

Ambivalence in Sinclair Lewis' *Dodsworth*

Asmaa' Khalaf Medlul Al-Jumaily

Department of English /College of Education for women/ University of Anbar

Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) represents an important stage in American literature. He shoulders the responsibility of denunciation of falseness of human societies. His own people is his starting point. He removes the veil from the hidden guise and leaves it bare to the public world. Thus, his novels are seen by his people as a capital betrayal and his attitudes as part of his disloyalty for his country. In spite of the punishments and ostracism, he achieves a surprised literary success, becomes a vital member of the "lost generation"¹ and crowns his skyrocketing with receiving the Noble Prize in 1930. The cruel chains on his pen fail. He is one of the pioneer voice that opens a new chapter in American literature "the literature of revolt."²

Lewis' personality is admixture of sensitiveness and restlessness which leave their permanent stamps on his life and work. Many of these effects are recorded as merits, which sharpen his satiric power, but few are unfortunately demerits that beset his pen as well as life. Ambivalence is one of them, its scant early appearance is in his choice, views, decisions and its virus reaches his heroes. Lewis' marriage is not the first point to trace his duality, but the most important one. Since he marries twice the surprise here is the palling contradiction between the two characters. The first is from high class, cares for appearance and manner only. While the second cares less for these things and focuses her attention on culture and mind. He devotes all his life to bombard his country with bitter attacks, finding no remedy for their hell save the escape from their hell. Later on he is captivated by eccentric eager and deep longing to his days in the country, Sunk centre. This proves that Lewis has the power to protect his love for American from his hatred which is part of his clear love toward it via his angry attacks, he wants to improve his country. His love is misunderstood and received with disapproval and reveal his sharp ambivalence. The creeping of his schizophrenia into his heroes is so manifest. It emerges in *Babbit*, *Main Street* and *Dodsworth*, which is our main topic here. It doesn't hit only his characters, but also the beginning and the closing of his novels, via his "savage ridicule as against the happy endings."³ In *Dodsworth*, Lewis unmask the depravity from the painful spot which hurts and threatens many. Maxwell Geismar says that it "displays Lewis as a mature and reflective writer."⁴ Also it is regarded as Lewis' best criticism of his country, really he proves, through it and other works, to be the writer of "experience and liberation."⁵

In *Dodsworth* Lewis wavers from satire to admiration toward: America, travel, Europe, Sam and Fran, to the extent that he leaves his readers puzzled to believe which part, especially when he injects logical power of conviction in many of criticized characters. Europe, for instance, is regarded in

this novel as the main reservoir of magical drug for happiness and the living source of culture. Thus, Mr. Sam dodsworth and his wife, Fran, decide to escape from the killing routine of America towards the assumed brightness of Europe. Fran thinks that she can "find youth again merely by changing skies." 6Sam leaves his work, friends and country to achieve this dream. Their first plan of travel to Europe starts when:

They had first planned to go Europe , her (Fran) belief, that they could make more passionate lives merely by running away to more complex and graceful civilization, had been seen as naïve as the belief of avillase girl that she could but go off to New York, she could magically become beautiful and clever and happy. (D. , P.53)

Even in this the Americans are deceived. The wars and their aftermaths make Europe lose most of its brightness Sam finds himself in Europe, that he praised previously as "a lost dog." (D.,P.51) He insists on returning to his country. He feels that he is just like "the prisoner who sinks into accepting jail." (D.,P.108) He can't endure the continual accusation of the Europeans to his country. Even Fran, who drags Sam to Europe, unconsciously bursts to tell Sam that "I can't stand staying in this country...."(D. P .94) Really she can't stay anywhere. She contrasts herself sharply when she gives double views towards the same topic. In foreign society Sam does nothing, only bewilder and lose his self-confidence. The Americans confuse the meaning of travel with aimless journey. He seems "meekly trots to Europ to buy sun-dials ... To try to buy aristocracy by buying the aristocrat's worn out coats."(D.,P.308)

Lewis may love certain characteristics in his victim, Sam especially, the elements that he lacked at his early stages of his life which are authority, money and social position. This is the chief cause behind his hesitation between satire and admiration toward Sam, who begins to probe the aims of travel and its benefits. He thinks that travel suits certain characters who is not one of them, thus , he doubts:

hybrid cosmopolites with a fancy for titles and baccoral, accentric artists who were fond of mistresses and chess, idlers who needed come one with whom to loaf, might prefer to tive a broad.(D.P.84)

He continues in thinking about travel , to contrast the previous thoughts about living abroad and travel, which are means to alleviate the personality to creative level and to remove the vulgarity. The paradox reaches its climax when Sam settles his doubt and reaches a satisfactory point that "we (the Americans) do all this hustling, all this jamming in subways, all this elbowing in elevators, to keep ourselves occupied and keep from getting anything done!" (D.,P.137)

Fran is introduced to be a symbol of cold American woman. She is the childish adult, has on interest save running after the newest model, caring for her faded beauty and attending parties. At the age of forty she frees herself from any responsibility toward her daughter and son, thinking that the former marriage and the latter friends can compensate her absence. Her "idiotic feather-brined" (D.P.131) mind and her self-center habit lead her to think about travel as the sole path to gain culture and enjoyment. Even her interest,

attending clubs and leagues fail to keep her busy. She admits that her care for these associations is part of her social appearance, since her interest in these leagues "in every aspect of these except perhaps the purposes for which they had been formed."

(D.P.16)

She plays a key role in castration of her husband and stultifying Sam's conscience. She wrecks what he builds in years only to enjoy her life. She exacts everything from him even his dignity :

He had helped to build a machine which was running away from him
He had no longer the dignity of a craftsman. He made nothing ; he
Meant nothing, he was no longer Samuel Dodsworth, but merely part
Of a world vigorously pushing one another towards nowhere.(D.P.19)

She proves to have no substance, when she makes many unheathy liasons in foreign society and neglects her husband. Even when Sam asks her hand, she sobs and tells him that she doesn't want to be a wife and a mother, but she "want(s) splendour! Great horizons." (D., P.11)

In spite of all above mentioned failings, physical coldness, frigidity and infidelity, Lewis grants her a great role of the spokesman and the reformer for the doctrine of freedom, man-women relationship and patriotism she accuses the American of neglecting their wives and regard them part of furniture or machines. She advices then to use soft words and elegant presents she addresses Sam and through him the American husband that:

You are always thoughtful about me. American husbands never are.
You are no worse than the rest, but you're just bad. You think of
nothing beyond business and gold. It never occurs to you tha a
woman, poor idiot, is lost more pleased when you remember to send
her flowers, or when you phone to her at odd hours just to say you
love her, than she would be a new motor car. (D.,P.48)

Fran who destructs her private life because of her flirtation, defends the rights of American women. She attacks her county and proves the falseness of their mottoes of being paradise for women. Then she appears to have a patriotic faith in her American which she deserted. Though she confuses the meaning of liberity, personal fulfillment with capturing of beauty, Lewis imbues her with persuasive voice and great credence. Her previous attack of American's inferiority and the vulgarity of its native contrasts her defending speech against Mrs.ouston attack of American. She states cleverly and accurately that American is built with democratic efforts, thus, it is ready to accept self-criticism to achieve self-development. She supports her words with literary instances she says that:

We probably have more self-criticism at home than any other nation-
our own writers call us everything from mainstreeters to the
Booboisie. But curiously enough we feel we must work out our own
fate, unassisted by generous foreigners! (D., 74-75)

The best character that reflects its author is Sam Dodsworth. Lewis injects him with all his opinion of his country. Via Sam Lewis satirizes the American business man who is divided between his work and being a man. He describes himself as truthful, attractive and intelligent who makes his money from few dollars. He admits that he “never love(s) passionately, lose(s) tragically, nor sit(s) in contented idleness upon tropic shore.” (D., P 11) He contrasts this sharply when he loves Edith cortright passionately before the novel closes weds here and loses Fran. He begins to think deeply about his heart and love, even his dreams take another turn when :

he began to desire to have - with Edith – a farm at home, but an authentic farm smelling of horses and cattle and chickens, with cornfields baking at noon, mysterious in their jungle-like alleys. This simple- hearted ambition stirred him more, gave him more Feeling that he had something secret and exciting to live for!

(D.,P. 305)

Lewis , in describing Sam vibrates from a lofty lover to a bitter hater. He is attracted to certain features in Sam's personality. Walter Allen notices that “Lewis is much more that half in love with what he is satirizing .” 7 In foreign society he provides reversed meaning to his previous belief towards American travel and Europe. He avows that all these are but ways to prevent them to do anything useful, he questions :

If travel, pictures , music , hobbies would ever be anything more than diversions interesting for an hour at a time. And of what he had left to keep life tolerable.

(D.,P. 129)

America is praised and attacked by the same persons and different ones. Fran hates to live America and praises it later on. The same thing happens with Sam. Lockert, Fran friend, says that the American care only for titles, and their nation is misunderstood by other nation. Even the Americans fail to understand themselves. From other side lady ouston finds nothing good in American which is regarded as a barbarian land. Their main focus is wn materialism. She regards a great shame to be American. She advices Dodsworths to desert such horrible land. Her biting words arouses Sam to defend his country which he escapes from and regards her criticism is unjust since his land, which he can't endure he tells Mrs. ouston:

American is the greatest nation on earth. And may be it is because we have got so many faults, shows were grewing! Sorry it's bad manners not to be ashamed of being American, but I'll just have to be bad mannered!

(D.,P.74)

Edith cortright, Sam's faithful lover, participates in increasing his duality of ideas. She enlists to Sam the negative points of his society. one of them is their hatred to the bare earth and wind, she tells him the American farmers “don't love earth you don't love the wind.” (D., 304) After this she agrees to wed Sam and go to live in zenith.

Every write can't escape certain features in his personality. Lewis' ambivalence doesn't impoverish his characters from their purposes. Sometime

this duality is sensed, not mentioned clearly. In general literary ambivalence has allusive and inconclusive effects, but the state is so different with Sinclair Lewis. The accurate study to Lewis personality and heroes clarify many ambiguity behind his intermittent satire. Lewis' faithful satire is the main reason for his double views. Sometime the butt of his satire has features that gain Lewis' respect. He is so truthful in his writing, thus, he fails to deceive his readers by continuing his attack, which is, really an admiration .

Also Lewis often injects his heroes with merits whom he lacks he can't hide his envy and love towards them. The state is reversed sometime when he derides certain weakness in characters or places whom he worships. America is the best example , Lewis states that he loves America , then he states that he hates it. This ambivalence is because of his accuracy in depicting his land. He regards America as his lover. His love for America is his love for its dreams of being a paradise , at the sametime he doesn't stand the foibles that spoil such wonderful dreams of the new land. Even if some critics regard Lewis' duality as a grave failing , they can't deny the importance of his being in America literature. Even his biographer , Mark schoner after numerating Lewis' worst mistakes, states that "without his writing one can not imagine modern American literature , that without his writing, we can hardly imaging ourselves"⁸

Notes

1. Rod w. Horton and Herbert w. Edward, Back ground of American Literary Thought (New York : Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., 1952), P .307 .
2. Josephine Hendin Vunerable people : view of American Fiction Since 1945 (oxford University Press, 1978), P. 14.
3. David Maddon ed. American Dream, American Nightmares (London: Feffer and Simons , Inc. , 1970), P. 104 .
4. S. N. Grebestein, The Great Decade: The Twenties in Sinclair Lewis (New York: Twayne publishers, Inc. , 1962), P . 116 .
5. Philip Raltu "Pale Face and Red skin" American Critical Essays Twentieth century , Harold Beaver, ed. , (London: Oxford University press, 1959) , P. 282 .
6. Sinclair Lewis, *Dodsworth* (London: Jonathan Capeltd. , 1967), P. 43. All the subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
7. Walter Allen, The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States (New York: E.P. Button co. , Inc. , 1964) , P. 69 .
8. Ibid , P. 65 .

Bibliography

Allen , Walter. **The Modern Novel in Britain and United States.** New York:
E.P. Dutton co. , Inc. , 1964

Beaver, Harold. **American Critical Essays Twentieth Century.** London:
Oxford University Press, 1959

Grebestein S.N. **The Great Decade: The Twenties in Sinclair Lewis.** New
York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. , 1962

Hending, Josephine. **Vulnerable People: View of American Fiction Since
1945.** Oxford University press, 1978.

Horton, Rod W. and Edward, Herdert W. **Background of American Literary
Thought.** New York: Appleton-Century crofts, Inc. , 1952

Lewis, Sinclair. **Dodsworth .** London: Jonathan cape Ltp. , 1967.

Maddon, David. **American Dream, American Nightmares.** London: Feffer
and Simons, Inc. , 1970.