



## LOSS OF HUMAN VALUES IN SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *BABBITT*

M. Vijiyapriya\* Dr. K. Muthuraman\*\*

\*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University.

\*\*Professor and Head, Department of English, Annamalai University.

In 1922, in the novel *Babbitt* Sinclair Lewis, the most influential novelist of modern America, creates an archetype of the American middle-class businessman. His message to the American people is that a true democracy cannot exist when society is dominated by standardization. Lewis characterizes his observations of how he sees American live: a culture determined by material objects, the machine-made stereotypical values. Lewis portrays what comes to be known as “Babbittry”: hypocrisy, a loss of American myths of integrity and happiness, and a loss of spiritual values. While conformity is rightfully described as the price of standardization, Lewis also illustrates how greed is the basic motivating factor for conformity and the willingness to abandon human values. *Babbitt* is a profound historical document in that Lewis successfully characterizes, through his observation, what other prominent social theorists teach.

Lewis's message to the American people, in the novel *Babbitt*, is that a true democracy cannot exist if society is dominated by standardization. With the publication of *Babbitt* Lewis received international fame and recognition. He would later be the first American to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, with *Babbitt* being considered one of his best novels. In *Babbitt*, Lewis utilized his gift of keen observation and focused on the American middle-class businessman. Using clichés, irony, mimicry, and satire, Lewis fashioned characterizations who unmasked conformity, greed, and the compliance of American people to standardized values. Lewis showed America, in exaggerated form, its deviation from freedom.

In 1920, Lewis related to his publisher his desire to write a novel about “...all of us Americans at 46, prosperous but worried, wanting - passionately - to seize something more than motorcars and a house before it's too late” (59) quoted by Alfred Harcourt in *From Main Street To Stockholm*. Lewis recognized that in America culture is determined by material, standardized, and stereotypical possessions: homes, offices, automobiles, and league memberships. Lewis saw Americans as the social critic Randolph Bourne describes, as conformers, “stampeded by herd emotion” brought on by the small town “folksiness,” particularly in the Midwest. In *The History of a Literary Radical & Other Papers*, Bourne states that “democracy may come to mean that the individual feels himself somehow expressed - his private tastes and intelligence - in whatever the crowd chooses to do” (288). As a boy, Lewis is not a conformist. He is questioned repeatedly by his father as to why he did not do like any other boy ought to do.

In *Babbitt* Lewis observes how man fears to be different and how being different jeopardizes an individual's place in society. Lewis notes how men join leagues and then lose themselves within the herd or the institution. Lewis notes how individuals feel compelled to conform to the rules of the herd for reasons of social acceptance and economic security because support lies in being part of a uniform group. In America, a capitalistic society, Lewis sees conformity as the price for making money. In *Babbitt* Lewis stresses how standardization and conformity destroy freedom. Lewis' message to the American people is that life has its meaning not in becoming enslaved to material standardized values and in losing one's self in society, but in being true to one's self and retaining traditional human values.

To comprehend the significance of *Babbitt*, it is necessary to keep in mind the social and historical era of 1922 because this is the era that Lewis memorializes. Lewis's talent lies not as a novelist, but in the social and historical documentation. In *Babbitt* Lewis projects the effects of WWI: Americans originally believe in freedom, not only for themselves, but as they enter the war, in freedom for all nations. Lewis observes how conformity to standardized values has made Americans slaves to society's values. Lewis notes how, with the war, publicity becomes propaganda as advertisers take advantage of civic promotions. He notes, as Jackson Lears in his presentation of advertising in *Fables of Abundance* points out, how “the consumer nearly always purchases in



unconscious obedience to what he or she believe to be the dictates of an authority which is anxiously consulted and respected” (208). Individuals place precedence in society’s values rather than their own values. Lears comments on how the failure of Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations “lowered the faith in the common man” (223). Lewis emphasizes the loss of integrity and high ideals as Americans isolate themselves from Europe and concentrate on their own resources. Lewis notes how the effect of the Harding administration, an administration void of morals, prompts corporate malfeasance out of greed and showmanship, a significant problem that continues to exist in the 21st Century. Lewis notes the effects of mass persuasion on society and in it he sees the threat of Fascism.

Lewis recognizes the American, as described by the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses*, as a *mass man*, “not so much because of his multitude as because of his inertia” (65), a man “just like everybody” (15). In *Babbitt*, Lewis targets the business industry, which Mark Schorer, the American Critic and essential biographer and critic of Lewis’ work, describes in *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* in 1922, to be “synonymous with ethical corruption; the world of business is savagely competitive, brutally aggressive, murderous. The motivation of the businessman is money, power, and social prestige - in that order” (356). From these observations, one notes how Lewis, through his observation, becomes the social conscience of America.

Lewis is unique in his observation in that what he sees is not the tycoon of the business industry, but the middleman. What Lewis recognizes is Public Relations. Lewis observes the middle-class businessman in the various phases of society and then creates his own Pinocchio as a protagonist called “Babbitt.” Babbitt has a balding head, wears frameless glasses, has a toothbrush moustache, and wears a standard suit with a Booster’s pin. His strings are constantly pulled as he hustles in every scene. Lewis pities him; he is the tired businessman who cannot come alive since he has only money values and no human values. He must live in the standardized home, work in a standardized office, wear standardized clothes, and work to make money along with the other puppets. In the novel, Babbitt is not a producer: “he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he is nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay” (6). Eventually Babbitt starts to come alive, but then he finds he cannot live because he is a standardized object, a businessman, and cannot function as a human. Everything he is or has is what the other puppets have made him.

In 1921, one year before the publication of *Babbitt*, Harold Stearns assembled the essays of thirty contributing writers in his edition of *Civilization in the United States*. In his preface Stearns noted that he found “three major contentions” in these writers’ work (vi, vii). The contentions are first hypocrisy, the dichotomy of what we represent and what we do, second the de-mything of American morals, namely the promise of America versus the loss of integrity and happiness, and third the loss of spirituality. Schorer maintains that Lewis is able to characterize all of these contentions in one novel, namely *Babbitt* (355). These contentions constitute “Babbitt,” the word coined by Lewis, and a synonym for both a state of mind and a way of life. It is the way of life in which Americans sacrifice their freedom for standardized values. Using the puppet Babbitt, Lewis enacts the three mentioned contentions in life-like scenes from his observations of Americans and documents historical era in literature.

Babbitt proclaims to be a businessman. He proclaims, “I’ve never done a single thing I’ve wanted to do in my whole life!” (391). From all appearances, Babbitt never knew what he wanted to do. He is the *Naturmensch* who thought he had it all. He walled himself off from everything of value, blind and deaf expounding his opinions. He had, for example, sought for how much he could give to Archibald Purdy instead of how much he could get, Babbitt might have been fulfilled. He had, for example, respected his half-brother Martin’s honesty and sincerity and appreciated humility instead of feeling superior, Babbitt might have felt fulfilled. The Babbitts had shown some empathy to the over-brooks instead of deceit, they might have felt fulfilled. Babbitt kept on the treadmill until he broke down mechanically. When he began to see the light of day, he wondered where love is. Where is fulfillment? Where is peace and harmony? Lewis made it clear that Babbitt had replaced the wrong god. There is no evidence of joy in his home. Without conformity Babbitt has nothing because he is what his peers make him. He creates nothing of value. He is the parasite.



Babbitt tells his son that the world is his to live. Babbitt's son is not of the institution of conformity. He need not do like every other boy ought to do. Babbitt's son does not choose college and the routine way to worldly success. Babbitt tells his son not to be afraid of the world "like I've been" (391). Perhaps for Babbitt's son it will be the mechanic's job, but it will be his son's choice. Like Babbitt, his son has no higher authority to turn to, nor has he learned from previous generations. Hopefully he will avoid hypocrisy, know integrity and happiness, and come to appreciate spirituality. He would then appreciate a true democracy.

The machine industry and business is shown to be the new god. If standardization is the vehicle for the machine industry, then for Babbitt, the vehicle ruined the ride. Babbitt did not look for human values: love, beauty, or integrity. His gods did not call for ideals; hence the hypocrisy, restlessness, and loss of spirituality. Babbitt creates nothing. He has no ideals for freedom.

America is not prepared for the colossal material wealth it experienced in 1922. Lewis projects this in detailing Babbitt's adolescent gratifications such as his novelty alarm clock, his electric cigar lighter, and his automobile, all toys amid a large, corporate, industrial society. Lewis projects Babbitt's view on education in a conversation with his son where Babbitt downplays scientific achievements, the telephone, the aeroplane and the wireless and proclaims efficiency, rotarianism, prohibition, and democracy as the "deepest and truest wealth" (85-86). Babbitt is unaware of how his democracy is compromised.

In addition, Babbitt has no spiritual side because his gods are material values. Lewis mimics the new values. Jose Ortega y Gasset states that the 19th and 20th Century man does not realize that someone more educated than he is responsible for the "material abundance that he enjoys, let alone acknowledges" (58-59).

The American Dream is pathetic in Babbitt's life. Jose Ortega y Gasset describes the 19th and 20th Century man as a "Naturmensch: The new man wants his motorcar, and enjoys it, but he believes that it is the spontaneous fruit of an Edenic tree" (82). Lewis illustrates Babbitt as a Naturmensch. Babbitt feels superior to other generations and his family in Catawba. He feels he has succeeded where others have not. He has no understanding of the values his half-brother Martin holds, such as the pride of hard and honest work. In another incident he dreams of running a "bank and having his son succeed him" (117). This does not seem realistic since his scope of knowledge in the Real Estate business is superficial and centres strictly on profit. Babbitt cannot comprehend a true democracy.

In the novel, Lewis immediately elicits the disparity between the modern city and the protagonist, Babbitt, a 46-year-old businessman. While the city is, "it seemed—built for giants" (6), Babbitt's persona is that of a child. The child symbol represents the development stage of Babbitt's provincial mind in relation to a highly developed corporate society. Babbitt's freedom has been destroyed by his indulgence in material wealth without the comprehension of its origin or mechanics. He thrives on fortune while his own abilities are un nourished. Lewis elaborates on his description of Babbitt, the child: "His large head is pink [...]. His face is babyish in slumber [...]. He is not fat but he is exceedingly well fed: his cheeks were pads, and the unroughened hand which lay helpless upon the khaki colored blanket is slightly puffy" (6). Babbitt lies dreaming of a "fairy girl"; "She is so slim, so white, so eager! She cried that he is gay and valiant, that she would wait for him, that they would sail" (6-7). The emotional starvation is self-evident. It is because Babbitt's values have been dictated to him by society that his own immaturity exists.

The descriptions of Babbitt, the child, bear resemblance to a harmless and docile sort, well fed on the whole, and somewhat placidly content with the full dinner pail. The technicians are not free because they assume the position of the employee of the businessman. The businessman is elected to get something for nothing. One concludes that Lewis is saying that Babbitt is not hungry or hurting so he won't grow up and become free; the engineers and industrial experts are comfortable so they would not try to abolish the business sector that takes their profit. There is hypocrisy in that the Babbitt (as well as the engineers) is not mature enough to hold independent positions and the individual is not what he represents. The de-mything of American morals is the loss of integrity. The loss of spirituality lies in spirituality being replaced by business values. Babbitt's freedom is compensated in that he is



not made to understand and enjoy his own individuality. His comfort has always been at his disposal. He is at the mercy of what he does not understand.

Lewis initiates the novel *Babbitt* by portraying a modern, industrialized city known as Zenith. Lewis describes the towers, the skyscraper of the Associated Press, the lights, the noise of the railroad, the concrete bridge, the sentience of a limo, and the shining new houses, all of which represent the new gods which replace what Lewis refers to as, “the fretted structures of earlier generations” (5). What Lewis is saying is that the new gods, the new values of the machine age, have replaced spirituality. The new gods are comprised of material stereotypical values that are enforced by the business sector. It is this replacement of spiritual values by material values in *Babbitt* that the contention regarding the loss of spiritual values. Clearly, democracy is compensated by the enforcement of the new values of business over individual spiritual values.

Lewis is also alluding to that the machine industry destroys human values. The machine industry treats strictly with the gauge and grade: If modern man takes to myth-making and personifies the machine or the process and imputes purpose and benevolence to the mechanical appliances, after the manner of current nursery tales and pulpit oratory, he is sure to go wrong. Once again, Lewis is stating that the machine industry suppresses spiritual values and democracy.

## REFERENCES

1. Bourne, Randolph. *The History of Literary Radical & Other Papers*. New York: S. A. Russell, 1956.
2. Harcourt, Alfred. *From Main Street to Stockholm*. New York: Harcourt, 1952.
3. Lears, Jackson. *Fables of Abundance*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
4. Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. New York: Modern Library, 2002.
5. Ortega Y Gasset, Jose. *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York: Random House, 1993.
6. Schorer, Mark. *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1961.
7. Stearns, Harold E. *Civilization in The United States*. New York. Harcourt, 1922.