

## AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM AND ITS AMBIGUITY IN SINCLAIR LEWIS' *MAIN STREET*

oleh Retno Wulandari

Fakultas Sastra Universitas Diponegoro

### Abstrak

*Main Street* merupakan salah satu karya terbaik Sinclair Lewis yang penuh nilai-nilai sosial di Amerika terutama mengenai eksistensi diri, feminisme, dan individualisme yang dialami si tokoh utama pada awal abad ke-20. Latar belakang keluarga, lingkungan, serta pendidikan yang diterimanya menjadikan dirinya seorang individualis yang mempunyai pola pikir berbeda dari lingkungannya. Dalam interaksinya dengan lingkungan barunya, yaitu desa Gopher Prairie, Carol Kennicott, si tokoh utama mengalami berbagai benturan yang seringkali berujung pada konflik. Puncak individualisme Carol adalah saat ia memutuskan meninggalkan masyarakat Gopher Prairie dan suaminya untuk mencari kehidupan baru di kota besar yang dianggapnya lebih sesuai dengan cita-citanya. Meski demikian di satu sisi ambiguitas juga muncul dalam dirinya saat ia berada dalam kebimbangan dan akhirnya memutuskan kembali ke masyarakat dan keluarganya. Lewis menggambarkan bahwa individu tidak bisa dipisahkan dari masyarakat karena individu selalu terikat pada norma dan aturan di mana ia tinggal, terlebih jika norma dan aturan itu telah turun temurun. Masyarakat akan melakukan "tekanan" terhadap orang yang membelot dari norma dan aturan mereka sehingga orang tersebut akan tunduk atau setidaknya melenturkan ideologinya.

Kata kunci : individualisme Amerika, ambiguity, konflik, masyarakat

### A. BACKGROUND

Individualism lies at the very core of American culture (Bellah, 1986: 142). According to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, individualism refers to a doctrine that the interests of the individual are or ought to be ethically paramount; and refers to a conception that all values, rights, and duties originate in individuals. It gives freedom to people to make his own decision, based on his own thought even though it has to oppose everything on society where he lives.

It is affirmed by Bellah (1986:142) as follows : "We believe in dignity, indeed the sacredness of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not morally

wrong, it is sacrilegious".

American individualism emerged since the arrival of the immigrant when they found out the new land as unlimited land space huddled up with wilderness, the absence of technology and other different things that were still undeveloped in any of the ways to which Europeans were accustomed. The new and wild circumstance made the immigrants tough since there were no way out but working hard to create a fruitful land. Graham (1957: 129) asserted that the result was a belief in the independence of the individual.

On the other hand, human beings are always tied with community where they live. The rules, norms, customs and faiths, and other community institutions applied by the community members indirectly affect and form

one's personality. This will usually lead people to face ambiguity whether he would conduct based on his belief or those in the frame of community's principles.

“One cannot choose starkly between many alternatives. When one can no longer rely on tradition or authority, one inevitably looks to others for confirmation of one's judgment. Refusal to accept established opinion and anxious conformity to the opinions of one's peers turn out to be two sides of the same coin” (Bellah, 1986: 147-148).

All the classic polarities of American individualism are still operating: the deep desire for autonomy and self-reliance combined with an equally deep conviction that life has no meaning unless shared with others in the context of community (Bellah, 1986 :150). Freedom of individual in relation to his society cannot be absolute because individual and the society are not really separate. Individual acquires his full identity only as member of society and society itself is a multiplicity of individuals (Potter, 1972:31).

Sinclair Lewis is one of American outstanding writers whose writings often depict American social portraits about American individualism with the background of early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His “big five” masterpieces, *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929) had essentially same pattern : a resolve to escape from society routine, flight, a partial success, and necessary compromise with the convention.

*Main Street*, which was initially written as *The Village Virus*, describes about dissatisfied young woman named Carol who always tries to apply her individualism in her society but never gets positive responses. At glance, it merely looks like a simple matter, a woman that is confused about herself and her society. But actually the character's confusion reflects the Americans' confusion about the definition of individualism itself as Bellah (1986:142) affirmed that the deepest problems

both as individuals and society are linked to American individualism. Furthermore, this paper will also discuss about the way Carol Kennicott escapes from her restlessness by leaving her community but finally returns to her community.

## B. CAROL KENNICOTT'S PRINCIPLES AND INDIVIDUALISM

The story begins in around 1906 when Carol Milford, the main character was a student of Blodgett College. She is described as an active and talented girl, critical, full of inspiration, and rather ambitious person. Compared with her counterparts, she did not want to be an ordinary people since actualization was very important for her. As a person who upheld individualism and freedom of thinking, she often acted based on her own principles even though she had to oppose those of her peers.

She sighed, “That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration. I suppose I'd better become a teacher then, but--- I won't be that kind of a teacher. I won't drone. Why should they have all the garden suburbs on Long Island? Nobody has done anything with the ugly towns here in the Northwest except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books. I'll make 'em put in a village green, and darling cottages, and quaint Main Street!” (Lewis, 1999:7)

Raised in a well-educated city family, Carol got used to having wide opportunity to widen her knowledge. Judge Milford's pedagogical scheme was to let the children read whatever they pleased, and in his brown library Carol absorbed Balzac and Rabelais and Thoreau, and Max Muller (Lewis, 1999:9)

After graduating from college, Carol worked as librarian in St. Paul. She met a lot of people, including, Dr. Will Kennicott, who later on became her husband in 1912. Following her husband workplace, she moved to Gopher Prairie, a village where her husband originated.

It was in the village where most of the story narrated. Lewis demonstrates Gopher Prairie, through the main character's view, as a place of ugly, rustic, and shabby even though there were already vital facilities such as telephones, telegraphs, and trains. Meanwhile the people, from their physical appearance, are described as provincial and rustic.. The situation made her long for city life she had experienced since for her there was neither sound nor sign of life in Gopher Prairie. She wanted to run, fleeing from the encroaching prairie, demanding the security of great city (Lewis, 1999:36).

And she saw that Gopher prairie was merely an enlargement of all the hamlets which they had been passing. Only to the eyes of a Kennicott was it exceptional. The huddled wooden houses broke the plains scarcely more than wood a hazel thicket. The fields swept up to it, past it. It was unprotected and unprotecting; there was no dignity in it nor any hope of greatness (Lewis, 1999: 28-29).

However, Carol tried to enjoy living in the village. At first, the villagers looked very friendly and welcomed her warmly, but sometimes what she found was uncomfortable feeling. She felt that everybody in the village always watched over her behaviour, the different things that she had never experienced in St. Paul.

"It's infuriating to have pay attention to what people think. In St. Paul I didn't care. But here I'm spied on. They're watching me. I mustn't let it make me self-conscious," she coaxed herself--overstimulated by the drug of thought, and offensively on the defensive. (Lewis, 1999: 88)

Despite the uneasiness, Carol kept interacting with the villagers and tried to see the novelty of the village. She realized her position as new comer that should adapt to the new environment. On such situation, she faced three things that she could do at that time, having children, starting her career as reformer, or becoming definitely a part of the town. To have

children, she had not been ready yet, meanwhile to be definitely a part of the town, she did not know whether the people liked her. At that time she found that what she could only do was the second choice.

Her "reforms," her impulses toward beauty in raw Main Street, they had become indistinct. But she would set them going now. She would! She swore it with soft fist beating the edges of the radiator. And at the end of all her vows she had to no notion as to when and where the crusade was to begin (Lewis, 1999:87).

In this story Lewis shows several movements Carol did in her reformation. The first reformation is making her "own house" by dismissing all the old-fashioned furniture and superseding it with the better-looking one. She got the carpenter to tear out partition between front parlor and the back one, and put Japanese obi and new couch (Lewis, 1999:70).

What she did raised vary comments. Many Gopher Prairians-- the people living at Gopher Prairie--asserted their amazement seeing the new interior design and its furniture, but some of them cynically mocked her by saying that Carol was too extravagant and show off.

"Welloff course you know your own mind, but I can't help thinking, when Will's ma was down here keeping house for himshe used to run in to see me, real often!it was good enough furniture for her. But there, there, I mustn't croak, I just wanted to let you know that when you find you can't depend on a lot of these gadding young folks like the Haydock and the Dyersand heaven only knows how much money Juanita blows in a yearwhy then you may be glad to know that slow old Aunty Bogart is always right here, ad heaven knows"A portentous sigh" I hope you and your husband won't have any of the troubles, with sickness and quarrelling and wasting money and all that so many of these young couples do have and--.."(Lewis, 1999:70).

Carol realized that it was not easy to materialize her dreams about reforming the village, including the people since they were hard to change. The villagers, who were accustomed to old tradition and convention, felt that they were fine and nothing needed to change or rebuild. Complacency and conformity to old tradition were the typical of most of the Gopher Prairians. Horton (1999: 218-219) affirmed that an isolated region to mark American rural region-- is the centre of stability, conservatism, and refusal towards social changes. Society which stresses on conformity and collectivism usually lack of receptive attitudes compared with those which uphold individualism and tolerant to various cultural substances. This is what the Dawsons, one of the Gopher Prairians alleged when Carol proposed her opinion to donate some money for town-rebuilding :

“Why now, child, you've got a lot of notions. Besides, what's the matter with the town? Looks good to me. I've had people that have traveled all over the world tell me time and again that Gopher Prairie is the prettiest place in the Middle west. Good for anybody. Certainly good for Mama and me...” (Lewis, 1999:142).

The differences in individual's background usually lead the differences in his ways of thinking. Carol's city background, which was unlikely to match with the villagers' rural background, finally led into conflicts. According to Soekanto (1977:222), conflict may occur since an individual or group realizes the presence of differences in physical traits, emotion, cultural aspects, attitudes, and other components.

Even though getting cynical sneers, Carol kept on her dream of reforming the town by actively involved in women club, library, drama association, and other activities that potentially could support her mission. At first, her ideas were accepted, but as the time went by, only criticisms she received from the people. Most of them complained about Carol's attitudes which were considered as bossy and uncommon.

Carol turned on the company. “See here, I want this nonsense to stop. We've simply

got to get down to work.”

Juanita Haydock led the mutiny :”Look here, Carol, don't be so bossy. After all, we're doing this play principally for the fun of it, and if we have fun out of a lot of monkey-shines, why then---“

“Ye-es,” feebly.

“You said one time that folks in G.P. didn't get enough fun out of life. And now we are having a circus, you want us to stop!”

Carol answered slowly : “I wonder if I can explain what I mean? It's the difference between looking at the comic page and looking at Manet. I want fun out of this, of course. Only I don't think it would be less fun, but more, to produce as perfect a play as we can.” (Lewis, 1999:227).

One of the important things that Lewis would like to raise is issue about the equal position among human beings. Through his main character, Lewis tried to lift the issues of human rights acknowledgment, including women and children's rights. In *Main Street*, it can be seen clearly how Carol tried to diminish borders between master and servant by paying her servant more than what the Gopher Prairians did. Carol had opinion that a servant had one of the hardest jobs in the world so that she deserved appropriate descent wages. This inevitably raised the people's firm reaction.

They gasped. Juanita protested, “Don't you think it's hard on the rest of you when you pay so much?” Juanita's demand was reinforced by the universal glower.

Carol was angry. “I don't care! A maid has one of the hardest jobs on earth. She works from ten to eighteen hours a day. She has to wash slimy dishes and dirty clothes. She tends the children and runs to the door with wet chapped hands and---“ (Lewis, 1999: 92)

In her efforts in reforming the town, Carol felt alone. Nobody could she share with, even her husband. Will Kennicott, twelve or thirteen years older than her, was proud of his homeland. Even though he had experienced city

life during his study in Minneapolis, Kennicott might not escape from his previous rural life in Gopher Prairie. In Carol's view, Kennicott is the same with other Gopher Prairians : physically old-fashioned, static, and provincial. Different from Carol who always tried to make changes, life remained simple to Kennicott, and he tended to let things the way they were. While in Kennicott's opinion, Carol liked criticizing and arguing as if there was nothing in Gopher Prairie that could please her. The differences in background between Carol and her husband lead into differences in thinking and viewing matters. One of the examples is those in rearing and educating children. Kennicott taught discipline by admonishing, while Carol broke the old tradition by letting the kid do whatever he wanted. Carol The view was inspired by the way her parents educated her by letting her do her preferred activities.

"Perhaps. Did you ever realize that children are people?"

"That's all right. I'm not going to have him monopolizing the conversation."

"No, of course. We have our rights, too. But I'm going to bring him up as a human being. He has just as many thoughts as we have, and I want him to develop them. Not take Gopher Prairie's version of them. That's my biggest work nowkeeping myself, keeping you, from educating him" (Lewis, 1999: 451-462).

Carol's individualism was also linked to her awareness on her rights as woman. The 18<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution indirectly separated men and women's scope of life. Men worked in places which were usually outside the houses, while women were devoted to work in domesticity (Woloch, 1984: 115). Through the main character, Lewis revealed an American woman awareness on her rights which is also supported by the women advancement in the nation in getting their suffrage through the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Carol is described as a woman who longed for working outside home, but still having her cares for family. She was deft person and did her homework by herself, but she

wondered how many millions of women had lied to themselves by pretending that they enjoyed doing the housework. She doubted the convenience and sanctity of the monogamous and separate home, which she has regarded as the basis of all decent life (Lewis, 1999:300).

"But was I more happy when I was drudging? I was not. I was just bedraggled and unhappy. It's workbut not my work. I could run an office or a library, or a nurse and teach children. But solitary dishwashing isn't enough to satisfy meor many other women. We're going to chuck it. We're going to wash 'em by machinery, and come out and play with you men in the offices and clubs and politics you've cleverly kept for yourselves! Oh', we're hopeless, we dissatisfied women! Then why do you want o have us about the place, to fret you? So it's for your sake that I'm going!" (Lewis, 1999:424).

Carol was in an intersection. She hated the system and life that made her into the situation, but she loved her husband and family. She would not nag her husband since as a wife she appreciated her husband's work, but she was not fall-behinded woman who just knew about houseworks. She also had rights to work outside and do whatever a woman wants to. "She energetically did not whine to Kennicott. But her eyes ached; she was not the girl in the breeches and a flannel skirt who had cooked over a camp-fire in the Colorado mountain five years ago (Lewis, 1999:300).

Could not longer endure the pressures from society and herself, she was inspired to cope with her problems by leaving for Washington and trying to find her desired life. She believed that there she could express and materialize her ideas and thought through working in office, and not being kept in like what she got in Gopher Prairie.

### C. CAROL'S FLEE AND RETURN TO SOCIETY : AN AMBIGUITY OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

Ambiguity always links to individualism since individuals cannot be

separated from society. The ambiguity and ambivalence of American individualism derive from both cultural and social contradiction (Bellah, 1986 : 150). Potter points out that the tension between the individual and society can beand often has been a productive one : that there is a kind of paradoxical “antagonistic cooperation” inherent in any society composed of independent individuals (Potter, 1972 : 339)

Lewis recognized the paradox and described Carol as also an ambiguous individual in applying her principles. Carol faced her ambiguity even when she had resolved herself to leave for Washington, leaving for her husband and people. When she was ready to leave at the station, Lewis demonstrated Carol's relieved feeling about freedom, but at the same time it was the emptiness.

She had her freedom, and it was empty. The moment was not the highest of her life, but the lowest and most desolate, which was altogether excellent, for instead of slipping downward she began to climb (Lewis, 1999: 426).

With Hugh, her small son, Carol moved to the city and worked in The Bureau of War Risk Insurance. Even though that was a monotonous job, but she declared that she finally found “real work” and “another world” beyond Main Street. She felt that she had found what she dreamt. Carol perceived that she could do office work without losing any of the feminine virtue of domesticity. She discovered that most of Washington people were more individualistic, which was different from those of Gopher Prairie, where everyone could freely see others' houses and privacy. She also discovered that business women may have friendships and enmities as frankly as men, and may revel in a bliss which no house wife attains a free Sunday. It did not appear that the great World needed her aspiration, but she felt that her letters, her contact with the anxieties of men and women all over the country, were a part of vast affairs, not confined to Main Street and a kitchen but linked with Paris, Bangkok, Madrid

(Lewis, 1999:428)

As the time went by, she discovered that Washington had also hiding bleak sides that she had never known. She was somewhat surprised facing that the office where she worked was full of cliques and scandals as much as that in Gopher Prairie. She also discovered that most of the women in the government bureau lived unhealthfully, dining on snatched in their crammed apartment (Lewis, 1999:428)

Outside the office she also found that there were many social problems faced by urban people, including the women. She was encouraged to believe that she had been abnormal in viewing Gopher Prairie as tedious and slattern. She was confused when Will Kennicott asked her to make up her mind whether she would go home with him or not since he did not want Carol to feel that she had to return to Gopher Prairie.

When they sat on the upper balcony, enchanted by the moon glitter, she cried, “Shall I go back to Gopher Prairie with you? Decide for me. I'm tired of deciding and undeciding.” (Lewis, 1999:442)

An acquaintance of Carol's in Washington alleged that she thought about thousands of women coming to big cities in America. They worked hard to catch their ambition but finally they had to soften their philosophy.

“Do you want to sacrifice yourself in such topsy-turvy world, where popularity makes you unpopular with the people you love, and the only failure is cheap success, and the individualist is the person who gives up all his individualism to serve a jolly ungrateful proletariat which thumbs its nose at him” (Lewis, 1999:443-444)

Suffering from her ambiguity, Carol finally returned to Main Street. Kennicott and her son were the most valuable things she had and she did not want to lose them. She realized that she could not radically change the society

that had had established convention. since Kennicott and Gopher Prairie had drained her self-reliance. Man always tends to conform to the community's principles, ways of life, faiths, and convention. People of the community will impose small pressures so that the rebels eventually follow the established institutions (Horton, 1999 : 178-179). In a communal relationship there is a strong sense of solidarity and common cultural values and norms which are widely shared and rigorously enforced through interpersonal influence (Olsen, 1991:329).

However, she still had her other side of individualism. She could not be a pure individualist or a pure conformist towards Gopher Prairie life. How conformist she was, she would still keep the faith of her own principles.

“But I won in this : I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dish-washing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.” (Lewis, 1999:454)

People could not choose one only choice among many alternatives. As Carol finally found that she could not totally being a rebel nor definitely conform to the society conventions. What she could do was softening their society and adjusting to theirs.

#### D. CONCLUSION

*Main Street* is a controversial novel which evokes criticism among writers and readers at that time. Amidst fictions which deplored the beauty and sweetness of a village life, *Main Street* broke that tradition by showing a depiction of a small town as a place of ugly, rustic, shabby, and static. The people were described as complacent society, who loves only following their conventions and reluctant to change.

These characteristics are opposite of Carol Kennicott who is depicted as developed,

individualist, and feminist. These differences in principles and cultural disparities between two cultures spur into conflicts. The one side wants to change the society, but the society itself does not want to change.

One tends to conform to the convention and institution where he lives perpetually and unintentionally because the society softly imposes a small pressure to the rebels to slowly conform. Even though he still keeps his own values, he discovers that his happiness means nothing without socialization with others.

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