

The Development of the Babbitt-American

George F. Babbitt was not a literary character who somehow miraculously developed in the mind of Sinclair Lewis. He was not a figure of mere creative and artistic imagination on the part of Mr. Lewis. George F. Babbitt, rather, represents America at the end of World War I. Babbitt is not the America of the intellectuals. Neither is he the America of the liberals. Babbitt is the symbol of the results of Social Darwinism, the New Industrial Revolution, pragmatism, and the early twentieth-century Republican Party upon the bourgeois American mentality. Babbitt is America in 1922.

Many social, philosophical, economic, and political innovations had determined the character of the Babbitt-American. Darwin's scientific theories of evolution were adapted by the late nineteenth-century mind into the form of social theories of evolution. "Survival of the fittest" acquired a materialistic and a capitalistic connotation. The "struggle for existence" implied a struggle to supercede one's fellow human financially. Eagerly, and perhaps a bit too rashly, these terms were accepted as the "Stations of the Cross" for capitalists making the devout pilgrimage to wealth. Coupled with the New Industrial

Revolution after the Civil War, this ~~Social~~ Darwinism spawned the Gilded Age of cut-throat competition, trusts, acquisitiveness, and a general denial of whatever slight spiritual and cultural values America had previously possessed.

By the middle of the 1890's the United States had become so oppressive to the sensitive and artistic mentality that Europe assumed the rôle of a sort of spa for the tender American, as lucidly illustrated not only in the person of Henry James, but also in his writings. James' brother, William, however, proved ~~worthy to~~ the task of incorporating this turn-of-the-century America into a philosophical system: pragmatism, a philosophy emphasizing the results of things, the utilitarian aspect of actions. Needless to say, America had found a national philosophy. It looked toward ends rather than means, and that was all that the larger capitalists and their guardian, the pre-Great Depression Republican Party, could ask of a nation's philosophers.

This was George F. Babbitt's heritage. Therefore, George F. Babbitt was a product of his environment, of those elements of his environment which were becoming reactionary even in 1922. The spiritual and cultural vacuum in which George F. Babbitt lived was not of his own creating. Neither was it a figurative literary device of Sinclair Lewis'. Social satire, to be effective, must be based upon realistic aspects of the society being satirized. ~~This~~ Lewis did clinically, astutely, and perhaps a

bit mercilessly. Only in Babbitt's affection for his friend Paul Reisling do we see some sort of redemption, some sort of assurance that this post-World War I America was not past salvation from its deadening materialism and standardization.

The 1920's were the culmination of the symbol of the Babbitt-American. Later, in the decade the "war wound" would expand into the general disillusionment descriptive of that era. But the final defeat of the Babbitt-American came in October, 1929.

Perhaps an outstanding contemporary novel is needed to satirize the new generation which contains Babbitt-American influences, which would clothe the "booster" of Zenith in a gray flannel suit.

Some writers are working on it.

Toole, J. K.
April 17, 1958
English 678
Dr. Adams

A
However, you
misrepresent the
philosophy of James.
He is no more
responsible for the
kind of "pragmatism"
you describe than
Darwin is for social
Darwinism, or
Nietzsche for Nazism.