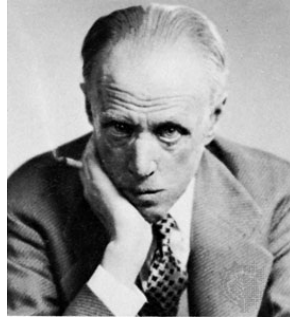


ELMER GANTRY

by Sinclair Lewis



THE AUTHOR

Harry Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) grew up in small-town Minnesota, the son of a country doctor. His mother died when he was six, and his father soon remarried, and his stepmother proved to be a real mother to him in his childhood years. He hated the narrowness of his hometown, and early learned to find solace in books, which were plentiful in his home. School was painful for him, not because of the academic requirements, but because his odd appearance – unusually tall and thin for his age with red hair and skin blemishes – made him the butt of jokes and ridicule. He even ran away to join the army at the age of 13, but his father caught up with him at the train station. After a year of boarding school at Oberlin, he matriculated to Yale University, where he quickly became involved in literary endeavors, writing for and eventually editing the university literary magazine. His desire for adventure led him to spend a summer working on the Panama Canal and another doing custodial work at the socialist commune led by Upton Sinclair.

After finishing college he worked at various odd jobs, including writing for magazines and doing freelance work. He sold some of his plots to Jack London for use in the latter's short stories, and soon began writing his own novels, beginning with *Hike and the Aeroplane* (1912), an adventure story. Lewis' first real literary success came with the publication of *Main Street* (1920), which became an instant best-seller. His critique of the ordinary life of Middle America through the picture of a disillusioned feminist struck a chord in the supposedly lively but deeply disillusioned America of the Roaring Twenties. With this work Lewis embarked on the writing that was to bring him his greatest fame – the bitter social satires that continued with *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929), excoriating respectively middle-class businessmen, the medical profession, Protestant evangelicalism, and affluent Americans with equal vitriol. When he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1925, Lewis turned it down, arguing that the prize was intended to promote all that was good about America, while his novel did quite the opposite. Later, he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1930). After winning the Nobel, he continued to write, but never regained the level of popularity and acclaim accorded to his early work.

Other targets for social criticism included conservative American politics in *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), in which a Fascist is elected to the presidency, and *Kingsblood Royal* (1947),

about racism. *Arrowsmith*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Dodsworth* were all made into Hollywood motion pictures, with the first being nominated for four Academy Awards. Burt Lancaster won a Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal of Elmer Gantry in 1960, while Shirley Jones was named Best Supporting Actress for her performance as Lulu.

Lewis was never good at making friends, but he did marry in 1914 to an editor at *Vogue* magazine, with whom he had a son, Wells, named after the British science fiction writer and Fabian socialist H.G. Wells, with whom he shared an interest in radical politics. The marriage led to divorce in 1925 and a subsequent marriage in 1928; Lewis' son was killed in battle in World War II. He became an increasingly heavy drinker, alienating his friends and second wife, from whom he was divorced in 1942 after he had a brief flirtation with an eighteen-year-old actress. Lewis finally was told by his doctor that he would have to choose between drinking and living. He died in 1951 of an alcohol-induced heart attack.

Elmer Gantry contains such a negative portrayal of American evangelical Christianity in the Midwest that it was banned in many cities, including Boston. His characters are drawn from his own experiences in frequent visits to churches in Kansas City, where he quickly decided that he liked the agnostic Unitarian much more than he did the evangelical Methodist pastor who was his original source of information. The story incorporates aspects of famous preachers of the day, including Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson (the model for Sharon Falconer), and Billy Sunday, the former professional baseball player and flamboyant crusader against alcohol and evolution. Lewis' hatred of evangelical Christianity is throughout the novel untempered with any mark of respect. Every Christian character is either a charlatan, a hypocrite who doesn't believe or practice what he preaches, or a sincere dupe whose ignorance makes him an easy mark for the religious manipulator. Only the skeptics, agnostics, and atheists come across as honest men, and even they are often forced into hypocrisy by the pressures of the surrounding society. It is no coincidence that Lewis dedicated the novel to H.L. Mencken, the cynical reporter who covered the Scopes Monkey Trial and became the prototype for newsman E.K. Hornbeck in Lawrence and Lee's *Inherit the Wind*. I find it difficult to imagine how an author can manage to keep a sneer on his face for the entire amount of time required to write a 450-page novel, but Lewis seems to have managed it.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins in 1902 with Elmer Gantry and his roommate Jim Lefferts drunk in a bar. They have gotten drunk after visiting two of the town girls with whom they were making love. Elmer is the captain of the football team at Terwillinger College in Kansas, where he studies as little as possible, spends his time womanizing, and has no idea what he wants to do with his life. He is considered the most popular man on campus, but Jim is his only friend, largely because he is self-centered and intimidating. Jim, meanwhile, is a freethinker and skeptic who terrorizes students and professors alike with his unbelief and unanswerable questions. After the two leave the bar, Elmer decides to pick a fight for the fun of it. He soon comes upon Eddie Fislinger, the president of the college YMCA, preaching on a street corner and being heckled by the crowd. Though he despises Eddie, Elmer leaps to his defense. He knocks out the ringleader, and then speaks out in support of the preacher. The police soon arrive to break up the fight. On the way

home in the train, Eddie tries to convert Elmer, sparking memories of the fears inculcated in him by mother and Sunday School teachers in his childhood. All his life, in fact, had been shaped by his experiences in church. And now, after an all-night prayer meeting, Eddie and the other Christians on campus are trying mightily to bring him to salvation.

Elmer's mother was a devout Baptist, and he had been made to attend church since childhood, baptized at the age of sixteen, and saved at least twice. His mother's great desire is for him to become a preacher; his is to get all the pleasure he can out of life, and he sees the two goals as irredeemably contradictory. But after the incident in Cato when Elmer defends Eddie in front of the mob of hecklers, Eddie and Jim Lefferts engage in a tug-of-war for the soul of the young profligate. Elmer grows so desperate that he asks for the help of Jim's father, Dr. Lefferts, a noted atheist who had raised his son in the faith. Dr. Lefferts meets with Eddie and confounds him by pretending to be a believer and rebuking him for denying infant damnation. Eddie, who has never in his life been called doctrinally lax, is routed, and for a month leaves Elmer alone.

During the January of Elmer's senior year, Judson Roberts, the head of the state YMCA, holds a series of meetings at Terwillinger College. He is a former college athlete and boxer [the author uses him to parody the "muscular Christianity" championed by the YMCA and associated with Christian athletes like Eric Liddell], and Elmer finds him fascinating in spite of himself. One day "Old Jud" comes to Elmer's room and challenges him to a fight for his soul. Elmer declines, but does agree to go to the preacher's meeting the following night. Jim is sick in bed and unable to protect him, and things only get worse when Elmer's mother shows up, apparently having been tipped off by Eddie. As they leave for the meeting, Jim warns Elmer to be careful and not do anything "they" want him to do. When Old Jud is done speaking, however, Elmer is swept forward in response to the invitation. The combination of the emotions of the crowd, his mother's pleadings, and the powerful presence of the evangelist overwhelm him and he cries out to God. The acclaim of the crowd thrills him as he finds the popularity that he has long craved. In the heat of the moment, Elmer feels truly repentant, and Jud pushes him forward to testify. As the words he has heard from childhood pour eloquently from his mouth, a boy in the congregation comes forward to be saved; Elmer has not been a Christian for ten minutes before he has his first convert.

On the way home, as he thinks on what he has done, he regrets betraying Jim and even hopes to convert him, yet feels the reality of what he has just experienced. Nonetheless, he stops for a smoke on the way, at the same time vowing that he will give up this sin, along with all the others that have dominated his life. For an hour he argues with himself, fearing to confess to Jim what he had done, yet basking in the warm feelings within and the adulation of the crowd that had gone beyond anything he had known on the football field. After Elmer spends the entire night arguing fruitlessly with Jim, the president of the college arrives to inform him that he is scheduled to speak at the YMCA meeting that evening. He has a terrible time deciding what to say, but when Jim throws a book at him by the notorious atheist campaigner Robert G. Ingersoll, Elmer finds a passage on love that he decides to rework into his first sermon. The sermon is well-received, so much so that the president of the college thinks Elmer is a born preacher. Old Jud, however, confesses on the way out of town that he is full of doubts about what he preaches and wishes that he could sell real estate instead. Jim, meanwhile, moves out of Elmer's room and into the college dorm, leaving the new convert raging and lonely.

Elmer now is convinced that the Gospel ministry is the career he ought to pursue, but is told by those around him that he cannot proceed without a clear Call from God. He has no idea how to obtain such a thing, and his new advisers provide little concrete assistance. May arrives

and still no call, so Elmer consults President Quarles, who invites him to his home for a time of prayer. Elmer is revolted by the smarminess of the gathering, and runs out to get some fresh air. There he encounters Jim, who gives him some moonshine – just enough to convince Elmer that he has heard the call of God at last. He returns to announce the good tidings to the prayer meeting. On the way home, the Dean and another faculty member discuss whether they would choose to enter the ministry again if given a second chance, and neither one is sure that he would.

After two years at Mizpah Theological Seminary, Elmer and Eddie are ordained to the Baptist ministry. Elmer, always a powerful preacher with a resonant voice, is now picking up the lingo of the pulpit with increasing fluency. His mother is very proud of her son despite the fact that he has not yet managed to give up smoking. After being examined by the attending preachers and listening to interminable sermons, the two are ordained.

Elmer now returns for his final year at Mizpah Theological Seminary, affiliated with the Northern Baptists. He is bored by his classes and dislikes his classmates. They do nothing but argue about the Bible and theology, and the author shares one of these discussions. The young men share why they have chosen the ministry, confessing such noble motives as parental pressure, the feeling of power over others, the desire to gain attention from the women in the congregation (Elmer tells the rapt audience about his own sexual experiences with willing choir members), and even the desire to be respected without ever having to work very hard (this from Harry Zenz, the admitted atheist in the group). They decide that among the primary qualifications for successful pastoral ministry are the physical prowess to throw hecklers bodily out of the church and a voice that will keep the congregation spellbound. The conversation goes on to cover the superiority of the Baptists to other denominations (the congregants are too dumb to notice that the preacher is saying the same thing every week), though one student advocates the beauty of Episcopal worship and Eddie Fislinger defends the unique truth of Baptist doctrine. The author uses the opportunity to ridicule the ignorance of everyday Christians, the venality and insincerity of preachers, and the absurdity of proof-texting defenses of contradictory Christian beliefs.

The next morning Elmer is summoned to the office of Dean Trosper. He fears one of his classmates has reported his sexual escapades to the Dean, but instead the head of the seminary offers him a position as pastor of a small church in Schoenheim. The job pays ten dollars a week, and Elmer looks forward to both the income and the challenge, especially since his classmate Frank Shallard is appointed as his assistant and he loves the idea of lording it over him. The Dean warns Elmer to shun the worldly practices in which he is still engaged.

Elmer and Frank take a handcar to Schoenheim and find a congregation of about seventy people. Elmer's first sermon is on the text, "Love covers a multitude of sins," and is very well-received. After the service, Deacon Barney Bains introduces Elmer to his daughter Lulu, and he is immediately smitten. In the weeks that follow, he seeks to impress her with his eloquence and sincerity, and manages to ascertain that she is not involved in any serious relationship with a young man at present. When Elmer and Frank go to Schoenheim to decorate for the Thanksgiving service, they stay overnight in the Bains barn. During the decorating, Elmer manages to get Lulu alone in a closet and begins to make advances. That night Frank warns him against seducing the girl, and Elmer tells him to mind his own business. During the evening, Elmer arranges a rendezvous with Lulu in the parlor after everyone has gone to bed, and can think of nothing else while the merriment proceeds. When she comes down the stairs, he slyly puts his arm around her and warns her not to trust Frank who had insinuated that there was something improper in their relationship. She insists that no such thing could be possible, but before she returns to bed, he

kisses her fingertips and she kisses his temple. Elmer is in ecstasy. Every night he dreams of seducing her, and one evening he walks to Schoenheim. He is warmly received by the Bains family, and after the parents go to bed he gets his wish. Afterward, Lulu asks him when they are to be married, but Elmer puts her off, saying that he must graduate and get a real pastorate first, and that she must say nothing to her parents in the meantime.

Though Elmer continues to find seminary boring, he learns a great deal from the instruction he receives in Homiletics, and grows ever more eloquent as a result. He also despises Greek, which he cannot seem to master, but it is Frank's favorite subject. Frank's love for biblical languages draws him into a friendship with Professor Zechlin, a German who teaches Hebrew and Greek at the seminary. Frank seeks him out to resolve apparent contradictions in the Bible, but the old man leads him into skepticism instead, ultimately revealing that he is a closet atheist, refusing to admit his lack of belief for fear of losing his job. When Frank asks if he should leave the church, Zechlin counsels him to remain and destroy it from within. Despite his conversion to skepticism, however, Frank retains his vivid hatred of Elmer Gantry. Soon after, Elmer writes an anonymous message on the blackboard accusing Zechlin of unorthodox beliefs. The Dean rebukes him, but Zechlin is fired, goes to live with his niece, and dies two years later. Not long after his dismissal, Elmer receives a package containing thirty dimes, and has little doubt about the source of the gift. He takes the money and spends it on pornographic postcards.

One day on the trip back from Schoenheim, Elmer and Frank both express their doubts about the ministerial qualifications of the other – Frank because of Elmer's budding relationship with Lulu and Elmer because of Frank's budding apostasy. The result of the conversation is that Frank resigns as Elmer's assistant, leaving a clear path for Elmer to pursue his amours. Elmer, however, is beginning to tire of the childish simplicity of Lulu. All she ever wants to do is kiss, even when he gets worn out and needs to work on his sermon, and she is beginning to moon over him openly and write him sappy notes at the seminary. He decides it's time to end the relationship, so he determines to be mean to her for her own good. After church the following Sunday, she seeks him out, but he begins to curse at her and rebuke her for acting like a ten-year-old. She cries in bewilderment, begs forgiveness for whatever she has done, and watches as he indignantly walks away. A few weeks later, she comes to him at Mizpah and tells him she is pregnant. He knows she is lying, tells her he can never marry a liar, and says he never wants to see her again.

Deacon Bains notices that his daughter does not seem up to par. His concerns are fortified when a local young man, Floyd Naylor, who is sweet on Lulu, tells him about the way she and the preacher have been carrying on. When Bains confronts her, she claims nothing has happened, but collapses in tears, and he, rightly assuming the worst, determines to do something about the deplorable situation. Bains and Naylor storm into Elmer's dormitory room and insist that he come with them to announce his engagement to Lulu to the church or else they will beat him senseless. When they grab his arms, he quickly agrees to go with them, figuring that he can somehow get out of the engagement later on. The betrothal is announced amid great rejoicing, and in the middle of the night Elmer creeps into Lulu's bed. The strategy he decides upon to end the engagement is to bring Lulu and Floyd together. He avoids Lulu and deprives her of the loving contact she craves while doing everything he can to whip up Floyd's lust by describing his own sexual conquests and showing him pornographic pictures. He then speaks harshly to Lulu and leaves her and Floyd alone at a picnic. When Floyd begins comforting her, Elmer runs to Deacon Bains and tells him he has been betrayed. They catch Floyd and Lulu in a passionate kiss. Bains quickly

apologizes to Elmer and insists that Lulu must marry Floyd, much to the horror of the former and the delight of the latter. Elmer, indignant, announces his immediate resignation from the church and stalks off in a huff.

When Elmer gets back to Mizpah, he pours out his tale of woe to Dean Trosper, who prays with him, comforts him, and tells him he is better off without such a disreputable woman. He then gives Elmer a new appointment, to the Flowerdale Baptist Church in Monarch, a city of three hundred thousand, and arranges for him to meet with a lawyer named Eversley, a deacon in the church. On the train to Monarch, Elmer prepares his Easter sermon – on love, of course – but is interrupted by his seatmate, a traveling salesman of farm equipment named Ad Locust. Elmer tells him he is a shoe salesman, and the two have a drink together. Ad invites Elmer to get together with some of his friends in Monarch for a good time, and Elmer, sick and tired of having to behave himself so much, agrees. In the company of Ad's fellow-salesmen, Elmer gets roaring drunk, preaches as parody of his Easter sermon, and passes out, only to awaken the next afternoon in the bed of a local prostitute. Eversley, meanwhile, has called Dean Trosper to find out where their new preacher is, and the Dean sends a substitute, a retired preacher who not only covers the Easter service, but also finds Elmer in the midst of another round of revelry. When Elmer finally contacts Eversley, he is told that his services are no longer required, and upon his return to Mizpah, the Dean expels him and tells him that he will expose him if he ever again dares to step behind a Baptist pulpit. Elmer then turns to his new friend Ad Locust, and by the end of the week is a salesman for the Pequot Farm Implement Company.

For two years, Elmer is a moderately successful salesman and all-around reprobate. Yet he continues to be drawn to the church; he misses the acclaim, the attention, the pretty girls hanging on his every word. At one stop in his travels he encounters Eddie Fislinger, who now has a church of his own. It is a pitiful little assembly, and Elmer instinctively knows that he could bring it to life and make something of it in no time. He finds Eddie and his family irremediably boring, however, and leaves as soon as he can. After visiting his mother and promising her that he would soon return to the ministry after sowing his wild oats, he goes next to Sautersville, Nebraska, where he notices placards advertising tent meetings led by a woman evangelist, Sharon Falconer. He decides to attend a service for the fun of it, but is smitten as soon as he lays eyes on the comely preacher. He instantly determines to add her to his lengthening list of conquests. He goes forward during the invitation, chats up one of her musicians, and tries to pull her aside for a minute the next morning, but all attempts to speak to her fail. After making a couple of quick stops on his sales circuit, he returns to take a train to Lincoln – the same train her company is taking. That night, he succeeds in sitting next to her in the train. She knows he is making a play for her, but enjoys the banter and is confident of her ability to resist his advances. They have breakfast together the next morning, and Elmer gets her to agree to let him speak at her rally the following Friday as a businessman converted through her preaching. Her assistant, an Englishman named Rev. Cecil Aylston, is both appalled and jealous because he is in love with the evangelist, but the reader begins to understand that Sharon and Elmer are birds of a feather; she is as cynical a practitioner of religion as he could ever hope to be, and Aylston is no better. At dinner before Elmer's sermon, he and Sharon enjoy swapping tales about their Bible Belt upbringings, while poor Cecil sits quietly and fumes. The sermon is spectacular, lifting the congregation to the heights and bringing them to their knees. Sharon is drawn into the enthusiasm of the audience and agrees to take Elmer on to work with her, holding out the hope that she might be able to love him someday. Her ecstatic ravings convince him she is crazy, but at this point he doesn't care.

Elmer appears to give testimony at two more of Sharon's crusades. He is so lovesick that he even gives up smoking and drinking at her request, though he can't seem to give up waitresses while on the road. One night he asks to come up to her room – just to talk, of course. When he comes upstairs she puts him off, but invites him to spend two weeks with her in October at her plantation in Virginia. When he arrives, they at first enjoy the beautiful Virginia countryside, but Elmer longs to enjoy something more. He finally confesses that she is far too good for him, a simple country boy, because of her aristocratic forebears. She in turn admits that she was not born Sharon Falconer, but Katie Jonas, in Utica, New York, that she had adopted the name while working as a stenographer, and had bought the plantation from a family named Sprugg. She is becoming tired of Cecil, who always looks down on her because of his superior learning, and longs to take simple Elmer Gantry and turn him into the greatest soul-winner in the country. That night she comes to his room and takes him upstairs to her shrine and altar, filled with garish decorations and images of goddesses from many religions; apparently she is quite an eclectic mystic and religionist. There she draws him to her and they become one with the goddess and with each other. Within two months, she fires Cecil, who undergoes a rapid moral decline and soon is killed in a gambling house in Mexico, and makes Elmer her assistant, though she still refuses to marry him; after all, male converts may be won more easily if they believe her to be single.

For the next two years, the two carry out a whirlwind ministry. Elmer convinces Sharon that she needs to leave behind the high-sounding language Cecil had taught her and reach for the common touch, all the while striking out against sin in all its forms. He urges her to leave the small towns for bigger cities, and she finds that she enjoys just as much success there as she had before. Even with female converts falling at his feet, Elmer remains faithful to Sharon. In the big cities, however, many are beginning to doubt the propriety of female evangelists, and of emotion-driven evangelism altogether. To overcome this barrier, Elmer convinces Sharon to hire a poker-playing promoter of real estate and circuses to serve as an advance agent. His know-how soon has contracts with churches in big cities lined up far ahead of schedule. He then softens up the newspaper reporters by wining and dining them and spreading rumors that D.L. Moody had recognized Sharon as his successor. The crusades become better-organized, preparation of the ground more thorough, and the proceeds more plentiful. Techniques are developed to encourage contributions and move sinners down the aisle, including Elmer's "Hallelujah Yell," modeled on a football cheer. Before long, manipulating the audience becomes a science, including paying people to come down the aisle when business is slow. Sharon's new sermons are a team effort, incorporating the talents of everyone in the troupe. Occasionally emotions are whipped up to such an extent that phenomena such as the jerks, the barking exercise, and speaking in tongues break out during the services.

Elmer and Sharon soon become as comfortable as an old married couple, but the wear of the constant demands on the evangelist is increasingly noticeable. Elmer more and more often must coddle and coerce her to do what she needs to do. He, on the other hand, is becoming increasingly dissatisfied with his salary, which has remained the same while the income of the operation has multiplied. After an unfortunate incident in a hotel, Sharon decides that they must in the future rent a house in each city in which they minister. The local pastors' committees object at the cost, and object even more when the houses are left in deplorable condition by the wild parties with which the members of the crew entertain themselves. Worse yet, the rent for the houses is never paid, and is left to the local committees to cover. As a result, rumors begin to

spread more insistently about the Falconer Evangelistic Team. When they encounter other traveling evangelists, they exchange trade secrets for maximizing converts and offerings, while at the same time slandering other preachers, who are clearly corrupt and third-rate by comparison.

Next Elmer leads Sharon into the healing business. She is reluctant at first, but it becomes a great success, and the money comes rolling in. Elmer negotiates a raise in his salary, and Sharon begins to get grandiose ideas about a Christian Socialist colony, a newspaper, and a crusade to convert the entire world. She winds up buying a run-down old resort on the New Jersey shore called Clontar and converting it into "The Waters of Jordan Tabernacle" for summer meetings. Elmer, meanwhile is getting restless and a bit tired of Sharon, and begins to eye up Lily Anderson, the virginal pianist on the team. Sharon gets a bit intimidated the night before the first service at Clontar, and wonders aloud whether she ought to turn the ministry over to Elmer and assist him. Elmer thinks this is a wonderful idea, of course, but is cautious about expressing his thoughts. When Sharon runs off in confusion, he decides to make her jealous by making a call on Lily. As he sits beside her on the bed, holding her hand and flattering her, Sharon bursts in and fires both of them on the spot. When he creeps into her room in the middle of the night, however, she takes him back, warning him never to look at another woman again. But Lily stays fired. When the big night arrives, the Waters of Jordan Tabernacle is crammed to the rafters, with more than five thousand people in attendance. Sharon is at her glowing best and everyone anticipates something special. When one of the workmen drops his cigarette outside the Tabernacle, however, it sets the whole place on fire. Most of the members of the audience escape, but 111 people die, including Sharon and the rest of the crew. Elmer alone escapes, and is considered a hero by the press for pulling people out of the surf who had already swum to safety.

After Sharon's death, Elmer strikes out on his own as an independent evangelist, but is an abject failure. He misses Sharon terribly, and discovers that his own preaching gifts are little better than mediocre. Finally he throws in his lot with Mrs. Evans Riddle, a practitioner of Victory Thought-power, a sort of mystical, theosophical agglomeration of Oriental religion, faith healing, and unvarnished gibberish. Though he has always been troubled by the possibility that the evangelical gospel he has been preaching might really be true after all, he entertains no such reservations about Thought-power. He finds considerable release in being able to say absolutely anything that comes into his head, no matter how nonsensical, and having his audience hang on every word. When he begins to think that Mrs. Riddle is cheating him out of his share of the profits, however, he starts to withhold funds, and when she discovers his thievery, she fires him on the spot. He then decides to start a Prosperity ministry of his own, passing himself off as a learned man with a doctorate in psychology. This ministry doesn't pay the bills, however, so he decides to go back and finish his last year of seminary at Mizpah. To do so, he determines to borrow money from his old colleague Frank Shallard, who now has a church of his own.

Frank, meanwhile, has become disillusioned with the church and the ministry. He believes nothing of what he preaches, finds his life boring and meaningless, and sticks with it only to avoid disappointing his father, a veteran clergyman. More and more, he discovers that anyone in his town with any common sense despises religion and avoids the church; he soon is ashamed of being a Christian, let alone a pastor. He is rescued by the aged Methodist minister in town, Andrew Pengilly. This simple soul calms Frank's fears and answers his doubts, not with argument but with the assurance of the presence of God, both in his life and in nature. Frank now can preach comfortably, and his ministry improves as a result, though his doubts are by no means assuaged. When he moves to a church in Eureka, Frank meets Bess Needham, who eventually becomes his

wife. They have three children in short order, but as a result Frank comes to understand that he cannot under any circumstances leave the church now. He feels trapped, and his conscience bothers him more each day. He soon joins the Preachers' Liberal Club, an ecumenical group made up of pastors from various religions and Christian denominations who share the trait of not believing much of anything. He enjoys their company and their conversation, but wonders why they continue to profess something they don't believe. Yet he cannot bring himself to leave the church or even the ministry for fear of hurting his beloved Bess and his congregation. Thus when Elmer arrives in town, Frank lends him the hundred dollars he requests, but does not follow him on his path of hypocrisy.

While Elmer enjoys only modest success in the city of Zenith – certainly not enough to repay Frank's hundred dollars – he meets Wesley Toomis, the local Methodist bishop, and after spending an afternoon with him decides to pursue ministerial opportunities in the Methodist Church, where he might himself hope to become a bishop someday. He is invited to join Dr. and Mrs. Toomis for dinner, and flatters them as he looks at their collection of books and photographs from their frequent overseas travels. Toomis soon arranges for him to become the pastor of a small Methodist Church at Banjo Crossing, population 900. He travels to the town determined to be humble and humanitarian, but his thoughts are all of himself. When he arrives, he is immediately disappointed by the rusticity of the town and the people, and almost decides on the spot to return to being a traveling salesman. But when he arrives at the home of Widow Clark, where he is to board, he meets her teenage daughter, Jane, and decides he might like the town after all. After going all over town to track down the church key, he finds that the church building is a clean, neat little structure. He soon comes to view it as his own possession, and prays that God would deliver him from his lower nature and enable him to minister to his humble flock. No sooner does he finish praying, however, than Cleo Benham, the choir director and daughter of one of the deacons, enters the building. He immediately concludes that she has fallen in love with him at first sight. She has in fact been waiting for years for a single pastor to arrive in town, convinced that she is intended by God to be a pastor's wife. Elmer quickly decides that she is the kind of wife who could help him to a bishopric, and determines to marry her rather than seducing her as he has with so many others.

In preparation for his new charge, Elmer had purchased a fairly extensive theological library, including books of sermons from which he could readily borrow. He was, in his own thoughts, now ready to be a Professional Good Man. He preaches his first sermon on Romans 1:16 – one he had often used while working with Sharon. The overflow crowd is impressed, no one more than Cleo; all avow it is the best sermon ever preached in Banjo Crossing. That evening the congregation is much larger than usual, and after whipping them up with several fast-paced hymns and rousing choruses of *Dixie*, he preaches his well-worn sermon on Love. He even reworks an account of his university days with Jim Lefferts, ending the story with his friend's tearful conversion as a result of his testimony. The people respond positively, but begin to wonder why someone who seems far too good for their small town should have been sent to them. He must, they feel, have a skeleton in his closet. He tries his best to behave appropriately, meanwhile educating himself in the Methodist Book of Discipline and exposing himself to great literature; he is especially impressed with Dickens and the power of his emotions. Rather than sharing his literary knowledge with Cleo, who is far his superior in educational attainments, he turns to Clyde Tippey, the local Brethren minister who never finished high school, and begins exhorting him about the benefits of great literature in the ministry. His studies in philosophy, however, fall by

the wayside when he attempts a volume of Josiah Royce, of whose writings he understands not a word. Meanwhile, he is trying his best to live a moral life, only occasionally sneaking into theaters in a nearby town and occasionally kissing his landlady's daughter playfully. His main focus, however, is Cleo Benham.

Elmer's relationship with Cleo progresses, but not at the rate that he had hoped. She is clearly in love with him, and he likes her well enough, but to him she lacks excitement, and he wonders if he can settle down to marriage with someone so fundamentally dull and virtuous. To make matters worse, her father absolutely refuses to leave them alone together for even a moment. When they do get a chance alone one evening, they somehow find themselves engaged by the time Cleo's parents get home. When they marry, Elmer suddenly realizes that he has committed himself to one woman and can never have fun again in the manner to which he was accustomed, and immediately begins to find his wife distasteful. Their marriage night is a disaster, with Cleo timid and afraid and Elmer rough and demanding, and their lovemaking is more acquiescence than passion on her part. Elmer turns his marital disappointment into ministerial ambition. With the goal of securing a larger church in the city, he begins to advertise his sermons and preach hellfire and brimstone. At that year's Annual Conference, Elmer is accepted formally into the Methodist ministry and reassigned to the larger church in Rudd Center. He is now convinced that he is on his way to great things, perhaps even a bishopric.

As Elmer advances to larger and larger churches, first in Rudd Center, then in Vulcan, and finally in Sparta, his fame grows, but his marriage deteriorates. He and Cleo have two children, Nat and Bunny, but after a loud quarrel one night, they take up separate bedrooms and cease living as husband and wife. Elmer, meanwhile, gives in periodically to temptation, then rails all the louder against sexual sins from the pulpit the following Sunday. He crusades in turn for support of the troops in World War I and for Prohibition, and supports political candidates from the pulpit, including a Jewish socialist who is popular with the people in his congregation. When the Jewish candidate wins, thanks in no small part to Elmer's efforts, the bishop summons Elmer and offers him a pulpit in Zenith, the capital city. Wellspring Church is a bit run-down and in a decaying neighborhood, but the bishop is convinced that Elmer can revive it. At first put off by the neighborhood, Elmer accepts the call when he discovers that new apartment buildings are being planned for the district. At the age of 39, Elmer has finally made it to the big city.

The Wellspring M.E. Church is run-down, to say the least, but Elmer is convinced he can attract the people and money to spruce things up. Soon he meets T.J. Rigg, a local lawyer and a trustee in the church. Rigg is not a religious man, but he believes that religion is good for keeping the lower classes in line. He and Elmer hit it off immediately, and Elmer finds his first real friend since the long-lamented Jim Lefferts. The new preacher's first sermon catalogues the vices to be found in Zenith, describing them in gruesome detail, and soon Elmer is drawing crowds that are the envy of almost every preacher in town. He then convinces Cleo to beg \$2000 from her father, which they use to furnish their run-down house and improve his wardrobe. He doubles the number of programs in which the church is involved, which he finds increases giving from wealthy donors significantly. Meanwhile, his family life suffers because he is always busy, and he takes it out on Cleo and the children. The demands on his time grow greater every day, and soon his congregation grows to more than a thousand. Elmer begins to cultivate the influential ministers in town while scheming to displace the most prosperous of them.

Elmer soon discovers that two of his classmates from Mizpah are in Zenith – Wallace Umstead, the gymnastics teacher who now heads the local YMCA, and Frank Shallard, his former

associate at Schoenheim, who has grown increasingly liberal and now pastors a small Congregational church. Elmer is afraid that Frank might tell some of what he knows of his past, and decides that he should immediately repay the \$100 he has owed him for many years. He begins to spend increasing amounts of time with the young married couples in his church, who are loose enough to give him pleasure and sure not to tell the older members of the congregation about it. Soon he becomes attracted to Beryl Gilson, one of the young wives.

One day Lulu Bains and her cousin Floyd Naylor from the Schoenheim church appear in his congregation (Elmer had for a short time been forcibly engaged to Lulu and had avoided the entanglement by maneuvering her into a compromising position with Floyd). They are now married and have two young sons. Elmer notices that Lulu has grown in beauty in her thirties, and suspects that she still carries a torch for him. He arranges to call on them at home, but arrives when Floyd is at work and the boys at school, and soon he and Lulu are in one another's arms. As she becomes more involved in the church, they manage to find many convenient times to carry on the affair without fear of discovery by Cleo or Floyd.

Elmer then begins to take steps to play up to the press in order to gain publicity for his ministry. He schedules Lively Sunday Evenings, tours newspaper offices, and schmoozes with editors and reporters, especially one young woman in his church named Miss Coey. Offerings continue to grow, and Elmer soon is able to hire two more staffers, Assistant Pastor Sidney Webster, and Director of Religious Education Henry Wink, allowing him to spend more time out among the public. In order to attract more attention, Elmer forms a Committee on Public Morals, made up of most of the prominent preachers in Zenith. When the pastors meet, they cordially detest one another, but share an interest in relating lurid stories of vice in the city. They cannot agree to do anything about it, however. Elmer, somewhat surprisingly, is not disappointed by this; he now intends to corner the market on preaching against vice, at the same time preaching against those preachers who refuse to move against it, then start a campaign of his own against the city's dens of iniquity. The first raid led by Elmer succeeds in breaking up five small-time operations, but garners him huge publicity, even from the cynical veteran reported Bill Kingdom, who fully recognizes that the preacher is seeking maximum impact with minimum risk, ignoring the really powerful purveyors of vice while cracking down on the small fry. Soon his church is bursting at the doors and the trustees are talking about erecting a new building. Elmer joins the Rotary Club, but T.J. Rigg warns him that the real money is not to be found there, but in the Tonawanda Country Club. Rigg arranges for Elmer to get a membership, and soon he is hobnobbing with the truly wealthy citizens of the city. Before long he is lecturing at Chautauqua meetings, and quickly finds a vulnerable female while doing so.

The author then spends a chapter on a conversation between Frank Shallard and Philip McGarry, two pastors who believe not a shred of what they preach. The chapter becomes an extended critique of Christianity and the church that in many ways summarizes the central theme of the entire novel. The two men don't believe the doctrines of the church, the Bible, or even think very highly of Jesus, but Phil is convinced that the church, once purged of all the balderdash, can be a vehicle to improve society, while Frank is on the verge of leaving because he is heartily sick of the whole charade. [Note also that Lewis has the cynical holy men speak critically of his own *Main Street*, which they describe as insufferably boring.]

Elmer next decides to steal William Dollinger Styles, the richest man in Zenith, from Frank Shallard's congregation. He plants a stenographer in Frank's church to take down in shorthand some of more outrageous and heretical declarations from the pulpit, then openly

preaches against such teachings, using Frank's name in his sermon, in his own church. The newspapers quickly publicize the attacks. The next time Elmer plays golf with Styles, he expresses surprise that such a prominent man should lend his support to such an infidel, and suggests that Styles and some of the other deacons schedule a lunch with Frank and Elmer and give Elmer the opportunity of bringing out what Frank really believes. Styles, though somewhat skeptical, agrees. At the lunch, Elmer badgers Frank into denying the deity of Christ and life after death and questioning the very existence of God. Styles and the other deacons are shocked and demand that Frank resign his pastorate before they expel him from the pulpit. At the first congregational meeting, no vote is taken on Frank's expulsion despite the fact that he freely admits his heterodox beliefs because many in the church have been comforted by his ministrations. T.J. Rigg then goes to Styles and convinces him that he has been insulted by his church, and that he would be much happier in the Methodist communion. Styles soon agrees and moves to Elmer's congregation, bringing his money with him. When Frank's congregation meets a second time, he resigns from the church and the ministry; Elmer then magnanimously pronounces his willingness to have Frank as a member of his church if he is willing to repent.

Frank starts working for the Charity Organization Society, which he finds cold and heartless, and also begins attending the local Catholic church, which has an aura of mystery that he finds attractive, despite the fact that he is no more able to believe in the Immaculate Conception and transubstantiation than he is in the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece. He concludes, however, that fairy tales after all have some value in enriching human life. But when he tries to join the Church and asks if he can do so in order to appreciate the worship even if he believes nothing of its doctrines, he is turned away and told to repent of his intellectual pride that refuses to submit to divine authority.

Three years later, the Scopes Monkey Trial creates a national sensation. Conservative ministers everywhere demand that faith-destroying teachings be banned from the schools. Frank, on the other hand, is again given the opportunity to speak before audiences, only now in opposition to Fundamentalism. When he arrives at a large southwestern city for his first lecture, however, he immediately receives death threats. When he begins to attack the Fundamentalists in his speech, accusing them of wanting to start a new Inquisition and burn heretics at the stake, thus imposing their views on others by force, he is shouted down by protesters in the back of the hall. A group of young men rushes the platform. Frank escapes by the back door, but is forced into a car, where he is taken out into the countryside and horsewhipped within an inch of his life, leaving him blind and mutilated. When Elmer hears about this act of brutality, he assures Frank that he will denounce the perpetrators from his pulpit, but never says another word about the incident.

Within a few years, Elmer is enjoying the glories of his new, awe-inspiring church building, and has decided to retain the services of the Jewish fund-raiser who had pumped up the building fund in order to pay off the debt for the new edifice. One day the president of Abernathy College visits Elmer, seeking to raise funds for his endowment. A brief conversation leads to a quick bargain – Elmer will start to raise funds for Abernathy College in two years if the college grants him an honorary Doctor of Divinity Degree. Before long, Elmer's sermons are being broadcast on the radio; within a few years he has more than one hundred thousand devoted listeners. One day Jim Lefferts shows up at one of Elmer's services; he is a small-town lawyer who has served briefly in the state senate. The two talk briefly, but never see one another again. In 1924 [Lewis has messed up the chronology here, since the Scopes Trial was in 1925], Elmer

and Cleo finally get their trip to Europe. Elmer makes prior arrangements to speak in several London churches, figuring that the experience will boost his reputation at home. Cleo gets seasick during the voyage, and Elmer, totally ignorant of the impression he is making, acts like the stereotypical Ugly American. His first sermon, however, is a highly-fictionalized account of his pastorate in Schoenheim, and the people eat it up. On the return trip he meets J.E. North, head of the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press, a large vice-fighting and lobbying organization. From speaking with him Elmer gains his grand vision – he intends to form a super-organization that brings all such organizations together under a single umbrella. He will head it, and from its pinnacle rule the United States, and eventually the world.

Elmer soon is absent from his church more frequently as he is asked to speak at churches around the country. He turns down a bishopric and the presidency of a small Methodist college while still hoping for North's retirement and a call to a big pastorate in New York City. Back in Zenith, he fires Miss Bundle, his efficient but homely secretary, and replaces her with attractive but inefficient ones, while growing almost as tired of Lulu as he is of Cleo. At the end of a morning service one Sunday, a young woman named Hettie Dowler approaches Elmer, says she is an experienced secretary, and offers her services. They both understand that she is offering a bit more at the same time, and arrangements are quickly concluded. Now that Elmer has found a superior mistress, Lulu is no longer needed, and he tells her untruthfully that they must stop seeing one another because Cleo has found out about them. She falls into deep depression and begins to drink. When Elmer's mother visits, she immediately rebukes him for ignoring Cleo and paying so much attention to his secretary.

Two nights later, Elmer receives a call from Hettie asking him to come over. In the midst of a romantic evening, a man suddenly bursts into the apartment and tells him he is Oscar Dowler, Hettie's husband. He threatens to sue Elmer for alienation of affection and spread the news all over the papers if Elmer doesn't pay him ten thousand dollars. When Oscar leaves, Elmer realizes that Hettie is in on the setup and he has been victimized by clever extortionists; she even admits that her real target was Styles, who refused to yield to her charms, leading her to settle on Elmer as a secondary patsy. Oscar hires the most disreputable ambulance-chaser in town to file the suit, but before any out-of-court settlement is possible, Bill Kingdom gets the lawyer drunk and he spills the beans; not surprisingly, the news shows up in the paper the following day. Elmer pours out his woes to his friend T.J. Rigg, who hires a private investigator to look into the past activities of the Dowlers. He finds that they have served time and are still wanted for criminal activities in Seattle. Rigg then offers them \$200 to get out of town before he reports them to the authorities, but before they go, he forces them to sign a letter of apology clearing Elmer of all charges laid against him in the lawsuit. When the exoneration is publicized, Elmer receives the grateful support of his congregation, is offered the big church in New York that he covets, and becomes the executive secretary of the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press. As he prepares to begin his new ministries, he swears that he will never look at a girl again.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Elmer Gantry – A drunk and womanizer who becomes a famous revival preacher.
- Jim Lefferts – Elmer's college roommate, and the only man who could ever control him. He is a skeptic and freethinker, and later becomes a lawyer.

- Eddie Fislinger - The president of the YMCA at Terwillinger College, he tries to convert Elmer.
- Rev. Dr. Willoughby Quarles – President of Terwillinger College, he comes to believe that Elmer is a born preacher and encourages him to enter the ministry.
- Judson Roberts – The head of the Kansas branch of the YMCA, he is a former athlete during whose revival meeting Elmer is “saved.”
- Frank Shallard – A classmate of Elmer’s at Mizpah Theological Seminary, he is appointed to assist Elmer in his first pastoral assignment at Schoenheim. He later comes to doubt everything Christianity stands for, though he enters the ministry. Elmer finally drives him out of his pulpit, after which he becomes a spokesman for agnosticism, for which he is nearly beaten to death by a group of Fundamentalists.
- Harry Zenz – A classmate of Elmer’s at Mizpah Theological Seminary, he is an admitted atheist who seeks a career as a pastor because he thinks he won’t have to work very hard though he is admittedly an atheist.
- Rev. Jacob Trosper – Dean of Mizpah Theological Seminary, he gives Elmer his first pastoral assignment in a small church in Schoenheim.
- Barney Bains – Deacon of the Schoenheim church, he welcomes Elmer and Frank and introduces them to his daughter.
- Lulu Bains – Barney’s daughter, she immediately attracts the attention of Elmer on his first Sunday in Schoenheim. When he takes liberties with her, Barney forces them to get engaged, but Elmer maneuvers himself out of the relationship by tricking her into a compromising position with her cousin Floyd Naylor, whom she later marries. Eventually, the two join Elmer’s church, at which time Elmer resumes his affair with Lulu.
- Bruno Zechlin – Professor of Hebrew and Greek at Mizpah, he is the only genuine scholar on the faculty, and a covert atheist.
- Ad Locust – A salesman for the Pequot Farm Implement Company, he meets Elmer on the train to Monarch. They get drunk together, leading to Elmer’s expulsion from seminary and subsequent employment by Ad’s company.
- Sharon Falconer – An evangelist with whom Elmer becomes infatuated. They travel together and sleep together until she is killed in a fire in her new seashore tabernacle.
- Rev. Cecil Aylston – Sharon’s assistant, he is British, stuffy but no saint, fiercely in love with Sharon, and jealous of Elmer when he intrudes on the ministry.

- Mrs. Evans Riddle – The founder of the Victory Thought-power movement, she hires Elmer as her assistant after Sharon’s death, but soon fires him for stealing.
- Wesley R. Toomis – A Methodist bishop who convinces Elmer to join the Methodist Church.
- Cleo Benham – Choir director of the Methodist Church in Banjo Crossing, she is also the daughter of one of the deacons, the storekeeper and the richest man in town. She quickly falls in love with Elmer after his arrival and they soon marry, but Elmer tires of her quickly; she gives him two children.
- T.J. Rigg – A lawyer in Zenith and a trustee in Wellspring Church, he and Elmer become fast friends because they share a similar pragmatic approach to religion and a similar disregard for Christian morality in their private lives.
- Philip McGarry - Liberal minister of Arbor Methodist Church in Zenith, he becomes Frank Shallard’s friend and mentor.
- William Dollinger Styles - The richest man in Zenith, Elmer schemes to steal him from Frank Shallard’s church.
- J.E. North - The executive secretary of the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press, a post in which Elmer eventually succeeds him.
- Rev. Andrew Pengilly - A simple and pious Methodist pastor who befriends Frank and questions Elmer about his unbelief.
- Hettie Dowler – A young woman who approaches Elmer and asks if he needs a secretary; the two soon begin an affair. When she turns out to be a con artist and extortionist, Rigg gets Elmer out of trouble by looking into her criminal background.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“He was born to be a senator. He never said anything important, but he always said it sonorously.” (ch.1, p.5)

“He had, in fact, got everything from the church and Sunday School, except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kindness and reason.” (ch.2, p.32)

“Elmer’s own people. Could he be a traitor to them, could he resist the current of their united belief and longing?” (ch.3, p.50)

“He had but little to do with what he said. The willing was not his but the mob’s; the phrases were not his but those of the emotional preachers and hysterical worshipers whom he had heard since babyhood.” (ch.3, p.53)

“Dear God – I’ll get down to it – not show off but just think of thee – do good – God help me!” (Elmer, ch.5, p.87)

“Though Frank Shallard might have come to admire pictures, great music, civilized furniture, he had been trained to regard them as worldly, and to content himself with art which ‘presented a message,’ to regard *Les Miserables* as superior because the bishop was a kind man, and *The Scarlet Letter* as a poor book because the heroine was sinful and the author didn’t mind.” (ch.6, p.88)

“He enjoyed defying lightning, provided it was lightning no more dynamic than Frank was likely to furnish.” (ch.7, p.114)

“Do you know, I like you! You’re so completely brazen, so completely unscrupulous, and so beautifully ignorant!” (Sharon, ch.11, p.175)

“Oh, I hate the little vices – smoking, swearing, scandal, drinking just enough to be silly. I love the big ones – murder, lust, cruelty, ambition!” (Sharon, ch.12, p.188)

“Her kiss was like a swallow’s flight, and he went out obediently, marveling that Elmer Gantry could for once love so much that he did not insist on loving.” (ch.12, p.189)

“Always, in every high-colored mood, she was his religion and his reason for being.” (ch.13, p.201)

“Elmer saw that the real purpose of singing was to lead the audience to a state of mind where they would do as they were told.” (ch.13, p.208)

“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.” (ch.15, p.223)

“Elmer Gantry was shocked when she hinted that, who knows? the next Messiah might be a woman, and that woman might now be on earth, just realizing her divinity.” (ch.15, p.225)

“He knew with serenity that all of his New Thoughts, his theosophical utterances, were pure and uncontaminated bunk.” (ch.16, p.241)

“He did very well at Prosperity, except that he couldn’t make a living out of it.” (ch.16, p.243)

“Lord, thou who hast stooped to my great unworthiness and taken even me to thy Kingdom, who this moment hast shown me the abiding joy of righteousness, make me whole and keep me pure, and in all things, Our Father, thy will be done. Amen.” (Elmer, ch.19, p.278)

“I may not be as swell a scholar as old Toomis, but I can invent a lot of stunts and everything to wake the church up and attract the crowds, and that’s worth a whole lot more than all this yowling about the prophets and theology!” (Elmer, ch.20, p.290)

“Elmer didn’t think much, he decided, of all this associating and fellowshiping with a lot of rival preachers – it was his job, wasn’t it, to get their parishioners away from them? But it was an ecstasy to have, for once, a cleric to whom he could talk down.” (ch.20, p.296)

“I’ve gone and tied myself up, and I can never have any fun again.” (Elmer, ch.21, p.303)

“It was not easy to keep on urging the unsaved to come forward as though he really thought they would and as though he cared a hang whether they did or not.” (ch.23, p.334-335)

“Mr. Gantry, why don’t you believe in God?” (Andrew Pengilly, ch.27, p.381)

“The Roman Catholic Church is superior to the militant Protestant Church. It does not compel you to give up your sense of beauty, your sense of humor, or your pleasant vices. It merely requires you to give up your honesty, your reason, your heart and soul.” (Frank Shallard, ch.29, p.403)

“Not even Napoleon or Alexander had been able to dictate what a whole nation should wear and eat and say and think. That, Elmer Gantry was about to do.” (ch.30, p.425)

“Let me count this day, Lord, as the beginning of a new and more vigorous life, as the beginning of a crusade for complete morality and the domination of the Christian church through all the land. Dear Lord, thy work is but begun! We shall yet make these United States a moral nation!” (Elmer, ch.33, p.447)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In Robert Burns’ poem *To a Louse*, he says, “O would some power the giftie give us / To see ourselves as others see us!” Should a Christian who reads Sinclair Lewis’ *Elmer Gantry* view the novel as such a gift? In what way can a Christian reader benefit from such a critical and cynical satire? Include details and quotations from the novel in your assessment of its potential benefits.
2. Satire often involves exaggeration in order to emphasize the point being made by the author. To what extent is this the case with Sinclair Lewis’ *Elmer Gantry*? Is Lewis engaging in hyperbole, or does he really believe that all Christians are either hypocrites or fools? Support your assessment with specifics from the novel.

3. Moliere's *Tartuffe* was originally banned in the France of Louis XIV because it was viewed as an attack on the Catholic Church. Moliere defended himself by saying that he had no intention of attacking the church, only the charlatans within it who used religion as a cover for their nefarious deeds. Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* was banned in Boston and other American cities for much the same reason. Could Lewis have argued the same justification as that used by Moliere? Would you have believed him if he did? Compare and contrast the two works in the ways in which they criticize hypocrisy and religious opportunism.
4. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the author ridicules Fundamentalism for stirring up people against all sorts of practices and beliefs that he believes to be completely innocent, including drinking, gambling, movies, mixed bathing, and evolution. Most Christians today would have little quarrel with some of these practices while continuing to oppose others as evil. Does the grouping of these moral crusades in the novel undermine the reality of differences among them? Show how this is the case by citing specific incidents and quotations from the book.
5. When Sinclair Lewis wrote *Elmer Gantry* in 1927, the Scopes Trial was still fresh in people's minds. To what extent is the mentality of the author similar to the fictionalized account of the Scopes Trial found in Lawrence and Lee's *Inherit the Wind*? In what ways do both books seriously miss the point of the trial and its outcome?
6. While Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* is intended to be a critique of the religious mind and lifestyle, it is also a critique of the lust for power and its consequences. Show how this is the case. Does the protagonist care more for power than he does for the actual content of his message and the issues with which he deals? Why or why not? Use specifics from the novel to support your conclusion.
7. Targets of satire are often cardboard figures, straw men constructed only for the purpose of being burned by the fiery darts of the clever author. Is this the case with the protagonist in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*? Is Elmer a two-dimensional figure constructed to bear the brunt of the author's sarcasm, or is he a more complex, three-dimensional figure in ways that lend greater realism to his struggles and decisions? Defend your choice with details from the novel.
8. The *Literary Review* described Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* as "the greatest, most vital, and most penetrating study of hypocrisy that has been written since Voltaire." Do you agree? Compare and contrast the social satire found in *Elmer Gantry* with that contained in Voltaire's *Candide*. Which is the more effective satire of the ideas and practices of the author's society? Why do you think so? Pay special attention to the treatment of the common theme of religious beliefs and practices.
9. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the protagonist is pictured as an evangelical – the sort of Christian the author intends to satirize. To what extent is the character portrayed by Lewis an evangelical Christian? His actions obviously contradict his beliefs, so answer the question by analyzing the beliefs he professes throughout the book? Do these qualify him as an evangelical? Why or why not?

10. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the protagonist's first sermon is plagiarized, with help from his friend Jim Lefferts, from the writings of atheist Robert G. Ingersoll. What is the significance of this key plot element, and how is the chord it strikes repeated in various ways throughout the novel? Be sure to cite specifics in developing your argument.
11. Compare and contrast the critique of evangelical Christianity found in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* with the treatment of Christians by the contemporary media in connection with issues such as homosexuality, feminism, and Intelligent Design. What tactics used by Lewis are still prevalent today? Give specific examples from the novel and pair them up with current media attacks to show how, in the world's opposition to Christ, things really have not changed very much.
12. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the protagonist destroys the lives of many of the people around him in the course of the novel. Choose three such people from the story, describe what Elmer does to ruin them, and discuss how these actions contribute to the larger themes of the novel.
13. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, very few characters escape unscathed from the poison pen of the author. Who are the characters most admired by Lewis? Choose three such characters (if you can find even that many), analyze what they have in common, and discuss what this communicates about the author's intentions in writing the book.
14. Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* was written at the height of the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy in the American church. The author leaves no question about which side he takes in the conflict. Evaluate the extent to which Lewis presents the components of the controversy accurately. Is there truth in the contrasts he establishes, or does he do nothing more than set up straw men in order to knock them down with smug satisfaction? Support your arguments with specifics from the novel.
15. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the author ridicules the brand of "muscular Christianity" promoted by groups like the Y.M.C.A. and popularized more recently by the views of Eric Liddell in the film *Chariots of Fire*. The use of sports to promote the Christian religion remains commonplace today, of course. Evaluate the "muscular Christianity" that is presented by Lewis in the novel. Is it a valid means of presenting the truth of the Gospel? What implications might this have today for the practice of sports evangelism?
16. One of the significant social issues addressed in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* is Prohibition, which began in 1920 and was still in effect when the novel was written. What does the novel tell you about the effectiveness of Prohibition? What was the author's attitude toward it? How does he promote his view in the book? What was the church's attitude toward it? Does Lewis present that view fairly?
17. Sinclair Lewis, the author of *Elmer Gantry*, was a long-time alcoholic and ultimately drank himself to death. How is the author's struggle with alcohol reflected in the novel? Consider not only the part it plays in the satire, but also the effect it has on the characters.

18. Would Sinclair Lewis, in his novel *Elmer Gantry*, have agreed with Karl Marx's assertion that religion is "the opiate of the masses"? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
19. Sheldon Norman Grebstein, in a critique of Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, argues that "it is distorted, even too much for satire; it lacks conflict and contrast." Would you agree with this assessment? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with details from the novel.
20. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, do you find the character of the protagonist convincing? Does he seem realistic in his words, actions, and responses? Why or why not?
21. Discuss the issue of character development in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*. Does the protagonist grow or change in the course of the novel? Do any significant characters show growth or development? If so, how? If not, why do you think this is the case?
22. Compare and contrast the three most important women in the protagonist's life in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*. How are Lulu, Sharon, and Cleo similar? What are their major differences? Why does Elmer find them attractive? How does he treat them? How do these three relationships serve to communicate the themes the author seeks to build into the novel?
23. Rebecca West, in her critique of Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, argued that the work was ineffective as satire because the writer of satire should "fully possess, at least in the world of the imagination, the quality the lack of which he is deriding in others." Is this a legitimate criticism? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
24. Discuss the view of conversion seen in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*. How does he understand conversion? In what ways does his view fall short of the biblical teaching on the subject? What phenomena in American revivalism would have led him to view it the way he did? Be sure to cite specific incidents and quotations from the novel in developing your arguments.
25. Authors often use foils - characters whose contrasts with a central figure help to bring out that figure's qualities in bold relief - to focus on certain themes they desire to emphasize. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, who would you describe as a foil for the protagonist? Justify your choice with details from the novel.
26. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the author often lists books owned or read by the characters in the novel. In using reading matter to define character, he also uses it as a form of criticism. Choose three such lists from the novel and explain what insight they give into the characters associated with them, and what the author is trying to say, both about the books and about American society in general.

27. If nothing else, Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* recognizes that Christianity is not simply a part of life, but a worldview that shapes the way a believer views everything. Sadly, he thinks that worldview is erroneous and dangerous. Discuss how he communicates what he believes to be the dangers of a Christian worldview in the novel. Give special attention to those in the book who actually believe it, though the frauds and hypocrites certainly play a significant role in his critique.
28. To what extent is Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* about the conflict between the past and the future in America? Be sure to go beyond Lewis' portrayal of the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy and consider other aspects of society as well as they are portrayed in the novel.
29. In chapter two of Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the author describes the protagonist in the following words: "He had, in fact, got everything from the church and Sunday School, except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kindness and reason." Lewis clearly believed that Christianity was incapable of imparting the qualities he lists. How does the novel demonstrate that conviction? How would you respond to Lewis' assessment of Christ and his followers?
30. In Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the author pictures Christians as people who are enslaved to the ignorance that has been communicated to them by the Church and the society controlled by it. Discuss the picture of the protagonist in this regard. Does Elmer ever have an original thought, or is everything he says, does, or even thinks taken from the thoughts and words of others?
31. In chapter five of Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the author describes Frank Shallard in these words: "Though Frank Shallard might have come to admire pictures, great music, civilized furniture, he had been trained to regard them as worldly, and to content himself with art which 'presented a message,' to regard *Les Miserables* as superior because the bishop was a kind man, and *The Scarlet Letter* as a poor book because the heroine was sinful and the author didn't mind." To what extent is this an accurate description of the way many Christians think about and evaluate literature? Why is this an inappropriate way to think about and evaluate art? Apply the principles you advocate to an evaluation of the book that contains such a harsh critique.
32. When Sharon Falconer first meets the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, she says, "Do you know, I like you! You're so completely brazen, so completely unscrupulous, and so beautifully ignorant!" To what extent is her assessment accurate? Does Elmer ever deviate from this characterization? Justify your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
33. In chapter twenty-seven of Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, old Methodist minister Andrew Pengilly asks the protagonist, "Mr. Gantry, why don't you believe in God?" Is the old pastor's assessment of Elmer a correct one? Why or why not? Defend your answer with specifics from the novel.

34. Discuss the role of love in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*. Consider not only love as the theme of Elmer's first plagiarized sermon, but also love as his constant obsession. Does he ever really understand what love is? Does he ever really love anyone? Why or why not? Defend your conclusions with details from the novel, and be sure to base your assessment on an understanding of love that is grounded in the Scriptures.
35. In chapter fifteen of Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the author skewers both revivalism and faith healing ministries in two sharp sentences: "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." To what extent are these criticisms valid? Does the element of truth in Lewis' words make his critique more effective despite its unfair lack of balance? Include in your assessment other passages in the novel that are of a similar character.
36. In chapter thirty of Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*, the protagonist fantasizes about fulfilling the greatest of his ambitions in these words: "Not even Napoleon or Alexander had been able to dictate what a whole nation should wear and eat and say and think. That, Elmer Gantry was about to do." Many people today, particularly those in the secular media, continue to believe that this is what Christians really want. Why do they think this is the case? How do the vicious slanders of Lewis' novel help to reveal the sources of such absurd misunderstandings?