo, this is the last straw. They determine to get rid of Ann before she disturbs the status quo. By sending Ann a note supposedly from Dr. Codella, they trick her into going into the doctor's room at night. He is in a drunken stupor, and when Ann tries to get him to bed to sleep it off, a photograph is taken. Blackmailed with the picture, Ann is forced to resign and leave Copperhead Gap.⁶⁵

⁶²Ibid., p. 345.

⁶³Ibid., p. 351.

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 366-367.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 373-374.

Lewis's realism is especially forceful in this part of Ann's story. All her lovely dreams of a one-woman reform have come to nothing, and Ann is actually lucky to escape with her reputation in one piece. But she is a stubborn woman, and later she does formulate and put into practice more realistic reforms when she becomes superintendent of the Stuyvesant Industrial Home for Women. Ann's book, Vocational Training in Women's Reformatories, makes her "known to all sociological and juridical groups in America," and in 1928, she receives an honorary "degree of Doctor of Laws from Erasmus University, Connecticut."⁶⁶

At the end of her story, Ann has a child out of wedlock--but she decides to keep her job, at least until she is fired. She feels there will always be other jobs.⁶⁷

Ann is not nearly as warm a woman as Una Golden. She seems, somehow, too forceful, too capable. The reader feels that she needs no sympathy. She does what she pleases, and it is difficult to tell how Lewis himself feels about her. By writing the book, he seems to be saying that a woman should be allowed to live her own life in her own way, but he does not say that he admires her. Perhaps

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 386.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 559.

he intends her to be an admirable woman because she has the courage to stand up for her beliefs in the face of society's criticism or the status quo. But the fact remains that sometimes she seems merely stubborn rather than courageous.

In Elmer Gantry Lewis writes of a different type of career woman--the female evangelist, Sharon Falconer. Sharon is young, beautiful, and somehow much more feminine than either Una or Ann. Lewis says of her: "She was young, Sharon Falconer, surely not thirty, stately, slender and tall; and in her long slim face, her black eyes, her splendor of black hair, was rapture or boiling passion."⁶⁸ In addition to her feminine side, however, Sharon also has a practical side--her businesswoman approach. For this role, she steps out of her Grecian robes and wears "a straw hat, gray suit, white shirt-waist, linen cuffs and collar. Only her blue bow and the jeweled cross on her watch fob distinguished her from the women in offices."⁶⁹ Sharon, like most of Lewis's women, has a good head for business. She is adept at squeezing money from her congregations, or perhaps they should be more properly called audiences. A typical

⁶⁸Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry (New York, 1927), p. 166.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 170.

speech to her staff is the following:

"I'm very glad you're all praying, but there comes a time when you've got to add a little shoeleather My charts show that in the Southeast district only one house in three has been visited And let's not have any silly nonsense about hesitating to hit people for money pledges, and hitting em hard!"⁷⁰

Occasionally Lewis shows how other characters react to Sharon when she is busy pleasing the crowd. In one such scene, when Sharon and her staff are boarding the train after a successful evangelistic campaign, one Congregational minister says to another bystander, "And so she goes away with enough cash for herself, after six weeks' work, to have run our whole church for two years!"⁷¹ Sharon counts heavily on her beauty and her manner of dressing to impress the local ministers of the towns in which they stop. In one town she wears "a long white coat"; she stands there a moment for her entrance to have its effect, with her eyes closed, "lost in prayer for this new community."⁷² Sharon's method is to pick the most sympathetic-looking minister in the crowd and appeal to him. She also mentions her support of an "Old Ladies'

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 172.

⁷²Ibid., p. 203.

Home," which is never heard of except when she is asking for money. Once, when Elmer becomes suspicious, he attempts to locate the home, but he fails.⁷³ Sharon depends for her income on one night devoted to a voluntary "thank-offering." Lewis writes, "It sounded unselfish and it brought in more; every devotee saved up for that occasion; and it proved easier to get one fifty-dollar donation than a dozen of a dollar each."⁷⁴ When the local clergymen seem unenthusiastic about gathering pledges for Sharon's "thank-offering," she becomes angry: "Have you told them they've got to double the amount of the pledges before this week is over or the souls in Lincoln can go right on being damned?"⁷⁵ Although Ann Vickers is usually considered the most successful of Lewis's heroines financially, according to the figures Sharon is. At one point, Elmer figures that she is earning more than twenty thousand dollars a year and that she will soon be making fifty thousand.⁷⁶

Sharon actually seems to have three sides: the evangelist in Grecian robes, the businesswoman in gray suit, and the passionate lover in crimson velvet embroidered

⁷³Ibid., p. 205.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 204.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 178.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 214.

with gold. While it is not hard to believe that Sharon is an effective evangelist, that she is an astute businesswoman, or that she is a passionate female, it is hard to believe that she worships personally at any such exotic altar as Lewis describes. It seems, to put it bluntly, fantastic: a room draped in black velvet, two stories high, with a gaudy altar in the center. On the altar, Sharon has mingled Catholic saints with busts of "ape-headed gods, crocodile-headed gods, a god with three heads and a god with six arms, a jade-and-ivory Buddha, an alabaster naked Venus," and in the center "a beautiful, hideous, intimidating and alluring statuette of a silver goddess with a triple crown and a face as thin and long and passionate as that of Sharon Falconer."⁷⁷ When Sharon shows Elmer this room, one can imagine his feelings. In spite of this one unbelievable scene, the rest of Sharon's personality is real enough. She talks to Elmer, especially when she is tired of being saintly: "Oh, I get so tired--all of them reaching for me, sucking my blood, wanting me to give them the courage they're too flabby to get for themselves."⁷⁸ Moments after this confession, however, she is before the audience "rejoicing,

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 197.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 213.

'Oh, my beloved, the dear Lord has a message for you tonight.'"⁷⁹ Sharon's messages are usually highly emotional, consisting of Biblical quotations lifted out of context, or of such catchy phrases as "Get right with God."⁸⁰ For Elmer's fraudulent repentant-businessman's talk, Sharon suggests the title, "Getting the Goods with a Gideon Bible."⁸¹

Sharon's contradictory nature is borne out by several conversations she has with Elmer. First she tells him she is from "a frightfully old Virginia family."⁸² Later, however, she admits that she lied, and that her real name is Katie Jonas, and she is from Utica. Then she turns about again and says that she is not a liar because she has made herself into Sharon Falconer.⁸³ In these times, Sharon would probably be considered mentally ill and could possibly be packed off to an institution because she really believes herself to be "the reincarnation of Joan of Arc, of Catherine of Sienna!" She goes on to say of herself: "I have visions! God talks to me! . . . I am God's right hand."⁸⁴ She also rationalizes her own errors to Elmer:

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid., pp. 206-207.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 176.

⁸²Ibid., p. 182.

⁸³Ibid., p. 194.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 186.

"I can't sin! I am above sin! I am really and truly sanctified! Whatever I may choose to do, though it might be called sin in one un-sanctified, with me God will turn it to his glory. I can kiss you like this-- . . . or passionately, terribly passionately, and it would only symbolize my complete union with Jesus! I have told you a mystery. You can never understand."⁸⁵

Obviously, in this passage Lewis is making cutting jabs at religious mystics. Yet Sharon is convincing, and even a sympathetic character. In another passage she tells Elmer, "No one can touch my soul."⁸⁶ Maybe she is right. Since there are contradictory people in this world, why shouldn't there be such people in fiction?

Sharon is killed when her "Waters of Jordan Tabernacle" burns while she is preaching to an overflow audience. Elmer finds her body the next day with "rags of white satin clinging to it, and in her charred hand . . . still the charred cross."⁸⁷

Whether Sharon is believable or not, she is certainly one of Lewis's most memorable characters. Yet he tells her whole story in less than one hundred pages.

Bethel Merriday, Lewis's last full study of a career woman, is the story of an actress. Bethel decides she

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 185.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 238.

wants to act after seeing a touring company play.⁸⁸ An old actress advises her against the stage: "When you grow up, child, you try to squirm into prison, or get a nice job hustling hash, or even get married, or anything to avoid going on the stage."⁸⁹

During her senior year in college, however, Bethel has the lead role in A Doll's House.⁹⁰ After finishing college in June of 1938, she goes to a summer theater at Grampion, Connecticut.⁹¹ In summer stock, she learns all the dirty jobs of behind-the-scenes stage work, and she also learns how to act. Her first rehearsal is terrible, but she stays because she feels that she is there "to get hell--to get training."⁹²

Eventually the summer theater closes, leaving Bethel without a job. She goes to New York to find work, but after six weeks, she realizes that "she might not find any theatrical job whatever this year," and that if she does find one, it will be "an accident." Bethel is conscientious--she feels guilty that her family is stinting in order to send her twenty-five dollars a week, and she be-

⁸⁸Sinclair Lewis, Bethel Merriday (New York, 1940), p. 23.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 29.

⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 34-35.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 47.

⁹²Ibid., p. 90.

gins to study stenography in order to find an office job.⁹³ Although Bethel feels sympathetic toward the aspiring actors and actresses waiting long hours in casting directors' offices, she deplores the fact that they continue to let their families support them. It becomes depressingly obvious to her that "her chance on the stage" will come purely by chance.⁹⁴ But she does not give up. Along with her stenography, she continues to take acting lessons on credit, to be paid for when she gets her first acting assignment.⁹⁵ Through rumor she finally hears that Andrew Deacon, the backer of the summer stock theater in Grampion, is casting a modern version of Romeo and Juliet.⁹⁶ Mr. Deacon awards her three parts: Mercutio's page, understudy to Juliet, and the speaker of the prologue. Bethel gladly takes the job.⁹⁷ Lewis obviously draws on his own stage experience in Bethel Merriday, and his understanding of actors and the stage seems clear. His description of Bethel on opening night is interesting. She stands frightened in the wings, and she realizes "that if she played for thirty years and endured fifty first nights, she would be

⁹³Ibid., pp. 160-161.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 168.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 171.

⁹⁶Ibid., pp. 178-180.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 189.

just as terrified and just as watery in the knees."⁹⁸ Her first mention in a newspaper, in Belluca, Indiana, thrills her.⁹⁹ Humanly enough, though, Bethel begins to wonder what she will do after the road tour of Romeo and Juliet is over. She hates the idea of being "just a girl back home in Sladesbury, boasting to bored friends of having 'once been on the stage myself,'" and hoping some home town boy will marry her.¹⁰⁰

Bethel's big chance finally comes near the end of the tour. The female lead is drunk, and Bethel goes on as Juliet. The other actors and actresses entertain her the afternoon before her performance, trying to keep her from being scared.¹⁰¹ In spite of their solicitude, Bethel's performance is terrible, and she knows it. She weeps in her dressingroom after the curtain falls, and she feels she is "finished forever as an actress."¹⁰²

In spite of Bethel's failure in her big chance, Lewis ends the story optimistically. Bethel marries a co-actor from the company, and we leave the happy couple with parts in a new play being produced in New York.¹⁰³

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 245.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 226.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 332.

¹⁰¹Ibid., pp. 347-349.

¹⁰²Ibid., pp. 353-354.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 390.

Bethel's story is admittedly not earth-shaking, nor is it particularly well-written in comparison to some of Lewis's other books. But it is a believable story of an ordinary, stage-struck girl. Lewis shows that most actors and actresses are decent, ordinary people, and he decries the general idea that they are heavy drinkers and sexually promiscuous. Actually, he makes stage life sound rather dull and dreary. The long train trips, the sleazy hotel rooms, the greasy cafe food, and the long parts to memorize are definitely enough to discourage any but the most determinedly stage-struck youngsters. The traditional glamor and stardust associated with the stage are completely missing. This is probably an accurate, if an unexciting, book. And Bethel, like Una, is another ordinary character.

CHAPTER V

WORKING WIVES

The working wives in Lewis's novels may be divided into two classes: wives who take jobs as a secondary interest, and married career women who consider their jobs their primary interest. Whether or not their jobs affect their marriages adversely seems to depend on the attitudes of the wives. Una Golden and Ann Vickers consider themselves career women first and wives second; therefore their marriages suffer.

Una Golden marries Julius Schwirtz to escape an unpleasant job situation. It seems to be a "spur-of-the-moment" decision without much thought behind it.¹ For two years she does not work, while she and Julius live in decaying family hotels. While he is away on selling trips, Una observes the other women and children who are her neighbors; she feels that they are "dehumanized" by living in such places.²

Quickly, Una develops an aversion to Julius and his vulgar habits. She doesn't like for him to touch her, and he knows it. His feelings are hurt. Perhaps to

¹Sinclair Lewis, The Job (New York, 1917), pp. 242-245.

²Ibid., p. 251.

bolster his pride, Julius drinks too much and dates other women. These two factors combined make him less efficient on his job, and he is fired.³ When he doesn't find another job right away, Julius becomes depressed. His depression causes him to complain and to drink heavily, which irritates Una. Their marriage, never a very good one, begins to falter as their quarrels become more and more bitter. Julius tells Una:

"You women that have been in business simply ain't fit to be married. You think you're too good to help a man. Yes, even when you haven't been anything but dub stenographers. I never noticed that you were such a whale of a success! I don't suppose you remember how you used to yawp to me about the job being too much for you."⁴

Una retaliates that being married to him is like "being a cow in a stable." She also says that the "business women" of America will

". . . bring about a new kind of marriage in which men will have to keep up respect and courtesy. . . . I wonder how many millions of women in what are supposed to be happy homes are sick over being chambermaids and mistresses till they get dulled and used to it. Nobody will ever know."⁵

Una is miserable with Julius. After she sees that her friends scorn him, she begins to avoid them because

³Ibid., pp. 265-267.

⁴Ibid., p. 269.

⁵Ibid., p. 270.

she doesn't want their pity. During one particularly low period, she even contemplates suicide.⁶ Apparently she is planning to return to work eventually, because she keeps practicing her skills by typing on a borrowed typewriter and by taking down radio sermons in shorthand.⁷

Julius is offered several low-paying jobs which he refuses, but finally Una forces him to accept a job in a paint store paying sixteen dollars a week. In order to economize, they move to a cheap room in a boarding house and Una manages their money. Then the final blow falls--Julius loses his position again. Una promptly goes out and finds herself a job at twenty dollars a week and "a chance to really climb."⁸ As Una makes friends with the other workers and learns about her job, she forgets about Mr. Schwirtz alone at home. Occasionally she feels a touch of pride because he, a big strong man, has to ask her for money.

After several months, Julius is again hired as a salesman. Since he is no longer dependent on her, Una seizes the opportunity to leave him. She finds herself

⁶Ibid., p. 258.

⁷Ibid., p. 261.

⁸Ibid., p. 277.

a pleasant room which she can pay for easily out of her salary, which has been raised to twenty-five dollars a week.⁹ She seems to put all thoughts of Julius out of her mind, but she does refuse her boss's proposal of marriage because she is still legally Mrs. Schwirtz.¹⁰

Several years pass, during which Una steadily progresses from good jobs to better jobs, while still married to Julius. She finally decides to divorce him when she meets Walter Babson, an old sweetheart from earlier years. However, she agrees to marry Walter only if he will let her keep her job. He agrees. Una muses that even though she is a business woman, she does "need love" and she wants her "own baby."¹¹ Her job, though, appears to be the major interest in her life, and her unsuccessful marriage to Julius is forgotten as she looks forward to a new career, with a new husband as a bonus.

Ann Vickers' reason for marrying Russell Spaulding is no more sensible than Una's reason for marrying Julius. Ann herself says she married Russell "because he asked me

⁹Ibid., pp. 297-301.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 313.

¹¹Ibid., p. 327.

to."¹² On their wedding night Russell confesses to Ann that he is not a "virgin," but when she admits that she isn't either, he is shocked. He manages to stammer, "Of course. You're a modern."

Ann retorts, "I am not! I'm a woman!" While still on the honeymoon, Ann decides that she doesn't want Russell to be the father of her children.¹³ Bitterly she realizes that if she doesn't have children within the next two or three years, she can never have any. It annoys her to think that at forty-five she will be still young, "yet too old for children," while Russell or "any cursed careless man" can still "have children at sixty."¹⁴

Russell acknowledges that Ann's job is more important than his, yet he still expects her to cook, darn his socks, and supervise the house. All the while he looks down on her for doing these tasks. Lewis remarks that Ann should "be warned that the cards have been stacked" against her.¹⁵ Apparently he means that a woman cannot hope to fill two jobs successfully in the eyes of other people. Russell seems to be proud of Ann as his wife, yet he also shows his jealousy by deflating

¹²Sinclair Lewis, Ann Vickers (New York, 1933), p. 414.

¹³Ibid., pp. 418-419.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 440.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 442-443.

her ego, especially in front of others.¹⁶

At a party Ann meets Judge Barney Dolphin and begins an affair with him. After knowing him only a few days, she agrees to spend a weekend with him.¹⁷ She falls in love with Barney and sees him as the father of her future child. She rationalizes, "A working woman has a right to her child and her lover."¹⁸ Since Barney is also married and a Roman Catholic, matters are greatly complicated when Ann does become pregnant. Although Barney is happy about the expected baby, he cannot promise Ann that his wife will give him a divorce.¹⁹ Ann herself is still married to Russell in spite of the fact that she has not been living with him for a while. On the advice of a friend she tells Russell about the baby and agrees to move back into their apartment. Russell actually takes her back, even though she tells him that the child is probably not his. She declares, "The child is mine and always will be."²⁰ All the time she is living with her husband again, Ann continues to see Barney.²¹

¹⁶Ibid., p. 437.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 462.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 469.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 478.

²⁰Ibid., p. 487.

²¹Ibid., p. 492.

Either Russell is not aware of her meetings with Barney, or he is too meek to reproach her.

In her mind Ann feels sure that her baby will be a girl, but it is a boy. She and Barney name it Matthew for his father.²² After she recuperates from the baby's birth, Ann goes back to work. With some of her own money, she buys an old cottage in the suburbs, which she plans to remodel for herself and Mat, the baby. She hopes that "maybe Barney will come sometimes on a Sunday."²³ Russell Spaulding, her husband, no longer has any hold on her as far as she is concerned. He has given the baby his name, and Ann is through with him. When the cottage is remodelled, she takes the baby and leaves Russell permanently. Russell weeps, but Ann sheds no tears over him.²⁴ At the close of Ann's story, she is living happily in her cottage with Barney, her baby son, and the baby's nurse. Barney is still married to his first wife, and Ann is still married to Russell. Ann also still has her job.²⁵

Lewis does not condemn Ann and Barney, nor does he make any specific comments about Russell. Russell is

²²Ibid., pp. 503-505.

²³Ibid., p. 529.

²⁴Ibid., p. 535.

²⁵Ibid., p. 557.

unattractive in certain episodes in the book, but he is much more decent about Ann's affair and pregnancy than most husbands would be. As a matter of fact, he is almost unbelievably decent. His unquestioning acceptance of Ann and the child, even after she tells him it is not his, make him appear more foolish than kindly. Lewis, however, leaves this judgment to the reader. Ann is left, like Una, with her job, her child, and her man, even though there is an extra man in her case.

Bethel Merriday's marriage to Zed Wintergeist occurs so near the end of Bethel Merriday that there is not much information about it. Although Bethel and Zed have been together in a touring company travelling all over the country, they do not really become interested in each other until near the end of the tour. Zed admits to Bethel that he has liked her ever since he "got over being a fool about Iris," his previous girlfriend.²⁶ At first Bethel is not sure of her feelings for him, but at the end of the tour she realizes that she does love him. "Oh, Zed, I don't know how much I love you, but I love you!" They are married in Pike City, Kansas.²⁷

²⁶Sinclair Lewis, Bethel Merriday (New York, 1940), pp. 339-340.

²⁷Ibid., p. 388.

Back in New York, they set up housekeeping in a one-room efficiency apartment. Both Bethel and Zed have parts in a forthcoming production of a comedy called Alas in Arcady. Bethel obviously intends to pursue her career as an actress. Lewis's closing comment is, "So Bethel had come home, and it was good."²⁸

He could have said, "And they lived happily ever after."

Una, Ann and Bethel are primarily career women. Their jobs are perhaps more important to them than their marriages are. Three Lewis women who are primarily wives also take jobs, but the difference between the two groups is that Carol, Peony, and Jinny do not consider themselves career women, at least not at first.

Carol Kennicott works because she has left Will and has to find some way to support herself. She finds "employment in the Bureau of War Risk Insurance," filing correspondence and dictating "answers to letters of inquiry." Lewis calls her job "an endurance of monotonous details."²⁹ Carol does not feel that her work is glamorous. On the contrary, she finds office work a deadly routine that "stretches to the grave" in the afternoons,

²⁸Ibid., p. 390.

²⁹Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York, 1961), p. 408.

and that every office "is as full of cliques and scandals as a Gopher Prairie." But she does discover advantages in her job that her life as a housewife did not have. One of these is a "free Sunday," and the other is the ease of cleaning house when it is not a full-time job.³⁰ After a year spent in office work, Carol is tired of it, although she does say that it is "far more tolerable than housework," in spite of the fact that it is "not adventurous." Lewis declares:

The thing she gained in Washington was not information about office-systems and labor unions but renewed courage, that amiable contempt called poise. Her glimpse of tasks involving millions of people and a score of nations reduced Main Street from bloated importance to its actual pettiness.³¹

In addition to this perspective, Carol also gains a new insight into her own motives--"From her work and from her association with women who had organized suffrage associations in hostile cities . . . she caught something of an impersonal attitude." She realizes that part of her trouble back home in Gopher Prairie was that she had been "touchily personal."³²

Before returning to Will and Gopher Prairie, Carol receives an interesting bit of advice from a woman Lewis

³⁰Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³¹Ibid., p. 413.

describes as a "generalissima of suffrage." She tells Carol that "easy, pleasant, lucrative home-work for wives" is to "keep asking people to define their jobs." She feels that this policy is the "most dangerous doctrine" she knows.³³ Possibly Carol will take her advice.

Peony Planish goes to work late in life after her daughter is grown. She likes her job of helping Winifred Homeward interpret the "war news" on the radio, and she takes it seriously. For her help, Winifred pays her "thirty-five dollars every Friday," and Peony spends "fifty of it every Saturday."³⁴ Apparently good, long-suffering Gideon pays the difference. Since Peony has been trained for her job at a business college, she feels secure in her position.³⁵ Part of her feeling of security also comes from her certainty that she wields influence with Winifred Homeward, whose father is Gideon's employer. During a domestic quarrel she tells Gideon that "neither Winnie Homeward nor the Colonel thinks you're so hot, and they'd of muscled you out . . . long ago, if it hadn't been for me!"³⁶

Peony's exaggerated feeling of importance becomes

³³Ibid., p. 423.

³⁶Ibid., p. 431.

³⁴Sinclair Lewis, Gideon Planish (New York, 1943), p. 428.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 409-410.

more and more pronounced as the story progresses. Once Gideon asks her, when his hopes are high, "How'd you like to be wife of the Minister to Cuba or Sweden some day?"

She shrieks, "And how'd I like to be Minister to Cuba or Sweden!"³⁷

Peony evidently intends to keep her job permanently, because she assures Gideon:

"Honeybird, don't you worry if old Marduc lands in the alcoholic ward, and leaves you without a job. The way I'm beginning to stand with Winnie Homeward and Tom Blizzard, I can always support you, and you can stay home and have a nice, long, quiet rest."³⁸

One hopes that her salary will be raised if she should have to support both of them. At any rate, Peony's job does become much more important to her than her former position as a mere wife; she enjoys her present position and apparently she aspires to an even more important situation in the future.

Jinny Timberlane's reasons for going to work differ from those of Carol and Peony. She neither needs the money nor particularly enjoys the work itself. Her decision seems to be based on a desire to relieve her boredom. Before her marriage, Jinny worked as a draftsman, and when

³⁷Ibid., p. 433.

³⁸Ibid., p. 438.

Cass asked her if she planned a career in drafting, she answered, "No, I have no real ideas. I'm just a fair workman, at best. I'll never have what they call a 'career.'"³⁹ Even though she becomes depressed and bored after her baby's death, Jinny at first tells Cass she doesn't want a part-time job, but later she changes her mind and asks Cass about taking a job she has been offered. He reluctantly agrees to her working, although he wonders if it is "any part of this theological doctrine of the economic independence of women . . . that women have to have independent jobs, even if it cracks up the men they love."⁴⁰

Jinny is not particularly devoted to her job, and eventually she leaves it to do volunteer work with the Red Cross. However, her primary motive behind the volunteer job seems to be that she can meet her lover more conveniently when she does not have to be on the job during set working hours.⁴¹ After she leaves Cass to live in New York with Bradd Criley,⁴² her job is not mentioned again.

³⁹Sinclair Lewis, Cass Timberlane (New York, 1945), p. 51.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 187.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 279-280.

⁴²Ibid., p. 331.

Lewis's opinion seems to be that if the marriage is basically sound to begin with, then the wife's working will not matter; but if the marriage is already showing signs of stress, then the wife's attitude toward a job of her own can be highly important. Another important factor which Lewis also considers is the husband's attitude. A husband and wife who compete with each other have difficulty in maintaining a smooth marriage, and a wife who works in spite of her husband's objections is asking for trouble.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: LEWIS'S APPARENT VIEWS ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY MARRIAGE

Lewis's attitude about marriage seems to be that it takes two people to make a marriage successful, and it also takes two people to destroy a marriage. All the marriages which fail in his novels do so because both partners in the marriage fail to meet their obligations. Four couples in the eleven novels in this study separate permanently: Martin Arrowsmith leaves Joyce; Sam Dodsworth leaves Fran; Una Golden Schwirtz divorces Julius; and Ann Vickers Spaulding leaves Russell. Lewis shows in each case that the fault lies with both partners and not solely with the women or the men. The reader knows that Martin is making a mistake in marrying Joyce Lanyon in the first place. Their dreams and expectations of life are too different to be reconciled. Similarly, long before Sam nerves himself to leave Fran, the reader has decided that he is an utter fool if he takes her back a second time. In the cases of Ann and Una, the basic error is the same-- they both marry men they do not love simply because they are tired of living alone.

Depending on the reader's point of view, several other "Lewis marriages" could be considered failures, too,

although the partners continue to live together. One of these is the marriage of Elmer and Cleo Gantry. While Cleo actually seems sincere, or possibly merely sincerely stupid in her love for Elmer, Elmer is unscrupulous enough to have married her because she can further his career.¹ As long as Cleo continues to trust Elmer blindly and he continues to use her, their marriage can hardly be considered a good one.

Another doubtful marriage is that of Jinny and Cass Timberlane. Even though their story ends on the happy note of a reconciliation,² a cynical reader or one familiar with the "Lewis marriage" cannot but wonder whether the reconciliation is genuine.

The marriage of Gideon and Peony Planish falters along on a rather doubtful basis. Peony is the boss of the family throughout the book. When the reader leaves them, Peony has just decided that Gideon should not become the president of a small liberal arts college, in spite of the fact that Gideon himself wants to take the post. Of course he has the right to take the position without Peony, but as she points out, the college would probably not

¹Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry (New York, 1960), p. 285.

²Sinclair Lewis, Cass Timberlane (New York, 1945), p. 387.

accept as its president a man who is separated or divorced.³ Shrewdly, Peony uses her wifely status as a club over Gideon's head. Lewis's own attitude here seems to be that if Gideon is not man enough to defy her, then perhaps he deserves Peony's club.

Lewis does not overlook modern leisure as a factor in the American woman's plight. The intelligent wives who have maids and cooks to do their work, and nothing but book clubs and luncheons to occupy their minds are almost certain to become bored. Boredom afflicts Carol Kennicott, Fran Dodsworth, Peony Planish and Jinny Timberlane to varying degrees. Apparently the other wives are either too unintelligent to be bored, or, like Leora, they find pleasant ways to keep themselves from becoming unhappy.

Lewis's career women crave a husband and family, but at the same time, they cannot give up their jobs. Una Golden marries Walter Babson only on the condition that she can keep her job, to which he agrees.⁴ Yet even with their jobs Ann and Una are not always happy. As one of the occupational hazards of marriage is boredom, one of

³Sinclair Lewis, Gideon Planish (New York, 1943), p. 431.

⁴Sinclair Lewis, The Job (New York, 1917), pp. 325-326.

the hazards of the career seems to be fear of the loss of femininity. Both Ann and Una want a husband and a baby. But both also want jobs and recognition for their work. The husbands seem to be expendable once they have provided their wives with the children they crave.

In an essay on American women, Lewis says that our females not only expect to "have their cakes and eat them," but that they "actually get away with it."⁵ But he also seems to think that the American men are the ones who let them get away with it. He says that American husbands have the reputation for being "so generous, so complaisant, so obedient" to their wives, but that "most women would rather be married to a Napoleon than to a Mr. Pickwick--and it is precisely the amiable, vague, foolishly generous virtues of a Pickwick that have been exhibited as admirable in American husbands."⁶

Sheldon Grebstein says of Lewis's views on marriage that "Lewis himself did not really know."⁷ He points out that in Dodsworth, "Fran is simultaneously right and wrong;

⁵Sinclair Lewis, "Is America a Paradise for Women?", The Man from Main Street, edited by Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane, (New York, 1962), p. 311.

⁶Ibid., p. 305.

⁷Sheldon Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis (New York, 1962), p. 113.

Sam is at the same time wise and foolish."⁸ Grebstein contends that "In its very ambiguity and lack of resolution Dodsworth displays Lewis as a realist"⁹

However, in Cass Timberlane, Grebstein feels that Lewis is saying that "men are better than women, that they love more tenderly, do not hurt their mates so deeply or so frequently, and that they are the strength and redemption of most marriages." Another point Grebstein finds in this novel is that "marriage is hard; that men and women cannot live together without colliding, simply because they are men and women." Grebstein also says that there is conviction behind Lewis's disturbing assertion that marriages are usually ruined by two people--even when one of them is loving, decent and forgiving."¹⁰ It is somewhat puzzling that Grebstein should call this assertion "disturbing" when it seems rather obvious.

Mark Schorer avers that the sketches called "An Assemblage of Husbands and Wives" which Lewis intersperses throughout Cass Timberlane are a "recognition of the American matriarchy." Schorer believes these represent "American marriages in general, including his Lewis's"

⁸Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 150.

⁹Ibid.

own two marriages, but that this one at the center, of Cass and Jinny, is another matter, the marriage he would now make if he could."¹¹ The fact is, however, that the Timberlanes's marriage is far from ideal, and it seems doubtful that Lewis wished one like it.

An additional factor which Lewis takes into consideration often in his fiction is the competition between men and women in marriage and in jobs. In The Job as early as 1917, the office girls discuss how unfair it is for men to be paid more for the same work.¹² Una notices that sooner or later even the average men in the office are promoted if they only stay long enough. But a woman may remain in the same job permanently, regardless of her abilities.¹³

The competition is very pronounced in Ann Vickers. Ann is in the awkward position of having a more important job than her husband; her superiority wounds his pride. Russell still expects her to cook, darn his socks, supervise the house and work, while at the same time he looks

¹¹Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis (New York, 1963), pp. 36-37.

¹²Sinclair Lewis, The Job (New York, 1917), p. 177.

¹³Ibid., p. 235.

down on her for doing these things.¹⁴

Before she marries Russell, Ann doubts her own attractiveness several times. On one such occasion, Ann tells Malvina Wormser, a female doctor and friend, that it is "impossible for any real man to love me." Malvina's reply is interesting, perhaps pointing out Lewis's own feelings about men and career women. She says:

" . . . all superior women have something . . . that makes the pretty real men afraid of our overshadowing 'em--the men who are ambitious, not commonplace, yet won't stand comparison with better stuff. We have to depend either on men so small that they get their pride and egotism out of being known as our associates, or on men so big they're not afraid of comparison with anyone."¹⁵

Later Malvina reminds Ann that it is not only career women who suffer in their relationships with the opposite sex.

She gives an example:

A first-class man marries a mean woman, and after she gets over her first awe of him as a celeb, she puts in the rest of her life . . . trying to convince the world that she's as good as he is. She suffers, almost to insanity, over the fact that most people see her only as the great man's wife. She tries to make him feel guilty for it.¹⁶

¹⁴Sinclair Lewis, Ann Vickers (New York, 1933), p. 442.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 412.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 413.

Lewis touches on a delicate situation here. The competition between women and men is still as keen as it was in Lewis's time. Twentieth-century American women have perhaps more freedom than any other women anywhere in the world, and yet the basic rivalry between the sexes remains. Lewis seems to be defending women and attacking them simultaneously, while also doing the same to men. He takes no definite stand, and he offers no specific solutions. Sheldon Grebstein asks, "Is Lewis's ambivalence, then, an aesthetic flaw here?" He answers, "No."¹⁷

Perhaps Cass Timberlane's thoughts are really Lewis's:

If the world of the twentieth century, he vowed, cannot succeed in this one thing, married love, then it has committed suicide, all but the last moan, and whether Germany and France can live as neighbors is insignificant compared with whether Johann and Maria or Jean and Marie can live as lovers. He knew that with each decade such serenity was more difficult, with Careers for Women opening equally on freedom and a complex weariness.¹⁸

In short, Lewis seems to mean that marriage is the foundation of our world, and if men and women cannot get along in this most basic of all relationships, how can we expect whole countries filled with men and women to live peacefully together?

¹⁷Sheldon Grebstein, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

¹⁸Sinclair Lewis, Cass Timberlane (New York, 1945), p. 173.

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