

**Social Contradictions in the Roaring Twenties as
Reflected by Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt: A Marxist Reading.**

A Thesis

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IKO RASAKI
05 185 088



**English Department
Faculty of Letters Andalas University
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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini merupakan pembacaan Marxist terhadap novel berjudul *Babbitt* karangan penulis Amerika pertama yang menerima penghargaan nobel sastra, Sinclair Lewis. Melalui asumsi bahwa karya sastra adalah refleksi dari zamannya dan sekaligus juga dapat berbalik mengkritik zamannya, penulis menjelaskan bahwa novel ini adalah refleksi dari tipikalitas dan kontradiksi sosial pada zamannya dan disisi lain juga merupakan kritik terhadap zamannya.

Melalui metode penelitian kualitatif, penulis mengaplikasikan pembacaan Marxist yang dikembangkan oleh Karl Marx dan para pengikutnya dalam ranah sastra seperti Georg Lukacs, dan Terry Eagleton dalam menganalisa data primer. Melalui pembacaan Marxist, penulis dapat memperlihatkan bahwa novel ini merefleksikan kontradiksi sosial pada *Roaring Twenties* di Amerika. Penulis menggunakan kerangka kritik sastra Marxist dalam menghubungkan kondisi material di Amerika pada awal abad 20 seperti hasil dari revolusi industri pertama dan kedua, awal perkembangan korporasi di Amerika, keterlibatan Amerika dalam perang dunia pertama, pertumbuhan korporasi raksasa yang mendasarkan diri pada produksi massal, dan aparatus ideologis yang merayakan nilai dominan pada masa itu dengan kontradiksi sosial yang direfleksikan oleh teks.

Setelah menganalisa novel ini dari perspektif kritik sastra Marxist, penulis menemukan bahwa George F. Babbitt dan beberapa karakter dalam novel ini adalah refleksi dari masyarakat Amerika awal abad 20 yang hidupnya ter-reifikasi – suatu kondisi dimana komoditas mengontrol hidup manusia dan segala hal yang seharusnya bukan komoditas dianggap sebagai komoditas. penulis juga menemukan bahwa karakter George F. Babbitt dan Paul Riesling dalam novel ini merupakan refleksi dari masyarakat Amerika awal abad 20 yang teralienasi di bawah kekuasaan kapitalisme. Lebih jauh lagi, reifikasi dan alienasi tersebut juga direfleksikan oleh unsur formal – sudut pandang dan alur – dari novel ini. Sebagai penutup, penulis juga menemukan bahwa melalui karakter Ted Babbitt dan Tinka Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis berhasil menyisipkan *tone* optimis untuk melawan reifikasi dan alienasi yang direfleksikan oleh novel ini.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. *The Background of the Research*

Sinclair Lewis is a name that is inevitably to say is inseparable from the America's history of literature, not merely because he writes highly acclaimed novels such as: Our Mr. Wrenn, Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith, and Kingsblood Royal, but also because he invents and contributes a word mean "unthinking conformist" to American vocabulary through Babbitt (Milch 2, Shaw 44). Even so, these facts are still far from adequate to represent in words the contributions of Lewis – whose name associated with the age of Roaring Twenties – to the realm of literature. Lewis' work have been interpreted, analyzed, and explained by number of critics in his country as well as overseas. The rumbles of his works fly overseas and countries, and have made acquaintances with those who are interested in literature, especially American literature.

Any of those who are mentioned last must be familiar with Lewis' style in capturing the way of 1920s Americans live their life in the post WWI, even some books such as: The 20th century and Beyond, McDougall Little: American History and an Encyclopedia about America's literature classify him as one of important figure in history of America's literature.

There is interesting fact I catch from Lewis, who is the first American writer who was awarded Nobel Prize in literature in 1930 (Milch 2, Streissguth 139). Lewis deems literary work should reflect its times and becomes a mirror of its society (139). What he professes is depicted by his work such as Main Street

which portrays the narrow minded American in post world war I and Babbitt that talks about a typical suburban businessman in 1920s who seeks happiness in things possession but remains restless.

In short, Lewis' Babbitt is a novel which takes its chronological setting in 1920's America or the time which is well known as *the roaring twenties*. Taking its chronological setting in the era of economic booming, this novel talk about a middle-class realtor named Babbitt. In fact, Babbitt never envision being a realtor. His dream is to pursue a career as lawyer who stands for the have-not. But the prosperous living possessed by businessman and economic booming makes Babbitt changes his mind. Moreover Babbitt is a novel which tells about middle-class American who buys books and the brand new lighter just because every person belongs to middle-class does that, and it also a novel which tells about Babbitt's restlessness among consumer goods around him.

I keen on discuss, analyze, and explain Babbitt which was published in 1922 since I have found that no students of English Department of Faculty of Letters in Andalas University analyze this salient novel. Furthermore I decide to discuss, analyze, and explain this important novel by bringing its extrinsic consideration and context because I strongly believe that literary work is tied to its social and historical roots. So, there is no way to discuss, analyze, and explain a work unless apprehend critically its conjuncture with the social and historical background that shapes it.

In this respect, I will analyze this novel critically from the perspective of Marxist literary criticism since in the light of my insight Marxist literary criticism

is the most appropriate "knife" to discuss, analyze, and examine the conjuncture between a work with its social and historical roots. Besides that, I also strongly believe that Marxist literary criticism – which in the words of Fredric Jameson is called "absolute horizon" – will be able to reveal the negative side of class-based society (e.g. alienation, reification, and commodification) that dehumanized human being who lamentably perceived it as natural thing.

I also lies my foundation on choosing Marxist literary criticism in the fact that this novel is written in the roaring twenties when America experienced the economic booming, beside that this novel also tells about a man who turns down his dream to be a lawyer just to pursue a prosperous career that he actually do not really like. In addition, this novel able to show how certain mode of production makes things able to take over human life. Furthermore, I expect this thesis will show how aesthetic form of a literary work – which is in this case, is novel – can be a weapon to criticize society from where it rises.

Furthermore, I also expect that by analyzing this novel from the perspective of Marxist literary criticism, I can figure out the conjuncture between the content of this novel and its formal element, and hence reverse the critics – some critics like El Doctorow and Mark Schorer state that Babbitt have awful formal elements (Doctorow 451, Schorer 320) – that condemn the formal element of this novel.

Inevitably to say, talking about choosing literary criticism to explain a work is talking about which side one is going to chose. It is because I strongly believe the history of modern literary theory as Terry Eagleton argues in his book

Literary Theory: an Introduction is a part of history of political and ideological values of our time. Just like Feminist or Post Colonial criticism for instance, one who applies Feminist criticism undoubtedly want to speak in the name of woman and oppose patriarchal society as well as one who applies Post Colonial criticism who undoubtedly wants to speak in the name of the subaltern and the colonized and hence aim to reveal the wicked face of colonization.

I – who belong to great majority whose option in living their life is limited and torn to shreds because wealth remains concentrated in the hand of minority – decide that I am going to apply criticism worthy to discuss in accordance of the marginalized liberation. And that criticism, as I strongly believe is Marxist criticism. It is because Marxist criticism, as remarked by Terry Eagleton, is not merely a technique to interpret Paradise Lost or Middlemarch, Marxist criticism is a part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies – the ideas, values, and feeling – by which men experience their societies at various time... and such understanding contributes to our liberation (Eagleton xii-xiii). In this light, instead of interpret or study history of a work, one who is keen on applying Marxist criticism have to understand and reveal the relations between a work with the ideological world it inhabit profoundly. In other words, Marxist literary criticism demands a revolutionary understanding of history and social process of which it is part (3).

In accordance to the theory I opt, and relating it to the story of Lewis' Babbitt, it is important to propose and conduct a research entitled: "Social Contradiction in The Roaring Twenties as Reflected by Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt: A Marxist Reading."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

After analyzing Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* I conclude that this novel is able to reflect the typicality of the Roaring Twenties and its motivating social contradictions. As my analysis goes, I figure out two social contradictions, reification and alienation.

Reification is embodied within the central character, George F. Babbitt and some other characters of this novel. As my argument goes, George F. Babbitt is a vivid portrait of urban middle class of the Roaring Twenties whose life is controlled by the commodities such as expensive alarm clock and expensive electric cigar lighter. Moreover, some scenes of this novel also symbolize how commodities, objects, and the medium of commodities which is money govern George F. Babbitt's life. However, the reification within George F. Babbitt's life does not cease at that point. As the logic of mode of production in the Roaring Twenties draws human being attention to commodities and objects, George F. Babbitt as the vivid portrait of urban middle class of the roaring Twenties also perceive everything – from Ida Putiak the manicurist until the McKelvey's and the Overbrook's and even his quality as human being – in terms of commodities that have exchange value, or sign exchange value. In addition, I also would like to state that the opening scene of this novel is a good foreshadowing to inform the readers that this novel will tell about human being whose life is governed by commodities and objects.

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