Abhiruph Seetha Raman

Mrs. Small

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Engulfed in Greed

Does money buy happiness? A question so simple, yet so difficult to answer. From the days of Aristotle to the present, it remains a mystery. Published at the height of the Roaring Twenties in the rapidly industrializing and consumerist United States, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* attempts to answer this very question, ultimately concluding that a society built upon materialistic values is bound to fail. *Babbitt* is a landmark novel in American literature, but it takes an often overlooked path to convey its message: satire. Satire is a genre of prose that utilizes humor, irony, and exaggeration to critique flaws in human character in the pursuit of change. Broadly, satire is divided into two styles: Horatian and Juvenalian, both of which approach their satirical targets differently. *Babbitt* is considered a Juvenalian satire, employing a darker, serious tone to criticize broad societal issues that are not easily reparable, compared to the light-hearted, playful tone associated with Horatian pieces. The novel centers around its namesake, George F. Babbitt, a real estate broker in the fictional city of Zenith, who is entrenched in the society's ways of focusing on material possessions over sentimental fulfillment. The piece utilizes various satirical techniques to critique his consumption-driven mentality, naive understanding of the world, and treatment of his family and peers, ultimately arguing that materialism leads to a flawed perception of joy, isolation from others, and distancing oneself from what makes life truly meaningful.

Babbitt's obsession with perfecting insignificant details throughout his day stems from his desire to seem socially acceptable, but ironically only distances him from the truly desirable qualities of a human being. In the first chapter of the novel, Babbitt's morning routine introduces him as scornful and pessimistic. He wakes up to his alarm clock, which he describes as the "best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks" (Lewis 4). His obsession with the quality of a trivial item, like an alarm clock, shows his deep infatuation with always having the "best," instead of what is considered enough. Babbitt explains that owning a clock like this "was almost as [socially] creditable as buying expensive cord tires" (Lewis 4). Not only does this prove his quixotism, but by introducing a comparison to another relatively meaningless item, cord tires, he proves that all that matters to him is the feeling of owning premium goods, not necessarily their utility to his life. After he recalls playing poker the night before, he hears his wife's "detestably cheerful" voice outside his bedroom (Lewis 4). This anhedonic manner of describing one of the most meaningful people in his life shows that he holds no regard for anything that does not result in either increased social or monetary standing for himself. As he wakes up, he describes his blanket as symbolizing "gorgeous loafing, gorgeous cursing, [and] virile flannel shirts," furthering his flawed perception of what his goods truly mean. As he looks to his yard outside, he is filled with joy: "it was perfection, and made him also perfect" (Lewis 4). This fallacious belief that one's possessions somehow correlate to their "quality" as a human being shows his oblivious, carefree life that focuses only on the quantitative value of items, rather than what they mean to him at a deeper level. Almost immediately after admiring this, though, he remembers "for the three-hundred-and-sixty-fifth time in a year" that his tin shack "isn't up to date" (Lewis 4). This dichotomy between old and new shows that all he cares about is how things look, even if their true qualities are hollow beyond belief. This can be reflected in

his own character, as he is only interested in how he appears to society, rather than the quality of person that is what truly defines one's contributions to society. He is especially pleased with the "porcelain and glazed tile and [sleek] metal" walls that line his "altogether royal bathroom," though, which he describes as a "sensational exhibit" (Lewis 4). Once again, he chooses an ultimately unimportant element of his house and life to focus on and admire, as the quality and appearance of a bathroom are immaterial to its use and function. All that matters is that he can utilize it for its purpose, but to Babbitt, an object is only valuable if it appears so. The connotative nature of "sleek metals" and "porcelain" implies that Babbitt only owns these goods to seem opulent. By furthering this description with the words "exhibit" and "glittering," Babbitt shows that the room only serves to look presentable, with no other added purpose. His unwavering obsession with the most inconsequential parts of his room shed light on his inherently flawed belief set and what he considers to be truly valuable.

Babbitt's willful ignorance in avoiding what he knows is just, in favor of what is materially beneficial, displays his innately flawed and fallacious set of beliefs. At the end of the first section, he contemptuously remarks that "for the first time in weeks" he was "sufficiently roused by his wife to look at her" (Lewis 6). He feels that his wife is only meant to satisfy him, rather than it being a two-way street. For Babbitt, unless something is "sufficient" for him, he does not consider it of value or "worth" pursuing. This only leads to more avarice, as he is left in a never-ending loop of wanting more than what he can have. His inflated ego simultaneously distances him from his family and anything of true sentimental value, while pulling him into a never-ending spiral of greed. However, the most dangerous effect of contempt is the lack of self-understanding that comes with an inflated ego. Babbitt naively exclaims that he is "the only person in the doggone house that's got the slightest doggone bit of consideration for other people

and thoughtfulness" (Lewis 6). His callow belief that he is somehow altruistic only serves to prove the opposite. When he introduces his job as a real estate broker, Babbitt states that his mornings are filled with a "thousand nervous details," but primarily "advice…on getting money out of tenants who had [none]" (Lewis 42). The deadpan tone with which he describes a brutally unethical mode of business shows how distanced he is from morally just behavior. Ironically, he considers these beliefs to be pillars of his job, or his "virtues as a real-estate broker" (Lewis 42). He claims that he is a "servant of society," despite his business decisions actively harming everyone but himself. Babbitt proceeds to acknowledge the "good advertisement" he would receive at Boosters' Club lunches if he "[spoke] sonorously of Unselfish Public Service," but argues that "[refusing] to take twice the value of a house if a buyer was such an idiot that he didn't jew you down on the asking price" is "impractical" (Lewis 42). The implications of this statement are two-fold. Firstly, Babbitt's description of unselfishness as "advertisement" shows that the only circumstance where sacrificing business profits is worth it is for external validation. However, his depiction of the buyer as an idiot puts his priorities on display front and center for one key reason. He considers twice the value of the house to be the asking price, showing that he is immoral enough to begin negotiations at that high a price, rather than what the house is fairly worth. This puts the onus on the reader to identify that the flaw is not with Zenith's expectations of real estate brokers or even the profession as a whole, but strictly Babbitt himself.

Babbitt's carefree and deadpan attitude toward his blatantly immoral business decisions serves to present his narrow-minded and naive view of the world, leading to logically flawed justifications of his actions. His reasoning for focusing on profits is coherent, but only for an individual and a society that values objective gain over what is just. Babbitt derides the public, who criticize him for his ignorance of the heating of "city schoolrooms" and the selection

process and salaries of teachers, because he spends all of his time memorizing “the market price, inch by inch, of certain districts of Zenith” (Lewis 43). He selectively chooses what he values, proving that a materialistic mindset never fades away, eventually engulfing any sense of morality left. As he continues discussing his “virtues,” Babbitt describes his approach to selling homes. As an avid critic of cesspools, Babbitt explains that “if a client impertinently wanted him to sell a house which had a cesspool, [he] always spoke about it—before accepting the house and selling it” (Lewis 45). Even though this instance of business seems like a trivial detail in the grand scheme of things, Babbitt’s compromise of what he truly believes, in favor of increased commission that comes from the sale of a house, is representative of his willful ignorance of what he knows is right. His belief in cesspools is symbolic of general morals and ethics that humans should live by, as Babbitt knows that what he is doing is wrong, because he “always [speaks] about it,” but subdues the feeling of regret with fake happiness to mask his pain. Babbitt is sarcastically described as being “virtuous” for the reasons that “he advocate[s], [without] practis[ing], the prohibition of alcohol” and “praise[s], [without] obey[ing], the laws against motor-speeding” (Lewis 46). His hypocrisy in his daily choices depicts him as a deeply flawed character controlled by the society he lives in. This is merely an extension of his morality, though, as he understands deep down that his business choices do not align with his sense of right and wrong, but he chooses to line his pockets in blissful and willful ignorance. He even defends himself in the process by saying that he has to “toot [his] own horn,” presenting himself as the victim rather than the manipulator (Lewis 46). This attempt to morally defend himself only places his stance further in the wrong, as it shows that, despite acknowledging the consequences of his actions, he takes no action to make amends.

Babbitt's manipulative rhetoric in order to selectively benefit himself reflects his broader selfishness and ego, proving that a materialistic mindset is destined to fail. One of his most important business deals in the novel surrounds the sale of an empty lot to Archibald Purdy, a local grocer. As soon as he hears of Purdy's interest in buying the lot, he informs his client, a "real-estate speculator" named Conrad Lyte. On hearing this, Lyte purchases the lot for its market value, but with Babbitt's advice, plans to sell it to Purdy at a much higher cost than what he bought it for. Babbitt describes the meeting with Purdy, cynically remarking that Purdy's "delay was going to cost him ten thousand extra dollars" (Lewis 47). He then boasts of his "virtues" by announcing that Lyte is lucky to have a broker who has "Vision…Talking Points, Strategic Values, Key Situations, Underappraisals," and most importantly, "the Psychology of Salesmanship" (Lewis 47). This sarcastic description of Babbitt's skills serves to define the pillars of his job: greed, immorality, and unethical behavior. As Purdy approaches them, Babbitt invites him to their room for negotiation with "affectionate little cries" (Lewis 47). Babbitt's fake outward expressions in pursuit of internal fulfillment show his paradoxical nature as a character. He would rather mistreat everyone around him if it means that he stands to gain some arbitrary form of social standing or money, when his hollowness as a person means that he is the one who constantly stands to lose. During the 'negotiation,' Babbitt tells Purdy, under the guise of a caring persona, that it would be "hard luck if one of these cash-and-carry chain-stores got in there…and forced [him] to the wall" (Lewis 47). This is a classic example of reversal for two main reasons. Firstly, it shows that despite Babbitt's intended responsibility as a broker, he prioritizes the profits and commissions he makes from his customers, rather than what they stand to benefit from their deals. However, it also depicts Babbitt as the villain that he fearmongers Purdy about. In reality, there is no menacing store that plans to destroy Purdy's business, but

rather a broker with plans to 'force him to the wall'. He concludes the conversation by telling Purdy that he and Lyte would be "glad to oblige" about the payment method, while rejoicing on the inside that he successfully lined his pockets because of yet another 'idiot' client (Lewis 49). As Babbitt leaves the scene, he disdainfully remarks that it makes him "sick to think of Lyte carrying off most of the profit," when he "did all the work" (Lewis 49). Despite making a "four-hundred-and-fifty dollar commission," he is still disappointed, showing the extent to which greed has taken over his life (Lewis 49). This scene serves to appeal to the reader's sense of pathos, as Purdy is depicted as a helpless yet kind-hearted grocer whose business is destroyed by the greed of a money-hungry broker with no regard for anyone but himself.

Babbitt's interactions with the setting and objects, and how diction and tone are used to describe them, strengthen the satirical message by providing clear evidence of Babbitt's ridiculous worldview. The diction of the passage is critical and reproving, with Lewis using a formal, educated tone to convey the satirical message. Phrases such as 'detestably cheerful,' 'quantitatively produced,' and 'exhibit' are used to describe the innate hollowness of the goods that adorn the walls of the Babbitt house, along with Babbitt himself. He is also described as 'belligerent,' a testament to his often childish behavior whenever he feels like he does not have enough. He is even stated as worshipping the god of "Modern Appliances," which explains the shallow-minded mentality he uses to distinguish between 'old versus new,' and 'good versus bad' (Lewis 5). The choice of diction also amplifies the impact of other satirical techniques, such as *reductio ad absurdum*. By focusing on the granular details of specific objects and characteristics, like the alarm clock in the first scene, Lewis reduces the state of Babbitt's life to just a few of his mannerisms and obsessions. The trivial and meaningless details that Lewis laboriously explores are intended to highlight the fallacious premise of Babbitt's reasoning, as a

gluttonous mindset is what drives him to obsess over these things in the first place. By focusing on the minute details that take up such a large portion of Babbitt's priorities, Lewis presents his mentality as inherently flawed and unjust.

The satirical approach of *Babbitt*, which criticizes consumerism through the lens of a money-hungry real estate broker in the pursuit of endless riches, surrounds the unlikelihood of true fulfillment under a materialistic mindset. By critiquing the systemic norms that drive the novel's protagonist into an obsessive fixation on his social credibility, Sinclair Lewis effectively argues against a consumerist and acquisitive societal framework, suggesting that money fails to provide the fulfillment it so often promises.

Works Cited

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922.