

# Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*: A Portrait of Social Problem in America of the 1920's

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## Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas kesaksian Sinclair Lewis tentang masalah sosial di Amerika di era 1920-an, sebagai suatu dasa warsa paling suram dalam sejarah Amerika, yakni mengenai dampak negatif dari sukses industrialisasi di Amerika atau sukses bangsa Amerika di bidang materi. Kehidupan George F. Babbitt yang dramatis dalam novel *Babbitt* diambil sebagai pokok bahasan. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan interdisipliner, kajian ini membahas novel *Babbitt* untuk menjelaskan masalah sosial di Amerika pada dasa warsa 1920-an beserta budaya bisnisnya. Babbitt, tokoh utama dalam novel ini, hanyalah seorang bisnis kelas menengah, yakni sebagai seorang pialang pada real estate yang menaruh perhatian utama lebih kepada keuntungan daripada kualitas bangunan, sedang motivasi utama dalam hidupnya adalah mencari uang, kekuasaan dan status. Setelah bekerja keras ia menjadi kaya raya, namun ironisnya keberhasilan tersebut telah menjadikan Babbitt dan keluarganya terlempar dalam kehidupan yang tragis. Dia menjadi terbiasa berselingkuh dengan wanita lain, sementara anak-anaknya, Ted dan Verona, terseret dalam kehidupan berfoya-foya dengan para gadis modern. Kesuksesan telah mengubah gaya hidupnya, dia terperangkap dalam kehidupan yang materialistis, konsumtif dan hedonistis. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa uang bukanlah satu-satunya hal yang bisa menjadikan orang bahagia.

**Kata-kata kunci:** tahun 1920-an, industrialisasi, materialisme, dekadensi moral, kekecewaan.

## 1. Introduction

America, a promised land and the land of hope, keeps on having a dream or “myth” for immigrants to get a better life. The coming of the first immigrants, from England, along the Atlantic coast of Virginia in the seventeenth century is considered as the embryo of the American success in manifesting their dream. Most of the first European settlers on the coast of the Atlantic were those who wanted to be free from ideological and economic pressure including those who wanted to enrich their own property. In order to gain their better dream, they had to work hard for taming the wilderness (Link, 1967:1).

Kenneth S. Knodt in his book entitled *Pursuing the American Dream* defines that “dream is the hope and ideals of a people. It implies an ongoing, active creation, a sense of possibility and hope” (1976:1). Knodt further asserts that “dream refers to the idea of unceasing progress through experiments, a progress which is not based on a mere passive, determinate experience” (1976:1), whereas “success”, for the new generation of Americans, is connected with “money”, as pointed out by John Van Dyke in his book *The Money God* as follows: “Everyone knows that success with the great masses spells money. It is money that the new generation expects to win, and it is money that the parents want them to win. The boy will make it, and the girl, if she is not a goose, will marry it. They will get it in one way or another” (1908:52).

America has changed much since the coming of industry in the country. Industry has brought enormous changes in American history and life, and the most recognizable is in the

1920's. As America becomes more and more industrialized, it moves farther from the idealism of its founding fathers, and even its people become more and more obsessed with material achievement. It is true that America has managed to become one of the richest industrial countries in the world. However, the rapid development of the country brings negative impacts as well. Leuchtenburg points out that "industry has created a powerful economy marked by material progress in the whole country. On the other hand, the decade also witnessed problems of labour, the decay of religion, a conflict between old and new values, and a "war" between urban and rural values" (1958:1-10). The course of the development of America brought unrest and turmoil to its people. This was very ironical since the success of the country should have brought happiness to its people, not the reverse.

Sinclair Lewis was one of the American writers who became anxious about the course of the development of American society. His criticism can be clearly seen in *Babbitt*, one of his works. In this novel he launches his ironic criticism. George Follansbee Babbitt, the main character of this novel, is just an average businessman, a real estate broker who only thinks about how to achieve success in business, how to get wealth and high position or high status in the society. After years of hard work, he manages to become a famous and wealthy businessman. He is financially successful; however, it is like the success of America which brings unhappiness to its people. Babbitt's wealth and fame also bring him disappointment. His success makes him withdraw from his society, even drags him into tragic life. In other words, his success means nothing. Babbitt symbolizes an American middle class who stress on material wealth in his life, the attitude which Lewis dislikes very much.

This article tries to discuss the Social problem in America of the 1920-s reflected in the novel *Babbitt*. This study is intended to show that this novel can be seen as a mental evidence to American experience in the 1920s.

## **2. Theoretical Approach**

This study is done under the discipline of American studies employing an interdisciplinary analysis. In his essay entitled "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" Henry Nash Smith, an American Studies scholar, asserts that American Studies is "a collaboration among men working from within existing academic disciplines but attempting to widen the boundaries imposed by conventional methods of inquiry. He suggests that the student of literature has to take account of sociological, historical and anthropological data and methods, and the sociologist or the historian take account of data and methods of scholarship in the field of arts" (1950:14). It means that American Studies scholars, in analyzing literary work, should consider the relationship between literary work and the society and its culture or its milieu where the literary work is produced.

As this study is interdisciplinary in its approach, it draws on and weaves together theories, research, and insights from numerous fields through the humanities and social science and history. In an attempt to understand the quality of American in the 1920's based on a literary work, a very wide range of knowledge is needed. This study weaves together different types of knowledge and information gained in a variety of fields, especially in history and in the social sciences, in an effort to present the complete picture of the era.

## **3. Method of Study**

This study will apply library research, taking materials collected from different libraries, private, public, and university, as the objects of the study. The primary source is the

novel itself, a literary work upon which the study is mostly based. Secondary sources are information and data collected from various documents: historical documents, sociological writings, letters, and other literary works. It is hoped that these secondary sources will help to support and verify facts gained from the primary source. In doing so, it is expected that the study of the novel *Babbitt* as historical and sociological interpretation will not go astray.

#### 4. American Success in the 1920's Depicted in The Novel

Endeavoring to record happenings such as economics, politics, and social phenomena in America of the 1920's, Frederick Lewis Allen, in his book *Only Yesterday*, believes that the decade would be “a distinct era in American history” which was marked by major shifts in America's mood and life. Among those enormous changes is the emergence of industrialism. William E. Leuchtenburg sees the decade as “the second industrial revolution” (1958:178). During these years, machine power replaced human labor at startling rate: 70 percent of industry was electrified and with more efficient management, greater mechanization, intensive research, and ingenious sales methods, industrial production almost doubled during the decade (1958:179).

Sinclair Lewis in his novel, *Babbitt*, depicts Zenith as one of the big cities in America of the 1920's, and as a progressive city in the State Winnemac, Ohio. In the city all business activities are centralized, and a lot of people from other villages around the city undoubtedly come to make money. It is the spring time, April, 1920, that the novel opens its story. It is clearly described that the city has changed into the better one than the former state. There are many new buildings such as skyscrapers, factories, offices, and railroads built beautifully. The most beautiful thing that can be seen is the towers of Zenith. The towers indicate Zenith as the center of business activities and its bigness as well. It is described as follows:

The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; auster towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. The were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beatifully office-buildings (Lewis:5).

As a business center, zenith becomes a city of urban and its residents are between three and four hundred thousand inhabitants. Schorer in the book *Landmarks of American Writing* asserts that the 1920 census in the United States between 1915 and 1920, American society changes from a rural to an urban society. Between those years, the old majority of farmers and villagers have become the minority, then the new majority are the residents of cities (Cohen, 1969:357). It is evident that industrialization has caused great urbanization.

Economically the society of Zenith is standardized, things are produced by the new technology. Industrialization has changed Zenith to become a big, standardized, modern city.

“Zenith's a city with gigantic power, gigantic buildings, gigantic machines, gigantic transportation” (Lewis:84).

Culturally, Zenith people adopt the American culture in general. Under the business practices they have a great concern in worldliness, in improving materials which is the reflection of Harding's administration during the twenties, justly called the “Jazz-age” and “Roaring-age”, that is the period of modernism, the period when the economic expansion and business enterprise is led to the commercial culture (Cohen, 1969:318).

Generally industrialization has made American people change their way of life, their way of thinking, their way of behaving, and their philosophy to balance the situation. In other words, industrialization in America has provided both positive and negative impact to all aspects of American life.

##### **5. The Analysis of the novel: Social Problem in America of the 1920's**

The discussion of American social problem in this article is just focused on the Materialist Spirit in Consumptive Society, The Increase of Moral Decadence, and Disillusionment of Lower Class Society.

By his novel, *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis tries to criticize the life of American middle class businessmen in the 1920's. He portrays the social and physical conditions of the twenties America. George Follansbee Babbitt, the main character of the novel, has been figured as a person who faces many problems of life such as household and social problems. Through Babbitt's attitude in facing the social change of the era, Lewis expresses his thoughts and feelings about his dissatisfaction with the condition of the twenties America, for instance, Babbitt's motivation in his life is just to get money, power, and social prestige.

He serenely believed that the one purpose of the real-estate business was to make money for George Follansbee Babbitt (Lewis:38).

It is a social phenomena of the era which Lewis dislikes very much. Such a motivation has been pervasive into American businessmen of the 1920's. Like Emerson and Thoreau, Lewis was unhappy with the government of his day and its policies. He hated conformity, materialism, hypocrisy and pretentiousness (Grebstein, 1961:31).

##### **The Materialist Spirit in Consumptive Society Portrayed Through Babbitt's Life Experiences**

The discussion about the negative impact or the darker side of American success in this article is just focused on the Materialist Spirit in Consumptive Society, the Increase of Moral Decadence, and Disillusionment, traced through Babbitt's life experiences.

Industrialization has brought in "prosperity" and the American form themselves the economic masters of the world (Allen, 1957:139). Dazzled by the prosperity of the time and by the endless stream of new gadgets, the American people raise business in the 1920's into "a national religion" and respect businessman as "the prophet of heaven on earth". Material comfort becomes the final end of life itself and church rituals are accepted with less reverence (Leuchtenburg, 1958:188).

Furthermore, Americans have given up "the work ethic" because of the luring of rich material and American society has become a "consumer society". Increasing number of Americans have measured individual worth by the goods and services they are able to consume. More and more, individual has come to be perceived as no more than means to get "the where-withal" for consumption (Robertson, 1980:187). People, Robertson further explains, are continuously tempted to spend their money. Status, worth, and success are now judged by quantity of goods and services which are consumed (1980:188).

Referring to the novel, Sinclair Lewis starts to write *Babbitt* in 1920. It concerns not only the new urban society but also certain new urban attitudes attached to American commercial culture such as the boosting idea, the aggressive promotion of special civic

interest that finally finds its apotheosis in our enormous system of public relations, the idea of business service to the community (Cohen, 1959:357-8) This statement shows the condition of the residents of Zenith at the beginning of the modern era. In this era there grows new attitudes such as the idea of boosting, the idea of business service to the community, a passion to improve the position in society by hunting money. The following quotation proves the statement.

Babbitt's virtues as a real-estate broker - as the servant of society in the department of finding homes for families and shops for distributors of food - were steadiness and diligence. He serenely believed that the one purpose of real-estate business was to make money for George F. Babbitt. True, it was a good advertisement at Boosters' Club lunches (Lewis:37-38).

Businessman's interest is profit, and his basic motivation is making money. Prestige also becomes his motivation that stands behind money success. AS. Hornby in his Dictionary of Current English defines materialism as a tendency to value material things such as wealth, bodily comforts, etc, too much and give too little attention to spiritual and intellectual things (1974:532). Such a condition was pervasive into American society and had been the social phenomena of the nineteenth century America and the most recognizable was in the 1920's. Knodt points out that "the pursuit of wealth is nowhere so eager as in America. No American characteristic excited so much unfavorable comment as devotion to the dollar" (1976:107).

Money colors businessman's activities. It also influences their children's mind. They find out that people who work at earlier ages are able to make more "money" than those who have to finish their school or college. This evokes the children's opinion that education is not necessary anymore. In other words, "materialist spirit" has obsessed the children's mind. This is clearly said by Ted, Babbitt's son who is intended to continue his study in law-school.

"Oh punk. I don't see what's the use of law-school - or even finishing high school. I don't want to go to college 'specially. Honest, there's lot of fellows that have graduated from colleges that don't begin to make as much money as fellows that went to work early (Lewis, 65).

The quotation shows that there has been an intellectual bankruptcy among the young generation at that time. The society of Zenith place material prosperity above everything. Man's status is judged by wealth rather than profession. Lewis presents some characters with different professions, but they are valued equally in their status. It is the content of their house and the material wealth they possess that determine the status. Things like the sleeping-porch, the 'Mode!-T' Ford car, the cigar-lighter, the radio, and other highly new products are symbols of prosperity and consumptive life.

### **The Increase of Moral Decadence**

Hofstadter (1963: I) explains that from the end of the Civil War to the close of the nineteenth century, the physical energies of the American people had been mobilized for a remarkable burst of material development, but their moral energies had lain relatively dormant. This era was marked with materialism and corruption. As a businessman, Babbitt always hunts money like most businessmen do, and to make much money he frequently uses unusual ways, even neglect the moral ethics because the most essential thing for him is profit.

He, therefore, never consider his action whether it inflicts a financial loss upon the customers or not. It means that most of businessmen have low morality as for the sake of their own profit they easily do the actions referring to moral decadence such as corruption, collusion, nepotism and other crimes. The following quotation witnesses that Babbitt does corruption by concerning more profit rather than quality of the building he manages.

He sang eloquently the advantages of proximity school-buildings to rentable homes, but he did not know - whether the city school rooms were properly heated, lighted, ventilated (Lewis, 38).

What Babbitt does is really the reflection of what most American businessmen do in the 1920's in which corruption, collusion, venality, prostitution, hypocrisy, deception of the people and so on have been their daily activities. For the smoothness of his business, Babbitt often acts in collusion with some elite of Zenith city either the elite of local banks or those of politics. The following quotation proves that Babbitt acts in collusion with the elite of politics, Lucas Prout - a wealthy and respectable manufacturer who has been a candidate in the local election for the mayoralty. Babbitt makes campaign speeches for Prout in order to get advantages of this election. When Prout is elected as a mayor of Zenith, Babbitt, one of the 19 speakers at his victory banquet, is rewarded a secret advance information about the extension of paved highways in the city which will be great value to him in the real-estate business.

Mr. Lucas Prout and Business defeated Mr. Seneca Doan and Class Rule, and Zenith was again saved. Babbitt was offered several minor appointments to distribute among poor relations, but he preferred advanced information about the extension of paved highways, and this a grateful administration gave to him. Also, he was one of only nineteen speakers at the dinner with which the Chamber of Commerce celebrated the victory of righteousness (Lewis:148).

In this case moral decadence has been pervasive in American people especially in the American businessmen's society.

### **Disillusionment of Lower Class Society**

It is the real America seen by Sinclair Lewis in the first decade of twentieth century and has been a mental evidence that material success or economic success gained by American businessmen through industrialization and business does not guarantee happiness and satisfaction, but on the reverse, it has given an impact of disillusionment on the American people. This fact is supported by reality that poverty and moral decadence deepen amidst the increasing wealth in industrial America.

This happens as the success has made the American businessmen greedy. Greedy men, for the sake of money, have frequently sacrificed virtue and justice and valued the money above everything. As a result, they are not reluctant to exploit the weak for the sake of their own profit. Besides that, they easily do something immoral such as corruption, collusion, nepotism and other crimes. On the other side, some of the Americans reap a little fruit of the success; they are the working class or lower class who live under the standard of American living. This condition, of course, has arisen disillusionment among them.

What Stanley Graff experiences in his life is one of the examples of this fact. Graff is a member of Babbitt's staff in Babbitt-Thomson Realty Company who is demands higher wages but Babbitt always denies it. Young Graff, the outside salesman, was always hinting that he deserved an increase of commission, and to day he complained, "I think I ought to get a bonus if I put through the Heiler sale.

--- Besides, Stan -- Matter O'fact, Thomson and I are against bonuses, as a matter of principle (Lewis:60).

The quotation witnesses that the strong or the rich never give the weak or the poor normal attention; even the weak often gets bad treatment. What Graff has experienced in his life is really a reflection of the era. Such a condition has, of course, aroused deep social gap between the rich and the poor in which the rich becomes richer and the poor becomes poorer.

Really those who feel disillusioned upon the condition are not only the lower class or the working class but American people as a whole. Frederick Lewis Allen points out that "disillusionment" was the keynote of the 1920's. The majority of American people felt a queer disappointment after the war. They felt that life was not giving them all they had hoped it would. They realized that some of the values which had once meant much to them were melting away, but they remained quite unaware of the change which was taking place beneath the surface of their minds (1957:198).

It is clear, based on the statements above, that the material success achieved by America through industrialization and business has provided great negative impact on its people besides the positive one.

Babbitt, one of the American middle-class businessmen, also feels discontent and disillusioned upon the condition of the era. To rebel against the condition that makes him feel dissatisfied and disillusioned, Babbitt acts like the other middle-class businessmen such as making and spending more money, and pursuing happiness by coming to some beautiful places, drinking alcoholic beverage, having love affairs with other women, holding parties, seeing the movies, playing golf and other entertainment.

This is quite different from the working class who always use "strike" as a common means of expressing their disillusionment or in rebelling against the disillusioning condition. He withdraws from his society and joins the "Bunch", a miscellaneous group of trivial and tawdry persons who are Tanis Judique's friend, to be a liberal. Babbitt has accepted their attitudes and shares them with drinking, dancing and rattling.

When he went home, at two, he was fully a member of the Bunch, and all the week thereafter he wad bound by the exceedingly straitened conventions the exceedingly wearing demand, of their life of pleasure and freedom (Lewis:270).

Babbitt also feels discontented and disillusioned with his children. He has three children : Verona, Ted and Tinka. He sends the two of his children, Verona and Ted, to college in order that they can lift up the social status of their family in the society.

Babbitt hopes and believes that it is just Ted, the only son, who can lift up the social prestige of his family if Ted has been a lawyer. But he is soon very disillusioned when he realizes that Ted has different idea. Even Ted and Verona are trapped into hedonistic life with the flappers.

“There’s plenty of fellows in my profession that stop and hate their competitor, but if you were a little older and understood business, instead of always going to the movies and running around with their dresses up to their knee and powdered and painted and rough as if they were chorus-girls (Lewis:70)

It is evident that wealth or material success achieved by Babbitt is not the only one to make him and his family happy and peaceful. On the reverse it has dragged them into tragic life.

## **6. Conclusion**

Babbitt becomes mental evidence as well as valuable historical material to the large explanation of American experience in the 1920’s. In addition to conventional documents, it provides facts and understandings about the complexities of the decade. This can be justified on the fact that the novel has a component of reality, and Sinclair Lewis makes his characters seem true to life and puts them into recognizable situations.

George F. Babbitt or Babbitt, the main character of this novel, becomes the stereotype of American businessmen. He is a businessman or professional man who conforms unthinkingly and complacently to prevailing middle class standards of respectability, who makes a cult of material success, and who is contemptuous of or incapable of appreciating artistic, spiritual and intellectual values. His motivation in his life is to get money, power and social prestige. He is fond of possessing many luxurious household equipment and accessories to prove that he is a prominent businessman as well as to lift up his social status in society. He does so since he thinks that in modern society wealth or money is the most important thing, and it symbolizes honor and prestige. To get money or wealth, he is not reluctant to do immoral actions such as corruption, collusion, nepotism and other crimes.

Through this novel, American Society with its industrial phenomena of the 1920’s can be possibly comprehended. The society becomes a context to the characters’ growth and self realization. This society is revealed through human relationship, through characters’ patterned interactions and their common expectation of each other.

Sinclair Lewis uses his main character, Babbitt, to express his thought and feelings about his dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the condition of the twenties America. He chooses to write about the life of American middle-class businessmen with their narrow-mindedness in his attempt to reveal the soul-destroying materialism of American Society and the greediness of American businessmen. In American class system, businessmen are regarded as middle class, a class that is perceived as bourgeois, whose great desire is founded on mere material success. This class is the majority and gives the color to American life with its morality and manners. Therefore, their manners and attitudes become the standard of Americans in general.

Lewis’s main idea is that American material success of the 1920’s gained through industrialization and business does not guarantee happiness and satisfaction to its people. On the reverse, the success has brought in the profound spiritual poverty, disharmony and very deep disillusionment to the American people as a whole, because at the same time, poverty, great moral decadence and crimes deepen amidst the increasing wealth in industrial America. Babbitt, a real-estate broker, is the servant of society in the department of finding homes for families and shops for distributors of food. He is very successful in his business but like the success of America which brings unhappiness to its people, Babbitt’s wealth and fame also



bring him disillusionment. Even his material success has dragged him and his family into tragic life.

On the whole, it can be concluded that money is not everything to make someone happy. The exorbitant love of money becomes the source of all evils and makes someone greedy. Greedy men, for the sake of money, sacrifice virtue and justice. This happens as they value money above everything.

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