

# LITERASI

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LITERASI

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## **MAIN STREET: LEWIS'S SATIRE ON SOCIAL PROBLEM IN SMALL TOWN OF GOPHER PRAIRIE IN MIDDLE WEST OF AMERICA**

### **MAIN STREET: KECAMAN LEWIS TERHADAP MASALAH MASYARAKAT DI KOTA KECIL GOPHER PRAIRIE DI BARAT DAYA AMERIKA**

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#### **Abstract**

*Main Street* is a novel telling its readers about the social problem in small town of Gopher Prairie in middle west of America. This article discusses about how Lewis, the writer of this novel, satirizes and criticizes the life of middle –class people of this town where Lewis finds it dull. He further sets down the audible and visual things of middle class's complacency, meanness, jealousy, gossips and the ugliness of railway station, and of the main street of the town. Through Carol, the main character of this novel, Lewis tries to express his ideas to reform this town as the representative of other towns in America which have such condition as Gopher Prairie. Lewis describes that Carol finds nothing to make her happy and comes across the intact aristocracy and hypocrisy of the town. The life experiences of Carol and her husband are taken as the main topic of this research by using Expressive and Psychological Approaches. It is depicted that Carol wants to reform all of the systems of the town to be more modern but she is unsuccessful. Even though She is always disappointed but never frustrated. The result of this research proves that it is impossible to reform the town personally but she has to compromise with the people living in the environment.

**Keywords :** satire, Lewis's idea reflected on Carol, reformation

#### **Abstrak**

*Main Street* adalah novel yang menceritakan masalah masyarakat di kota kecil Gopher Prairie di barat daya Amerika. Artikel ini membahas bagaimana Lewis, pengarang novel ini, menggambar kehidupan masyarakat menengah di kota yang penuh gossip dan kemunafikan termasuk juga keburukan bangunan dan jalan raya dari kota yang kotor dan tidak teratur. Melalui Carol, pemeran utama dari novel ini, Lewis menyampaikan ide-idenya untuk mereformasi kota. Pengalaman kehidupan Carol dan suaminya diambil sebagai topik utama penelitian ini dengan menggunakan pendekatan ekspresif dan psikologis. Carol berusaha mereformasi semua sistem dari kota ini agar lebih modern tetapi usahanya tidak berhasil. Meskipun dia selalu kecewa tetapi dia tidak pernah frustrasi. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa mustahil mereformasi suatu kota dengan cara sendiri tetapi harus melalui musyawaran dan kompromi dengan masyarakat yang tinggal di kota tersebut.

**Kata kunci:** sindiran/kecaman, ide-ide Lewis yang direfleksikan pada Carol, reformasi

## A. Introduction

Literature is closely related to human life because most of literary works are created based on the experiences of men. Through the experience and imagination which inspire the author, he or she creates his or her literary work. Jones (1969:1) in his book *Outlines of Literature* states " literature is simply another way we can experience the world around us through our imagination". By the power of writing words, an author wants us to listen, makes us feel how the author's feeling which is represented through the characters in literary work, and makes us to see the moral message that he or she wants to express. While, Scholes (1968:7) said that " literature is an expression of life that uses the form of language. It offers us an imitation of life. It helps us understand life and life helps us understand fiction". In writing their works, of course, the authors have certain purposes, possibly they wanted to criticize the social system surrounding them, or may be they wanted to protest against the government policy in certain time and certain era.

Lewis as a realist and satirist would like to satirize or criticize the life of middle-class people in the Middle West of America by presenting a strong sense of things actual in experience. As a realist, he describes the unexciting and ugly things of the town of Gopher Prairie that give essential impression of actuality or reality to the reader. "Realism meant a faithful depiction of the details of ordinary life and willingness to come to grips with all that is not genteel in experience" (Schorer, 1962:2). As a satirist, he shows and holds up the portrait of the society with the foolishness or wickedness of an idea, custom and so on. Therefore, the element of setting has important role for him to provide the smells, the colors, and the sounds of the town in order to make the reader see and comprehend them in actual experience. "...*Main Street* provided a comprehensive background and setting for the full length portraits he was to draw later" (Parrington, 1953:364), He puts the matter of setting into the context of the whole story in

order to lend the concreteness of the story. Taylor says

*"One of the principle functions of setting is to lend concreteness to a narrative. Concreteness is important because it helps us bring people and events down out of some vague Never-Never Land where the reader's imagination functions only with great difficulty, like an astronaut who has ventured outside his spacecraft"*

(Taylor, 1969:626-627)

Lewis who sets his story in many places, like Chicago, Gopher Prairie as the most important setting of the story, Joralemon, and some others, is only to develop his story. By developing in many places, he realizes that it will be more concrete and realistic. One of the towns he criticizes which is mentioned before is the small town of Gopher Prairie Sauk Centre, Minnesota. This small town, according to Lewis's conception is the representative to the town everywhere in America. "...as in Lewis's explicit statement that Nine-tenth of American towns are so alike that it is the completest boredom to wander from one to another" (Quinn, 1964:662). In the preface of *Main street*, he says that it is the continuation of main street everywhere in America. Lewis in this case makes the reader sure that no one later says that Gopher Prairie is the exception. "Lewis made Gopher Prairie, a town of three thousand inhabitants in Minnesota, the symbol of a national disease, the small town mind" (Quinn, 1964:661).

## B. Method of Research

The research is done by deskwork that is a research process which does not require going into the field. It means that the data are taken from printed books, journals, articles and essay (Blaxter, 2006:65). It is also conducted through qualitative method in which the format of data is textual data and not numeral ones. Qualitative Research is used to explain and explore the information, the data and the fact. The data will be written in the research as quotation, it can be direct or indirect quotation.

The data collected are taken from: first, the novel, *Main Street*, as the primary source ; second, some references dealing with the topic discussed in the research such as the biography of the writer, journals or articles, various documents and also those from internet, as secondary source. It is hoped that these secondary sources will help to support and verify facts gained from primary one.

After collecting the data it is started analyzing them by applying Abram's Expressive Theory saying that a work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the artist's perception, thoughts, and feelings. So, the primary source of and the subject matter of a literary work, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the writer's own mind (Abrams, 1971:22). Therefore, the first step the researcher has to do in this research is understanding much about the biography of Lewis because the story of this novel is really the Lewis's own feeling, thoughts and imagination reflected through Carol, the main character of this novel.

### C. Discussion

#### 1. Lewis's Satire Reflected Through Carol, The Main Character of This Novel.

Lewis tries to provide the criticism of Gopher Prairie through the main character, Carol Kennecott, who endeavors to plant seed of beauty in the town. With her, the reader travels from one end to main street to the other, finding almost nothing to please her eyes. With her, the reader meets the entire aristocracy and hypocrisy of the small town, and everything with her.

Before Lewis sets his story in Gopher Prairie, he makes impartial observation about the ugliness of the railway stations, like in St. Paul, Schoenstrom, and in Gopher Prairie itself. It happens at the time of Carol's going to Gopher Prairie with her husband from St. Paul. She finds that the railway station of St.

Paul is unhealthy and even the train itself. "A solid man and woman munch sandwiches and throw the crusts on the floor" (Lewis, 1961:25). And

*"There is no smug Pullman attached to the train, and the day coaches of the East are replaced by a free chairs, the head-rests covered with doubtful linen towels. Halfway down the car is a semi-partition of carved oak columns, but the aisle is of bare, splintery, grease - blackened wood. There is no porter, no pillows, no provision for beds, ..."*

(Lewis, 1961:24)

and

*" Two facing seats, overflowing with a Slovene iron-miner's family, are littered with shoes, dolls, whisky bottles, bundles wrapped in newspapers, a sewing bag. The oldest boy takes a mouth-organ out of his coat pocket, wipes tobacco crumbs off, and plays 'Marching through Georgia till every head in the ear begins to ache."*

(Lewis, 1961:25)

The quotations show that not only does he portray the ugly railway station but he describes the social habits as well. He uses impressionistic words, like 'the aisle is of bare, splintery blackened wood', dolls, whisky bottles' that can reveal mood to the reader.

#### 2. Lewis's Satire on Physical Setting

Lewis also describes the Schoenstrom's station. When the train comes to this station, Carol observes the town especially the railway station and says to her husband "You wouldn't call this a not-so-bad town, would you?" (Lewis, 1961:27). Coming to Gopher Prairie, she also finds that the station is ugly.

*"Now the train was passing the elevator, the grim storage tanks of oil, a creamery, a lumber-yard, a stock-yard muddy and trampled and stinking. Now they were stopping at a squat red frame station, the platform crowded with unshaven farmers and with loafers unadventurous people with dead eyes."*

(Lewis, 1961:31)

He informs every object as clearly as possible by presenting the reader the untidy and bad smell of 'the stations with the crowded and unshaven farmers' and 'loafers'. The smells and the colors of the 'stock-yard muddy and trampled and stinking' awfully make impression to the reader. Even he makes the reader horrible with the things he sees and the sounds he hears.

A trait of Lewis's original conception appears near the beginning of the book that is in Chapter 4. Carol's first walk down main street is followed by Bea's. "So it chanced that Carol Kennicott and Bea Sorenson were viewing Main Street at the same time." (Lewis, 1961:42). It means that he provides a clear indication of his intention to make his reader understand the problem of Midwestern town in all its aspects. To make the problem more realistic, he intentionally uses settings as the important element, like the small-town streets, the small-town parties, the small town gossips, the small-town money-madness or greed, and some pitiful small town cultural endeavor.

In Carol's private seeing to Main Street, for example, Lewis describes the condition of Main Street affecting to Carol.

*"When Carol had walked for thirty-two minutes she had completely covered the town, east and west, north and south, and she stood at the corner of Main Street and Washington Avenue and despaired."*

(Lewis, 1961:36)

He also portrays the drab or ugly condition of stores along the main street. The following quotation shows some stores in which he describes in the story

*"Howland & Gould's Grocery. In the display window, black, overripe bananas and lettuce on which a cat was sleeping. Shelves lined with red crepe paper which was now faded and torn and concentrically spotted." Dahl & Oleson's Meat Market a reek of blood.*

*A Jewelry shop with tiny looking wrist watches for woman. In front of it, at the curb, a huge wooden clock which did not go."*

(Lewis, 1961:38)

For Carol, in all the town not one building that gives pleasure to Carol's eyes, furthermore when she sees her husband's office that is shabby. Lewis, in this case, shows the faded and unpleasant colors of buildings. The environment is not only unattractive but threatening as well, like Bea's private seeing main street. "Bea stood on the corner of Main Street and Washington avenue. The roar of the city began to frighten her" (Lewis, 1961:43). Lewis, further, uses concrete words which specify details of information, for instance, 'a reek of blood', 'overripe bananas and lettuce'. Such image from the words he uses convey sensory impression and achieve vividness and concreteness, and therefore the passage gives more emotional impact.

Lewis continually intends to make the reader sure about the story of Main Street by presenting intensively the street condition in many times. In chapter 11, for example, he portrays the small-town street in winter.

*"For two days there had been steady rain. Even in town a furrowed welter of mud, hideous to view and difficult to cross. Main Street was a black swamp from curb to curb; on residence streets the grass parking beside the walks oozed gray water. It was prickly hot, yet the town was barren under the bleak sky."*

(Lewis, 1961:137-138)

The other event which Lewis tries to develop his story in many places for the purpose that the story of Main Street is more realistic, he takes Carol with her husband meeting Dr. Calibree in Joralemon, There he portrays the same things in which Carol experiences in Gopher Prairie. "She looked at the town. She saw that in adventuring from Main Street, Gopher Prairie, to Main Street, Joralemon, she had not stirred" (Lewis, 1961:295). And also when Carol comes from California, Lewis gives

direct comment, that "She assured herself that the streets of New York and Chicago were as ugly as Gopher Prairie in such weather. She dismissed the thought..." (Lewis, 1961:393). Finally Lewis makes a conclusion through his protagonist that "I do not admit that Main Street is as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe!" (Lewis, 1961:432). The description of the physical setting which is pointed in visual and comprehensive background gives impressionistic emotion that the town is gloomy or ugly.

### 3. Lewis's Satire on the Life of Middle Class People

The previous discussion has explained that Lewis criticizes and satirizes the middle-class life in Middle West of America. His criticism and satire are controversial through his portrait of the stupidity of the small town of Gopher Prairie which is the representative to many towns in America. "Lewis skyrocketed to national attention in 1920 when he painted a grim picture of a small midwestern town in Main Street" (Shannon, 1963:261). He pictures, some have been mentioned before, the portraits of the stupidity of small-town parties, of small-town gossips and jealousy, of small-town parties, of small-town gossips and jealousy, of small-town victorianism, of small-town clubs and some pitiful small-town cultural endeavour, The detail description of the society ere certainly very valuable to make the story realistic and the reader awfully participates in the visual and audible things in the story. To gain this discussion or this analysis clear and valid, the following description of events will be presented through short summaries and quotations.

Lewis unceasingly presents a long portrait of the details of the social life in the hope that the reader feels that he is actually present at what is happening in the story. The stupidity of the party, for instance, appears in Sam Clark's house when he welcomes Carol's coding to Gopher Prairie. The party is not interesting for

Carol and certainly for Lewis himself because they only play an old fashioned stunt named 'Norwegian catching a hen'. The matrons attending to this party only talk about their own homes and shops, while their husbands are conversing their business. In short, she finds that the matrons are not genteel and also she hardly finds a good talk and thought in the party. While the meanness, the greed, and the complacency appear for instance, in Thanatopsis club the members discuss art and do social work. Their discussion of art dealing mostly with Victorian English literature, like Tennyson, Browning, in two sessions seems to be deadly in their accuracy. They read as though some usually acute reporter had been present taking notes. While the social work does not fit with its real program. It happens when Carol suggests that the club ought to help the poor of the town, like direction in giving the babies bath and giving clothes to the poor, as the subject of its next fall and winter's program. They refuse her suggestion that the poor has much more time than they do. They also perceive that the poor will feel much more grateful and they argue that they earn money not for the poor. The following quotations inform the reader how Carol suggests her plan and how the people's response represented by Ella Stowbody, the daughter of Ezra Stowbody, the president of Ionic Bank of the town.

*"Carol intruded again. 'Oh yes the clothes. I was going to speak of that. Don't you think that when we give clothes to the poor. If we do give them old ones we ought to mend them first and make them as presentable as we can?"*

(Lewis, 1961:141)

Ella Stowbody answers

*"Heaven's and earth, they have more time than we have! They ought to be mighty good and grateful to get anything, no matter what shape it's in. I know I'm not going to sit and sew for that lazy Mrs. Vopni, with all I've got to do! Snapped Ella Stowbody."*

(Lewis, 1961:141)

Lewis continually describes the social background as clearly as possible by presenting the details of social habits or aspects. He also describes the self-satisfaction and victorianism of the town. The people of the town do not like to develop the old buildings inherited by their old-timers. Carol, who tries to propose her plan to restore the city hall as the center of the reborn town, comes to meet Mrs. Champ Perry, the kind and ample bossomed pioneer woman who gives historic dignity to modern matrons of the Thanatopsis. She, however, refuses it by the reason that everything in the town has been good and beautiful for her and the society of the town as whole. While for Carol the city hall is bad and old in fashion. Principally she proposes to create the town beautiful. And also when she tries to propose that the city hall as the center of education to Mrs. Warren, a slender gray, nervous woman, the president of Thanatopsis and the wife of Congregational pastor, she is rebuffed. Mrs. Warren opposes her that the church is the central education. "After all It's churches, isn't it, that are real heart of the community" (Lewis, 1961:131). Another event which deals with their thoughts is that when Carol attends to the library-board and proposes to add the new books in new volumes in the library of the town. They, however, do not like the new ones she proposes but the old volumes. "... and the board themselves were interested in old stilled volumes. They had no tenderness for the noisiness of youth discovering greet literature" (Lewis, 1961:226). While their victorianism has actually been described by Lewis through how the people in the town furnish their houses.

*"Mrs. Cass's parlor belonged to the crammed-victorian school, as Mrs. Luke Dawson's belonged to the bare Victorian. It was furnished on two principles: First everything must resemble something else... The second principle of the crammed-victorian school was that every inch of the interior must be filled with useless objects."*

(Lewis, 1961:135)

He continually describes as clearly as possible the types of the small-town people as the portrait of a whole gallery of people such as the atheist and radicalist ( Miles Bjornstam), the cruelty sanctimonious widow (Mrs. Bogard), the local queer (Erick Valborg), the town bully (Cy Bogard), money-lender on morgages (Luke Dawson) and many others.

The details of setting described above, in fact, cause conflict to Carol. She does not do conflict with individual but with her entire environment whether social or material setting. It is necessary to note that, it is mentioned before, setting has function to shape events or conflicts. Carol, whose knowledge is useless and who has conflict with her environment, flees to Washington where she is determined to find her career by abandoning her husband and trying to live in independent life with her young child. There Lewis portrays the same things as Carol experiences in Gopher Prairie.

*"She discovered that en office is as full of cliques and scandals at a Gopher Prairie. She discovered that most of the women in the government bureaus lived unhealthfully dining on snatches in their crammed apartments"*

(Lewis, 1961:408)

and

*"The cautious dulness of Gopher Prairie rapper red in boarding-house where lady like bureau-clerks gossiped to polite young army officers about the movies, a thousand Sam Clarks and a few widow Bogards were to be identified in the sunday motor procession, in theater parties,*

(Lewis, 1961:410)

Lewis, in this case intentionally uses setting as the important element to describe comprehensively the details of social customs, speeches and various aspects of moral values. Using setting as the important element, he realizes that story is more realistic and concrete, or credible. He has created it in the terms in which he wants to make the reader agree with what he describes such as the grossly

materialistic, money-madness and smugly hypocrisy. Providing setting as the Means of making the story realistic, the reader of this novel certainly not only knows the story told but also participates and believes in what he experiences in the story communicated.

#### D. Conclusion

*Main Street* is an American novel, written by Sinclair Lewis, telling about the social problem happened in Sauk Centre, the small town of Gopher Prairie in Middle west of America. Lewis sets his story mostly in his own town where he ever lived until he was grown up. He knows well the social and physical condition of the town that is not enjoyable for him. Therefore, through Carol, the main character of this novel he satirizes and criticizes the life of middle-class people where he finds it dull. The description of the social values, thoughts and speech and the physical background in this novel are portrayed as audibly and visually as possible. In this novel, although Lewis is as a realist, he employs the inclusive formula of the naturalists setting down as much of the visual and audible stuff of life in Gopher Prairie.

Through Carol, Lewis expresses his disillusionment on this town as well as on the life of middle-class people that full of ugliness, untidiness, complacency, meanness, jealousy, gossips and hypocrisy. Moreover, the people of the town reject Carol's idea to reform all systems of the town. The result of this research proves that through Carol's characterization,

Lewis is very disappointed on this town as well as its social system in which Carol stated that she finds nothing to make her happy and comes across the intact aristocracy and hypocrisy of the town.

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