# Elmer Gantry Study Guide

## Elmer Gantry by Sinclair Lewis

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# Introduction

Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry* (New York, 1927) is a ferocious satire against Protestant fundamentalist religion in the American Midwest. It tells the story of a hypocritical, corrupt, but very successful preacher named Elmer Gantry. Elmer starts his career as a Baptist and then joins up with a charismatic but equally unprincipled female revivalist preacher. After her death, he joins the Methodist Church. Amoral and relentlessly ambitious, Elmer builds a statewide and national reputation as a fiery preacher who never tires of denouncing vice, while at the same time feeling no need to curb his own vices, particularly adultery.

Besides being an effective satire targeted against religious hypocrisy, *Elmer Gantry* provides insight into the clash of cultural forces in America in the 1920s. During this period, traditional religious believers were deeply disturbed by the encroachments made on faith by science and secularism. They also decried the growth within the church of the "higher criticism," that sought to understand the Bible based on modern methods of scholarship.

On publication, *Elmer Gantry* had a sensational reception. So scandalous was Lewis's portrayal of religion that the novel was banned in several cities and denounced from pulpits across the nation. The famous evangelist Billy Sunday called Lewis "Satan's cohort."

Over seventy-five years after it first appeared, *Elmer Gantry* still has power to shock as well as amuse.

# Author Biography

Harry Sinclair Lewis, best known as Sinclair Lewis, was born on February 7, 1885, in Sauk Centre, Minnesota. His father was a physician. In 1903, Lewis went to Yale University, where he served as editor of the *Yale Literary Magazine*. During his Yale career Lewis also traveled widely, including a trip to England working on a cattle boat, and he also lived in the Utopian colony at Englewood, New Jersey, which was founded by the novelist Upton Sinclair. He graduated from Yale in 1908 and worked in various jobs in the publishing industry, including editor, reporter, manuscript reader, and reviewer. While working for the *Daily Courier* in Waterloo, Iowa, in 1908, he wrote an editorial about fraudulent evangelists, which suggests that the seeds of *Elmer Gantry* were already being sown.

Lewis married Grace Livingston Hegger in 1914, and they had one son, Wells, in 1917. Pursuing a career as a freelance writer, Lewis began to produce fiction with ease and ingenuity, and he published five novels from 1912 to 1919. However, these were exercises in popular, rather than literary, fiction. Lewis's first real success came with *Main Street* (1920), the book that made him famous. It was both a popular and critical success, selling 295,000 copies in the first year. Lewis's reputation as a satirist of American life continued to develop in the 1920s with the novels *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929). In 1926, Lewis refused the Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith*, because he believed it would compromise his artistic independence.

Lewis divorced his wife in 1928, and married Dorothy Thompson. They had a son, Michael, in 1930, the same year that Lewis became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Lewis published a further nine novels, as well as plays and short stories. But he did not achieve the heights of success he had enjoyed during the 1920s. Only the novels *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) and *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) have stood the test of time.

Lewis's personal life was troubled, and he and his second wife were divorced in 1942. In 1944, his son Lieutenant Wells Lewis was killed in action in France during World War II.

Lewis died of heart disease in Rome, Italy, in 1951.

# Plot Summary

## Chapters 1—8

*Elmer Gantry* begins in 1902. Elmer Gantry and his roommate, Jim Lefferts, have traveled from their college in Kansas to Cato, Missouri, to see their girlfriends. After dinner, the drunken Elmer picks a fight with a man who is heckling Eddie Fislinger, a fellow Terwillinger College student, as he preaches to an outdoor crowd. Eddie spreads the word that Elmer, who has never shown any zeal for religion, has been converted. Jim tries to persuade Elmer not to go along with it, but when Elmer attends the Annual Prayer Week he cannot resist the emotionalism of the service. Everyone congratulates him on his conversion. That night he has doubts, but he is persuaded to speak the following night at the Y.M.C.A. He cribs some passages from a book and then gives a rousing sermon. The college president declares that he is a born preacher, and everyone urges him to become a minister. Liking the idea of having power over an audience, Elmer convinces himself he has been called to the ministry.

Elmer attends Mizpah Theological Seminary, a Baptist institution in Babylon, in the Midwest. In 1905, after two years' study, he is ordained. During his final year he is restless and bored, but he is given a Sunday appointment at a country church in Schoenheim, eleven miles away, with Frank Shallard as his assistant. At the church, Elmer tries to seduce Lulu Bains, the daughter of one of the deacons, while Shallard warns him against even the appearance of evil.

## Chapters 9—16

Under pressure from Elmer, Shallard resigns. Lulu becomes devoted to Elmer but he gets bored with her. Lloyd Naylor, who is in love with Lulu, complains to Lulu's father about Elmer's amorous conduct towards her. Bains and Naylor confront Elmer at the Seminary and tell him he must marry Lulu. Elmer is forced to agree, but promises himself he will find a way out of the engagement. He behaves cruelly to Lulu, and when Floyd comforts her with a kiss, Elmer, who has planned the whole incident, bursts in on them with Lulu's father. Bains promises Elmer that he will make Lulu marry Floyd. Pretending to be outraged, Elmer resigns his position.

Elmer's next position is at a church in Monarch. On the train he meets a traveling salesman who invites him for a drink, which results in Elmer failing to keep his appointment at the church. Fired from the Seminary, he is hired as a traveling salesman of farm implements.

After two years as a salesman, Elmer meets Eddie Fislinger at his church in Kansas, and he decides he wants to be a preacher again. In Nebraska, he attends a meeting of the evangelist Sharon Falconer. He falls for her on sight, and follows her to Lincoln, Nebraska, for her next revival meeting. In Lincoln, he persuades her to let him speak at

the meeting about how he, a businessman, was converted. The speech is a roaring success.

Elmer is so infatuated with Sharon that he gives up smoking and drinking for her. Sharon soon fires her assistant, Cecil Alyston, and appoints Elmer as his replacement. For two years, he helps her lead revival meetings in large cities, mastering the art of press advertising and fundraising. But it all comes to an end one night in Clontar, on the New Jersey coast, where Sharon has purchased a pier. During the opening service, with a crowd of more than four thousand, fire breaks out. Elmer escapes by knocking other people out of the way, but Sharon is burned to death.

Elmer tries but fails to continue as an independent evangelist. He joins up with Mrs. Evans Riddle, who teaches New Thought, a Westernized version of Indian religion. But he is caught stealing from the collection and is fired. He starts to teach Prosperity classes on his own but cannot make a living from them.

## Chapters 17—24

Elmer borrows a hundred dollars from Shallard, who is now a minister and is married with three children. In Zenith, Elmer meets Bishop Toomis, a prominent figure in the Methodist Church. Elmer joins the Methodists and is sent to the small town of Banjo Crossing, where he falls in love with Cleo Benham, the daughter of a church trustee. His flamboyant preaching style makes a big impression on the small town. He marries Cleo but gets bored with her and resents her lack of sexual passion.

Elmer works diligently and is rewarded at the Methodists' Annual Conference by being sent to a bigger church, at Rudd Center. He spends a year there, and three years in Vulcan, where Cleo gives birth to two children. Then from 1918 to 1920 he is in Sparta, where the population is 129,000. At Sparta, Elmer gains statewide fame for his sensational sermons denouncing drinking and other sins. He is rewarded by being appointed minister of the Wellspring Methodist Church in the large city of Zenith, where the worldly trustee, T. J. Rigg, advises him to bring in the crowds with a rousing sermon denouncing vice. Elmer is soon preaching to crowds larger than almost all the churches in Zenith. His ambition knows no bounds.

## Chapters 25—33

Elmer meets up again with Lulu, now married to Floyd Naylor, and they resume their flirtation. At his Lively Sunday Evenings, Elmer gets up to many publicity-generating stunts. He also forms a Committee on Public Morals, persuades the police to make him a temporary lieutenant, and personally leads raids on the red-light districts. He denounces other churches for their laxity in condemning sin. Elmer moves in ever-higher social circles and goes on a three-month speaking tour aimed at the youth of America. He raises money to build a new church.

Elmer denounces his old classmate Shallard, who now preaches at a Congregational church in Zenith, calling him practically an atheist. Shallard is forced to resign. Some while later Shallard goes on a lecture tour to speak against fundamentalism. In a southwestern city, he falls into the hands of violent fanatics who beat him so badly he is blinded.

The new Wellspring Church has been built, and Elmer is awarded an honorary doctorate from Abernathy College. He becomes one of the first clergymen in the country to have his services broadcast by radio, and in 1924, he travels to Europe with Cleo. On his return, Elmer meets J. B. North, who is in charge of the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press, known as Napap. After North invites him to lecture for Napap, Elmer is filled with ambition to combine all the moral organizations in America, with himself as the leader. He speaks in many big cities and acquires a new secretary, Hettie Bowler, with whom he has an affair. He successfully schemes to become pastor of the prestigious Yorkville Methodist Church in New York and the new executive secretary of Napap. Meanwhile, Hettie turns out to be a married woman who, with her husband, tries to blackmail Elmer. Elmer, with the help of T. J. Rigg, turns the tables on her and preserves his career.

# Characters

## Cecil Aylston

Cecil Aylston is Sharon Falconer's assistant. He is a well-educated Englishman in his early thirties with a colorful past. He fell in love with Sharon when he first met her, and is devoted to her. After Sharon dismisses him in favor of Elmer, Cecil tries to conduct a rescue mission in Buffalo. He dies in a gambling den.

## Barney Bains

Barney Bains is a deacon at the Baptist church in Schoenheim and the father of Lulu. Bains initially forces Elmer to agree to marry Lulu, but later, after Elmer shows him Lulu kissing Floyd Naylor, he orders Lulu to marry Floyd.

## Lulu Bains

Lulu Bains is the daughter of Barney Bains. Elmer tries to seduce her, but once she has become devoted to him he gets bored with her and treats her cruelly. She is forced by her father to marry Lloyd Naylor. Lulu later meets Elmer again many years later in Zenith, where they resume their clandestine affair. After Elmer dumps her for Hettie, Lulu loses interest in life.

## Cleo Benham

Cleo Benham is the high-minded daughter of Nathaniel Benham. She engages in worthy activities at the church in Banjo Crossing, and falls in love with Elmer. Elmer at first returns her affection, and they get married. Elmer starts to detest her when he finds out that she is cold, sexually.

## Nathaniel Benham

Nathaniel Benham is a trustee of the Methodist church in Banjo Crossing and the father of Cleo.

## Nellie Benton

Nellie Benton is Jim Leffert's girlfriend when he is a student.

## Dr. Howard Bancock Binch

Dr. Howard Bancock Binch is a prominent Baptist who defends the literal interpretation of the Bible in his writings.

## Chester Brown

Chester Brown is a prominent Methodist preacher in Zenith and one of Elmer's rivals.

## Horace Carp

Horace Carp is a student at Mizpah Theological Seminary. He ends up as a minister in the Episcopal church.

## Hettie Dowler

Hettie Dowler becomes Elmer's secretary at Zenith when Elmer is already famous. She and Elmer have an affair, which later turns out to be a trick on the part of Hettie and her husband Oscar to blackmail Elmer. Elmer's lawyer outwits Hettie's lawyer, and she is forced to withdraw the charges she made against him and state that she was part of a plot by the liquor interests to ensnare him.

## Sharon Falconer

Sharon Falconer is a charismatic evangelist who travels around the country holding spectacular revival meetings. She dresses in exotic outfits such as Grecian robes, and uses a gold and white pyramidal altar. These help her to put on a dramatic show that wins many converts. Sharon believes she is above sin and that she can do anything she wants to because she is God's messenger. She even tells Elmer (who falls for her the instant he sees her) that she is the reincarnation of Joan of Arc, although she later admits that she does not really believe this. "I'm a very ignorant young woman with a lot of misdirected energy and some tiny idealism," she explains to Elmer. Elmer wants to marry her but she says she is too old for marriage (she is thirty-two, three or four years older than Elmer) and she must also remain free to devote herself to her missionary work. Sharon's real name is Katie Jonas; she picked out the name Sharon Falconer when she was working as a stenographer.

## Eddie Fislinger

Eddie Fislinger is a student at Terwillinger College and the president of the Y.M.C.A. Initially, he is an enemy of Elmer and tries to prevent him from becoming president of the student body for the second time. Eddie is an enthusiastic Christian who becomes a

student at Mizpah Theological Seminary and later a minister in western Kansas. Elmer despises him.

## Elmer Gantry

Elmer Gantry was raised by his mother, a staunch Baptist, in the small town of Paris, Kansas. At Terwillinger College, Elmer captains the football team. He is friendly but self-important; everyone thinks he is popular, but in fact he has almost no friends. He hates piety and prefers drunkenness, profanity, and seducing women. Elmer gets converted to Christianity only because he cannot resist the pressures put on him to do so. He enters the ministry because he cannot think of anything else to do in life. He soon discovers he has a gift for preaching, and he loves the feeling of power he gets when his sermons move his congregation. As a preacher, he shamelessly plays on people's emotions and their fear of Hell. He is not a deep thinker and does not really care whether the Baptist doctrines he preaches are true or false. He thinks they might, for all he knows, be true, and that is enough for him. Elmer loves to preach against immorality but feels no need to be moral himself. Fired from the ministry after going drinking rather than contacting his new church, he works for two years as a traveling salesman. He is drawn back to preaching when he falls in love with Sharon Falconer, and he hones his publicity and fundraising skills with her for several years until her death. After a brief interlude with Mrs. Evans Riddle's New Thought movement, and teaching Prosperity classes on his own, Elmer joins the Methodist Church. Driven by ambition to become a bishop, he is hugely successful, and is given bigger and bigger churches. His specialty is in denouncing vice, and in Zenith he even leads a police raid on the local dens of iniquity. Now famous, Elmer's ambitions know no bounds, especially when he starts to work with the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press. He has an affair with his secretary, who then tries to blackmail him, and only escapes ruin because he has a clever lawyer. At the end he is still eyeing the women in the congregation even as he calls for a crusade to make America a moral nation.

## Mrs. Gantry

Mrs. Gantry is Elmer's mother. She is a widow who owns a millinery and dressmaking shop. She is also a pious churchgoer who has always wanted Elmer to become a preacher.

## Dr. Otto Hickenlooper

Dr. Otto Hickenlooper is a prominent Methodist minister in Zenith, and one of Elmer's rivals.

## Juanita Klauzel

Juanita Klauzel is Elmer's girlfriend in Cato, Missouri, when he is a student at Terwillinger College.

## Jim Lefferts

Jim Lefferts is Elmer's roommate and his only friend at Terwillinger College. Jim is the college freethinker and the only person who has any influence on Elmer. Jim doubts the literal truth of the Bible and has contempt for the church. When Elmer is converted, Jim moves out of his room in disgust. He later becomes a lawyer.

## Ad Locust

Ad Locust is a traveling salesman for the Pequot Farm Implement Company who befriends Elmer on the train to Monarch.

## Philip McGarry

Philip McGarry is the minister of the Arbor Methodist Church in Zenith. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago who espouses a very liberal theology. Known as the *enfant terrible* of the Methodist church, he is ruthlessly critical of others. Elmer loathes him but Frank Shallard regards him as a friend.

## Floyd Naylor

Floyd Naylor is a large and rather stupid farmer in Schoenheim who is in love with Lulu Bains, whom he eventually marries.

## Bess Needham

Bess Needham marries Frank Shallard and bears him three children.

## J. E. North

J. E. North is the executive secretary of the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press (Napap). He meets Elmer on a steamer home from Europe and invites him to lecture on behalf of Napap.

## Reverend Andrew Pengilly

Reverend Andrew Pengilly is the old pastor of the Catawba Methodist Church. He is a simple, decent, pious man who is loved by his congregation. He befriends Frank Shallard.

## Don Pickens

Don Pickens is Frank Shallard's roommate at Mizpah Theological Seminary.

## Mahlon Potts

Mahlon Potts is the influential minister of the First Methodist Church in Zenith. Elmer thinks he is fat and pompous, but respects him nonetheless.

## Reverend Dr. Willoughby Quarles

Reverend Dr. Willoughby Quarles is president of Terwillinger College. He urges Elmer to become a minister.

## Mrs. Evans Riddle

Mrs. Evans Riddle is the proprietor of the Victory Thought Power Headquarters in New York. She teaches classes in Concentration, Prosperity, Love, Metaphysics and Oriental Mysticism, and invites Elmer to join her.

## T. J. Rigg

T. J. Rigg is a famous criminal lawyer and a trustee of Wellspring Methodist Church in Zenith. He is a worldly man and gives Elmer some shrewd advice about how to build up the church.

## Judson Roberts

Judson Roberts is an evangelist who is the state secretary of the Y.M.C.A. He preaches at the service that gets Elmer converted. However, Roberts doubts the truth of the doctrines he preaches so convincingly.

## Frank Shallard

Frank Shallard is a student at Mizpah Theological Seminary, but he doubts the literal truth of the Bible. He is influenced by the atheistic Dr. Zechlin who lends him theological works by liberals and skeptics. Despite his doubts, and following Zechlin's advice, Shallard decides to remain in the church. He is ordained despite the examiners' doubts about his orthodoxy, and he takes charge of a small church in Catawba. But throughout his career he wonders whether there is any value in his work. He is encouraged to stay in the church by the Reverend Andrew Pengilly, and he ends up as a minister of a Congregational church in Zenith. Elmer forces him to resign by questioning his religious beliefs, after which Shallard gets a job with the Charity Organization Society. He is invited by a group of scholars to go on a lecture tour to oppose religious fundamentalism, but his first lecture, in a city in the southwest, he is interrupted by local toughs. Shallard is then attacked by religious fanatics and blinded.

## William Donninger Styles

William Donninger Styles is a rich businessman in Zenith. He is treasurer of the Congregational church, but Elmer succeeds in getting him to support the Methodists instead.

## Bishop Wesley R. Toomis

Bishop Wesley R. Toomis is a bishop in the Methodist Church who has a great reputation as an orator and thinker. He welcomes Elmer into the Methodist church.

## Reverend Jacob Trosper

Reverend Jacob Trosper is the dean and chief executive of Mizpah Theological Seminary. He looks stern and Elmer is afraid of him.

## Wallace Umstead

Wallace Umstead is a student Mizpah Theological Seminary who becomes the secretary of the Zenith Y.M.C.A.

## Dr. Bruno Zechlin

Dr. Bruno Zechlin is Professor of Greek, Hebrew, and Old Testament Exegesis at Mizpah Theological Seminary. He long ago lost his faith in the literal truth of the Bible and has become an atheist. After Elmer writes a critical comment about him on a blackboard, Zechlin, who is suspected of heresy, is forced into retirement by the Seminary. He goes to live with his niece and dies within two years.

# Harry Zenz

Harry Zenz is a student at the Mizpah Theological Seminary. He is known in his church for his piety, but in fact he is an atheist. He ends up as minister of a large church in a West Virginia mining town.

# Themes

## Anti-clericalism

Throughout the novel, clergymen and the church are presented in an extremely unflattering light. For the most part they are hypocrites, not even believing the doctrines they preach to their congregations every week. Judson Roberts, the enthusiastic, apparently confident evangelist who converts Elmer, admits to himself that his preaching is dishonest. He plans to quit the church and get a good job selling real estate.

The attack on the hypocrisy of Protestant ministers continues throughout the novel. At Mizpah Theological Seminary, Elmer and his fellow students all smoke in their dormitory, even though smoking is practically forbidden. When the pious Eddie leaves the room, all they want to talk about is sex. Harry Zenz does not believe a word of what he is taught at the seminary. He also thinks that Baptist leaders are "word-splitting, text-twisting, applause-hungry, job-hunting, medieval-minded second-raters. . . ." Horace Carp hates the Baptists and wants to switch to the more upscale Episcopalians as soon as possible because this will give him a better social position in which he will ". . . be able to marry a nice rich girl." Brother Karkis only wants his divinity degree so he can get a better paying job.

The evangelist Sharon Falconer, although she is not attached to any particular church, is no exception to the anti-religion theme. She turns to healing the sick not because she has a gift or a calling for it but because it is more profitable than mere evangelizing: ". . . the whole evangelist business was limited, since even the most ardent were not likely to be saved more than three or four times. But they could be healed constantly, and of the same disease."

In Zenith, when a group of local clergymen meet as the Committee on Public Morals, they reveal a distinct lack of brotherly love amongst themselves:

They all detested one another. Every one knew of some case in which each of the others had stolen, or was said to have tried to steal, some parishioner, to have corrupted his faith and appropriated his contributions.

In many ways, of course, Elmer is the worst of them all. He possesses none of the cardinal virtues and many of the cardinal sins. He uses the church to further his own ambitions for power and fame. He is a social climber and a publicity seeker. He feels little desire to practice what he preaches. He does not really hate sin, because it is useful to him: the more vice he can discover and denounce, the more his reputation as a man of God grows.

# Liberalism versus Literalism

Within the Protestant church, a battle rages between the traditionalists, or fundamentalists, who believe in the literal truth of the Bible, and the liberals, who believe that some parts of the Bible may be understood in a symbolic sense. The fundamentalists also have to deal with outright skeptics, like Jim Lefferts, and covert atheists like Dr. Zechlin.

Terwillinger College and Mizpah Theological Seminary are both fundamentalist institutions. When Lefferts asks Reverend Quarles, the college president, an awkward question about some passages in the Bible, Quarles tells him not to question the ways of the Lord. Quarles has no time for ". . . vain arguments that lead nowhere!" Quarles is hostile to the kind of free intellectual inquiry that the liberals advocate, and he relies instead on prayer and faith.

The fundamentalists believe that if even one thing in the Bible is questioned it is only a matter of time before faith is undermined completely. This is indeed what happened to Dr. Bruno Zechlin, one of the faculty at Mizpah, who lost his fundamentalist faith even before he received his theological doctorate. He survived for a while by interpreting some of the Biblical stories as symbols that revealed the glory of God and the leadership of Christ. But not long after that he lost his faith in God altogether and became an atheist.

The debate between fundamentalists and liberals is conducted amongst the students at Mizpah. The pious but stupid Eddie complains that ". . . [E]verything we Baptists stand for is threatened by those darn so-called liberals. . . ." He is referring to the practice of open communion, which is favored by liberals, as opposed to the closed communion of the fundamentalists, according to which only Baptists are allowed to participate in the rite. Harry Zenz vehemently disagrees with Eddie.

Of the other characters, Frank Shallard and Dr. Philip McGarry are examples of the liberal tendency in the church. McGarry is accused by the fundamentalists of heresy, and he does not seem to accept the traditional dogmas of the Methodist Church: ". . . [T]he only dogma he was known to give out positively was the leadership of Jesus□as to whose divinity he was indefinite."

The clash between fundamentalists and liberals comes to a dramatic and violent climax in the final incident involving Shallard. When he at last finds the courage, now that he is out of the church, to speak his mind, he is viciously attacked and blinded by fundamentalist fanatics.

# Style

*Elmer Gantry* is a picaresque novel. A typical picaresque narrative chronicles the exploits of a rogue, an immoral but not criminal character who lives by his wits. There is no character development, and so Elmer, after his character is first established, does not change during the course of the novel. The main purpose of the picaresque novel (a modern example of which is Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*), is satire. Satire ridicules its subject, with the intention of arousing contempt or scorn in the reader. A satire can be aimed at an individual or a group. In *Elmer Gantry*, the object of Lewis's satire is not only Elmer himself□who after the tabernacle fire ". . . rescued at least thirty people who had already rescued themselves. . . ."□but the entire clerical profession and the fundamentalist Protestant dogmas they represent. For example, the division between Northern and Southern Baptists is explained in this way: ". . . [B]efore the Civil War the Northern Baptists proved by the Bible, unanswerably, that slavery was wrong; and the Southern Baptists proved by the Bible, irrefutably, that slavery was the will of God." Later in the novel, Frank Shallard realizes how threatened conservative clergymen are by scientific knowledge and how inadequate they are to preside over educational institutions. According to such people:

A proper school should teach nothing but bookkeeping, agriculture, geometry, dead languages made deader by leaving out all the amusing literature, and the Hebrew Bible as interpreted by men superbly trained to ignore contradictions, men technically called 'Fundamentalists.'

Christian beliefs about the proper observance of Sundays also comes under heavy satirical fire in this passage: ". . . [T]he Maker of a universe with stars a hundred thousand light-years apart was interested, furious, and very personal about it if a small boy played baseball on Sunday afternoon."

# Historical Context

## Fundamentalism

Protestant fundamentalism was in part a reaction in the early twentieth century to the development of the "higher criticism" in Biblical scholarship. Higher criticism was a method of Biblical criticism that originated in Germany. It applied the methods of historical and literary analysis in order to determine the authorship, date and place of composition of the books of the Bible. Higher criticism also showed that some elements in the Bible were also found in other religions and mythologies (the virgin birth, for example). This tended to undermine the uniqueness of Christianity and the literal interpretation of the Bible. Traditionalists, therefore, rejected the new approach of liberal theology. In the novel, when Elmer takes up his first appointment in a small-town Methodist church, one of the first questions the fundamentalist trustees asks him is, "Do any monkeying with this higher criticism?" Against the tide of modernist thought that included science and secularism, fundamentalists insisted on the truth of their core doctrines, including the virgin birth, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the atonement, the infallibility of the Scriptures, and the second coming of Christ.

## Revivalism

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were many evangelists, like Elmer and Sharon Falconer in the novel, who traveled around the country conducting revival campaigns for large audiences. One famous evangelist was Gipsy Smith (1860—1947), an Englishman who made twenty-six trips to the United States. On his first visit in 1889, he held campaigns in cities from Boston to San Francisco. In 1928, he preached in a tent in Long Beach, California to more than 5,000 people, and on his return to America the following year, when he was nearly seventy years old, he attracted even larger crowds, including 15,000 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In the novel, people in Nebraska say that Sharon Falconer compares with the great evangelists of the past, naming Gipsy Smith as one of them. They also name Billy Sunday. Billy Sunday (1862—1935) was a professional baseball player who quit baseball a few years after he had a religious conversion. He became a Presbyterian preacher, and was famous for his energetic, fiery sermons in which he denounced liberalism, the theory of evolution, and the evils of drinking. He also raised large amounts of money at his meetings, and like Elmer Gantry, he was one of he first evangelists to spread his message through the new technology of radio.

Another famous name was Aimee Semple McPherson (1890—1944), a female evangelist who clearly resembled the fictional Sharon Falconer. McPherson preached in southern California from 1918 to the 1940s. Like Sharon, she drew huge crowds and practiced faith healing. She wore expensive clothes and jewelry and put on a spectacular show. McPherson was involved in a scandal in 1926. She was reported missing after swimming off Venice Beach, California, turning up five weeks later in

Mexico, claiming she had been kidnapped. But a grand jury investigation found that McPherson had spent a pleasant month in Mexico with a married man from her church. This was not the last of McPherson's affairs; one of her lovers described the homemade altar in her apartment, in front of which they would make love□which is strikingly similar to the scene in Chapter 12 of *Elmer Gantry*, in which Elmer and Sharon also make love before an altar in her house in Virginia.

# Critical Overview

On publication in 1927, *Elmer Gantry* created a public furor. According to Mark Schorer, in his introduction to *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, "No novel in the history of American literature outraged its audience so completely, and very few novels in American literature had a larger immediate audience." The book was banned in Boston and other cities and denounced from hundreds of pulpits. One cleric suggested that Lewis should be imprisoned for five years, and there were also threats of physical violence against the author. The adverse publicity helped sales, and 175,000 copies were sold in less than six weeks.

Reviewers were divided on the merits of the novel. Some found it repugnant and accused Lewis of grossly distorting his subject matter. Others praised its accurate reporting and its denunciation of hypocrisy, comparing Lewis to great satirists such as Voltaire and Swift. Charles W. Ferguson, in the *Bookman*, described *Elmer Gantry* as a "glorious lampoon," although he also commented that the novel was a ". . . social commentary and not a work of fictional art. As a character, Dr. Gantry lacks verisimilitude, and he lacks it more the longer he lives."

Later judgments have also been mixed. For Sheldon Norman Grebstein, writing in 1962, the novel ". . . has snap, flavor, a strong narrative line, a good deal of authenticity . . . But it is distorted, even too much for satire; it lacks conflict and contrast." In a generally favorable assessment, James Lundquist, in *Sinclair Lewis*, brings attention to Lewis's mastery of irony, but he also comments on a weakness in the plot, arguing that the final crisis Elmer faces is unconvincing in its details.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

# Critical Essay #1

*Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses how Lewis's characterization in* Elmer Gantry *serves his satiric purpose.*

Institutionalized religion has attracted its fair share of satirical assaults in its time, but *Elmer Gantry* must surely rank as the most savage in American literature. Lewis is like a ruthless hunter who spares nothing and still has ammunition left at the end of the day. It is a fairly narrow assault, since Lewis's targets are confined to Protestant churches and revival campaigns, but within that range, Lewis's fire is deadly and continuous. For the most part, he does not create complex human portraits but caricatures. Those who believe in the doctrines of the church are presented as fools or morons, and are easy targets for malicious fun. One such incident (chapter 2, section 3) is when the pious but not very bright Eddie Fislinger is outwitted by Jim Lefferts's atheist father for the amusement of Jim and Elmer. The incident is not strictly necessary for the plot, and Lefferts's father never appears in the novel again.

There are several other minor characters who are introduced with no apparent purpose other than to serve as victims of the author's anti-religious inclination. One such character is the dean of Terwillinger College, who makes a brief appearance in chapter 4, section 3, in which he wonders, in conversation with his wife, whether he has sacrificed too much by going into the ministry. He wonders whether he might have become a great chemist, which would surely have been better (and more profitable) than "year after year again of standing in the pulpit and knowing your congregation don't remember what you've said seven minutes after you've said it." From discontented dean, who never appears again, the narrative moves immediately to the aged parents of the dean's wife. The wife is full of complaints about the life she has had to lead, married to a preacher, criticized by the church women if they thought her clothes weren't suitable, sick of "having to pretend to be so good when we were just common folks all the time!" Her tirade at her husband, who only wants to be allowed to go to sleep, includes the following passage:

Oh, dear. Fifty years since I married a preacher! And if I could still only be sure about the virgin birth! Now don't you go explaining! Laws, the number of times you've explained! I know it's true□it's in the Bible. If I could only *believe* it!

Another minor character who serves as one small brick in the vast anti-clerical edifice that is *Elmer Gantry* is Dr. Howard Bancock Binch, a renowned defender of the literal truth of the Bible. Binch is brought on for one five-page section of chapter 14, when Elmer and Sharon happen to meet him in Joliet and lunch with him. Binch is a dreadful character who leers at Sharon and has an excessive interest in church fundraising. He advises Elmer not to denounce vice directly, by naming names and giving addresses of illegal drinking places, because the owners of such buildings□who *of course* have no knowledge of any illegal activities□are often leading church contributors and attacking them would jeopardize their support for the church. This is tantamount to an admission

that the church is happy to receive money that is tainted by the very practices it denounces so vehemently.

Binch is also a snob who has contempt for other preachers. At a revival meeting he does not like to include all the preachers in town. If all of them are there, he says,

. . . you have to deal with a lot of these two-by-four hick preachers with churches about the size of woodsheds and getting maybe eleven hundred a year, and yet they think they have the right to make suggestions!

Even the physical description of Binch is calculated to evoke disgust: "Dr. Binch stopped gulping his fried pork chops and held out a flabby, white, holy hand."

Having ridiculed the unfortunate Dr. Binch, Lewis removes him from the scene and never mentions him again.

In creating the evangelist Sharon Falconer, the author presents himself with a bigger, although more complex, target. Sharon is a woman of many selves: she is imperious and efficient, but also vulnerable. She is flirtatious, and able to get men to do her bidding. She is volatile, self-dramatizing, self-deceiving, self-promoting, cunning, playful, cynical, ambitious, and ruthless□a Cleopatra of the revivalist circuit. She is certainly not the saintly evangelist she presents herself to be, and she maintains a smug sense of superiority over the common folk she seeks to save. After she admits to Elmer that she loves to dance, she says, "Oh, of course I roast dancing in my sermons, but I mean□when it's with people like us, that understand, it's not like with worldly people, where it would lead to evil." It is not hard to see how she and Elmer are a perfect match.

The steady accumulation of damning portraits of those whose spiritual home is the Protestant church, and the lack of any serious counterweight to them, led Rebecca West, in a hostile review of *Elmer Gantry* that first appeared in 1927, to write that Lewis lacked the necessary requirement of the satirist, which was to "fully possess, at least in the world of the imagination, the quality the lack of which he is deriding in others." West's point was that Lewis effectively exposes the charlatans and the way they misuse their power, but fails to show how that religious power might better be used.

West's point is a telling one. The relentless, unrelieved exposure of religious hypocrisy, while amusingly presented in parts, tends to become wearying. It is a pity that Lewis did not choose to develop more fully the few exceptions to the prevailing mendacity, including the lightly sketched figure of Reverend Andrew Pengilly. Pengilly is an old Methodist pastor who is something of a saintly figure. He befriends Shallard and tries to answer Shallard's doubts about the truth of the Christian faith. Disappointingly though, Pengilly's arguments do not rise above the commonplace. For all his wisdom, he speaks in platitudes, although Lewis does give him one searing moment of insight. It comes when Elmer regales Pengilly with a self-congratulatory story about the success of Elmer's ministry in Zenith. Pengilly sees through him with the spiritual eye of an eagle, and asks, "Mr. Gantry, why don't you believe in God?"

Indeed, why doesn't he? Elmer would probably not be able to answer this question. It is not so much that he does not believe in God. He is no Harry Zenz or Bruno Zechlin, who have both thought deeply about theology and have emerged as atheists. Elmer's mind is shallow; he simply does not have the capacity for serious thought about such issues. One might say that on matters of truth, he is neutral; he is not a believer or a nonbeliever. One thing he is aware of is that professing belief serves his purposes very well, and for all he knows, every word of Baptist or Methodist dogma might be true.

Elmer of course towers above everyone else in the novel. He is a gigantic, larger-than-life character. He is also too bad to be true. Can there ever have lived a clergyman with Elmer's astonishing range of vices: his chronic insincerity, his hypocrisy, his lust, his overweening ambition, his cynicism, his appalling behavior to his family? Elmer cheats, he boasts, he lies, he deceives. He is an opportunist, a rogue, a charlatan. And yet Lewis's attitude to his character is a little more complex than this long list of his faults might suggest. Mark Schorer, in his biography of Lewis, records a remark that Lewis made to his friend Richards Brooks in 1946. According to Brooks, "He [Lewis] confessed that he really loved Elmer, the big bum, and hated only what he stood for; but halfway through the novel he had been carried away, and turned on his character and demolished him."

Based on the evidence in the novel, there is some truth in this comment. Although Elmer is clearly a self-centered individual from the beginning, Lewis presents him, up to and including his conversion, as being swept along by sociological and psychological forces over which he has no control.

The sociological factor that works against Elmer is the entire small-town Protestant environment in which he was raised. As a boy, the Baptist church was all he knew. He was saturated with it□the sermons, hymns, Bible stories, funerals, weddings, Sunday schools. The church filled him with awe, frightened him, became the center of all his emotions. As Lewis so devastatingly wrote, Elmer "got everything from the church and Sunday School, except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kindness and reason." The implication is that those three qualities were not present in the Baptist church of Paris, Kansas. For such a high-spirited boy as Elmer, this was such a limited, stifling environment to grow up in that it effectively steered him away from the kind of occupation that would have suited him much better: "It was lamentable to see this broad young man, who would have been so happy in the prize-ring, the fish-market, or the stock exchange, poking through the cobwebbed corridors of Terwillinger."

The psychological factor that works against Elmer is the mechanics of the conversion experience. Lewis attacked it as no more than mass hysteria. "They hypnotize themselves," says Jim Lefferts to Elmer, trying to persuade him not to go along with it. Lewis's description of the service at which Elmer succumbs is compelling in its evocation of the rampant emotion of the occasion. Elmer is subjected to a kind of collective emotional manipulation. Everything conspires to overwhelm him and break down his defenses; he does not really have a chance. Later, Lewis will show Elmer no mercy, but at this stage his target is not so much the soon-to-be preacher but the social and psychological context in which he is formed.

Lewis seems to have had a particular loathing of the conversion experience that is so central to Protestant spirituality. He returns to it in the context of Sharon's revival meetings. He takes care to point out that people return again and again to get converted, which would seem to negate the idea that they are "saved" in a once in a lifetime experience. He also notes that the more bizarre and irrational the experience, the more the evangelists value it, but he leaves the reader in no doubt about the contempt with which he views such phenomena: ". . . once occurred what connoisseurs regard as the highest example of religious inspiration. Four men and two women crawled about a pillar, barking like dogs, 'barking the devil out of the tree.'"

For the evangelists, the irrational is valued more highly than the rational, but for the novelist, the reverse holds true.

**Source:** Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *Elmer Gantry*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

# Adaptations

*Elmer Gantry* was made into a movie and released by United Artists in 1960, starring Burt Lancaster as Elmer and Jean Simmons as Sharon Falconer. Both actors won Academy Awards for their performances.

# Topics for Further Study

Discuss the issue of creationism and evolution. Should creationism be taught in public schools? Is there really a conflict between science and religion, between reason and faith, or can the two live in harmony?

Watch the 1960 film version of *Elmer Gantry*. Is Elmer the same in the movie as he is in the novel, or have the filmmakers altered his character? What are the major differences between the film and the novel?

Write a brief character sketch of Frank Shallard and describe his role in the novel. Why does Lewis include him in the book?

Consider the character of Jim Lefferts, as revealed in the first three chapters. What sort of a man is Jim? What are his leading characteristics? Then read chapter 30, section 5, where Jim reappears. How would you describe his demeanor? Is he successful? Which man seems to have the more vitality? This short scene is written from Elmer's point of view. Rewrite it from Jim's point of view. Think about how Jim would view Elmer, and how he might react to what Elmer says.

# Compare and Contrast

**1920s:** From 1920 to 1933, the sale of alcohol is prohibited in the United States. The aim is to reduce crime and other social problems and improve health. However, although alcohol consumption does decrease, crime and corruption around alcohol increase. Public officials are bribed by gangsters to overlook illegal brewing and selling of alcohol.

**Today:** Advocates for the legalization of marijuana use arguments drawn from the experience of Prohibition. They claim that banning marijuana leads to drug trafficking which benefits organized crime; that the illegal sale of marijuana is linked to violence and terrorism; and that it presents huge costs to the taxpayer for law enforcement.

**1920s:** In Tennessee in 1925, a law known as the Butler Law is passed banning the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools. In the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925, the state, aided by fundamentalist and Bible expert William Jennings Bryan, wins the case brought against J. T. Scopes, a biology teacher. Scopes is defended by well-known lawyer Clarence Darrow.

**Today:** Many fundamentalist Christians still favor the teaching of creationism (the biblical account of creation) alongside, or in place of, the teaching of evolution in public schools.

**1920s:** The growth of the automobile industry marks the emergence of the consumer society. In 1929, there are more than 27 million cars in America, which amounts to nearly one per household.

**Today:** According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the average American household has 1.9 cars, trucks, or sport utility vehicles and 1.8 drivers. Since there are 107 million U.S. households, that equals 204 million vehicles and 191 million drivers.

# What Do I Read Next?

Lewis's *Arrowsmith* (1925) is one of his most admired novels. It portrays the career of Martin Arrowsmith, a dedicated, idealistic physician and truth-seeker who is severely tested by the cynicism he encounters in the medical profession.

*The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), by Harold Frederic, has many similarities to *Elmer Gantry*. The Reverend Theron Ware is a young, ambitious Methodist minister whose encounter with the new intellectual ideas of "higher criticism" and Darwinism destroys his simple faith in Methodism and ruins his career.

Thornton Wilder's novel *Heaven Is My Destination* (1934), which is both comic and sad, follows the adventures of George Brush, a traveling salesman who unlike Elmer Gantry is a sincere convert to religious faith. He travels across America during the Depression, determined to live a good life, but he is frequently misunderstood by people he encounters.

*Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (1997), by Edward J. Larson, is an account of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in Tennessee. Larson provides an excellent cultural history of an issue□the teaching of religion and science in public schools□that remains relevant today.

# Further Study

Dooley, D. J., *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, University of Nebraska Press, 1967, pp. 126—30.

Dooley argues that the novel fails because it is not a realistic portrayal of religion, and it lacks sufficient wit and humor to compensate for its unfairness.

Light, Martin, *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis*, Purdue University Press, 1975, pp. 99—107.

Light examines what he sees as quixotic elements in the novel, especially in the characters Sharon Falconer and Frank Shallard.

Schorer, Mark, "Afterword," in *Elmer Gantry*, Signet Classics edition, New American Library, 1967, pp. 419—30.

Schorer discusses Lewis's research for the novel, including the clergyman he met in Kansas City. He also analyzes the characterization and structure of the novel and Lewis's occasional failure to integrate his story-telling with the social facts he presents.

□□□, "Sinclair Lewis and the Method of Half-Truths," in *Society and Self in the Novel*, Columbia University Press, 1956, pp. 117—44.

Schorer analyzes the novel's lack of conflict and dramatic counterpoint; there are no obstacles to Elmer's success, since the good characters are weak and play only peripheral roles and there are no competing orders of value, since everything is corrupt.

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Ferguson, Charles W., Review of *Elmer Gantry*, in *Critical Essays on Sinclair Lewis*, edited by Martin Bucco, G. K. Hall, 1986, pp. 47—48; originally published in the *Bookman*, March 1927.

Grebstein, Sheldon Norman, *Sinclair Lewis*, Twayne United States Authors Series, No. 14, Twayne, 1962, pp. 99—107.

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□□□, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, McGraw Hill, 1961, pp. 737—38.

West, Rebecca, Review of *Elmer Gantry*, in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Mark Schorer, Prentice-Hall, 1962, pp. 39—45; originally published in *New York Herald Tribune Books*, March 13, 1927.