

## ANALYSIS

*Babbitt* (1922)



Sinclair Lewis

(1885-1951)

“I want to develop him so that he will seem not just typical but an individual.... He is all of us Americans at 46, prosperous but worried, wanting—passionately—to seize something more than motor cars and a house *before it's too late*. Yet, utterly unlike Carol [Kennicott in *Main Street*], it never even occurs to him that he might live in Europe, might like poetry, might be a senator; he is content to live and work in the city of Zenith, which is, as everybody knows, the best little ole city in the world. But he would like for once the flare of romantic love, the satisfaction of having left a mark on the city, and a let-up in his constant warring on competitors, and when his beloved friend Riesling commits suicide, he suddenly says, ‘Oh hell, what’s the use of the cautious labor to which I’ve given everything’—only for a little while is he discontented, though.... I want to make Babbitt big in his real-ness, in his relation to all of us, not in the least exceptional, yet dramatic, passionate, struggling.”

Sinclair Lewis  
Letter to Alfred Harcourt, his publisher  
(July 1921)

“Mr dear Lewis--I want to write praise. *Babbitt* is one of the greatest novels I have read for a long time. He is what we call a ‘creation’ but what we really mean is that he is a completely individualized realization of a hitherto elusive type. He is the common American prosperous business man *got*. You have got him. No one has been anywhere near getting him before. He lives & breathes another atmosphere! He moves about. His baseness, his vile gregariousness, his vulgarity &--what is the hope of America—his suffering and struggling intimations of beauty, are all wonderfully done. You never seem to strain. Your ease is perfect. In every way I think *Babbitt* knocks *Main Street* (which is a very good book you know) into a cocked hat. Reading it fills me with regret that I did not see more of you while you were in England. I salute you with gestures of respect & affection. I wish I could have written *Babbitt*.”

H. G. Wells  
Letter to Lewis (1922)

“If I’ve waited as long as this to have a book dedicated to me, Providence was evidently waiting to find just the Right Book. All my thanks for it.... At every page I found something to delight in, & something to talk about.—The prevailing impression, when one has finished, is of an extraordinary vitality & vivacity, an ever-bubbling spring of visual and moral sensibility--& this kind of ‘liveness’ is one of the most important qualities in any work of fiction—or of any other art. I don’t think *Babbitt* as good a novel, in the all-round sense, as *Main Street*... But then there is much more life & glow & abundance in the new book; you must have felt a stronger hold on it, & a richer flow... And I admire nothing more in your work than your steady balancing on your tight-rope over the sloppy abyss of sentimentality.... One suggestion, which I venture to make now, that is, that in your next book, you should use slang in dialogue more sparingly. I believe the real art in this respect is to use just enough to colour your dialogue, not so much that in a few years it will be almost incomprehensible. It gives more relief to your characters, I’m sure, than to take down their jargon word for word.”

Edith Wharton  
Letter to Lewis (1922)

“A complete example of [his] enlivened vernacular appeared in...*Babbitt* (1922), in the speech the hero makes before the Zenith Chamber of Commerce. No actual enthusiast ever spoke with such swift and full and revealing glibness. What Babbitt says is quintessential and archetypal. Thousands of such speeches had been undertaken by such men. Here was the speech they would all have liked to make. Babbitt at once became as much a symbol and an epithet as Main Street, and the name Babbitt a synonym for a conventional business man. From the village Lewis had turned to another American tradition. The business man in fiction had been a hero, sometimes a malefactor. Lewis studied him more fundamentally, in a case that was taken to be a specimen. George F. Babbitt has not prospered according to the familiar maxims about economy, industry, and perseverance. He has more or less blundered into such success as he has had, in a business which was not his first choice, with a wife whom accident chose for him. He has no thorough-going character because he has never needed one. It has been enough for him to do whatever others do, like an indistinguishable bee in an instinctive hive. But in him, as in Carol Kennicott, though not so strongly, there is possibility of dissent.”

When one of his friends had come to grief by falling out of step, Babbitt reconsiders his own situation. A troubling love affair makes him reflect on his emotional life as he has never done before. Since he has no gift for thinking, and no original opinions, he cannot go far in his little rebellion. In a temporary resentment he struggles to be himself, without quite knowing what his separate self is. And though he soon drops back into the rhythm of the community, he has learned enough to encourage his son in marrying for love and doing the work he likes best. Babbitt’s fling has not been pure folly but a kind of abortive triumph. His triumph was generally overlooked by readers, who failed to notice that this was a classic experience: a man in the midst of prosperity stopping to weigh and value his possessions. The familiar theme was lost in the volume of evidence as to Babbitt’s conformity before and after his adventure. Countless critics saw in Babbitt a proof that the typical American was like a standard part of a machine, always ready to be fitted into the national design.

It was easy to get such an impression from the book. Lewis had created a whole city in Zenith, the principal town in the synthetic Middle Western state of Winnemac, which is impossibly bounded by Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. Gopher Prairie had been a dusty village; Zenith was an enterprising town. Lewis was as much at home in one as in the other. He built the town according to a minute map he had drawn, even to the plans of houses and offices. The many characters besides Babbitt come and go in Zenith with the most convincing naturalness of movement because their lives had all been painstakingly studied. They belong in the town. Their recurrences in the plot confirm the sense that this is the compact community Babbitt feels it to be. Of all Lewis’s novels *Babbitt* is the most expertly constructed. Dedicated to Edith Wharton, it made his sprawling Zenith seem as close-knit as her Manhattan, though his vernacular was worlds away from her formal art.”

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1921-68) 306-08

“George Folansbee Babbitt, an enterprising, moral, stereotyped, and prosperous real-estate broker of the typical Midwestern city of Zenith, has been trained to believe in the virtues of home life, the Republican party, and middle-class conventions. Suddenly tiring of his life, he takes a vacation with Paul Riesling, an artist who had been forced into the role of businessman. His return to Zenith is at first difficult, but he shortly discovers pleasure in profitable real-estate deals, in the vice-presidency of the Boosters’ Club, and in speeches before prominent local gatherings. During his wife’s absence, he again tries to find an outlet from Zenith standards. After an unsuccessful and lonely trip to Maine, he enters into a liaison with Mrs. Tanis Judique, an attractive widow who fails to be the ‘fairy child’ of his dreams when he sees her in clear light in relation to her group of nondescript would-be bohemians, ‘The Bunch.’ He next turns to liberalism, when impressed by Seneca Doane, a socialist lawyer. For this added heresy he is ostracized by all right-minded citizens. He is not again able to return to Zenith’s outlook until his wife Myra is suddenly taken ill, and he once more feels a spiritual union with her and a sympathy with his city’s point of view.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“It was the satire that always gave Lewis’s books their design, but the life that steamed out of them impressed people most by giving them a final happy recognition. Lewis caught the vulgarity and the perpetual salesmanship, and caught it as effortlessly as he caught the sights and sounds, the exact sound of a Ford car being cranked on a summer morning in Zenith in 1922, the exact resemblance of Chum Frink to Eddie Guest and of Sharon Falconer to Aimee Semple McPherson.... Lewis’s characters have often been criticized as ‘types,’ and they are, partly because he memorialized some of them as such, gave people in George F. Babbitt what seemed the central portrait of a businessman. But what is really significant in his use of types is that his mind moved creatively in their channels. With his ability to approximate American opinion, his lightning adaptability to the prejudices, the fears, the very tonal mood, as it were, of the contemporary American moment, Lewis has always been able to invest his tintypes with a careless energy that other writers would not have been able to understand, much less share, since they did not work so close to the surface.”

Alfred Kazin  
*On Native Grounds*  
(Doubleday/Anchor 1942,1956) 176, 178

“George F. Babbitt could not be written off as a caricature, for he was a tragic figure. The man was kind; he was pathetic in his efforts to be both happy and successful; he was as sincere as he was ludicrous in his conviction that he served the community; he was completely devoid of self-knowledge except in brief, devastating gleams of the truth that he had never done what he really wanted; he was completely inconsistent in his morals, he could be both a strutting rooster and a runaway dog trying to sneak home. In fact, he was entirely male, completely bourgeois, and as much of a personality in his way as Falstaff, who was also created for satire.

To tell this man’s story with scrupulous realism was inevitably to be satiric. Babbitt is living in the speed-up of the industrial revolution. Zenith is his wonder city, whose misty towers in the morning light provide his one concept of pure beauty—Zenith where automobiles breed faster and better than men. In Zenith everything except respectability is sold or bought for a price, and buying and selling are ends in themselves. In Zenith all boasts come true, because the Babbitts boast only of size and number, both of which science has made possible to very mediocre men. No souls are necessary in Zenith, for a lack of spiritual dignity is compensated by a pride in gadgets, which anyone who works hard enough where the money is, can possess. A new cigar lighter is a baptism into a faith, a new automobile is a conversion. And to control and give objectives to all this activity is a code of individualism stereotyped from the heroic age of the frontier, when the pioneer’s ability to produce made or broke him.

No one had to think about ultimates, for no one could doubt the religion of success which made a Zenith possible. Yet the society of Zenith was so efficient in its production of wealth and comfort that it had to be explained by something nobler than the ethics of profit on which its practice was based. Hence the accepted morality of ‘Root, hog, or die’ was twisted to cover anything that made money. Profit was morality, for

profit was clearly service, and service justified itself. Thus it became necessary for Babbitt and his kind to conform, verbally at least, to ideals of service, because, once you denied that the go-getter served the community and was himself truly successful, the whole show became immoral.

*Babbitt*, which begins with an ironical description of a perfect bathroom and the morning ritual of a gadget-minded man, soon passes into satire. The really vigorous faith of Babbitt himself in his Rotary clubs, his deals, his capacities for leadership, soon begins to threaten wreck on the reefs of personal experience not provided for by his philosophy. His world was like a river steamer, all flimsy top, built for quick profits, sailing down broad but treacherous currents, with the rudder set on the shortest course to wealth, and no pilot on the bridge. Like so many characters of the novels of the era, Babbitt himself is a good man with tremendous vitality. But he is abysmally ignorant of everything but salesmanship. Like Lewis himself, he really cares for the success of his country, and for its ideals as he understands them. Lewis' immediate successors in a more irresponsible decade were not to care.

Babbitt does not represent Babbitry, which, as is now evident, was an endemic disease, epidemic only in his generation. He is its victim, a victim of class pressure and his own mentality, a human being with close relationship to every American of his period, even though he has become a symbol of the false motives that got him down. And he is prophetic of nothing. All that he had learned from his experience was that you should do what you really like—and so he tells his son in the last chapter. But the next generation did not know what they wanted, and were swept into the war, which recognized at least the true values of necessity. Sinclair Lewis was never to write a more memorable book than *Babbitt*.... Babbitt seemed pathetic to Lewis. He was a man blown up till he burst spiritually by subservient and erroneous ideas of how to be happy and successful.”

Henry Seidel Canby  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-83) 1225-27

“Lewis's portrait is at once a skillful organization of middle class detail, a series of caricatures of middle-class types, a parody of middle-class habits, forms of speech, gestures, and a fantasy world, derived from the real but unreal in its actual effect. His interest is primarily anthropological; he is the student of a strange tribe that exists in a world (Winnemac) that includes all states of the Midwest but is none of them, behaves in a way that resembles the behavior of the actual middle-class world, but in vigor and extreme of gesture transcends it. As an analysis of this half-real, half-fantasy world, Lewis gives it all forms of attitude, belief, faith, gesture: a ‘piety of things’; a full complement of rituals (together with totem signs and magic slogans): a metaphysic (‘Service and Boosterism’); an ethic (‘Gotta hustle’); a religion (Dr. John Jennison Drew's ‘Salvation and Five Per Cent’ church, where ‘everything zips’); an aesthetic (red-blooded, efficient, sentimental ‘Poemulations’ by Chum Frink); and a fully articulated political philosophy (Republicanism and the wisdom of Harding and Coolidge).

The Zenith setting is itself an architectural and religious symbol of the faith, a temple dedicated to the religion of business. Its Athletic Club is a masterpiece of eclectic display: the entrance lobby ‘Gothic, the washroom Roman Imperial, the lounge Spanish Mission, and the reading-rooms in Chinese Chippendale.’ In this world, in the Floral Heights residential region, lives Babbitt, the symbolic hero, scapegoat, and prodigal son. His religious faith is associated almost entirely with ‘things’—gadgets, automatic and mechanical and efficient instruments of a busy man's life. To maintain his morale he has to buy more things, whether he needs them or not: their ‘thingness,’ quite apart from need or practicality, sustains him. His outward expression of ‘the faith’ is ‘hustle,’ which gives the appearance of absorption and direction and quiets the suspicions of the tribe; any attempt to remain isolated from it is a form of backsliding. In a noisy confraternity lies the best resort of orthodoxy.

Babbitt wears the uniform of the solid citizen, as his mind wears uniform opinions. The ‘standard suit’ is a gray business suit, and in its pockets he carries certain badges of his loyalty: a fountain pen and silver pencil, a gold penknife, a silver cigar-cutter, ‘a large yellowish elk's-tooth,’ a looseleaf pocket notebook (containing, among other things, verses of C. Cholmondely Frink and newspaper editorials), and the Boosters' Club button (‘his V.C., his legion of Honor ribbon, his Phi Beta Kappa key’).

The Babbitt 'program' involves a dedication to Unselfish Public Service ('a thing called Ethics...if you had it you were a High-Class Realtor'), a proper reverence for the 'spiritual value of things,' and intellectual stimulus from 'rubbing up against high-class hustlers every day and getting jam full of ginger.' It demands the right kind of political activity; campaigning for the 'right kind' of loyal Americans, warning against the 'Red professors' in the university, guarding the local political scene against its enemies. Most of all, it requires a tribal solidarity with 'the boys': Vergil Gunch, Professor Joseph K. Pumphrey (of the Riteway Business College, instructor in Business English, Scenario Writing, and Commercial Law), Orville Jones (owner of the Lily White Laundry, the 'biggest, busiest, bulliest cleanerie shoppe in Zenith'), Chum Frink, Dr. Howard Littlefield, Ph.D., and the rest.

At the peak of his success as a tribal Booster, Babbitt delivers the annual address before the Zenith Real-Estate Board. This is a summing up of the 'parody Babbitt' and of his stock-in-trade of tribal opinions and evaluations. It is a literary ordering of Mencken's accumulations of what 'the booboisie' thinks. Its substance is contained in Babbitt's description of 'Our Ideal Citizen': he is 'first and foremost' busy ('busier than a bird-dog'), and he has no time for daydreaming 'or going to sassiety teas or kicking about things that are none of his business,' but spends all his time 'putting the zip into some store or profession or art.' The slang puts the daydreamers in their place; the warning that no one should 'kick about things that are none of his business' identifies the solidarity of the group, jealously guarded. Our citizen is also a 'he-man,' an extrovert, a conscientious family man; for entertainment he plays 'a few fists of bridge, or reads the evening newspaper, and a chapter or two of some good lively Western novel if he has a taste for literature.' He is a good, sound, efficient man in his taste for the arts; nothing of the bohemian about him—'in America the successful writer or picture-painter is indistinguishable from any other decent businessman'—and he should be properly rewarded, have his chance 'to drag down his fifty thousand bucks a year.'

The middle-class stereotype is a hundred-per-cent standardized American, a full-blooded, he-man, native American citizen.... There are those who 'don't like us'; but one advantage of Zenith over big cities like New York is that there are very few 'foreign-born' people in it, with their 'foreign ideas and communism.' The 'Regular Guys' are creating a new civilization of vital, standardized living, which is the great hope of the future and must be protected from 'the long-haired gentry who call themselves "liberals" and "radicals" and "non-partisan" and "intelligentsia" and God only knows how many other trick names!' There are certain instructors 'over at the U' (of which 'I am proud to be known as an alumni') who 'seem to think we ought to turn the conduct of the nation over to hoboes and roustabouts.' These are the men to watch; if we're going to pay them out good money, 'they've got to help us by selling efficiency and whooping it up for national prosperity!' Only when they are set right, and the communist-socialist foreigners are locked up, can this he-man tribe of Moose, Elks, Lions, and other right thinkers proceed on the road to a glorious standardized civilization, a paradise of gadgets and standardized proprieties.

This is, of course, as far as the parody Babbitt can go. But *Babbitt* is a novel as well, and its hero is a personality; Lewis had the choice of making him simply a mouthpiece of middle-class views (as is Lowell Schmalz of *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*) or of breaking into the pattern of his gestures and appearance to give him a sensitivity, make him a doubter of his own loud confidence. Lewis was careful to plant suspicion of a 'complex' Babbitt from the start: the businessman Babbitt does not seem the same person when the very latest alarm clock with its cathedral chime and its phosphorescent dial rouses him from dreams of the 'fairy child.' Further, he has a friend, Paul Riesling, who is not a mixer, who sits apart from 'the boys,' and encourages Babbitt to doubt the whole tribal structure. Riesling is obviously the 'criminal type,' and his friendship is a great risk to Babbitt; when Riesling tries to kill his wife and is given a three-year sentence, Babbitt loses confidence and morale. This is the beginning of his treachery, his flirtation with 'alien' ideas. It is the novel, as distinguished from the parody.

It is interesting that Lewis should have made the two Babbitts so very distinct from each other. The doubting Babbitt, upon yielding to his temptations, becomes an anti-Babbitt, a rebel and scapegrace, violating the social, political, and sexual taboos, and for a while taking pleasure in his defiance. He associates with the bohemian 'Bunch' instead of with the Athletic Club boys or regular guys; he refuses to join any more Booster organizations; he is unfaithful to his wife, neglects his family, sneers at the architectural harmony and social stability of Floral Heights, openly flouts Prohibition. Worst of all, Babbitt

begins to defend his friend, Seneca Doane, who remembers him from the university as 'an unusually sensitive chap.' He begins to play the role of the liberal, argues against those who condemn Doane's middle-of-the-road liberalism, defends the strikers and admires the men who march with them in a protest parade. Lewis has saved Babbitt from himself, has given him this 'fling' of sanity and intelligence, and has thus revealed his own private confidence in the soundness and the fundamental decency of the extracurricular Babbitt.

Lewis's own position was that of a liberal humanist; in a "Self-Portrait" (1927) he admitted that the parody-artist was not his real self... Lewis saves his greatest respect and affection for the man and woman of integrity, of an instinctive sense of decency. The double view of Babbitt is thus a consequence of Lewis's mixed emotion concerning the middle class. Its most hideous extremes of boasting, vulgarity, and cheapness of mind are fully given in the parody figure of Babbitt in the 'gotta-hustle' public world; but Babbitt is himself saved from the parody. In the end one discovers he is only weak—not malicious, illiberal, ungenerous, and fascistic, but sentimental and basically decent. In so revising the portrait of Babbitt, Lewis has to shift the center of his characterizations. Babbitt, who is in the beginning the epitome of all the violations of decorum that Lewis hates, must—because of his revolt—move downstage. The really villainous incarnation of the middle-class evil is not Babbitt but Vergil Gunch. His hostile eyes follow Babbitt as he moves from one petty defiance of the tribe to another; he proposes that Babbitt join the Good Citizens League as a testament of renewal of the faith; he leads the move toward extradition, which strikes fear in Babbitt's heart.

Vergil Gunch succeeds finally in convincing Babbitt that his extra-tribal spree is sinful. 'The independence seeped out of him, and he walked the streets alone, afraid of men's cynical eyes and the incessant hiss of whispering.' A minor family crisis helps to solve the major tribal crisis. Myra Babbitt is stricken, and at once he reacts with all tribal and family correctness; he drops all his 'inner dramas' and asks his wife's forgiveness for them. 'The boys' return, with fulsome gestures of regular-guy affection; and Babbitt, almost in tears because he can now stop fighting them, is restored to full membership. He moves quickly to resume his status; as a newly accepted member of the Good Citizens League, he is 'fired up' over 'the wickedness of Seneca Doane, the crimes of labor unions, the perils of immigration, the delights of golf, morality, and bank-accounts.' He goes to the efficient Reverend Doctor Drew, who efficiently prays with him (watch in hand) for five minutes, after which he must rush off to a meeting of the Don't-Make-Prohibition-a-Joke-Association. And now Babbitt knows he is safe from the terror of being alone, outside the tribe, isolated 'from the Clan of Good Fellows.'

The crucial fact about *Babbitt* is that it is two novels—or two types of literary exposition poorly combined in one work. The Babbitt of the address before the Real-Estate Board is one character, a perfect representation of its limited kind; but Lewis creates another, a sensitive, humane Babbitt, who in his person and in his behavior cancels the validity and nullifies the success of the other. The parody Babbitt is so indisputably the imaginative product of the Lewis-Mencken view of the middle class that he cannot also be an anti-Babbitt, a Babbitt conspiring against himself.

In order to humanize a parody figure, Lewis must make him over into a person with at least some of the sensitivity of a Seneca Doane. Babbitt must become a complex man in order than 'something happen.' What happens to the parody Babbitt is within its own context merely a succession of 'Americana' incidents; the novel demands more of crisis, a stronger narrative line. Besides, Lewis does not want to leave us with a pure caricature; he likes the middle class and would only point up its absurdities and follies. So, midway in the novel, Babbitt changes from a raucous, naïve Booster to a vaguely resentful doubter; and the center of the criticism shifts from Babbitt to 'the boys' and especially to Vergil Gunch. The middle class is saved from its worst sins, and its worst sins have at the same time provided high comedy.

Lewis touched upon every critical image applied to the middle class in the 1920s. The chief of these is, of course, Mencken's image of an inverted business mythology; but there is also—and perhaps underlying it—the liberal humanistic position of Seneca Doane, which, in Babbitt's brief flirtation with his ideas, is drawn into the range of a possible middle-class self-criticism. Babbitt briefly recognizes the heroism of strikes and the selfishness of sympathizers who put their 'alien, red notions' on public display. But all of this is dominated throughout by the great middle-class tribal fantasy, to which the extremes of

standardization of thought, ownership, and belief contribute. This, the dominating motif of middle-class criticism in the 1920s, is by all odds the most memorable quality of the novel.”

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*  
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 408-15

“*Babbitt* (1922) is called his masterpiece by most of the critics who do not, instead, choose its immediate successor, *Arrowsmith* (1925). Originally the action was planned to take place during twenty-four hours, and many have the impression that *Babbitt* is superior to *Main Street* in its structure. But the change of plan did not help, and severity in the matter of structure was never to fall within Lewis’s range. Where *Babbitt* is superior is in characterization. The Zenith ‘realtor’ superb in what has been called his ‘smoking room ignorance,’ has the kind of vitality associated with Dickens, Hogarth, and Daumier, and his name has already become a part of the language.

The basic trouble with *Babbitt* was that ‘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.’ His story, as Lewis tells it, is a merciless attack upon the cultural imbecility, the childishness, the coarseness, and the cowardice of too many solid American citizens; to read it now is to be taken back to the days following World War I, when decent men, shocked...and sickened by the horrors of the Ku Klux Klan, began to fear that the mob spirit might really be going to rule America. Yet with great skill, Lewis never allows his hero to decline to a mere stalking horse. We know that in college he was ‘an unusually liberal, sensitive chap’ who wanted to be a lawyer and take the cases of the poor for nothing... He dreams of ‘the fairy child’...befriends the tragically sensitive Paul Riesling, rebels abortively against the repressions of the Good Citizens’ League, and at last hopes wistfully that his foolish son may find the way he has somehow missed. Unhappily, the reader finds no reasonable ground to share this hope.”

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:*  
*From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*  
(Holt 1952) 357-58

“*Babbitt* is a superficially satirical but perceptive study of the suburban middle class. The protagonist, George F. Babbitt, is a real-estate salesman in Zenith, a city resembling Minneapolis; he is aggressive, enthusiastic, optimistic, and devoid of any finer sentiments. His ideals are those of the ‘go-getter’ and the ‘booster’—Zenith to him is the greatest little city in the world, selling real estate is the finest occupation known to society, and progress is constantly making Zenith and to a proportional extent America better and better in every way. Babbitt mistrusts liberals, artists, drifters, loafers, and clever people; he is rigidly moral in his domestic life, but is not averse to a fling with the ‘girlies’ when he travels a few hundred miles to a convention.

*Babbitt*, however, is not a total materialist; in fact he is not even a typical ‘Babbitt’ as the term had later come to be understood. At the age of forty-six he begins to realize the superficiality of his life, and turns toward his friend Paul Riesling, an introverted and creative personality who is a sort of alter-ego to oppose to his own materialism. Paul, however, is basically an ineffectual person; he begins to degenerate, and finally is arrested for the murder of his wife. Babbitt, shaken, dabbles in radicalism and attempts a brief experiment in adultery with Mrs. Tanis Judique. The fear of social censure, however, proves too much for him; he prefers to be conventional and frustrated. At last he sinks back into the life of vulgarity and complacency he has tried in a perfunctory way to escape. In his son, Ted, however, he sees promise of a vicarious escape. When Ted rebels against his school life and elopes against his parents’ consent, Babbitt tries to tell him of the emptiness of his own life and encourages him to seek a finer existence on his own.

‘Babbitt’ has become an American byword; *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* lists ‘Babbitt’ and ‘Babbitry,’ the latter defined as ‘smug acceptance of the ethical and social standards of ordinary business and middle-class respectability; in allusion to the blatant hero of...Sinclair Lewis’.”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 116-17

“Here are all the clichés of our commercial culture, the rasping rhetoric of American business enterprise at its crudest middle-class level. This is the world of George F. Babbitt.... *Main Street* ends in 1920, and appropriately, since this novel is a kind of elegy to the decade just ending. *Babbitt* begins in 1920, and quite as appropriately, since it is a satiric prelude to a decade of dizzying and often mindless economic expansion. *Babbitt* is the epic of our ‘boom’ years, and it remains today as the major documentation in literature of American business culture in general.

Documentation is the proper word, for in some ways *Babbitt* is hardly a novel at all. The structure of the book, if examined closely, proves to be quite fantastic.... The original structural conception remains in the first seven chapters, in which we do indeed follow Babbitt from dreaming sleep to dreaming sleep. But that is only one fourth of the whole novel. The remainder, twenty-seven chapters...are...a highly conscious, indeed systematic, series of set pieces, each with its own topic, and all together giving us a punctilious analysis of the sociology of American commercial culture, of American middle-class life. Over halfway through the book, mingling with these set pieces, the first of three ‘plots’ begins.

Chapters Eight and Nine, given over to a dinner party at the Babbitts’ house, have as their topic Domestic Manners. The next two chapters are concerned with Marriage, Pullman Car Culture, and Relaxation. Chapter Twelve is about Leisure Time: baseball, golf, the movies, bridge, motoring. Chapter Thirteen takes up the phenomenon of the annual Trade Association Convention and, since it ends in a brothel, what for lack of a better word one must call Sin. Chapter Fourteen has to do with Political and Professional Oratory, and Fifteen, with Social Stratification. Sixteen and Seventeen devote themselves to Religion, and Eighteen, to Family Relations. Putting aside for the moment the three separate ‘plots’ (the first of which begins in Chapter Nineteen), we may observe that topics that remain to be treated are the weekly Service Club Lunch, the Bachelor, the Barber Shop, Labor Relations, the Speakeasy, and ‘Crank’ Religion. It is a very thorough canvassing of an entire milieu, and its nearly anthropological intention is made evident in such a sentence as ‘Now this was the manner of obtaining alcohol under the reign of righteousness and prohibition,’ the sentence which introduces Babbitt’s visit to a bootlegger.

The ordering of these pieces is almost as aimless as the canvass is complete. They could be ordered in almost any other arrangement, and that is because there is no real plot, or connected march of events from the beginning to the end, which would necessarily have determined their order. Their fragmentariness is in part overcome by the fact that Babbitt moves through all of them in the course of his rising discontent—his rebellion, his retreat and resignation. Each of these three moods, in turn, centers in a more or less separate narrative. The first develops after Babbitt’s one real friend, Paul Riesling, shoots his wife and is given a three-year prison sentence. It is this event that suddenly makes Babbitt feel that his life is empty and that all his bustling activities are meaningless.

It is in this mood that he decides to be ‘liberal’ (although he hardly understands what the word means) and thus declare his independence from the clan of his business associates. Paul Riesling disappears pretty much from the novel, but now Babbitt meets a new friend, Mrs. Tanis Judique, an adventuress with whom, in the absence of Mrs. Babbitt, he begins a love affair. This open break with the professed moral code of the middle class is the dramatization of his revolt from the values of his business culture. He tries to forget his discontent and the insecurity and fear from which he is immediately suffering by drink and debauchery with ‘the Bunch,’ a miscellaneous group of trivial and tawdry persons who are Tanis Judique’s friends.

These pleasures pall, and presently he breaks off his friendship with Tanis, and now she disappears from the novel. In the meantime, Vergil Gunch and other of Babbitt’s associates are forming the Good Citizens’ League, an anti-labor vigilante organization, and they attempt to coerce Babbitt into joining them. In his mood of stubborn discontent, he resists their efforts and suffers alarming social and economic injuries as a result, and it is only his wife’s happily coincidental emergency operation that enables him to scuttle into that organization and back into the old security of the Boosters’ Club and the business order of Zenith. Perfectly safe again, he recognizes at the end of the book that he has never in his life really done anything that he wanted to, and he hopes for a fuller, more independent life for his not very promising son, Theodore Roosevelt Babbitt. But he cannot define for himself anything real that he ever did want to do except what in fact he had always done.



It is Babbitt's tragedy that he can never be anything but Babbitt, and this he learns well before the end of the book... He can never be anything but Babbitt even though he has a glimmering recognition of what it is about being Babbitt that he does not like.... The terror and loneliness that he feels in his brief taste of freedom (and that freedom itself consists largely of a very 'mechanical' bit of adultery) arise from the fact that when he is free he is nothing at all. His only self is the self that exists only within the circle of conformity. Since the publication of *Babbitt*, everyone has learned that conformity is the great price that our predominantly commercial culture exacts of American life. But when *Babbitt* was published, this was its revelation to Americans, and this was likewise how the novel differed from all novels about business that had been published before it. American literature had a rich if brief tradition of the business novel. James, Howells, Norris, London, Phillips, Herrick, Sinclair, Wharton, Dreiser, Poole, Tarkington....

*Babbitt*...is the world of the little businessman, and more particularly, of the middleman.... A little cheating in a deal, a little lie to one's wife, a little fornication that one pretends did not occur. Not in the least resembling the autocratic individualist, he is always the compromising conformist. No producer himself, his success depends on public relations. He does not rule; he 'joins' to be safe. He boasts and boasts with his fellows, sings and cheers and prays with the throng, derides all differences, denounces all dissent—and all to climb with the crowd. With the supremacy of public relations, he abolishes human relations. And finally, therefore, he abolishes his own humanity....

*Babbitt* was raucously satirical of a crowd of ninnyes and buffoons who, if they were malicious and mean, were also ridiculous. And yet, along with all that, *Babbitt* was pathetic. How could it possibly have failed? It did not. It was one of the greatest international successes in all publishing history. The European response was unadulterated delight: 'This was the way—crass, materialistic, complacent, chauvinistic—that Europe had always known America to be, and now an American had made the confession to the world. In the United States the response was, understandably, more mixed. Among those who were either unimpressed or outraged, there was, however, a small complaint on the score of deficiencies of *Babbitt* as a novel. No one, for example, observed the slack structure, or the repetitiousness of point in the long series of sociological demonstrations. Edith Wharton, in her letter of congratulation to Lewis, did observe that he seemed to depend on an excess of slang, on nearly endless imitation of midwestern garrulity; but this did not bother others....

There are other faults. Lewis had a tendency to reduce his irony to the most mechanical formulas, as when he immediately juxtaposes the disaster of the Babbitts' dinner for the McKelveys' with the disaster of the Overbrooks' dinner for the Babbitts, or when, in Chapter Eighteen, he juxtaposes Ted Babbitt's complaints about his father with the father's similar complaints about his daughter.... Such aesthetic crudities were overlooked by readers who delighted once more in Lewis's detail-crowded canvas, in his faithful observation of social and material surfaces, in his stream of reportorial lingo. These were, of course, his virtues. How perfect is a detail such as this, descriptive of a real-estate speculator: 'Below his eyes were semicircular hollows, as though silver dollars had been pressed against them and left an imprint.' Lewis had developed, too, a kind of rhetorical flourish of style that he had probably learned from Dickens, his favorite novelist.... 'Babbitt love his mother, and sometimes he rather liked her...'

Most readers found more to praise in the writing than to condemn. As for those who were unsatisfied, it was not the writing, nor even Lewis's satiric exposure of American commercial culture in itself that disturbed them, but rather their failure to find in the novel anything beyond this grossness.... In *Babbitt* they saw only the exemplification of Mencken's 'boob,' who was not capable of being saved, and in the novel at large they saw no one else who was, and Sinclair Lewis seemed to them, like Mencken, to be without 'spiritual gifts.' The world that Lewis drew was a damned world, as closed to escape as a circle in Hell... This spectacle was supposed to be America. The complaint was to say of Lewis, in effect, what Lewis had himself said of Babbitt, that he was 'without a canon [of value] which would enable him to speak with authority.'

Babbitt is obsessed with a love of *things*. "He had enormous and poetic admiration, though very little understanding, of all mechanical devices. They were his symbols of truth and beauty.' In his discontent he has vague glimmerings of a freer and a fuller life than a world of things will permit, but outside his world of things, as we have seen, he is lost and a cipher. His identity had been imposed upon him by that world

of things.... Truth, beauty, excellence, joy, passion, and wisdom—these are all the qualities that Zenith lacks and all the qualities that Zenith, if it is to be humane, needs.... How to find them? There is only one way, and that is through the cultivation of a true individuality, but how to cultivate a true individuality George F. Babbitt assuredly does not know, since he has no sense of what it is.... It has been a commonplace to say of Lewis that he was himself too much a George F. Babbitt to lift his sights to values beyond Babbitt's own. In many ways the charge is just. But he is different from Babbitt in one supreme way: He *created* him...and Babbitt endures in our literature as in life, where Sinclair Lewis enabled all of us to see him for the first and for an enduring time.”

Mark Schorer  
Afterword, *Babbitt*  
(New American Library/Signet 1961) 320-27

“In Zenith, the Zip City, George Babbitt—realtor, booster, joiner, self-styled ‘typical American’—holds forth. Middle-aged and hopelessly middle-class, he ultimately realizes that being a prosperous family man and all-round good fellow is not enough. He tries to revolt, seeks a woman who will ‘understand him,’ but finds he cannot escape. When his son elopes, however, he has the courage to turn against the conventional clichés of his own life and tells him: ‘I’ve never done a single thing I’ve wanted to.... Don’t be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself, the way I’ve been.’

The novel, perhaps Lewis’ best, made a tremendous sensation when it appeared. Although businessmen and boosters’ clubs denounced it bitterly, it undoubtedly helped to turn some of the latter’s meetings away from silly antics and toward something more adult. Lewis’ observations of details in the American social landscape is superb, his dialogue and descriptions magnificently satiric. The name of the book identified an American type and gave a new word to the language.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Readers’ Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)