

Babbitt
by
Sinclair Lewis**Book Information**

Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt
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472 Pages
Book Level: 7.8
Interest Level: UG

This tale relates the story of a conniving, prosperous real estate man who becomes one of the most convincing and ugly figures in American fiction.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Careers and Opportunities; Emotions, Misc./Other; History, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

George F. Babbitt the principal character of the story, a middle-aged real-estate broker

Katherine "Tinka" Babbitt the Babbitts' youngest and affectionate child

Myra Babbitt a plump, frumpy middle-aged housewife

Paul Riesling Babbitt's closest friend and fellow college classmate; a quiet, sensitive man

Reverend John Drew the minister of Chatham Road Presbyterian Church

Seneca Doane a leftist thinking attorney and advocate for the working class

Tanis Judique a middle-aged widow with whom George Babbitt has a love affair

Theodore Roosevelt "Ted" Babbitt George and Myra's mechanically minded teen-aged son

Verona Babbitt the oldest Babbitt daughter, a college graduate and self-proclaimed radical thinker

William W. Eathorne president of the First State Bank of Zenith, one of Zenith's richest citizens

Zilla Riesling Paul's demanding and selfish wife

Vocabulary

alembic a device that purifies or alters by a process comparable to distillation

arcnum a deep secret; a mystery

profligacy recklessly wasteful; wildly extravagant

seditions engaging in conduct or language inciting rebellion against the authority of a state

Synopsis

George F. Babbitt awakes to begin his usual morning ritual of preparing to go to work in his office as a real-estate broker. He is comforted by the standardized home in which he lives in the Floral Heights district of Zenith with his wife, Myra, and three children. He is grumpy from a late night of fraternizing, and it reflects in his interactions with his family that morning.

At work he closes a shady real-estate deal with a poor businessman, and then meets his best friend, Paul Riesling, for lunch at the Zenith Athletic Club to which they belong. Paul shares with George his discontent in his marriage to Zilla. She has become obnoxiously demanding in public and expects Paul to defend her. Paul, in his embarrassment, acts nonchalantly, but pays the price when they are at home alone. George and Paul commit to a vacation alone together in Maine before their wives arrive. Upon returning to work, George refuses a hardworking salesman a raise before retiring for the day. Once home, George and Myra discuss the relative merits of college and correspondence courses with their son Ted. There is little affection between George and Myra at this point in their marriage, yet that night he dreams of a fairy child who loves him.

George's life consists of meetings with the Boosters' Club, Saturdays playing golf, and lunches at the Athletic Club. He becomes involved with a questionable real-estate transaction and then fires a salesman who acts dishonestly. Myra and George host a successful dinner party of their peers, but fail later when they try to climb the social ladder by inviting an established family to dinner. On Paul and George's getaway to Maine, George realizes his life is not all it should be.

Upon returning to Zenith, George becomes

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recognized as an orator and is asked to help in the mayoral election, speaking against his former classmate, Seneca Doane. When George later travels to Chicago on business, he sees Paul with another woman and confronts him. Paul confesses that he can no longer stand his marriage with Zilla. George promises he will not tell Zilla. Soon after, George is elected the vice-president of the Boosters' Club and as he is about to inform Myra, she tells him that Paul has just shot Zilla. Zilla lives; Paul is sent to the State Penitentiary for three years; and George feels dead and alone.

George's life now changes. He rebels against the very things he always defended; he challenges the ideas of his associates at the athletic club. He seeks after his "fairy child" and has an affair with a widow, Mrs. Tanis Judique. He begins to drink excessively and spend money foolishly. He stands up to a vigilante group of the Good Citizens' League that wishes to squelch the outcries of the working class. He defends Seneca Doane. His behavior begins to cost him personally and professionally. Upon a return trip to Maine, George discovers he has nowhere to run, for he has very few inner resources.

George reverts back to his "former" self when Myra falls ill. He joins the Good Citizen's League and becomes an active Booster again. The only remnant of George's rebellion shows when he privately tells his son, Ted, that he admires him for his independence. Ted elopes and decides to quit college to follow his heart.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What did George's fairy child symbolize?

She symbolized all the unfulfilled longings in his relationship with Myra. He dreamed of youth, beauty, and sexual love. He wanted someone that could truly comfort him. The fairy child was not demanding or petty, and he could share his thoughts and feelings with her.

Literary Analysis

What statement about the middle-class businessman does Lewis want to communicate to the reader through this book?

If a person's goal becomes attaining a material success, the person risks losing freedom, individuality, and happiness.

Inferential Comprehension

George and Paul seemed outwardly opposite in personality. What do you think was the basis of their friendship?

Their friendship began in college where life-long relationships are formed. Both George and Paul had dreams that dissolved once they married. From their interactions, it seems that they allowed themselves to be real with another, something everyone craves and needs.

Constructing Meaning

The opening of the book describes the towers of Zenith's skyline. How do these relate to George's view of life?

For centuries, the tallest buildings in a town were the church steeples or towers of a castle--places where people paid homage. They have been replaced in modern society by office towers--places of business. In George's case, they also represent the things he values the most--material success and social status. These are the principles to which he pays homage. His faith is governed by how it will help his business instead of the other way around.

Teachable Skills

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Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Investigate the political climate of the times that led to Prohibition. Research the Prohibition Party and the Anti-Saloon League. Feelings ran very strong on both sides of this issue. Fierce competition arose among the bootleggers. Look into the St. Valentine's Day massacre and illegal traffic in liquor that occurred during this time. Have the students report their findings to the class.

Comparing and Contrasting George Babbitt and his wife Myra were caught up in acquiring "just the right thing." From cigar lighters to the proper foods, from the district they lived in to the place George got his hair cut, their choices were dictated by "image." Compare and contrast the motives of George and Myra to the way people operate today. Have things changed? Does *Babbitt* have something to say to our current culture? What?

Recognizing Details The students should page through *Babbitt* and list all of the organizations that are mentioned in the book, and then research these organizations, finding out about their purpose, date of founding, requirements for membership, etc. Are any of these organizations active in your area? If so, have students interview members of a group. It may be enlightening to attend one of their meetings. Is the organization serving its original purpose? Is there an unwritten code of behavior that can be surmised? How is the organization currently helping the community?

Identifying Persuasive Language On the heels of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the workers' unrest in cities across America threatened the established business community. Take a stand on the issue of workers' rights versus the interests of business. Research the topic. Have a classroom debate or panel discussion on this issue.