Sinclair Lewis, the Voice of Satire, and Mary Austin's Revolt from the Village

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My dear Mr. Lewis:
I have lived in Main Streets most of my life, and I could match almost every incident from life. I know dozens of Carol Kenicotts [sic], and what I want to know is why you didn’t know her better?
—Mary Austin to Sinclair Lewis, 12 Dec. 1920

Dear Mary Austin:
...Can’t you see that I do know that Carol, to quote your own well-worded prescription, “never functions spiritually in sex”? That is more than indicated in the chapter devoted to Will and his wistful frightened affair with Maud Dyer. The author doesn’t say so, and Will, not being at all articulate, cannot say so, but in his confused soliloquy about himself and Carol he indirectly expresses the same idea.
—Lewis to Austin, 15 Dec. 1920

My dear Mr. Lewis:—
You score! I forgot you created Carol, I was under the impression she was somebody we had known when we lived in Main Street.
—Austin to Lewis, 17 Dec. 1920

Mary Austin had a crush on Sinclair Lewis. That is to say, in her 1932 autobiography Earth Horizon, Austin uses the mention of one Jim Lynch, the boy “who sent me my first valentine,” as an occasion to reveal that “I
am certain that my first interest in another lank, red-headed roughneck, when he was young and Nobel Prizes far from him, was because he reminded me of Jim Lynch.3 Whether by “first interest” Austin intends for her reader to think that she actually had romantic inclinations or that her admiration was of a more professional, non-romantic nature is, of course, impossible to say (the reference to a valentine notwithstanding). However, one thing is for certain: The “lank, red-headed roughneck” she describes is none other than her longtime friend Sinclair Lewis, America’s first Nobel Laureate in Literature.

In 1909 Austin was, at 41, one of the founding artists-in-residence of the Carmel, Cal., arts colony, and Lewis was at that time a 24-year-old itinerant writer and seller of ready-made plots to Jack London.3 And while it is highly unlikely that the two ever actually met while in California (Austin left in 1908 for an extended tour of Europe, several months before Lewis’ January arrival in Carmel), they were both members of the same bohemian social set in Carmel and held a number of acquaintances in common. In any event, by the time Lewis’ Main Street was published in 1920, they were both living and working in New York City as published writers, and they were steadfast friends.4 Out of this relationship would grow a literary kinship wherein Austin’s work as a social novelist would have a direct impact on Lewis’ satirical lampooning of American values and mores. Just as her friend would do several years after her career was already well under way, Mary Austin honed her social critique through the deployment of a narrative voice based in part on sardonic wit and satire. More to the point, the themes and tone we have come to associate with Lewis, namely those of the satirically-inflected social novelist, are to be found running, however subtly, through a good deal of Austin’s writings. Viewed in this manner, Austin’s role in literary history becomes that of a major figure in early twentieth-century literary discourse. Through her prose, Austin was able to develop and contribute to the particular rhetorical forms of Realism that reach their peak in Sinclair Lewis and the “revolt from the village.”

The recognition of a connection between these two writers is not a new one, although it has become somewhat buried in the critical discussion of Austin’s achievements as a nature writer. In fact, the subtle but definite debt that Lewis owes to Austin’s work was remarked upon both during and immediately after Austin’s lifetime. A very young Henry Nash Smith, for example, once noted: “Critics who tend to think of her [Austin] as a sort of recluse in the Western deserts should remember this critical work [concerning contemporary American society]…. Years before Sinclair Lewis she seized and conveyed the deadliness of all that is confining in the rural Middle West and in the well-ordered life of the wealthy middle class in the cities.”5 These comments appeared in 1931, in an article on Austin written for the first issue of The New Mexico Quarterly. Smith clearly has no trouble recognizing Austin’s value as a social critic, a value he asserts
is equivalent to that of her friend Lewis. Similarly, Austin's friend and biographer T. M. Pearce wrote in his 1940 critical biography, *The Beloved House*, that “Mary Austin and Sinclair Lewis have much in common as critic and censor of small-town America.” What these all-too-brief evaluations hold in common is the glimmer of a suggestion that Mary Austin's works might have had a formative impact on Lewis.

The bulk of more recent criticism, however, has viewed Austin's place in the literary world somewhat differently, for current methods of inquiry seek primarily to establish the antecedents to Austin's work, to discover the salient influences on Austin. Reversing this line of inquiry, however, offers the opportunity to consider that which may be interpreted as “the Austin influence.” Esther Lanigan Stineman notes, in the introduction to her 1989 biography, *Mary Austin: Song of a Maverick*, “[Austin's] *The Land of Little Rain*, praised for its humanistic eloquence and ‘analytical’ balance, and her autobiographical *Earth Horizon* (1932) were largely responsible for establishing her literary reputation. Yet this legacy would have disappointed the writer who finally yearned for an enduring reputation as a social novelist.” It is this element of social commentary in Austin's writing, related as it is to the career of her friend Sinclair Lewis, that is worth re-establishing and exploring, for doing so reveals that Mary Austin shared more than a friendship with Lewis. She in fact shared a vision of fiction as a socially meliorating force. To that end, she developed, as early as 1902, the model for a narrative voice inflected with ironic wit and satire that Lewis would eventually perfect in a body of work that begins with *Main Street*. Thus, while it may not be the case that everything Lewis achieved can (or should) be attributed to Mary Austin's direct influence, the rhetorical forms of narrative voice that she picked up and retooled during her own career as a Realist are among those which Lewis later borrowed with tremendous success.

In a letter written to Lewis a mere seven weeks after the publication of *Main Street*, and thus before the novel's tremendous cultural impact had become clear, Mary Austin already wanted to know, “why Willa Cather, Vachel Lindsey and I find one end of the rainbow in Main Street, and why you and Masters, Anderson, Sandburg, Dreiser and thousands of others who flock from Main Street to the cities can't find it.” The discourse to which Austin here refers is, of course, what has come to be known as a sub-genre within early twentieth-century Realism, namely the “revolt from the village.” First coined by Carl Van Doren in a 1921 article of that name and developed further in his *Contemporary American Novelists, 1900–1920* (1923), the phrase has been taken up to indicate generally any writer of the early twentieth century whose works concern themselves with challenging a nostalgic yearning for the values and lifestyle of the seemingly sacred American small town. The now-familiar list includes those names mentioned by Austin, writers such as Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Carl
Sandburg, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis. While more recent scholarship has revealed the highly ambivalent and complex opinions about village life that inform this literary movement, critical perception in the 1920s saw the “revolt” as being very much absolute. Thus, while Main Street can now be read as both a scathing critique of and a panegyric for the small-town existence, contemporary critics such as Van Doren saw nothing less than a wholesale rejection of the fantasy of a livable small-town ethos. According to Van Doren, this misguided nostalgia usually manifested itself in the depiction of the small town as a place in which social, cultural, and moral issues were free of complexity and satisfyingly comfortable in their reassurances of the good life. To oppose this apparently naïve perception of the village, writers of the so-called “revolt” offered instead a “realistic interpretation of the town, emphasizing its moral repressiveness and stultifying conformity, and protesting its standardized dullness.” Austin’s suggestion that, unlike Lewis, she can find the “end of the rainbow” in the American small town might indicate that Austin’s position in the discourse of the “village” would place her on the side of those who favor the small town in all its supposed heroic simplicity. Indeed, the utopian vision of Las Uvas, which closes The Land of Little Rain, would lead one to suspect Austin of being wholly enamored with the small town mystique. It is thus understandable that, in amplifying his arguments regarding the revolt from the village in Contemporary American Novelists, Carl Van Doren only briefly mentions Austin’s interest in depicting the complexity of urban and city life, favoring her instead for her talents as a portrait of the desert.

This, then, is Austin’s reputation as we have it today: Austin the nature writer, Austin the desert dweller, Austin the Carmel colony mystic. In none of these incarnations does Austin the social commentator come through with any clarity, and, as a consequence, neither do Austin’s relatively complex and ambivalent attitudes about the village/small town. Lewis’ ambivalence has become a well-documented, recognizable feature of works such as Main Street; Austin, it might likewise be noted, shared these feelings both in kind and in degree. In an article written for The New Republic in 1922, she asserts that “Such a novel as Main Street should sustain itself a long time as a record of our discovery of the Community as villain, or, if you feel as some of us do toward its leading lady, as hero.” By allowing that the community can be both villain and hero, Austin offers in a nutshell the two sides of a very ambivalent coin, those which herald the small town simultaneously as a communal ideal and as a stultifying, repressive force. Austin’s literary villages also reflect this ambivalence. On the one hand, she provides in The Land of Little Rain perhaps the most idealized, utopian vision of a desert community on record, El Pueblo de Las Uvas—a celebrated small town that Van Doren somehow missed, despite his immense respect for the book. On the other hand, in A Woman of Genius (1912), Austin is equally interested in exploring what her narrator Olivia
Lattimore identifies as the problem of a talented woman's struggle against the villainous "social ideal of Taylorville, Ohianna." By questioning the "ideal" of a small town but not necessarily the town itself, Austin enters fully into the highly charged turn-of-the-century debate about the merits of small-town life. Her contributions, particularly with respect to the turning of a realistic narrative voice toward the sardonic and satiric, will, in turn, advance the "revolt from the village" to the point at which Lewis picks it up, as well as beyond.

Mary Austin's most obvious contribution to the "revolt from the village" is *A Woman of Genius*, and, indeed, this novel is frequently, albeit briefly, connected with *Main Street* in discussions of Lewis and Austin. Written eight years before *Main Street* and during the time when the two novelists were presumably forging their friendship, *A Woman of Genius* bears quite directly on Lewis's subsequent work in a number of significant ways. For one, it tells the story of a woman's battle, as already mentioned, against "the social ideal of Taylorville, Ohianna" (*WOG* 4). Recounting a path similar to that of Dreiser's Carrie Meeber, Austin's village-bred narrator, Olivia Lattimore, tells of being forced to choose between a professional life as a successful tragic actress in New York and a love life complete with marriage and a fulfilling realization of sexuality. More precisely, the conflict in *A Woman of Genius* is about being simultaneously a woman and a genius. Near the end of the novel, when she looks back upon her one great love, which she was forced to forego in favor of her professional life, Lattimore laments:

We did not know any but theatrical people among whom the wife had interests apart from her husband. That is where Taylorville betrayed us. And now you know what I meant when I said in the beginning that the social ideal, in which I was bred, is the villain of my plot; for we wished sincerely for the best, and the best that we knew was cast only in one mould [sic]. (*WOG* 266)

In other words, for Olivia Lattimore, the culture in which she grew up and lived simply could not entertain the possibility of a woman's having both a marriage and a career. Similarly, Lewis' Carol Kennicott, while certainly no artist, would have the same trouble negotiating her way around her twin desires to be a wife and a social meliorist, as the occasion of her trip to Washington, D.C., indicates. The extent to which Austin dramatizes this conflict between marriage and career is perhaps unique among the other texts in the "revolt from the village" canon; it is most certainly so prior to the publication three years later, in 1915, of Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*.

Just as Carol Kennicott crystallizes a particular character type, namely the small town woman who battles for a fulfilling life in her small town
setting, so does Austin's creation in Olivia Lattimore present the full realization of a similar type. Esther Lanigan Stineman suggests in her biography of Austin that Austin's chief motivation for writing *A Woman of Genius* lay in her desire to "answer" the literary depiction of a woman given in *Martin Eden*, Jack London's 1909 *Künstlerroman*. Stineman writes: "Austin carried on a long-term and lively debate with London about women in fiction. In the character of Ruth Morse in *Martin Eden*, he provided an example of the 'new woman' that she fought against portraying in her own work." The method here, as it has been in most discussions of *A Woman of Genius*, is to consider Austin's fiction, as innovative as it may be, in the context of how Austin reshapes and reconfigures earlier material. No doubt Austin did work off the available codes for the representation of an intelligent and outgoing woman as she received them from antecedents such as Hamlin Garland's *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1901), and London (as would Lewis, in his portrayal of Carol). However, it would be equally beneficial to consider what Austin has to offer to the "revolt from the village," to consider what her works contribute that hadn't yet been done. In the case of *A Woman of Genius*, Austin introduces into this sub-genre a first-person narrator with wit, intelligence, and the occasional sardonic turn of phrase. Austin, in short, gives us a novelistic narrator whose rhetorical strategies are eventually taken up by Sinclair Lewis. Prior to 1920, Lewis' reputation was that of an earnest and serious Realist whose prose only occasionally exhibited a "palatable satiric touch." As he began in 1918 to compose the first drafts of *Main Street*, though, Lewis no doubt had before him the example of the stylistic and rhetorical strategies employed by one of America's most well-known and best-selling authors on the agony of small town life.

Roughly one quarter of the way into *A Woman of Genius*, Olivia Lattimore comments: "What society fails to understand, or dishonestly fails to admit, is that marriage as an act is not invariably the stroke that ushers in the experience of being married" (WOG 81). Remarkably, at little more than one-fourth of the way into *Main Street*, Lewis has Carol Kennicott ponder, however less elegantly, a notably similar idea. Having just had her first serious flirtation with the attorney Guy Pollock, Carol wonders in conflict as she heads for home, "They say that marriage is a magic change. But I'm not changed." Perhaps the most striking plot parallel between the two novels, however, must be the depiction of a party given by the new woman in town for some of the townspeople. Upon arriving with her husband Tommy Wettersworth in a town called Higgleston, Olivia Lattimore attempts to garner the friendship of the town's leading women. She recalls:

I began wrongly in the first place by asking the Higgleston ladies to tea. Afternoon tea was unheard of in Higgleston, and I had forgotten, or perhaps I had never learned, that in Higgleston you

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couldn't do anything different without implying dissatisfaction with things as they were.... My invitations read from four to five, and the Higgleston ladies came solidly within the minute and departed in phalanxes upon the stroke of five. They all wore their best things, which, from the number of black silks included, and black kid gloves not quite pulled on at the finger tips, gave the affair almost a funereal atmosphere. (WOG 98)

Once in her parlor, Olivia’s guests “sat about the room against the wall,” unmoving and unimpressed by the event. Similarly, then, does Sinclair Lewis describe Carol’s first entrance into Gopher Prairie society at a party where, upon her entrance into the house, she notices the guests “sitting in a vast prim circle as though they were attending a funeral” (MS 36). At Carol’s own party, given several weeks later, she is dismayed to discover that, while some of the guests playfully engage in the games Carol initiates, “half of the company were sitting back against the walls, where they had craftily remained throughout the engagement” (MS 70). It would in all likelihood be a bit of a stretch to impugn Lewis of directly borrowing descriptive passages in order to depict similar scenes. The parallels do suggest, however, that Lewis had read his friend’s novel and had absorbed a good deal of its imagery and denotative language in the process.

Beyond being suggestive of the plot and thematic elements of Main Street, Austin’s novel provides a glimpse of a particular style of narration that Lewis eventually adapts to his own rhetorical purposes, namely the practice of Ironic Capitalization.22 The use of capitalization to draw attention to a character’s vocabulary as being somehow “official” dogma or, more to the point, a meaningless discursive shortcut is, of course, a technique Lewis would perfect in 1922 with the publication of Babbitt. In that novel, for instance, the title character is shown donning “his uniform as a Solid Citizen” and speaking

sonorously of Unselfish Public Service, the Broker’s Obligation to Keep Inviolate the Trust of His Clients, and a thing called Ethics, whose nature was confusing but if you had it you were a High-class Realtor and if you hadn’t you were a shyster, a piker, a fly-by-night. These virtues awakened Confidence, and enabled you to handle Bigger Propositions.23

Such instances of what George Babbitt calls a vocabulary with a “punch” reveal, via the promotion of abstract terms to capitalized importance, that their user frequently fails to grasp any substantive meaning in the words beyond their significance as stirring catch-phrases. And while Babbitt is rich with such examples, Main Street as well occasionally tests this technique, particularly in the service of satirizing provincial dogmatism.
Nat Hicks is the official Gopher Prairie joke teller who is always ready with a “New One” (MS 402). Carol’s habit of buying books instead of borrowing them from the library is to her husband, who has been “worrying about it for two or three years,” one of her “Funny Ideas ... from which she would never entirely recover” (MS 238). And Carol herself is described as ultimately deciding to rage not against individuals but rather at “institutions [that] insinuate their tyranny under a hundred guises and pompous names, such as Polite Society, the Family, the Church, Sound Business, the Party, the Country, the Superior White Race” (MS 387). Through capitalization, Lewis suggests that terms such as those listed above have taken on a universally recognized definition among their users, a condition that deadens the terms and strips them of the possibility of containing dynamic and mutable meanings (Nat Hicks’ jokes are, in all likelihood, neither “New” nor funny, except perhaps to those Gopher Prairieans who enjoy hearing the same thing over and over).

Mary Austin puts this narrative technique to occasional satiric use in *A Woman of Genius*, ten years prior to its fullest achievement in *Babbitt*. In one notable instance, Olivia Lattimore describes the eating habits of her country cousins by recalling that “my mother’s relations did things with their knives and neglected others with their forks that were not done in circles that by virtue of just such observances, got themselves called Good Society” (*WOG* 28). The subdued but unmistakably sardonic tone of this passage aims at a wide field, for Austin’s language not only lampoons Olivia’s cousins for their crude table manners but also effectively brings into comic relief those people who may think that proper utensil usage represents the apotheosis of “Good Society” behavior. The result of Austin’s capitalization of “Good Society,” then, is a narrative voice that deprecates equally the lowly country cousins and the pretentious, self-styled aristocracy of Higgleston. *A Woman of Genius* employs this rhetorical strategy on other occasions as well, such as during a discussion about Tommy Betterworth’s frustrated job prospects in economically depressed Higgleston. Lattimore’s husband, it seems, suffers under the simplistic “supposition that Capitalists ... never meant what they said. Capitalists were always talking of hard times” (*WOG* 102) and, as a result, he is unable to grasp the truth of his employer’s rationale for laying him off. In such a manner does Austin indicate the practice of over-generalization that masks tiny Higgleston’s inability to understand the complexities of entrepreneurial rhetoric.

Austin’s 1917 novel *The Ford* directs an ironic use of capitalization toward the puncturing of a small town mythos even more pointedly, by employing the technique to indicate the moral vacuum that blinds a town’s members to any wrongdoing in their mistreatment of a government water-rights inspector. Austin writes, with a hint of sarcasm, that “It is rather fine, that exalted cult of Locality, by which so much is forgiven so long as it is done in the name of the Good of the Town.”234 Austin can thus be seen on
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several occasions playing with the rhetorical approach that would later serve Lewis in his own scathing critique of the moral and visionary shortcomings inherent in small-town America.

Austin’s occasional, subtle use of a sardonic and bitingly humorous narrator dates to her earliest writings, particularly to “Jimville—A Bret Harte Town,” a sketch first published in 1902 by The Atlantic Monthly and collected the next year in The Land of Little Rain. This sketch represents another of Austin’s contributions to the turn-of-the-century interrogation of small-town wholesomeness and serves as another point of topical and rhetorical reference for Main Street. Austin largely refrains in this sketch from describing the physical layout of Jimville, focusing instead on the effect that the “elemental violence” of the surrounding Eastern Sierras has had on the town’s community of naïve, brutish miners. What little description she does provide, however, hints at a shoddy, ramshackle place that has lurched and stuttered into existence: “The town looks to have spilled out of Squaw Gulch, and that, in fact, is the sequence of its growth.... Squaw Gulch is a very sharp, steep, ragged-walled ravine, and that part of Jimville which is built in it has only one street,—in summer paved with bone-white cobbles, in the wet months a frothy yellow flood.” Along this street, “solitary small cabins” share the view with “tin cans and packing cases.” Finally, “there are three hundred inhabitants in Jimville and four bars, though you are not to argue anything from that” (LOLR 68). Indeed, a reader would be hard pressed not to infer from this description that Jimville represents the ugly side of frontier behavior.

Similarly, Carol Kennicott’s famous eye-opening first encounter with Gopher Prairie is depicted in the following way:

Main Street with its two-story brick shops, its story-and-a-half wooden residences, its muddy expanse from concrete walk to walk, its huddle of Fords and lumber-wagons, was too small to absorb her. The broad, straight, unenticing gashes of the streets let in the grasping prairie on every side. She realized the vastness and the emptiness of the land. The skeleton iron windmill on the farm a few blocks away, at the north end of Main Street, was like the ribs of a dead cow. She thought of the coming of the Northern winter, when the unprotected houses would crouch together in terror of storms galloping out of that wild waste. They were so small and weak, the little brown houses. They were shelters for sparrows, not homes for warm laughing people. (MS 29)

All the elements of Jimville are here: the mud, the “gashing” feeling of the unfriendly surrounding landscape, the industrial detritus, the uninviting little houses, and, by implication, the emotional and intellectual poverty of the inhabitants. Again, while it might not be wholly accurate to claim that
Lewis was thinking of Jimville when he sketched the details of Gopher Prairie, Lewis does undoubtedly join Austin in describing a familiar literary type within the context of the “revolt from the village.”

*Main Street* further shares with Austin’s “Jimville” sketch a concern for deflating what both authors perceive as the literary romance of the frontier. Austin’s narrator claims that, “If it had been in medieaval times you would have had a legend or a ballad. Bret Harte would have given you a tale. You see in me a mere recorder” (*LOLR* 68). She thereby reassures her audience that hers will be a much more realistic and, hence, largely unflattering depiction. And Chapter 1 of *Main Street* opens, after the epigraph, “On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas camped two generations ago.” From here, after describing the notably trite and banal thoughts a young Carol Kennicott has as she stands atop this rise, Lewis writes that, “The days of pioneering, of lassies in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings, are deader now than Camelot” (*MS* 1). Tactically similar to Austin’s dismissal of Harte-like romance, Lewis also raises the issue of medieval romance with the expressed intent of calling into question the representational value of such a discourse. In other words, he too is interested in acting the Realist who will puncture the prevailing myth. Moreover, a significant element of *Main Street* is the degree to which Carol Kennicott shares in those romantic myths about the frontier. Hurting toward Gopher Prairie for the first time as the new bride of Dr. Will Kennicott, Carol fights an oncoming depression by looking out the train window, “to look at the prairie objectively.” What she sees are farmlands that were “turned into exuberance by the light. The sunshine was dizzy on open stubble … and the sky was wider and loftier and more resolutely blue than the sky of cities.” To this vision Carol exclaims “It’s a glorious country; a land to be big in.” Lewis chooses this moment to bring Carol down from her airy perch by having Doc Kennicott announce that they are getting close to Gopher Prairie. Carol’s next emotion, as Lewis describes it, is fear. And it is in this mood, with the bubble of her sublime vision of the landscape burst by the mention of the word “home,” that Carol arrives in Gopher Prairie and sees “a frontier camp. It was not a place to live in, not possibly, not conceivably” (*MS* 22–23). Carol’s wished-for romantic landscape thus begins to give way to Lewis’ uglier, satirical rendition of Gopher Prairie.

Finally, “Jimville” is instructive of more than just thematic congruencies, for it also provides the clearest instance of Austin’s assumption of the satirist’s position. When Austin assures that, “You see in me a mere recorder,” she concludes the sentence by adding, in virtually the same breath, “for I know what is best for you; you shall blow out this bubble from your own breath” (*LOLR* 68). With this assertion, Austin claims for herself the classic stance of the Horatian satirist, the wise, pithy, often ironic and somewhat aloof observer of a scene who promises with wry amusement to elevate hypocrisy and folly to the level of the ridiculous. This distinction
resolves largely on a definition of **direct satire**, in which the narrative persona addresses an audience directly with an opinion. Within this form, particularly as it was perfected in the English language by Pope, Dryden, and Johnson, there exist two classically influenced models, from which Austin draws primarily on that deriving from Horace. Notably, while Horatian satire is marked by irony and a certain degree of wise urbanity, it frequently subjects the speaker to the same mockery leveled at its victims, a particular tactic which Austin’s does not employ. Austin’s satiric tone is nonetheless largely Horatian, for Juvenalian satire, the other method of direct-address narrative, is marked by more overtly abusive, indignant, and invective-laden rhetoric. Needless to say, such a style hardly characterizes Austin’s work.

In his informative discussion of the function of satire in *Babbitt*, Glen Love affirms that

> If realism focuses on the way things are, satire operates in the considerable and lamentable gulf between how things are and how they should be. . . . For the satirist is always possessed of a discriminating moral sense, a perception of an ideal, which, although it may never be overtly present or even stated, nevertheless powerfully exists as the implied opposite of the stupidity and arrogance that is rampant in the world actually portrayed.27

In an article on “The Pioneer Myth” published four months after *Main Street*, Lewis uses the novel’s figure of Sam Clark in a humorous denunciation of America’s cultural belief in its glorious pioneer roots. However, Lewis is quick to distinguish himself from those who would attack “everything American,” preferring instead to see his satiric vision as arising “from a love of Main Street, from a belief in Main Street’s power, a belief so strong that the writer is not willing . . . to insult America by believing that we are all so commonplace that we can find romance only by making believe. . . .”28 The ideal to which Lewis’ satire gestures is, apparently, very much within reach. With a similar sense of mission, Austin describes small-town shortcomings such as the debauchery of Jimville’s male citizens, whose “improprieties had a certain sanction of long standing not accorded to the gay ladies” (*LOLR* 69). Thus does her narrator make evident the double standard that holds the town’s women to a much stricter ethic of sexual behavior than it does its men. In contrast to this mining camp “that does not know a great deal about the crust of the earth” and that strains under “the perfectly accepted instinct which includes passion and death” (*LOLR* 71, 72), the final section of *The Land of Little Rain* offers, as a curative counterexample, the harmonious life available in the Little Town of the Grape Vines (Las Uvas). In each instance of sarcastic deflation the narrator clearly has in mind a better alternative, about which she “know[s] best,”
to the examples of human community offered by the small town of Jimville. Armed with this strong sense of propriety, Austin describes both what is and, by implication, what ought to be.

While Sinclair Lewis' satiric technique is best understood as indirect satire, a form in which folly is not directly excoriated but rather dramatized and, hence, allowed to speak for itself, Lewis nevertheless shares with Austin the satirist's imperative to "know what is best." Significantly, Lewis' first draft of *Main Street* contains a first-person narrator who bears a decidedly cynical and sarcastic tone. In other words, *Main Street* was initially composed as direct satire. The typescript draft of the novel contains a remarkable number of narrative digressions in which the narrator's first-person voice inveighs satirically against a variety of topics. The YMCA, advertising, jazz orchestras, Christian Science, the Republican Party, Baptists, New Thought, spiritualism, "other forms of mothball-scented metaphysics, the mumbo-jumbo of 'lodges,'" all receive bitter denunciations. Several of the narrator's mini-polemics deride, in Juvenalian form, the myth of the pioneer, asserting that America has become an authentic democracy, with the poet, the oaf, and the potential financier yoked in service. But it also produces that democracy of the spirit which is called mediocrity. The physical democracy has disappeared. The millionaire and the yokel and the artist no longer work together. But the spiritual mediocrity persists, as the symbol and result of a condition now dead.

In revising his initial drafts, Lewis deleted virtually all such invective-rich, first person speeches. But whatever else might be said about Lewis' first-draft typescript, it most certainly presents a narrator who presumes to "know best what is best for you," a narrator whose first-person attack derives in part from Olivia Lattimore's rhetorical strategies and whose moral imperative to crush the frontier myth stems from precedent-setting works such as "Jimville." That Lewis tempered this initial rhetorical approach, redirecting much of the satire indirectly through Carol's slowly evolving consciousness, is testimony to Lewis' particular talents as a social commentator and a Realist.

Never quite achieving the Swiftian provocation of the mocking, painful laughter commonly associated with satire, Austin's prose nevertheless exhibits a sardonic and presumptuous tone and draws extensively on the techniques of distortion and bubble-bursting familiar to satire. And the differences in style, narrative focus, and sarcastic overtones between Austin's and her friend's respective works may finally be attributable to differing tastes and temperaments. However, at one point late in her career Austin complained to Henry Seidel Canby, her friend and editor at the *Saturday Review of Literature*, that "I have never yet let myself go completely in the
direction of satire, sarcasm, irony; those directions in which women flash occasionally but take no sustained note. I doubt, should I indulge what I believe to be a really handsome talent for invective, if I could ever get it printed. As a Woman of Genius may not be as rhetorically scathing an indictment of middle-class provincialism as Main Street is, nor may “Jimville” be as insightful into the creative and moral torpor that plagues those guilty of Babbittry. However, Austin’s self-aware reflection on the low market and cultural value of a woman who writes direct satire suggests that any differences between her and Lewis may be reliably accounted for by Austin’s cautious response to the limited rhetorical means available to her.

Austin’s career as a revolutionary from the village is marked by a remarkable number of turns, ranging from her efforts to debunk mythologizing representations of the Western small town to her valorization of a regional, communitarian ethic, from her initial attempts at crafting a female narrative consciousness to her later experiments in doing the same with a male consciousness. Consistent throughout much of this writing is Austin’s narrative persona, a voice heavily inflected with a sardonic, wise, erudite, often obfuscatory but always engaging tone, a voice in which the satirical elements that Sinclair Lewis borrowed, adapted, and ultimately made famous frequently come into play. As an American novelist working during the first thirty years of the twentieth century, Austin thus makes a number of important contributions to the literature of the village. Among them are her renditions of the character type for which Carol Kennicott eventually entered the lexicon, namely the Midwestern small-town woman who has aspirations, overly-ambitious or otherwise, to something called culture. Significantly, Austin makes this contribution by concurrently introducing the rhetorical approach and tone of the satirist into the discourse known as the “revolt from the village.”

It might seem unfortunately ironic that Main Street became, for Austin, a central touchstone in her literary criticism, while her contributions to crystallizing much of what Lewis achieved in his satire of the small town have largely gone unnoticed. This would almost certainly be the case if one considers authorship in the more traditional sense of the author as well-spring from which ideas emerge sui generis. From such a point of view, Sinclair Lewis, the most successful of the “revolt from the village” generation, wins by virtue of doing it best and, by inference, by seemingly inventing a form unique to himself. In the exchange of letters excerpted at the head of this essay, Austin appears to interpret Lewis’ defense of the decision to convey Carol’s sexuality exclusively in terms of the stories that a man can (or refuses to) recount as evidence of Lewis’ belief that his authorship of Carol was generative. In response, Austin hints, with characteristic sarcasm, that an author not so much creates characters as gathers the stories, feelings, and beliefs of familiar people, thereby reorganizing and re-presenting the material through prose. Following Austin’s lead, we might
very well see Lewis not only as the creator of *Main Street* but also as a gatherer of Main Street's stories, a role that invariably includes the gathering of rhetorical forms appropriate to the project of satirizing village provincialism. Understood in such a manner, Mary Austin's role in the history of literary Realism is that of a significant contributor, for she provides a number of the thematic and rhetorical forms that help shift the discourse about the small town from sentimental celebration to ambivalent satire. To put it more directly, there would be no Sinclair Lewis as we know him without Mary Austin.

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Notes


5. Henry Smith, "'The Feel of the Purposeful Earth: Mary Austin's Prophecy,' *New Mexico Quarterly*, 1 (Feb. 1931), 17–18.


7. An assertion like this, of course, should not go wholly unqualified. Recent studies such as John P. O'Grady's *Pilgrims to the Wild* (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 1993) and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1995) assume as their chief methodological tactic the attempt to show Austin's reworking of American nature writing and pastoral conventions. Similarly, see Faith Jaycox, "Regeneration Through Liberation: Mary Austin's 'The Walking Woman' and Western Narrative Formula," *Legacy: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Women*, 6 (Mar. 1989), 5–12, for a discussion of Austin's rewriting of traditional western narrative formulae. And in their respective discussions of Austin's *A Woman of Genius* (1912) and *Starry Adventure* (1931), Stineman and Mark Schlenz ("Rhetorics of Region in *Starry Adventure* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," in *Regionalism Reconsidered: New Approaches to the Field*, ed. David Jordan [New York & London: Garland, 1994], pp. 65–86) see these novels primarily as responses, respectively, to Jack London's *Martin Eden* (1909) and Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). This is not to say that such discussions are not insightful or valuable. However, they only cover one half of the influence continuum. Of the numerous studies of Austin recently published, only Melody Graulich ("The Short Stories," *Western Trails: A Collection of Short Stories by Mary Austin* [Reno: Univ. of Nevada Press, 1987]) and Carl Bredahl (*New Ground: Western American Narrative and the Literary Canon* [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989]) attempt...
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in any substantive way to establish Austin as an influence on later writers. Graulich briefly touches on Austin's impact on the likes of Lewis, Cather, Jean Toomer, and Sherwood Anderson (pp. 13, 23), while Bredahl considers in some detail how Austin's episodic technique in The Land of Little Rain (1903)—"divided narrative" he calls it—had been taken up by Anderson and Ernest Hemingway (pp. 49–67).


10. Letter, Austin to Lewis, 12 Dec. 1920, Sinclair Lewis Collection, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

11. A great deal of positive and insightful work has been done recently to show how Austin fits into the literary legacy of writers such as Frances Harper, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Mourning Dove, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton and even Gertrude Stein. See in particular Elizabeth Ammons, Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991); also, Marjorie Pryse, "Introduction," Stories from the Country of Lost Borders (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1987), pp. vii–xxviii. While such work has succeeded in calling into question the pejorative label of "women regionalists," it has yet to consider in any depth Austin's relationship to the writings of her male contemporaries, i.e., to the men in her list.

12. The standard text on this topic is still Anthony Hilfer's The Revolt from the Village, 1925–1930 (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969), which includes a chapter on Willa Cather's variegated depictions of the small town and a section on Zona Gale's Miss Lulu Bett (1921).

13. Hilfer, p. 3.


22. This phrase, as it can be applied to Lewis, comes from Glen Love's Babbitt: An American Life, Twayne's Masterwork Studies (New York: Twayne, 1993), p. 45.


26. Thanks to Glen Love for suggesting this particular comparison.


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29. See chapter 1 of Hutchisson's *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis*, pp. 9–46, for a thorough reconstruction of Lewis' composition of *Main Street*, including an extensive discussion of the differences between the extant typescript drafts and the published text.
30. From the typescript of *Main Street*, quoted in Hutchisson, pp. 30–32.
31. Letter, Mary Austin to Henry Seidel Canby, 1 April 1930 (item AU1076); printed by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
32. On Austin's configuration of a female narrative consciousness, particularly in texts such as *The Land of Little Rain* and *Lost Borders* (1909), see Ammons; Jaycox; Stineman, esp. 106–113; and Cynthia Taylor, "Claiming Female Space: Mary Austin's Western Landscape," in *The Big Empty: Essays on Western Landscapes as Narrative*, ed. Leonard Engel (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1994), pp. 119–132. Melody Graulich demonstrates in her "Afterword" to a recent reprint of *Earth Horizon* how Austin strove to formulate throughout much of her career a "distinctly feminine approach to intellectual problems" ("Afterword: A Book You Can Walk Around In," *Earth Horizon*, p. 391). Austin's attempts to craft a male narrative consciousness is not nearly as thoroughly explored. Austin's novella *Cactus Thorn* (Reno: Univ. of Nevada Press, 1988) explores the "woman as nature" metaphor arguably from the narrative point of view of the story's lead male character; and *Starry Adventure* (1931) limns the sexual coming of age of Gard Sitwell, the primary male character, through the frequent and daring use of a second-person narration.
33. See, for example, Austin's "The American Form of the Novel" and "Regionalism in American Fiction," *English Journal*, 21 (Feb. 1932), 97–107.