

Conforming to the standard



Conformity is one of the most prominent themes of the satirical novel *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis. The main character, George F. Babbitt, is middle-aged, middle-class, and lives in middle America in the 1920s. World War I has just ended and the nation, including Babbitt's town of Zenith, is focused on progress and development. The post-war boom in white-collar jobs seems, according to the context of the novel, to breed a certain type of individual, of which Babbitt is a perfect example. These people are so-called "standardized Americans" who share similar values and characteristics. They are white, Republican, social club-joining, church-going, family-loving, business men. In certain respects these men represent the American Dream of happiness and prosperity. Yet in this context, Lewis shows that despite attaining the levels of conformity so desperately sought after, the American Dream is just a dream after all. Though Babbitt catches a glimpse of what life is like outside his standardized bubble of existence, this life will remain a dream for him because he has already succumbed to the conformist lifestyle and it is too late to backpedal. Lewis conveys to the reader a dismal and sometimes terrifying idea of early 1900s America in which strict class conformity is the rule and lack of adherence is absolutely unacceptable. This standardization and the consequences of not meeting the social norm can be seen in the people of Zenith, and Babbitt in particular, through their possessions, their conversation, and even their thoughts. Judging by the pride Babbitt takes in what he owns, it is obvious that material possessions are crucial to his status. Not only are the possessions important, they must fit the exact standards of what is expected from a man of his status. In an almost comical manner, Lewis has Babbitt take inventory of his living room — "A blue velvet davenport faced the fireplace, and behind it was a

cherrywood table and a tall piano-lamp with a shade of golden silk. (Two out of every three houses in Floral Heights had before the fireplace a davenport, a mahogany table real or imitation, and a piano-lamp or a reading lamp with a shade of yellow or rose silk.)” (88) This examination continues with Babbitt concluding that his living room is in compliance with all the standards of a “decent” Floral Heights living room. His excruciating detail with respect to the objects as well as attention to his standings in relation to his neighbors is clearly satirical on the part of the author. Lewis does this to indicate how completely ridiculous and mind-numbing that kind of behavior can be but also to show the preoccupations of the “standardized American.” Lewis continues his critique with Babbitt admiring the “standard advertised wares” around him that are “his symbols and proofs of excellence; at first the signs, then the substitutes, for joy and passion and wisdom.” (92) Lewis clearly believes that material conformity will undoubtedly lead to vacant unhappiness. This belief actually foreshadows Babbitt’s ultimate realization of the sad and empty bed he has made for himself by aspiring to and achieving this level of conformity. Before (and even after) reaching this epiphany, Babbitt judges people’s worth based on their material possessions. For example, Babbitt and Mrs. Babbitt’s disdain at going to a dinner at the home of an acquaintance of a lower status is obvious in the description of their surroundings—“The Overbrook house was depressing. It was the second story of a wooden two-family dwelling; a place of baby carriages, old hats hung in the hall, cabbage-smell, and a Family Bible on the parlor table.” (193) This illustration stands in sharp contrast with the proud and boastful account of Babbitt’s own house. Not surprisingly, Babbitt and his wife consider the Overbrooks to be just as dull and uninspiring as their

possessions. Lewis includes this to draw attention to the importance of material conformity in Babbitt's social relationships. Conversation may have been strained with the Overbrooks, but it is only because Babbitt is used to conversing with his own social set. Chief among his social equals are the Roughnecks, as they refer to themselves, a group of business men who meet at the Athletic Club and engage in a standardized sort of conversation consisting of a lot of joking, boasting, and meaningless conversation. It's remarkable how much of the novel Lewis manages to fill with this type of trivial banter. It seems he wants to show that there is a standardized script that is followed among people of the same social class. For example, upon entering the Club, Babbitt begins fraternizing with his peers. This involves name-calling—" How's the old Bolsheviki?", teasing—" Hope you haven't forgotten I took the last cute little jack-pot!", political commentary—" Say, juh notice in the paper the way the New York Assembly stood up to the reds?", affirmation and weather—" You bet I did. That was fine, eh? Nice day today." (53) and ending with a long discussion about business that consists of petting each other's egos. In virtually every situation that involves interaction between Babbitt and other men of his social status (with the exception of Paul Riesling), they engage in the same formulated conversation that really doesn't say anything. Lewis shows Babbitt engaging in this type of banter numerous times to emphasize the emptiness of it. The people Babbitt calls his friends are all just cookie cutters of each other and none of them would dare to stray from the narrow confines of " acceptable" conversation. Paul makes this mistake when he and Babbitt are on their way to Maine in the smoking car of the train. They pass a scene that Paul exclaims is " beautiful" and " picturesque." By doing this " he committed an

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offense against the holy law of the Clan of Good Fellows. He became highbrow.” (138) Though this error in social conduct is taken very seriously by his peers, Paul’s blunder doesn’t seem so extraordinary. Lewis includes it to set Paul apart from the rest of the men in order to foreshadow his ultimate act of non-conformity—shooting his wife. It also draws attention to just how narrow the conversation is and that any deviance is considered unacceptable. Babbitt learns this the hard way when he is nearly exiled from his peers by making sympathetic remarks about the labor unions and calling himself liberal. Lewis uses this scenario to show the possible repercussions of non-conformity. Except for his brief flirtation with non-conformity, throughout most of the novel Babbitt doesn’t voice an original opinion. For example, he tries to respond to his wife about the phenomenon of a preacher being elected mayor, but he only “ searched for an attitude, but neither as a Republican, a Presbyterian, an Elk, nor a real-estate broker did he have any doctrine about preacher-mayors laid down for him, so he grunted and went on.” (20) He has been so trained to be the “ standardized American” that he lacks the ability to come up with a thought of his own. Most of his opinions come from what he reads in the newspaper. For example, when discussing the merits of Shakespeare with his son, “ he wasn’t really an authority: Neither the Advocate-Times, the Evening Advocate, nor the bulletin of the Zenith Chamber of Commerce had ever had an editorial on the matter, and until one of them had spoken he found it hard to form an original opinion.” (73) This makes Babbitt seem not only pathetic but also a little scary, especially if his peers form their opinions the same way. Often when Babbitt has a particularly important sounding borrowed opinion, he will not hesitate to spout it off to every person he sees. He tells almost everyone he meets

how all the government needs is a “ business administration” even though he never goes on to explain what he means by it. Babbitt is a puppet who regurgitates any information he is fed. Lewis includes examples of this time and time again throughout the novel. He is exposing the danger that seemingly innocent conformity can culminate in. It can lead to such extremist organizations as the Good Citizens’ League. Formed near the end of the novel, its members include the most prominent members of Zenith and together they have sufficient influence to impose their extreme conservatism upon whomever they choose. Fittingly, they choose to wield strong control over the newspapers in order to maintain their conformity to the League’s values. The idea of the Good Citizens’ League seems to be Lewis’s terrifying vision of the consequences of a standardized nation. Through his portrayal of the characters’ possessions, conversation, and thoughts, Lewis was able to convey a sense of standardization and conformity within a certain social class in the town of Zenith. People’s possessions determine their status and their self-worth. There are strict material requirements to be considered a “ decent” household in Babbitt’s neighborhood. Conversation is kept within the narrow boundaries of what is “ acceptable.” The jovial chatter heard at the Athletic Club is empty and indicative of every conversation between the men of Babbitt’s social class. For the most part, Babbitt’s thoughts are only borrowed opinions from the editorial column in the newspaper. His glimmer of self-awareness is short-lived as he realizes that he is already too far gone in the confines of conformity to become a new man. Lewis shows that in Babbitt’s world, sometimes it is too late to attempt to turn one’s back on the standardized world that has bred them.