

George f. babbitt and women: a vicious cycle of dissatisfaction



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In his book *Babbitt* (1922), Sinclair Lewis presents George F. Babbitt, a tormented man anchored in the Roaring Twenties. Firstly described as an active citizen who is pleased with his job, his Club and all the thriving technological developments of his time, the protagonist of the story quickly appears nonetheless as an unhappy man discontent with his life. Although it comes from various aspects of his world, Babbitt's relationships with women play a major role in this dissatisfaction. Whether it is with his wife, his mistress or his feminine acquaintances in whom he is interested, Babbitt never seems to reach a complete state of content in his relations, as his expectations always turn into disappointment. In addition, America undergoes revolutionary changes in the 1920's which cause destabilisation in several domains, particularly gender roles. Indeed, with the progressive emancipation of women since the nineteenth century and the apparition of the national women's suffrage in 1920, many men find themselves in a situation of confusion regarding the gender balance that had prevailed until then. The purpose of this paper is thus to demonstrate that George F. Babbitt is continuously dissatisfied with his relationships with women because of two main factors. On the one hand, Babbitt undergoes the consequences of the imbalance between the genders taking place in America at that time which lead him to adopt a misogynist attitude towards women and, on the other hand, he restlessly looks for an ideal woman that cannot possibly exist.

The first possible explanation for Babbitt's discontent with his relationships with women is linked to the context in which he is immersed. Afraid of the emancipation of women, Babbitt adopts a hyper-masculine behaviour that prevents him from having a satisfying relationship with a woman, as he

restlessly denigrates them. For the sake of contextual setting, it is necessary to remind that the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth century in America is a period of radical improvements that touches either the technological, industrial and societal fields. Regarding this last category and especially the part involving gender roles, an imbalance appears. With the apparition of the “ New Woman”, a movement that will result in the right to vote for both sexes in the United States, women actually take an important step towards their emancipation. Conscious that it is only the beginning of a period which will tend to impose gender equality, men are torn by mixed feelings of confusion and fear of what is about to happen to their masculinity. In her work *Babbitt as Veblenian Critique of Manliness*, Clare Virginia Eby explains that, as a consequence of women’s suffrage, America witnesses a “ crisis of masculinity” (Eby 6), leading men to adopt an “ hypermasculine behavior” (7). According to the Collins English Dictionary, hypermasculinity can be defined as “ an exaggeration of traditionally masculine traits or behaviour ». George F. Babbitt is not immune to the crisis American men get through and Eby explains that “ Babbitt . . . thinks he is in revolt against the pressures imposed by women” (8). Thus, as a response to women’s emancipation, Babbitt’s hyper-masculine behaviour, which is translated through the use of gender stereotypes and misogynist discourse as it will be demonstrated below, prevents him from having any satisfying relationship with a woman, as he denigrates them over and over.

Babbitt’s derogatory attitudes towards women appears throughout the book through various processes but are mostly to be seen through gender stereotypes and misogynist discourse. Indeed, stereotyping women is a way

for Babbitt to enhance men and fight his fear of women's emancipation by belittling them. For instance, one striking example of Babbitt's genders stereotype is when he welcomes the wives of his friends at his dinner party, explaining that there were " six wives, more or less – it was hard to tell, so early in the evening, as at first glance they all looked alike, and as they all said, " Oh isn't this nice!" in the same tone of his determines liveliness" (Lewis 114). In this example, Babbitt reproaches women to act in the same superficial and exaggerated way. On a more physical aspect, while washing his forearms, Babbitt claims " Damn soft hands – like a woman's. Aah!" (258). This is a typical hyper-masculine comment from the protagonist which aims at denigrating women's sensitivity. Of course, having soft hands is not something negative but in this context, Babbitt probably links it with an expression of weakness, something that his manliness prohibits. Regarding attitudes, he repeatedly criticizes several female behaviours, such as when he asserts that " That's the trouble with women . . . they haven't any sense of diplomacy" (91), or that the " Trouble with women is, they never have sense enough to form regular habits" (97). He also complains that " these women . . . get you all tied up in complications!" (333), " They always exaggerate so." (335) and that "[they] never can understand the different definitions of a word" (303). Thus, usually aiming at one woman in particular, Babbitt stereotypes her, which means that he extends his critic to all women. The effect of such habit is that by belittling them, Babbitt enhances their male counterparts.

Also preventing him from having any successful relationship with a woman because of constantly denigrating them, Babbitt tends to hold a misogynist

discourse throughout the story. Further than just stereotyping genders, the protagonist tries to assert men's superiority through various comments. For instance, he reproaches women's lack of gratitude towards men, such as when he notices that " his wife was too busy to be impressed by that moral indignation with which males rule the world" (112) or when he gets angry regarding the fact that women think that " a man doesn't do a darn thing but sit on his chair and have lovey-dovey conferences with a lot of classy dames and give ' em the glad eyes" (337). Through these two comments, Babbitt stands up for the image of the man as a pillar of an efficient world which traduces one more time his fear of what is about to happen to his masculinity. Other hyper-masculine comments occur when he refers to places aiming at men only, such as when he asserts that " They were free, in a man's world" (139), when he addresses Joe by offering to "[get] away from these darn soft summerites and these women and all" (285) or finally when he "[wants] to flee out to a hard, sure, unemotional man-world" (348). All these locations free from women are therefore depicted as quiet, genuine and far from any useless superficiality. The separation between men and a women's worlds, as well as the glorification of male places, are one more way for Babbitt to enhance men and fight against his fear of women's emancipation. This is what Eby confirms when she asserts that these kinds of manly comments are " anxieties of this transition from macho to domesticated man: George Babbitt runs from . . . women in a frenzied search for a separate men's culture that would help him to prove his manhood" (Eby 8). Consequently, if Babbitt is not entirely satisfied with any of his relationships, it is, in a first instance, because he reacts to women's emancipation through a hyper-masculine behaviour that prevents him from

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having a successful relationship with a woman, as he constantly belittles them.

The second possible explanation for Babbitt's discontent with his loving relationships is that he is looking for an ideal woman that cannot possibly exist in real life. Babbitt always had a firm belief that "[h]e was hunted by the ancient thought that somewhere must exist the not impossible she who would understand him, value him, and make him happy" (Lewis 281). Indeed, the protagonist is on a quest to find the perfect partner who possesses all the requirements necessary to satisfy him and allow him to be finally entirely content. The idealistic girl Babbitt longed for appears recurrently throughout the story but mostly in his dreams as she is a figment of his imagination. The fairy child, as the protagonist calls her, possesses a set of characteristics that responds to the perfection Babbitt looks for. First, what emerges from Babbitt's recurrent description of this fairy creature is a mix of youth, beauty and sexual attraction when, for instance, he dreams that "[s]he was so slim, so white, so eager" (12). The fairy child also owns a gift for understanding Babbitt, what other women do not. For instance, in one of his dreams when he finds himself surrounded by strangers laughing at him, he escapes by catching up with her (105). As for when the fairy girl "cries that he was gay and valiant [and] that she would wait for him" (12), it procures to the protagonist a feeling of being admired, another sensation that he expects to find in his ideal woman. Finally, as Graham Thompson asserts, "the closest reading of the fairy child in Babbitt has suggested that this imaginary character acts as a way for Babbitt to express his desire to escape from his wife and his friends and the world to which he belongs"

(Thompson 53). Therefore, in addition to youth, beauty, sexual attraction, understanding and admiration, what completes the archetype of the ideal woman is the aspect of escape and freedom that she procures to Babbitt. Although it seems that some of these characteristics can be found in each of his feminine acquaintances, none of them own them all and, consequently, the insatiable expectations created by the fairy child are another way to explain Babbitt's dissatisfaction with women.

At first sight, the woman that appears to be the most opposed to the fairy child is Myra, with whom Babbitt is unhappily married from the beginning of their relationship. Indeed, Mrs. Babbitt does not possess any of the requirements that Babbitt expects from his ideal partner and therefore, this is evidence of the impossibility for the protagonist to find satisfaction in his married life. First of all, Myra fails Babbitt's first expectation of the perfect woman, composed of youth and attractiveness. In her introductory description already, Mrs. Babbitt is reproached for not maintaining her physical appearance when it is said that she is "definitely mature" and "as sexless as an anaemic nun" (16). This distaste for Myra's physique has existed since Babbitt met her as even then, young Myra appeared to his eyes as "a Nice Girl – one didn't kiss her, one didn't 'think about her that way at all' unless one was going to marry her." (93). This reflection from Babbitt, in addition of being ironic as he ended up marrying her, demonstrates very well that he never saw her as potentially appealing. When Myra is not discredited for her physical appearance, she is simply described by her function as "a Good Wife" (93) but she is never associated with flattering terms regarding either her age or her physical appearance. Understanding is also not part of

Myra's qualities according to Babbitt. He points it out several times in the story, such as when he claims that "And Myra, useless to expect her to understand" (361) or when he talks about politics and complains about the fact that she does not get his point (304). As for admiration, the reader cannot contest that Myra is supportive towards her husband. Either when he scribbles in an exercise-book (158) or when he gives public speeches (176), Mrs. Babbitt never misses an occasion to praise Babbitt. However, it seems that the latter only notices the couple of times when her wife remains silent, such as when he comes back home after a ride in his car and feels like "to Mrs. Babbitt he was a William Washington Eathorne, but she did not notice it." (213) or when he reproaches her to be "too busy to be impressed by the moral indignation with which males rule the world" (112). Regarding freedom, Babbitt seems to undergo the opposite effect from his wife than the one he looks for. Indeed, when Myra has to leave, Babbitt "[is] glad that his wife was away. He admitted it without justifying it." (269) and when he has to pick her up at the station, he simply does not want her to be back (281-82). As for when she is absent, Babbitt cannot help but enjoy his freedom by acting childishly and doing things usually prohibited by Myra, such as raiding the refrigerator. The fact that he calls that latter action "one of the major household crimes" (263) shows his irritation at Myra's rules and highlights even more his enjoyment of freedom when she is not there. Finally, it can be sum up by acknowledging that if Babbitt lives an unhappy married life, it can be explained, at least partially, by the fact that his wife does not possess any of the qualities he looks for in a woman.

Babbitt mentions many of his feminine acquaintances throughout the story but the female being who resembles the most the fairy child because of the similitude in their characteristics is Tanis Judique according to him. Indeed, Tanis fulfils all Babbitt's expectations except one and if he does not succeed in having a satisfying relationship with her, it is probably because of this only missing feature. Babbitt first met Tanis as one of his client at the real estate agency and he quickly finds in her the youth, beauty and attraction that he seeks. Babbitt actually immediately focuses on her age, thinking that "[s]he must have been forty or forty-two, but he thought her younger" (269) and he continues her description regarding her body and face in an enhancing tone (269-70), implying that Tanis fulfils Babbitt's first requirement of the ideal woman. Beyond her physical appearance, Tanis also offers to Babbitt the understanding he longed for. When they spend an evening together, they keep agreeing on every topic: the weather, the prohibition, art, modern young girls and so on (308). Tanis makes up for the comprehension Myra does not provide to Babbitt and he realizes it once Tanis is gone when he says: " I thought I was so smart and independent, cutting Tanis out, and I need her, Lord how I need her! . . . Myra simply can't understand. All she sees in life is getting along by being just like other folks. But Tanis, she'd tell me I was all right." (358). Furthermore, the admiration Babbitt expects from the ideal woman is also part of Tanis's qualities. Since they first met, she never skimped on compliments towards Babbitt, either regarding his questionable skills in driving and dancing (270-71), his knowledge in tinkering (307) and so forth. Overall, Tanis's personality and look seem to resemble greatly the fairy child's and consequently, the ideal woman that Babbitt is looking for. This is what he believes when he claims: " I've found <https://assignbuster.com/george-f-babbitt-and-women-a-vicious-cycle-of-dissatisfaction/>

her! I've dreamed of her all these years and now I've found her!" (316).

However, as an irresolute man, Babbitt is still not satisfied with his relationship with Tanis. Indeed, later in the story when she phones him at his office, he realizes that he is annoyed by such demand of attention and begins to feel trapped in their relationship and he finally puts an end to their relationship after many contradictory thoughts and once it is done, even if he is not completely convinced of letting her go, he is grabbed by a feeling of relief and freedom (349). Thus, despite all her characteristics resembling the fairy child's, Tanis cannot provide an entire satisfaction to Babbitt as she lacks the ability to offer Babbitt the freedom he expects from his ideal woman.

Babbitt also fails in building any successful relationship with other women because of his way of behaving. Indeed, because of Tanis and Myra's inability to satisfy Babbitt's need of freedom, the protagonist desperately starts some sort of sentimental rebellion. This loving revolt is illustrated throughout the book when he tries, in vain, to seduce or impress some of his feminine acquaintances. What prevents Babbitt from having a successful relationship here is not some lack of expected qualities but his own behaviour towards women. A similar process actually applies to each of his attempt to seduce a woman. First, either it is with Miss McGoun, Louetta Swanson or the manicure girl Ida Putiak, Babbitt finds in each of these women a particularity that does not leave him indifferent. For instance, he mentions Ida Putiak as "[t]he girl who especially disturbed him" (273) or he even associates Miss McGoun and Louetta Swanson with the fairy child, his ultimate ideal. Then, he tries to seduce the girl in question and as she does

not respond positively to his advances, he usually becomes too insistent, fails badly and finally, accumulate frustration. With Miss McGoun, Babbitt tries several times to get more private with her, but each time the conversation turns back to the professional level. Disappointed, he convinces himself that he “knew there was nothing doing” (265) but his detachment is betrayed when he recognizes that he misses her when she is absent (357). As for Louetta Swanson, at Babbitt’s dinner party, while sitting next to her, the protagonist starts with a flattering description of her (126). He then addresses her a compliment on her look and continues by openly flirting with her in front of his friends and wife. Later in the story, when he is invited at the Swanson’s, he insists on helping Louetta, holds her hand, sits next to her and even has “the conviction that they had always had a romantic attraction for each other” (266). He keeps flirting with her until she rejects him. At that moment, Babbitt changes his attitude and, filled with frustration, asserts that he never wanted anything of her and childishly avoids her for the rest of the night (268). The same process applies repeatedly to the other women he makes sexual advances to, such as Ida Putiak. Although Babbitt criticizes the men who “get fresh with [her]” (276) he does exactly the same by inviting her to dinner only a few minutes after knowing her name (277-78) and when going back home in a cab after their evening together, he becomes too insistent towards Ida with his “hungry hands”, begging her not to stop their kissing (279). Babbitt ends up one more time “cold with failure” (280) and once again, filled with frustration. It is without any great surprise that Babbitt is displeased with his relationships as the same doomed process applies repeatedly. As long as he keeps behaving the same way, by getting over

thrilled and therefore too insistent towards his addressee, he will never succeed in building a successful and satisfying relationship.

George F. Babbitt appears throughout the story as an unhappy man who struggles in his relationships with women and this can be explained by two main factors. Firstly, Babbitt is anchored in a period and place where the gender roles is being re-evaluated with the apparition of nation women's suffrage in the United States. This imbalance generally brings to men insecurities regarding their masculinity and they express it through a hyper-masculine attitude which, in the case of Babbitt, is confirmed with his habit to stereotype women and hold a misogynist discourse. By constantly denigrating women through these processes, Babbitt cannot possibly find satisfaction with a relationship with someone he is revolted against. Nevertheless, Babbitt never gives up the idea to find the perfect partner and repeatedly dreams of the fairy child, an ideal woman who has all the features he expects from a woman in the real life. The problem is that he looks for a utopic number of qualities that none of his feminine acquaintances have all at once: beauty, youth, sexual attraction, understanding, admiration and of course, freedom. To conclude, unless Babbitt realizes that his hunt for the perfect woman is utopic or that a new balance between the gender sets in America, Babbitt is trapped in a vicious circle of dissatisfaction with his relationships with women.

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