

TEACHING SINCLAIR LEWIS

Getting *Kingsblood Royal*

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The biggest challenge in teaching *Kingsblood Royal*, Sinclair Lewis's 1947 novel about race relations in the United States, is getting a hold of enough copies of the book. (*Kingsblood* and *Cass Timberlane* [1945] are the only really important Lewis novels still out of print. Are there any publishers in the house?) Luckily, so many copies of Random House's initial edition and the book club edition were sold (1.5 million, according to Mark Schorer) that they can be found in used bookstores rather easily. Our local bookseller, Brian Simpson of Babbitt's (!) Books, was nice enough to gather 25 copies for my class.

Kingsblood Royal is set in 1945 and focuses on wounded World War II vet Neil Kingsblood, who, at his father's urging, starts to research his family tree. He discovers that his maternal great-great-grandfather was "a full-blooded Negro," and he immediately starts to think of himself as black. Realizing that he knows nothing about African-Americans, Neil cultivates the friendship of some of Grand Republic's blacks, and before long he has admitted his ancestry to them, then to his family, and finally to the entire community. As a result, most of his family and white friends turn against him. Neil loses his cushy bank job and cannot find another that he can keep for long. His wife, Vestal, considers leaving him and having an abortion so as not to have "a black baby." His father dies from a heart attack. When his neighborhood association tries to force Neil to sell his house, he resists, and in the climactic scene he, Vestal, and a few friends, black and white, defend the house against a mob. After Neil shoots three of his former friends and neighbors, the police arrive, arresting him and Vestal.

I taught *Kingsblood Royal* at the end of a survey course, American Literature: 1920-1945 (OK, I fudged on the dates). In the first half of the semester we looked at the aesthetic experiments of the high modernists; in the second half we read texts that comment on social conditions and self-consciously seek social reform. My challenge to the students was to explore the ways in which the aesthetic and theoretical concerns of the modernists are connected to, overlap with, or allow us to understand in a different way the social and ideological concerns of the social commentators. Our reading of *Kingsblood* (preceded by readings of Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*) was the climax of this exploration and allowed us to discuss and come to various conclusions about the issues of race, identity, discourse, and power.

Our discussion of the novel focused on four basic questions or problems. First, what do we do with the first chapter, in which the Blinghams, that obnoxious family from New York City, drive into Grand Republic, have lunch at the Fiesole Room, and then drive out of town and out of the novel? Without too much trouble the group decided that the chapter establishes the relativity of belief systems. The Blinghams are viciously mocked by the narrator for their New-York-centric worldview, in

which everything and everyone west of the Hudson is deemed inferior. The group noted that much of what we are told in the chapter is expressed in terms of what the Blinghams *don't* see; their prejudices act as blinders, keeping them from really seeing their surroundings. After reading on a bit, the students guessed that the chapter functions as a sort of overture, establishing the themes that will be developed in the novel. Specifically, just as the Blinghams' worldview can be attacked for its mean-spirited narrow-mindedness, the worldviews of the residents of Grand Republic might also be seen as arbitrary, relative, and potentially dangerous to others.

The second question is: Why does a 1/32 black ancestry lead Neil to assume he's black? Why does his entire sense of self change when he finds out? One student suggested that because of his intellectually and emotionally boring life, Neil, perhaps unconsciously, finds the idea of being something different, something (from his society's point of view) taboo, exciting and exotic. She noted Neil and Vestal's fascination with the social life of their black maid Belfreda and her boyfriend Borus Bugdoll; probably because of stereotypes, Neil and Vestal, for all their assumptions of superiority, are sexually excited by (respectively) Belfreda and Borus. Taking this farther, we were able to bring in some ideas from cultural anthropology. Neil's self-identity as a white man has been culturally constructed by means of oppositions to various groups classed as Other. For Neil, being white means being not-black; being mostly white and only a little black confuses him because it breaks down the oppositions that are necessary (he thinks) to have an identity. He must be all one or all the other. In this case being the Other, while potentially dangerous, is also the chance to break out of the culturally imposed limitations of his white identity.

The third question: Why does Neil come out? Why does he announce, first to friends in the black community, then to his family, and finally to the whole community, that he is black? This posed some problems for my students, just as it did for some initial reviewers and has for some subsequent literary critics. After some discussion, we reached a consensus that it is connected to Neil's growing sense of identity. That is, one's identity is very much a product of one's social relations: we know who we are because we are someone's child, someone's spouse, someone's parent, someone's friend; we know who we are because of our profession, what church we go to, what clubs we belong to, what political party we support. Neil has discarded his old sense of identity and learns that he must construct a new one. He does this by using his newly discovered status as a black man to establish new friendships. Then, as this new sense of identity becomes more solidified, he becomes less satisfied with the fiction he is living at the center of, a number of what he now sees as inaccurate business, social, and familial relationships. Thus his announcing his status as black man to his family and to the larger community—despite his having a good sense of the consequences—is part of a process of revising his various outward-reaching relationships to fit and make more stable his new sense of identity.

The fourth question: Why do Neil's friends and neighbors respond to his announcement as they do? Why is there a community-wide amnesia about his past and a certainty that through all the previous years, when he was "just like them," he was unfairly deceiving them? Prejudice is one thing, but are all these people morons? My students connected this to the second

question. Like Neil, the Grand Republic community (that is, the white community) defines itself by means of oppositions; thus Neil is either white like them or Other. Building on this and taking into account the novel's context—the postwar attempts to remove blacks from positions of empowerment and to deflate blacks' feelings of entitlement—we can see that these culturally constructed oppositions define not only identity but power in society. Neil, a white man according to his various social relations but one who claims to be black, becomes a deconstructive principle threatening the factitious oppositions that define the economic, political, and cultural status quo in Grand Republic and, by extension, the United States. He must be put down by the Grand Republic power elite because he shakes the intellectual foundations of their power and their status as elite.

Through all of this, I kept using passages from the novel to stress the function of discourse in these questions. Lewis's most important achievement in this novel, I think, is to capture the discourse of race in America with a self-consciousness of it *as* discourse. (With his typical lack of perception, Mark Schorer gripes that "The people of Grand Republic almost never talk of anything except the inadequacies of their Negro servants, or, if they do not have servants, of the inferiority of Negroes in general"; that's the point, Mark.) Power in the United States is grounded in social relations, relations that are based in culturally constructed assumptions, assumptions that are constructed by means of oppositions, all of which are articulated by means of language. Thus the prevalent discourses of race as used by those in power are fundamental to understanding how power is distributed between the races and, concomitantly, how society is structured. *Kingsblood Royal's* most basic message, I think, is that the prevalent discourses of race are inextricably interconnected with the social relations between the races; for these relations to improve, enough people—like Neil and, eventually, Vestal—need to find or construct new discourses of race. *Kingsblood Royal* seeks to make us conscious of the power of the discourse of race and to make available to us the new discourses we need to change our society.