

FROM SOCIETY TO BABBITTRY:
LEWIS' DEBT TO EDITH WHARTON

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At first glance no two novels of manners could seem more alien to one another than Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt and Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence. What could be further removed from the Fifth Avenue of Newland Archer than the Zenith of George Babbitt? Babbitt sticks in the popular mind as the archetypal Midwestern booster, while Newland Archer--for those who know about him--remains the epitome of Eastern effete-ness. The chasm between their wives--Myra Babbitt and May Welland--seems equally immense: the Babbitt living room and the Beaufort ballroom exist in divided and distinguished worlds. Moreover Lewis' novel is a frontal assault, while Edith Wharton's is an infiltration in depth: the one smashes, while the other probes. Taken together the two works might illustrate the difference between the "redskin" and the "paleface" in American fiction. Or from another perspective, they might be thought to represent two Americas: that of an East tinged with European awareness and that of a Midwest blessed by native innocence.

Despite these apparent contrasts, I believe that The Age of Innocence was actually the master blue print for Babbitt. Regionalists, like Allen Tate, may speak of the "all destroying abstraction America" and cry for a "return to the provinces," yet particular time and place mean little in the search for universality. Perhaps the anonymous reviewer for the Times Literary Supplement came very close to the truth when he wrote in 1922 that Babbitt "though intensely American in its setting and the language in which it is told, is a drama of something universal--the tyranny of conventions."¹ For this "drama of something universal" Lewis drew heavily on the experience of literature rather than life. His very success as an observer of the social scene, as the ingenious creator of the cartoon-like Babbitt, has ironically obscured Lewis' obligations to other writers. He was himself either evasive or scornful on the subject of literary influences. He once described Carl Van Doren's essay linking him with Edgar Lee Masters as a "rotten article."² Grace Hegger Lewis, his first wife, undermined Stuart Sherman's comparison of Main Street and Madame Bovary with the declaration that "I don't think Hal had read Bovary until after Main Street was finished";³ though more recently this statement has been significantly amended to: "neither did he read the history of Emma Bovary until he was half-way through the final draft of Main Street."⁴ To Mr. Allen Austin, Lewis once suggested Dickens, Wells, and Thoreau as his chief inspirers,⁵ yet like most authors Lewis may not have been his own best critic. Behind the mask of the ingenuous observer, unfettered by literary obligations, was the reality of a shrewd sensibility. The folkways of Babbitt's Zenith are the playback from Lewis' eyes and ears, but the bitter comedy springs from the

intelligence that could appreciate the achievement of Edith Wharton in The Age of Innocence.

The facts are that Lewis knew Edith Wharton quite well, that he admired her as a person and as an artist, that he dedicated Babbitt to her (with her approval),⁶ and that the plan of Babbitt parallels the structure of The Age of Innocence. Indeed at times Babbitt almost seems a parody of Mrs. Wharton's novel about the Gilded Age, a clue that the famous writer and friend of Edith Wharton remained inwardly the lonely and rejected Yale undergraduate from Sauk Centre. What the grand dame of American letters represented was something Lewis could both admire and scorn, just as George Follansbee Babbitt both envies and detests the world of the Blake McKelveys. In Babbitt, Lewis quietly and skillfully suggests not the differences between the older and newer America so much as the likenesses. George Babbitt, Zenith realtor, and Newland Archer, Fifth Avenue socialite, both lead the lives of quiet desperation which make them uniquely human, rather than blatantly Midwestern or coyly Eastern.

The loudest signal to Lewis' intention remains of course his dedication of the novel to Edith Wharton, though his precise reason for so doing has never been clear. Possibly he made this decision during a luncheon at Edith Wharton's home in Paris.⁷ Lewis' admiration for this remarkable woman was reciprocated when, in writing to thank him for his gesture, she remarked on Babbitt's "extraordinary vitality and vivacity."⁸ The Yale man from Sauk Centre and the artist from Newport after all shared a common disability: both were afflicted with the double vision which made their respective worlds seem alternately attractive and repulsive. Still Lewis' exact feelings toward Mrs. Wharton remain obscure. Mrs. Grace Lewis wrote recently: "I do not remember why Hal chose to dedicate Babbitt to Mrs. Wharton."⁹ And Mrs. Wharton's autobiography, A Backward Glance, ignores Sinclair Lewis (though of course she devoted considerable attention to Henry James).¹⁰ A Wharton Scholar, Mr. Blake Nevius, has touched generally on the link between the two writers:

Lewis has allied himself however casually, and with whatever failures of insight, with the tradition in which she worked--the novel of manners--so that they looked to the same kind of evidence for their understanding of the human comedy.¹¹

On the other hand, Mr. Nevius also believes that Mrs. Wharton "seems to have admired Lewis above any American novelist of the twenties."¹²

Whatever faults may be attributed to Lewis as a novelist, he can hardly be said to exhibit a "failure of insight" in Babbitt. He was not so outraged by the selection of The Age of Innocence over Main Street for the 1921 Pulitzer Prize¹³ that he could not turn setback into triumph by borrowing from the technique of his rival. One reason Babbitt survives as literature is precisely that Lewis painstakingly rather than "casually" imitated the patterns of The Age of Innocence. The evidence lies in the novels themselves.

The Fifth Avenue and Zenith settings cannot obscure the underlying bond in theme, characters, and plot of *Babbitt* and *The Age of Innocence*. An identical theme--the impact of a social class on an individual--is at the core of each novel. The protagonists, Newland Archer and George Babbitt, find themselves torn between familial obligation and personal inclination. Newland must choose between a conventional wife, May Welland Archer, and the exotic Countess Ellen Olenska. Babbitt's choices lie between the "bulgy" Myra Babbitt and an illusory "fairy child more romantic than scarlet pagodas by the silver sea" (p. 2).¹⁴ The "fairy child" is embodied, generally imperfectly, in Loretta Swanson (p. 277), Eunice Littlefield (p. 226), Tanis Judique (p. 280), Ida Putiak (p. 288), and even Miss McGoun (p. 273). All these women are to Babbitt what Ellen Olenska is to Newland Archer, a "complete vision of all that he had missed" (p. 350).

Correspondences between characters in the two stories are simple to detect. May Welland Archer and Myra Babbitt, like the Colonel's lady and the sergeant's wife, are sisters under the skin. Each is the high-priestess of group values, ever alert to possible assaults on the sanctity of the home. May, a woman of "Diana-like aloofness" (p. 211), shares the distaste of her class for "unpleasantness," restrains her husband with the rein of "family," and nudges his conscience with appeals to "duty." Myra Babbitt, like one of "the underwalks of persons" in a Caroline drama, presides over a lesser but comically analogous world of "pansy-embroidered" face towels, "Standardized Citizens," and bungled dinner parties. May and Myra (could the name "Myra" be a kind of anagram on "May"?) share a Machiavellian flair for controlling husbands. When Newland Archer lies to May about the real purpose (to see Ellen Olenska) of a trip to Washington, the reader is confronted with the following colloquy, clearly indicating the triumph of wifely shrewdness over masculine ineptness: "'Look here,' he said suddenly, 'I may have to go to Washington for a few days--soon; next week perhaps.' . . . 'On business?' she asked, in a tone which implied there could be no other conceivable reason. . . . 'On business, naturally. There's a patent case coming up before the Supreme Court'. . . . 'The change will do you good,' she said simply, when he had finished; 'and you must be sure to go and see Ellen,' she added, looking him straight in the eyes with her cloudless smile, and speaking in the tone she might have employed in urging him not to neglect some irksome family duty" (pp. 268-69). George Babbitt in search of the "fairy child" finds Myra a less adroit but ultimately successful opponent: "His wife was up when he came in. 'Did you have a good time?' she sniffed. 'I did not. I had a rotten time! Anything else I got to explain?'. . . He went up to bed well pleased, not only the master but the martyr of the household. For a distasteful moment after he had lain down he wondered if he had been altogether just. 'Ought to be ashamed, bullying her. Maybe there is her side to things'" (pp. 369-70). Myra and May have heavier defensive weapons in the arsenal than mere words when the need a-

rises. When Archer has strayed too far in the direction of Ellen Olenska and when Babbitt has drifted toward the arms of Tanis Judique, pregnancy or illness can strike with frightening speed. May Welland accomplishes the capture of Newland and the doom of Ellen Olenska with the announcement--"her blue eyes wet with victory" (p. 346)--that she is an expectant mother. Myra conveniently contracts acute appendicitis (p. 385) in time to save George Babbitt for boosterism. Neither wife need stoop to sex as a snare for husband entrapment: to kiss May, we are told, is "like drinking at a cold spring with the sun on it" (p. 141); Myra, less tastefully, is "as sexless as an anemic nun" (p. 7).

Desperate, Newland and Babbitt turn to the demi-monde for spiritual salvation. Newland's Ned Winsett deploras his wealthy friend's political inactivity (p. 123), while his M. Riviere fans the embers of intellectualism (p. 201). Babbitt's Seneca Doane reawakens his undergraduate radicalism (p. 303), while his Paul Reisling arouses vague spiritual aspirations, somehow linked with nature study (p. 66). Again the wives are equal to the occasion. May's epithet, "clever" (p. 203), directed against intellectual but unfashionable people, is sufficient to cool Newland's interests. Myra's less elegant, "strange people," (p. 369), shatters Babbitt's image of himself as a "veteran liberal."

Both writers employ dinner parties for visiting nobility to contrast the social mores of old and new world, a theme borrowed from Henry James. In the dining room of the formidable Van der Luydens, Mrs. Wharton's Duke of Saint Austrey wears "shaggy and baggy" evening clothes with "an air of their being home-spun" (p. 60). He speaks in such low tones "that despite the frequent silences of expectation about the table, his remarks were lost to all but his neighbors" (p. 60). At the Charles McKelveys, Mr. Lewis' Sir Gerald Doak, "of aspect sad and doubtful" (p. 199), suffers—"twixt. . . original and Oriental decorations" (p. 197)--through the Zenith equivalent to a ritual New York dinner party. Fittingly the Duke of Saint Austrey finds the salon of the outcaste shoe-polish heiress, Mrs. Struthers, charming (p. 76); while Sir Gerald Doak--"dressed in a tweed suit and reluctant orange tie" (p. 244)--revels in an evening at the Grantham watching Bill Hart "in a bandit picture" with George F. Babbitt, realtor. Other dinner parties also function as narrative fulcrums: if the Van der Luydens (who in their remoteness resemble the William Eathornes (p. 213) of *Babbitt*) initiate Ellen Olenska's social acceptance with a dinner party, then May Archer's party for Ellen becomes an excommunicatory rite, "a tribal rally around a kinsman about to be eliminated from the tribe" (p. 337). The Babbitt dinner parties are also of interest to the social anthropologist. They move through the "canonical rite" (p. 112) of mixing and drinking cocktails when entertaining "the best fellows in the world," to "Lynnhaven oysters and champagne" for the Charles McKelveys (who in their glossiness compare with the Julius Beauforts in The Age of Innocence). The failure of the party for the McKel-

veys reduces Myra to weeping "slowly, without hope" (p. 197), though she and her husband fail to sense their own ironic role as McKelvey-figures at a subsequent dinner party given them by the Ed Overbrooks (p. 201).

At the close of each story, the sons of the protagonists, Dallas and Ted, achieve what was denied to the fathers. Dallas plans a marriage with Fanny Beaufort (p. 353), a younger version of Ellen Olenska and member of a family once disgraced in a financial scandal. Ted Babbitt marries Eunice Littlefield (p. 226), a girl who closely fits the father's dream of a "fairy child." The marriages represent more than the triumph of personal inclination over the totem of familial obligation. They capture in miniature the protean character of American social patterns, which change as rapidly as the architectural face of the cities themselves. The easy assumption is that Dallas and Ted somehow emerge as nobler men than their bewildered fathers. This view overlooks the sentimental but nevertheless valid emphasis on the decency in Newland and George, a trait which is at once a defeat and a triumph. It robs them of strength but colors them with humanity. The Age of Innocence and Babbitt in this sense betray a debt to the Jamesian preoccupation with the ambiguity of moral choice. Babbitt, looking back over his life, might well agree with Newland Archer's conclusion "that the worst of doing one's duty was that it apparently unfitted one for doing anything else" (p. 354). Yet, given the kind of man he was, neither Newland nor George could ever really choose self-indulgence over self-sacrifice. May and Myra saw to that.

Acknowledgement of Babbitt's debt to literary experience in no way detracts from Lewis' astuteness as an observer of the social scene. Rather it serves to remind us that the novelist captures reality through a process somewhat more complicated than merely holding a mirror, or even a tape recorder, up to nature. The materials of human experience remain raw and unshaped without the controlling hand of some preconceived narrative design. Sinclair Lewis and the social scene, alone, add up at best to an essay in manners, at worst to a case history. Sinclair Lewis, the social scene, plus the precedent of a novel of manners like The Age of Innocence make possible a fictional account featuring a human being caught up in a timeless conflict. The human conflict will engage a reading audience long after the particular foibles and follies of the social scene have entered the dust bin of the antiquarian. On some such ground as this men gradually begin to distinguish between what is literature and what is social document. Lewis' commitment to the school of Wharton unquestionably added a dimension to Babbitt, one that may guarantee the survival of its forlorn hero long after the bulk of his creator's works have been forgotten.

Footnotes:

- ¹ TLS (Oct. 12, 1922), 647.
- ² From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-30, ed. Harrison Smith (New York, 1952), 86.
- ³ Ibid., 108.
- ⁴ Grace Hegger Lewis, With Love From Gracie: Sinclair Lewis (New York, 1955), 190.
- ⁵ Allen Austin, "An Interview with Sinclair Lewis," University of Kansas City Review, xxiv (March, 1958), 199-210.
- ⁶ Letters, 43, 82, 139, and passim.
- ⁷ With Love, 185.
- ⁸ Ibid., 221.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ (New York, 1934).
- ¹¹ Edith Wharton, A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley, 1953), 220.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Letters, 203. Lewis called it "the Main Street burglary."
- ¹⁴ Textual references are to Babbitt (Harbrace Modern Classics: New York, 1922), and The Age of Innocence (Modern Library, New York, 1948).

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