

Babbitt....conformity assignment

Psychology



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Like most people in Zenith, Paul has sacrificed his personal dreams for commercial success, giving up the violin for a roofing business. Reselling is also troubled like Babbalanza and he is unhappily married. Blaming his problems on his bitter wife, he shoots her in the shoulder and is put in prison. Babbalanza now has no real friends and feels that he faces " a world which, without Paul, [is] meaningless. " While returning from an unsuccessful vacation meant to find happiness, Babbalanza talks with Seneca Deane, a man with liberal views. Without anyone else telling him what to think, Babbalanza begins to agree with Donna's liberal ideas. Upon arriving back in Zenith, Babbalanza begins openly expressing his newly found liberal ideas, meeting opposition. For showing his new beliefs, Babbalanza is rejected and becomes a social outcast from his group of " friends," being ignored in both friendship and business. Babbalanza is pressured by many people to return to his old conservative and conforming self, but he refuses. In order to keep his liberal views, he must continue to be unrecognized and rejected, but can he? Does he have the strength to withstand the demands for conformity?

If he is like the majority of people in Zenith, he will not. Sinclair Lewis has the ability to capture the essence of Zenith businessmen with their words. His use of slang words such as " Franciscan" and " size" helps to portray the not-so-sophisticated personalities of the rich " Zeniths. " With this thorough and accurate style of mimicry, there comes very long, boring, and essentially empty speeches by Babbalanza and other people which drone on slowly. The pressures of conformity on society in Babbalanza occurred not only in the fictional city of Zenith, but in all America during the 1920s.

Lewis exposed how ridiculous conformity made Babbitt and the other characters in the story appear and he greatly emphasized this fact to make it obvious. Zenith would have fit in with America in the past, but it could also fit in America today as well. George's story is fairly simple. A successful Realtor in the booming Midwestern city of Zenith, married with three children, George is a pillar of the community and a support to his family, but he's not happy. Everyone is always coming to him with their complaints about life, but he's never supposed to question his lot.

Then his friend, Paul Reselling, begins to express his own dissatisfaction and together the two begin to sow some wild oats. George goes along on a trip to Maine without their wives, but eventually Paul sprints ahead by first having an affair and then shooting his wife. George, who had tried reigning Paul in, now proceeds to have his own affair with the widow Tania Judie. He also starts to hang out with some of Tannin's scrub friends ' OFF George's wife, Myra, finds out about the affair and George's business partners bail out on a few deals.

Meanwhile, George discovers that Tania, though her life seemed freer at first, is just as bound by societal conventions as he. With his own business now suffering and the bloom off of his new romance, George is already beginning to waiver, and when Myra comes down with a potentially deadly case of appendicitis, he realizes that he wants his old life back. Myra and his friends welcome him back to the fold. In a final scene, George's son elopes, and he surprises everyone by accepting the marriage. He even tells the boy that he should seize his opportunities now, because he (George) never truly did anything he wanted to his whole life.

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Now I understand that on the surface this does seem like an indictment of middle America, but it also reads like a cautionary tale, defending Zenith and its citizens from the notion that they'd be happier if they rebelled. In fact, the most convincing and moving moments in the whole book come when George returns to Myra. Likewise, perhaps the truest and certainly the funniest social criticism in the book is aimed not at the good people of Zenith, but at those who would change them. When The Reverend Mike Monday, who might easily be nothing but a caricature of a huckster preacher, comes to town.

Sure, Lewis may have thought this was so over-the-top as to preclude the reader paying any heed to the message, or he may have meant it as nothing more than self- appreciating humor, but isn't it at least possible that he suspected we'd prefer this kind of muscular Christianity to the offerings of the lemon-sucking professors, maybe even that he himself preferred it ? If Monday is supposed to be one of the bad guys, ask yourself this, outside of Richard III, when's the last time you recall the bad guy getting such funny lines at the expense of the good guys ?

At any rate, however Lewis intended us to take the story of George Bait and his abortive rebellion, the past eighty years have certainly vindicated the morality, even the hypocrisy, of Zenith and its most famous resident. George Bait is really one of the heroes of American Literature, all the more so because he chafes at the tugging of the reins but keeps pulling the wagon. Of such sacrifices are great nations and great cultures made. George F. Bait is a man who is completely controlled by the conformist society in which he lives. Pressure to conform lies in all aspects of Bait's life.

Relationships, family, social life, and business are all based on his ability to conform to Zenith's preset standards of thought and action. All of Bait's thoughts are controlled by society. Thoughts that are not those of society are renowned upon. "What he feels and thinks is what is currently popular to feel and think. Only once during the two years that we have him under view, does he venture upon an idea that is remotely original-and that time the heresy almost ruins him. "(Bloom) At first the reader sees Bait as a person more than happy discomfort to the standards set for him by the rest of society.

Bait saboteur his normal routine praising modern technology, material possessions social status as ways to measure the worth of an individual. In facet readers first encounter with Bait sees him praising modern technology. It was the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks, with all modern attachments, including cathedral chime, intermittent alarm, and a phosphorescent dial. Bait the technology of his alarm clock only because it is a symbol of material worth and therefore social status. All of Bait's actions and thoughts are controlled by the standards of Zenith. His every action is related to the phenomena of that society. It is not what he feels and aspires to that moves him primarily; it is what the folks around him will think. "(Mencken). All of Bait's thoughts are those of society, and thoughts that are not society's are ridiculed Bait works simply to raise his social status by means of increasing his material worth. Bait belongs to many popular clubs, the purposes of which he does not even completely understand. Why does Bait do these things? Bait does these things to perform for the other members of society.

He does everything expected of him even if he does not expect those things of himself. Bait does these things in hope of improving his social status. This conformist man is exactly who Sinclair Lewis wanted to show the reader, a man whose life is based on the ideals and standards of others. " Villages-overgrown towns-three -quarters of a million people still dressing, eating, building houses, attending church, to make an impression on their neighbors." (Lewis). This is what Lewis thought of American society and he used Bait to voice his opinions to his readers.

In fact that passage was intended to be included in the original introduction of Bait, which was never published. Bait does well in conformist society because in the beginning of the novel he accepts all the standards, goals, ideals, likes, and dislikes of society. Bait's though mirrors all those around him and he is therefore accepted in society. At first Bait lives in the illusion of happiness. The happiness Bait experiences is not genuine because he has replaced his desires with those of society. Since Bait is controlled by society his goals are also controlled by it.

The goals set by society are economic and material worth, social standing, and conservative thought. Since Bait has achieved, at least in part, these goals he is in a sense fooled into believing he is truly happy. Bait's true desires however are not those of society he dreams of nature instead of deterioration, young women instead of his wife, adventure instead of standardization, and he secretly sympathizes with certain groups he is supposed to despise because of their non-conformist nature. Bait can dimly see the flaws in his life but feels powerless to change his fate and become a better man.

Bait feels the pressure of conformist society and begins to witness the control it has over his life. The true awakening of Bait to the nature of conformist society springs from his friendship with Paul Reselling. Paul is Bait's only true friend and is the extreme example of the stifling conformity in Zenith. Zenith's harsh conformity demands that people give up their dreams and goals causing them to become unhappy later in life. Paul is one of the only characters who can see Zenith for what it really is. Paul tells Bait that Zenith is a place of cutthroat competition and conformity.

He says that the conformity in Zenith has ruined his dreams of becoming a fiddler, and instead forced him to become a tar roofing salesman. He makes a very important observation about the citizens of Zenith. "one third of 'me are sure enough satisfied with their wife's and kids and their friends and their offices; ND one third feel kind of restless but won't admit it; and one third are miserable and know it." (Bait peg. 64-65). This statement is the most accurate description of unhappy with their lives due to the power that conformity has on their lives stifling their dreams.

Paul realizes that these people are helpless to fight their unhappiness because conformity has trapped them into a life which does not satisfy them. Bait fits into the second class, those who are restless but wont admit it. Throughout the novel, however we will see Bait move into the third class of openly miserable people. Reselling already fits into that class. In an attempt to lighten Pall's spirits Bait suggests a trip to the woods of Maine where him and Paul will fish and hunt. Bait hopes that time away from Gila will help Paul and that maybe the trip could help to cure the restlessness he has been feeling.

This trip is when Babbalanza begins to realize that he is discontent with his life and must try to improve it. The realization that he does not want to end up as unhappy as Paul prompts Babbalanza to completely rebel against the conformist society in which he lives, and fight for the life he wants. When eventually Paul shoots his wife out of discontent Babbalanza realizes he must rebel against society and prevent himself from suffering the same fate as Paul. At the end of the novel Babbalanza is almost the same man he was at the beginning of the novel, except for one major difference. Babbalanza now has no hallucinations about his life.

He accepts his fate as a miserable member of conformist society. Babbalanza now realizes the terrible fate that Zenith sets for its citizens. When Babbalanza's son asks him permission to quit college and elope Babbalanza approves in hope that his son will fare better against the power of conformity than he has. "I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life! I don't know I've accomplished anything except just get along..... Maybe you can carry things on further. I don't know but I do get a sneaking kind of pleasure out of that fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it.

Well, those folks in there will try to bully you, and tame you down. Tell 'em go to the devil! I'll back you. Take your factory job, if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself the way I've been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours! ". Babbalanza (pg 401) In this meaningful ending passage Babbalanza admits his failure in life to his son, and tells him to go after his dreams. He hopes that his son will not fear life, himself, or Zenith the way he did. Babbalanza realizes that fear is how conformity captures its victims, and that without fear anything is possible.

Thanks to both the economics and the psychology of depressions, the early 1930s saw a decline in the marriage rate, the divorce rate (people couldn't afford to separate), the birthrate, and even, as far as it can be known, the frequency of bisexual relations. "Sketchy evidences surging at due to the tensions of hard times, sex within marriage decreased," writes Susan Ware. "Fear of pregnancy was a major factor, but feelings of inadequacy on the part of the male and lack of respect for the unemployed man from his wife also played roles. One woman told Lorena Hick of her fear of pregnancy, balanced by a fear of withholding sex from her depressed husband: "I suppose you can say the easier way would be not to do it. But it wouldn't be. You don't know what it's like when your husband's out of work. He's gloomy and unhappy all the time. Life is terrible. You must try all the time to keep him from going crazy. And many times-that's the only way." The historian Robert S. Mescaline studied an enormous cache of letters that officials; out of this and other personal materials, he constructed a portrait of the inner lives of working-class Americans during the Depression.

Of their "family troubles" he writes, Unemployment upset the traditional roles of father, mother, and children. Since the father's position was based upon his occupation and his role as a provider, the loss of his job was likely to mean a decline in his status within the family. The man who was without a position was, well, without a position.... Being "on relief" serialized an unwire family, but most especially the father, 2' The mood of the Depression was defined not only by hard times and a coming world crisis but by many extraordinary attempts to cheer people up-or else to sober them up into facing what was happening.

Though poor economically, the decade created a vibrant scene rich in the production of popular fantasy and trenchant social criticism. This is the split personality of Depression's era: on one hand, the effort to grapple with unprecedented economic disaster, to explain and interpret it; on the other hand, the need to get away, to create art and entertainment to distract people from their trouble, which was in the end another way of coming to terms with it.

In the city of Zenith the power of conformity is too strong to battle, and even when its power is realized it is impossible to battle. Conformity traps the fearful into unhappy lives, and forces its will upon them. Once captured by conformity it is impossible to escape its grasp. Some hope however exists for a newer generation including Babbitt's son to conquer conformity and aspire to carry out their dreams.