Babbitt Study Guide

Babbitt by Sinclair Lewis

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Introduction

Lewis won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930 on the strength of a number of significant works, including *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Babbitt*, a satire of the prosperous and conservative business class of 1920s America. Published in New York in 1922, Lewis's novel follows two years of realtor George F. Babbitt's life, during which Babbitt goes from a lifestyle of complete conformity with the business world, to a period of rebellion including heavy drinking and adultery, and back again to conformity. Throughout this journey, Lewis skillfully highlights the lack of culture in medium-sized American cities during the Prohibition Era, the hypocrisy and corruption of pro-business organizations, and the emptiness in typical businessmen's lives.

Babbitt is more than an embodiment of what is wrong with America, however. He is a vivid and lifelike character searching for meaning in a life dominated by conformity and loneliness. Babbitt tries to rebel in every way he knows until a conservative organization threatens his business because of his new liberal ideas, at which point he falls back into the lifestyle of what Lewis called a "Standardized Citizen." In a society that, today, retains many of the basic values that Lewis attacks, Babbitt's struggle continues to engage readers and expose some of the deepest and most longstanding infirmities of American culture.

Author Biography

On February 7, 1885, Lewis was born in the prairie town of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, where he spent a childhood biographers have described as awkward and lonely. He did not find much social success at Yale University either, but he began to develop his talents as a poet and short story writer, and he took time away from the college to travel to England and Panama. After he graduated in 1908, Lewis worked as a journalist and an editor in California, Washington D.C., and New York. In addition, he traveled more extensively throughout Europe and America.

In 1914, Lewis married Grace Livingstone Hegger, and they had a son, Wells Lewis, who would eventually die in World War II. In 1928, he divorced Grace and shortly thereafter married journalist Dorothy Thompson. They had one son named Michael.

By the end of World War I, Lewis was regularly selling short stories and had published his first novel. In the 1920s he became a prolific novelist. *Main Street* (1920) was his first widely successful satire, followed by *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929), all of which satirize American culture. In 1926, Lewis was the first writer ever to decline the Pulitzer Prize, citing the award's emphasis on the "wholesome atmosphere of American life," although he did not turn down the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930.

Ironically, the Nobel Prize marked the turning point of Lewis's critical and popular success. He continued to write novels through the 1930s and 1940s, including one of his more successful portrayals of interpersonal relationships, *Cass Timberlane: A Novel of Husbands and Wives* (1945). None of these were as successful as his previous efforts, partly because of an alcohol problem and increasing fatigue. Meanwhile, Lewis began an affair with a young actress in 1939 and divorced his second wife in 1942. He then lived in Duluth, Minnesota for two years before moving to Massachusetts. In 1950 he moved to Italy, where he died of heart troubles on January 10, 1951.

Plot Summary

Chapters 1—7

The first seven chapters of *Babbitt* follow one day in the life of its title character, beginning with his process of waking up, talking to his wife, and squabbling at breakfast with his three children. Babbitt starts his car and drives to work, stopping to chat with his neighbor Howard Littlefield, and to pick up a man waiting for the trolley, before he parks outside his real estate office. After a morning of dictation, taking advantage of a grocer looking to expand his shop, and smoking cigars□which he promises himself he will quit□Babbitt meets his best friend Paul Riesling at their club for lunch.

The Athletic Club is chiefly a meeting place for Republican businessmen, and Paul does not fit in there very well, as he talks to Babbitt about his marital problems and complains about their meaningless lifestyle. Babbitt and Paul plan to take a trip to Maine without their wives, and Babbitt goes to pick up his partner and father-in-law Henry T. Thompson. After Babbitt denies his salesman Stanley Graff a raise at the office, Babbitt goes home, has a talk with his son about college, takes a long bath, and falls asleep. Chapter 7 reveals glimpses of the intrigue in other parts of Zenith while Babbitt slumbers.

Chapters 8—14

Time moves forward more rapidly after chapter 7, and the major event of the spring is the Babbitts' dinner party, for which Babbitt makes bootleg cocktails. The dinner party seems to go well despite its commonplace conversation. But Babbitt is anxious for his guests to leave, and when they do he explodes to his wife, "I'm sick of everything and everybody!" He tells her he wants to go to Maine alone with Paul. The Babbitts visit the Rieslings in their apartment and, after Paul's wife has a fit and Babbitt yells at her, she agrees to let the men spend some time alone.

Babbit and Paul have a nice and peaceful time fishing, sleeping, and playing poker before their wives come to meet them, although Babbitt is just beginning to feel "calm, and interested in life" when it is time to go home. Chapter 12 describes Babbitt's leisure time. In chapter 13, Babbitt attends the annual State Association of Real Estate Boards conference, followed by a trip to a brothel. The speech he gives at the conference is the first step in Babbitt's social climbing, and he follows it with political talks against the liberal lawyer Seneca Doane's candidacy in the local election, as well as a long speech about "sound business" values to the Zenith Real Estate Board.

Chapters 15—21

Trying to ingratiate himself with his wealthy and powerful classmate Charley McKelvey, Babbitt chats to him at their class reunion and has him and his wife to dinner. This is not

a success, but Babbitt has more luck with the banker William Eathorne during their campaign to improve the Presbyterian Sunday school. Babbitt pays the young reporter Kenneth Escott to give the Sunday school favorable press, and Kenneth begins a friendship with Babbitt's daughter Verona. Babbitt's son Ted, meanwhile, is beginning a relationship with their neighbor Eunice Littlefield, and her father Howard is angry to find them dancing together at Ted's high school party.

At work, Babbitt makes a corrupt deal with a loan off the books from Eathorne, fires his salesman Stanley Graff, and then takes a business trip to Chicago with his son. After Ted goes back to Zenith, Babbitt happens to meet the Englishman Sir Gerald Doak, who had been a guest of Charles McKelvey while in Zenith, and entertains him thoroughly. Then Babbitt sees Paul Riesling with a suspicious woman and waits for him in his hotel room. Paul tells him that he can't stand his marriage anymore, and Babbitt tells him he will make an excuse to Paul's wife, Zilla. After Babbitt is elected vice-president of the Boosters, he finds out that Paul has been arrested for shooting his wife. Paul's lawyer will not allow Babbitt to testify on his behalf, and Paul is given a three-year prison sentence.

Chapters 22—29

Paul's imprisonment deeply affects Babbitt, and it inspires a series of increasingly rebellious activities. He goes to the movies during work hours, flirts with three women including a client named Tanis Judique and a young girl from the barbershop, whom he takes out to dinner. Babbitt goes to Maine by himself but fails to stop thinking about all of his problems in Zenith or to be satisfied by the "woodsman" life. On his way back to Zenith, Babbitt meets Seneca Doane, who inspires him to hold increasingly liberal opinions and even take the side of the strikers in the big walkout. This earns Babbitt the suspicion and contempt of his conservative friends at the Boosters.

Babbitt then begins a love affair with Tanis, after he goes to her apartment ostensibly to fix a leak. He makes no protest when his wife says she is going to visit her sister, and after she leaves he sees Tanis frequently, meets her socialite friends called the "Bunch," and becomes a heavy drinker and party-goer. His liberal sympathies increase, and when Vergil Gunch, the president of the Boosters, asks him to join the conservative "Good Citizens' League," Babbitt says he has to think it over.

Chapters 30—34

Babbitt finally writes to his wife that he misses her, and she is somewhat suspicious on her return. But Babbitt spends time with her and takes her to a spiritualist talk she wants to hear before he goes back to Tanis. Dissatisfied with this relationship as well, he breaks it off and assures himself that he's going to "keep free" and "run my own life!" After he takes a stand against the prominent citizens asking him again to join the Good Citizens' League, he begins to lose business; even his stenographer goes to a competing firm.

But Babbitt's wife's appendicitis and his devotion to her during and after the operation, cause him to return to his old ways, and he accepts when he is once again invited to join the conservative Good Citizens' League. Returning to his prominent conformist role, Babbitt's business prospers (through corruption), and he even partially confesses his sins to the uninterested Presbyterian priest. Verona marries Kenneth Escott and the Babbitts find, to their shock, that Ted has eloped with Eunice Littlefield. Although the rest of the family are very critical, Babbitt takes his son aside and tells him he has his support because, as Babbitt could never do, he has ignored what others think and done what he really wants.

Characters

George Follansbee Babbitt

The oblivious and conforming, yet inwardly restless, character of George Babbitt has penetrated American culture and become a pervasive cultural symbol. An unthinking, cultureless, greedy, and corrupt businessman can still be called a "Babbitt" and reactionary, selfish, absurd, and conservative behavior can still be called "Babbittry" with wide recognition. Babbit has come to represent the absurd and corrupt aspects of the American business world that Lewis was so effective at satirizing.

In many ways, Babbitt has been created to be the perfect target; he holds none of his own opinions, has no genuine passions, and rarely even manages to be a good or dependable husband and father. Yet there is an unmistakable inner life in Babbitt that fascinates readers and makes them sympathetic to his vivid character even if they finds all of his opinions and beliefs detestable. Chubby, pink-skinned, and wrinkled, with thinning hair and thick glasses, Babbitt makes an unlikely hero, yet he inevitably draws the reader into his struggle and his hollow life. Despite all of his falseness and emptiness, he is an unmistakably real character.

In the course of the novel, Babbitt undergoes the only major rebellion against the meaninglessness of his life that he will ever have. This is sparked by the imprisonment of his friend Paul Riesling, and it extends from a search for the calm outdoor life to debauchery and adultery. Afterwards, Babbitt once again becomes the corrupt, ignorant businessman content to oppress the poor and the standardized, dutiful husband who does not love his wife.

Myra Thompson Babbitt

Paul Riesling's second cousin, Myra is a "nice" and "gentle" person who does not have many opinions except for a desire to be a social climber and an interest in hokey spiritualism, but her own struggles and thoughts in the novel are undeveloped. She began to spend time with Babbitt while he was studying to go to law school and Paul was falling for Zilla. Babbitt did not love Myra then, but merely grew used to her after she assumed (without his proposal) that they were engaged, and he never really loves her during their marriage except with a bland sort of affection. Myra's feelings for her husband are not so clearly stated. She is upset, however, when he is having an affair with Tanis, and he fails to show her the expected level of devotion.

Ted Babbitt

Babbitt's slightly pert son, named after Theodore Roosevelt, graduates from high school, begins college, and elopes with Eunice Littlefield in the course of the novel. His two main interests are Eunice and cars, and he does not want to study anything except

mechanical engineering, but Babbitt does not allow him to transfer colleges. Nevertheless, Ted has an increasingly close relationship with his father, and Babbitt is the only one to support his elopement at the end of the novel.

Tinka Babbitt

Tinka is Babbitt's youngest daughter, with "radiant red hair and a thin skin which hinted of too much candy and too many ice cream sodas." Despite his fondness for her, Babbitt does not seem to spend much time with his daughter, and Tinka does not play an important role in the novel.

Verona Babbitt

A "dumpy brown-haired girl of twenty-two," Verona is Babbitt's socially conscious child. She talks earnestly about all kinds of liberal social issues with her friend and eventual husband Kenneth, and the rest of the family often makes fun of this. She has graduated from college and works as a secretary, although she would like to work for a charity of some kind.

Dr. A. I. Dilling

Dr. Dilling is a prominent member of the Good Citizens' League and the surgeon who operates on Babbitt's wife. He is a chief influence in the group that warns Babbitt he must join the league and then ostracizes him from the community until he turns back to conservative conformity.

Sir Gerald Doak

Charles McKelvey's guest when he visits Zenith, "Sir Gerald" is something of a celebrity and considered to embody the stereotypes of the old English gentry. However, as Babbitt finds out when he makes friends with him in Chicago, Doak is an uncultured conservative businessman much like Babbitt.

Seneca Doane

Doane is Zenith's most radical lawyer and politician, as well as Babbitt's former college peer. He loses the mayoral election to a corrupt Republican but remains committed to social change through the strike. He even briefly draws Babbitt into his liberal thinking.

Sam Doppelbrau

Babbitt's neighbor and the "secretary of an excellent firm of bathroom-fixture jobbers," Sam and his wife throw wild parties and go for late-night car rides.

Dr. John Jennison Drew

Dr. Drew is the reverend of Babbitt's Presbyterian church, but he is much less interested in religion than in conservative politics. He uses his sermons as a platform for Republican ideas including anti-labor sentiments. Drew fails to pay any attention to Babbitt when the confirmed rebel tries to confess his sins.

Captain Clarence Drum

The leader of the force to suppress the strikers during Zenith's major walkout, Drum wishes he could use violence to solve labor conflicts.

William Washington Eathorne

Eathorne is the president of the First State Bank and a prominent member of Zenith's old-fashioned rich and powerful folk. He is also a member of Reverend Drew's Presbyterian church, and he befriends Babbitt during the drive to make a better Sunday school. Because Eathorne approves of Babbitt, he later allows him to take loans off the books for Babbitt's corrupt real estate ventures.

Kenneth Escott

The reporter that Babbitt hires to publicize the Presbyterian Sunday school, Kenneth is a young liberal writer at the newspaper. He begins a relationship with Babbitt's daughter Verona that eventually leads to marriage.

Sidney Finkelstein

The buyer for a department store, Sidney is a loyal Booster and Elk.

T. Cholmondeley Frink

"Chum" is the Booster and a good friend of Babbitt's that writes poetry and advertisements for a living. He is one of those disturbed by Babbitt's rebellion. Lewis uses his character to satirize the ridiculous platitudes of popular newspaper and magazine poetry.

Stanley Graff

Graff is the outside salesman of the real estate office until Babbitt fires him for tricking a tenant. Graff takes much of the abuse for Babbitt and Thomson's corrupt practices. He resorts to trickery because Babbitt has denied him a much-needed raise.

Vergil Gunch

Vergil is the President of the Boosters, a model for the conservative businessman, and a good friend of Babbitt's, except when Babbitt refuses to join the Good Citizens' League.

Orville Jones

Orville Jones is in the Babbitts' dinner party circle, although Myra does not want to invite him to their dinner party because he owns a common laundry shop.

Tanis Judique

Tanis is a lonely widow of forty or forty-two who has an affair with Babbitt. Babbitt meets her because she rents one of the office's apartments. She is a "slender woman" that Babbitt sometimes finds very attractive in one of her black frocks, although he is generally more interested in hearing her praise him than in her physical affection. Part of a "Bunch" of socialites and "Midnight People" that drink and party through the night, Tanis and her friends prove to be no more substantial, and their lives no more meaningful, than those lived by the conservative business types. Tanis eventually fails to excite Babbitt, and he leaves her, realizing that she is old and lonely.

Eunice Littlefield

The daughter of Babbitt's neighbor and Ted's eventual wife, Eunice is obsessed with the movies. Babbitt, who like his son is charmed by her short skirts and bobbed hair, suspects her of smoking. In this sense, she represents some of the typical characteristics of the "flappers," women of the 1920s who defied traditional roles.

Dr. Howard Littlefield

Howard Littlefield, father of Eunice, is Babbitt's neighbor and close friend. Full of trivia and obscure facts supporting conservative politics, Howard is a welcome accessory to the Babbitts' dinner parties, and Babbitt considers him extremely knowledgeable. In fact, Littlefield is full of nonsense, which Babbitt only begins to suspect during his rebellious phase. Otherwise, their only conflict comes over Eunice's relationship with Ted Babbitt.

Miss McGoun

Babbitt's able and efficient stenographer, Miss McGoun is much better at letter-writing than her employer and does a good deal of his work. This is why, in addition to his attraction to her despite her consistent refusal to so much as have a conversation with him, Babbitt is so upset when she briefly goes to a competing firm.

Charles McKelvey

McKelvey is one of the most rich and powerful men in Zenith, and Babbitt and his wife aspire to his social position. During their college reunion, Babbitt convinces McKelvey and his wife to come to dinner, but the party is a failure. Afterwards the McKelveys do not return the invitation.

Mrs. Opal Emerson Mudge

A pudgy, ridiculous lecturer that Myra enjoys, Mrs. Opal Emerson Mudge is a satire of trendy spiritualists.

Ed Overbrook

Like Babbitt's relationship with Charles McKelvey, Ed wants to ingratiate himself with a college classmate who is higher on the social ladder. The Babbitts ignore him after they go to his failure of a dinner party.

Joe Paradise

Half Native American, Joe is Babbitt's guide for both of his trips to Maine. Although Babbitt thinks of him as the perfect outdoorsman, Joe would rather set up a shoe store if he had enough money.

Professor Joseph K. Pumphrey

Owner of the "Riteway Business College," Professor Pumphrey is a fellow Booster.

Ida Putiak

Ida is the "small, swift, black-haired" young girl that works in Babbitt's barber shop. Babbitt asks her out to dinner while he is getting a manicure, and she agrees mostly for a free meal and a joke at Babbitt's expense.

Paul Riesling

Babbitt's best friend and the only person around whom he feels calm and happy, Paul Riesling is a misfit and an outcast in Zenith. Because of his sensitivity and his lack of business skills, the conservative and standardized society simply does not accept him. After his wife, Zilla, nearly drives him insane, he spends a period with another woman. Paul then shoots his wife and is imprisoned for three years, which completely breaks his spirit. At this point Paul disappears from the story and is "dead" to Babbitt. Although, during his rebellious phase, Babbitt imagines that Paul is in Maine with him at the front of a canoe. Since his role is to bring out the genuine aspects of Babbitt's character, Paul has no place in the novel as it becomes more and more clear that Babbitt and Zenith are empty and false.

Zilla Riesling

Paul Riesling's wife, Zilla is characterized by her vanity, her moodiness, and her constant nagging of her husband. After Paul shoots her, she becomes fanatically religious and bitter. As Babbitt's wife understands, however, Zilla justifiably feels locked-in and unappreciated during her life with Paul, and as she says, if she did not nag Paul he would not motivate himself to do anything.

Sheldon Smeeth

Smeeth is the educational director of the Y.M.C.A. and is active in the Presbyterian church, where he conducts the musical program.

Louetta Swanson

Louetta, who lives across the street from the Babbitts with her husband Eddie, is a "pretty and pliant" woman full of excitement and flirtatiousness. The Swansons and the Babbitts attend each other's dinner parties, and Louetta is the first woman Babbitt tries (unsuccessfully) to seduce.

Henry T. Thompson

Babbitt's father-in-law and partner in the real estate business, Thompson is made to represent the "traditional, stage type of American business man." He is an "old-fashioned, lean Yankee," and he lacks the "subtlety" of the modern businessman. This is why, for example, Thompson is more willing to be outwardly corrupt while Babbitt prefers to lie even to himself when bending the law.

Social Concerns

The name of the title character in Babbitt has become a symbol for a particular type of American described by Sinclair Lewis in this, probably his best novel. Lewis's description of the character and of the townspeople who live in Zenith, USA, is, as an early reviewer noted, "hideously true." It is a description of a way of life typified by sham and hypocrisy, fraudulent and crass behavior, vulgarity, and a money ethic that invades every area of American life where a person's value is measured in terms of the amount of money he makes.

Techniques

Very few critics or literary scholars praise Lewis for the aesthetics of his work. It makes some sense to think of Lewis more as a social commentator than as a literary artist of the first rank. Too often Lewis wrote rapidly and carelessly; he tended toward cloying melodrama and gross overstatement. But mixed with his literary lapses are many excellent passages, and no American writer captured as well as Lewis did the nuances of the language or the personality of a particular American type.

Many critics have described Lewis as having two sides: the ironic/satiric which is where his real talent lay and the romantic for which he could never find a valid literary expression. The success of his satire is rooted in the American sense of fairness, by exposing the injustices and hypocrisy of closed social systems. His talent, and the effectiveness of his writing, depends upon his ability to judge American values, and to juxtapose them with the reality of an evolving society that is not as honorable as the values it embraces.

Thematic Overview

The main thrust of the novel is social satire. The focus of the satire is the novel's theme, for Babbitt's quest for material success never brings him happiness, a fact that even he comes to realize; and although he tries to change his lifestyle, eventually he must return to it because he knows no other way than the kind of mass vulgarity which he both created and, in his sanest moments abhors.

Themes

American Business

Babbitt has chiefly been understood as a satire of the prosperous, conservative business class of which Babbitt is a prominent member and a perfect example. At a point in the political and social climate where, Lewis felt, private enterprise and the economic interests of the business and ruling classes were valued above cultural endeavors or basic ethics, the novel struck an important critical tone.

The novel has a host of targets for its business satire, and most of them are institutions of which Babbitt is a member or a co-conspirator: the Boosters, the Elks, the Chamber of Commerce, the Good Citizens' League, the fraudulent financial powers of big cities such as William Eathorne's bank, and underhand political interests like the Street Traction Company. Lewis stresses that these institutions create a greedy and corrupt business atmosphere in Zenith. They ruin anyone who seems to go against their agenda (as they begin to ruin Babbitt before Myra becomes ill), they are only interested in cultural endeavors like a symphony orchestra if it brings money to the city, and, as becomes clear during the suppressed telephone-workers' strike, they ruthlessly exploit the working classes.

Lewis also penetrates the deep hypocrisy of conservative American businessmen (that they say one thing and do another). The men of Babbitt's organizations preach the value of free competition and then ostracize all those who do not hold the same religious and social values, they support Prohibition but frequently drink themselves, they cheat on their wives, they suppress labor unions but organize into pro-business action groups, and they support religious groups like the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.) without holding any real Christian convictions.

One of the most condemning features of the American business class as portrayed in *Babbitt*, however, is its lack of any culture, imagination, or conviction. Babbitt's beliefs and those of his fellow Boosters and Elks are simply a conglomeration of the day's presiding commonplaces, and their only reason for holding an opinion is to fit in with their peers. Babbitt seems briefly to encounter some of his actual feelings in the course of the novel, but these "liberal" sentiments come more from a general discontentment he doesn't understand than from any genuine conviction. Presenting a culturally destitute society controlled by an insensitive and unthinking business class, Lewis launches a biting attack against the predominant American ideology of the 1920s.

Religion, Marriage, and Social Life in the Prohibition Era

Lewis's satire is not confined to the business world; he exposes many of the contradictions and absurdities in American private life during the era of Prohibition,

focusing on family and social life in medium-sized cities such as the fictional Zenith. Ridiculing Babbitt's passionless marriage, his uninteresting social clubs, and even his depraved yet ultimately unexciting period of rebellion and adultery, Lewis highlights the emptiness of this social world. It is taken for granted that men do not love their wives, that couples rarely enjoy their dinner parties except as a chore, and that parents show a minimum of care or attention to their children. The alternative, emblematized by Tanis Judique and her "Bunch," is shown to be equally tiresome.

Religion and spirituality in Zenith are also absurd and unfulfilling. Babbitt has no conviction whatsoever in the Presbyterian Church, and when he tries to partially confess he meets with nothing but an uninterested reverend fitting in his prayer before a political meeting. Reverend Drew uses his sermons to make Republican political statements, and religion seems to have no more meaning than Mrs. Opal Emerson Mudge's ridiculous spiritualism. Lewis incorporates the emptiness of religious and social pursuits into the discontentment of the business world to more effectively satirize the American lifestyle in cities like Zenith.

Midlife Crisis

Babbitt is forty-six at the beginning of the novel and forty-eight by its end. In these two years, triggered by the imprisonment of his one real friend, he has undergone the major rebellion of his life. The various aspects of this crisis, from his trip to the movies during office hours and his developing liberal convictions, to his adulterous love affair and his drinking bout, represent his only departure from conformity. Babbitt had some liberal ideas in college but these do not represent serious, earnest, or original ideas. He stresses that he wants to stop all of his dirty dealing before he retires in twelve years.

Babbitt's one revolt, then, however much it is merely a tame and ineffectual attempt at escapism, is extremely important to Lewis's ambitions in the novel. *Babbitt* is more than a simplistic satire; it is the study of a character trying to escape from the standardized culture of which he is so prominent a member. And it is not simply that Babbitt cannot escape the business culture because he is fundamentally a conformist; his livelihood is severely threatened by his mildly liberal ideas when he sees his business start to disappear after failing to join the Good Citizens' League. Lewis is exploring the fears and doubts that result from half a lifetime in the American system, the dissatisfaction that can result from conformity, and the futility of outward rebellion at such a late stage.

Style

Satire

Lewis's insightful exposure and condemnation of American values and institutions in the 1920s is effective and compelling mainly because he is such an adept satirist. He understands the conventions of humor, mockery, and social commentary, and he is able to draw a full and compelling portrait of an insecure and doubtful businessman in order to draw his readers into his way of thinking. By weaving his satirical points and attacks on American society into the various characters and dilemmas in Babbitt's life, Lewis establishes a convincing argument and wins over his readers.

Lewis is also effective because he so thoroughly understands the elements of American society he wishes to attack. One of the author's particular talents is in satirizing characters, ideas, and organizations by exposing their hypocrisy. Sometimes he forms the observation into a joke, as in Babbitt's thoughts about the Chamber of Commerce:

No one ought to be forced to belong to a union, however. All labor agitators who try to force men to join a union should be hanged . . . In union there is strength. So any selfish hog who doesn't join the Chamber of Commerce ought to be forced to.

Other times, particularly towards the end of the novel when Babbitt joins the Good Citizens' League and the fraudulence of his business endeavors become less silly and more contemptible, Lewis engages in more earnest social commentary. When the Good Citizens' League burns down the Zenith Socialist Headquarters, throws their desks out the window, and beats their office staff, it is a significantly less funny instance of hypocrisy. In fact, Lewis is here using a classic satirical device, which is to make the audience laugh and later reveal the brutal reality behind the joke, implicating the audience in the problem.

Plot

Lewis balances his satire with the building action of Babbitt's social rise and midlife crisis. His novel develops Babbitt's struggle to reconcile his vibrant inner life with the meaninglessness around him into a plot with rising action of his dissatisfaction, the climax of his rebellion, and the denouement (resolution) of his renewed conformity. But one of the principal criticisms of the novel has been that its plot is poorly managed, and it lacks a compelling struggle against the corruption and standardization in Zenith. For critics such as Mark Schorer, in his afterward to the 1961 edition of *Babbitt*, the details of Babbitt's life and Lewis's episodes of parody and satire do not provide the convincing dramatic action of a finely crafted plot.

Historical Context

The Roaring Twenties

After World War I, American politics and social life became increasingly conservative. Republican Warren G. Harding defeated Woodrow Wilson in the 1920 presidential election on a very conservative platform claiming to be a "return to normalcy." Cutting government expenditures, vetoing bonuses for World War I veterans, and lowering income taxes for the wealthy, Harding vigorously supported private enterprise and suppressed labor unions. Harding's conservative administration also, in some ways, set the stage for a decade that enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, at least for the middle and upper classes. As was notoriously exposed after his death in 1923, however, his administration was involved in a great deal of corruption and bribery.

The social conservatism of the 1920s was evidenced most notably by the prohibition of alcohol. Supported by claims that alcohol is bad for health and productivity, as well as by religious groups and post-war racist sentiments towards the German Americans who owned much of the alcohol trade, the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect in January of 1920 and persisted until 1933. Prohibition was, ultimately, a failure; it increased health risks because of unsafe bootleg alcohol and led to a sharp rise in organized crime since illegal brothels and saloons were so popular. But it was also a policy in line with a puritanical and conservative culture that frowned upon socialism, organized labor, and deviations from convention. The decade saw a major rise in the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, a sharp decrease in the immigration allowance, and the raiding and suppression of suspected "radicals."

There was, however, an active counterculture to the mainstream, although it was not always much more socially conscious. The decade showed considerable progress in women's rights, however, as the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution allowing women to vote was passed by Congress in 1919 and ratified in 1920. This was the era of "flappers," or women who defied domestic social constraints and were often associated with smoking and short hair. Jazz music was becoming increasingly popular, the film industry was thriving, and America was becoming increasingly inundated with technological advances such as cars and household appliances.

Late American Realism and Social Comedy

Nineteenth-century authors such as Mark Twain and William D. Howells, though committed to the "realist" goals of accurate representation by detailed description, were often involved in social satire. Like Lewis's chief English influences, Charles Dickens and H. G. Wells, Twain wrote comedic novels that attacked and parodied unjust social and governmental institutions. Howells's novels, like those of Henry James, were less comedic and more staunchly realist, but they also raised questions about social institutions such as marriage and business.

Realism began to split into a variety of factions in the late nineteenth century, however. Among the chief new influences on writers such as Edith Wharton was the "naturalist" movement, which concentrated on the inevitable helpless rise and fall of an individual character's fortunes. Also, novelists including Stephen Crane were deeply influenced by symbolist and romantic tendencies, while later expatriate American writers such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound turned to the developing influence of European modernism.

There remained a strand of writers, however, that were chiefly interested in social comedy and satire that posed as American realism. Upton Sinclair's "muckraking" books and pamphlets, written to expose social injustice, and with a specific political agenda, were one aspect of this strand, although they were perhaps less concerned with strict realism than with propaganda. Nevertheless, Sinclair was very influential over one of the most famous and bestselling realist satirists of the early twentieth century: Sinclair Lewis. Creating his own brand of late American realism with a heavy emphasis on comedic satire, Lewis was the chief writer to bring the convention of American realism and social comedy through the 1920s.

Critical Overview

In his introduction to *Critical Essays on Sinclair Lewis*, Martin Bucco writes that the literary community reviewed *Babbitt* very positively and saw it as an improvement on *Main Street* (1920) despite the fact that: "Reviews in business and club magazines naturally remonstrated against Lewis's bestselling raillery of a 'standardized' American businessman discontented amid zippy fellow Rotarians, Realtors, and Boosters." H. L. Mencken and Rebecca West were among the most influential early critics to praise *Babbitt*. West wrote in the *New Statesman* that the novel "has that something extra, over and above, which makes the work of art."

In 1930, Lewis won the Nobel Prize, and this award secured the place of the novel as a classic in American and international literature. Afterwards, however, Lewis suffered a major decline in reputation from which he never fully recovered. He was possibly less successful during the 1930s because America was no longer enjoying the prosperity of the 1920s; critics have suggested that the privileged circumstances of the 1920s caused people to be more receptive to Lewis's satirical talents. Interest in Lewis revived after his death in 1951, but critics continued their skeptical reevaluation of all of his novels, including *Babbitt*.

Critics have most often treated *Babbitt* as a satire of the American business world, although topics have ranged from Clare Virginia Eby writing on the influence of social critic Thorstein Veblen over the novel, to Stephen Conroy writing on the popular-culture trend in Lewis's work. David Pugh discusses whether the novel is applicable to the modern world in his 1975 essay "Baedekers, Babbittry, and Baudelaire," and he continues the debate about Lewis's critical appraisal by asking: "Babbitt: alive, readable? . . . or cold, boring, and very dead?" This question of whether *Babbitt* and Lewis's other works will stand the test of time continues. John Updike observes in a 1993 article in *The New Yorker* that, "Sinclair Lewis is at last fading from the bookshops." However, in his lengthy biography *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*, published in 2002, Richard Lingeman highlights "the apparent consensus among scholars and general readers that it was time for a fresh look at Lewis."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell discusses the role that Babbitt's homoerotic relationship with Paul Riesling plays in Lewis's novel.

Babbitt is primarily a satire that exposes the emptiness and discontent in the life of its main character, but it is not always clear that Babbitt's life has no value or meaning. From his occasional pleasant drive to his self-satisfaction with his rise in the social hierarchy, Babbitt sometimes revels in and enjoys his conformity. He has moments of bonding with his children, particularly with Ted, although the children can seldom hold his interest. Although he finds his wife distasteful, he sometimes feels a passionless affection for her. And the various aspects of his rebellion, such as his relationship with Tanis, are initially very exciting until they are revealed to be nothing more than unsuccessful attempts at escapism.

All other relationships fade, however, in comparison to Babbitt's one worthwhile relationship, with the one person around whom Babbitt feels truly and consistently happy. Paul Riesling is not only Babbitt's best friend; he represents all that is genuine and valuable in Babbitt's life, a fact that Babbitt himself acknowledges after Paul is given a three-year prison sentence: "Babbitt returned to his office to realize that he faced a world which, without Paul, was meaningless." With Paul "dead" to him, Babbitt loses the only person around whom he can express his real thoughts and be silent and calm, and he can no longer face his family or the business world. Babbitt is willing to perjure himself for Paul, ignoring the effect this would have on his career and social status. Paul's imprisonment sparks a major mid-life rebellion in which Babbitt overturns nearly all of his beliefs and habits to escape his now "meaningless" existence.

Lewis is careful to emphasize that Paul is a misfit whose sensitivity, lack of business acumen, and inability to endure his wife are incompatible with the standardized business world of Zenith. Indeed, the satirist seems eager to stress that Paul represents the genuine side of Babbitt that cannot conform to his outward life. Just as Zilla is a foil (a character whose purpose is to reveal something about another character) that emphasizes the vain, insecure, and nagging aspects of Myra that repel her husband and do not fit into Zenith domestic life, Paul is a foil for his best friend. Lewis makes this point most overtly after Babbitt's visit to Paul in prison:

Babbitt knew that in this place of death Paul was already dead. And as he pondered on the train home something in his own self seemed to have died: a loyal and vigorous faith in the goodness of the world, a fear of public disfavor, a pride in success.

Paul does not embody these characteristics, but he has always been the one to reveal them in Babbitt. So, in order to drive the plot and test Babbitt's character, Lewis imprisons him and removes him from Babbitt's struggle. Paul is an expendable device in Lewis's satire, which needs to demonstrate that Zenith has no place for him, that Paul's genuineness, his "moodiness, his love of music," and his inability to conform are

incompatible with Lewis's satirical vision. The author seems intent on refuting the possibility of a meaningful relationship for someone like Babbitt, although this is initially a realistic possibility. As D. J. Dooley observes in his book *The Art of Sinclair Lewis*, it is after Paul's imprisonment that this possibility is extinguished, the plot begins to fail, and the storyline loses its vitality:

But in the melodramatic story of how Babbitt, now a hero, battles his former friends, now villains, the characters are simple and unreal, the plot is full of improbabilities, and Lewis does not come close to pulling it off.

This is because Lewis has abandoned Babbitt's central hope and purpose, turning the struggle of his main character into a desperate but ultimately futile attempt at escapism. The futility of the plot becomes particularly clear when Babbitt fails to enjoy his time in Maine; whereas before the outdoors had been his only truly calm and completely happy moment, without Paul: "He was lonelier than he had ever been in his life."

As is clear from Babbitt's pursuit of women around the same time, this loneliness is for both a friend and a lover. Babbitt's wife sometimes makes him feel less lonely, but he has never loved her and finds her completely repulsive sexually. Tanis also makes a brief dent in Babbitt's loneliness, but their affair is (like her) superficial and desperate, and it is shortly extinguished. Indeed, Babbitt never seems to be genuinely attracted to women; even his "fairy child" is a completely unconvincing fantasy, as Virginia Woolf notes in her 1947 essay, "American Fiction." With Paul, on the other hand, he feels "a proud and credulous love passing the love of women," and their relationship is far more erotically charged than any of Babbitt's encounters with women.

There are a number of hints of this homoerotic aspect of Paul and Babbitt's relationship. During their trip to Maine, for example, where they need to abandon their wives and "just loaf by ourselves and smoke and cuss and be natural," this idea of the "natural" comes to a climax with the reaction one might expect from a taboo erotic encounter: "The shame of emotion overpowered them." And, when Babbitt returns to Maine, he has a desire for male affection, to "be a regular man, with he-men like Joe Paradise□gosh!" that culminates in a vision of Paul playing his violin at the end of Babbitt's canoe. Perhaps the most convincing example, however, comes as Babbitt is considering Paul at the only moment in which he considers the carnal and sexual aspects of his otherwise quite frigid fairy girl:

But he did know that he wanted the presence of Paul Riesling; and from that he stumbled into the admission that he wanted the fairy girl□in the flesh. If there had been a woman whom he loved, he would have fled to her, humbled his forehead on her knees.

There is no woman Babbitt loves; his only true love is a man in prison. The end of chapter 6 reveals that even the passionless and insubstantial love of Babbitt's marriage is an extension of his romantic feelings for Paul. Myra became a replacement for Paul's companionship while Paul was "bespelled by Zilla Colbeck," and Myra's role of ineffectively substituting for Paul is underscored by the fact that she is Paul's second

cousin. Lewis is (wittingly or unwittingly) emphasizing that his novel is describing a homoerotic love story.

Unfortunately for Babbitt, this story comes to an abrupt end in chapter 21. It is at this point that, in the novelist's struggle between his satirical goals and his desire to develop the dramatic conflicts of his characters, the love story is sacrificed to the demands of Lewis's satire. Genuine homoerotic love is the central aspect of Babbitt's search for meaning, but it is certainly not something that Lewis is willing to accept into his satirical agenda. Just as Paul is a misfit who has no place in the cultureless and standardized Zenith, Babbitt and Paul's love must be eradicated from a city that does not tolerate deviations from passionless and duty-bound marriage.

There is seldom any love at all in Zenith, either among the married Boosters and Realtors who cheat on their wives and pay no attention to them, or among Tanis's escapist and insincere "Bunch." The only instances of passion, aside from that of Babbitt and Paul, are the relationships of Babbitt's children, particularly of Ted and Eunice Littlefield. So it is no coincidence that Ted's bonding with his father and the escalation of his relationship with Eunice begin to develop just before Paul shoots Zilla. Lewis requires the developing dramatic energy of Paul and Babbitt's relationship to move along his reader and power his satire, but it is too vivid and taboo to follow to its natural destination. Not only is a homoerotic relationship unacceptable in Zenith, it is unacceptable to Lewis and to his readers. It is as if, recognizing that the course of Paul and Babbitt's relationship as the central dramatic energy of the novel was becoming too dangerous and developing too fully, Lewis forcefully steers the plot towards the safer Ted.

Ted is not too safe; his dislike of college and his elopement are edgy enough to create a potential dramatic conflict against the empty, satirical Zenith. And Babbitt is shown to enjoy a sort of genuine, though compromised, passion by proxy at the end of the novel: he allows Ted to follow his dreams although he cannot follow his own. Despite the fact that it does not ring true or genuinely address Babbitt's struggle, Lewis manages to power his satire to the end of the novel with this secondary dramatic action.

After Lewis abandons the central conflict of the novel and imprisons its only real solution, however, his novel loses steam. As discussed above, the plot flattens and dies after Paul's imprisonment, and Babbitt's relationship with Ted fails to convince or even interest many readers and critics. Lewis has crafted a thorough and compelling satire, but his suppression and abandonment of the main love story leaves his famous main character unhappy, unchanged, and undeveloped. It sucks the life out of the novel and leaves the reader wondering whether, had Lewis not succumbed to a cheap plot trick, Babbitt might have fought a successful battle for meaning.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *Babbitt*, in *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

The critic David Pugh has suggested that Lewis's satire is no longer powerful or applicable to young Americans today. Do you agree? Discuss the implications of *Babbitt* in contemporary American culture. What would Lewis say about today's government and today's business world? How would you describe a modern-day Babbitt and how would he or she differ from the original? Which lessons from the novel remain important and which remain poignant?

Babbitt is full of references to the political and cultural life of 1920s America. Do some research on the era and discuss whether the novel is a justified and accurate portrayal of life in medium-sized American cities in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Is the fictional Zenith grounded in research and fact? How much, if any, of the satire is an unfair exaggeration?

Read another of Lewis's novels from the 1920s, such as *Dodsworth* or *Main Street*. How does the novel you have chosen compare with *Babbitt*? Does Lewis use similar methods to satirize other aspects of American society? Are the plot and the melodrama of the novel more or less effective and engaging?

Writers have approached the business world in many different ways. What makes *Babbitt* unique? Why has it been so influential? Does its approach have anything in common with other famous works that take American business as their theme, such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1945) or David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984)? How is *Babbitt* suited to its era?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Prohibition is in effect throughout the United States, making it illegal to manufacture or consume alcohol. Although supporters of Prohibition argue that it increases health and safety, organized crime has skyrocketed and over four times as many people will die of alcohol-related causes, due largely to unregulated bootleg liquor.

Today: The legal drinking age in the United States is twenty-one, and the major alcohol-related health concerns are injuries and deaths from drinking and driving.

1920s: The conservative culture of the early 1920s is characterized by conformity, pro-business politics, Puritanism, and a desire to return to normalcy after World War I.

Today: The election of George W. Bush's Republican administration and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have marked a shift in American culture. Legislation such as the Patriot Act, the attempt to outlaw certain types of late-term abortion, and the pro-business shift in environmental policy suggest an increasing promotion of conservative agendas and values.

1920s: Upper middle-class businessmen and their families continue to live near the center of medium-sized American cities, although the decade will see the development of the first automobile suburbs.

Today: Families of the Babbitts' class typically live outside of congested urban areas, in the suburbs. This trend exploded in the 1950s and continues to dominate American demographics.

What Do I Read Next?

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) uses techniques associated with European modernism to display the empty and hollow undercurrent in American life in the years following World War I. It is one of the most influential masterpieces of the era.

Main Street (1920), Lewis's novel written just before *Babbitt*, is a satirical portrait of small-town American life based on Lewis's home town of Sauk Center, Minnesota.

A famous muckraking novel about the working conditions in a slaughterhouse, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) is one of the enduring satires of the early twentieth century. It greatly influenced Lewis's work.

Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) centers on the tragedy of Willy Loman, a salesman whose life becomes meaningless except for his love of his sons. It focuses on a very different kind of family. The play employs distinct melodramatic methods in order to examine family and business culture after more than two decades of vast social and economic change, but it sharply resonates with Babbitt's struggle.

Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) tells the story of a hardware merchant with firm beliefs in rationality and fact coming into conflict with the world of imagination and culture. The novel, by the famous and influential satirist of English culture, is one of Dickens's shorter and more readable works.

John Dean's new biography *Warren G. Harding* (2004) examines the controversy and scandal behind Harding's presidency and illustrates the political environment of the early 1920s.

Literary Precedents

Clearly, Sinclair Lewis descends from a line of social critics such as Thomas Paine, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Mark Twain; but the contemporary he came closest to was H. L. Mencken who attacked American university professors and others with the same gusto as Lewis attacked the American middle class. Where they differed is in their belief systems. Mencken's primary attitude toward the United States and its people was negative. He believed that Americans were a people ruined by their heritage of bigotry and that democracy, rather than being a force for individual growth and achievement, actually operated to keep power in the hands of the powerful.

On the other hand, one part of Sinclair Lewis continued to believe in the American dream and in concepts of chivalry and romance, but he apparently lacked a philosophical framework to provide for him a reason to believe, and consequently, his novels lack an element of tragic confrontation with a real world.

Further Study

Allen, Frederick Lewis, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*, John Wiley & Sons, 1997; originally published by Harper & Row, 1931.

This book, written with the atmosphere of the 1920s fresh in the author's mind, provides a useful glimpse into the politics and intrigue of the era.

Hutchisson, James M., *The Rise of Sinclair Lewis: 1920—1930*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.

Hutchisson's book offers a further critical perspective on Lewis's years of critical and popular success.

Lewis, Sinclair, *If I Were Boss: The Early Business Stories of Sinclair Lewis*, edited by Anthony Di Renzo, Southern Illinois University Press, 1997.

These stories, which Lewis wrote during his early career as a short story writer, are important examples of his developing ideas about American business, and they expand upon some of the key themes in *Babbitt*.

Love, Glen A., *Babbitt: An American Life*, Twayne Publishers, 1993.

Love's study follows the influence of the "Babbitt type" throughout the literature of the twentieth century. It is a very useful source in determining Lewis's influence over the American literary scene.

Schorer, Mark, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, McGraw-Hill, 1961.

Schorer is perhaps Lewis's most famous biographer, and this work was instrumental in re-evaluating Lewis's reputation in the latter half of the twentieth century.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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