

**Chapter-I**

**Introduction : The Socio-literary  
Context of Lewis's Satire**

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### The Socio-literary Context of Lewis's Satire

It was after the Civil War, more particularly after 1890, that America started moving into the twentieth century. In accordance with Alexander Hamilton's policy, the American Government had encouraged commerce and industrialization. As a result of this policy, America underwent a series of rapid socio-economic changes.

With industrialization, the economy of the American States went into the hands of capitalists. The railway gave a big boost to the progress of industry. It became easy to transport raw material from one place to another. Various types of industries came into existence. As Horton and Edwards describe it :

Steel, rail roads, meat-packing and petroleum were the largest industries to arise from the smoke and hatreds of the

the Civil War, but their rise brought with it a corresponding lift to all manner of American mercantile enterprise. Lumbering, textiles, retailing, shipping, brewing, building trades, clothing, and boot-making, among others, took a violent stimulus from the vitality of the Big Four and has tended the developing portrait of an industrial United States.<sup>1</sup>

This heavy industrialization gave birth to a capitalist life style. Industrialists invested their money and fostered competitive spirit in American society. With this great industrial expansion, America became a promised land for the world. People from all over the world started migrating to America. A great famine took place in Ireland, so the Irish farmers went for jobs to America. At the same time Germany was under the Prussian imperialism. There was religious persecution in Russia and Poland. Italy was caught in political and social upheavals. All these events disturbed and purturbed people who sought refuge in America. They found America to be a land of opportunity.

The expansion of industry gave birth to new problems of urbanisation. Cities like New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Chicago became centres of urbanisation. By 1900 these cities became metropolitan centres. As a result of industrialization, urbanisation and migration, American society saw a high degree of mobility characterised by competitive spirit directed towards success. As Horton and Edwards rightly observe :

American society has been in a constant state of flux, with all manners of persons striving to reach the top of the social ladder and entrenched possessors of wealth and position constantly on the defensive against the newly rich aspirants to social fame.<sup>2</sup>

America's participation in the First World War also gave her a historical and political importance. America lost her provincial nature and became part of the modern world. It was during this post-war period that the middle class achieved a certain kind of importance. The middle class got social, political, economic and religious freedom.

For all this progress in industrial, and economic areas and the general prosperity it ushered in, American society was undergoing a moral crisis. The crisis was particularly reflected in the new middle class as well as in the world of business. It was this emergent world ~~of business~~ which became a focal point of Satire for writers.

## II

It was during this period of significant social change that Sinclair Lewis emerged as a novelist. The literature of the early part of <sup>the</sup> twentieth century invariably reflected this social change in American life. In the early part of the twentieth century, realistic and naturalistic traditions emerged in American literature. These two trends were seen simultaneously in American fiction.

<sup>The</sup> Realistic tradition was dominant during the interwar period. Realism was a literary movement <sup>which</sup> was practised by Balzac in France, George Eliot in England

Dean

and William Howells in America. Realistic fiction opposed the romantic fiction because it presented <sup>a</sup> picturesque and adventurous life. Realism as a faithful rendering of directly observable aspects of every day life, gave a new impetus to the art of the novel.<sup>3</sup> The realistic writer gave an authentic and sincere picture of every day life. He preferred a hero for his writing from ordinary life. He presented the selective material of the common place life of the contemporary scene.

where does the qualification begin?

Characters of such realistic fiction belong to the middle class, the business class, or the working class. They go through ordinary experiences of childhood, adolescence, love, marriage and parenthood. They find life dull and unhappy. But under special circumstances they show their heroism.

The writers of the realist group of <sup>the</sup> early twentieth century in fiction were William Dean Howells, Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis. These novelists wrote about their society, seeking to portray social ills. While writing about the capitalistic society, they gave a realistic analysis of it. Described as muck-rakers, they attacked

John Tolstoy  
Upton Sinclair  
Here we are  
muck-rakers

American society by using satire. They satirised social, political, economical and religious conditions of society.

*where does the genre start?*

Howell is the first realistic novelist in American fiction. He was concerned with the "well-to-do actualities" in American life. He wrote about the American middle class. He rejected the sentimentalized, idealized and moralistic popular fiction.<sup>4</sup> He wrote about the small business man and the big businessman in his novels like The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885) and A Hazard of New Fortunes (1890). Sherwood Anderson further strengthened this trend of realism in American fiction. It was called the realism of revolt.

Realism was followed by naturalism which was borrowed from France. Zola was a major naturalistic writer in France. The philosophy of naturalism contends that man belongs entirely in the order of nature. A man is a higher order animal whose character and fortune are determined by natural forces. These natural forces are heredity and environment. In Zola's words, "nothing is occult; men are but phenomenon and the conditions of phenomenon."<sup>5</sup>

Literary naturalism came from France to the United States in the last decade of the nineteenth century. It emerged in America as a result of industrial and political growth. American naturalist writers in fiction are Henry Adams, Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London and Theodore Dreiser.

Sinclair Lewis wrote his novels when realism and naturalism were operative forces in fiction. He did not turn towards naturalism even though he shared with them a concern with the problem of the relationship between the will and the environment. He wrote his novels in the realistic vein. Sinclair Lewis belonged to the group of Sherwood Anderson and Ellen Galsgow.

quote?  
Sinclair Lewis wrote in the tradition of revolt. Alfred Kazin says that <sup>cc</sup> Lewis's realism was instinctive, rambling and homespun.<sup>6</sup> His realism emerged out of the struggle for freedom of conduct. His realism was concerned not with the conflict of great social forces but with "the experience of native culture."

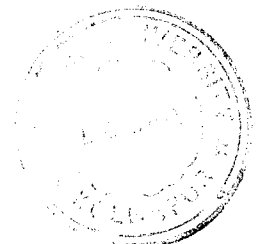
Sinclair Lewis published in all twenty two novels in his career which can be divided into three phases. The



first phase of <sup>his</sup> writing career began in 1914 with his novel entitled Our Mr. Wrenn, followed by The Trial of the Hawk (1915), The Innocents (1917), and Free Air (1919). In these novels he created struggling heroes who faught against capitalist society. But these novels were not treated as important writings of Lewis.

The second phase of Lewis's fictional writing was great and noteworthy. In this period his writing career reached its best. This period began with his novel Main Street in 1920. This novel brought about a qualitative change in his art of writing. Later, he wrote valuable novels like Babbitt (1922), Arrowsmith (1925), Elmer Gantry (1927), The Man who Knew Coolidge (1928) and Dodsworth (1929). He created characters of revolt in these novels. These characters revolted against their social surroundings. Deming Brown rightly says :

This was his period of "petty bourgeois protest" in which he began to rid himself of illusion by discarding his "romanticism and dreams of an unreal world."<sup>7</sup>



The third phase of Lewis's writing career started with the publication of the novel Mantrap. This phase was a period of artistic decline. He wrote Ann Vickers (1933), Work of Art (1934), It can't Happen Here (1935), The Prodigal Parents (1938), Bethel Merriday (1940), Gideon Planish (1943), Cass Timberlane (1945), Kings blood Royal (1947), The God-seeker (1949) and World So Wide (1951).

III

*Introduction on satire far too long - could have been condensed.*

Some theoretical discussion of the nature and function of satire is necessary before we undertake an analysis of Lewis's novels. Satire is a mode of literary writing. It may be a poem, a drama, a novel or an epic. While other modes emphasize what is real, satire emphasizes in order to explode what seems to be real. It ridicules man's naive acceptance of institutions at face value. That ridicule may be expressed in amused or in bitter terms. But the essence of satire is revelation of the contrast between reality and appearance.

The origin of the word 'satire' is Latin. Latin 'Satira' or 'Satura' means a full dish of mixed fruits as an offering to a rural god. The root sense mixture or medley or apparant disorder, helps us clarify the meaning of the word. Roman critics and Renaissance English critics have tried to extend the meaning of the term 'Satire'.

Joseph T. Shipley's Dictionary of World Literary Terms defines 'Satire' in these words :

"Satire as attack to expose folly or vice, dullness or evil - or even to advance some amoral position or an immoral stance whether by gentle rebuke or scarifying verbal onslaught, by ridicule or invective, whether direct through burlesque or indirect through irony."<sup>8</sup>

There are two kinds of satire. They are Horation Satire and Juvenalian Satire. Horation satire generally attacks foibles and follies in man and in society.

Juvenalian satire passionately attacks vices and crimes. Juvenalian satire is more savage and bitter than Horatian. Both these satires use comic devices for criticizing human activities. Both use humour and wit. They hold a critical attitude towards human activities and institutions.

Northrop Frye suggests third type of satire. It is called as 'Menippean Satire'. This type of satire is not concerned with form but it is concerned with tone. It deals less with people. But it gives importance to mental attitudes. This type of satire is written by Swift, Rabelais, Voltaire and Aldous Huxley. Sinclair Lewis too can be described as belonging to this tradition of Menippean satire. Menippean satire often uses dialogues. This type of satire we find in loosely knit novels where the satirist brings all characters together.

It is generally assumed that satire appeals to the intellect. But the mechanism of satire is not simple. The intellect seeks order. Leonard Feinberg says that the basic technique of satire is distortion, usually in the form of exaggeration, understatement, and pretense; and distortion implies disorder.<sup>9</sup> Satirist uses

incongruity to achieve distortion. He uses reason to create unreason and logic is used to create illogic. Schopenhaur says that satirist uses humour to escape from reason. But on the contrary humour is appeal to reason. Bergson was of the view that satire should appeal only to the intellect.

It is openly accepted that satire relies on moral norms, which are to be explained in relation to a given cultural situation. On the basis of moral norms Oscar Wilde wrote the bohemian satire, Shaw wrote the socialistic satire and Chesterton wrote the catholic satire. The satirist, thus takes into consideration moral and social norms. Social norms are concerned with ethics as expressed through customs. This constitutes the strenght of the satirist. As Leonard says :

Satire ranges over the entire field of human activities and relies on standards which are metaphysical, social and moral.<sup>10</sup>

The satirist is always conscious of the follies and vices of his fellows. He tries to show these follies

and vices of his fellows. He tries to show these follies and vices to the world. He is not that way an easy man to live with. As David Worcester says :

The satirist is a moral agent, often a social scavenger, working on a storage of bile.<sup>11</sup>

The satirist and the preacher are one in their method of convenience and persuasion. Their approach towards the reader is more or less the same though they differ in their manner of address. The manner of address of the satirist is more delicate subtle and difficult than that of the preacher. The satirist unlike the preacher has <sup>an</sup> aesthetic desire for self-expression. He is always motivated by aesthetic desire. He is stimulated by the incongruities in society. He is infuriated or amused by the incongruities. He ridicules the incongruities which he sees. The satirist <sup>exposes</sup> shows the faults of the society but he does not necessarily give solutions to them. Planning an ideal society has not been the ideal of every satirist.

Satiric literature possesses the originality of perspective. It remains always fresh. But it rarely offers original ideas. | Satirist looks at familiar conditions from perspective which makes these conditions foolish harmful or affected. Chivalry and science were known before Cervantes and Aldous Huxley. Before Swift, English men were aware of the famine. Popularity of satire does not depend upon the originality of the idea. It depends on the manner of expression and the satiric method. The satirist gives a fresh vision of life to ✓ the known and unknown things.

Satire is divided into indirect satire and formal satire. Indirect satire presents a story with invented characters. We do not find story in formal satire. In formal satire, the speaker is the author who in his own person reports what he has seen. Aldous Huxley, Sinclair Lewis wrote indirect satire while Byron wrote formal satire. Tom Jones and Vanity Fair are satirical novels where satire is pervasive. The form of the novel can also combine satire with allegory. The allegory may be beast-fable, as in Animal Farm, utopian fantasy as in Brave New World.

The sphere of satire is criticism of man and society. The satirist is an artist and satire is an art. Arthur Pollard says :

The aim of satire is to move his readers to criticize and condemn. Moving them to various emotions ranging from laughter through ridicule, contempt and anger to hate. Seriousness of satire depends upon faults attacked.<sup>12</sup>

We read satire because it gives us pleasure. The ethical satisfaction is one of the pleasures involved in satiric experience. The pleasure given by satire is different than that of sermon.

A major function of satire is reformation of society. When social institutes go astray and deviate from their moral norms, the satirist tries to show the falling standards in his work. The satirist dramatizes and exaggerates objectionable qualities in man and society. He tries to give a realistic picture of society so that people could understand it.



The satirist uses various techniques and devices while writing satire. He uses monologue, dialogue, epistle, character drawing, allegory, fantasy and parody in his works. Dickens and Thackerary wanted to reform <sup>the</sup> society of nineteenth century England. The intention of Sinclair Lewis's writing was to reform the society of his times. Spacks says :

*The quotation should be included in what word should be used before*

The purpose of satire is to combine jest and earnest, "to tell the truth laughing". The best satire contains the minimum of convention, a maximum of reality. Satire constantly approaches truth-telling.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV

The objective of the present dissertation is to examine the nature and function of Lewis's social satire with reference to his five major novels of the middle period, Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry

and Dodsworth. Chapter II offers a critical discussion of Main Street (1920) and Babbitt (1922), novels which together constitute Lewis's satirical portrayal of the American business class. Chapter III offers a critical statement on the remaining three novels, Arrowsmith (1925), Elmer Gantry (1927) and Dodsworth (1929). Arrowsmith is concerned with the medical profession, Elmer Gantry with the institution of church and Dodsworth once again goes back to the theme of the business world in a familial context. These novels thus testify to the range and variety of Lewis's social satire and his vision as a novelist. What all these novels of the middle phase show is Lewis's satirical perception of the sad, uncomfortable gap between idealism and opportunity in American culture. As Mark Schorer puts it :

The source of Lewis's satire lies in the defection from the American potentiality for individual freedom. When he scolded America it was because Americans would not be free, and attacked all the sources by means of which they betrayed themselves :

economic system, intellectual rigidity,  
theological dogma, legal repression,  
class convention, materialism, social  
timidity, hypocrisy, affection,  
complacency and pomposity.<sup>14</sup>