The Distortion of American Dream as Reflected in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*

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Abstract

The writer concerns to analyze the distortion of American dream as reflected in *Sister Carrie* that influenced by the social condition of America at the end of nineteenth century. The writer uses historical and sociological approach in analyzing the data. The primary data were taken from the novel itself and the secondary data, historical background and sociological aspects, were taken from other resources. From historical approach, the writer reviews the context of the time dealing with the story in the novel. From sociological approach, the writer studies about the social condition of America at the end of 19th century that influenced the story in the novel. *Sister Carrie* is the story of a naive girl who live as the mistress of a man who fell in the social scale as she rose to her success as an actress. From this novel, the writer found that the effect of social changing influenced to American character in getting their dream. This condition were strongly seen in the character of Carrie and Hurswood, as the main characters of this novel. Both of them ignored the Contending of American Dream (equality, commonwealth, community, and generosity). Meanwhile, it was explained by American Statements as the guidance to get the dream.

Keywords: Distortion, American Dream, Social Condition

INTRODUCTION

The writer concerns to analyse novel *Sister Carrie* because of some specific reasons. Firstly, she was interested in analysing the distortion of American dream especially at the end of nineteenth century as novel written. American dream is pictured in several literary works and the writer decides to choose *Sister Carrie* that was written by Dreiser who considers naturalistic novel - the works that real exist in nature. By this kind of novel, the writer would be able to see the history and social condition of America during this period.

Secondly, American dream is interesting to analyse. This novel clearly portrays the ambition of a young girl to get her dream living in the city. But she had to face some conflicts and she distorted the ideality of her life for success. She was influenced by the glamour of city life and determined to do everything for a better life. Unfortunately, she got the dream by the distortion of American Dream as the nation’s rules.

In addition, many literatures have exposed about American dream. However, in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser creates the experience of its two main characters in a specific time and place. In fact, this novel presents the valid condition as when it was written in order to understand the American society. Thus, Frank Norris, an author of the powerful naturalistic novel *MC. Teague* in Martin (1966:252) appreciates enthusiastically that *Sister Carrie* was the best novel that he had read. Considering the reasons above, the writer tries to study and analyse *Sister Carrie* in writing from.
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The American Dream in Term of American History

American dream is the ideal dream that should be achieved by American people for a better life. According to Martin (1967:42), American dream is the American ideal of success. It means that when American want to be succes, they should dream the ideal thing to do. This dream will influence their life to have their ambition.

In addition Burns and Cronin (1989:424) state that the American dream has much in common with the aspiration of most people peace, prosperity, personal ownership of property, personal library, and the belief that individuals are free to achieve any goals, to accumulate material wealth, to live any lifestyle. Because of that, this dream motivates American people to work hard to achieve their goals with life style and financial success. They live in restless to get money because they believed that by working hard they would be rich.

According to Burns and Cronin (1989:424), the beliefs of people hold most dear are often called myths or dream. Certainly early Americans knew the myth about America that American gives wealth to a hardworking man. Fundamental materialist version of American Dream is the story about the rich. It means that they competed to get the wealth for being richman.

In addition, Burn and Cronin (1989: 424) also explaine that some consider that American Dream is term used by the middle and upper classes to fool the poor and unemployed in order to drink of improving their lives. For the letter the dream has often a nightmare: equality of opportunity is a bitter myth for those who cannot get decent educations, which are generally unorganized and unrepresentative in politic, and who make the system work of them.

The nation became the central to American Dream. In Declaration of Independence of America, it was set the principles of liberty and equality as the part of the American Dream. It is as the guidance as the American life. The contending of American Dream can be seen in table 1 below.

Table 1: The Contending of American Dream

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE AMERICAN WAY</th>
<th>THE AMERICAN STATEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>Equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Liberation from discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rugged individualism</td>
<td>E pluribus Unum – commonwealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private property rights</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival of the fittest</td>
<td>Pro underdog, pro yeoman farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success to the best</td>
<td>Affirmative action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement, merit, excellence</td>
<td>Help for those who can’t help themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave me alone</td>
<td>Generosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Life is unfair”</td>
<td>Fairness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are not angels-government</td>
<td>“We can do better”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government by the people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In his explanation, Burns and Cronin (1989: 426) state that list on the left is primary American Dream for most Americans. It was for the founders of this nation in the 1770s and 1780s. Elements of the list in the right have evolved to take an important place in Americans life as the guidance to the list in the left.

The table 1 above shows that the American ways should point to the American statement in order to make it ideal. For example; let’s see to the principle of liberty. This value seemed to serve the personal liberty of the people, but they should put equality of opportunity to get personal liberty such as in education, political power and economic security in American society. Then the principle of freedom means freedom from fear. American should be free from discrimination and outrageous doctrines that might appear in American life. So, American should comprehend the value of freedom itself. Likewise, the American Ways should be followed by American Statements.

From the list above, it can be understood that American government paid attention to American dream seriously. Consequently the parts of the American Dream become the American national character in several ways. Thus some American literature exposes American Dream, which reflects American characters to exist their dream. These issues are never vanished until nowadays.

Social Condition of America at the End of Nineteenth

Urbanization increased in America city especially in economic reason at the end of nineteenth century. They commonly came from rural in hopping to get the better life to live in the city. The agriculture was hard at that time. The people who lived in rural area got limited harvest. Thus many immigrants came to the city in order to get a job to improve their life better (Carman and Wishy, 1967).

However, America also began to get financial problem. Industrial labor suffered as unemployed before, banks were going to bankrupt and business failed in large numbers. It was hard to get a job at that time (Luedtke, 1987). From this condition, of course, America were in financial panic. It influenced into the way of American to get their dream in their social life. Some get their dream disorderly. They did not care that they destructed the standard of American ways to get their dream anymore. This situatiaon would enforced them to get their wish by doing anyway.

METHODOLOGY

Related to the analysis, the writer uses mimetic method. Abraham (1979:8) states that the mimetic orientation is the explanation of art as essentially an imitation of aspects of the universe. This method is based on the point of the view to see the art as an imitating
of universe. Literature, including novel, is a part of the art itself. It can be said that mimetic method tends to see literary work as a document of social condition.

In analysing this novel the writer uses historical and sociological approach, because it is important to know the relationship between the social condition and the context of the time with the topic of the novel. Muller and William (1994:15) write that historical criticisms are the study of literature by placing it within the context of the time which it was written”. Meanwhile, Laurenson and Swinghood (1972:18) state that sociological approach is the emphasis on the increasing alienation of the writer from his society and the consequent impact on literary style and context. In this study, the writer reviews the context of the dealing with the story in the novel. In this analysis, the writer investigates the influence of social condition in America to the distortion of American dream within the context at the end of nineteenth century as the time this novel written.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The ambition of American can be seen in American’s attitude in getting their goal and dream. In Sister Carrie, Dreiser reflects American who distorted American Dream. The Distortion was influenced by the social condition in America at the end of nineteenth century.

Based on the American Statements as in contending of American Dream, it was found four kinds of statements that have been distorted clearly in this story. This distortion were reflected dominantly in Carrie and Hurstwood as the main characters of this novel.

Equality

According to Burns and Cronin (1989:427), equality might mean taking personal property from some to redistribute to others who need it in a manner that might jeopardize individual liberties of the formers. However, equality of opportunity would be meant by providing youngsters, for example, with the kind of housing, home life, medical care, and schooling they need to expand their actual liberties, and thus give them a truly equal start.

On the contrary, Sister Carrie reflects American who did not get the equality as well as Burn said. It can be seen in Carrie that it was hard for her to live in the big city. She lived in smell and narrow flat of her sister. She also had to pay the room for four dollars. Thus Carrie’s salary was not enough to fulfil her need, including clothes and carfare. Consequently her body was worse, with aches and pain. She did not get medical care as American should get in bad situation. Thus, the whole atmosphere of the flat was contrast to Carrie’s expectation.

Unfortunately Carrie’s condition, living in Chicago, signed that liberation is just a symbol stated in contending American dreams. She still felt that the oppression came to her and she did not get the equality to get opportunity living well. She was suffering to get the job and to live with her sister.

The distortion of equality also happened to Hurstwood when he lived in New York. Hurstwood found himself humiliating situation of searching work and living in limited budget. He tried to find job, but it was nothing to do in New York. Then he hoped to get money from gambling that the sometimes became a winner and a loser. Such compensation brought him into the worse and going to collapse.
American statements explain that we also protect against the economic catastrophe of illness, disability, and unemployment. However, at the end of nineteenth century this standard was still far in application.

Commonwealth

Individualism is one of American character as stated in contending of American Dream. American should not depend on the others to choose their way. Tocqueville argued (in Luetdke: 1987) that individualism was an inevitable consequence of democracy and equality. Individualism should aim to commonwealth. Americans should consider them as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands. Commonwealth serves American to live better.

However, commonwealth cannot be seen in Sister Carrie. When Carrie lived with her sister, Minnie, she could not get commonwealth to survive. Besides, Carrie’s salary was not enough to fulfill her need. Minnie’s husband looked cynical to her. On the other side, he asked Carrie to do workday in order to help Minnie. It is clear that the commonwealth, as Carrie’s hope, was contrast to the reality she faced. It can be seen in the quotation below:

“Carrie, on the other hand, had the blood of youth and some imagination. Her day of love and the mysteries of courtship were still ahead. She could think of what she would like to do, of clothes she would like to wear, and of places she would like to visit. These were the things upon which her mind ran, and it was like meeting with opposition at every turn to find no one here to call forth or respond to her feelings.” (p. 41).

Carrie felt lonely of living in the big city. The crowd of the city did not influence her heart, which could not get what she wanted. She had to limit the blood of youth to exist her imagination. In the shoe factory, Carrie also accepted the uncomfortable place. It was hotter and without fresh air or water. It made Carrie be sick. She wanted to rebel her fate but she no had no strength and power to do it. This condition have borken Carrie’s dream to have money in America. The money she got was not enough to fulfill her life. But she tried to stand for this condition and keep going with the bad condition.

Community

Burns and Cronin (1989) state that American dream has common to get property, personal liberty and prosperity. Thus Americans accumulate material wealth as much as possible. They are known as the hardworking man to get rich. Although they were competed each other to have money, they should keep their community well. It means that American have norms and rules to exist in community.

In Sister Carrie, it seems Carrie did not consider her social value. She decided to live together with Drouet, the man whom she met on the train, without marriage. Drouet “lent” her money and bought her the meal when she lost her job. Then, Drouet persuaded her to leave Minnie in order to help her from suffering. Thus Carrie left her sister secretly by giving a note that made Minnie upset. The struggle for survival in the big city forced her to accept Drouet’s attention to her that he had never got from her sister.

Carrie closed her eyes upon the roles of society by the reason that she wanted to live better and hoped that her loving to wealth would become a reality. Therefore, she did not care whether her action was ideal for a young girl in getting financial or not. It means, Carrie might destruct the purity of her traditional life. She also had the secret love with Hurstwood, Drouet’s friend, when she live with Drouet. She prefers to Hurstwood, because
she knew that Hurstwood managed a great company in Chicago. In addition she thought Hurstwood was more in property. It is made Drouet lose Carrie’s heart as quickly as Hurstwood gained it. Carrie always spent her time with enjoyable life. She did not realize that her attitudes were negative moral actions towards people around her. She just knew that Chicago presented many wonderful things since Hurstwood was getting along with her. Her attitudes became the common gossip in her neighbourhood.

It is clear that Carrie got property without working hard. She left her traditional life, by loving man to another in order to get money. It means, Carrie distorted her dream toward the community as the contending of American dream stated.

Hurstwood also got private property disorderly. He stole the money in his office before. The money was used to buy the tickets in getting Carrie away and getting rid form his wife. He played this game in order to get his wishes in love affair and financial reason. He thought that the money would be the guarantee for him to get happiness.

Private property rights are one of American way in contending of American dream. Actually, in getting property, American should not ignore his community. American statement considers community, because an individual is a part of community. Unfortunately, Hurstwood used his right disorderly. He received Carrie and stole the money to get happiness. However he made office community to be disappointed.

At this time, the new social and economic condition appeared. The city might become evil place, which destroyed the social unity and traditional community. Mohl (1985: 143) supports this opinion that unprecedented levels of economic and social disorder 19th century accompanied the urbanization of American society in the late. The people began to leave their traditional life style, which was characterized by a strong sense of social unity and community, and they came to modern life style.

*Generosity*

The homogenous people come to the big city caused changing at the end of nineteenth century. They were from traditional society into modernizing society. According to modernization theory, the modernizing society is characterized by human dislocation, social disorganization, instability, disorder and alienation (Mohl, 1985).

The situation above brought American to the distortion of generosity. It can be seen in Sister Carrie. After Carrie married with Hurstwood, she became a well-known actress. Meanwhile, Hurstwood only sat in his rocking chair as the jobless. Then, Carrie left Hurstwood, because she needed all the money she made. She wanted to be involved in the glamour of the city life. Her style was drastically changed that influenced by her material satisfaction. She did not care of Hurstwood’s condition anymore. Thus Hurstwood felt that it was difficult for him to get help from anybody because they would claim that he was an unproductive man. It was clear that Carrie’s motive to live with someone was only to satisfy her needs in property. Now, she got what she was originally dreamt of (wealth, finery and prestige). Unfortunately, she failed to understand them all. This was happened when she heard that Hurstwood did suicide, this case was found at the end of the story as follows:

“Oh, Carrie, Carrie! Oh blind strivings of human heart! Onward, onward, it faith, and where beauty leads, there it follows..... Know, then that for you I neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.” (p.398-399).
All of the condition above shows that there were the distortion American dreams done by Carrie. She forgot about the effects of her decision toward others. It means that Carrie was not generosity as American statement said. Although one of American way is ‘leave me alone’ that he was free to determine his own life, but it does not mean American forget the generosity to the others.

The phenomena above brought American to be out of the ideal to get their dream. According to Luedtke (1987:145), the reputation of American wealth also helped produce another crisis in social relationships. Dream of financial in dependence (and personal liberty) lured millions of immigrants to American in the late of nineteenth century, many of them from Southern Europe. Their physical appearance, religious beliefs, and languages contrasted with American models. It is clear that the distortion of American dream is reflected in Sister Carrie, which is influenced by the social condition at the end of nineteenth century America.

**CONCLUSION**

American dream become National Character in America because the nation pay more attention for its contending. However, the social condition at the end of nineteenth century influenced American life. This condition made them getting dream disorderly. Sister Carrie reflects the distortion of American dream related to American social condition at the end of nineteenth century. From this novel, it can be learned that the happiness does not depend on the financial only. So, It is not good to be hypnotized by the promised financial only. Many things that should be considered by American related to the statements in contending og American Dream

**REFERENCES**