

TEACHING SINCLAIR LEWIS

IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE IN THE CLASSROOM (OR CAN IT?)

By Robert L. McLaughlin
Illinois State University

I have been teaching *It Can't Happen Here* in my "Literary Analysis I: Prose Fiction" course at Illinois State University. As one of two courses designed to introduce new majors to the discipline of English Studies, this course has many demands placed on it by the English Department: students are to become familiar with techniques and terminology for reading and interpreting prose literature, with research tools and methods in literary criticism, with the formal and rhetorical conventions of writing about literature, and with the various critical theories in which the study of literature can be grounded. Interestingly, it is in this last area that *It Can't Happen Here* proves particularly useful. Read at the beginning of the semester, it serves as a touchstone for our discussions of literary theory over the next several weeks.

I organize my course around a history of literary theory in the twentieth century. Readings (from Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* and K.M. Newton's *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*) and class discussions about theory are illustrated by fiction texts, and writing assignments ask students to apply specific theories to their readings of specific texts.

It Can't Happen Here, with its Depression-era setting, speculations about the 1936 election, and proposed fascist takeover of the U.S. Government, introduces the theories and methods of the Old Historicism. I begin our examination of the text with handouts and informal lectures on Lewis's life and career. We read the Nobel Prize address and talk about his ideas on literature and the purpose of studying literature. We learn about the issues that concerned Lewis in his other novels. I especially stress his continuing concern that the reality of America never lives up to the ideals of its origins. As part of our discussion of the novel, students present to the class the results of assigned research projects on such topics as fascism, the Great Depression, Huey Long, and Fr. Coughlin. The writing project attached to the novel is an annotated bibliography for which the students must summarize and react to the chapter on *It Can't Happen Here* in Mark Schorer's *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* and other literary criticism on Lewis they find on their own.

We end our discussion by using the text to deal with the issue of the Old Historicism. I ask them to decide, considering the things we learned about Lewis and the 1930s time period, how the text is most valuable: as a window on the past which tells about American life 60 years ago or about Lewis the man; as a text that speaks to and about America today; or as a text that speaks to and about all times and places. Opinions are usually divided pretty equally (though in this Perot-filled election year almost everyone made the case for the novel's relevance), and the supporting arguments provide a context and a starting point for our exploration of the purpose of literature and of literary studies.

We spend the next part of the semester learning, talking, and writing about the New Criticism and Reader-Response theories. For the midterm exam, I ask the students to define and compare the two theories so as to identify the positive and negative aspects of each. I suggest that one approach for doing this would be to ask how each theory would deal with *It Can't Happen Here*. I remind them that Schorer's New Critical interpretive premises led him to conclude that "it is futile to approach any Lewis novel as a work of art" (355). Many students conclude that it would be difficult to see the novel as an "organic whole," considering its loose and baggy structure and prose style. Similarly, they find it difficult to reconcile the New Critics' desire to find universal meaning in the particular with Lewis's intention to write about the specific situation in America in 1935; the fuzziness which results from an attempt to "universalize" the novel's meaning seems less interesting than the sharpness of Lewis's specific criticism. The students also learn a lesson in the politics of the canon when they realize that Lewis's fall from academic respect is linked with the rise of the New Criticism in English Departments. Reader-Response seems more valuable for dealing with the novel's structure; the students become conscious of the work they had to do as readers to make sense of the text: the point of view changing from an omniscient narrator to a narrator limited to Doremus Jessup's consciousness; the plot events occurring on the national level and the Fort Beulah level; the chronology in which dead characters are resurrected for episodes that occur earlier on the novel's time line. But having learned so much about Lewis and his intentions for the novel, they find it difficult to think of themselves as the seat of meaning for the text. And those who think that Reader-Response criticism wants the reader to relate the text to their own experiences have a hard time relating to events so long ago.

We leave *It Can't Happen Here* while we discuss structuralism, semiotics, and deconstruction, but we find it a good example once again when we turn to contemporary attempts to repoliticize literary criticism in the wake of poststructuralism. Our attention here becomes focused on discourse analysis. Using a Bakhtinian approach, I argue that specific discourses are manifestations of specific ideological belief systems. In prose fiction these discourses are used not just for the transmission of information but as objects of representation themselves; that is, the discourses and their associated ideological belief systems become what the text is about. A novel, then, is a battleground wherein various discourses are put into conflict so that they and their belief systems can be defined, examined, and critiqued. This complex approach to literature becomes easier for the students by returning to Lewis and *It Can't Happen Here*. They

see that Lewis's talents for mimicry and satire have allowed him to reproduce languages and styles of speaking that are associated with specific ideological positions and to exaggerate them enough to make them subject to the reader's criticism. The students find that just in the first chapter (the Fort Beulah Rotary Club meeting) the discourses and belief systems of General Edgeways, Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch (the Fort Beulah business community), represented by Francis Tasbrough, Lorinda Pike, and Doremus Jessup can be clearly identified and defined; in fact, the conflict of the chapter (which foreshadows the conflict of the novel) is defined entirely by the use of battling discourses.

My point, then, is that Lewis's novel is relevant not only in its subject matter, the critique of American society, but also in its theoretical underpinnings. In essence, my course becomes a search for how to read *It Can't Happen Here*. The solution, discourse analysis, is a good model for reading all prose texts, is defined in terms of the difficult questions poststructuralism asks about authorship and meaning, and is a way of demonstrating the vital political importance of the study of literature. ♦

Works Cited

- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983.
- Lewis, Sinclair. *It Can't Happen Here*. 1935. New York: Signet, 1970.
- Newton, K.M., ed. *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*. London: Macmillan, 1988.
- Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961.
- Anyone who has successfully taught a Sinclair Lewis novel or short story is invited to submit a short essay for consideration for publication. Please use MLA style. Send to the Sinclair Lewis Society, c/o 4240 Department of English, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61761-6901.*