

## Commentary

*George F. Babbitt is a middle-aged real estate agent who lives in Floral Heights, in the middle-class residential neighborhood of Zenith, in the Midwest. The passage is taken from the First Chapter of the novel. The story is set on April 20 1920.*

### III

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. Babbitt was proud of being awakened by such a rich device. Socially it was almost as creditable as buying expensive cord tires.

He sulkily admitted now that there was no more escape, but he lay and detested the grind of the real-estate business, and disliked his family, and disliked himself for disliking them. The evening before, he had played poker at Vergil Gunch's till midnight, and after such holidays he was irritable before breakfast. It may have been the tremendous home-brewed beer of the prohibition-era and the cigars to which that beer enticed him; it may have been resentment of return from this fine, bold man-world to a restricted region of wives and stenographers, and of suggestions not to smoke so much.

From the bedroom beside the sleeping-porch, his wife's detestably cheerful "Time to get up, Georgie boy," and the itchy sound, the brisk and scratchy sound, of combing hairs out of a stiff brush.

He grunted; he dragged his thick legs, in faded baby-blue pajamas, from under the khaki blanket; he sat on the edge of the cot, running his fingers through his wild hair, while his plump feet mechanically felt for his slippers. He looked regretfully at the blanket—forever a suggestion to him of freedom and heroism. He had bought it for a camping trip which had never come off. It symbolized gorgeous loafing, gorgeous cursing, virile flannel shirts.

He creaked to his feet, groaning at the waves of pain which passed behind his eyeballs. Though he waited for their scorching recurrence, he looked blurrily out at the yard. It delighted him, as always; it was the neat yard of a successful business man of Zenith, that is, it was perfection, and made him also perfect. He regarded the corrugated iron garage. For the three-hundred-and-sixty-fifth time in a year he reflected, "No class to that tin shack. Have to build me a frame garage. But by golly it's the only thing on the place that isn't up-to-date!" While he stared he thought of a community garage for his acreage development, Glen Oriole. He stopped puffing and jiggling. His arms were akimbo. His petulant, sleep-swollen face was set in harder lines. He suddenly seemed capable, an official, a man to contrive, to direct, to get things done.

On the vigor of his idea he was carried down the hard, clean, unused-looking hall into the bathroom.

Though the house was not large it had, like all houses on Floral Heights, an altogether royal bathroom of porcelain and glazed tile and metal sleek as silver. The towel-rack was a rod of clear glass set in nickel. The tub was long enough for a Prussian Guard, and above the set bowl was a sensational exhibit of tooth-brush holder, shaving-brush holder, soap-dish, sponge-dish, and medicine-cabinet, so glittering and so ingenious that they resembled an electrical instrument-board. But the Babbitt whose god was Modern Appliances was not pleased. The air of the bathroom was thick with the smell of a heathen toothpaste. "Verona been at it again! 'Stead of sticking to Lilidol, like I've re-peat-ed-ly asked her, she's gone and gotten some confounded stinkum stuff that makes you sick!"

The bath-mat was wrinkled and the floor was wet. (His daughter Verona eccentrically took baths in the morning, now and then.) He slipped on the mat, and slid against the tub. He said "Damn!" Furiously he snatched up his tube of shaving-cream, furiously he lathered, with a belligerent slapping of the unctuous brush, furiously he raked his plump cheeks with a safety-razor. It pulled. The blade was dull. He said, "Damn—oh—oh—damn it!"

He hunted through the medicine-cabinet for a packet of new razor-blades (reflecting, as invariably, "Be cheaper to buy one of these dinguses and strop your own blades,") and when he discovered the packet, behind the round box of bicarbonate of soda, he thought ill of his

wife for putting it there and very well of himself for not saying “Damn.” But he did say it, immediately afterward, when with wet and soap-slippery fingers he tried to remove the horrible little envelope and crisp clinging oiled paper from the new blade. Then there was the problem, oft-pondered, never solved, of what to do with the old blade, which might imperil the fingers of his young. As usual, he tossed it on top of the medicine-cabinet, with a mental note that some day he must remove the fifty or sixty other blades that were also temporarily, piled up there. [He finished his shaving in a growing testiness increased by his spinning headache and by the emptiness in his stomach. When he was done, his round face smooth and streamy and his eyes stinging from soapy water, he reached for a towel. The family towels were wet, wet and clammy and vile, all of them wet, he found, as he blindly snatched them—his own face-towel, his wife's, Verona's, Ted's, Tinka's, and the lone bath-towel with the huge welt of initial. Then George F. Babbitt did a dismaying thing. He wiped his face on the guest-towel! It was a pansy-embroidered trifle which always hung there to indicate that the Babbitts were in the best Floral Heights society. No one had ever used it. No guest had ever dared to. Guests secretively took a corner of the nearest regular towel.]

He was raging, “By golly, here they go and use up all the towels, every doggone one of 'em, and they use 'em and get 'em all wet and sopping, and never put out a dry one for me—of course, I'm the goat!—and then I want one and—I'm the only person in the doggone house that's got the slightest doggone bit of consideration for other people and thoughtfulness and consider there may be others that may want to use the doggone bathroom after me and consider—”

He was pitching the chill abominations into the bath-tub, pleased by the vindictiveness of that desolate flapping sound; and in the midst his wife serenely trotted in, observed serenely, “Why Georgie dear, what are you doing? Are you going to wash out the towels? Why, you needn't wash out the towels. Oh, Georgie, you didn't go and use the guest-towel, did you?”

It is not recorded that he was able to answer.

For the first time in weeks he was sufficiently roused by his wife to look at her.

Sinclair LEWIS, *Babbitt*, 1922

## 1) SOME CONTEXT

### i. Reform in the Progressive Era (1890-1920)

To some historians, Progressivism was merely a rather **confusing phase in American history**. Others consider it a genuine “movement”. In 1912, a “Progressive Party” was even created, yet it failed to bring Theodore Roosevelt back to the White House – it had failed to gather the support of the millions of voters who seemed to be calling for “reform” throughout the nation. No single organization can be said to have embodied “Progressivism”. The term was **widespread at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century** and encompassed a number of different ideas and policies.

At bottom, Progressivism can be seen as a reaction towards the new America that was taking shape in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To a certain extent, **the urge for reform was a response to the industrialization and urbanization of the country during the so-called “Gilded Age”<sup>1</sup>**. This entails that a number of reformers had fairly ambiguous positions on such crucial issues as immigration, education and women’s rights. **They were genuinely progressive insofar as they came to believe that social and economic problems were not “natural” consequences of modern society, but rather that they should be taken care of by the community at large** – even if this meant **government interference**. However, their outlook remained “conservative”, in the sense that many **tried to defend “traditional” American values** and were especially worried of the potential uprising of labor or about the American family.

In 1890, **the western frontier was officially “closed”**, which meant that new settlements and territorial expansion were no longer possible within the borders of the nation. This **symbolic event** confirmed what most Americans had already begun to realize: they were becoming an **urban, industrial country**. Furthermore, it seemed that the American economy was increasingly coming under the control of a limited number of **giant corporations**. The rise of these monopolistic practices was hardly kept in check by the **Sherman Antitrust Act (1890)**.

This development of big business had consequences both on the **organization of work and on the country’s demographic trends**<sup>2</sup>: population moved to cities and “new” immigrants came from Eastern and Southern Europe and provided an **abundant and cheap workforce**. They settled in big cities, where modern mills were located.

Conflicts started to appear between **labor and capital** and climaxed in **1901** when an **anarchist assassinated President McKinley**. This event fueled the anxiety felt by the American middle-class. At the federal level, Progressivism is often associated with the **controversial figure of Republican President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1908)**. Following the uproar caused by Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), which described the appalling sanitary conditions in Chicago’s slaughterhouse, Roosevelt pushed for the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. As president, Woodrow Wilson – a Democrat and the first American president with a PhD – also promoted a number of progressive ideas such as the Clayton Antitrust Act (1914), which reinforced the rather inefficient Sherman Act of 1890.

At the end of WWI, the United States went through **two major social revolutions**, as Congress adopted both the **prohibition of the manufacturing and sale of alcohol (18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, 1919)** and **women’s suffrage (19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, 1920)**. These two events bear contradictory testimony to the heritage of Progressivism. Based on moral and religious principles, Prohibition was meant explicitly to **“protect” the family and alleviate poverty**. Yet the ban on liquor production and sale was also a way to **force “decent” behaviour on the working class**. Most employers supported it, hoping that it would make their workers more efficient. Ultimately, Prohibition is mostly remembered as an ill-fated attempt at social control, which gave rise

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain had labelled *The Gilded Age* as early as 1873.

<sup>2</sup> The 1920 census marked the first time in which over 50 percent of the U.S. population was defined as urban.<sup>2</sup> Urbanization went at a fast rate in the south, the west & the midwest (in 2010 80% of the US pop is urbanized, 51% in 1920).

[https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban\\_and\\_rural\\_areas.html](https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban_and_rural_areas.html);  
<https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

to **large-scale organized crime**. One year later, however, genuine “progress” was achieved through the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, a democratic breakthrough that extended voting rights to millions of women. Within a year, the last echoes of the progressive era had once again produced a mix of conservative legislation and social progress. But the “**roaring twenties**” of jazz, prosperity, Ford cars and immigration quotas were about to begin, giving America the short-lived illusion that economic and social justice was no longer an issue. It would take the **Great Depression of the 1930’s** to bring back to the surface some of the Progressives’ ideas.

**Further reading:**

Lewis L. GOULD, *America in the Progressive Era (1890-1914)*, Pearson Education Limited, 2001.

**ii. Social and political background of the post-war era**

<from Grellet, *Literature in English*.

**WWI left deep scars on the American psyche:**

- its involvement had been presented as a crusade to save Europe <President Wilson: "The world must be made safe for democracy", start of interventionism ;
- but the war was a bloodshed and resulted in an unprecedented human waste (death, PTSD...);
- the Versailles Treaty (1919) and the League of Nations (1920) led to a sense of betrayal and absurdity ;
- industrialization triggered an economic boom that gave rise to a generation seeking pleasure.

**Some key technological and manufacturing breakthroughs** that changed America by giving people mobility and independence:

- the radio (Amos 'N' Andy show) ;
- the telephone ;
- the movies ;
- the Ford "Tin Lizzy".

**Social background:**

- poor living conditions of black people and new immigrants in big cities. Rise of the Ku Klux Klan ;
- absence of recognized trade unions, poor working conditions ;
- buying on credit became wide-spread which encouraged mass consumption ;
- speculation and rise of big business <Calvin Coolidge, "The business of America is business" ;
- rugged individualism "root, hog or die" rhetoric ;
- prohibition (18th Amendment) led to moonshining, contraband and organized crime ;
- women obtained the right to vote in 1920 (19th Amendment), era of flapper girls ;
- rise of Fundamentalist Christian sects, Darwinist theories were banned at schools in many states.

**The arts:**

- jazz music/Jazz Age that changed manners & morals of the Roaring Twenties ;
- Harlem Renaissance (cf brochure) ;
- architectural innovation (skyscrapers), futurism ;
- entertainment became part of America's way of life.

➤ The Roaring Twenties partly reflect the aimlessness and disenchantment of a post-war generation which was cynical and had lost its faith or values. Artists reacted differently:

- the Lost Generation’s reaction was to go on exile (cf brochure) ;
- those who stayed wrote caustic/scathing (mordant) satire: now let's return to *Babbitt!*

## 2) SINCLAIR LEWIS: SOME BIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS

1885 (Sauk Centre, Minnesota, USA)-1951 (Rome, Italy)

American novelist and social critic who punctured American complacency with his broadly drawn, widely popular satirical novels. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930, the first given to an American. <Britannica

Sauk Centre was 30 years old when SL was born. He saw his town outgrow the frontier village to become an agricultural community => **from rural economy to the machine age.**

He was not a good student and graduated 17 out of a class of 19, but he was a voracious reader and kept a diary. His mother had died when he was 7 and his father later remarried. He was a small town doctor known for his precise daily routine.

In 1902 he worked as a clerk at a hotel (from 6 pm to 6 am). Although he was fired for daydreaming, this gave him the opportunity to catalogue the attitudes of businessmen; => **satirist as master of portraiture.**

WWI changed US mindsets and questioned the romantic myth of small towns as youngsters flocked to big cities to find work. Sinclair Lewis about his work: "During these years of novelwriting since 1915, I have lived a quite unromantic and unstimulating life. Dreiser, in Canada, Mexico, England, Scotland, France, Italy, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Greece, Switzerland, Spain, the West Indies, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Poland, and Russia Dreiser. The fact is that my foreign travelling has been a quite uninspired recreation, a flight from reality. **My real travelling has been sitting in Pullman smoking cars, in a Minnesota village, on a Vermont farm, in a hotel in Kansas City or Savannah, listening to the normal daily drone of what are to me the most fascinating and exotic people in the world – the Average Citizens of the United States, with their friendliness to strangers and their rough teasing, their passion for material advancement and their shy idealism, their interest in all the world and their boastful provincialism – the intricate complexities which an American novelist is privileged to portray.**" <Nobel Prize

Sinclair Lewis achieved an **international reputation with *Main Street*** (1920), a satiric caricature that detailed the drabness, the conformity and the materialism of small town middle America. From Minnesota himself, his early satires targetted the Midwest, where *Babbitt* is set. In the first seven chapters, the narrator follows Babbitt through the events of one day, while the remaining chapters are more focused on establishing a sociology of middle-class American life. This is what created a large controversy at the time, since it was the first uncompromising assault on American virtue. As Babbitt evolves, his discontent with the mores of the world rises. Babbitt actually tries to break out of the stifling conformity of his middle-sized Midwestern city (a failed liaison, a friendship with a one-time artist, some involvement with liberalism) but fails, as he is caught up by personal & structural shortcomings. So even if he struggles & wishes for something better, he sinks back into compromising conformity. The novel implies that only love & friendship can answer Babbitt's problems, not social positions/norms.

- Lewis was, **faithful to the American tradition set by Dreiser & Wharton**, a sharp **delineator of manners**. His **gallery of portraits** is representative of his country and is faithful to the **staccato style of the Jazz music of the 20ies**.

### Consulted websites:

- Britannica online biography: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sinclair-Lewis>

- Lewis writing about himself:

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1930/lewis/biographical/>

## Proposition de corrigé <plan détaillé

(*amorce*) The end of WWI was followed by a rise of consumption in the United States as speculation and credit gave the illusion to the population that the country deserved this latch<sup>3</sup> from an era of sacrifice to the era of the American dream and of materialism.

(*présentation de la source*) **Yet**, writers like Sinclair Lewis wrote scathing satire to denounce the excess of bigotry, consumerism and rugged individualism. Two years after the publication of *Main Street* where he debunked the myths behind small town life in rural Midwest, Lewis published *Babbitt* in 1922. (*présentation du texte et de sa spécificité*) Taken from the opening chapter, this extract from the third section of the incipit introduces the eponymous character in its natural habitat/milieu of Floral Heights, a wealthy neighborhood in Zenith, somewhere in the Midwest. **Indeed**, the passage is highly liminal:<sup>4</sup> Babbitt painstakingly wakes up and tries to get out of bed in order to get about the daily routine of the successful business man he is. The text stages the imminent transition from his private sphere (the world of his family that he seems to despise) to the public world he thrives in. **However**, his wealth and possessions, far from bringing him comfort, seem to produce irritation and unhappiness. Paradox that the omniscient narrator sardonically underlines.

(*annonce de la problématique et du plan qui répond à la question*) **Thus**, how does materialism strip the protagonists and American society of their true self to fabricate a mock identity? I will **first** show the text can be read as the satirical portrait of a "plump" character (l. 17, 44) who is, **as the second part will contend**, lost in a dialectic between seeming and being. **Finally**, the last part will ponder on the debunking of American consumer society and on the narrative voice "stropping its blade" (l.47).

- Problématiques alternatives proposées par les étudiants:
  - To what extent does the satire of the American middle-class make fun of Babbitt and help the reader become aware of his own behavior?
  - How does this text underline that consumption turn the American dream into a living nightmare?
  - How does this text illustrate/show the flaw of US society with the allegory of a man who conflates happiness and material comfort?

### I) The satirical portrait of a "plump" character (l. 17, 44)...

#### A) A conspicuous & oblivious type

- the text portrays the **type of a paradoxically round character (round but shallow)**: a "round face" (l. 56), a "plump" demeanor (l.17, 44).
  - **stereotypical of the middle-class wannabe Rubber Barons** (19th)/character as **social climber**: playing poker and drinking at the club (l.7). Passive attitude toward vice "the cigars to which that beer enticed him" (l.9): attitude opposed to that of a businessman in control of himself. Weak, as he cannot resist temptation. Tempered by his wife cf **Temperance movement** that led to the prohibition of the manufacturing and sale of alcohol (18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, 1919).
  - **antithetical character**: saying one thing but never acting on it, of versatile disposition (contempt for his wife but then plays the victim: l. 48 vs. l.67). **Chauvinistic attitude**. Be it in the private sphere (home) or in the public sphere (club), Babbitt doesn't seem to act as the "bold man" (l.10) he thinks he is because of his social position.

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<sup>3</sup> any of various devices in which mating mechanical parts engage to fasten but usually not to lock something. <Merriam Webster (une bascule en électricité)

<sup>4</sup> of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition: **in-between, transitional** <Merriam Webster

- **infantilized<sup>5</sup> by his wife**: a) calls him "Georgie boy" (l.13), b) he sleeps in a "cot" (l.26), c) in "baby-blue pajamas" (l.15), d) can't speak (l.74) => **inability to speak turns him into an animal**: "grunted/dragged his thick legs" (l.15), "groaning" (l.20).
- **a blurry scene**. A hollow protagonist whose perception is faulty/he is **oblivious to his reality**:
- **distorted vision** which is symbolically represented through a blur ("looked blurrily out at" l.21) or an impaired vision ("eyes stinging from soaping water", l.57, "blindly", l. 58). He is **unable to see/face the situation** as it really is.
  - **fails to look at his wife** => his perception is twofold : he hears her then looks at her, which **fragments her**. First, her unpleasant voice is heard ("her detestably cheerful" l.12), and underlined by the binary rhythm + repetition of sound to frame his perception (l.13). But he only looks at her at the end of the text/chapter and "for the first time in weeks" (l.75). End of the text as **final perceptive revelation/grim climax**.

### B) A creature of habit<sup>6</sup>/habitus

- **Babbitt as a creature of/created by modern life**: living to the rhythm of "modern attachments" (l.2)
- **phonetic pun Babbitt/habit**. Staccato/gradual introduction of his name: a) title, b) surname (l.3), c) infantilized by his wife "Georgie boy" (l.13), d) twisted into a concept/a noun by the narrator "the Babbitt" (l.37), e) Christian name ("George F. Babbitt" l.60). Following the publication of the novel, the name "Babbitt" became a noun and was used in press articles, especially by Henry Louis Mencken (American journalist, editor & critic who co-founded *the American Mercury* in 1924). Mencken used the term to refer to the petty bourgeois, whom he also called "boobus Americanus" or "ignoramus." + the 3 Bs suggest **stammering/hesitation and blabber** (infantilization).
- **a conventional and conformist protagonist**: defined by **passivity**. Use of a passive structure on l. 30: no agency when he moves around the house, as if the house/his possessions were in charge of him. He is defined by his predictable actions ("mechanically felt for his slippers" l.17, "as always" l.22, "re-peat-ed-ly asked her" l.39) and by his mechanical flow of ideas: "For the three-hundred-and-sixty-fifth time in a year he reflected" ll.23-24, "reflecting, as invariably" ll.46-47 => but the **reflective process is shallow. VS sceptical empiricism** (cf cours): unable to draw conclusions from experience, he keeps making the same mistakes: "as usual [...] with a mental note that...." (ll.53-54): procrastination and pointless experience that do not help him to grow as a character.

=> T°: A character who is everything but tempered

## II) ... lost in the dialectic between seeming and being.

### A) Failing to 'husband' his household...

- **liminal text where he wakes up but this is far from a wake up call**.
- the alarm clock triggers a **cycle of self-loathing** ("he lay and detested the grind of the real-estate business, and disliked his family, and disliked himself for disliking them" ll.5-6). Babbitt's **sole source of pride lies in his materialistic accomplishments** ("proud of being awakened by such a rich device" l.3). cf polysemy of the adjective "rich": irony of the narrative voice (rich also means laughable, entertaining in US English) => **double layer**.

<sup>5</sup> Latin *infantem* (nominative *infans*) "young child, babe in arms," noun use of adjective meaning "not able to speak." Source: Etymonline

<sup>6</sup> habit <from Latin *habitus* "condition, demeanor, appearance, dress," originally past participle of *habere* "to have, hold, possess; wear; find oneself, be situated; consider, think, reason, have in mind; manage, keep,". Source: Etymonline

- a situation that gets out of hand. Still hungover, as the adjective "irritable" l.8 shows. Understatement that translates a narrative comment + one the tools of satire (cf cours), Babbitt complains about every aspect of his life and grouses about material & human possessions alike (vulgarity/use of swear words ll. 45, 49, 64, 67...).
- **overwhelmed by his saturated life** ("thick with the smell of a heathen toothpaste", l.38), the text stages the **desacralization of the American family**:
  - **his role as master of the household is challenged by the feminine presences of his wife and daughter Verona**: 1) irritating voice of his wife whose name is never mentioned, 2) defiant attitude of the teenager (ll.38-40) => self-victimization + logorrhea than ends on a suspensive dash (ll.64-69). Tantrum of a man infantilized by his wife and who is dispossessed of composure, akin to female hysteria => crisis of masculinity
  - **he has neither dominion over 'his women' nor over himself**: dissociation himself/his body (his eyes have their own agency on l.21), dissociation himself/language <logorrhea (l.64). **Parataxis**: no (logical) links between the paragraphs, this creates fracture, division and splits (of self, of family).
  - **yet one surge of masculinity/virility**: when aroused by the prospect of a business transaction (ll.28-30). Shift in the text: he feels enabled ("seemed capabled" l.28) to "get things done". Innuendo virility (etymology vir <man, hero)/"vigor" (l.30). An American hero? **From rigor mortis** ("he creaked to his feet", l.20) **to vigor officii**.
  - Sole source of contentment is when he contemplates his "neat yard" (l.22) ie. the outside yet he never questions his unhappiness => **shortcoming of the protagonist at the start of his initiation/Bildungsroman?**

#### **B) ... he clings to the clang of appearances**

- disappointment. The surge of masculinity leads him to the bathroom. Hyperbolically equipped cf advertising frenzy of the 20ies (on the radio, on TV, in newspapers). Translates Babbitt's **perfectionist philosophy where having the best is akin to being the best**. Note the parallel "the best of nationally advertised" l.1 that entails "the best Floral Height society" (l.62). **Possession = social status**.
  - the bathroom can be read as an **allegory** (*passus* through a place where Babbitt's resilience and manlihood are tested: he has to shave => symbolic of the transition from boyhood to manhood). The place, rather than being practical, is for show: "to indicate that" (l.61) => *demonstrare/monstrare*.<sup>7</sup> + social indicator of wealth (cf diegetic purpose of the incipit)
  - **failed attempt at renewal/baptism**: "the tub was long enough for a Prussian Guard" (l.34) but instead of gaining purity he "pitch[ed] the chill abominations into the bath-tub" (l.70 <cf central importance of Methodists<sup>8</sup> & Baptists in the Midwest, where Sinclair Lewis was from and where the novel is set.
- **the supposedly realistic incipit alludes to the American way of life of the Roaring Twenties, when consumption was as its peak**. Cf President Harding's campaign slogan "Return to normalcy". Normality = consumption.
  - **showcase for modernity tinted with European (ie. foreign) imperialism** ("royal bathroom of porcelain" ll.32-33, note the use of an Italian word + "Prussian Guard" l.34). **Invasion** from within (at home) and from abroad (immigration + European sophistication).
  - **norms and codes regulate the text and "frame"** (l.25) **Babbitt's life**. Implied rules that only apply to this household <the narrator hints at this absurdity/nonsense with a sardonic remark in parenthesis about Veronica's unuasal/rebellious use of the tub (ll.41-42) which contrasts with the parents' vision: if there are "regular towels" (l.63), then there are irregular ones <**upsy topsy logic/lack of logic that brings to mind Alice in Wonderland's ludicrous implied rules**.

<sup>7</sup> "to point out, indicate, exhibit," a sense now obsolete, from Latin *demonstratus*, past participle of *demonstrare* "to point out, indicate, demonstrate," figuratively, "to prove, establish," from *de-* "entirely" + *monstrare* "to point out, show," from *monstrum* "divine omen, wonder". Source: Etymonline.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism>



- **however ironical twist:** instead of bringing structure, comfort and solace objects destructure individuals and deprive them of their agency which is, in essence, un-American. Babbitt is betrayed by foreign objects that he cannot master/use efficiently <the situation is "soap-slippery" (l.50) and gets out of hands, **showing how the myth of the self-made man is made up**, a mere "sensational exhibit" (l.35). **Freudian 'slip'<sup>9</sup> that manifests his unconscious?**

=> T°: the bathroom <allegory of excess (the Gilded Age + The Roaring Twenties)

### III) "Stropping one's blade" (l.47) and debunking American consumer society.

#### A) A tale of the "modern" (l.2) tub

- an accumulation of material goods turning Babbitt into a **social competitor who can 'keep up with the Joneses'**<sup>10</sup>: "socially it was almost as creditable as buying expensive cord tires" (ll.3-4). Central notion of value (credit<sup>11</sup>) shattered by the adverb "almost" that leads the reader to consider the credit/creditor dialectic <**distortion of a pact with the Devil, Faust/Wilde:** unlimited wealth in exchange for one's soul? Another type of **business transaction** exemplified in the transition between the world of dreams and the world of "real-estate business" (l.6).
- **text as a satirical attack on America's latest religion: consumerism** "The Babbitt whose God was Modern Appliances" (l.38): irony of the capitals. Tribute to Jonathan Swift's satire, *A Tale of a Tub*, 1704.<sup>12</sup>
  - everyday objects used to ridicule a situation
  - shift in the text as Babbitt "slipped on the mat" (l.42): **physical instability that results in generic instability as well:**
    - the text takes on comic undertones to the point where it mimicks the popular **slapstick comedy** of the time (cf use of Italian word, "porcelain", here hinting at the shift toward *commedia dell'arte*). cf rhythm + repetitions of conjuncts ("and/but/then" ll.41-60) + w/s alliterations from ll.41-73: sounds of slipperiness (to slip AND to dodge).
    - **epic battle with the "shaving-cream"** (l.43): adverb "furiously" repeated x3 (ll.43-44). Another shift in the text at the end of the battle. Reified until now, Babbitt is finally portrayed as a hunter, thus reversing the dynamic ("he hunted through", l.46). But forever ridicule due to the **dullness of his "blade"** (l.45). vs that of the narrator.
    - **Defeated by towels, wiping out his humiliation** (ll.70-71), his wife "serene" questions (x2, l.71) adds another layer of ridicule to the scene. Final blow with the passive voice + impersonal structure "It is not recorded that he was able to answer" (l.74). **Protagonist who can neither act nor speak, yet preterition => his failure is actually recorded.** Power of the satiric voice whose efficiency lies in the gap between the situation as is and the situation as Babbitt sees it (a distorted American dream). Satiric narrative comment with emphatic do "he did say it" l. 49.
  - **corrective function of satire:** dull character who is **destructured by materialism/sharp narrator whose pen punctures.** Lame/dull hunter <cf Andrew Carnegie who argued in his "Gospel of Wealth" (1889)<sup>13</sup> that competition was "essential to the future of the race", thus expressing a belief in what is known as **Social Darwinism**, such intellectuals as economist Richard T. Ely and philosopher

<sup>9</sup> a slip of the tongue that is motivated by and reveals some unconscious aspect of the mind <Merriam Webster. "Lapsus" in French.

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keeping\\_up\\_with\\_the\\_Joneses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keeping_up_with_the_Joneses)

<sup>11</sup> Latin origin of *creditum*: a loan, a thing entrusted to another. Source: Etymonline.

<sup>12</sup> "an energetic defense of literature and religion against zealous pedantry [...]In the preface Swift explains the title: sailors toss a tub overboard to distract a whale that might attack their ship; in the same way, Swift suggests, his work may act as a decoy to deflect destructive criticism from the state and established religion".

< <https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Tale-of-a-Tub-prose-satire-by-Swift>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.carnegie.org/about/our-history/gospelofwealth/>

John Dewey tried to develop a social model based on cooperation and education rather than the survival of the fittest.

### **B) "No more escape" (l.5): distorting American myths to correct the mores of the Roaring Twenties**

- Here the purpose of the text is less to laugh than to **correct our mores**. **Heuristic function of satire/satire as a science?** Unabashed satire: yet entertaining the reader with a modern anti-hero. Narrative voice warns against the "grind of the real-estate business" (ll.5-6) that is be lethal to individuals (cf Dickens' "grindstone of history" in *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859). **Empathy with a character who suffers from a situation he cannot grasp** (as it slips out of control).
- **short hope** when Babbitt wakes "on the edge of" (l.16): can the reader expect a revelation? Blanket stands for memorabilia of "freedom and heroism" (l.18). But notions that are emptied of their American meaning as they are attached to the "blanket", ordinary object that evokes sleep and not action/evasion. Here escapism => sleep, that is escaping into the world of dreams.
  - Motif of the "camping trip" (l.18): **revival of the myth of the Gentleman Farmer**, close to Nature (cf Transcendentalism). Babbitt unlikely to escape his ethos, unlike American heroes. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or *Tow Sawyer*, Edgar Rice Burrough's *Tarzan* series in 1912, Jack London's 1903 *Call of the Wild* (Gold Rush in the 1890ies) or James Fenimore Cooper's 1826 *Last of the Mohicans* suggest that adventure is a way to escape the stifling norms of society. However, Babbitt never contemplates or never tries to follow this American tradition. For him, adventure is not considered as such, only later in the novel and in the French meaning of the term: affair. Thus diminishing the scale, the scope and the spectrum of his modest rebellion.
- **voicing a warning**: narrative voice/author as clear-sighted witnesses of the Roaring Twenties.
- era of movement, innovation yet "oft-pondered, never solved" (l.52): Babbitt as a **poorly trained engineer who stagnates** although he surrounds himself with electrical objects (source of energy and movement). Babbitt's tragedy is that he uses objects without understanding how they're made or how they should be used, resulting in waste and stagnation (blades "temporarily piled up there" ll.54-55). Poor engineer but also poor user of his own language. Dispossessed even in speech: "to build me" (l.25): object/subject reversed. In the equation/transaction, the "self" has vanished. His English, like his blade, is dull and hazy: "thing" (ll.25, 29, 60), "stuff" (l.40), "dinguses" (l.47).
  - myth that resources are unlimited to balance the end of the Frontier era. Lack of horizon. Life ordained like a broken clock and not like the working mechanisms of the Ford era.
  - **Manifest destiny of the American satirist?** Manifest destiny: belief that American settlers were meant to expand across North America because of the special virtues of the American people and their institutions, the mission to redeem and remake the west and the irresistible destiny to accomplish this essential duty.