Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt: A Portrait of a Midwestern Conformist Businessman

By: Hadeel Hatif
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The aim of this research is to expose the corruption, the moral depravity and hypocrisy of the American business community during the boom years of the 1920s. It sheds light on the conformity of the middle-class society—the subject of Lewis's criticism—and its effect upon his principal character. Lewis hates the idea of conformity or homogenization. He is against all that is standardized for he feels that it abolishes humanity. He, through his novel, as Schorer says, wants "to show the world of the little businessman, and more particularly the middleman" who "abolishes his own humanity, in the culture of business."¹

Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt (1922) was set during the 1920s, the period that followed World War I. As a period, it was characterized by an unprecedented economic, industrial and technological growth and significant changes in lifestyle. In fact, this decade was, perhaps, one of the most significant decades in the United States history due to the drastic economic, cultural, and social changes that came about in American society. Culturally, America experienced and witnessed “a bitter conflict between the forces of modernism associated with the new urban—industrial society and the forces of traditionalism associated with the more provincial, often rural communities.”² Lewis, unlike the Americans who seemed to be proud of and happy with this change, saw the changing America from another perspective. For him, the new America was even more of a nightmare than the old one had been. In Babbitt, Lewis captured and recorded the cultural shifts which happened in the turbulent
1920s, and the social and the political unrest of the whole era. In this context, he uses his novel as a vehicle to question the burden of surviving in quickly changing modern world which was the direct antithesis of the pre-war society. Babbitt, as Lewis intends it to be, is an account of the ugly conditions of life in an industrial and commercial society, a society dominated by money motive and ready to accept the pressures of sameness and standardization. Lewis, much like Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, was critical of the American way of life. Commenting on the novel and its value, Mark Schorer, Lewis's biographer, says "Babbitt is a satiric prelude to a decade of dizzying and often mindless economic expansion, the epic of our ‘boom’ years, and it remains today as the major documentation in literature of American business culture in general.”

Babbitt is an assault on the moral hypocrisy, the futility and the conformity of the American middle class of which Babbitt, the title character or the protagonist, is a member and for which he is a symbol. According to Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, the word Babbitt and its subsequent meaning that comes from the novel itself, come to mean "a self satisfied person who conforms readily to conventional middle class ideas and ideals, especially of business and material success.”

Lewis opens his novel with the description of modern Zenith, the imaginary Midwestern city and the novel's setting. This city is considered modern in the sense that it is bustling with new skyscrapers, automobiles and factories, the symbols of technology and great commercialism. Lewis uses this name because, as the word suggests, it means the highest point or the greatest achievement of which the
community is proud. It is a city, as Lewis himself says "built-it seemed - for giants." (B, Ch.I, Sec. I, P.2) His statement is ironic. It is intended to poke fun of Babbitt and the others of his kind who live in the city. For him, Babbitt is anything but a giant. He is more a dwarf than a giant for there is "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" (B, Ch. I, Sec.II,P. 2). Lewis's rapid shift from the focus on Zenith's greatness as a city to Babbitt's appearance as he awakens in his bed on the sleeping – porch, in whose aspect there is "nothing of the giant," establishes a juxtaposition which reveals Babbitt's smallness, insignificance and characteristic ineffectuality. Lewis describes Babbitt in the following lines:

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 of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay.

(B, Ch. I, Sec. II, P.2)

The above quotation reflects the rapaciousness of capitalism and commercialism during the 1920s that Lewis does not stop to criticize. Of capitalism, Lewis, in his article "The Passing of Capitalism," asserts:

And does it not by now seem that practically every
writer —certainly in America and to some extent in England—who is gravely seeking to present the romance of actual life as it is to-day, must perforce show capitalism as a thing attacked, passing—whether the writer lament or rejoice or merely complain at that passing? Few of them have any very clear idea of how the passing is to occur; as to what is to take its place ....Yet there is, in nearly every seeing writer of to-day—an attack on capitalism.

Babbitt is a prosperous real-estate businessman. Having everything in life, he is supposed to be happy and content. In spite of having everything required to fit neatly into the mold of social expectation—a loyal wife, three children, a modern house that has all modern appliances and an automobile—he seems to be dissatisfied with his life. Due to his discontentment, he always goes into a romantic dream of having a fairy girl with whom he could escape "the grind of the real-estate business" and "his family." (B, Ch. I, Sec. III, P.4) Babbitt, as Schorer says, "can't escape being a Babbitt" because for him to succeed is to conform to the standards of middle class culture. This means that to rise in business and the social world of Zenith is to stick to the social norms that the society enforces. The power of conformity, in a city like Zenith, is so great that Babbitt must conform to the mold of his society, or else he would lose everything. To conform means to speak, think, eat, drink, dress, and live like everybody else and this explains Lewis's presentation of Babbitt's house as a copy of all prosperous middle class houses. His description of Babbitt's house reveals the monotony that homogenization impresses on American middle-class
Although it has "the best of taste, the best of inexpensive rugs, a simple and laudable architecture, and the latest conveniences," (B, Ch.II, Sec. I, P 15) it has "nothing to do with the Babbitt's nor with any one else." (B, Ch. II, Sec. I, PP. 14-15) It, as Lewis says, lacks the atmosphere of being a home for it is as impersonal as a hotel room. Babbitt's wish for his house to be like everyone else's is based on the idea that if his house fits the standardized mold, then he can never be accused of not having an adequate and luxurious lifestyle. His house has become a standardized symbol of middle class affluence and success. It is designed to impress and show off the inhabitant's abundance than anything else. In fact, the reason behind Babbitt's infatuation with having the latest "gadgets" and technology in his house is to make people aware of his status. This means that the material possessions determine, define, and mirror one's position in society. Babbitt seems to be more concerned about such material items than about his wife and children. Lewis, through Babbitt, attempts to mock the average American citizen who buys anything, even if unnecessary, just to make others think highly of him.

Babbitt, as a real-estate businessman, has a lofty aspiration to rise socially. This desire, H.L. Mencken, the American controversial critic who affects Lewis by his thoughts and ideas, states, is the root cause of American uneasiness or restlessness. In his The American Credo, he offers an analysis of the American character, an analysis perfectly applicable to Babbitt:

The thing which set off the American from all other men, and gives a peculiar color not only to the pattern of his daily life but also to the play of his inner ideas.
is what, for want of a more exact term, may be called social aspiration. That is to say, his dominant passion is a passion to lift himself by at least a step or two in the society that he is a part of—a passion to improve his position, to break down some shadowy barrier of caste, to achieve the countenance of what, for all his talk of equality, he recognizes and accepts as his betters.

This is really true of Babbitt himself. He has a very great desire to climb the social ladder and befriend the members of rich upper class, “the class that belongs to the Union Club as best emblemed by Charles Mckelvey,” Babbitt's wealthy college classmate. Babbitt reflects on his social frustration and his wife's need to be accepted by and invited to the Mckelvey's party. In the following lines, Babbitt's strong desire to be in contact with the Mackelvesys, is clear:

Yes, maybe—kind of shame to not keep in touch with folk like the Mackelvesys. We might try inviting them to folk to dinner, some evening. Oh, thunder, let's not waste our good time thinking about 'em!

( B, Ch. II, Sec. II, p. 23)

In a city, like Zenith, social barriers are impossible to cross. The Babbitts, as members of the middle-class society, must not try to cross the lines established between classes.
Lewis's main thrust is satire. In his novel, he satirizes the middle-class for its conformity, hypocrisy and ignorance. Babbitt thinks that he is a respectable, honest businessman. For him, business ethics are something very integral to honest business dealing. All this reflects the irony of the novel, for it is clear, through its plot and satire, that Babbitt is unethical in his business deals, opposite to what he usually claims to be.

Babbitt's business ethics, as Sheldon Norman Grebstein says, "are elastic" enough that "they can be stretched to condone bribery, lying, bullying, and conspiracy," the same methods that he will later use to discharge one of his employees. Though he preaches about business ethics, he does not hesitate to make a shady deal with the real-estate speculator, Conrad Lyte, whom he has advised to purchase the lot adjoining Purdy's grocery for which they demand a price twice its actual value. Babbitt is an opportunist. In a world like Babbitt's, Grebstein, referring to the point of the American economist, Thorstein Veblen, says what is right or wrong has come to be "determined by what is expedient and profitable, by what brings in a financial return," as long as it does not threaten the balance of the community's system.

Babbitt's actions show the contradiction within himself. He is a man of double standards. Once he disapproves of the working class's efforts to organize labor unions to support their cause and protect their rights and once more he approves of the middle class's attempt to organize certain organizations to protect the business community interests. His beliefs, too, do not coincide with his actions, i.e., what he always says does not go hand in hand with what he does and this is
clearly shown in his attitude towards prohibition laws. Though he praises prohibition, he likes to drink alcohol. Of Babbitt and his attitude towards prohibition, Lewis says:

But Babbitt was virtuous. He advocated, though he did not practise, 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 Y.M.C.A.; he followed the custom of his clan and cheated only as it was sanctified by precedent;

( B, Ch. IV, Sec. IV, p 46 )

Babbitt and his associates' response to prohibition reflects their moral hypocrisy. This has something to do with the theme of appearance versus reality. Publicly, they defend this law while privately, they indulge themselves in drinking whenever the opportunity permits. Lewis, in his novel, exposes middle-class values as appearance without substance. Babbitt sticks to the society's moral code and his fear of change makes him feel this tension of being himself. He, as Love views him, "was virtuous the way society said he should be." 17

Tired of his own life, Babbitt decides to have lunch with Paul Riesling, his closest friend and roommate at state university, at the Zenith Athletic Club. At their meeting, Babbitt opens his heart to Paul, telling him of his dissatisfaction with his wife and the daily routine of his life. He informs Paul that he thinks he has fulfilled all the requirements of the American dream, yet he feels that his life is inept. In the following
lines, Babbitt's complaint to Paul is very clear:

...here 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 haven't any vices 'specially, except smoking—and I'm practically cutting that out, by the way. And I belong to the church,... And yet, even so, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied!"

( B, Ch. V, Sec. III, PP. 60-61 )

Similarly, Riesling to whom he goes seeking rest, seems to be even more dissatisfied with his life. He speaks about his wife, Zilla who constantly vents her frustration by nagging him. Though their conversation, both Babbitt and Paul reflect on their own abandoned ideals. Babbitt was to have been a powerful lawyer of the common man and Paul, on the other hand, was to have been a successful violinist. The unfulfillment of these ideals are, of course, part of their present dissatisfaction. Both of these men have given up their personal dreams for a broader dream of social success. However, they come to realize that this new dream does not afford them the happiness they have desired.

To escape the reality of their own existence, Paul suggests to Babbitt to have a vacation. Their trip into the wilderness of Maine enables them to escape the tension and anxiety of modern life. In Maine, they find happiness, enjoying themselves in fishing, drinking and
playing poker. But Babbitt's happiness is not complete because he can't quite shake his restlessness. This means that their escape is only temporary. However, they go home with the expectation that things will be better. But opposite to their own expectation, they return to their old monotonous life, the life they readily plunge into. After coming back home, Babbitt is asked to give a speech at a real estate convention. In this speech, he advocates the approved candidate, Lucas Prout, a manufacturer of mattresses, for Zenith's mayor. Soon after helping the conservative Prout win the mayoral election, and establishing his reputation as an effective orator, Babbitt is invited to deliver the annual address to the Zenith Real Estate Board. In his speech, he claims Zenith is the greatest and finest city in the United States for it contains the highest proportion of ideal standardized citizens, and that those who call themselves "liberals" or "radicals" are the "the worst menace to sound government" (B, Ch. XIV, Sec. III, P. 187). Lewis criticizes Zenith, a miniature representation of America, because of its standardization. He thinks that standardization and more particularly the standardization of thought, is the most dangerous aspect of Zenith's life.

In spite of the fame Babbitt reaches to, he and his wife do not achieve "the social advancement" they think they deserve. Though proud, at first, to win the favor of the prosperous Mr. Mckelvey who represents the peak of Zenith's social hierarchy, to have dinner at his home, he is later dissatisfied for the Mckelveys not turning his own invitation. This shows the reality of Zenith's caste structure, the structure that everybody must abide by. The working class, too, should not try to ascend the community's social ladder and this explains Babbitt's contemptuous attitude towards the Overbrooks, the less successful and
socially inferior to Babbitt, whom he denies friendship for having tried to invite the Babbitts to dinner. Lewis, though the novel, depicts the materialism and the shallow attitudes of the middle class society during the 1920s. In fact, Babbitt's attitude towards the Overbrooks parallels that of the Mckelveys. It makes clear how Babbitt and many of his acquaintances are deeply obsessed and concerned with the question of social status.

Babbitt “spends his lifetime trying to relate to the ‘status quo’ and put himself on a pedestal.” 18 By buying and supplying his house with the best and the most expensive material goods or items and throwing dinner parties, he wants to make people aware of his noteworthy position in society. Lewis's criticism of his society is very acute. What he wants to say is that America, which claims itself as the land of equality, is not. This is also shown though Babbitt's and his acquaintances' later attitude towards those who look different from them, especially immigrants and minorities, whom they regard as inferiors. In fact, the blame, Lewis emphasizes, should not be put on them but on the American society that accepts and passes down through generations this false notion, the notion that brands immigrants and minorities as less human or superior to the native white man 19.

Falling ill for a day or two, Babbitt comes to see how dull his life is. It, as he himself says, has become "mechanical". One of the most important causes that make standardization a permanent fixture into the American society is the process of machine upon which industry depends. Despite the change that comes about by the machine process, the standardization inculcated by it has to prevail in the lives of the industrial society and put an end to anything that upset the system's
equilibrium. The sense that Babbitt comes to is a consequence of living in such an industrial and business world. However, there are no other alternatives for him other than going on with business.

Going back to work, he closes his day with a lucrative, but crooked business deal with Zenith's Street Traction Company. Though unethical himself in his deals, he is overwhelmed by the dishonesty of his employee, Stanley Graff, the outside salesman, and fires him. Alluding to these incidents, Lewis tries to shed light on Babbitt's moral hypocrisy, the cover he puts to hide his own dishonesty in order to appear as a solid and honest middle-class businessman.

Feeling uncomfortable, Babbitt makes up his mind to have a trip to Chicago with his son, Ted. There, in one of Chicago's big hotels, and while having dinner, Babbitt is shocked to see his friend, Riesling who is "supposed to be in Akron, selling tar-roofing" (B, Ch. XIX, Sec. V, P. 248), with a woman, named May Arnold. Once Babbitt discovers the truth that Riesling is having an affair with this woman, he reproaches him, preaching the values of keeping one's high moral standards and good social standing in the community. Soon thereafter, Babbitt, who is now the new elected vice president of the Booster's Club, receives the nasty news of Riesling's shooting of his wife, Zilla during an argument. As a result of his disastrous act, Riesling is sentenced to three years in the state penitentiary.

Devastated by the loss of Riesling's steadying presence, Babbitt struggles to find meaning in his hollow life. His secure complacency is shattered and thus his desire for rebellion comes to the surface when he acknowledges that he wants his fairy girl in flesh. In an attempt to alter
the pattern of his life, Babbitt enters a liaison with an attractive widow, Tanis Judique, a client. Sill feeling uneasy, he decides to go to Maine "to seek Paul's spirit in the wilderness", telling his wife that he is to have some business in New York. Unable to find what he seeks, he makes his mind to go back to Zenith. On his way home, he meets Seneca Doane, the socialist and the losing candidate in the mayoral election against Prout.

Falling under Doane's spell, he is impressed with him and his liberal ideas. He, reminded of his former potential as a liberal, is seized with zeal and begins to espouse liberal causes. He sides and supports him and the strikers in one of Zenith's labor strife, publicly defending the cause of the laborers, shocking and leaving his social set.

In fact, his affair with Tanis and her "Bohemian" set of friends with whom he involves himself in drinking and dancing is “one of his first manifestations of liberality.” Tanis, who shares and approves of Babbitt's new rebellious beliefs, is, perhaps, one of the reasons that makes him go on and be more daring in the presence of his friends. Aware of Babbitt who challenges both the social and the economic bases of his world, his friends, members of the Boosters Club, grow suspicious of, and start to ignore him. For them, to rebel or to think differently is a threat to their social and political position. They attempt to bully him to return to his old lifestyle, to join in the newly formed "Good Citizens League" — "a kind of Rotarian Ku Klux Klan." But Babbitt, of course, has to pay the price of his nonconformity. When he refuses to conform, they threaten to destroy him and hurt his business. Sensing his confusion, they spring, using Robert Cantwell's words, "like the
stronger wolves on a crippled member of the pack " 24.  Meanwhile, his wife, Myra falls seriously ill with appendicitis. It is her illness together with his business that starts to suffer that cause him to come to the realization that it is too late, and he is too weak, to continue his rebellion.

His fear of public opinion, his own need for acceptance and his dread of ostracism, which he finally finds "greater than his desire for escape," 25 bring him back to the fold of his society. This means that the only way for him to succeed is to conform, and as Sheldon Norman Grebstein puts it, "to assume protective coloration, to lose himself in the crowd, and then to be approved by it as one of its members." 26 Babbitt, as a result, gives up his liberalism and becomes a member of Good Citizen's League, the organization that urges its members to approve the ideal of equality in everything except abundance and for everyone but the lower class 27.

Lewis believes that conformity and societal pressures repress any light of individuality and this is precisely Babbitt's tragedy. He is a man with no identity. Except for his brief rebellion and flirtation with non-conformity, he never gives an original opinion or speaks for himself. He is a pawn of his own society. In the following lines, Mencken views Babbitt as:

… no more than a single member of the society he lives in—a matter far more difficult to handle, obviously, than any mere character sketch. His every act is related to the phenomena of that society. It is not what he feels and aspires to that moves him; it is what the folks about him will think of him…. The salient thing about him, in
truth, is his complete lack of originality - and that is precisely the salient mark of every American of his class. What he feels and thinks is what 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 the heresy almost ruins him²⁸.

However, Lewis ends his novel with a glimpse of hope. When Babbitt's son, Ted announces to his family that he has left college and married Eunice Littlefield secretly, everyone except Babbitt rebukes him because of his foolish move at his young age. Though he has desperately wanted his son to conform to middle class aspirations and gain a university degree, Babbitt now readily consents to Ted's choice of being a mechanic. Perfectly secure again, he finally concludes that he has never in his life really done anything he desired to do. Seeing his hope in Ted and the younger generation, Babbitt tells him:

Well, maybe you'll carry things on further. I don't know. But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it. Well, those folks in there will try to bully you, and tame you down. Tell 'em to go to the devil! I'll back you. Take your factory job; if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of your –self, the way I've been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours.

(Bo, Ch XXIV, Sec. VI, P. 40)
Babbitt does not want his son to be a carbon copy of himself. He leans the lesson and imparts it to him. If it is late for Babbitt, then it is not so for Ted to have a fuller, freer and more independent life in the future and this is the solution that Lewis finally gives. Lewis, as Conroy states "saw this deferred and displaced gratification as the best solution to the problem facing the individualist in a culture demanding conformity. … All that is left is conformity, adjustment, and a vague hope for a freer future."
Conclusion

Reading *Babbitt*, one can deduce that Lewis's message is that man should follow what he believes in, not what his society imposes upon him. He, through Babbitt's journey, tries to show the danger of hiding oneself behind a mask, and conforming blindly to the society's norms. Babbitt, unable to have control over his life, ends in final ruin. His tragedy is that he has never been himself in all his actions, speeches and opinions, except for the occasions in which he is found with his favorite friend, Paul Riesling. Had he not been subordinated to and ruled by others, he would not have paved the way to his final destruction. The awakening that he reaches to is too late. However, he, as Lewis believes, thinks that the world is open for his son and the future generations to determine their own lot.
Notes


3 Ibid.


8 Cited in Grebstein, P. 5.


13 Cited in Grebstein, P. 78.


15 Grebstein, PP. 79-80.

16 Ibid., P. 80.


20 Grebstein, P. 77.


22 Cummings.

23 Current.
Ku Klux Klan is the product of the first years after the American Civil War (1860-1865). It is a terrorist secret organization whose object is to murder thousands of the blacks so as to prevent them from voting and participating in public life. In fact, it died in the 1870s but in 1915 it is established again. At first the new Klan, like the old one, was largely concerned with and devoted to intimidating the blacks who are, the Klan leader William J. Simmons claims, becoming dangerously insubordinate. After World War I, however, its concern about the blacks gradually becomes secondary to its concern about Catholics, Jews, and foreigners. The Klan devotes itself as its leaders proclaim to purging American life of impure, alien influences. The members of this Klan oppose immigration and level attacks against Catholics, Jews, foreigners, and anything else that isn’t white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, threatening their families and attempt to dismiss them out of their communities. The Klan, in fact, feared not only foreigners, racially impure groups, but also anything or anyone who may pose a challenge to traditional values. It, just like the organizations Babbitt joins and supports, is against drunkenness, enforcing prohibition and defending a traditional culture against the values and morals of modernity.


26 Grebstein, P. 78.

27 Ibid., P. 82.


29 Cited in McInnes.

Bibliography


