

Chapter II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Exploring the satire aspects in Sinclair Lewis ' Main Street , we should not go far from the intrinsic elements of this novel as the form of the author's expression. Since from the elements such as, setting, character, and conflict, the satire which is emphasized by the author in this novel can be easily known and understood by the readers.

II.1. Related Theories

For his thesis the writer applies the expressive theory in analyzing the use of satire in this novel, - which is supported by the sociological approach and also completed with the biographical approach.

II.1.1. The Expressive Theory

As the writer has stated in the previous chapter, literature is the manifestation of a certain thought and feeling in writing. It is the reflection of the author's ideas, feelings, and thoughts. In addition, Harry Shaw in his Dictionary of Literary Terms considers literature as writing in which expression and form, in connection with ideas and concerns of universal and apparently

permanently interest, are essential feature.

This thesis is dealing with the analysis of Lewis' Main Street, which is regarded as the product or the result of the creative process of the author and as the form of expression. As one of literary works, the novel can be used by the author as a medium to express his thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Through this satirical novel, which is considered as Lewis' masterpiece and best novel, the author can talk, react, and criticize about life, especially about American society. Regarding this novel as the form of expression and the satirical novel, the expressive theory is applied by the writer in this thesis.

The expressive theory of art regards the work as essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, embodying the combined product of the author's perceptions, - thoughts, and feelings.

(Abrams, M.H., The Mirror - and The Lamp, 1979, 22)

II.1.2. The Sociological Approach

Since this study is about the satire of Sinclair Lewis towards American social condition, the writer focuses his attention on the social setting and the social conditions of Gopher Prairie, a small and prairie town - in this novel as the representation of today's American small town in general, and the life of its society. Ac-

According to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, setting is environment, especially domestic interior which may be viewed as an expression of character and as physical or social causation. While social setting is usually about the characteristics of members of society and about the physical conditions of certain place where the society is.

In this novel Sinclair Lewis emphasizes and satirizes the bad sides and the ugliness of the life of American small town. He also emphasizes the way people of the town treat Carol Kennicott, the main and important character in this novel, as the outsider in the town. This novel deals with the conflicts between Carol and those people, and even the conflict between she and Will Kennicott, her husband. They are the inner conflicts of Carol, who was used to live in a big city and now has to live in the small town of Gopher Prairie. The conflicts between Carol, who has new and different ideas of improvement, and the town people, and also the conflict between Carol and her husband Will, who is the native of the town and has the different background of life. According to Robert A. Nisbet, the conflict itself is the process of social interaction in which two or more persons struggle with one another for some commonly prized object or value.

Nothing is so likely to reduce conflicts within a given social relationship as the threat of conflicts between that relationship and other, possibly hostile, organiza-

tion, or individuals on the outside.

The Latin word 'hostis' means 'stranger' or 'enemy'. Given the powerful tendencies in human history toward conformity within the group, conflict among groups has often been the principal means.

There is no group or relationship, however, small and intimate, in which conflict does not occasionally occur. However devoted two friends, may be, two lovers, a husband and wife, or brothers, there cannot help but be conflict from time to time.

(Nisbet, Robert A. , The Social Bond, 1970, 76)

By noticing the life of Carol Kennicott in this novel, it is interesting to note that she, as the newcomer in the small town and as the product of modern life in big cities of America, tries to bring and introduce - some new and modern ways and ideas to the traditional - people of the small and prairie town. This is the reflection of the condition of American society in the twenties. In this case, Sinclair Lewis tries to criticize - the self - satisfied and unconformist society of the American small town in accepting the new and good influences, since Carol, the high educated and modern woman, is interested in arts and in general culture. She just wants to participate in developing the prairie town. Carol has tried to insert those new and modern influences, but she always fails because of many impediments in society. - The details of conflicts which occur among them will be

given in the analysis of this paper. These social conflicts are actually the real condition of American society, as what Robert A. Nisbet, the American sociologist, has stated,

The conflict of traditional folkways and new technicways is, of course, a clear feature of our own society.

(Nisbet, Robert A. , The Social Bond, 1970, 247)

II.1.3. The Biographical Approach

In creating the satirical novel, such as Lewis' Main Street, the author is the main and important factor. The author is the subject matter in regarding and analyzing novel as the form of expression. Through his work, he can express his ideas and feelings of disappointment towards the life and certain people. To observe the author's ideas which is reflected in the satirical novel, it is certainly considering the author's details of his background of life and the biography as a principal concern. From the author's biography we will know the reasons which have become the background of the creative process in creating this satirical novel.

The most obvious cause of a work of art is its creator, the author; ... we can think of biography as affording materials for a systematic study of the personality of the author and of the creative process.

(Wellek and Warren, Theory -

of Literature, 1978, 75)

Although this novel is not merely an autobiographical novel of Sinclair Lewis, there are some autobiographical elements of Lewis which are reflected in this novel; the character of Carol Kennicott, the main character, for example is mostly like Sinclair Lewis himself. What happens with her are mostly the same with what Sinclair Lewis himself had experienced. There are also some similarities between other characters in this novel and certain persons in Lewis's own life.

Talking about the character whose life is mostly like Sinclair Lewis himself, Harry Shaw has defined that kind definition of character as :

... the aggregate of traits and features that form the nature of some person or animal. In literature, has several other specific meaning notably that of a person represented in story, novel, play, etc.

(Shaw, Harry, Dictionary of Literary Terms, 1972, 70-71)

Those are the importances of the biography of the author in literary works. The exact sketch of Sinclair Lewis, the author of Main Street, will be given in chapter III. This sketch of the author will be completed with some of Lewis' other works in general discussion which may support the analysis of this thesis.

II.2. Related Studies About This Work

The writer realizes that there have been many studies and critics about Sinclair Lewis and his works, especially about his novel Main Street. The writer also admits that he is not the first man who makes the study or the thesis of Sinclair Lewis' works. However, the writer thinks it is an appropriate way to reveal the use of satire in Lewis' Main Street on the analysis of this thesis, which he believes is a different way to look at Lewis' work. This specific study, as the writer has done, is analyzed by using the sociological and biographical approaches. The writer calls it specific, because Sinclair Lewis as the native of Sauk Centre, which he satirizes in this novel, writes the bad sides of his own hometown. It seems Lewis hates this town very much, but in fact he loved and was proud of being born there, since it was his own will that his ashes were returned to Sauk Centre. We can learn further about this fact in chapter III of this thesis.

Here are some studies and critics about Sinclair Lewis and his novel Main Street which the writer has selected and quoted from certain books and which may support the analysis of this thesis.

II.2.1. 'The America of Sinclair Lewis' by Lewis Mumford

In 1920 Mr. Sinclair Lewis published Main Street. For the first time all the nebulous criticism and dissa-

tisfaction, which had been accumulating over a long period, had found a voice, and what is more important, had been embodied in creatures of flesh and blood. The combat of Carol Kennicott with the stodgy, self-satisfied society of Gopher Prairie was symbolic of an underlying conflict that was going on all over the country. "Main Street", said Mr. Lewis in a brief introduction, "is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. "

What did Mr. Lewis show? He showed a dreary collection of hovels lined haphazardly along a shabby thoroughfare; a hard, pushing, aggressive economic life, in which the only admirable and spiritually independent figure was the town outcast, Miles Bjornstam; and upon the muddy surface of this society, like a few planks thrown desperately across the slippery ooze, a handful of wistful ignorant souls who aspired to gentleness and culture but who were all too easily swallowed up in a vast and overpowering banality. The effectiveness of Mr. Lewis' portrait of Main Street was due to the fact that he was not an alien in this environment; his essential foreignness consisted in his ability to see Main Street for what it was, not for what it thought it was. Was it satire or was it portraiture? Plainly it was both; and the strength of the satire was in proportion to the universal reality of the portrait.

Are Mr. Lewis' novels representative of American life? Yes - if one is careful to qualify the meanings of these words. Mr. Lewis knows his own people of the Middle West very well. His satires have value of photography. Most of the phenomena that Mr. Lewis shows in his novels are real.

(Schorer, Mark, Sinclair Lewis, 1962, 102-103)

II.2.2. 'The Great Decade: The Twenties' by Sheldon Norman Grebstein

Main Street had a tremendous impact upon the American mind. It was, of course, not the first novel to attack the small town, for E.W. Howe had anticipated it forty years before. However, Main Street and the mood of the time made Sinclair Lewis the voice for which the young rebels had been listening. America's intellectuals and a good part of its thinking citizenry had become introspective, self-conscious, and self-critical.

The critics added to the novel's momentum by discussing it widely and often with glowing praises. Irvin Cobb explained the book's success in this way : "People in the cities are sure to like it because it makes fun of rural places, and the folks that live in villages and little towns have to read it just to find out what Sinclair Lewis is saying about them." One writer called it "one of the milestones in the discovery of America", and

an English critic wrote, "One is tempted to generalize a bout American characteristics on the basis of nearly every chapter of this book. It sums up brilliantly and mercilessly everything that the new generation in America detests."

The public took Main Street with as much seriousness as the critics. What seems to them most significant about the whole affair of Main Street is the painful conscientiousness of any number of people in regard to it. "This is America," says Mr. Lewis in his own italicized foreword, and far from his being lynched, there is a widespread uneasy fear that his picture may largely be true ...

(Grebstein, Sheldon Norman,
- Sinclair Lewis, 1962, 72-73)

II.2.3. An Introduction to Lewis at Zenith

The delay from 1916 to 1920 was fortunate. Nineteen-sixteen might have been just a little too early, but the publication of Main Street in 1920 seems to have hit almost to the day the moment at which American readers were most receptive to precisely such an attack on the small town, and this whether in the larger group that praised it as the truest novel ever written about America or in the sensitively defiant group that damned it as untrue. The result was one of the most explosive events in the history of American publishing, and it led Robert

Littell to observe that 'If Main Street lives, it will probably be not as a novel but as an incident in American life.'

(An Introduction to Lewis at Zenith, by Mark Schorer, vii-ix)



CHAPTER III

THE LIFE OF SINCLAIR LEWIS AND HIS WORKS