

Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*

Suggestions for commentary

As the passage begins, George F. Babbitt, a 46-year-old real estate broker, reluctantly awakens from a recurring dream about his fairy girl, a slim maiden who fulfills his fantasies of being a “gallant, romantic youth”. The sound of the alarm clock, a noticeable example of the latest technology, and Myra Babbitt's cheerful morning greeting dispel the last vestiges of Babbitt's fantasy world. Babbitt sulkily embarks on his morning ritual. Babbitt is irritable and keeps on grumbling because he spent the previous evening drinking Vergil Gunch's illegal home-brewed beer, smoking cigars, and playing poker. He resents having to leave the virile world of manly activities to enter the low regions of family life and professional preoccupations.

The alarm clock is clearly described as fulfilling the role of a *social* marker (“as creditable as being expensive cord tires”)—hence Babbitt’s pride of owning such a “rich device”. The use of the adjective “rich” to refer to the sophistication of the alarm clock (“all modern attachments”) as well as the term “creditable” are also indirect ways of stressing the financial cost that it implies. It is not any kind of alarm clock. It is the best that modern America can mass-produce and sell. Babbitt’s purchase of such an instrument is also the result of a nationwide advertising campaign. The alarm clock is thus more than an alarm clock. It is a huge “architectural” symbol—the hugeness of which being implied by the term “cathedral”. The alarm clock is the monumental epitome of modern industrial America in the early 1920s.

Key-words:

Irony ; structural irony ; internal focalization ; dream vs. reality ; mythopoeics ; duality.

The only problem is that the alarm clock is *also* the symbol of Babbitt’s daily return to real life—namely “the grind of the real-estate business”. The use of “real” in “real-estate” is of course most ironical as it points both to the the *realtor* (real-estate agent) he is (from Latin *res* “property, goods, matter, thing, affair”) but also to the hard and inescapable *reality* he has to face. The grind of his business is thus the grind of real life. And, clearly enough, Babbitt rejects and hates reality. He sees himself as a paragon of masculinity living in a world of male friends, poker cards, cigars and alcohol (and because this is prohibition time, drinking alcohol amounts to *transgression*). This “bold man-world” is the world of “holidays”—and more particularly of “gorgeous loafing, gorgeous cursing, virile flannel shirts”. These are words which conjure up images of pioneers exploring the wilderness. And his blanket— because of its khaki colour—is somehow reminiscent of army life.

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This is the way Babbitt sees himself. This is how he *reads* himself. He is, in his own eyes, a creature of “freedom and heroism”. Yet the narrator constantly questions Babbitt’s self-representation. And the alarm clock *intermittently* rings a bell and arouses the reader’s attention to the unsustainable and unconvincing nature of such a portrait. Though largely the result of what seems to be an internal focalization, the narrative also discreetly debunks Babbitt’s mythopoeic construction of himself. In other words—and to quote from the text—the trip Babbitt plans *for* himself, *in* himself and *about* himself, “never comes off”.

The reader rapidly understands the character’s unfair bias towards his wife through the use of the oxymoronic expression “detestably cheerful” to describe his wife’s voice and the overall impression is that some sort of bad faith is at work in the passages that give us access to his inner self. This impression is in fact corroborated by other clues which, here and there, imply that, far from being a man or a hero, Babbitt is *in fact* still a child. There is of course his wife’s morning call (“Georgie boy”) but also, in the narrative, the mention of his “faded baby-blue pyjamas”. It is interesting to emphasize at that point the iteration of the *b* sound in “baby” and “Babbitt” — the character’s name actually sounding like some sort of stuttering baby talk.

As to his physical appearance, a number of elements (“thick legs”, “plump feet”) indicate that Babbitt is far from being an athletic figure. Ironically, the only thing that is “wild” about him is his hair. *Structural irony* is at stake. The concept of structural irony is traditionally associated with an implication of alternate or reversed meaning that pervades a work. A major technique for sustaining structural irony is the use of a naïve protagonist or unreliable narrator who continually interprets events and intentions in ways that the narrator signals are mistaken. For attentive readers, it is as if two voices could be heard simultaneously, one voice questioning or contradicting the other one, more or less audibly.

Babbitt is a child-like figure but, if we look at there text even more closely, we may understand that what he embodies is perhaps even more disturbing. Babbitt’s relationship with his wife—and in fact with all his family—is described as being highly problematic. Babbitt does not look particularly attached to his family and the looseness of the bonds between he and the others: “[he] disliked his family, and disliked himself for disliking them”. Such a sentence hints at the emotional vicious circle which makes Babbitt a prisoner of his own self. Babbitt is apparently more *attached* to his alarm clock—which has “all modern *attachments*”— than to his family. Such an analysis is confirmed by the the way his feet “felt mechanically for his slippers”. Irony here culminates at the reader grasps that Babbitt—not the clock—is the incarnation of alienation. Babbitt is completely controlled by modern life and its mechanical power of conformity and idealism The character does not realize that he eventually is the product of stereotypes which stifle his real being, turning him into a puerile *and* mechanized version of his own self. Babbitt is indeed a product desperately trying to advertise himself.