

## American Satire

It was during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the American economy slowly changed from its original agricultural character to a new industrial one. The United States was able to rival the industrial power of Britain, under which it had been a colony a little more than a hundred years before by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The social consequences of this change were enormous.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century began with most of the American population living in cities, working in factories or engaged in business. The habits of the independent farm owner and the fresh ideals of a new democracy were now only part of the American history.

The United States demonstrated its economical as well as its military might. Starting in 1914 and ending in 1918 the First World War burnt in Europe. However it was only in 1917 that the United States entered this great war and American soldiers were sent over the Atlantic, their country was battling as together with the European nations. Americans entered the war with the high, and somewhat naive, ambition that it would be *a war to end all wars*, according to President Woodrow Wilson, a war to make the world "*safe for democracy*." The presence of the United States was decisive in the victory and in the peace negotiations which took place afterward, thus affirming itself as a world leader.

### Sinclair Lewis (1855 ~ 1951)



Born in a small town of the American Midwest, an area frequently believed to be the most representative corner of America. He was surrounded by a self-contented middle-class, with material interests and narrow moral values. What he witnessed of America in the twenties tormented him. In numerous satirical novels, he expressed his dissatisfaction by savagely criticizing the shallow and trivial values which he perceived permeated American society, starting with the oppressive small towns to the aimless, aggressive business world. His most aggressive satire on the feeble, materialistic values of this society was portrayed in the novel, *Babbitt*.

*Babbitt* tells the story of a typical American businessman, George F. Babbitt, who lives in a house with decorations and appliances that are exactly like those of his neighbors and colleagues. He is married with children, the family members are hardly aware of each other. Babbitt's trifling values are those of the *status quo*; and he is forcefully opposed to any critic or reformer who would change the order of his world.

Yet Babbitt does not follow the rules of his own society. He is in favor of the sanctity of marriage, but has a mistress; in his time drinking alcoholic beverages is prohibited by law, but he frequently gets drunk; he criticizes workers for demanding higher wages, but gets rich through dishonest business practices. Babbitt is self-contented as well as hypocritical.

Dissatisfaction however broods in Babbitt's heart. He suspects that his individuality has been repressed. He starts to express unorthodox opinions and associ-

The war had demanded enormous industrial and agricultural supplies, thus stimulating production which continued accelerated after the war so that throughout the 1920's the American people enjoyed enormous prosperity. It was the first time in history that a most of the population owned cars, radios, record-players, refrigerators, telephones, and a plethora of other conveniences.

However, this sudden prosperity was not approved of by everybody. A great number of distinguished citizens, particularly writers, regarded it as a corruption of human values and the deterioration of American social ideals. They believed that the industrial and commercial advances of the United States caused a materialistic mentality which ignored higher values. Materialism overtook the values of culture, intelligence. The growth of materialism brought on standardization and conformity which threatened the American character. The mass production and consumption of manufactured goods produced a population of similar persons in their possessions, ambitions, habits, and thoughts. Many of the writers in the 1920's became observers and critics of this phenomenon. The novelist Sinclair Lewis, the first American author to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature was among the most perceptive persons

ate with people who are slightly bohemian. He is criticized for these associations and, angered he becomes even more rebellious.

Threatening society, Babbitt is left by his old friends and colleagues. Babbitt continues his rebellion. But in a moment of crisis he fears to remain isolated from the social tribe to which he belongs. Besides, his rebellion is really only that of a middle-aged man who has not progressed beyond an adolescent way of thinking.

Babbitt decides to return to his boring life by conforming. He readapts to all the accepted thoughts, actions, and habits. He returns to his family, his business, his church, and his club. He goes back to the "paralyzed contentment of middle age."

The following selection shows the opening scenes of the novel, introducing Babbitt and his wife.

## *Babbitt*

There was nothing of the giant in the aspect of the man who was beginning to awaken on the sleeping-porch of a Dutch Colonial house in that residential district of Zenith known as Floral Heights.

His name was George F. Babbitt. He was forty-six years old now, in April, 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling (vocation) of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay.

His large head was pink, his brown hair thin and dry. His face was babyish in slumber, despite his wrinkles and the red spectacle-dents on the slopes of his nose. He was not fat but he was exceedingly well fed; his cheeks were pads, and the unroughened hand which lay helpless upon the blanket was slightly puffy. He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic; and altogether unromantic appeared this sleeping-porch, which looked on one sizable elm, two respectable grassplots, a cement driveway, and a corrugated iron garage. Yet Babbitt was again dreaming of the fairy child, a dream more romantic than scarlet pagodas by a silver sea.

For years the fairy child had come to him. Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth. She waited for him, in the darkness beyond mysterious groves. When at last he could slip away from the crowded house he darted to her. His wife, his clamoring friends, sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him, and they crouched together on a shadowy hillside. She was so slim, so white, so eager! She cried that he was gay and valiant, that she would wait for him, that she would sail

Rumble and bang of the milk-truck.

Babbitt moaned, turned over, struggled back toward his dream. He could see only her face now, beyond misty waters. Someone slammed the basement door. A dog barked in the next yard. As Babbitt sank blissfully into a dim warm tide, the paper-carrier (boy who delivers newspapers) went by whistling, and the rolled-up *News* thumped the front door. As he relaxed, he was pierced by the familiar and irritating rattle of some one starting a Ford. Not till the rising voice of the motor told him that the Ford was moving was he released from the panting tension.

He escaped from reality till the alarm-clock rang, at seven-twenty.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. List the economic characteristics of the United States during the 1920's.
2. What was the origin of the economic prosperity of the United States during the 1920's?
3. State the negative consequences of this prosperity
4. What traits of American society were criticized by Sinclair Lewis?
5. What does the description of Babbitt tell us about his character?
6. What can be revealed about the characters and relationship of Babbitt and his wife from the final dialogue between the two?

...

Myra Babbitt - Mrs. George F. Babbitt - was definitely mature. She had creases from the corners of her mouth to the bottom of her chin, and her plump neck bagged. But the thing that marked her as having passed the line (passed the margin of middle-age) was that she no longer had reticences before her husband, and no longer worried about having reticences. She was in a petticoat now, and corsets which bulged, and unaware of being seen in bulgy corsets. She had become so dully habituated to married life that in her full matronliness she was as sexless as an anemic nun. She was a good woman, a kind woman, a diligent woman, but no one save Tinka, her ten-year-old daughter, was at all interested in her or entirely aware that she was alive.

After a rather thorough discussion of all the domestic and social aspects of towels she apologized to Babbitt for his having an alcoholic headache; and he recovered enough to endure the search for an undershirt which had, he pointed out, malevolently been concealed among his clean pajamas.

'What do you think, Myra? How about it? Shall I wear the brown suit another day? ,

'Well, it looks awfully nice on you.'

'I know, but gosh, it needs pressing.'

'That's so. Perhaps it does.'

'It certainly could stand being pressed, all right.'

'Yes, perhaps it wouldn't hurt it to be pressed.'

'But gee, the coat doesn't need pressing. No sense in having the whole suit pressed, when the coat doesn't need it.'

'That's so.'

'But the pants certainly need it, all right. Look at them - look at those wrinkles - the pants certainly do need pressing.'

'That's so. Oh, Georgie, why couldn't you wear the brown coat with the blue trousers we were wondering what we'd do with them? '

'Good Lord! Did you ever in all my life know me to wear the coat of one suit and the pants of another? What do you think I am? A bankrupt?'



## LITTLE BOXES

The Womenfolk

Little boxes on the hillside,  
    little boxes made of ticky-tacky.  
Little boxes on the hillside,  
    little boxes all the same.

There's a green one, and a pink one,  
    and a blue one, and a yellow one.  
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky,  
    and they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses,  
    all went to the university  
Where they were put in boxes,  
    and they came out all the same.

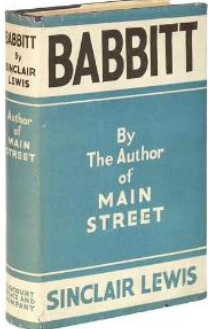
And there's doctors and there's lawyers,  
    and business executives  
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky,  
    and they all look just the same.

And they all play on the golf course,  
    and drink they're martinis dry  
And they all have pretty children,  
    and the children go to school  
And the children go to summer camp,  
    and then to the university  
Where they're all put in boxes,  
    and they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business,  
    and marry and raise a family.  
In boxes made of ticky-tacky,  
    and they all look just the same.



# Babbitt (novel)

| Babbitt   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
|  |                       |
| 1st edition cover   |                       |
| Author(s)   | Sinclair Lewis        |
| Country   | United States         |
| Language  | English               |
| Subject(s)  | American Values       |
| Genre(s)  | Satire                |
| Publisher   | Harcourt, Brace & Co. |
| Publication date  | 1922                  |
| Media type  | Print (Hardcover)     |
| ISBN  | NA                    |
| Preceded by   | Main Street           |
| Followed by   | Arrowsmith            |

*Babbitt*, first published in 1922, is a novel by Sinclair Lewis. Largely a satire of American culture, society, and behavior, it critiques the vacuity of middle-class American life and its pressure on individuals toward conformity. As is indicated in many editions of the book, the working title of *Babbitt* was *Pumphrey*.

## Plot

The book takes its name from the principal character, George F. Babbitt, a middle-aged partner, with his father-in-law, in a real-estate firm. When the story begins, in April 1920, Babbitt is 46 years old. He has a wife, Myra; three children (Verona, 22; Ted, 17; and Tinka, 10); and a well-appointed house in the prosperous Floral Heights neighborhood of “Zenith,” a fictitious city in the equally fictitious state of “Winnemac,” which is adjacent to Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. (*Babbitt* does not mention Winnemac by name, but Lewis's later novel *Arrowsmith* elaborates on its location.) When *Babbitt* was published, newspapers in Cincinnati; Duluth; Kansas City; Milwaukee; and Minneapolis each claimed that their city was the model for Sinclair's Zenith.<sup>[1]</sup> Cincinnati possessed perhaps the strongest argument for such a claim, because Lewis had lived there for a time while researching *Babbitt*.<sup>[2]</sup> Lewis's own correspondence suggests, however, that Zenith is meant to be any Midwestern city with a population between about 200,000 and 300,000.<sup>[3]</sup> Zenith's chief virtue is conformity, and its religion is “boosterism.” Prominent boosters in Zenith include Vergil Gunch, the coal-dealer; Sidney Finkelstein, the ladies'-ready-to-wear buyer for Parcher & Stein's department-store; Professor Joseph K. Pumphrey, owner of the Riteway Business College and “instructor in Public Speaking, Business English, Scenario Writing, and Commercial Law;” and T. Cholmondeley “Chum” Frink, a famous poet of dubious talent.

Babbitt is professionally successful as a realtor. He lives with only the vaguest awareness of the lives and deaths of his contemporaries. Much of his energy in the beginning is spent on climbing the social ladder through booster functions, real estate sales, and making good with various dignitaries. Lewis paints humorous scenes of Babbitt foolishly bartering for liquor (illegal at the time because of Prohibition), hosting dinner parties, and taking clients to view property. All of this is juxtaposed against backdrops of Babbitt's incessant materialism and his growing discontent.

Gradually, Babbitt realizes his dissatisfaction with "The American Dream" and attempts to quell these feelings by going camping with his close friend and old college roommate Paul Reisling in Maine. It has no great effect. After Paul shoots his abrasive, emasculating wife Zilla during an argument, Paul is sent to prison, and Babbitt is devastated by the loss of his best friend and by his contemplations on how equally suffocating and changeless their lives are. In time, he rebels against it all: he jumps into liberal politics with famous socialist litigator Seneca Doane; conducts an extramarital affair with client Tanis Judique; goes on various vacations; and cavorts around Zenith with would-be Bohemians and flappers, friends of Tanis. But each effort ends up disillusioning him to the concept of rebellion, as when Babbitt vacations in Chicago and encounters Paul's alleged mistress. On his excursions with Tanis and "the Bunch," he learns that even they have just as rigid standards for their subculture. And when Virgil Gunch and others discover Babbitt's activities concerning Seneca Doane and Tanis Judique, Virgil tries to convince Babbitt to return to conformity. Babbitt refuses. His former friends then ostracize him, forming the "Good Citizens' League," which boycotts Babbitt's real estate ventures and shuns him publicly from clubs around town.

Babbitt slowly becomes aware that his forays into nonconformity are not only futile but also destructive of the life and the friends he once loved. Yet he continues with them — that is, until Myra suspects Babbitt's affair, though she has no proof or specific knowledge. Unrelated to these events, Myra falls seriously ill. Babbitt, in a near-epiphany, rushes home and relinquishes all rebellion in order to care for his wife, realizing that there is value in marriage even though it not be romanticized or passionate love. In short time, his old friends and colleagues welcome Babbitt back into the fold. The consequence of his disgruntled philosophical wanderings being met with practical events of life, he reverts into dispassionate conformity by the end; however, Babbitt never quite loses hold of the sentimentality, empathy, and hope for a meaningful life which he has developed. In the final scene, all has been righted in his life and he is back on a traditional track. He is awakened in the night to find that Ted and Eunice have not returned from a party. In the morning his wife informs him that the two have been discovered in the house, having been married that night. While an assemblage of friends and family gather to denounce this development, Babbitt excuses himself and Ted to be alone. He offers his approval of the marriage stating that though he does not agree he admires the fact that Ted has chosen to lead his life by his own lights and not that of conformity.

## Themes and structure

The novel is divided roughly into thirds. The first seven chapters follow Babbitt closely through a typical workday, from his restless dreaming before he awakens in the morning to his struggle to fall asleep that night. The middle third of the novel reveals Babbitt in various settings: on vacation, attending a business convention, campaigning for the conservative mayoral candidate, giving dinner parties, giving speeches, attempting (in vain) to climb socially, serving as a member of the Sunday School Advisory Committee of the Chatham Road Presbyterian Church, and so on. This section of the novel has drawn criticism about the thread of the plot becoming lost; critics have argued that Lewis seems to move aimlessly from one set-piece to another.<sup>[4]</sup> The final third of the novel reprises the pattern of Babbitt's midlife crisis: He rebels, is "punished," and "repents (conforms)," but, toward the end of the story, the possibility of redemptive change is implied in the rebelliousness of Babbitt's son.

Though written well before the Great Depression, the New Deal, World War II, and the post-war economic boom, Lewis's comic novel has remained popular into the 21st century. Critics have posed reasons for the book's continuing accessibility to include Lewis's seeming success in identifying and portraying emotions, challenges, and concerns that remain relatively viable over time. By the 1920s, the United States was already concluding the process described

by historian Olivier Zunz as “making America corporate.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Historically significant is the author's use, throughout, of the political word “liberal.” The book was written not long after the project of “new liberalism” began, and the term had not yet congealed in the United States as a definition of a specific brand of ideology belonging to centre left-wing politics. Babbitt’s warped interpretation of the word, and his (and other characters’) equally skewed practical application of it, are examples of one of the humorous literary devices in which Lewis uses satire to illustrate and simplify complex ideas.

## Films

*Babbitt* was filmed in 1924 as a silent film,<sup>[6]</sup> with Willard Louis as George Babbitt, and again in 1934 as a talkie,<sup>[7]</sup> with Guy Kibbee in the title role. Both films were Warner Bros. productions.

## References

- [1] Schorer, M.: *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, page 344. McGraw-Hill, 1961.
- [2] *Ibid.*, page 301.
- [3] *Ibid.*, pages 301–2.
- [4] Schorer, M.: “Afterword,” in 1961 reprint ed., *Babbitt*, New American Library.
- [5] Zunz, O.: *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920*. Univ. of Chicago, 1990.
- [6] *Babbitt* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0014690/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- [7] *Babbitt* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0024851/>) at the Internet Movie Database

## External links

- *Babbitt* (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new?id=LewBabb&tag=public&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&part=0>) by Sinclair Lewis
  - *Babbitt* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1156>) at Project Gutenberg
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