

UNIVERSIDAD DE ALMERÍA



GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

**How It Can Actually Happen: A Study of
Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* and
its Prediction of Recent American Politics**

*Cómo puede llegar a suceder: un estudio de "It Can't Happen Here" de
Sinclair Lewis y de su predicción de las políticas americanas más recientes*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the valuable role of Sinclair Lewis as a writer in American literature, and to study the way in which he used totalitarian regimes as inspiration for his dystopian depiction of a fascist government in the United States in *It Can't Happen Here*. It delves into the connections between this novel and the Nazi dictatorship in Germany, and also into how it can serve as a predictor of the most recent approaches to politics that have been developed in America by such politicians as Donald Trump.

Key words: Sinclair Lewis, Great Depression, fascism, dystopia, trumpism.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo explorar la importante figura de Sinclair Lewis como escritor en la literatura americana, además de hacer un estudio sobre cómo el autor usó los regímenes totalitarios como inspiración para su retrato distópico de un gobierno fascista en los Estados Unidos en “It Can't Happen Here”. Profundiza en la conexión entre esta novela y la dictadura Nazi que tuvo lugar en Alemania, haciendo también una reflexión sobre cómo esta historia vaticina las tácticas políticas desarrollados en América recientemente por políticos como Donald Trump.

Palabras clave: Sinclair Lewis, Gran Depresión, fascismo, distopía, trumpismo.

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How It Can Actually Happen: A Study of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* and its Prediction of Recent American Politics

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1. Introduction

1.1. Topic of discussion

As a result of my interest in dystopian literature, I stumbled upon the novel *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis. The story that is narrated in this book immediately captured my attention since it deals with American culture and the state of politics in this country, which are topics that I have been inclined to throughout my degree.

Not only was I interested by the story Lewis describes, but also by the political implications that are present in it and the explicit references to the totalitarian regimes that were being developed around the time this novel was written.

The main topics of discussion in my dissertation are the study of the figure as a writer of Sinclair Lewis, his prominent role in American literature during the 20th century and his intentions behind the novel *It Can't Happen Here*. Furthermore, I have analysed the development of fascist regimes that the author uses as inspiration for the story, the ideologies behind these political movements and how they are represented in the book. As the final concern of my paper, I have reflected on the prophetic elements that foresee the possible establishment of this fascist model in the United States, and the compliance showcased by American people to these beliefs.

1.2. Sources

In order to shape my essay, I have utilized several different sources which have allowed me to further understand the topics I considered to be appropriate for the correct development of my thesis.

The main sources of information that I have used deal with the three essential concerns in this paper: Sinclair Lewis and his career as a writer, the historical context in the United States in the early 20th century and the emergence of totalitarian regimes. The biography composed by Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis* (1963), has allowed me to learn about

the life of the author, his contributions to American literature, and both his stardom and decay as a writer. Then, I have relied on multiple historical sources which supported my explanation for the circumstances at the time. The most helpful have been Nick Shepley's *The Roaring 20's and the Wall Street Crash: Good Times, Deep Pockets and Poverty* (2011), and Dietmar Rothermund's publication *The Global Impact of the Great Depression, 1929-1939* (1996).

Once I acquired some context on this era, I explored the issue of totalitarianism in the 20th century and its representation in Lewis' novel to which I resorted to Phillip Morgan's *Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945* (2003), and Bruce Pauley's *Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini: Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century* (2014). Other sources have also been explored aiming to provide my paper with more nuances that could better explain my thesis, especially about Nazism and the political figure of Donald Trump.

1.3. Methodology

The procedure that I have followed for the production of this paper consists of three different stages: the exploration of the novel itself, the collection of information about the topics I thought were appropriate for research purposes and the examination of the association between the themes in the novel and the recent state of politics in the United States. The structure of my dissertation reflects these focal points.

Firstly, I focused on the author and the study of *It Can't Happen Here*, this way I could understand what Sinclair Lewis was aiming for with this novel and the devices he used when composing it. Subsequently, I moved to the investigation of these topics so I could base my thesis on factual concepts. And finally, I used all this information in order to explore the way in which this novel by Lewis was envisioning an American society where fascist ideals would be developed.

2. Analysis of *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis

2.1. American Context in the 20th Century

The early decades of the last century were quite eventful times for the United States. Because of the Second Industrial Revolution, North America was immersed in one of its most prosperous periods. The nation was leaving past misfortunes behind and was beginning to

build the powerhouse status that it holds to this day. The quality of life of the middle class was improving, and so was the overall economy of the country. This growth was partially possible due to the high volume of immigrants who arrived to the country during those years, aiming for a better future. But this industrial development also came with several negative after-effects which were mostly endured by the less fortunate, the working class. The rights of the workers were highly overlooked, as were the conditions that they had to face in order to provide for their families.

Whilst some people, closely associated with the big business, were making bank from their companies, others could barely gain enough money to survive. This class difference kept growing bigger and it is still latent in the American social dynamics of today. A series of strikes in the late 19th century, brought to the surface this problem of class. The social differences, and the uprising of the exploited workers, spawned the emergence of progressive activists who saw the inconsistencies of American society and had a mission to amend them. This is how the Progressive movement came to be, even supported by presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. But the real faces of the movement were individual reformers, activists and intellectuals who got inspiration from the Abolitionists against slavery who gained popularity and developed their discourse in the United States after the Civil War that ended in 1865. (Stromquist, S. 1943: 33-34)

This is the case of Jane Addams, one of the most renowned activists at the time, who devoted her life to the betterment of this social breach between classes. She ultimately won the Nobel Peace Prize, partially due to her initiative with the Hull House in Chicago. But the Great War prevented her and this wave of progressive thinkers from reaching their goal. Reformers within the movement started to experience a division in their once shared ideals, some of them saw war as an opportunity to bring all people together through a common sense of national pride, such as Randolph Bourne; but others saw it as an obstacle for the main purpose of progressivism, like Jane Addams and President Wilson. The former actually voiced these conflicting opinions to those of her peers: "Within a year after the war began the old causes were gone, and we were steadily forced back from our advanced positions". (Ibid. 1943: 194-198)

After its late involvement in the Great War, which ended in 1918 with the victory of the Allies, American economy suffered for a couple of years; but during the 1920's the country was once again experiencing a prosperous time. The war, although it brought

economic development and international notoriety to the United States, was also responsible for the increasing hatred towards immigrant citizens. The white race was considered to be the blueprint for the ideal American and immigrants, also referred to as bad seeds, were seen as neither capable nor valid. These ideas were the basis for the eugenics movement which planted the concept of white supremacy into the minds of the American people. It also allowed for the passing of discriminatory laws that regulated the volume of immigrants who were allowed into the country.

During the 1920's, progressive politics were no longer being implemented as they used to years prior. American society and its economy were back on, and fully embracing, the principles of capitalism. People were now able to get credit from banks for personal spending and not just for real-estate investment or business development. This made it easy for the average person to follow the capitalist idealization of the American dream, and was the foundation of the mass consumer culture that would follow. But even in this new time of economic prosperity, some groups of society were already falling victims to the system. Throughout the Great War farming became a necessity for the survival of the nation and its deployed troops, but in the 1920's it was starting to lose its value as a profitable business. The surplus of produce and low prices forced already indebted farmers to cease production and lose their properties. They were the first ones to suffer the consequences of a forthcoming crisis, best known as the Great Depression. (Shepley, N. 2011: 17-19)

Due to the recession in other business ventures, people resorted to the stock market as a way to still make a profit out of their investments. But speculation and the unawareness about the real situation of the market meant its ultimate fall in the infamous Wall Street Crash of 1929. This event was not the sole reason for the following Great Depression. The poor state of the economy after the crash happened, and the subsequent high levels of unemployment, are what forced the United States into one of its biggest financial crises during the 1930's. (Ibid, 2011: 22-25)

This is the era where the narrative of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* is set in. In this novel we can perceive a crippled American society longing for a solution to its despair. The author makes a great portrayal of how difficult it was to navigate life during such troubling times, while describing the willingness of people to regain the pride and status they once experienced.

2.2. Sinclair Lewis and his Intention Behind “It Can’t Happen Here”

The author of the novel I will be analyzing, Harry Sinclair Lewis, was born in 1885 in the United States, in Minnesota to be more accurate. Son of a doctor, Lewis attended public school through his childhood and adolescence but his great capacity allowed him to enroll in the prestigious Yale University. While studying, he was a great contributor to the literary magazine of said institution. (Schorer, M. 1963: 5)

Once he graduated in 1908 he started working as an editor for various publications but his ultimate goal was to become a novelist. After working all across the United States he landed a position in a publishing house in New York City. Reviewing manuscripts and creating adverts for books was neither his ideal job nor it was his passion in life, but it allowed him to continue writing; so much so that he was able to make a living out of free-lancing as a short-story writer for several magazines in the city, including his own *Adventure*. (Ibid. 1963: 6)

Through 1914 to 1919, he managed to publish five novels which were quickly forgotten about by both critics and public, but he never lost his drive. It was in 1920 when he published his first critically acclaimed novel, *Main Street*. Set in his home state of Minnesota, this satirical book was surrounded by great scandal as it painted quite a different picture to what was considered to be the norm in American society. In his Nobel Prize in Literature acceptance speech, he mentioned this controversy that the novel generated: “One of the most treasured American myths had been that all American villages were peculiarly noble and happy, and here an American attacked that myth”. (Nobel Prize, 2021)

Main Street seemed to those readers who had known Lewis’ earlier work to be a complete rupture with everything he had done before. A look at those earlier novels now shows this not to have been the situation at all. All five works had essentially the same pattern: the impulse to escape the conventions of class or routine; flight; a partial success and a necessary compromise with convention. Realistic in detail, these novels were optimistic in tone in a way that was not generally associated with what was then thought of as the school of realism, and it was a combination of the optimistic view of human character with the body of observed social detail that critics remarked and some readers enjoyed. (Schorer, M. 1963: 10)

During the 1920's the author finally found the ideal method that would identify his style of writing and succeeding novels, this allowed him to make a name for himself within the American literary scene at last. This unique way of conducting the research for his novels made him stand out from other novelists at the time. As opposed to other authors, his point of departure was a specific topic and not a particular character or situation. Lewis' work reflects his lonely nature which characterized his existence, and also his ultimate goal of earning the respect he lacked during childhood through the success that his writing skills would bring him.

The theme of his novels usually dealt with a part of society that he considered was worth investigating. He paid special attention to the middle class in the United States, and the problems they had to endure during those times. After choosing the focal concern that the novel revolved around, he used to go and socialise with the actual people that he was using as inspiration for his next project. This provided his stories with a more natural and realistic tone, and made them more approachable for the average reader who could relate to its message in a greater manner. (Ibid. 1963: 11)

[...] immediately after *Main Street*, he plunged into his research in that section of American life where those qualities were most obvious and therefore most readily lampooned - the commercial world of the middle-class businessman in a medium-sized city. "Research" is the correct word if one thinks of a novelist operating in the fashion of a sociologist preparing to make a field report. It is the novel *Babbitt* that established what would henceforth be Sinclair Lewis' characteristic method of work [...]

To begin, he chose a subject - not, as for most novelists, a character situation or a mere theme, but a social area that could be systematically studied and mastered. Ordinarily, this was a subclass within the middle class, a profession, or a particular problem of such subclass. Then, armed with his notebooks, he mingled with the kind of people that his fiction would mainly concern. [...] He drew intricately detailed maps [...] in which his actions would take place. [...] He would then write out a summary of his story, and from this a much more extended "plan", as he called it, with every scene sketched in, the whole sometimes nearly as long as the book that would come from it. (Ibid. 1963: 11)

His novel *Babbitt*, published in 1922, embodied all the elements present in this newfound method developed by the author. In this novel, Sinclair Lewis makes a depiction of the American middle class through the lens of a businessman. It was not until 1926 after some failed attempts, following the publication of *Arrowsmith* in 1925, that he got a formal consideration for the Pulitzer Prize which he ultimately won.

Far from feeling ecstatic about being honoured with such a prestigious award, which solidified his all-time goal of becoming a respected writer, Sinclair Lewis decided to turn it down and also refused to accept the money that came with it. He did so as a way to criticize and to get back at the organization of said award for not seeing *Main Street* and *Babbitt* as worthy of recognition. Before *Arrowsmith* won this prize, these two preceding novels were also considered to be of great quality but they were thought to represent a neither wholesome nor hopeful portrait of how life was like in America. The jury was trying to encourage stories that were more positive than this unpleasant image of the American society that was done by Lewis. This is why he did not receive the award before, although his work held tremendous literary value. Even if he refused to accept it, *Arrowsmith* is still considered to be the novel which won the 1926 Pulitzer Prize. (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2021)

As the decade progressed, his work kept being praised and so was his figure as a writer. He was not only being read and celebrated in his home country but also internationally. But the work that he produced after *Arrowsmith* slightly changed in form. In following novels, Lewis presented the satirical element in a more brutal way with barely any positive aspects that could balance out his harsh portrayal of the American society. An example of this change is *Mantrap* from 1926, where he tells the story of a New Yorker lawyer who flees to Canada in an attempt to escape his busy career and life in the city.

His following novel would showcase this shift in his original approach to writing in a greater way. In his novel *Elmer Gantry*, which was published in 1927, Sinclair Lewis chose the state of the evangelical religion in America as his topic of research. The satire in *Elmer Gantry* is one of the most biting from any previous work by Lewis, as well as the least concerned with the introduction of positive elements that could still bring some hope when reading the story. (Schorer, M. 1963: 18-20)

This novel was considered to be one of his most notorious pieces since it meant a drastic change in his career, and in his position as a reputable writer. *Elmer Gantry* was seen

as one of the reasons for the beginning of the decay of Lewis' prime in American literature in later years. This bad reputation would be closely related to his work in the following decade. The 1920's then marked the peak of his career as a writer. (McFee, 12-14)

Although negative opinions about him and his work were starting to form, the beginning of the 1930's brought him one of his most important accomplishments. In 1930, as a recognition to his remarkable back catalogue, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature "for his vigorous and graphic art of description and his ability to create, with wit and humour, new types of character". (Nobel Prize, 2021)

This was not only a great achievement for Sinclair Lewis but for American literature as a whole, since he was the first American writer to receive such a prestigious acknowledgement.

As previously mentioned, the 1930's would not be as fruitful as the preceding decade in terms of consideration by the public. Even if he was deemed to have passed his prime as a writer, there were works that he produced around this time which were still of great value, and where he presented a picture of the United States that could even serve as a premonition for the political state of the country years later. This is the case of *It Can't Happen Here* which was published in 1935. In this novel he describes an American society where fascism slowly takes control. He still deals with the middle class, but instead of choosing the most prolific figure within this part of society he uses an ordinary person that might not have great relevance at first glance.

Although his writing was beginning to be looked down upon by critics, this work still reflects his great capacity when it comes to conveying a particular topic to the reader. In his writing we can see how different he is to other dystopian authors such as Aldous Huxley or George Orwell; in terms of coherence and the portrayal of a dark future, respectively. This time he showcased his interest in the political situation outside of the United States. This novel comes as a response by Sinclair Lewis to the growing wave of totalitarian regimes that were arising in the decade of the Great Depression, showing his inner fear of this political movement planting its seed in the minds of the American people. He used *It Can't Happen Here* as a critique addressed to the average person, in order for them not to fall victim to these dangerous fascist ideals. (Schorer, M. 1963: 33-34)

This novel received great praise in Europe, especially in such countries as the United Kingdom or France, because it appealed to their most recent history and their close connection to fascist regimes. This opportunity that people had to identify with the story on a practical level, made it easier for this specific audience to see the relation between the demagogues in the story and their counterparts in real life who Lewis used as inspiration.

It Can't Happen Here would be his last piece of work to be widely acclaimed by the public. His following productions, although they made him money, were not considered to demonstrate the high quality that was present in previous publications. By the end of the 1940's, Sinclair Lewis was not seen as the relevant figure in American literature he once was. During this decade he resorted to theatre and the production of plays but did not experience great success. When it comes to his later novels, we can see Lewis' attempt to return to the realism that brought him to literary stardom which was once again ineffective.

The juxtaposition of his incredible rise to success, his subsequent dreaded decline and his life-long troubled relationship with critics, makes it very difficult to firmly determine the literary value and excellence of Sinclair Lewis' career as a whole. Although he might be considered to not showcase the literary quality to the extent that other authors were known for, he still remains as one of the writers whose portrayal of the reality in the United States feels the most genuine and accurate, and for that we should still acknowledge and celebrate his great contributions to American literature.

2.3. The Great Depression and the Surge of Totalitarian Regimes

In order to further understand the reasons why this novel by Sinclair Lewis came to be, we need to take a closer look at the state of the economy at the time and how new political movements were being implemented with the ultimate aim to restore the power that countries around the world were losing.

As stated previously in this paper, the crash of the stock market in the United States in 1929 and the following Great Depression, that came as a consequence, were considered to be some of the most relevant events which shaped American society in the early 20th century, also influencing many other nations internationally. After the Crash of 1929, the United States was immersed in one of the most critical times in the history of the country. The

national economy took a turn for the worse after experiencing such a prosperous decade during the Roaring 20's. A multitude of banks closed, an increasing number of people were laid off from their jobs or lost the ability to keep up with their businesses, and famine became an usual concern within society.

The most essential values that the country was built on and the concept of the American Dream, which sold the idea of the limitless prosperity of the nation and the individual, seemed as though they no longer represented the current state of the country at the time. America and its citizens were losing hope and beginning to see the flaws of a system that was based on capitalist ideals. As loans were no longer a feasible option to obtain liquidity, people had to deal with the little money they had left which would only add to the generalized anger against the government that the population was experiencing.

Because of the commercial relationships that existed between the United States and the rest of the world, it would not take long for other countries to feel the effects of this unpleasant situation. Developing countries which provided the country with the materials required for its industry were no longer needed, and the capitalist cycle was beginning to experience a deceleration in its expansion. Western countries were also affected by this decline in both imports and exports, which ultimately meant the recession of their economies. One great example of this was Germany, but it also took a toll on countries such as France or Great Britain which shared a close economic relationship with the United States especially after the Great War.

This financial crisis was particularly harsh on Germany. The country was already experiencing a strong dependency on American credit before the crash of the stock market, since it was their primary solution to the monetary difficulties they were undergoing after losing the war. These problems were a consequence of their need for reconstruction of the nation after such distressing times, and the reparations to other countries that they needed to provide. The resolution to this concern that Germany resorted to was the development of a totalitarian regime also known as Nazism, which promised to regain financial autonomy and international power. As head of this new political approach, Adolf Hitler was determined to take over the country in order to make it prosperous once again, or so he made the German population believe. (Rothermund, D. 1933: 69)

Totalitarian governments were not a new concept at the time. Communism in the Soviet Union and Italian Fascism had already paved the way for other similar political movements to develop across Europe in the 20th century, also including countries such as Spain. Although they are usually put together under the umbrella of totalitarianism and also share some similarities, each of these regimes has its own particularities.

Firstly, we should look at what made a political movement to be considered totalitarian. They needed to have a leader whose powers were above all citizens; although they did not have complete control over every aspect of the sovereignty of the nation, they still had the ability to get things done their way fairly easily. Then, it was also very important to transmit an ideology which resonated with the people as the only solution in such desperate times. They usually rearranged the political atmosphere of the country in order to have one single party and seized the freedom of speech in the media. According to totalitarian ideals, individuals were too unreasonable and illiterate to be trusted with any opportunity to intervene in politics, which goes against any democratic belief that people had experienced before. (Pauley, B. 2015: 1-4)

Although these different totalitarian governments shared common structural elements, they also had different goals and ways of developing their plans. Communism aimed for the redistribution of wealth, proposing the concept of universal public property against the capitalist system that was widely spread around the world. They also tried to appeal to other nationalities, as to make people believe that this was the appropriate alternative to the old ways. On the other hand, Italian and German fascism were more focused on colonialism and on the superiority of their own race, respectively. These countries tried to improve the economical situation of their countries working around capitalist ideals, while still despising the concept of capitalism and trying to provide for themselves as much as possible. (Ibid. 2015: 6)

Another important difference between these forms of totalitarianism is the way in which they obtained power. While the bolsheviks took a more violent route, Adolf Hitler actually followed the legal procedure in Germany at the time and won the government through elections in 1933. All of these new political movements that originated in the early 20th century could have been seen as valid and as the only solution at some point, but they were also incredibly threatening to the most essential aspect that makes us human. The freedom of the individual was never taken into account as they were considered to not be

deserving of autonomous thinking, although if you had the money or connections you were still able to enjoy some sort of privilege and liberty that the rest of the population would never experience. (Ibid 2015: 4-8)

On the other hand, the United States chose a more democratic route. As opposed to Germany, America tried to find a solution through the system that was already implemented in the country. This evolution of the political approach in the United States allowed for the voices of people to be taken into consideration in a greater manner than before. (Himmelberg, R. 2000: 56)

The democratic candidate for the 1932 elections, Franklin Roosevelt, introduced the concept of the New Deal to the American people as the means for salvation. “The country needs bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something”. Not only did he win the elections that year through the New Deal coalition, but this new set of policies designed to improve the quality of life in America, and intended for the creation of new jobs and opportunities, allowed Roosevelt to get re-elected in the following elections. (Ibid, 2000: 60-63)

Although Sinclair Lewis was theoretically part of a democratic society, he still saw the cracks in the system that could potentially affect in a negative way American society. As he was deeply interested in international concerns, like the development of fascism in such an advanced and highly educated nation as Germany, it was easier for him to acknowledge the ideas that were being introduced in his country which shared similarities to the discourse that enabled Nazism to establish in this European country.

2.4. Sinclair Lewis' Depiction of a Dystopian Fascist America

After introducing the notion of totalitarianism, and more specifically of Nazism, I can now provide a closer examination to how *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis assimilates the core elements of this Nazi dictatorship. In today's day and age, through the perspective that time and the historical awareness offer, it is easier for us to identify the similarities between Lewis' story and the way in which Nazi Germany developed.

In *It Can't Happen Here*, Sinclair Lewis continues to deal with issues concerning the American middle class as he did in previous works such as *Elmer Gantry*. This time he does not focus on the elite within this part of society, instead he takes a more ordinary approach when choosing the characters for the story. In this novel we become acquainted with the character of Doremus Jessup, and we get to experience how he navigates life in an ever-changing American society. This sixty year-old liberal journalist is the head of the only newspaper in the imagined town of Fort Beulah in Vermont, which is called the *Daily Informer*. From the very beginning, Lewis makes a depiction of how people were already using and spreading the nationalist message that resonated in great manner with the fascist concept of the superiority of one race over the rest, and the need for America to take action in order for the nation to survive such troubling times.

As the story progresses, we get to meet the character of Berzelius Windrip, also known as Buzz. He is a demagogue politician who is a key element in the depiction of fascism in this novel. Lewis uses Windrip as a fictional representation of an American version of Adolf Hitler. Buzz Windrip started as a senator in the United States and progressively escalated to the almighty position of dictator in the Corpo regime. This was not a simple task, but the incredible oratory that he possessed allowed him to make people think of him as the ultimate and only solution that could bring America back to prosperity. This character follows a quite identical route to the one Hitler had to undergo in order to become German chancellor. But in essence he was still a commoner, an ordinary American turned dictator.

Aside from his dramatic glory, Buzz Windrip was a Professional Common Man.

Oh, he was common enough. He had every prejudice and aspiration of every American Common Man. He believed in the desirability and therefore the sanctity of thick buckwheat cakes with adulterated maple syrup, in rubber trays for the ice cubes in his electric refrigerator, in the especial nobility of dogs, all dogs, in the oracles of S. Parkes Cadman, in being chummy with all waitresses at all junction lunch rooms, and in Henry Ford (when he became President, he exulted, maybe he could get Mr Ford to come to supper at the White House), and the superiority of anyone who possessed a million dollars. He regarded spats, walking sticks, caviar, titles, tea-drinking, poetry not daily

syndicated in newspapers, and all foreigners, possibly excepting the British, as degenerate.

But he was the Common Man twenty-times-magnified by his oratory, so that while the other Commoners could understand his every purpose, which was exactly the same as their own, they saw him towering among them, and they raised hands to him in worship. (Lewis, S. 2017: 71)

The way in which Berzelius Windrip rose to power feels like it follows the blueprint laid down by Adolf Hitler. Through a series of speeches, he received the attention of powerful figures within the American democrats who would see him as the potential new head of the Democratic party. This was partially because of his radical demagogic message that was based on an unfounded mixture of different ideals which the intellectuals in the story, Doremus Jessup included, were quick to identify. But not everyone was able to recognize the senseless concepts that were present in his discourse, that is why he rapidly gathered a multitude of followers who saw him as the only hope. In the same way, Hitler made a name for himself within his party, the DAP or the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, by means of his excellent eloquence. He quickly became the leader of the party and managed to eradicate any sense of democracy in the DAP. It would not take long for him to even change the name of the party to Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, or NSDAP, which would be known as the Nazi party. (Pauley, B. 2015: 41)

But their aspirations for total control did not stop there. The next step would be to become presidents of their respective nations. In *It Can't Happen Here*, as well as in real life, both Windrip and Hitler chose to follow the legal procedure in order to obtain the power of the country. The former did so with an indisputable electoral victory, while the latter got into office after a tedious process due to the lack of a majority in parliament. Once they acquired the presidency, they started to showcase their true colours. Windrip already hinted at his intentions during his campaign through “The Fifteen Points of Victory for the Forgotten Men”. Number fifteen reads as follows:

Congress shall, immediately upon our inauguration, initiate amendments to the Constitution providing (a), that the President shall have the authority to institute and

execute all necessary measures for the conduct of the government during this critical epoch; (b), that Congress shall serve only in an advisory capacity, calling to the attention of the President and his aides and Cabinet any needed legislation, but not acting upon same until authorized by the President so to act; and (c), that the Supreme Court shall immediately have removed from its jurisdiction the power to negate, by ruling them to be unconstitutional or by any other judicial action, any or all acts of the President, his duly appointed aides, or Congress. (Lewis, S. 2017: 64)

This initial proposal became a reality when Buzz Windrip abolished the Republican party forcing his opponent, Walt Trowbridge, into exile. In the plan carried out by Hitler, we can also see how he removed any other party from the German political scene, which allowed him and the Nazi party to do as they please with the country and its society.

These totalitarian approaches to politics also came with the removal of freedom of speech in the media. This topic is represented in a very personal manner in *It Can't Happen Here* since the main character, Doremus Jessup who is a journalist, suffers from this issue at first hand. After witnessing his country fall apart and drift away from the American values that it once had, we can see how Doremus lost the very thing that still held meaningful value to him and where he felt in command.

‘You are to be released on parole, to assist and coach Dr Staubmeyer who, by orders from Commissioner Reek, at Hanover, has just been made editor of the *Informer*, but who doubtless lacks certain points of technical training. You will help him - oh, gladly, I am sure! - until he learns. Then we’ll see what we’ll do with you!. . . You will write editorials, with all your accustomed brilliance - oh, I assure you, people constantly stop on Boston Common to discuss your masterpieces; have done for years! But you’ll write only as Dr Staubmeyer tells you. *Understand?* Oh. Today - since ‘tis already past the witching hour - you will write an abject apology for your diatribe - oh, yes very much on the abject side! You know - you veteran journalists do these things so neatly - just admit you were a cockeyed liar and that sort of thing - bright and bantering - *you* know! And next Monday you will , like most of the other ditchwater-dull papers, begin the serial publication of the Chief’s *Zero Hour*. You’ll enjoy that!’ (Ibid. 2017: 192-193)

Sinclair Lewis made this character to be involved in journalism as a way to bring awareness to how serious the removal of liberty in the media truly is, and to showcase the evolution that this activity experiences in a fascist regime. Although it was difficult at first because of the plurality of German media, this was a very common practice in Nazi Germany, allowing Hitler and his people to spread misinformation in a broader and easier way.

In this novel, we can see how Windrip's political movement despises the notion of the economic systems that were implemented around the world at the time, and considers them as enemies. Buzz Windrip paints them as the reason for the American debacle, therefore the country should work against them. He also conveys the idea that a brief authoritarian government would be ideal for the quick recovery of the situation in the county.

President Windrip's first extended proclamation to the country was a pretty piece of literature and of tenderness. He explained that powerful and secret enemies of American principles - one rather gathered that they were a combination of Wall Street and Soviet Russia - upon discovering, to their fury, that he, Berzelius, was going to be President, had planned their last charge. Everything would be tranquil in a few months, but meantime there was a Crisis, during which the country must 'bear with him'.

He recalled the military dictatorship of Lincoln and Stanton during the Civil War, when the civilian suspects were arrested without warrant. He hinted how delightful everything was going to be - right away now - just a moment - just a moment's patience - when he had things in hand; and he wound up with a comparison of the Crisis to the urgency of a fireman rescuing a pretty girl from a 'conflagration', and carrying her down a ladder, for her own sake, whether she liked it or not, and no matter how appealingly she might kick her pretty ankles. (Ibid. 2017: 139-140)

On a more practical note, in Sinclair Lewis' novel we can find literal reproductions of some of the most representative elements of Nazism which the author slightly modified in order to make them more genuine. That is the case of the publication of a book within the story called *Zero Hour*, which collected all the ideas that Berzelius Windrip utilized to construct his discourse and where people could find the proper ways to conduct themselves in the Corpo dictatorship. Although it was written by Lee Sarasson, a close acquaintance of

Windrip's, it was still published under the name of the dictator. This book is a very straightforward nod to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which was actually written by the leader himself when he was incarcerated and the Nazi party was declared as illegal. All of this happened before the Nazis secured the power of the government in 1933.

Another interesting translation that Sinclair Lewis provided between the real and fictional regimes is the presence of a private police or militia, which answered to the will of the leader. The name for them in the novel is the Minute Men, also abbreviated as M.M., whose uniforms consisted of "slant-topped blue forage caps, dark blue tunics, light blue trousers, with yellow stripes at the seam, tucked into leggings of black rubberoid" (Ibid, 2017: 92). These troops also wore a five-pointed star on their left arm. Through the description of the clothes that they wore, Lewis is showing how important it is in totalitarian regimes to have a collective sense of belonging through the uniforms that they are required to wear. The M.M. is a shameless reproduction by Sinclair Lewis of Hitler's Schutzstaffel, or S.S., and the five-pointed star was an adaptation of the swastika symbol used by the Nazis.

In this depiction of a fascist American state, Doremus Jessup serves as a representation of the willingness of people to not lose their authenticity and to fight against a deeply rotten system where the individual freedom that America was built on no longer exists. With this novel, Sinclair Lewis is demonstrating how easily it could be to demolish the democratic basis of American society, and also how the economic difficulties can radicalize the way in which people think. *It Can't Happen Here* also works as a prophetic vision to how things would turn out in Nazi Germany.

2.5. *The Power of Propaganda*

In the novel *It Can't Happen Here*, we can recognize the important role that propaganda plays in the genesis, development and survival of a totalitarian regime. This term makes reference to the set of promises, and often lies, developed by political organizations with the ultimate intention to appeal to the general public. The propagandist approach does not work if the ideas that are being spread are too far removed from the initial point of view of the audience which the message is intended to. In a similar fashion, propaganda had a big role in the consolidation of the Nazi regime in Germany. (Pauley, B. 2015: 103)

The principal character who is associated with this practice in the story is Lee Sarason. He was the closest political advisor to the Chief of the Corp regime. Sarason and Windrip were already acquaintances long before they managed to attain the power of the nation. The book he wrote under Windrip's name, *Zero Hour*, was already a great example of this political propaganda. This manifesto sought to open the eyes of the population through the transmission of speculative ideas against other races, politicians with a different ideology or conflicting economic systems. But this is not the only time that we encounter this concept throughout the novel. All the speeches made by Berzilius Windrip showcased a multitude of propagandist ideas which actually helped him make a name for himself in this fictional American society, although Sarason was the man in charge of the production of such discourse.

Sinclair Lewis once again drew inspiration from fascist Germany for the creation of his characters in *It Can't Happen Here*. This time Lee Sarason was based on the relevant Nazi figure of Joseph Goebbels. He became the minister of propaganda during the Third Reich, but influenced the way of thinking of Hitler before that. The fictional pair in the novel resembled the relationship between the Nazi leader and his counselor. Both Windrip and Hitler shared a great oratory but limited developmental capacity, this is where Sarason and Goebbels would step in to generate a more elaborate message that their respective commanders could then transmit to the masses. The following excerpt, taken from the book *Zero Hour* which was published under Windrip's name but was thought to be of Sarason's authorship, showcases this propagandist ideas in the novel.

An honest propagandist for any Cause, that is, one who honestly studies and figures out the most effective way of putting over his Message, will learn fairly early that it is not fair to ordinary folks - it just confuses them - to try to make them swallow all the true facts that would be suitable to a higher class of people. And one seemingly small but almighty important point he learns, if he does much speechifying, is that you can win over folks to your point of view much better in the evening, when they are tired out from work and not so likely to resist you, than at any other time of day. (Lewis, S. 2017: 180)

Joseph Goebbels saw the important role of propaganda in a totalitarian system. He was also aware of the real purpose behind this style of message and the appropriate way in which it should be delivered to the people, “propaganda must not investigate the truth objectively - but it must present that aspect of the truth which is favorable to its own side”. (Campbell, K. 2012: 128)

As much as it was believed, Nazi propaganda was not as easily assimilated by the population as we have assume throughout history. People within a totalitarian government were not as credulus as multiple historians have made us think. These citizens were well aware of the situation that they needed to survive in, but that did not mean they completely lost their ability of individual opinion even if the censorship of the regime affected every aspect of ordinary life. Although this is true, totalitarianism, and especially Nazism, would not have been as successful without the development of this political propaganda. (Pauley, B. 2015: 104)

2.6. Eugenics Movement in Nazi Germany

The eugenics theory aimed for racial purity and the betterment of the human being through an unfounded scientific perspective. Its supporters believed in the existence of a superior race worth reproducing, and an inferior antithesis which was not deserving of such privilege. It became a common wave of thought during the 20th century, especially in the early decades, reaching its prime with the racial policies of Nazi Germany; but it has been present across the world for a long time. This trend was also developed in the United States, causing the issue of racism to broaden and to still be latent in current American society.

This movement is based on quite an ambiguous concept, thus making it possible for the emergence of different approaches to the matter. Though this may be true, they all share a common ideological ground. Many scientists saw the mingling between different cultures and nationalities as the reason for the survival of the white race to be threatened in society. This was their way to back up racism and anti-Semitism through science. By the mid-20th century, such people as the anthropologist Roger Pearson were trying to disassociate the concept of eugenics from the radical approach conducted by the Nazi state during the Third Reich. He defined the movement as the scientific desire for the betterment of the health of future

generations. But it was not difficult for other experts to recognize the fascist influence behind his theory. (Kuhl, S. 2002: 3-5)

After receiving international support to their racial hygiene propagandist message, Nazi Germany approved in 1933 its sterilization law that would become a focal point of this dictatorship, which would precede the Nuremberg Laws. The Nazi government tried to amend the poor state of the national birth rate through the passing of laws that would encourage the marriage of non-Jewish couples who were neither mentally nor physically disabled by providing monetary assistance. (Ibid, 2002: 29)

These measures would eventually become more drastic and it was partially due to the above-mentioned Nuremberg Laws, which advocated for a Germany free from Jewish people. They went from sterilizing those who would not meet the standards for reproduction, which was also practiced in the United States to a lesser extent, to the seizure of Jewish private property and the terrorisation of this population. Jewish people were being forcefully pressured to leave the nation. These German politics would take an even more sinister turn, as the Jewish population was being abused and persecuted leading up to the infamous Holocaust. (Gilbert, M. 2014:18-19)

This part of German history is very present in *It Can't Happen Here*. In the story, Jewish and African American people are not regarded as legitimate parts of society. Windrip, like Hitler, spreads the idea that the current situation of the country is due to the mere existence of these communities. He campaigns aiming to highlight the importance of racial purity and the white supremacy in America.

The real trouble with the Jews is that they are cruel. Anybody with a knowledge of history knows how they tortured poor debtors in secret catacombs, all through the Middle Ages. Whereas the Nordic is distinguished by his gentleness and his kind-heartedness to friends, children, dogs, and people of inferior races. (Lewis, S. 2017: 196)

In this excerpt from the book *Zero Hour* published under the name of the dictator in the novel, we can see how Buzz Windrip conducts similar policies to those of the Nazis. This example helps to illustrate the alienation of these individuals because of their religious

beliefs, but we can also see the establishment of concentration camps as the story progresses. In a sense, Lewis' story serves as a prophecy of what was in the horizon for Hitler, although Windrip does not experience such a fatal outcome as the Nazi dictator.

3. Sinclair Lewis' Prediction of Recent American Politics

3.1. Donald Trump: Demagogue in Office

In Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*, we are witnesses to the radicalization of the political approach in a dystopian interpretation of the United States. As previously mentioned, this novel served as a prophecy of how the Nazi totalitarian regime would unfold in the 20th century. But we can also extrapolate Lewis' message into today's day and age, and see how the story was also foreseeing the most recent political events in American history. In this fictional representation of the United States created by the author, fascist ideals are at the core of this imagined society and are regarded as valid. We can perceive an extremist message which resonates at some extent with the approach to politics conducted by the last American president, Donald Trump.

The way in which this reality TV star turned president rose to power seems quite similar to the way Buzz Windrip won the elections in this novel. In these two cases, the American electorate is as polarized as ever since they are going through a challenging time. In *It Can't Happen Here*, the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression, and before Trump won his election in 2016 the country was also experiencing a concerning economic growth which was at its lowest by the end of Obama's presidency. This poor financial situation is what in most cases radicalizes the way people think, although they still need a demagogic figure who can actually voice their opinions and provide public validation to such extremist ideas.

Donald Trump emerged into the political scene by providing a demagogic and baseless message only meant to arouse the people at his rallies. The former American president was also selling the idea that he was the only capable person to amend the current state of the economy at the time, which is exactly what Windrip does in the novel. Sinclair

Lewis portrays the dictator as the ultimate eloquent leader who, at the same time, lacks real substance in his discourse.

Doremus had never heard Windrip during one of his orgasms of oratory, but he had been told by political reporters that under the spell you thought Windrip was Plato, but that on the way home you could not remember anything he had said.

There were two things, they told Doremus, that distinguished this prairie Demosthenes. He was an actor of genius. [...] He would whirl arms, bang tables, glare from mad eyes, vomit Biblical wrath from a gaping mouth; but he would also coo like a nursing mother, beseech like an aching lover, and in between tricks would coldly and almost contemptuously jab his crowds with figures and facts [...] even when, as often happened, they were entirely incorrect. (Lewis, S. 2017: 70)

Under the false pretense to reconstruct the country and to “Make America Great Again”, Trump managed to build a legion of followers who identified with this MAGA movement. Lewis uses a similar device in *It Can't Happen Here* with the League of the Forgotten Men, a group of sympathisers of Windrip's figure and his political message. This idea of being forgotten by the system was of great relevance during Trump's campaign and subsequent presidency. He appealed to the parts of society which felt that they were underrepresented by the American government. “We are transferring power from Washington, DC and giving it back to you, the American people ... The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer” (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 5). It almost feels as if Donald Trump, or his advisors, read this novel and then decided to implement this fictional approach to politics in real life. In this excerpt from Lewis' story, we can see an analogous approach in the discourse that was being presented to the masses.

When Colonel Dewey Haik put Buzz's name in nomination, the Colonel wound up by shouting. ‘One thing more! Listen! It is the special request of Senator Windrip that you do *not* waste the time of this history making assembly by any cheering of his name - any cheering whatever. We of the League of Forgotten Men (yes - and Women!) don't want empty acclaim, but a solemn consideration of the desperate and immediate needs of 60

per cent of the population of the United States. No cheers - but may Providence guide us in the most solemn thinking we have ever done. (Lewis, S. 2017: 50)

This demagogic method of gaining followers and power cannot be conducted without a solidified foundation and a plan of action which can provide credibility to such a performative style of politics. It is already theorised that this extreme polarisation in the electorate and the support of the most populist ideas are usually developed within the rural parts of society, white heterosexual men, the older generations and the less educated (Norris and Inglehart. 2019: 90). We can see how these two leaders shaped their discourse in order to represent these people, since they saw them as compliant and as a valuable tool that would allow them to build the almost mythical representation of an American ruler. In the novel, Windrip uses a nationalistic message and the assurance of actual money to win the votes of the population, promising up to \$5,000 for each family per year which they would receive once he was elected as president.

I shall not be content till this country can produce every single thing we need, even coffee, cocoa, and rubber, and so keep all our dollars at home. If we can do this and at the same time work up tourist traffic so that foreigners will come from every part of the world to see such remarkable wonders as the Grand Canyon, Glacier and Yellowstone etc. parks, the fine hotels of Chicago, & etc., thus leaving their money here, we shall have such a balance of trade as will go far to carry out my often-criticized yet completely sound idea of from \$3000 to \$5000 per year for every single family - that is, I mean every real American family. Such an aspiring Vision is what we want, and not all this nonsense of wasting our time at Geneva and talky-talk at Lugano, wherever that is. (Lewis,S. 2017: 90)

On the other hand, Donald Trump based his message on a more abstract economic compensation to his voters while diverging the public interest to the issues of race and immigration in the country. These two populist politicians share several similarities, even detractors who unified in the ‘antibuzz’ and ‘antitrump’ movements although in the novel this group did not gather as many supporters as its counterpart did in real life.

‘Antibuzz’, a word credited to Mrs Gimmitch but more probably invented by Dr. Hector Macgoblin, was to be extensively used by lady patriots as a term expressing such vicious disloyalty to the State as might call for the firing squad. Yet, like Mrs Gimmitch’s splendid synthesis ‘Unkies’, for soldiers of the A.E.F., it never really caught on. (Ibid. 2017: 100)

This is why we need to be aware of the presence of these recycled ideas which are ultimately harmful to society and its development in time. We should acknowledge the unfounded concepts in which political figures can base their discourse in order not to fall victims to them.

3.2. Hate Speech and Fascist Tendencies in Trumpism

One of the many reasons for the outstanding emergence of Donald Trump into the political scene in the United States is the radical element within his approach to politics. Prior to and during his campaign, he broke the moral code of what was considered to be the ethical procedure of conducting politics in western cultures, if there was ever any. Although populism has always been a rather frequent device which has been widely used by other governments, he used it in such a strong and shameless manner that he was able to increase polarization in the electorate. This allowed him to gain both sympathisers and detractors, but more importantly he received the attention from the media he ultimately aimed for.

Hate speech and racist messages have always been at the core of Trump’s discourse. These instruments are deeply related to the way in which populist governments have unfolded during the 21st century. Trumpism has based its message on the alienation of certain groups of society, regarding their religious beliefs, ethnicity or ability to speak the official language. Donald Trump encouraged the portrayal of these people as responsible for the deterioration of the country. He has constructed a narrative where anyone who does not fulfill the requirements to be a legitimate American is hence considered as a threat to the nation and its values (Wodak, R. 2015: 2). This practice of depicting the irrational love for the nation as the only solution for the improvement of the situation, and to ostracise whoever does not follow the norm can also be seen in *It Can’t Happen Here*, with the persecution of both Jewish citizens and people of colour.

That Love and Patriotism have been my sole guiding principles in politics. My one ambition is to get all Americans to realize that they are, and must continue to be, the greatest Race on the face of this old Earth, and second, to realize that whatever apparent Differences there may be among us, in wealth, knowledge, skill, ancestry or strength - though of course, all this does not apply to people who are *racially* different from us - we are all brothers, bound, together in the great and wonderful bond of National Unity, for which we should all be very glad. (Lewis, S. 2017: 68)

Although this is part of Sinclair Lewis' fiction, we shall not forget that he mirrored the fascist ideals of Nazism which makes it more difficult to accept that these notions are still finding support in our society. The infamous wall along the Mexican border with the United States serves as a physical representation of this racist political message that Donald Trump has developed throughout his presidency.

Trump's alliance with the alt-right and white supremacist movements has not been a secret to the public. This is one of the reasons why he became so popular during his term. These groups were finally given a public platform which validated such harmful ideas (Mollan and Geesin, 2019). The American president did not consider himself as part of these organizations but it was not difficult to identify the fascist tendencies that he was showcasing. His close relationship with the alt-right, and the tension he had built during the time he was president, culminated with the assault on the U.S. Capitol building perpetrated by the more radicalised MAGA supporters. Even if they were not aware, this event endangered the essential values of the welfare state in America.

Although Donald Trump's legislature was legitimate, we should acknowledge the dangerous politics he has developed as president of the United States in order to learn from them. His extreme discourse and support to radical groups have jeopardised the nature and purpose of American democracy. This renaissance of fascist patterns should not be allowed in today's society, especially in the leading nation of the free world.

4. Conclusion

After exploring Sinclair Lewis' career as a writer and the political implication behind *It Can't Happen Here*, while also considering the historical context in which this novel came to fruition, I can say that this author does not get enough recognition for his key role in American literature.

His accurate portrayal of American society in the early decades of the 20th century allows the reader to understand the struggles that the middle class had to endure during these strenuous times. Although it could be considered as if he went against the concept of the American dream in his work, he provided an honest depiction of the life of the commoners in the United States at the time. This is why he gained many detractors throughout his career, and maybe the reason for his writing to not be seen as valuable as others for a long time. In order to understand the reality we are living in, we also need to address the negative aspects within it; this is the only way we can improve and evolve as a community. Through *It Can't Happen Here*, Lewis also proposed the debate about the true nature of American democracy and the flaws in the system that he perceived. Despite the fact that the Constitution stated that every person was free and equal, we should bear in mind that in a capitalist society there will always be differences concerning social class and monetary power. We shall aim for this inequality to cease even if capitalism is so ingrained into the human brain that any alternative is regarded as utopian.

Apart from the argument about whether or not democracy is real, in this novel Sinclair Lewis was also warning the public about the dangers of whitewashing fascists principles and implementing them into our society. This criticism was aimed at Nazism but, as previously mentioned, it could also serve as a scolding to the populist politicians from the 21st century. *It Can't Happen Here* helps the reader to understand how problematic totalitarian regimes truly are. The removal of individual freedom does not benefit the fate or economic prosperity of a country, instead it only allows ego-driven demagogues to obtain the power that they have always longed for. With the example of American president Donald Trump, I wanted to bring awareness about his aggressive manner of conducting politics during his term, and how people should be able to identify these unoriginal concepts which he based his message on. We have the power to choose who represents us in government, this is why we should use our right wisely in order not to elect people whose misleading discourses are ultimately harmful towards certain parts of society.

Through this paper I want to stress the importance of remembering our history since this is the only way that we will be able to acknowledge these unfounded and concerning behaviours in politics, which have been developed in the past and will potentially be reproduced in the future.

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