

## *Babbitt* as a Satire on the Self-Made Man

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Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922) is usually regarded as a pungent satire on the American middle-class businessman. It is certainly a minutely detailed documentation of one type of American business culture. It is quite reasonable, therefore, to place it, as Mark Schorer does,<sup>1</sup> in the tradition of the business novel. The novel can be, at the same time, counted among the major American novels that criticize the concept of the self-made man.

The protagonist of the novel is George F. Babbitt, a successful, middle-aged real estate agent living in Zenith, a Midwestern city of medium size. The novel divides itself into two parts; the first part comprises Chapters 1–18 and the second part Chapters 23–34, with intervening Chapters 19–22 serving as a pivot. Of the first part, the first seven chapters record the protagonist's one workday in April, 1920, from his dreaming sleep to dreaming sleep. In these seven chapters, Lewis presents the over-all view of the protagonist, particularly emphasizing such sociological aspects as his house, family, neighbors, work, social status, cultural taste, and educational background, which he later develops further in the rest of the first part. What is emphasized in the first seven chapters is the superficiality and triviality of Babbitt's relations with his family members and other people in general (with his friendship with Paul Riesling excepted), the lack of his genuine values, the smugness and conventionality of his views on such areas as politics, religion, and education, the tediousness of his work, and his emotional and spiritual aridity. Under the surface cheeriness and briskness lay the hero's loneliness, dissatisfaction, and boredom. Very early in the novel, we learn that Babbitt detested his "real-estate business" and disliked "his family."<sup>2</sup> It is poignantly fitting that the description of the protagonist begins with his dreaming of a fairy girl, who would refuse to see him as he actually was but as a gallant youth of some ultimate worth. This subliminal figure amply conveys to the reader Babbitt's yearning for being an entirely different person together with his yearning for acceptance and love.

On this particular day, Babbitt unburdened himself to Paul Riesling, his closest friend, who was unhappily married and whose hope of becoming a violinist was long since thwarted, as follows:

“... I've pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six-cylinder car, and built up a nice little business . . . And 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 that I'm entirely satisfied!” (pp. 60-61)

Together with the interspersed voicings of his desire to escape, these subconscious and conscious admissions of his dissatisfaction create a suspense in this fundamentally comic portrait of the protagonist.

Chapters 8-18 are in essence an amplification of the first seven chapters. They convey both the vigorous, go-getting image of Babbitt and his growing sense of dissatisfaction in spite of his increasing popularity and social success. These chapters deal with Babbitt's social life, leisure activities, public life as an eloquent spokesman for his profession, political and religious activities, and domestic affairs. The reader is further impressed by the emptiness at the core of the man, both in his private and public lives. At the end of Chapter 18, Lewis describes Babbitt's state of mind as he lay sick in bed in February, 1921, summarizing, in a manner, the first part of the novel:

He was conscious of life, and a little sad. . . . [H]e beheld . . . his way of life as incredibly mechanical. Mechanical business—a brisk selling of badly built houses. Mechanical religion—a dry, hard church, shut off from the real life of the streets, inhumanly respectable as a top-hat. Mechanical golf and dinner-parties and bridge and conversation. Save with Paul Riesling, mechanical friendships—back-slapping and jocular, never daring to essay the test of quietness. (p. 234)

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To the best of my knowledge, virtually no attention has been paid in the criticisms of the novel to the family background of the protagonist. Babbitt was proud of being a leading citizen of Zenith, which was founded as early as in 1792 and was now one of the most illustrious cities of the state. It is significant that Babbitt was not born and raised in Zenith but in an obscure up-state village named Catawba. Babbitt's real father, whom his mother habitually referred to as “Your Father” (pp. 231-232) in talking with Babbitt, apparently died when Babbitt was still a boy. He was presumably a man of courage and integrity. According to Babbitt's mother, he retorted that he had “a reputation around these parts for being one who is amply qualified to mind his own business and let other folks mind theirs!” (p. 232) to a local resident who tried to impose on him in an election campaign. He died too soon to leave a legacy of his valiant personality to his son, and Babbitt felt only

embarrassed when his mother discussed the man. His step-father, who ran a country general store (and was presumably dead now), was financially a failure, so that Babbitt had to work extremely hard to earn his way through college. Babbitt, a successful businessman in Zenith, was somewhat contemptuous to his step-father.

Why did Lewis bother to specify this particular parental lineage for Babbitt? As I indicated elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> a self-made man, as in the cases of Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Thomas Sutpen in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, generally repudiates his father for his hopelessly deprived condition. Lewis altered the archetypal situation, but he meant to tell the reader that Babbitt was also ultimately a fatherless man. Lewis's account of Babbitt's lineage is vague and elliptic, as Sheldon N. Grebstein complains,<sup>4</sup> to be sure, but it is obviously because he did not want to introduce a tragic implication by giving a more detailed analysis of the situation, lest it should undercut his satire.

The passage toward the end of Section 2 in Chapter 8 records Babbitt's conversation with his friends on the topic of the small towns such as Catawba. Babbitt with his friends criticize the muddled thinking, unimaginative conversation filled with repetitions, uneducated speech, and narrow viewpoints of rural people. The entire passage is a marvelous piece of satire as the reader realizes that Babbitt and his friends betray exactly the same kind of shortcomings that they say they find among small-town people, but the more significant point here is that Babbitt's contemptuous stance toward his past in Catawba is clearly revealed in this passage. In considering Catawba, the reader is perhaps invited to compare and contrast Babbitt and his half-brother, Martin, who, in Catawba, bred cattle and ran the country general store that he inherited from his father. "He was," Lewis says, "proud of being honest, blunt, ugly, and disagreeable." (p. 233) Lewis certainly does not endorse Martin, but the reader will be seriously in doubt as to whether Babbitt was any better off than Martin in terms of self-realization.

As a characteristic move of a self-made man, Babbitt uprooted himself from Catawba and tried to plant himself in Zenith, a wonder city full of the promises of plenitude and happiness. Zenith, as the name implies, was the pinnacle as a city in the eyes of Babbitt. In fact, he married Myra Thompson, partly because she was "ennobled by birth in Zenith." (p. 89) In college, Babbitt was idealistic enough to dream of a career as a lawyer to serve the underprivileged, but he was dazzled by Zenith. After some hesitations, he finally settled for a career of a businessman in search of material success.

Babbitt was very proud of his 5-year-old Dutch Colonial house in Floral Heights in the residential district of Zenith as a visible symbol of his material success. A self-made man's house such as Gatsby's mansion or Sutpen's remain in the reader's mind as an externalization of the owner's ambition, and Babbitt's house is also to be remembered, not for its stupendous immensity but for its glossy competency. It had a "neat yard of a successful businessman of Zenith" (p. 4), which was perfect so that "it made [Babbitt] also perfect" (p. 4), and the bedroom which was "a masterpiece among bedrooms." (p. 14) To quote one example of Lewis's extended satirical comments on various parts of Babbitt's house, he says about the bedroom:

Only it had nothing to do with the Babbitts, 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. One expected the chambermaid to come in and make it ready for people who would stay but one night, go without looking back, and never think of it again. (p. 15)

His house abounded in efficient modern gadgets. Babbitt loved things because the ingenious mechanical contrivances and latest conveniences that he possessed were all "his symbols and proofs of excellence." (p. 95) His porcelain bathtub, fancy alarm clock, electric fan, percolator, toaster, and such tangibly demonstrated his wealth. He assured himself that each little item in his house reflected his worth. This grotesque thinginess, on the contrary, attested to Babbitt's lack of inner worth. Babbitt's identity was diffused over these bits of status symbols, and, these things, Lewis says, turned out to be the substitutes for "joy and passion and wisdom." (p. 95) On a disconsolate day like the day described in the first seven chapters, even Babbitt could not sustain the premise that spiritual fulfillment accompanies material possessions. He realized that the excellent new water-cooler in his office was not necessarily a correlative to his value as a human being.

He hadn't even any satisfaction in the new water-cooler! And it was the very best of water-coolers, up-to-date, scientific, and right-thinking. It had cost a great deal of money (in itself a virtue). It possessed a non-conducting fiber ice-container, a porcelain water-jar (guaranteed hygienic), a dripless non-clogging sanitary faucet, and machine-painted decorations in two tones of gold. He looked down the relentless stretch of tiled floor at the water-cooler, and assured himself that no tenant of the Reeves Building had a more expensive one, but he could not recapture the feeling of social superiority it had given him. (p. 34)

The futility of the materiality of Babbitt's world is eloquently stated in this finely satiric passage.

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One way of Lewis's satirizing the myth of the self-made man was to describe how Babbitt ceased to be a distinct individual. It was not just his ludicrous form letter that was "imitative" (p. 36), but his whole life was imitative. Just as Sutpen spent his entire life trying to imitate a Virginia planter in his externals, Babbitt tried to imitate a successful businessman as he conceived him to be. His was after all a borrowed identity, and his life eventually became a series of gestures. With a fully satiric intent, Lewis has Babbitt complain of his wife that "All she sees in life is getting along by being just like other folks." (p. 378) This would be one of the most fitting pieces of self-criticism applicable to Babbitt. He deliberately undermined himself by the continual process of emptying himself to make a total imitation possible. What we see in the novel is not an integrated self but an accumulation of loose fragments. To point out Babbitt's total loss of autonomy, Lewis makes, among others, the following comment:

[Babbitt] felt that on the subject of Shakespeare he wasn't really an authority. Neither the *Advocate-Times*, the *Evening Advocate*, nor the *Bulletin of the Zenith Chamber of Commerce* had ever had an editorial on the matter, and until one of them had spoken he found it hard to form an original opinion. (p. 76)

It is no wonder that the more we read of Babbitt's social success as a political orator, a champion of real estate business, or a religious leader, the more we realize the irredeemable hollowness at the core of the man. Babbitt did succeed in transforming himself from "a country boy" (p. 89) into a prosperous urban businessman, but he had to pay a really dear price. It can be argued that such a gross approach to life as Babbitt's was possible only when success per se is regarded as the ultimate purpose of life.

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When Babbitt himself was such a hollow man, how could he hope for a genuine human relationship? When he would not accept his real father or his step-father, how could he function as a father to his children? When he was nothing but a human emptiness, how could he relate himself with his wife? We realize that his dissatisfaction with his family stems largely from his failure as a human being.

As was mentioned before, Babbitt momentarily realized that his relations with his friends were mechanical. What else could he expect? As T. K. Whipple pointed out, Babbitt and people like him “have, and are capable of having, no true personal relationship.”<sup>5</sup> The conversations between Babbitt and his friends were stale, superficial, cliché-filled, and full of emphatic agreements. Lewis devoted two chapters, Chapters 8 and 9, to the description of their dinner party, partly to indicate the barrenness of their conversations.

Completely unable to establish a true human relationship with his family members and his friends, Babbitt was barred from experiencing a sense of communion. Babbitt reveled in his popularity, but his memberships in various service groups and professional organizations did not guarantee any alleviation of his sense of separateness and aloneness. At the beginning of the second part of the novel, in Chapter 23, Lewis has Babbitt review his life again, and Babbitt this time had to admit that “perhaps all life as he knew it and vigorously practised it was futile.” (p. 273) He came to realize that wealth and social positions were not what he primarily wanted out of his life, but no matter how hard he tried, he was not able to specify what he wanted. It is significant, however, that Babbitt in his musing stumbled upon his yearning for the presence of Paul Riesling and the fairy girl. His tentative answer suggests that Babbitt was starving for acceptance, love, and understanding. The reader, however, given the picture of Babbitt up to this point, must seriously doubt whether he could find salvation through love. His affective life had been dominated mostly by self-love.

Could Babbitt hope to feel solidarity with other human beings through work? Babbitt claimed that his work required “the trained skill” and “the knowledge” (p. 157), but as Grebstein pointed out,<sup>6</sup> Babbitt was ignorant even of such elementary matters concerning real estate as the science of sanitation, the quality of police service and fire service, and what constituted the adequate educational facilities. He not only did not know about these matters but he did not bother to investigate into them.

What was more damaging to his psyche was the fact that Babbitt engaged in illegal deals, in contradiction to his insistence on the real estate business as a form of “public service.” (p. 157) After making a somewhat casual mention of Babbitt’s underhanded transaction in the past in Chapter 4, Lewis began two separate chapters with a description of Babbitt’s illicit deals. At the beginning of Chapter 8, the important chapter that heads the second cluster of chapters in the first part of the novel, we have a description of Babbitt’s secret buying of several real estate options for some executives of the Zenith Street Traction Company before the company publicly announced its plan to extend a certain streetcar line.

It meant a great profit to both Babbitt and the executives. The inside information was obtained through an illicit maneuver by Henry T. Thompson, Babbitt's father-in-law and partner for the Babbitt-Thompson Realty Company, and Jake Offutt, a politician. The maneuver, Lewis hints, involved "grand larceny." (p. 102)

Incidentally, Babbitt's father-in-law is a parody of the archetypal father-in-law in the myth of the self-made man. Usually a young man of merit meets a wealthy and upright gentleman, and the gentleman, impressed by the young man's caliber, asks him to marry his daughter, and aids his son-in-law in his honest endeavor. Henry T. Thompson, however, schemed with a dirty politician and took advantage of his son-in-law to use him as a cover for his illegal manipulation.

Chapter 19, the first chapter of the 4-chapter pivot, begins with a description of another major illicit deal with the officials of the Zenith Street Traction Company. Babbitt learned of the company's plan to build a new repair shop and bought options on the required land. He connived with the officials and they all reaped a substantial profit. There is another reference to Babbitt's secret deal with the same company at the end of Chapter 17. Lewis also records that Babbitt did not hesitate to solicit the newly-elected mayor for some secret advance information about the extension of paved highways in reward for his campaign work for the mayor. The reader gets the impression that the Babbitt-Thompson Realty Company thrived essentially on these illicit deals.

Babbitt took pride in his ability to make money, but it was not the hard, honest work that brought in the money. Babbitt's unethical business practice can be taken as a stock element of the business novel, but it can also be taken as an index to the confusion of his moral identity as a self-made man. Our sense of function in the human community helps sustain us, but Babbitt could not hope to gain a meaningful identity through his work any more than through his relations with other human beings.

The first part of the book, Chapters 1–18, alone, would have made a devastating satire on a self-made businessman, but Lewis gave another turn to the novel. In the 4-chapter pivot of Chapters 19–22, Lewis provides the principal motive for Babbitt's rebellion in the second part of the novel. Paul Riesling, the one and only person on earth who could have some understanding of Babbitt's problem, was put in jail for shooting his wife. In Chapter 23, with his best friend away, Babbitt was suddenly overcome with the feeling of the utter

meaninglessness of his life and resolved to rebel. But what could a man like Babbitt really accomplish in rebellion? He was, the reader knows, destined to fail.

A chance meeting with Seneca Doane, a liberal lawyer, occasioned Babbitt to rebel against the conventional politics, and Babbitt supported the strikers in a local strike, while his business friends all condemned the strikers. In rebelling against the middle-class domesticity, he began a love affair with Mrs. Tanis Judique, a widow, and began to associate with her Bohemian friends, although the whole thing palled on him soon. Babbitt, still in a rebellious mood, refused to join the Good Citizens' League, a conservative vigilante group. One of the consequences of his refusal which terrified Babbitt was the fact that the officials of the Zenith Street Traction Company suddenly refused to give its latest business to him. Anxious to be re-accepted, Babbitt, at the first opportunity, entirely forgot about his rebellion and joined the Good Citizens' League. It was natural that Babbitt's rebellion was so tentative and short-lived, because he had no real resources within himself for a sustained effort. Lewis was careful enough to mention in the last chapter of the novel that Babbitt, after the rebellion, resumed his illicit connection with the Zenith Street Traction Company.

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Babbitt discovered that money could not buy fulfillment, but he could not escape from the commitment to money, because he had entirely failed to develop personality. By subordinating everything else to business and profit-making, he was oblivious to all human values. On the very last page of the novel, Lewis has Babbitt say to his son, Ted, "I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life!" (p. 401) He had nothing to wait for but "the paralyzed contentment of middle-age." (p. 386)

Babbitt was always conscious of his being a self-made man, but his success actually impoverished his life. His false values made him waste his entire life. Because he symbolizes, in his own particular way, the emptiness of the American dream of success, George F. Babbitt has achieved a permanent place in our imagination.

**Notes**

1. Mark Schorer, "Afterword" to Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. 323-324.
2. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950), p. 4. All the references to *Babbitt* hereafter will be to the pages of this Harbrace Modern Classics edition, and the pages will be indicated parenthetically in my text.



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3. "The Great Gatsby as a Critique of the Self-Made Man" in *Gakujutsu Hokoku: Jinbun* (The Scientific Reports of the Kyoto Prefectural University: Humanities), No. 34 (November 1982), p. 30; "Sutpen's Dream in *Absalom, Absalom!*" in *Jinbun Kenkyu* (The Bulletin of The Faculty of Literature of Osaka City University), Vol. 28, No. 11 (December 1976), p. 10.
4. Sheldon N. Grebstein, *Sinclair Lewis* (New York: Twayne, 1962), pp. 84-85.
5. T. K. Whipple, "Sinclair Lewis," in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Mark Schorer (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 74.
6. Grebstein, p. 79.

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