



The Theme of Hypocrisy in Sinclair Lewis's novel *Elmer Gantry*

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Abstract

Hypocrisy appears to be true and virtuous in this capitalistic and materialistic society. Hypocrites know no bounds. They try to manipulate the people in order to present themselves to be virtuous. The word “hypocrisy” is nothing but “deception”. In the early twentieth century America, corruption was rampant in the churches. For instance, the religious institutions and the religious preachers had become commercial-minded and materialistic in their approach. Hypocrisy is in practice from time immemorial. The present paper focuses to explore the religious practices of the early twentieth century America. The novel *Elmer Gantry* by Sinclair Lewis presents this very practice and the spread of *evangelism* in America. The evangelists were pious and virtuous in form but in nature they are hypocrites, greedy, corrupt and immoral. They got involved in preaching sermons among the congregations for it provided them an opportunity to manipulate people. Their obscurity in charity led people to go into their hands. They always dreamt of spreading their sermons in the churches. In this novel, Sinclair Lewis the great 20th century American satirist bitterly attacks on the religious hypocrisy of such hypocrites in the American society.

Keywords: Hypocrisy, Capitalistic, Materialistic, Deception, Corruption, Elmer Gantry, Evangelism.

Harry Sinclair Lewis was one the greatest satirist, novelist and playwright of the early 20th century America. He was the first American to be awarded with the Noble Prize in Literature in 1930. Lewis used satire as the tool to expose the vices, follies, moral degradation, materialism and capitalism of the American society. Though Lewis presented the American society pessimistically in all his novels, but he had the optimistic concern towards his society. He can be rightly called as “the conscience of his generation”. Lewis understood the conscience and the temper of his times minutely.

The novel *Elmer Gantry* was published in 1926. It was written during the period when the socio-political and economic changes were at high peak and the social morals were declined. The 20th century American society was called as the “Roaring Twenties”. It was also the period of Jazz and the Prohibition. There was nationwide ban on the consumption, production, import and export of alcohol. Though alcohol was banned, many people sold it illegally and made money. The Scopes Monkey Trial in Tennessee gave birth to the rise in fundamentalism, and evangelism. Hence, this era was called as the Roaring Twenties.

There were many controversies revolving around this novel. The novel *Elmer Gantry* was banned in United States for its scandalous depiction of religion. The odd reviews burst out against this novel. The famous evangelist Billy Sunday called Lewis as “Satan’s cohort”. However, the book sprang into popularity in a very short span for it depicted the realism of the times. The novel was made into a movie in 1960, starring Burt Lancaster as Gantry and Jean Simmons as Sister Sharon Falconer. The novel is based on the life of an evangelist Billy Sunday and Sister Sharon Falconer’s life on a Canadian born American radio evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, who founded the Pentecostal Christian denomination referred to as International Church of the Foursquare Gospel in 1927.

Lewis exposes the religious hypocrisy of Americans in the novel. The eponymous character Elmer Gantry is a perfect example of a hypocrite of the American society. Hypocrites are the one who pretend to be virtuous but they are not so. They are smart in winning the people through deceit ways.

According to *Macmillan Dictionary*, hypocrite is a person who claims to have certain moral principles or beliefs but behaves in a way that shows they are not sincere.

A religious hypocrite is an Athian that tells Christians that there isn’t God, yet they believe in him them-selves (Urban Dictionary)

The above definition of hypocrite is apt to the characters in the novel *Elmer Gantry*. Hypocrites are the one who pretend to be righteous and sincere but in reality, they do not really possess the virtues. The novel exposes the evangelists who are cruel, corrupt, hypocritical and wicked. Thus, the theme hypocrisy predominates the novel.

Lewis attacks the authority of the churches, the business technique in religion, the superficiality of Sunday Schools and the hypocritical clergymen who not even believe in the doctrines they preach to their congregations. He also tries to show the corrupt world and the darker side of the religious institutions.

Elmer Gantry was the traveling evangelist who loved whiskey, women and wealth. Gantry becomes a successful Methodist minister despite his hypocrisy, greedy and self-centred nature. There are some internal and external factors which influenced Gantry to be a hypocrite. On one side, ambition of becoming popular overpowers his heart and mind and, on the other side, his mother’s dream of making him a preacher and the strict regulations of the church made him to be a hypocrite. As the American critic, T. K. Whipple says:

Elmer Gantry is a clinical report on the morbid symptoms which attacks religion in a land where religious spirit is dead. Nothing is omitted, not possible fraud or quackery or hypocrisy or iniquity nothing is missing but religion (74)

The religious spirit is missing in the novel as the evangelists were engaged in the quackery and hypocrisy. Gantry always pretended to be an honest evangelist towards his duties. But in reality, he was devoid of spiritual values.

Judson Roberts, an evangelist, athlete and a boxer who was known for his splendid knowledge of Christianity and his talent of oratory is another example of hypocrite. Though he preaches and converts people, he doubts the doctrines he preaches. It was in his revival meeting; Elmer Gantry was converted. Lewis writes about Gantry's interest as:

The willing was not his but the mob's; the phrases were not his but those of the emotional preachers and hysterical worshippers whom he had heard since babyhood (Lewis 54)

The above quote talks about Gantry's conversion and how he was forced to conform to the society. He sacrificed his dream of becoming a lawyer for the sake of his mother's dream. He changed from rebellious young boy to a charismatic preacher. He became hypocritical preacher.

Lewis continues to attack on the hypocrisy of the clergymen throughout the novel. At Mizpah Theological Seminary, Gantry was surrounded by many other hypocrites. Though smoking is forbidden, his fellow friends all smoke in their dormitory. Jacob Trospen, a chief executive of the Seminary assigned him to the post of pastor of a small church in Schoenheim and Frank Shallard would accompany him as Assistant. As Gantry was more inclined towards acquiring the materialistic things. Trospen warns him:

Brother Gantry, you eliminate the worldly things I suspect you of indulging in! (Lewis 104)

Trospen warns Gantry to expunge all the worldly practices in which he is still engaged. At Schoenheim, Gantry and Frank were hosted by Deacon Barney Bains. Gantry was attracted towards his daughter Lulu Bains. When their relationship was revealed, he refuses to marry her and tricks with Floyd Naylor for having affair with Lulu. Thus, he ends up his relationship with her. Gantry pretends to be honest man in order to escape from marrying her. He easily manages to fool them. This clearly shows his hypocritical nature. He always indulges in such illegal activities.

On his way to attend Easter services at Flowerdale Baptist Church in Monarch, Elmer meets a travelling salesman Ad Locust in train. Elmer violates his sacred duties. He fell prey to drinking. As a result, he loses his job and was expelled from Seminary too. Later, for two years he works as a traveling salesman at Pequot Farm Implement Company.

One day Gantry attends a revival meeting of Sister Sharon Falconer. Sharon, a charismatic evangelist who had a great influence on people through her sermons. She manipulated and converted people through her sermons. She is one of the female hypocrite characters in the novel. She says to Gantry:

I can't sin! I am above sin! I am really and truly sanctified! Whatever I may choose to do, though it might be sin in one unsanctified, with me God will turn it to his glory (Lewis 190)

This statement shows Sharon was indulged in self-glorification, she believes in surface appearance and is shrewd, hypocritical and selfish to the core. Both Gantry and Sharon fall in love and use their talents for preaching and manipulation to build a huge congregation and grow rich from the offerings. When Sharon rises to prominence, she was in the pursuit of expanding her business for getting success in the monetary world. Lewis describes Sharon's changing behaviour as:

Sometimes she was priestess and a looming disaster, sometimes she was intimidating in grasping passion, sometimes she was thin and writhing and anguished with chagrined doubt of herself, sometimes she was pale and nun-like and still, sometimes she was a chilly business woman, and sometimes she was a little girl (Lewis 219)

Sharon often pretended to be a devout evangelist. Her life comes to an end when one of the workmen drops a cigarette during the congregation which sets to fire. After Sharon's death, Gantry joins with Mrs. Evans Riddle who teaches New Thought, Concentration, Prosperity, Love, Metaphysics and Oriental Mysticism. She is another hypocritical character. Mrs. Riddle cheats Elmer and refuses to give him his share of profit. So, in turn he withholds her funds.

Frank Shallard, a minister of Congregational church in Zenith. Though a hypocrite, he pretended to be pious, to avoid disappointment with his father, a veteran clergyman. He doubts the literal truths of *The Bible* and his preaching. He joins the preachers Liberal Club, an ecumenical group made up of pastors from various religions and Christian denominations. He enjoys their company and their conversation, but wonders why they continue to profess something they don't believe. Yet he feels trapped and cannot leave the church now.

Gantry always desired for popularity. He was influenced by the luxury and modernity. With the goal of securing larger church in the city, he begins to advertise his sermons and preach. He joins a number of Clubs and Organizations with a view to rise socially. At Sparta, Gantry gains state wide fame for his sensational sermons denouncing drinking and other sins. Gradually, his congregation grows day by day. He begins to cultivate the influential ministers in town while scheming to displace the most prosperous of them. He, being the figure of inspiration, says:

The growing madness, worldliness and materialism of the age that has prevailed are the cause of prevalent cultural and moral deterioration in the country could be cured only by returning to the simple old-time religion as preached at the Wellspring Methodist Church (Lewis 368)

In order to rise his social status, Gantry joins Tonawanda Club and forms a Committee on Public Morals made up of most of the prominent preachers of Zenith. He starts to mingle with the truly wealthy citizens of the city. He raises money to construct new churches. In his sermons, he attacks the social evils in order to draw attention of the people and to increase the attendance of the church. His intention was not to make them aware, self-conscious, but to make them dependent on him. He himself cannot stay away from the social evils but he pretends to be wise and good. He manipulates and coaxes his followers to fulfil his intentions.

Gantry meets J. D. E. North, head of the National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press, a large vice-combating and lobbying organization. When North invites Gantry to give lecture for NAPAP (National Association for the Purification of Art and the Press). Lewis states:

He would combine in one association all the moral organisations in America-perhaps, later in the entire world. He would be the executive of that combination; he would be the super-president of the United States, and someday the dictator of the world (Lewis 440)

As he has achieved in establishing his large congregation and success. He still longs for more fame and power. Gantry is filled with ambition to combine all the moral organizations in America, with himself as the leader.

Gantry has been persistently in relationship with a number of women since the beginning. When he had attained highest position, his new secretary Hetti Dowler cheated him. She made relationship with him to expose him in public domain. Even then he is in great fear of losing his status, dignity and destruction of his career. At the end of the novel, in his congregation prayer, he announces, “to make these United States a moral nation” (Lewis 465). Like all other hypocrites, Gantry convinces himself of his sincerity. The critic D. J. Dooley is apt in saying:

All those who profess to be religious in the novel are shown as hypocrites or morons (128)

Elmer Gantry can be subtitled as the “novel of hypocrites”. The characters in the novel work towards gaining popularity and leading luxurious life through hypocritical means. They resort to all sorts of things which should not be present in the society. The novel clearly shows how America was reeling under foul means of corrupt and hypocritical religious heads. Thus, Lewis strongly attacks the hypocrites in this novel. The novel is the perfect example of hypocrisy. Though he preaches against theft, smoking and sex, he himself indulges in all sorts of evil activities. Gantry continuously acted as a selfish hypocrite who focused on money rather than pious preaching. The characters in the novel are all religious hypocrites. The novel is an excellent depiction of preacher’s ego, their desire to become popular, their dependence on charity to get money, committing sin, their lust for money, evangelists using methods of marketing and organization in order to have successful meetings and using emotional manipulation to get converts etc., are all the traits of hypocritical evangelists who still pretend to be devoid of these adulteries.

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