

TEACHING SINCLAIR LEWIS

USING STUDENTS AS EXPERTS

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One of the challenges to be met when teaching Sinclair Lewis is the amount of detail he put into his writing to create a specific socio-historical context. Popular songs, movies, and authors, as well as politicians, philosophers, and poets appear with regularity in his novels. Although this certainly indicates Lewis was well read and that his references correlate with his characters' economic and intellectual attainments or at least comment on them, this denseness of allusion can prove daunting to students. They may feel distanced from a text that seems to create obstacles to understanding.

However, empowering students to become experts on a certain topic or theme in Lewis's works gives them valuable contextual knowledge and makes them feel in control of the text, enough so to be willing to discuss complexities in light of their specialized knowledge. For example, while teaching *It Can't Happen Here* in connection with last November's election, I assigned individual students topics ranging from the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe and the United States to politicians and celebrities like Huey Long, Theodore Bilbo, Father Coughlin, and Upton Sinclair. Each student presented to the class the efforts of her or his research and was called upon to explain references within the text to her or his topic. Sometimes this meant that students picked up sarcastic asides that they might otherwise have missed, other times the research provided a deeper understanding of the political situation that Doremus Jessup found himself in. Since the presidential campaign was running simultaneously with our reading of the novel, the interrelatedness gave students reasons to question the concerns of a populace eager to turn to a third party populist candidate, especially one whose physical description was so close to Buzz Windrip's.

For *Main Street* this semester topics were again assigned on such themes as women in the pre-World War I era, the Chatauqua Circuit, H. L. Mencken and the revolt from the village movement, and isolationist and anti-German sentiment during World War I. These topics gave students some grounding in ways to understand Carol Kennicott and her insulated life in Gopher Prairie. One of my nontraditional students actually remembered attending Chatauqua meetings and seeing a production of *Peg O' My Heart*. Her closeness to the events in the novel gave students a unique insight into midwestern life of fifty years ago.

Allowing students to lay claim to expertise in areas of culture and history gives them a more vital interest in the novels of Lewis. It is understood that they are resources in their specific area and can be called upon at any point in the discussion of a text to provide commentary and insight. The classroom becomes less teacher-centered and more student-centered, providing for a richer learning experience. ♦