

Sinclair Lewis: The One And The Other

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ABSTRACT

Sinclair Lewis, the American novelist of the 1920's is essentially a critic of Social life. Man's duty as a responsible gen of the society where he lives is coloured by a spectrum of social imagination. Man is the product of society from the very beginning of the existential predicament in his home far away from his Home, the heavenly abode . Man's Success and failure depend mostly on the type of life he follows, imbibing the cultural traits, Customs and practices of the spirit of the time represented as the 'spirit zeist' peculiar to each society . Man cannot live in a vacuum, devoid of Social presence and Social awareness . So a closer analysis of Lewis's novels yields rich dividends to an enterprising critic to conclude that 'man is nothing if not social'. The social imagination of the novelist is exploited in the present study title, "Sinclair Lewis: The one and the other".

Keywords: *Social imagination, Cornucopia, existential predicament.*

"Then the Lord God said, "I see that it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make the Companion he needs, one just right for him", (Genesis: 2:19).

God created the first man Adam from red clay and created Eve from one of the ribs of Adam, as per the Bible. God Himself understood that man cannot be and should not be alone as he needed company, society, the other self to make life livable and pleasing. The word 'society' does not always mean a group of people living together sharing common passions, objectives and priorities. The smallest unit of society is 'the other one' who makes life complete and meaningful without the other comparisons becoming meaningless as man becomes an island by himself. But man so not an island and should not become an island. There should be inter-subjectivity, shared-consciousness and the policy of give and take to construct the strongest and grandest edifice called LIFE. It is this vision that prompted Sinclair Lewis to create the Web of human life on a strong Social order and earn a name by himself as a novelist and a practitioner of 'the sociological imagination'. According to. C Wright Mills in his treatise, The Sociological Imagination opined that Sinclair Lewis was gifted with the talent of seeing life into the things "to find out the interplay of man and society, of biography and history of self and world," ("P. 4). In other Words one remains as one unless there is a nothing called the other. Therefore his novels share the invisible thread of Social order running through all this creative efforts. The three unities of place, time and action are a well-balanced mixture of society, history and character. The culture of a person or for that matter a society can never be created without the interplay of spatio-temporal dimensions suitable to unravel the theme, the story or the action to give a name to 'airy nothing'.

The history of a nation is not created in empty vacuum without a society of Permanent dwellers engaged in actions influenced by the geographical Conditions peculiar to the place. The social order exercises a paramount influence on the individual both negatively and positively. The culture of a society exerts tremendous influence on the individuals. Some individuals adapt, while some rebel and some become autonomous in actions. This Social truth is the main strength underlying the writings of Sinclair Lewis .

A sociological study of the novels of Sinclair Lewis, will yield rich dividends to the probing mind. If social consciousness is removed from Lewis, his writings crumble down to form an amorphous mass of disarrayed Concepts. Lewis exhibits this sociological consciousness and imagination in his novels like , Main street, Babbitt and Arrowsmith. The first two novels display either unwilling and Coercive forms of adjustment with the Social order expressing the view 'what will Mrs. Grundy say?.' In other words the protagonists are silenced by the public opinion of good and bad and are hemmed in, but yield unwillingly to please the social order. But the protagonist of Arrowsmith is unable to adjust. or adapt the Social and alienate himself from social stipulations and feels dissatisfied as experiences mount on . There is a similarity between Carol Kennicott of Main Street and George F Babbitt in Babbitt. Both wage a relentless fight mentally against the social order, but as time goes on lose steam to sustain the force of defiance and unwillingly silence themselves to follow the social order and way of thinking.

A comparison of the final stages of submission and adaptation of social order by the heroine of Main Street namely Carol Kennicott and George F Babbitt, the protagonist of Babbitt reveals that both these characters did not want to admit defeat due to the defiant social attitude to save their lives, from being misunderstood by the society on one hand and to save their family from rumours and scandals on the other. They mellow down and pull themselves out from the verges of defeat wisely enough with smiling faces unmindful of the seething and boiling mental discontentment. so it is the Careful Consideration of the Sociological imagination of Carol and Babbitt that turned them on the path of conformity. The novel Arrowsmith presents the conflict between an individual and the society at large, as the fight between David and Goliath or like the old man against the sea. The Individual should be brought completely under the rigid rules, customs and

practices of an elite society. In Arrowsmith the alienation of Martin from Social stipulations stems out of sheer despair and lack of interest in life. He pulls himself-back into his mental shell like a Snail should not be taken as Self-inflicted defeat, but an attempt to salvage his son's future. As "Martin was afraid of him, because he saw that this miniscule aristocrat, this child born to the self approval of riches would Someday condescend to him". (Arrowsmith, P. 4890. His decision to give up everything including his family, position, wealth and human intercourse is a kind of autonomy of decision making, all by himself. His disorientation to sociological imagination is an attempt to assert his individuality. Declaring one self autonomous risking social compulsions is not at all advisable nor healthy too. Here Lewis's sociological imagination makes up the last sent himself does not want such an ending. But there are individuals whose ways are strange. But this autonomy is to be taken as a detachment from society and not a withdrawal from social order Completely.

The next novel of Lewis deals with yet another type of autonomy. In this novel titled *Dodsworth* Lewis is very particular that the autonomy practised by Sam Dodsworth is practically positive and not negative. His life is an example of change — a change from a conformist to a man who becomes autonomous and leads himself rather than following the views and opinions of others. He formulates his own theories and relies on it. So the growth of Dodsworth's mentality is the result of self-reliance. Even Though he forms his own opinion, he does not reject or set aside his culture because he knows that man is a social animal. This change has occurred in his life only when his personal assumptions were challenged and criticised in Europe. He himself agrees that "..... I never thought much about America as a whole. Sort of taken it for granted..." (P. 17). In other words he was a conformist in the beginning, but through this contact with the European society when he visited there. The influence of the new society around him taught him to analyse his own notions and concepts objectively and got corrected and formed this own ideas which made him autonomous But this autonomy was not imposed by as he changed his mental track to make comparisons with his American Way of thinking and then with the European Way when he became a man on the road, independently encountering the challenges of life. So he cultivated an impersonal way of thinking leaving aside his untested pet theories. Sinclair Lewis himself admits that "it was a new occupation for him, and he was a little confused." (D: 92) Stephen s. Conroy in his essay on "Sinclair Lewis's Sociological Imagination states that when an intelligent man begins to think, to ponder, to broaden his Society and its relationships to Other societies in the world, he begins to detach himself intellectually from his own culture no matter how well-adjusted, he must certainly will gain a certain amount of autonomy." (P.360).

Towards the last part of Lewis's writing career he met with disappointments, setbacks and restlessness when he found that his pet notion of Sociological imagination was not 'cornucopia' of more of producing more and more socially oriented outputs. Thus his creative powers began to desert him Asif he showed a tendency to fall back heavily upon his sociological notions of human life and endeavours.

References:

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