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American Social Realism and Sinclair Lewis: A Study of Babbitt

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Abstract:

Sinclair Lewis, the famous satirist of the 1920s, who won the Nobel Prize in 1930, in his novel *Babbitt* presents the American materialist adventure which he critiques. Though this kind of materialism is manifest in the capitalist spirit, but Lewis instead of making a satiric attack on American capitalism, makes a caricature on the materialist man Babbitt who when looks back at his materialist adventure finds himself to be hollow. It is to be understood here that the society is full of Babbitts and Lewis through a realist portrayal of Babbittic society is making us aware of the pitfalls of such materialist pursuit(s). In other words, it can be said that Sinclair Lewis' social realist approach towards writing finds artistic manifestation in *Babbitt*.

Keywords:

Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, 1920s America, Satire, Social Realism, Materialism, Zenith, Standardization.

Realism is a mode of narrative writing which tries to describe life and times without any idealization or romantic subjectivity which, in general, literature is so famous for employing in writing. Especially the French novelist Flaubert and Balzac employ this technique on their writings to talk about the then France. George Eliot and Charles Dickens introduced Realism as a mode of writing in the novels of the English tradition whereas William Dean Howells did it in case of United States of America. The term 'social realism' comes into existence from the beliefs of the Russian writers who thought that one of the other words, it can be said that the Russian realist writer believed that social realist fiction

has the power in it to portray the documentary of the structure of the social reality in such a way so as to make the readers see the reality. Sinclair Lewis is a realist writer, as he consciously and deliberately makes an effort to mirror the society as his aim was to reform the then American society and also to celebrate the American society. Not only does he mirror the society but at the same time makes conscious efforts to satirize it.

Sinclair Lewis is a reformist as in his realistic portrayal of things he makes every effort to present things in as detailed fashion as possible so as to make things clearer to his readers. If we look at his novels written in the 1920s one would necessarily see that he has made a choice to present the American society in its extreme details so as to make people see what they cannot see with their naked eyes. Our perception of the world is not dependent on what we see; but moreover dependent on the dominant ideology prevailing in the society. If the dominant ideology tells us to see a society in positive light, the majority of people see the society in a similar way. It is the role of a creative artist to present the society in the light which will lead to the development of the society at large. It is the role of the writer to make an effort to consciously highlight that aspect of the society which makes people see the society in its true light.

In the 1920s, when Sinclair Lewis started his writing career, the dominant representation of the American towns was that of being idealistic. It was that of being a society where there is nothing wrong, where things exist as it should and there is no need of any change towards betterment. This view needed a change according to Sinclair Lewis as the society wasn't as ideal as it was represented. There was not much writers then who could see the society from the other point of view and could penetrate into the deepest recesses of the human follies of the 1920s America and present that. Sinclair Lewis is thus one of the first one to locate the problem of society of the then America and represent it so as to make a critique of it in his writings. What Sinclair Lewis was doing new was to bring the satirical mode of representation to the American life and times for the first time in the 1920s. Never before in the American soil, have writers tried to be so realistic in their representation of society. In that way Lewis was different and acknowledging his role in the representation of American society, the Nobel Prize was awarded to him in 1930. It is interesting to note here that he is the first person in America to get the Nobel Prize for literature.

In Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, we see a person of modest background reaching to a somewhat better position in life and thus enjoying all the material benefits of life. Sinclair Lewis' concern with the 1920s American capitalistic situation is another example of such a critique. Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*, can be termed as a good example of his explanation of the capitalistic trends in society. Babbitt is an example of such a capitalistic man who is deeply seeped into materialism. Babbitt values everything in terms of materialistic means

in terms of money. He has got a big house, surrounded with gadgets and modern amenities most of which he does not need. They are present in the house as they are needed to show off to the world that he is a modern man who is advanced in terms of technology and all and in tune with the latest developments. His house seems to be directly taken from the catalogue of the advertisements. Such a house lacks all individuality, it lacks a definite identity it is like anyone's house that has got money. A

man seeped into materialistic comforts and capitalistic trends will have a house of that kind, but it is not a home at any point because it lacks the warmth and affection which is needed to make a house into a home.

It is interesting to note that by making Babbitt a caricatured character in the novel *Babbitt*, Lewis is trying his best to prove to his readers how seeping oneself into materialistic capitalistic life can lead one to acquire things in life, but it is definitely not a means through which one can get happiness and joy of life. Deeply satirical in tone and spirit,

Babbitt makes an attempt to represent the sad situation of people who are seeped into capitalistic spirit and do not understand how they are wasting their lives and times in false pursuits.

This does not mean that Sinclair Lewis is against capitalism and that he is taking in favour of some kind of proletarian revolution. What he is suggesting is that when one gets seeped into capitalism, one should not forget the essential aim of a human being's life. One should not falsely think that the objective of one's life is to accumulate wealth and more wealth. Money is important in life to lead a good comfortable life, but when money becomes the single most concern of one's life, then it creates a problem as one starts living a hollow life a life which is meaningless in every sense of the term.

The world of *Babbitt* is the world of the middle class, of fairly prosperous citizens aspiring to climb even higher on the social ladder and in the process the city dwellers have confined themselves into a kind of shallow existence. What they have done is to replace the values of their forefathers with certain values

which they think are necessary for going up the social ladder. They do not any more care for the spiritualistic side of their existence; but are more concerned with the appearances. They are so much concerned with the existence that they have forgotten to think about the meaning of life. Babbitt is driven by an urge to buy things he does not need © a cigarette lighter is a great example of the same. He has given up smoking but nevertheless the lighter will remain a possession for him © ©the last touch of refinement and class© (51) to his car. And when he meets up his friends for lunch in the Athletic Club he showcases his material collection for their approval and admiration. Babbitt©s reverence for technical devices is matched by a lack of understanding of their inner workings: ©He had enormous and poetic admiration, though very little understanding, of all mechanical devices. They were his symbols of truth and beauty.© (65).

It is interesting to note that capitalism brings along with such desires in human beings for material things which one does not need in practicality, but one needs them to brag about oneself, one©s possessions. It is a result of advertising which forces people to demand things that they really do not need, but want it because it is a thing to flash to people. Sinclair Lewis portrays how Babbitt©s house is a good illustration of advertising business in the 1920s. His house seems to be directly out of the catalogue of the advertising companies © but that kind of a house does not in any way reflect his personality or his individuality; but it is precisely one of those houses from the catalogue.

© ©Every second house in Floral Heights had a bedroom precisely like this.© So apparently it seems to be a house with all the material comforts, with all the latest conveniences, but instead of it being a home, it has merely remained a house. Everything in this house is merely for showcase © furniture is great but lifeless, books are there, but never read by anyone except his youngest daughter Tinka, the piano is there but no one uses it.

Thus the house has all material comforts but it has no life, no warmth. Babbitt has lost done all these coming from humble background © but at what cost he has achieved it? He has become a mere show off © a person who tries to show to his friends and neighbourhood what he has achieved in life. He himself reflects ©that it was agreeable to have it known throughout the neighborhood that he was so prosperous that his son never worked around the house© (70) © even when it annoys him that his son, Ted, is so lazy.

Babbitt constantly needs the approval of his friends and peers. Moreover, he does not have an opinion of his own ☉ his opinions are all shaped and copied from others. In his pockets he keeps ☉clippings of verses by T. Cholmondeley Frink and of the newspaper editorials from which [he] got his opinions and his polysyllables☉ (9). Thus he takes the position of the majority ☉ what the majority thinks he just carries on behaving and thinking in the same fashion as that puts him in a comfortable position. In other words, it can be said that Babbitt is a typical average man who by sheer luck has achieved material comforts in life, but does not have any knowledge about the world so as to have an opinion of his own. He is just like everyone ☉ copying the general trend ☉ confirming to the general process of Americanization in the early twentieth century.

According to Stevenson, ☉[a] strain of hysteria continued after the war; there was a hunting down of radicals and aliens; a hating of the new and startling; a hugging of the false, a preventing of healthful innovation and spontaneity.☉(74)

Nothing could be truer of the members of the Boosters☉ Club or any of the other clubs Babbitt belongs to; they are suspicious, if not downright afraid, of the so-called radicals, like Seneca Doane, ☉the radical lawyer.☉ They perceive any socialist idea as a threat to their own position in the community. Like the well-to-do villagers of Gopher Prairie, they are eagerly protecting their own interests and terrified that their ☉hard-earned☉ money will fall into the wrong hands.

Thus the whole of the society is deeply class divided where there are the privileged people like Babbitt who would never like to give up their privileged position and would do anything and everything to keep on clinging to the situation and at the same time would want the laboring classes to always remain in their own sufferings. Neither intellect, not emotions have any place in this kind of a society. There are avenues of entertainment ☉ the clubs, the churches; but they are not devoid of the hollowness with which the people of Zenith live. And with this kind of a mentality and culture, they have presumed amongst themselves that Zenith is the best city to live in and that everything in Zenith is ultimate. The people live with this false sense of themselves and their city. In a world such as this, Babbitt seems to be an archetypical American. With economic prosperity came the modern notion of leisure time and leisure time needed to be filled with something ☉ so in the Babbitt☉s world there are clubs, movies, baseball games, etc. Babbitt thus is a member of many clubs and goes to watch Base ball matches even though he does not like watching them

very much. But the leisure time needs to be filled and social trends need to be followed. So Babbitt is forced to follow all these. Another of Babbitt's pastimes is going to the movies. For the modern man movie going is an outlet to escape from the realities of everyday life. But when Babbitt goes for movies he does not go because he has an intense liking for them, but primarily because he needs to be in tune with times and need to show to the world that he too is similarly fascinated by the new media of Cinema as others of his class are. Babbitt wants a quick fix or an easy solution for everything. Surrounded by all kinds of conveniences that make life easier, he is not in the mood for books that will challenge him to think for himself. Rather, he seeks entertainment or entertainment which does not require any kind of intellectual understanding.

Like all good satirists, Sinclair Lewis exaggerates to send his message across to the readers or to send the message that standardization and conformity to majoritarianism that has prevailed in American society in the early twentieth century needs to be condemned. That the American middle class in its ambition to reach the perfection or material perfection or has grossly undermined their own good. The real danger of material standardization is that people now have to somehow keep themselves in a position that will not allow them to be seen in any way lacking the standards.

According to Philip Allan Friedman, or Lewis approves of material standardization but abhors the fact that with all their material success too many Americans in their complacent arrogance are unaware that they concentrate on being like one another. or (72.)

In *Babbitt*, Seneca Doane opposes the standardization of mind, but he maintains that or standardization is excellent, *per se*. When I buy an Ingersoll watch or a Ford, I get a better tool for less money, and I know precisely what I'm getting, and that leaves me more time and energy to be individual in. or He concludes that or what I fight in Zenith is standardization of thought, and, of course, the traditions of competition or (97).

Babbitt probably has realized that he cannot change anything in his own life as he has pursued a kind of materialistic standard life and knows that he is a victim of it. As he has realized it he does not want his son Ted to follow the same. He wants Ted to do whatever his heart intends to do and in that sense Babbitt is looking for a change in the next generation. He knows that Babbitts are doomed by their very own nature,

that Babbitts have no place to escape to; that Babbitts would carry on silently suffering the success of a deeply capitalistic civilization; but the next generation probably will not be the same. Martin Light reads Babbitt as a "quixotic" character who is capable of romance and be fanciful at times. Martin Light reads him as such as Babbitt is influenced by the movies and the editorials and the other stuff that he has read which has made him such that he wanted to explore the other facets of his life in his middle age.

His romantic inclination gets highlighted when he meets Seneca Doane. Seneca is able to provide George F. Babbitt with a direction "to speak against the crowd, not to follow what the majority does, not to have the herd mentality, and also to talk in favour of the least fortunate people of the society. Martin Light sees this as quixotic though many critics like to see it merely as a mid life crisis when he is not able to adjust to the realities of life and therefore is looking for romance outside it. But at the end the reality takes over his romantic inclinations and he is back to his usual self. In the return to his normality, there is a disappointment; but he gets over that personal disappointment by passing the baton to his son, Ted, who now is ready to explore life. Babbitt knows now that exploration of romance is not anymore possible for him at this stage of his life; but then Ted is there to live life as he wants to.

At the age of forty six years when George F. Babbitt looks back at his own life "he just sees the hustle bustle of his process of earning money, buying house, settling down with a family, etc. Nowhere does he perceive a bit of excitement "everything was standardized and this standardization kills him. He is in disgust with himself till he realizes that he just needs to readjust himself and cannot afford to be quixotic in his mid-life. This awareness brings him back to reality and he accepts it. "here I've pretty much done all the things I ought to; supported my family, and got a good house and a six-cylinder car, and built up a nice little business, and I haven't any vices "specially, except smoking " and I'm practically cutting that out, by the way. And I belong to the church, and play enough golf to keep in trim, and I only associate with good decent fellows. And yet, even so, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied!" (57-58). This little speech by George F. Babbitt, more or less, sums up his life "it makes an attempt to see his life in a nut shell and make him find meaning in life. He is sure not to find the meaning of life in all that he has achieved in life, because they are not what life is all about; but then Babbitt has to readjust with his loneliness of mid-life and he needs to march forward.

Babbitt wishes that like his grand dad he had the complete liberty as that of a pioneer "Wish I'd been a pioneer, same as my grand-dad" but then, wouldn't have a house like this. I "Oh, gosh, *I don't know!*" (85). It is true that one cannot have two things at the same time "otherwise Babbitt has to have the pioneering spirit or he has to have the big house that he owns" both of them cannot be there at the same time. He has the house and longs for that liberty of his grand dad. But one needs to understand here that George F. Babbitt, like all other Babbitts of the world, is caught up at this juncture of social circumstance where capitalistic spirit has taken over his life, where material possessions become his only concern. Babbitts are successful people but they have given up their freedom in the process of making money "they have been enslaved by the capitalistic spirit. Babbitt is so enslaved by that spirit that even if he wants to he cannot go back to the pioneering days" Sinclair Lewis thus makes a comparison of the 1920s America with the days of the pioneer and shows how degraded life has become because of the materialistic demands.

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