

A Critical Appreciation of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*

- Iros Vaja

Abstract

The present paper discusses various aspects of an American author Sinclair Lewis's novel Babbitt.. Very few men of letters in American literature have done what Lewis did in Babbitt about a middle-aged realtor. Here he gave the world a character so vivid and indestructible that the name has come to stand not just for a single fictional character but for many American businessmen of that era as well. In some ways the novel contains certain autobiographical elements too. Lewis was himself much like Babbitt- Midwestern, ambitious, occasionally loud, sometimes obnoxious, and insecure. He replaced the traditionally romantic and complacent conception of American life with one that was realistic and even bitter. No other writer seemed to know the American business world and American middle-class life as intimately as Lewis knew it. This knowledge was one of the main reasons for Babbitt's success.

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If you go to any large dictionary and open it to the "B" section, you'll find two definitions that didn't exist before 1922: Babbitt- an uncultured, conformist businessman; Babbitttry- smugness, conventionality, and a desire for material success. These words have become part of our vocabulary, thanks to Sinclair Lewis.

Few authors in American literature have done what Lewis did in his novel about a middle-aged realtor: in George F. Babbitt he gave the world a character so vivid and indestructible that the name has come to stand not just for a single fictional character but for many American businessmen of that era as well. In some ways Sinclair Lewis was himself much like Babbitt- Midwestern, ambitious, occasionally loud, sometimes obnoxious, and insecure. Sinclair Lewis's naturalistic style and choice of subject matter was much imitated by later writers. He replaced the traditionally romantic and complacent conception of American life with one that was realistic and even bitter.

Lewis wasn't the only literary figure of the 1920s critical of American life. Writers like Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were making some of the same attacks, and many readers believe they made them with more skill and intelligence. But no other

writer seemed to know the American business world and American middle-class life as intimately as Lewis knew it.

This knowledge was one of the main reasons for Babbitt's success. As many readers have noted, Babbitt is not at its heart a realistic novel. Lewis frequently selects his evidence to make Babbitt and Zenith appear as bad as possible. Because he portrayed the surfaces of middle-class American life so accurately, however, he convinces us that his exaggerated satiric attack on that life is accurate. If some of Lewis's readers protested that Babbitt's world was too horrible to be true, far more feared that Lewis's portrait was too correct in all its details not to be true.

Another reason for Babbitt's success is its humor. Despite the seriousness of its subject matter, Babbitt is a very funny book. Lewis was a satirist- he wanted us to laugh as he went on the warpath. Like one of his favorite writers, Dickens, he created characters that were often humorous caricatures, and like Mark Twain he depended on exaggerated everyday speech to make those caricatures live. Of course, Lewis could have written a bitter and humorless attack on Babbitt and all he stood for. But he didn't want to do that, because, as he later admitted, he liked Babbitt- at least in part. He was fully aware of Babbitt's absurdity but he couldn't bring himself to be utterly harsh with him.

After all, Babbitt represents not just one man but much of what Lewis felt was middle-class America; and Lewis was too much the child of that America to be able to condemn Babbitt completely.

The 1920s saw Lewis at the pinnacle of his career. He followed Babbitt with *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929), all widely praised best-sellers. Lewis died near Rome on January 10, 1951. *From Main Street to Stockholm*, a collection of his letters was published posthumously in 1952. His reputation was international. Although he generally scoffed at prizes and refused the Pulitzer Prize in 1926 for *Arrowsmith*, Lewis accepted the 1930 Nobel Prize in literature. He was the first American ever to receive this award.

But the years following the Nobel Prize were not happy ones. He had divorced his first wife and married the well-known journalist Dorothy Thompson; he would divorce her as well. He began to drink heavily. His reputation as a writer declined as critics began to favor younger authors like Ernest Hemingway, and as Lewis published a string of novels inferior to his earlier works. His last years were filled with hectic traveling. He was in Rome, Italy, when he died on January 10, 1951.

Sinclair Lewis's greatest creation, however, has lived on. Today's Babbitt might be selling computers rather than houses, and no doubt the automobile he now worships is sleeker than the 1920 model. But he still worries about keeping up with the neighbors, and he gets much of what he thinks from advertisements and newspaper headlines. (Today he can also watch television.) He remains a symbol of all that is stupid, ridiculous, and funny- and, occasionally, sad and noble- about many of us in America.

The novel begins in April 1920. Above the morning mist rise the towers of Zenith, a city of 360,000 somewhere in the American Midwest. In a

suburban house, a forty-six year-old realtor named George Babbitt wakes, shaves, eats breakfast. Every object he owns is a symbol of his prosperous, respectable life. Yet Babbitt is filled with a discontent, which he takes out on his patient but dull wife, Myra, and on his children, Verona, Ted, and Tinka. As we follow Babbitt through his day, we see his many- often very funny- failings. Loud, smug, backslapping, he boasts of business ethics but doesn't really know what they are. Yet he's capable of sensitivity, as when he explains his unhappiness to his best friend Paul Riesling. Paul, a once-promising violinist who now sells roofing, says that Zenith's cutthroat competitive ways make people unhappy. He suggests a week in Maine away from businesses and families. Babbitt's day ends. As Babbitt goes to sleep, Lewis shows us other scenes of Zenith life: the city's idle rich and its struggling poor, its would-be reformers and its cynical politicians. Zenith is modern and prosperous, but it's full of conformist citizens like Babbitt and his friends, who all buy the same products and think the same thoughts.

Social success is as important as business success in Zenith, and when the Babbitts hold a dinner party they invite their most "highbrow" friends, including Boosters' Club president Vergil Gunch and famous poet T. Cholmondeley Frink. But Frink's dreadful verse and the deadly dull dinner conversation prove how little genuine art or wit there is in Zenith. Babbitt persuades his wife to let him go to Maine. The Babbitts then visit the even more unhappily married Rieslings, where Babbitt bullies clever, bitter Zilla Riesling into letting Paul go with him. The Maine woods make Babbitt and Paul feel young again, and Babbitt vows he'll change his life. But as soon as he's back in Zenith, he's avidly chasing business success and making crooked deals he refuses to admit are dishonest. He aids conservative Lucas Prout's campaign for mayor against the "radical" lawyer Seneca Doane and addresses the Zenith Chamber of Commerce, where in a speech that is unintentionally hilarious but at the same time disturbing, he claims Zenith is the finest city in the world because it contains so many Standardized American Citizens who think and act alike.

Anxious to improve their social standing, the Babbitts invite the wealthy Charles McKelveys to dinner, but the McKelveys aren't interested in acquiring middleclass friends. The Babbitts, for their part, behave equally snobbishly to the lower-class Overbrooks. Zenith, we see, claims to be a place of equality, but its social barriers are impossible to cross. Zenith also claims to be religious, but its religion is more a high-powered business than a faith. Babbitt seems to go from success to success. But he still worries about business and about his family. While on a business trip to Chicago, he sees Paul Riesling dining with a strange woman. He tries to get Paul to end the affair, but a few weeks later, as Babbitt is glorying in his election as Boosters' Club vice president; he gets word that Paul has shot his wife, Zilla. She survives, but Paul is put into prison, and Babbitt has lost his only friend. Adrift, Babbitt thinks of having an affair himself.

He's attracted to an elegant client, Mrs. Tanis Judique, but instead turns his attentions to a teenaged manicurist- unsuccessfully. He goes to Maine, hoping to find the happiness he found there the year before, but this time sees only the same greed and conformity he sees in Zenith. On the train home, Babbitt bumps into Seneca Doane. This much-hated man surprises Babbitt by seeming intelligent, rational, and humane. Babbitt begins to express sympathy with Doane's liberal views, though without really understanding them.

His new beliefs are soon tested when Zenith is hit with labor strife. While Babbitt's conservative friends demand the strike be halted, Babbitt sides with the workers. Now Babbitt begins to see firsthand the price of any kind of nonconformity in Zenith: his friends grow deeply suspicious of him.

The strike is crushed. Babbitt, still looking for something or someone to give meaning to his life, begins to visit Tanis Judique. Tanis is part of a wild set who call themselves "The Bunch," and when Babbitt is seen with them; his old friends grow more hostile. Then Babbitt commits another "crime": he refuses Vergil Gunch's invitation to join the Good Citizens' League, a group dedicated to stifling opinions it considers too liberal. Mrs. Babbitt, confused and unhappy about her husband, seeks comfort in the half-baked philosophy of the American New Thought League. Babbitt feels trapped; even after he ends his affair with Tanis, pressure from Gunch and his other conservative friends' increases. Join the Good Citizens' League, they demand, and when he again refuses they make him an outcast in his own city, whispering, spying, and denying Babbitt both friendship and business.

One night Mrs. Babbitt complains of a pain in her side: appendicitis. The illness terrifies her and Babbitt as well. As they rush to the hospital, he realizes he's too weak to continue his rebellion. Zenith has licked him. He vows loyalty to all the false values he briefly fought: to business, to success, to Zenith. Mrs. Babbitt recovers. At the end of the book, Babbitt is almost the same man he was at its start- except that now he has no illusions about his dishonest, empty life. When his son Ted shocks the family by eloping, and asks permission to quit college and become a mechanic, Babbitt takes him aside and gives his approval. Perhaps the younger generation can make up for Babbitt's failure- if, unlike Babbitt, Ted can remain unafraid of his family, unafraid of Zenith, unafraid of himself. Then disillusioned father and still-hopeful son march in to greet their family.

Babbitt is a loosely structured novel. There is a plot- Babbitt's growing discontent with his life in Zenith, and his attempt to change by supporting Seneca Doane and engaging in an affair with Tanis Judique. There are subplots as well: Paul Riesling's desperation, which leads to a shooting; Ted Babbitt's romance and elopement with Eunice Littlefield; the growth of the Good Citizens' League. But many critics have noted that Lewis is really more interested in exploring Babbitt's world in all its

variety than he is in creating a tightly woven plot and moving that plot forward. One thing doesn't always lead to another. You could reverse the order of many of the episodes in the book- say, Babbitt's speech to the real estate convention and his church work for the Reverend Drew- without any harm.

Still, Babbitt does possess a structure. Chapters 1 through 7 show a typical day in the life of George Babbitt. Then comes a long middle section- chapters 8 to 19 - that examines Babbitt's growing restlessness but also examines various aspects of life in Zenith. We see important social institutions like dinner parties, leisure activities, business conventions, political campaigns, and churches. In a sense, not much happens in this middle section to move the plot forward, but you come away from it with a much greater understanding of the society George Babbitt lives in, the society against which he's about to rebel. The last section of the book deals with rebellion, Babbitt's and others'. Paul's affair and its aftermath are treated in chapters 20, 21, and 22. Babbitt's first efforts to change his life- by dating Ida Putiak, going to Maine, and supporting Seneca Doane- occupy chapters 23 through 27. His open revolt and its failure are recounted in chapters 28 to 34.

Lewis focused on the American middle class, replacing traditional notions of its complacency with a vision that was far harsher and at times bitter. In both *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922), Lewis satirically portrayed the monotony and emotional, spiritual, and intellectual poverty of American middle-class life. Here are the major themes that Lewis treats in *Babbitt*.

Most of Babbitt's relationships are, he admits, mechanical, empty, unfulfilling. Though he jokes with his friends at the Athletic Club, he can't reveal his true feelings of restlessness to them; only with Paul Riesling can he really be himself. Babbitt's marriage, too, seems at best a comfortable but passionless routine.

Zenith has become admirably prosperous because its industries churn out standardized products. Unfortunately, Zenith also churns out standardized citizens, who not only buy the same cars and living room furniture, but get their information from the same sources and think the same thoughts. Worse, they oppose anyone who dares to be different. As you read *Babbitt*, you'll want to look at the ways Lewis portrays standardization in Zenith. And you'll want to compare Zenith to your world. Where do you get your opinions? What do you think of people whose views differ greatly from yours? Zenith is ignorant and intolerant of genuine art and literature. Great poets like Dante and Shakespeare go unread, while business letters, advertisements, and newspaper poetry columns are hailed as works of genius. Lewis vividly condemns Zenith's upside-down cultural values, but some readers have felt that he shares them in part- that he must in part like the literary garbage he parodies to be able to parody it so effectively.

In Zenith, business is all important, and the hunger for business success

corrupts every part of life. Zenith politics are manipulated for personal gain. Friendships are used to advance careers. Education and culture have no value if they can't earn you money. Even religion has less to do with God than with profits.

Lewis's attacks on the tyranny of business in America are harsh indeed. Do you think they were valid at the time he wrote? Do you think they're still valid now? How important is material success to Americans today? And what are Americans willing to do to achieve it?

Babbitt and his friends think of themselves as highly respectable businessmen. Yet their honesty is limited at best. They praise Prohibition but like to drink. Babbitt preaches business ethics but seldom practices them. He claims to lead a strictly moral life but visits a brothel and begins an affair with Tanis Judique.

Babbitt and most of the other characters are obsessed with social status, in large part because the barriers between classes in Zenith are so difficult to cross. The middle-class Babbitts are denied friendship by the upper-class McKelveys. The Babbitts in turn deny it to the lower-class Overbrooks. Such snobbery goes against the ideal of America as a democratic, classless society. You'll want to ask yourself if such class division still exists in America today. Babbitt's world worships things: alarm clocks, cigar lighters, automobiles. What does this say about people when they must depend on material possessions for their sense of self-worth? Religion too has been corrupted by the Zenith business mentality. Evangelist Mike Monday is brought in to fight labor unions, and the Reverend John Jennison Drew runs his church like a highly competitive business. Zilla Riesling's Pentecostal Faith teaches only bitterness.

Babbitt is an example of a third-person, omniscient narrative. For the most part we experience the story from Babbitt's point of view: We're with him as he wakes up, as he drives to his office, as he has lunch with Paul Riesling. But the opening scene of the novel demonstrates that Lewis the narrator is reserving for himself the right to be omniscient, to show us scenes that Babbitt (who is asleep) couldn't possibly see: a speeding limousine, workers leaving a factory. He'll use the same tactic at the end of Babbitt's day, taking us from Babbitt's house to Lucile McKelvey's parlor, to a Mike Monday revival meeting, to the room where Jake Offutt and Henry T. Thompson are plotting a crooked business deal. These narrative techniques are very useful for Lewis. The third-person narrative lets him satirize Babbitt's failings more easily than if he had chosen (for example) to have Babbitt narrate the story in the first person. And by making the narrator omniscient he's able to smoothly portray not just one man but an entire society. Probably no aspect of Babbitt has prompted so many different opinions as has Lewis's literary style. At its best, it's vivid, fast moving, and funny. One favorite technique is to use overly grand language (often capitalized) to show that Babbitt's life isn't nearly as heroic as Babbitt thinks it is- as when Lewis tells us that Babbitt

feels his underwear represents the God of Progress. Lewis's greatest gift, perhaps, is his ability to mimic his characters' slang filled speech and parody their ridiculous writings. Babbitt's business letters- "I know you're interested in getting a house, not merely a place where you hang up the old bonnet but a love-nest for the wife and kiddies"- are strings of enthusiastic, incoherent clichés. And there are equally effective parodies of correspondence school advertisements, T. Cholmondeley Frink's dreadful poetry, John Jennison Drew's syrupy sermons, and the mystical nonsense spouted by Opal Emerson Mudge of the American New Thought League.

Despite Lewis's gifts as a parodist, however, many readers have criticized his writing. Even at its most effective, Lewis's satire is seldom subtle. And too often, some readers feel, his strengths become his weaknesses. He skillfully mimics the speech of the 1920s, but dialogue so dependent on the slang of one era can seem out-of-date to later generations. And Lewis is so adept at imitating Babbitt and his friends that he tends to let the imitations go on too long, running the risk of boring the reader just as Babbitt himself bores his audiences with his speeches.

Another flaw, some readers feel, is that Lewis is so eager to give us a broad look at life in Zenith that much of Babbitt- the discussions of the importance of automobiles, for example, or the role of women- reads more like journalism or sociology than like a novel; we get the accurate but superficial acquaintance a newspaper or magazine article might give us, not the depth of understanding a great novel would provide. Still, Lewis's style reflects his familiarity with Babbitt, Zenith, and a part of America that really hadn't been set down in fiction until he came along. And if Lewis's novel occasionally reads like something his main character might have written, that may help us know George Babbitt all the better.

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