

Portrayal Of The Barrenness Of Familial Relationship And The Existential Themes Of The Individual Isolation

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ABSTRACT

Lewis's novels are concerned with the intricacies of family relationships and the isolation of the individual within the family. In his novels, he discusses the importance of family relationship, and for Lewis, families clearly provide not only his major sources for learning about the world as a child, but also a fertile ground for studying how people adapt themselves and endure the pain of loss and disappointment of life, and also how they adjust living with these and yet continue to live and love. All the major conflicts and central themes of his novels evolve from this concern for the family, the individual isolation, and relationship to the community. Also, Lewis's early isolation and struggle for identity provide both style and material for his fiction.

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Lewis's novels portray the barrenness of familial relationship, the existential themes of the individual isolation and struggle for independence and identity as well as the lack of meaningful communication among people living together. Particularly his four widely acclaimed novels *Dodsworth*, *Arrowsmith*, *Main Street* and *Babbit* reflects the basic principle of human relationship. Lewis became the source of influence for many contemporary American novelists. Lewis's treatment of an individual and his quest for identity and social recognition. Lewis's second novel, *Dodsworth* is fine in its depiction of modern man's dilemma. The protagonist is involved in an interminable search through the cluster of every day existence for sense of satisfying identity. The protagonist confronts himself and a critical self-appraisal leads him ultimately to self discover. Lewis's third novel *Arrowsmith* mainly focuses the difficulties of undoing the hold of a deprived and wasted past of breaking through the hardened cement of self-frustration.

In *Arrowsmith*, Lewis shows his continuing concern with modern man's search for authenticity and acceptance on the social and emotional levels. An interesting fact that relates this novel to the American culture is that its protagonist retraces in his West ward journey the frontier myth within the American-American pattern. Despite the fact that the world of this novel is close to contemporary America, it explores, like the earlier novels, man's quest for his selfhood and acceptance in a world that denies him these. The fourth chapter "Isolation of an Individual" analyses Lewis's far more acclaimed and satisfied

novel. *Main Street*, the isolation of the protagonist as a human being is seen in his contempt for the Americans. In a way his imprisonment is a necessary stage in his progress towards acceptance of pain and suffering as the medium of human existence. *Main Street* occupies a special place among Malamad's novels

The major American characters in this novel are not blinded only by greed as they have been in many other Lewis novels, Samuel *Dodsworth* has made a great deal of money without having been corrupted by it. He has looked upon what he has done as a kind of game, saying it is "fun to beat the other fellow and put over a thundering big sale, He has prospered until he is president of the Revelation Auto Company, but he is forced to sell to a huge firm of auto-makers when they threaten to undersell him. They offer Dodsworth a first vice presidency, but he rejects it. He does not want to do business their way."They had taken from him the pride in pioneering which was one of his props in life--and who They were, he didn't quite know." He decides that he is partly responsible for the new economic condition he (and by implication his author) deplures. Lewis has him muse, "He had helped to build a machine which was running away from him. He had no longer the dignity of a craftsman. He made nothing; he meant nothing; he was no longer Samuel Dodsworth, but merely crowd vigorously pushing one another toward nowhere "Although sam can no longer control the machine, he can withdraw from though its operation. Withdrawal is to him only the lesser of two evils, for and whether he stays or leaves he has lost his sense of workmanship: the only distinction is that by withdrawing he has lessened his responsibility to the system and has taken the necessary first step toward his final autonomy.

Lewis' feelings may be one-sided, but he tries to be fair, gives Fran an opportunity to give her side of the story, and her case is not a bad one. Her complaint she makes into a general statement about American husbands, with Sam's behavior becoming only a particular example of the general rule. She says, "you aren't always thoughtful about me. American husbands never are. You're no worse than the rest, but you're just as bad. You think of nothing beyond business and golf." She adds that most women would be more pleased by an occasional gift of flowers or an unexpected phone call than by a new car. Lewis believed that one of the troubles with the American family was that it too had become dominated by economic goals and considerations. Surprisingly, in *Dodsworth* Lewis voices his sentiment through Fran, who says, commenting on the general situation regarding husbands and wives in America, "I am convinced that the fault belongs to our American industrial system, with its ideal of forced selling--which isn't a big enough ideal to satisfy any really sensitive woman," Samuel Dodsworth is well aware that the blame for the disintegration of the American family cannot be laid solely at the feet of women, although Lewis makes it clear that the Dodsworth marriage in particular collapses primarily because of the attitudes and behavior of Fran Dodsworth. But on his return to Zenith Sam, seeing now with clearer eyes, notes that the ideas of his friends on married life are far from sound. He becomes aware that "to them women were only bedmates, housekeepers, producers of heirs, and a home audience that could not escape, and had to listen when everybody at the office was tired of hearing one's grievances."

Dodsworth does not end, as did *ArrowSmith*, with a denial of the institution of the family. As soon as he leaves Fran, Dodsworth speeds back to Edith Cortwright, The implication is that she will make a good wife. That she will be a good companion for him she

has already demonstrated, and she has given some hints of passion. During the brief period which he has spent with her he has begun and again to feel like a person of importance, mainly due to her ministrations. That they will establish a sure and stable home is clearly implied; that it will be in zenith made explicit

To recapitulate Lewis' picture of American culture: American Marriage is often a failure because of the selfish nature of women and because of the thoughtlessness of men. Too often wives do not provide a home as a haven from economic worries, and sometimes husband economic activities are not sufficiently idealistic to interest their wives, In their occupations men work too hard for no sound reasons; they often make a religion of their work, perhaps in part because conventional religion is unimportant to them. In addition, Americans do not know how to relax, they tend to pursue their leisure time interests only somewhat less grimly than they do their occupational activities, Much of the blame for what is wrong with the culture can be laid at the door Much of education, although education is what it is because it is pursued for the wrong reasons. Political ignorance is the usual condition in America, with political activity largely being left to the women and that political power being left to professional politicians. Lewis feels much lacking in American society. He would want a sense of craftsmanship brought back into work and a sense of companionship into marriage. He would like to see increased participation in politics especially by the more emancipated individuals. Generally, he would wish for more reason and open-mindedness by Americans of all sorts on all questions.

Sam Dodsworth lives in the world Lewis pictured, however, and not in his ideal one. He is a man living in a world of "things as they are" and not as they ought to be. Lewis makes

of him a man who begins as a conformist, gradually gains perspective, and with him new insight still does not reject his culture. In the beginning he is what Riesman would call an adjusted man; he is comfortable in his culture. As he says, "Why, I never thought much about America as a whole. Sort of taken it for granted--." That was his response the first time in Europe his assumptions were challenged. Much later he is rather amused at his earlier naivete, or rather his earlier unthinking acceptance of all things American. He tries to recapture what it was that he had believed and says, "I suppose I felt that the entire known world revolved around the General Offices of the Revelation Motor Company, Constitution Avenue, Zenith...." From the man who takes things for granted to a man who analyses is a great leap. For Sam Dodsworth it was a change based on the painful process of thought.

Dodsworth was an intelligent man, but he had not been trained in analytic thought, rather he had been trained out of it. The welter of his new experiences demanded cataloging, and the most effective way of doing this was by comparing these new experiences to familiar ones. It was not an easy process for him, for it demanded that he think "almost impersonally," and "it was a new occupation for him, and he was a little confused...." The cause of this first "almost impersonal thought is trivial; it has to do with why he enjoyed after-dinner conversation in England even when it consisted of gossip, banter, and baiting of the United States. He concludes that it is better than American shop talk and storytelling; even with its occasional silliness it is more interesting. But once this analytic thinking on the part of Dodsworth begins, it continues almost of its own volition, As it continues it is rewarding but uncomfortable; Lewis says, "all thinking about matters less immediate than food, sex, business, of one's children is a disease and Sam was catching it," What he is catching will not make him happy, Lewis suggests, for the wiser the more one is aware of, the more there is to

be hurt and puzzled by. Dodsworth finds his awakening not particularly pleasurable. Thinking about impersonal things like cultural differences leads to pondering for extended periods about them, "thus brooding hour-long...thus then he slowly and painfully perceiving a world vaster than he had known," pressed about when with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission

When an intelligent man begins to think, to ponder, to brood about his society and its relationship to other societies in the world he begins to detach himself intellectually from his own culture. No matter how much of a conformist he is in the beginning, no matter how well adjusted, he most certainly will gain a certain amount of autonomy. Dods- Worth tells Edith Cortwright that he has learned one thing in Europe, "I've learned to doubt everything, " and he concludes humorously, "No American businessman ought to go abroad, ever, except to a Rotary convention, or on a conducted tour where he's well insulated from furriers'. It upsets him and spoils his pleasure in his own greatness and knowledge!" He has gained aesthetic distance from his society; he is no longer immersed in it, and he no longer accepts its ways as given. He may or he may not decide to obey any particular norm, for business, he now has freedom of choice; in a word, he is autonomous.

One sign of his autonomy is the critical attitude he takes to- wards the ideas of his old friends who remain in Zenith. After his and return to America for the first time, and before he was completely sure of his new stance," sometimes he found himself allied against,, them when the talk fell on labor or European alliances and they expressed the flat opinions which Sam himself had once accepted but... about which he now felt shaky. He can no longer completely accepted he had the received opinions on economics and politics, although he is

not yet completely detached either. His clear-eyed attitude towards his society's view of love and marriage has already been alluded to, and the surprising thing is that he can sense that something lacking is the way his male acquaintances treat their wives even though he himself is undergoing the breakup of his marriage, caused by behavior of his wife. The fact that he can at such a time take as objective look at the institution is a sign how far he has traveled towards autonomy.

His objectivity at such a time indirectly reveals one way in which Lewis structured the novel. Lewis has Dodsworth's gradual awakening to the nature of his culture parallel in many ways his gradual awakening to the true nature of his wife. Midway through the novel Dodsworth returns to America; he is estranged temporarily from his not wife, but he does not as yet understand her. And in the same fashion he does not as yet fully understand his growing estrangement from his culture, but his former opinions about it now seem "shaky" to him. By this time he had learned some of the more unpleasant facts about Fran, that she was flirtatious and that she was bored by him, and paralleling this he has learned some unpleasant facts about America life. More revelation comes later, as Dodsworth becomes more aware of Fran's true nature, and as ponders more deeply on the nature of his society. It may be that her behavior forced him to take a new look at her and that this exercise in critical thinking led to his subsequent critical look at many previously unexamined items of his culture.

As time passes, Fran Dodsworth is less careful about showing the more unpleasant aspects of her personality to her husband. But there are deeper flaws in her character than she is aware of, flaws which flirtatiousness is only one symptom. The only time the first Mrs. Dodsworth meets her eventual successor, Sam is struck by the genuineness of Edith

Cortwright and the artificiality of Fran. Lewis save that Dodsworth "reflected that Fran had an unsurpassed show-window display but not much on the shelves inside." His imagery is not particularly original, but the discovery was a damaging one for Sam to make about his wife, although he is never completely cured of his fascination with the display. This final judgment he makes just after "he had suddenly grasped something' which he had never completely formulated in their twenty-three years of marriage: that she was not in the least a mature and responsible woman, mother, and wife and administrator, but simply a clever child, with a child's confused self-dramatizations, " With the formulation comes a degree of disenchantment.

The paths of Dodsworth's awakening regarding the nature of his wife and of his culture are parallel but do not lead to the same conclusion, for Dodsworth ultimately rejects his wife but he does not reject his culture, Interestingly enough, when he returns to America he will return with a new wife, for although he has rejected the institution of marriage, anymore than he has rejected of other institutions of his culture, But it seems clear that he will treat Edith differently from the way. he treated Fran, just as he most: surely will have a new viewpoint toward his society.

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