

NOBEL CINCINNATI: A TALE OF TWO CLUBS

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100 years ago, in 1922 Sinclair Lewis wrote a book called Babbitt which helped propel him to be the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Sinclair Lewis was a popular and influential author in the 1920s. He was ranked with Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, and Louis Bromfield. Lewis was considered one of the literary giants of the “Roaring Twenties”.

He wrote three novels about America, not a trilogy but really a madrigal. Mainstreet was about the crushing small-mindedness of a small town. Arrowsmith is about a physician who believes in science and his journey from a small town to the heights of scientific success, while he helps his patients. Babbitt is about a medium size Midwest city called Zenith.

Babbitt is written as a satire, and its protagonist is a residential realtor and avuncular, likable hypocrite in a Midwestern city called Zenith. America has emerged victorious after World War One, and rising expectations are depicted with sardonic humor. George Babbitt, the protagonist is a realtor, always looking for the next rung in the ladder of success.

For instance, Babbitt was a member of the Zenith Athletic Club. Across the street from Babbitt's club was another club, the Union Club. The one Babbitt was a member of was full of merchants and the one across the street was “highfaluting.” George Babbitt said he would never join the fancy Union Club as it was full of fancy people and he would always be loyal to his club.

Lewis wrote that Babbitt says: *The Zenith Athletic Club is not athletic and it isn't exactly a club, but it is Zenith in perfection....But most of its three thousand members use it as a cafe in which to lunch, play cards, tell stories, meet customers, and entertain out-of-town uncles at dinner. It is the largest club in the city, and its chief hatred is the conservative Union Club, which all sound members of the Athletic call "a rotten, snobbish, dull, expensive old hole—not one Good Mixer*

in the place—you couldn't hire me to join." Statistics show that no member of the Athletic has ever refused election to the Union, and of those who are elected, sixty-seven per cent, resign from the Athletic and are thereafter heard to say, in the drowsy sanctity of the Union lounge, "The Athletic would be a pretty good hotel, if it were more exclusive." ¹

And Babbitt was loyal to his club until he got an invitation to join the Union Club. Upon the receipt of the invitation, he immediately resigned his club to join the fancy one.

When Sinclair wrote the book Babbitt, he lived at the Queen City Club in Cincinnati. It was his "Pied de Terre."² Were the clubs Lewis wrote about the University Club and the Queen City Club? The clubs are across the street from each other. As he wrote, we can easily imagine him staring out across the street at our University Club. Was this book an example of life imitating art?

Moreover, was Zenith Cincinnati? Were the characters in the book our grandfathers or their friends?

To try to answer these questions, I divide this paper into four parts. The first part will give a thumb-nail history of satire and where this book historically and literarily fits; the second part will review the book's main parts; the third part is a short history of the University Club and the Queen City Club; and the 4th part will determine whether or not Cincinnati is the subject of this book.

- I. Part one: A short history of Satire, which does not do justice to the subject of satire but it helps to see where the book Babbitt could fit.

¹ Lewis, Sinclair, Babbitt, Harcourt and Brace and Company 1922 at page 54-55

² Schorer, Mark, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, McGraw Hill Company Inc. 1961, page 301-302

What is a satire? Satire is a form of criticism that uses humor. It is an artistic form and is found in all the arts, and especially literature. It is humorous ridicule of a subject. Without humor satire is an angry retort; without artistic form it is childish ridicule. Samuel Johnson's dictionary states that satire is a "poem in which wickedness or folly is censured..." Satire humorously mocks and it commonly is used as social criticism of the elite, governing class, or philosophers. It seldom satires the common person.

An early example of satire that attacks the politicians--at least one that wants to become king--can be found in Jotham's parable of the bramble bush. In Judges 9:8-15 the prophet compares the tyrant Abimelech's desire to be king to a burning bramble that catches the trees and vines (symbolic of the tribes of Israel) on fire and destroys them. A burning bramble is juxtaposed to Moses's burning bush: the first destroys freedom and the second creates freedom.

Satire pervaded drama and literature in the Greek Golden Age. The earliest seems to be Margate's, a book by Homer that is lost, about a man who was so unwise that he did not know which parent gave him birth and was a lampoon about the meddling socialism. Archilochus was supposedly the first great master of satire.

Of course, there is Aristophanes who beautifully combined satire with poetry. He helped set the stage for the use of satire to criticize leading citizens and societies as well as governments. The satirical play The Clouds was about Socratic absurdities. It was effective and so tainted Socrates's reputation that Socrates at his trial had to counter the play's impression. Of course, he lost his trial and died.

The Romans had their satires. Among them was the Golden Ass, which told the story of Lucius who was turned into an ass by a witch. This book criticized Roman society and how they treat the downtrodden and enslaved.

At the beginning of the Reformation, Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote In Praise of Folly or in Latin Moriae Encomium. In Praise of Folly is a satirical work criticizing the foibles of professionals like lawyers and philosophers as well as the pious but superstitious abuses of Catholic doctrine and the corrupt practices of the Church. He named the book in a satirical way to further warn his friend Thomas More. The title Moriae Encomium could also be translated to be In “Praise of More” as well as In Praise of Folly. The book was written when Erasmus was staying with More in London.³ In fact, it has been said that Erasmus had warned Thomas More not to become Henry VIII’s Chancellor of England as Erasmus feared that More would end up at odds with Henry VIII.

But my favorite satirists are the English. The English had a long line of satirists from Chaucer, Andrew Marvell, Swift, Defoe, Pope and, more recently, Bernard Shaw and George Orwell. Pope and Swift were members of the same club, the Scriblerus Club. Another member of the club, Arbuthnot, recounted that they would try to outdo each other’s satire. Arbuthnot was the person who invented the character of John Bull.⁴

Pope wrote the satire of The Rape of the Lock, which harpoons the flippish society. The poem is a mock-heroic narrative poem story comparing a minor incident to the epic world of the ancient

³ McLachy, Micahael, *The Intellectual and Social Relationship of Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus*, Proquest Dissertations Publishing 2005, 14363379 who refers to Albert Rabil Jr., “Desiderius Erasmus” In *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations Forms and Legacy*, vol 2, *Humanism Beyond Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) pages 224- 225

⁴ Damrosch, Leo, *The Club*, Yale University Press 2019 page 44

gods. The plot is that Belinda, a vain young woman, encounters a man at a party who cuts off a lock of her hair. That is the rape. As Samuel Johnson, a master of satire, wrote: "...he (Pope) wrote *The Rape of the Lock*, the most airy, the most ingenious, and the most delightful of all his compositions, occasioned by a frolic of gallantry, rather too familiar..."⁵

As an example of his satirical verse is when Belinda the heroine sits at her dressing table and prepares for a ball:

And now, unveil'd the Toilet stands display'd

Each Silver vase in mystic ordered laid....

Here files of pins extend their shining rows,

Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux...

The Rape of the Lock is a humorous indictment of the vanities and the idleness of 18th-century high society. As an example, the above stanza equates the Holy Bible with puffs, powders, and billet-doux.

And I am not alone in admiring Pope, as no less than the fellow whose picture graces this presidium arch, Samuel Johnson, comments in his last book on the Poets wrote: "Pope had genius; a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still ongoing to go forward...."⁶

In A Modest Proposal, Jonathan Swift writes as if he were an economist (that dismal science) imitating Adam Smith's style and gives the economic and rational argument that the best way to stop the famine in Ireland is reduce the population by eating children. Thus, there would increase the food supply while decrease the demand for the food. In Gulliver's Travels Swift

⁵ Johnson, Samuel, The Lives of the Poets, Oxford World's Classics, 2009 page 356

⁶ Johnson, Samuel, The Lives of Poets 3:441 as quoted in Damrosch, Leo, The Club, supra page 360

satires governments and the worse side of humanity (Yahoos). In that book Swift writes that the job description for the Secretary of Treasury seemed to be to walk a tight rope while jumping, turning, and even pirouetting.

Others include Lord Byron's Don Juan in which he satirizes the Spanish. A typical satirical stanza is his description of the pseudo brave Dan Jose. *A true Hidalgo, free from every stain
Of Moor or Hebrew blood, he traced his source*

Through the most Gothic gentlemen of Spain;

A better cavalier ne'er mounted horse,

Or, being mounted, e'er got down again...⁷

Dickens' Bleak House was a satire on lawyers and judges. It was about a will contest that was finally ended when the lawyers bled the estate of all assets. It begins with a page and a half about the fog created by lawyers and Judges. Here is part of it:

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships....

And this part ends with: *The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation, Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.*

It goes without saying that Dickens did not care for lawyers and judges.

The 20th century had Gilbert and Sullivan, Oscar Wilde, and Bernard Shaw all of whom satirized high society.

⁷ Lord Byron, Don Juan Milner and Sowerby 1837 Canto First line 64

In France of course there is Voltaire, who lampoons philosophers with Candide. At the opening of the novel, its eponymous, young and naïve Candide, is schooled in this optimistic philosophy by his tutor, Pangloss, claiming that "all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds,". Candide is then ejected from his magnificent castle. Candide and his companions endure multiple hardships and disasters in their travels. These include war, rape, theft, hangings, earthquakes, cannibalism, and slavery. Pangloss comments about all the trials of Candide: "This is the best possible of all worlds."

The Spanish have the wonderful Cervantes, who satirized Spanish culture, repressive society and nobility and its repressive laws such as book burning.

The Americans also had a history of satires of the American leaders and their morality and social norms. Without going deeply into the American satire, we can comment that the satirists include from Ben Franklin to Mark Twain, to Charlie Chaplin's The Great Dictator.

Most of the pre-Babbitt satires are about the elite, ruling class, intellectuals and not the common man or middle class society. In the next part of this paper, you will see how Babbitt does not follow the usual satirical subjects. Instead, Babbitt represented the common man in America in the 1920s, the great commercial class. That satire seems unique, an American innovation.

II. We will proceed with the next part of the paper, the book, to describe the plot and the characters of Babbitt.

The book is about an American named George Babbitt, who is 48 years old, too heavy, has little hair, is a sound businessman, a faithful Booster, an assiduous Elk, a trustworthy Presbyterian.

The book traces part of Babbitt's 48th year, his friends, and experiences in the American culture of the post-World War I in cities like Cincinnati. While he has temptations for an affair, he is a good husband and loving father. He is "a successful and unchallenged fraud".⁸

The summary and meaning of the book Babbitt is elegantly described by the Nobel Prize's President Erick Axel Karfield's Presenter's speech:

Mr. Babbitt – George Follansbee Babbitt – is the happy citizen of such a city. It is called Zenith, but probably it cannot be found on the map under that name. This city with its enlarged horizons hereafter becomes the starting point for Mr. Lewis's critical raids into the territories of Americanism... the enchantment of its optimism and progressive spirit is embodied in George F. Babbitt.

As a matter of fact, Babbitt probably approaches the ideal of an American popular hero of the middle class. The relativity of business morals as well as private rules of conduct is for him an accepted article of faith, and without hesitation he considers it God's purpose that man should work, increase his income, and enjoy modern improvements. He feels that he obeys these commandments and therefore lives in complete harmony with himself and society.

His profession, real estate, is the highest in existence, and his house near the city, with its trees and lawn, is standard, inside and out. ...

He enjoys excellent health, is well-fed and thriving, alert and good-natured. His daily lunches at the club are feasts of instructive business conversation and stimulating anecdotes; he is sociable and winning. Babbitt is furthermore a man with the gift of speech.

Thus, Babbitt lives the life of the irreproachable citizen conscious of his respectability. Then Babbitt discovers that he has tendencies toward vice which he has neglected.... As he approaches fifty, he hastens to make up for the neglect.... But his deeds find him out. His lunches at the club become more and more painful through the silence and aloofness of his friends. They hint that he is spoiling this chance of future membership in the committee of progress.He succeeds in recovering his better self, and it is edifying to see him kneel in his pastor's study, where he receives absolution. And then Babbitt can once more devote himself to the Sunday school and other socially useful activities....

That it is institutions as representatives of false ideas, and not individuals, that Mr. Lewis wants to attack with his satire, he has himself indicated. It is then a triumph for his art, a triumph almost unique in literature, that he has been able to make this Babbitt, who fatalistically lives

⁸ Mencken, H.L. Portrait of an American Citizen, 1922 as found in Mark Schorer's Sinclair Lewis, the Twentieth Century Views Series

within the borders of an earth-bound but at the same time pompous utilitarianism, an almost lovable individual...

*There are bouncers and Philistines in all countries, and one can only wish that half of them were half as amusing as Babbitt....*⁹

Karfeildt goes on to quote the theme of the book in which commercial travelers in a compartment on the train called the New York Express gives a halo over selling anything. Lewis writes: *To them, the Romantic Hero was no longer the knight, the wandering poet, the cowpuncher, the aviator, nor the brave young district attorney, but the great sales manager, who had an Analysis of Merchandizing Problems on his glass-topped desk, whose title of nobility was "Go-getter" and who devoted himself and all his young samurai to the cosmic purpose of Selling – not of selling anything in particular, for or to anybody in particular, but pure Selling.*¹⁰

As President Cleveland said: "The chief business of the American people is business..."¹¹

Juxtaposed to President Karfeildt's description is the Encyclopedia Britannica's terse and cynical description: "The novel's scathing indictment of middle-class American values made Babbitry a synonym for....a conformist, materialistic, anti-intellectual way of life..... Lewis's novel satirically but lovingly details Babbitt's routines and rituals as he goes to and from work, socializes, plays golf, and goes to clubs."¹² Indeed, there is one word to describe what the Nobel Prize President Presenter elegantly wrote about the American middle class in the 1920s. The word is *Babbitry*."

Walter Lippman wrote Babbitt "is the descendant of a pioneer; he is completely stripped of all association with an ordered and civilized life. He has no manners, no coherent code of morals,

⁹ Presentation Speech by [Erik Axel Karlfeldt](#), Permanent Secretary of the [Swedish Academy](#), on December 10, 1930 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1930/ceremony-speech/>

¹⁰ Lewis, Sinclair, *supra* page 143

¹¹ Coolidge, Calvin, Speech to the American Society of Newspapers Editors January 17, 1925

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Babbitt-novel-by-Lewis>

no religion, no piety, no patriotism, no knowledge of truth and no love of beauty. He is almost completely decivilized.”¹³ Yet Lippman goes on to say, “Babbitt is pervaded by an almost serene kindness.”¹⁴

But what kind of “guy” is Babbitt: He is a hard worker and at his club preaches ethics. He felt he should have gone to college and could even have been a lawyer, but he dropped out and got married.

He has two sets of morals which conflict: the personal morals and the morals of a marketplace. Babbitt despises “shysters” and he believes that a realtor should not sell a house for twice its real value even if the buyer is stupid enough to pay the price. But when he learns that a grocery store owner will expand to a lot nearby to open a butcher shop, Babbitt tells a real estate speculator who swoops in and buys the lot. They then extort the grocer who buys it for twice the price. The grocer will pass the high price on by charging the customers a higher price. Is Babbitt evil? No -- he is a product of the American Culture: material success is the definition of a successful person.

What kind of citizen is Babbitt? He believes in a democracy that helps his career and social acceptance. He is not concerned with Warren G. Harding being elected President, but is greatly concerned with Seneca Doane, a lawyer running on a labor ticket against Lucas Prout, a conservative manufacturer. Doane’s platform was a call for higher wages and better working conditions. It was a threat to the middle and upper classes’ hold on power. Babbitt speaks on behalf of Prout, who defeats Doane. He turns down Prout’s offer to appoint him to civic

¹³ Lippman Walter Sinclair Lewis 1927 as found in Schorer, Mark, Sinclair Lewis a Collection of Critical Essays, Prentice-Hall 1962 pages 90-91

¹⁴ IBID p.93

positions and merely asks for insider information about the extension of the future paved highways. Prout's easy win raised the specter that politics are dependent on money and power rather than democratic ideals. This was written during the time when in Cincinnati the Liberal Murray Seasingood (a Harvard lawyer) was running for Mayor against the notoriously corrupt government under George B. Cox.

What kind of father was Babbitt? While he had not finished college and law school, Babbitt's hopes for his son Ted to go to college and be an attorney. Instead, his son elopes and does not go to college. Babbitt's hopes for his eldest daughter Verona is that she marries well. But he is concerned about her left wing socialist politics and her reading of H.L. Menken and Vachel Lindsay. These authors and her attitude threatened the virtues of being a solid citizen. Tinka, his youngest daughter is loved, is only ten, but still admired.

To H.L. Mencken, the great critic, George F. Babbitt was an archetype of the American city dwellers who touted the virtues of Republicanism, Presbyterianism, and absolute conformity because "it is not what he [Babbitt] feels and aspires that moves him primarily; it is what the folks will think of him. His politics is communal politics, mob politics, herd politics; his religion is a public rite wholly without subjective significance."¹⁵ Mencken said that Babbitt was the literary embodiment of everything wrong with American society. In the cultural climate of the early 20th century, like-minded critics and Mencken's followers were known as "Babbitt-baiters".¹⁶

¹⁵ Schorer, *supra* (Sinclair Lewis A Collection of Essays) pages 21-22

¹⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babbitt_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babbitt_(novel)), note 26

The book utilizes the individuals in the book to describe middle class America. And while we laugh at the parts that we can relate to and understand, it also hurts. A true satire.

III. The next subject is a short history of the University and the Queen City Clubs.

The history of the Queen City Club: In 1874 a group of people decided to form a club. Their names are long associated with Cincinnati: Longworth, Probasco, Ramsey, Sinton, Anderson, Taft, and Shillito. It began with Joseph Longworth when he asked a few friends to join him to start a club. It was to be a business and professional men's club with its own quarters. The first minutes were handwritten on a scratch pad in which it was called a "literary club". It was the first business and professional men's club of a modern sort with its own quarters. In November 1874 the first officers were elected at the Grand Hotel and Joseph Longworth was President, Henry Urner, Vice President, George Hill Treasurer and J.W. Boyer Secretary. In November of 1874 Cincinnati was in hard times, as there not only a severe depression but Cincinnati's main trade route was cut off a few years before as a result of the Civil war. Chicago had grown as result of the stock yards and the railroads.

The Club survived and moved to the West End at the corner of Elm and 7th Street (which was offered by W.H. Harrison). In 1897 the University Club, "precursor of today's club and related in name only--was going under." Its building was where the Western and Southern building is now across from the present University Club. To make certain they would have a club, the University Club members sent the Queen City Club's Board a letter (dated September 28, 1897), stating: "thirty-two members expressed a desire to join the Queen City Club." The members were taken in without initiation fee.

In 1922 the West End became less elegant and there were no longer tree-shaded homes. Roger K. Rogan was authorized to lease the building at 4th and Broadway across the street from the University Club. Polk Laffoon, treasurer “reported the subscription of \$528,000. Charles P. Taft made a motion to approve the building and President Lawrence Maxwell declared Mr. Taft’s motion to pass. There was much discussion and Harry Hake, the architect, expressed that the Club could be built at a cost “not to exceed \$.60 per square foot”. The cornerstone was set on November 9, 1927, by Col. Edward Colston, the oldest living past president of the Club, and Mr. Taft, “the only charter member of the Club who is now surviving as an active member.” I would stop here as the club’s history goes beyond the relevant time of Babbitt’s writings and is not germane here.

But the history of the Queen City Club is not complete without the history of the Art Association of the Queen City Club started in about 1895. Members agreed to pay \$5.00 per year to acquire works of art. With these moneys the great art collection of the Cincinnati impressionists was accumulated including Frank Duveneck, J.H. Twachtman, H.F.Farney, T.S. Noble, J.H. Sharp, J.R. Hopkins, L.H. Meakin, John Rettig and L.C. Voght. Others gave art, including the United States Playing Card Company. The largest painting, “The Storm”, by Louis Robbe, was bought and given by John Sherlock and G.H. Schenberger. Many of the paintings and sculptures were gifts of the family of the artist

THE UNIVERSITY CLUB¹⁷ Its historian has a different bent on some of the history. The Club was founded in 1879 and was composed of college men. The Cincinnati newspapers reported its

¹⁷ This information came from The History of the University Club of Cincinnati by Steven Eha and Hans Zimmer published 1998 and the 25th anniversary history of the University Club document and conversation with Alan O’Brian, manager of the University Club

founding along with the fact that Jesse James had been shot to death in Oklahoma territory. There were 1,000 college graduates in the city then, and the club had 350 initial members.

The club house was at 122 West Seventh Street, then moved to C. D. Coffin homestead at 165 West Seventh Street, and then to the Dexter House on Fourth and Broadway. It was incorporated on September 14, 1888. Some of the prominent members were George Hoadly, Sr., Joseph Benson Foraker, Manning F. Force, Charles Phelps Taft, and Nathaniel Henschman Davis. The club was dissolved in 1896. That could have been because of the panic of 1896 and some disagreements. In 1905, alumni of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton held a joint outing and at the outing came the idea of re-establishing the University Club, which was done in 1906. Many of the old members became members of the reestablished club. The initial committee including Harry McCoy, Murray Seasongood, Edward H. Ernst. In 1907 the Board of Managers elected officers and authorized a committee to search for an appropriate club house. They decided upon the William Wallace Seely house on the Southwest corner of Fourth and Broadway. The formal opening of the club was April 27, 1907. The Honorable William Howard Taft, then Secretary of War, came from Washington "to lend his distinguished presence to that occasion and afford the Club to list him as the first honorary member." Charles P. Taft was the president of the Club for many years and purchased the Seely house and the adjoining Snowden Smith properties and gave it to the club so that it would have a permanent home. He also made a large contribution. The articles on incorporation were signed in December of 1928 by Robert A. Taft, Edward H. Ernst, and Malcom McAvoy. The first and second floors of the adjoining Smith House were the ladies' rooms, as they were not permitted in the other parts of the building. The Duvneck painting of the Gloucester Port was bought by the club from the artist. He painted it while in Gloucester and the town wanted to buy it. He said: "I must take it back to my friends in Cincinnati". This

Duveneck and the Elizabeth Norse were recently displayed at the Cincinnati Art Museum. Their painting collections include De Camp's portrait of Charles P. Taft, Potthast's "Springtime Woods", Birney's "In the Attorney's Office", and Norse's "La Toilette du Martin".

IV. Our last chapter is a resolution as to whether this book was about Cincinnati and our Grandfathers and their friends. Was this book about Cincinnati? The three Babbitt children are our parents' generation. Are the children a prediction of what they would be like?

Newspapers in five cities claimed this dubious connection: Cincinnati, Duluth, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis. Minneapolis even celebrated a "Babbitt Week".¹⁸

Several commentators have written that the book is about Cincinnati: Listen to what they say about the book and Cincinnati:

In The Cincinnati Enquirer the reporter wrote: *Lewis' satirical jab at the middle class is set in the fictional Midwestern city Zenith. Many cities vied for the ignominious claim of being the inspiration for this city of hustlers, but Lewis kept a suite at the Queen City Club while he wrote the book, so we have a strong claim. Lewis in a letter thanked a friend for sending him to Cincinnati and wrote: "I am quite indebted to you for the material of the book. I am quite sure that none of our friends in Cincinnati [sic] will ever know it."*¹⁹ The Enquirer was quoting from a letter Lewis sent to the Harvard professor of law Eldon R. James. Professor James "urged Cincinnati upon him as the ideal setting for his researchers."²⁰

¹⁸ Schorer, Mark Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, ibid at page 344

¹⁹ <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/entertainment/2021/04/29/16-novels-set-cincinnati-your-reading-list/7342812002/>

²⁰ Schorer, Mark, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life, McGraw Hill, Inc, 1961, Page 330

Philo on Books wrote:

Certainly, Babbitt is a satirical skewering of certain forms of conformity of its era (the 1920s). It is set in the fictional town of Zenith, which is probably modeled after Cincinnati. In a sense it does not matter if it's a version of Cincinnati...²¹

The American Class Review article about Sinclair Lewis's Booster Speech on the city of Zenith wrote: *Set in the fictional midwestern city of Zenith in 1920, Sinclair Lewis's classic novel Babbitt satirically portrayed the anxieties and adjustments of middle-class Americans after World War One. His lead character, George Babbitt.... prototypical small businessman, delivers the address at the annual meeting of the Zenith Real Estate Board. Beginning with a joke, as was recommended to amateur speakers, Babbitt goes on to champion Zenith as the "best city in the world" and "the finest example of American life and prosperity to be found anywhere."*

...Because Lewis modeled Zenith on Cincinnati, Ohio, ... photographs of Cincinnati are used to illustrate this selection.²²

In another article it wrote regarding the labor strike:

No issue ignited the partisan divide in postwar America more than the nationwide labor strikes of 1919-1921. The "labor vs. capital" battle pitted industrial workers who demanded higher wages in the postwar inflation economy against the industrialist "bosses" who rejected unions as the product of foreign-inspired anarchist and Bolshevik (Communist) agitators.... Babbitt finds himself caught between his newly adopted liberal views and his business colleagues' unequivocal condemnation of the strikers. Lewis captured the us-vs.-them mentality of the Red Scare in America when many were "ready to disown any friend who did not hate the enemy." [Because Lewis modeled Zenith on Cincinnati..., photographs from Cincinnati's labor history are used here to illustrate the chapter²³.

²¹ <https://philoonbooks.wordpress.com/2015/03/08/babbitt-by-sinclair-lewis/>

²² <http://americainclass.org/sources/becomingmodern/divisions/text3/babbittbooster.pdf>

²³ <http://americainclass.org/sources/becomingmodern/prosperity/text6/babbittstrike.pdf>

But was the novel *Babbitt* really describing these Cincinnati Clubs we know so well? Maybe it was. Both were in existence when he wrote the novel and he lived in one of them. But at the time Lewis was writing *Babbitt* the University Club was on 4th Street and Broadway. The Queen City, which then stood blocks away, was buying the property across the street from the University Club.

But there are other reasons to think our town was Zenith. Lewis did his research here. And, look at its name: Zenith sounds like Zinzinnati. And Murray Seasongood's run for reform mayor is described in *Babbitt*. Further there were riots and Communists here as described in the book.

While this novel may have been researched in Cincinnati and about Cincinnati, several commentators tried to universalize it to mean more than that. The President of the Nobel Prize committee certainly did. As Menken wrote in 1922:

*"As an old professor of Babbitry, I welcome him as an almost perfect specimen –a genuine museum piece. Every American city swarm with his brothers. They run things in the Republic, East, West, North, South. They are the originators and propagators of the national delusions---all that is, save those which spring from the farms. They are the palladiums of 100% Americanisms; the apostles of the Harding politics; the guardians of the Only True Christianity. They are the advertisers who determine what is to go into the American newspapers and what is to stay out. They are the Leading Citizens the speakers at banquets, the profiteers, the corruptors of politics, the ...the peers of the realm Babbitt is their archetype.... He is the average American of the ruling minority in this hundred and forty-sixth year of the Republic... What (Walter) Lippman tried to do as a professor, laboriously and without imagination, Lewis has here done as an artist with a few vivid strokes. It is very fine piece of work indeed....I know of no American novel that more accurately presents the real America. It is a social document of high order."*²⁴

While this book might have been about Cincinnati, it certainly was about America. Walter Lippman wrote :

*"..... By 1920 the American people were thoroughly weary of the old faith that happiness could be found by public work and the very dubious about the wisdom of the people. they found out that the problem of living is deeper and more complex than they had been accustomed to think it was...."*²⁵

²⁴ Menken, supra at page 21-22

²⁵ Lippman, Walter, Sinclair Lewis (1927, Schorer, supra page 84

While commentators may universalize the novel and state it is about American middle class hypocrisy, it is greatly influenced by Lewis's research in our city.

My conclusion is that the novel is about American middle class hypocrisy, and that could be found in Cincinnati as well as many other cities. The book ends in a quintessentially American hope for subsequent generations to remedy the then present flaws. Babbitt sums up his life as a conformist and gives his advice to his son to do what he wants. Babbitt's son has eschewed college and eloped. His in-laws, grandparents, and mother yell at him in the living room for this foolish decision. For the first time Babbitt raises his voice and says "stop!", and takes his son out to the dining room. Babbitt says to his son that he always wanted him to go to college, but if he wants to take a job of a mechanic, that is ok. The book ends by George Babbitt saying: "Now for heaven's sake don't repeat this to your mother or she will take off the little hair I have left. I never have done a single thing I have wanted to in my whole life. I don't know I ever accomplished anything but to get along. I've figured out that I made a quarter inch out of a hundred rods. Well maybe you'll carry things further. I don't know but I do get a kind of pleasure in knowing that you knew what you want and you did it. Well, those folks in there will try to bully you and take you down Tell them to go to the devil. I'll back you.... Arms about each other, the Babbitt men went into the living room and faced the swooping family"

E.L. Doctorow has written that the historian will tell you what happens, the novelist will tell you what it felt like.²⁶ And the book gives you a feeling of Cincinnati in the 1920s. Alan O'Bryan, the manager of the University Club ended my conversation with him. "I like Cincinnati, the

²⁶ E.L. Doctorow as quoted in the Guardian, article found : <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/22/el-doctorow-in-quotes-15-of-his-best-:-:text=The%20historian%20will%20tell%20you.read%20more%20may%20begin%20to>.

people here are nicer than other places and more grounded.” Perhaps Sinclair Lewis would write a different book about our town now.