

TEACHING SINCLAIR LEWIS

FROM RESENTMENT TO RECOGNITION: *BABBITT* IN THE CLASSROOM

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Babbitt still speaks to me, and to my students, because of Lewis's treatment of one of the most important conflicts depicted in American literature: independence versus conformity. While Lewis's treatment is bleaker than that of some canonical texts such as *Huck Finn*, his message is not too far removed from that of *The Age of Innocence* or *The Scarlet Letter*. The problem with teaching *Babbitt* is that many students initially find themselves distanced from the novel either emotionally or aesthetically: some of them find it too "depressing" to risk connecting with it, while others resent what they feel is its lack of artistry. My goal is to move students from the resentment they feel toward Lewis, his characters, and his novel to a recognition of how *Babbitt* continues to speak to us.

I have successfully taught *Babbitt* three times at the University of Connecticut, Greater Hartford Campus. *Babbitt* appears in a course I've designed called "American Attitudes Toward Business," which meets once a week in the evening. Consequently, the course draws many "nontraditional" (i. e., adult) students. The growth of the adult student population (many of whom have exposure to the business world) in universities across the country is an important resource to draw upon in the pedagogical selling of *Babbitt*. The business literature framework is also very helpful, but while I have the liberty to use *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *The Financier*, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, *The Octopus*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Big Money*, and *The Bonfire of the Vanities* to provide a context for Lewis's novel, I believe it would also work in a more mainstream American lit survey, clustered with thematically related works such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Sister Carrie*, or *Death of a Salesman*. The syllabus, then, can establish an important context for reading *Babbitt* as commenting on American preoccupations with money, status, and success.

I begin class by introducing two seemingly contradictory lines of thought: the importance of Lewis as cultural spokesman, and the resentment many readers feel about considering *Babbitt* as a work of art. Students are intrigued to hear details about Lewis's refusal of a Pulitzer, and his receipt of the Nobel (particularly when I tell them how few Americans have been laureates). By quoting some of Lewis's comments about the literary climate and the "American Fear of Literature," I get students on his side.¹ The rebel in Lewis appeals to them, makes them consider some political and social dimensions of literature—and provides a useful framework for our later discussion of *Babbitt*'s own attempted rebellion. A particularly effective way to bring home *Babbitt*'s cultural importance is by passing around E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, which includes "Babbitt" as an entry in the pompous list of "what every American needs to know." Students are fascinated by this list and, I suspect, pleased with themselves for recognizing *Babbitt* on it.

I segue, then, to *Babbitt*'s historical status as the "classic American business novel" (or, one could say, a "classic American novel"), reading them excerpts of contemporary reviews, and ask students what they think of that estimation. As long as they have read related texts, students have ready responses—many of them negative. Provided that students are allowed to voice their criticisms without fearing retribution from me, the discussion productively engages them with the novel—even if this engagement is initially negative. It is helpful to affirm that their negative emotional reactions, such as depression, revulsion, and frustration, are entirely appropriate. I admit (and exaggerate) my own reservations: that Lewis is taking a lot of cheap shots, that the novel seems hollow, that the characters are flat, that it seems more a series of sociological abstracts than a novel.

I exploit the tension between *Babbitt*'s historical importance and our complaints about it. Students enjoy being allowed to criticize a book on Hirsch's list; in current parlance, they are "empowered" by doing so. Furthermore, when students enter into a process of intelligent criticism, they are placing themselves in a position to appreciate Lewis's own highly critical novel.

After students have voiced what they dislike about *Babbitt*, I move them from resistance to recognition by focusing the discussion on satire. A brief definition of satire may be in order, but what is more interesting is to ask students to pin down exactly *what* Lewis is satirizing, and *why*. This question can be answered in so many ways—including materialism, advertising, standardization, the commercialization of religion, the rigidity of gender roles, peer pressure, hypocrisy, anti-intellectualism, conformity, cowardice—that discussion can continue for some time. As students begin to articulate what Lewis is satirizing, pointing out their favorite quotations, the giggling begins. This amusement is a sign of further engagement with the novel, and I second it by quoting my own favorite passages. Often students acknowledge without any prodding from me that these problems persist in their own world but, if not, all I need to do is ask, "Do you know anyone like Babbitt?," or "Have you ever felt this sort of pressure?" The shock of recognition, combined with amusement, gets many students to connect with the novel.

Another useful approach, particularly for the adult students, is to set up *Babbitt* as a novel of midlife crisis. As with the question of satire, asking students exactly what *Babbitt* is rebelling against and whether or not he accomplishes anything in his rebellion provokes many responses. Asking students how they feel, for instance, when *Babbitt* tells Myra "I'm back," can provoke a heated argument about issues crucial to the novel such as family values, autonomy, conformity, and indepen-

dence. Asking about the role of Paul Riesling is another way to engage students with these issues.

Discussion of Babbitt's aborted rebellion helps students to see the tension in Lewis's characterization: George F. is largely a type figure but tries to become individualized. An effective closing question is to ask students how they evaluate the fact that Lewis plots the novel around Babbitt's conformity, rebellion, and reclamation by the tribe. Many students are depressed, but by now able to empathize with Babbitt and to respect Lewis's social commentary. Most importantly, they recognize that the tension between independence and conformity persists in their own lives.

*I would like to thank my students in English 217, Spring 1989, Fall 1991, and Fall 1993.

"The American Fear of Literature," Lewis's Nobel Prize address, is reprinted, along with other useful documents, in *The Man from Main Street*, ed. Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane (New York: Random House, 1953).