

## Babbitt

Babbitt

If one were to look at the words of any modern dictionary they would find amongst them the word Babbitt. If one were to glance, however at a dictionary from the early part of this century, the word Babbitt would not appear. The word Babbitt means "a self satisfied person who conforms readily to conventional middle class ideas and ideals, especially of business and material success" (Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 106). The word Babbitt, and its subsequent meaning, comes from the 1922 novel by Sinclair Lewis, "Babbitt". It is a novel which shows a cross section of American middle class life through the eyes of the ultimate conformist, George F. Babbitt. By turning Babbitt's name into a noun "a name has been given to that which people recognize as true to their experience of life, but which they hadn't realized in any palpable way before" ( Love 12). Just analyzing Babbitt himself however, is not enough if one wishes to truly recognize the beauty of Lewis's work. One must delve deeper, under the surface, beyond Babbitt's personality, to uncover the methods, and the reasons behind Lewis's "madness". What must be explored in Lewis's work is, why was Babbitt created the way he was, and why has he become such a paradigm of American middle class life? To truthfully, and accurately answer these questions one must know who George F. Babbitt was, who Sinclair Lewis was, the historical context of the 1920's, and most importantly what Lewis wanted out of Babbitt.

George F. Babbitt is a man without an identity. His "individuality" has been imposed on him by a world of other things. "Just as he was an Elk, a Booster, and a member of the chamber of commerce, just as the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined his every religious belief and the Senators who controlled the Republican party decided in little smoky rooms in Washington what he should think about disarmament, tariff, and Germany, so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality" ( 30 ).

Babbitt is a man who does everything based on how it will look to others. He desperately wants his son, Theodore Roosevelt Babbitt, to attend a real university, even though he himself confesses to have learned nothing useful at college. Babbitt wants his son to go to college for all the wrong reasons, he wants to be given the prestige of having a son in a fine State institution (Love 53). He will do anything for his son, as long as he is given proper credit (219). Babbitt lends much of his time and energy to the Sunday school at the Church. This, however does not come about because of Babbitt's altruistic nature, rather he wants the "praise and good repute" that comes with being

involved in the church (219).

Babbitt's chief characteristics are "shouting, backslapping, and self conscious masculinity" (Light 77). Babbitt feels that he must engage in such childish maneuvers so that everyone is assured of his "pep, punch, vision, red-blooded Americanism" (Schorer 327). Babbitt's main goal is power, anyway he can get to it. He does not want to be the average middle class man, he wants to be like the bank president (and his close friend) William Washington Eathorne. He wants to be "deliciously, rigorously, coldly powerful" (218).

For Babbitt, business represents the sole purpose of living. "At his middle class level, business not only thrives but it is the chief cultural characteristic" (Schorer 327). Babbitt sees his life as the new wave of America. To Babbitt the middle class businessman is taking over the country. He sees himself as something of a romantic hero (Light 74). "The romantic hero was no longer the knight, the wandering poet, the cowpuncher, the aviator, nor the brave young district attorney, but rather the great sales manager" (143).

Babbitt, however is neither a hero, nor a romanticist. He lives in a closed world, like his own little hell (Schorer 333). His house is everything a house in the middle class Floral Heights should be. "The bedroom a modest and pleasant color scheme, after one of the best standard designs of the decorator who did the interiors for most of the speculative builders' houses in Zenith [Babbitt's beloved town]...there was a dressing table of solid silver and a standard bedside book with colored illustrations-what particular book it was cannot be ascertained, since no one had ever opened it. The Mattresses were triumphant modern mattresses which had cost a great deal of money. It was a masterpiece among bedrooms, right out of the Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes. Only it had nothing to do with the Babbitt's nor with any one else. If people had ever lived and loved here, read thrillers at midnight, and lain in beautiful indolence on a Sunday morning there were no signs of it. It had the air of being a very good room in a very good hotel. Every second house in Floral Heights had a bedroom precisely like this one" (16). Babbitt is a simple conformist.

Platitudes necessarily come along with a conformist, and Babbitt's choice of words is no exception. "Clichés are the only words a Babbitt type dares to use to express hi/her emotions. Their misunderstanding of emotion is what makes them comic, grotesque and dangerous" (Light 78). He can not even deal with his daughter's wish to do social philanthropic work, without spitting out cliché after cliché from the "wedges of socialism", to "Now look you here!" (Light 17).

Babbitt is always looking for the weaknesses of his

friends (Love 20). This comes from his need to be the best of his bunch, before he moves on to a more sophisticated crowd. Babbitt actually evaluates people "by tabulating their possessions" (Light 76). When Babbitt is able to mix with the upper class it becomes his obsession, and as he retells the stories of his excursions, his relationships with the rich become more profound. For example, when Sir Gerald Doake of Manchester was in Zenith he scarcely noticed Babbitt's existence. On a lonely business trip to Chicago, however Doake opted to break the monotony, and he got drunk with Babbitt, one could call it a one night stand. To Babbitt, however a life long friendship had begun. Babbitt pictured himself, by chance, bumping into Mcelvey, his college pal who had moved up in the world. Babbitt fantasized of telling Mcelvey. " I had a fair time in Chicago, ran around with Sir Gerald Doake a lot...Jerry's an old friend of mine-the wife and I are thinking of running over to England to stay with Jerry in his castle, next year" (248). Babbitt lived for such encounters where he could show up his friends, especially prosperous ones like Mcelvey.

"Babbitt was virtuous the way society said he should be" (Love 48). "He advocated, though he did not practice, the prohibition of alcohol; he praised, though he did not obey, the laws against motor speeding; he paid his debts; he contributed to the church, the Red Cross, and the YMCA; he followed the custom of his clan and cheated only as it was sanctified by precedent" (41). Along these same lines Babbitt was not unreasonably honest. In one section he gives a rambling speech on the virtues of honesty, throwing out cliché after cliché. Yet in the next breath he swindles a poor shopkeeper out of thousands of dollars. His moral code is derived from The Puritan business ethic "which encourages pragmatic decisions which then fatigue the conscience" (Light 82).

Along with the tensions Babbitt feels to make large sums of money, he also feels the tensions of social climbing. Babbitt along with his other metropolitan middle class friends would like to enter the social class of the rich (Light 82). Babbitt also feels marital tensions as he desires many other women, yet he could never " hazard respectability" by cheating on Myra. This prospective loss of respectability is the sole reason for his continued fidelity to his wife (Light 82). This is a perfect example of how Babbitt's morals work. He does not decide for himself whether things are right, or wrong, rather he acts based on what society expects from him.

Babbitt speaks of red blooded family oriented America. A place where the "ideal citizen is busier than a bird dog at his profession...then he lights up a good cigar and shoots out home to be with the family... Then he goes happily to bed his conscience clear, having contributed his mite to the prosperity of the city and to his own bank account" (181-2). "Yet in reality Babbitt sleeps fitfully and dreams

of escape and rebellion" (Light 83). Babbitt has never done anything to make himself, rather than society, happy (Schorer 329). " He is prosperous but worried wanting passionately to seize something more than motor cars and a house before it is too late" (Light 77). Babbitt can not foster a true disposition because he does not know what individuality is. He dreams always of a fairy child, "a life with a little whirl of romance and peril" (Love 48). The fairy child is never described however, because he does not know what this whirl of romance, and peril mean. The fairy child is not necessarily a woman, although

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originally assumes that it is.

Babbitt's discontentment with life shows us his interior motivations and desires. A simple glance at Babbitt's morning routine shows just how fast his frustration is mounting. His morning begins with his "irritability about the wet towels in the bathroom, and the little chunks of toast, and the socialist threat and his rebellious and bickering children. Soon so early in the day we hear the great burst of fatigue: Oh lord sometimes I'd like to quit the hole game. And the office worry and detail just as bad. And I act so damn cranky and I don't mean to, but I get so darned tired (Light 81). Conformity can be very tiring. Even through the quagmire of conformity, which

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represents there is a surprise. Babbitt is able to break away from the standardized being, just a little, when the time comes (Light 77).

"What Babbitt feels and thinks is what it is currently proper to feel and think. Only once during the two years that we have him under view, does he venture upon an idea that is even remotely original - and that time [Babbitt's attempt to liberalize himself] the heresy almost ruins him. The lesson you may be sure is not lost upon him. No thought will ever get a lodgment in his mind, even in the wildest deliriums following bootleg gin, that will offer offense to the pruderies of Vergil Gunch, President of the Boosters club, or to those of old Mr. Eathorne, president of the First State Bank...Babbitt has been rolled through the mill. He emerges the very model and pattern of a forward looking, right thinking Americano" (Mencken 22). The evils of society, with all of its peer pressures did not allow Babbitt to change his ways. Babbitt's fate seems to say that under present conditions nothing will ever be achieved.

Babbitt did chase the fairy child. He tried to have a stable loving relationship with another woman and, on the other extreme, he went wild and slept with as many women as he possibly could. However, "it is Babbitt's fate itself, an ironic recognition that all his yearnings and aspirations and attempts to escape have gone for naught", which shows us who Babbitt really became. Babbitt's fate is

"a conclusion in which nothing is concluded" (Love 50). At the end of the novel the reality of his wife's appendectomy breaks his fantasy, but not all is lost. Babbitt knows that he will always be a conformist, but he now knows that he has a chance to break the cycle with his son. He can give his son a chance to catch the "fairy child". It seems as if the anti - Babbitt is speaking in the last lines of the novel when he says to his son " Take your factory job if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I've been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours!" (326). Babbitt is so wonderfully alive that you can't keep your eyes off him (Love 18).

To try and understand how, and why Sinclair Lewis created a character the likes of Babbitt one must understand Sinclair Lewis himself, with all his intricacies. Lewis lived in the city but yearned for the simplicities of the countryside, much like Babbitt (Love 11). Lewis was always struggling for the natural rights of man to be bestowed on everyone, a rarity in the big city. In some of Lewis's previous works, before Babbitt, he championed these rights before the American public. For example in *The Job* Lewis portrayed a female character, Una Goldin, trying to find an egalitarian profession. In *Main Street* Carol Kennicott spends her life searching for the rights which she feels that she, as a human being, deserves (Love 8). There are certain unalienable rights, which apply to all people, which Lewis felt society was not granting.

Lewis was a man of many passions. Among them "were humor, and craftsmanship, but above all a poetic passion for his country" ( West 23). Lewis was a man who as a popular satirist defied his times. "While our greatest comic writer, Mark Twain, was capable of withering satire, he was never loved for it in his own times, nor in ours for that matter. Much of Twain's most devastating satire was either suppressed by him or ignored by his readers. It is as a humorist that he is best remembered. Similarly great satirists like H.L. Menckle's satire were deemed to erudite by society. Lewis on the other hand gave Americans vinegar and made them like it" (Love 14). The greatness of Lewis's feat is admired by many as a breakthrough in American literature, as well as something of an enigma. " Lewis is a paradox. He gets away with telling America their faults even though Americans are self conscious of all criticism. Everything is right because we did it. Lewis tears of the hoods of our Ku-Klux-Klan to show the cruel faces beneath the masks. Yet he is able to flourish" (Lovett 32). Lewis holds his audiences by the importance of his message rather than humor. Lewis in fact writes his satire out of his disappointment in his beloved country. He is writing in denunciation of ugliness, in simple black and white (West 23).

A direct result of Lewis' disappointment with his country was his inability to commit himself or his characters to the new America. Lewis was influenced by the nineteenth

century's progressive heritage of E. Bellamy in Looking Backwards. "Lewis and his characters project the hope that America could subsume the city and machine civilization into the traditional democratic framework, without sacrificing pastoral values" (Love 10-11).

Sinclair Lewis was a man on a mission. Previous to

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he had written satires on everything from the organization of God, or the Church, to the medical field. By 1921, however, Lewis was sensitive of criticism that he was repeating himself, so he launched himself on a brand new endeavor (Light 77). Lewis delved into himself to create a masterpiece for the ages.

Lewis's nature was to write satire on American values, and the accepted ideas of his era. Although there may be some overlap to contemporary times, Lewis lived and was writing about the sensational decade of the twenties. The generation in which Lewis was writing, however, was not his. Lewis was somehow able to achieve fame in a generation which wanted to ignore him, as well as his contemporaries. This era, of drastic change, favored younger writers like Hemmingway, Fitzgerald and Don Passos (Love 9). Lewis survival, forgetting his success, is an enigma in itself.

Lewis was adamant that his novel be a microcosm of American middle class life. He therefore did extensive research for Babbitt. "From his notes he was able to put into the book a mass of accurate detail about clothes, houses, furnishings, cars, clubs, real estate enterprises, and conventions. Therefore we have great confidence in Babbitt typicality in respect to things and opinions: his toothpaste and bath towels, his gray suit, and his spectacles, the contents of his pockets, his booster club button; and his indecisive and inconclusive discussion with his wife Myra about the choice of suits, his concerns for his stomach, the opinions he gleans from his newspaper's editorials, his scorn for socialist agitators, and his faith in the strength of the towers of Zenith - all of these observations we are delighted to recognize as true" (Light 80). Through this extensive research Lewis found a shallow materialistic world in a state of hysteria, which feared the reds, and a workers revolution, as if it was the plague (Love 7).

The fact that Babbitt begins in 1920 is of extreme significance. 1920 is a satiric prelude to a decade of dizzying and mindless economic expansion and obsession. "Babbitt is the epic of our boom years and it remains today as the major documentation in literature of American business culture" (Schorer 327).

When Lewis delved into the society, of the 'boom' years, he uncovered terrible intolerance of anyone who looked, acted, or thought differently. The infamous case of the

Italians, Sacco and Vanzetti is a perfect example of this sheer intolerance. "They were killed for having unpopular opinions. It was a systematic exploitation of alien blood, their imperfect knowledge of English, their unpopular social views, and their opposition to the war, is what led to their murders" (Love 4). Furthermore the now infamous Ku - Klux - Klan was started at this time with their goal being "native, white, Protestant, supremacy" (Love 5).

Along with the intolerance, of the twenties, Lewis also found a great deal of hypocrisy. Nothing embodies this better than peoples attitudes towards prohibition. Prohibition represented a hypocrisy and subterfuge which manifested the decade (Love 6). Babbitt himself applauds the amendment, but then goes out drinking as if he is above it. Lewis also felt that people were very hypocritical in their political ideas, and he illustrated this characteristics within Babbitt. Babbitt speaks of the United States' neutrality with contradictions only a man with many sets of engraved ideas could utter when he says "We got no business interfering with the Irish, or any other foreign government; still it's beyond me why we don't just step in there [Russia] and kick those Bolshevik cusses out" (Light 80). It is clear that the many contradictions which represented the twenties clearly annoyed the more mature Lewis.

The Twenties also represented the beginning of a more open society, like the one we have today. Through the invention of the radio "people could now hear everything that was going on", all over the world (Love 5). By the time Theodore Dreiser finished his work, *An American Tragedy*, sex was an open and respectable subject. The way was being paved to sexual honesty (Love 7). Along these same lines the twenties represented the gradual ascension of women's hemlines. Women could now vote, and there were many new jobs opening up for women (Love 6). The old restraints of the earlier decades were coming off. You could no longer "keep 'em down on the farm", so people like George F. Babbitt moved to the big cities (Love 41-2). Furthermore people were no longer as committed to the church. Rather the church was just used for social purposes, it had become known as the institution of God " (Love 7). Babbitt, who was Mr. 1920 used the church only as a vehicle to meet powerful people, thus personifying societies actions.

Even in light of all the changes "middle class America still, as Babbitt was to show, was hostage to a series of clannish beliefs powerful enough to determine their pleasures as well as their responsibilities" (Love 41). Lewis was appearing on the scene right when the emperors new clothes were finally disappearing (Love 42). Society was rapidly changing right before Lewis's horrified eyes.

Lewis was a man who cared deeply for the world. He was disappointed, however, as to the turn the world was taking. He therefore created *Babbitt*, which became a paradigm for

many generations to come. What however did Lewis want to do, in making Babbitt, and what did he want to accomplish? Sinclair Lewis wanted to "debamboozle American society", he wanted to portray the confusion in which Americans ran their lives (Lovett 34). Lewis desired to accurately portray American middle class life. He coveted delving into the newly found 'culture' of business. However "Lewis did not merely want to show the typical tycoon, synonymous with corruption. The tycoon was fiction. The powerful manufacturer, the vast speculator, the fabulous financier, the monarch of enormous enterprises, was just a myth. Lewis wanted to show the world of the little businessman, and more particularly the middleman. The middleman who abolishes his own humanity, in the culture of business" (Schorer 330-1). Lewis was looking for an objective representation of contemporary social humanity, rather than the anti - novels of today where only the book, itself, is real. (Love 27).

Lewis related in a letter to a friend that " he wanted to make Babbitt big in his realness, in his relation to all of us, not in the least exceptional, yet dramatic, passionate struggling" (Light 75). Babbitt was supposed to represent a mold, or a type of mechanical American citizen. Lewis's inclination was to bring a revelation to the American people. Lewis wished to show that "conformity is the great price that our predominantly commercial culture exacts of American life" (Schorer 330). Lewis related in a 1920 letter to Professor Carl van Doren " I want it to be the story of an average business man, a tired business man, not in a gopher prairie but in a city of three or four hundred thousand people (equally Minneapolis or Seattle or Rochester or Atlanta) with its enormous industrial power, its little theater, and lively country club and its overwhelming menacing heresy hunt, its narrowed eyed (and damned capable) crushing of anything threatening its commercial oligarchy. I hope to keep it as far as may be from all propoganda; I hope to make that man live - that man we have heard in the Pullman smoker, ponderously lecturing oil stock, the beauty of Lake Louise, the impertinence of George the porter, and the excellence of his 1918 Buick which is so much better a model than the 1919" (Love 17). Having once seen this man Lewis wanted to develop him, so that he would not seem just idiosyncratic but, rather a conforming individual who retains some capabilities of his own (Light 80).

After pointing out the complete conformity the T.B.M. (tired business man) exhibits, Lewis wished to show its damaging consequences. " Lewis has discovered that a Babbitt can suffer the tensions of conformity, though conformity was not supposed to bring tension. Discontent with the work routine, Babbitt would like for once the flair of romantic love, the satisfaction of having left a mark on the city, and a let up on his constant warring with competitors. So tired is Babbitt, that deciding what suit to wear is an exhausting problem with many subtleties"

(Light 81).

All American's feel that they are chasing the, somewhat elusive, American dream. Lewis wanted to exploit the fine line between the American dream and reality (Love 43). That the streets are paved with gold is not the question. The dispute is over the definition of gold. Babbitt thinks that he has achieved the American dream, this is why he is so bewildered at his discontentment with his life.

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feels that he's "done everything he ought to do", as he bemoans to his friend "I supported my family, and got a good house and a six cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven't any vices specially except smoking...I belong to the church, and play enough golf to keep in trim, and I only associate with good decent fellows. And yet even so I don't know if I am entirely satisfied. Babbitt has lived according to his dreams inspiration, but they are dreams which leave the dreamer restless and betrayed" (Light 81).

Babbitt represents America's disclosure to the world that the US is "crass, materialistic, complacent and chauvinistic". Lewis banked on the fact that furtively, society could not tolerate what it had made itself (Schorer 331). Lewis wanted to tell America the truth. He had the guts to tell America "to which stupid, and finally devastating, social damnation, we were drifting to" (Schorer 334). This type of satire about middle class subjects, for middle class readers never took off in America (Love 39). Lewis made it happen, why? Lewis wanted to use the subliminal to its full extent. Lewis knew that by creating a humorous, realistic character, like Babbitt, people would subconsciously identify themselves with Babbitt. As a result people would hopefully change so as to avoid Babbitt's frustrating fate. This was Lewis's goal.

The type of satire which Lewis wanted to utilize was "satire which operates in the considerable and lamentable gulf between how things are and how they should be. What drove Lewis's pen was the galling realization of how human subjects had fallen away from their rightful responsibilities and potentialities" (Love 43). Lewis possessed a discriminating moral sense, or a perception of a momentous ideal. To middle class America this satire was essential. Lewis felt it crucial that their beliefs no longer be funneled to them by the demands of society (Love 41). Lewis's exploited this idea to the fullest in Babbitt. "Lewis's tendency to move quickly from one topic to another, covering the entire range of middle class business life in America, from its ugliest aspect - its racial, ethnic, and religious bigotry, and its cutthroat commercial practices - to its essentially harmless, merely silly pursuits of diversion and pleasure. The effect is to suggest a world not so much of business as of busyness - a crowded scene in frantic motion, yet without any real

movement toward any specific and worthwhile goals" (Love 44).

Lewis wanted to capture the hypocrisy of society. In "Huckleberry Finn", Twain wanted to show Miss Watson's hypocrisy in owning a slave and at the same time being a Christian. Lewis tried to point out similar hypocrisies, where society is to blame for the inconsistencies. Take for example Babbitt's friend Chum Frink. "He enjoys liquor then cheers prohibition" (42). Lewis wanted to use satire by self exposure. This is accomplished "when characters, like Frink, give their ignorance away" for all to see (Light 78). Lewis was trying to capture the sad realities of life. Lewis wanted to trap his immolation into painting his own portrait of reality; "and when the last garment, which covers his nakedness is stripped off, the flashlight explodes and the camera has caught the victim in every feature of his mean, and vacuous reality" (Love 15).

Lewis wanted Babbitt to come alive. He wanted to portray the world of the little businessman, who conforms to society in every which way. Main Street was Lewis's first attempt at accomplishing this, but by writing Babbitt he declared himself a failure. "In Main Street heat and exhilaration were foreign to the hour, Babbitt, however, has that something real, which makes it a work of art; and it is signed in every line with the unique personality", and more importantly the desires, "of the writer" (West 23). Lewis wanted Babbitt to come alive, and to face life the way the conformists of society beseeched him to. Lewis wanted Babbitt to be the typical guy next door.

Babbitt has become "the epic of our boom years, and it remains today as the major documentation, in literature, of American business culture" (Schorer 327). It seems as if Lewis succeeded in his goal, he had made the world aware of its monumental problems. Lewis was the first American writer to receive the Nobel prize in literature (1930), which he received for his efforts in Babbitt (Love 16). Upton Sinclair, a major figure in literature, crowned Babbitt as "the best novel of all time" (Love 16). "Babbitt became part of our lives which before we had not recognized" (Love 18). Along with Babbitt's pomp and pep he was also, very humanly, pathetic. How could it have possibly failed? Commercially it did not. Babbitt became the greatest international success in publishing history (Schorer 331). It seems as if Lewis got exactly what he wanted. His book was widely read and people accepted its trenchant remarks as truths. Lewis had in fact, hoping to overcome the limitations of caricature, consciously made Babbitt seem real, "yet before the novel was finished, Lewis had to concede something to its inevitable tone, and was looking towards his next book where he would try again" (Light 77). Why was this the case? Hadn't Lewis succeeded? The answer is the basis for the book itself. Lewis's love for the world was so great that there was always something he could ask society to work on, so therefore his work was

never complete. He died, tragically, without ever realizing that in a perfect world there is no place for people.

Ralph Waldo Emerson in "Self Reliance" had some of the same ideas as Sinclair Lewis. To Emerson the objection to conforming is that "it loses your time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead bible society, vote with a great party either for the government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers - under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the precise man [that] you are" (Emerson 411). This was Lewis's Babbitt, as if Lewis wrote it himself. Lewis was against all that was standardized, he felt that it abolished humanity. The little white house with a blue door, and a walk in closet was Lewis's nemesis. "He was the first to show us into what social damnation we were drifting. The question is - have we landed!?" (Schorer 334).

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