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## **SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *BABBITT* : A TOTAL SATIRE**

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### **Résumé**

Cet article examine le fonctionnement de la satire dans *Babbitt* de Sinclair Lewis. L'approche théorique utilisée est la narratologie rhétorique, qui envisage l'œuvre littéraire comme un triangle comportant une intention d'auteur, un texte chargé d'effets et les réactions attendues du lecteur. Il débusque d'abord les moyens rhétoriques de la satire horatienne, visant à susciter le rire et la pitié. L'humour du roman repose d'une part sur l'ironie situationnelle, et d'autre part sur une parole tantôt argotique, tantôt grandiloquente qui s'analyse comme une parodie burlesque et caricaturale. Quant à la mise en scène des situations, elle sert l'intention satirique en arrangeant librement croquis et vignettes autour d'une intrigue mince, débouchant sur des dénouements ironiques. L'onomastique joue aussi un rôle actif avec des noms cocasses porteurs de sens. À l'autre extrémité du spectre satirique, nous révélons une convergence monologique du narrateur et de certains personnages pour incarner la satire juvénalienne, exprimant la colère et le dégoût. L'utilisation d'un narrateur hétérodiégétique, généralement focalisé sur le protagoniste, permet des commentaires psychologiques et l'exposition des écarts entre les prétentions des personnages et la réalité. Enfin, la critique des processus de pensée, connue sous le nom de satire ménippéenne, se manifeste par la pensée cliché, les mantras et l'anticipation de concepts dystopiques orwelliens : « Police de la Pensée », « Double-Pensée » et « Crime-Pensée ». *Babbitt* se révèle donc comme une satire totale qui englobe les trois aspects du spectre satirique et finalement expose la psychologie humaniste de l'auteur.

**Mots clés :** horatienne – juvénalienne – ménippéenne – parodie – satire.

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the workings of satire in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*. The theoretical approach used is rhetorical narratology, considering the literary work as a triangle made of an authorial purpose, an effects-filled text and the reader's expectations. It first ferrets out the rhetorical devices of Horatian satire, aiming at arousing laughter and pity. The humor of the novel hinges on the one hand on situational irony, and on the other hand on speech: the widespread use of slang and grandiloquence is analyzed as a form of burlesque parody and caricature. As for the staging of situations, it serves the satirical intent by loosely arranging sketches and vignettes around a thin plot, to eventually bring out ironical outcomes. The onomastic also plays an active part with funny names that carry out meaning. At the other end of the satiric spectrum, we reveal a monologic convergence of the narrator and some characters to embody Juvenalian satire, expressing anger and disgust. The use of a heterodiegetic narrator, usually focalized on the protagonist, allows psychological insights and the exposure of discrepancies between people's pretensions and reality. Finally, the critique of thought processes,

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known as Menippean satire, takes the form of cliché-thinking, mantras, and the novel's anticipation of Orwellian dystopian concepts: "Thought Police", "Doublethink" and "Crimethink". *Babbitt* eventually reads as a total satire that encompasses the three-fold satirical spectrum, and exposes the humanist psyche of the author.

**Keywords:** Horatian – Juvenalian – Menippean – parody – satire.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sinclair Lewis, the first American Nobel prize for literature, has enjoyed literary fame for a decade in the 1920s as the prime satirist of the American way of life, notably with his novels *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. However, he has also usually been disparaged as a lesser writer than his contemporaries, Hemingway, Fitzgerald or Faulkner. Schorer (1961) thus rails him as "one of the worst writers in modern American literature", though he acknowledges that "without his writing one cannot imagine modern American literature" (p.17). This is the Lewisian paradox: recognized as a giant in American literature, and deprecated as an artless writer<sup>2</sup>. This paradox is also an interesting springboard to an issue surrounding the peculiar poetics of satire: how to properly read, interpret and evaluate that art form? Among those who pinpointed the problem, Northrop Frye (1957) rightfully noticed that when the workings of satire are improperly understood, an "exquisite and precise" writer as T.L. Peacock reads as a "slapdash eccentric" (p. 289). Likewise, Wayne C. Booth (1983) argued that "in judging [Aldous Huxley's] peculiar kind of satiric fantasia we must appeal to criteria very different from those appropriate to [realist fiction]" (p. 31). More recently, R. Phiddian (2013) laid bare "the impasse that literary approaches to satire have led to" (p. 44). As a protean form pervading literary genres and almost all other forms of art, satire holds an uneasy location that can easily mislead literary critics to contempt or condescension.

A first step toward a proper evaluation of satire, as suggested by R. Phiddian (2013) is to eschew "the literary-theoretical tendency to 'genericize', to describe satire as an entity", and thus admit that "the satirical is not a brute, formal fact about texts, but a perception of purpose speaking rhetorically through them" (p. 46). In line with that statement, this article suggests a view of satirical fiction for what it essentially is: a rhetorical endeavor whose success rests on its authorial *purpose* and the efficiency of its rhetorical *means*, which are burlesque, irony, wit, parody, caricature, among others (Elliott, 2022, Section 1)<sup>3</sup>. Such a framework calls for rhetorical narratology as its theoretical matrix. This approach suits the analysis of satire precisely because of its emphasis on the purposefulness of fiction, and the means deployed to achieve that end. For

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<sup>2</sup> Reactions to Lewis's art often range from reluctant recognition of a "major American writer [...whose] fictions ultimately imply a good deal of contempt for the novel as an aesthetic object" (Fischer, 1986, p. 433), to outright blame of his "irresponsible exaggerations" (Beck, 1948, p 174).

<sup>3</sup> This rhetorical nature is also emphasized by satire scholar Dustin Griffin (1994): "[S]atire is a highly rhetorical and moral art. A work of satire is designed to attack vice or folly. To this end it uses wit or ridicule. Like polemical rhetoric, it seeks to persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous; unlike pure rhetoric, it engages in exaggeration and some sort of fiction" (p. 1)

James Phelan (2007), rhetorical narratology “postulates a recursive relationship among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response” (p. 209). With a similar mindset, Bogel (2012) analyzes “the rhetorical situation of satire” by devising an iteration of that rhetorical triangle,

with the satirist at one point, the satiric object at another, and the reader or dramatic audience at the third. In this scheme, the satirist aims a certain combination of attack and artifice (including, in different formulations, wit, humor, exaggeration, fictionality) at the satiric object that has attracted his or her notice. The reader's position, in turn, is expected to be aligned with the satirist's, and the reader to share in the condemnation of the satiric object (p. 2).

In the triangle, the text is the vehicle that modulates a virtual interaction between the writer and the reader, and the latter's side is implicitly construed in his *expected* reactions to textual effects.

This article takes Lewis's *Babbitt* as a paradigmatic case, showing how satirical purpose combines with rhetorical skill to achieve its critique. The objective is to name and explain the variety of rhetorical tropes and narrative strategies deployed in the text, with an emphasis on the two other points of the triangle, namely the narrator's satirical intent on the one hand and the reader's expected reaction on the other. In order to underscore the wide range of *Babbitt*, the analysis is aligned with the three classical rhetorical categories of satire. First, the funny and witty representations of Horatian satire are ferreted out. Secondly, the tropes of Juvenalian anger and rage are analyzed. Finally, the presence of Menippean satire, aimed at thought processes and intellectuals, is explored.

### **1. *Babbitt*: a Horatian satire**

John Gilmore (2018) contends that “one of the most obvious features of satire is that it needs [...] to be directed against something, whether that be as broad as the human condition or human folly generally, or, more narrowly, particular manifestations of this, or even particular individuals” (237-8). *Babbitt*'s eponymous protagonist is a successful upper-middle class real-estate agent in the Midwestern American town of Zenith. Engulfed in stultifying routines with his family, his men's clubs, his political allegiance to the Republican Party and the Presbyterian Church, Babbitt's whole life is predicated on blind conformism and materialism, making him a convenient prey for satirical fun. Humour is indeed pervasive in *Babbitt*. Most of the descriptions, situations and effects are devised to strike the comical chord in the reader. It makes us smile or laugh, but this comic is never innocent, since it always aims at revealing the vice and folly of characters and institutions. *Babbitt* is thus a satire, and not a mere comedy, as defined by Elliott (2022):

At the Horatian end of the spectrum, satire merges imperceptibly into comedy, which has an abiding interest in the follies of men but has not satire's reforming intent. The distinction between the two modes, rarely clear, is marked by the intensity with which folly is pursued: fops and fools and pedants appear in both, but only satire tries to mend men through them. And although the great engine of both comedy and

satire is irony, in satire, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century critic Northrop Frye has said, irony is militant (Section 1).

In order to make its satirical meaning emerge, the novel has specific means which are inherent to its form. Pollard (1970) thus identifies “at least four ways by which the satiric meaning may emerge, namely, by what a man does (or fails to do), by what others do to and say of him, by what he says of himself, and, in the novel, by what the author says of him” (p. 24). The analysis of those authorial strategies help us ferret out the Horatian nature of *Babbitt*.

### **1-1. Satire in narration: a funny characterization**

When Lewis describes characters, he carefully chooses words that achieve a maximum comical effect. For example, Babbitt’s physical appearance is the first element of the general fun that his character exudes. Whatever he does in the novel, the rotundity of his head and his body, added to his “babyish” and “pink” outlook (Lewis, 2010, p. 4) deprive him of any seriousness. Similarly, his son Ted, whose attitudes are often criticized in the novel, is nevertheless described as a “decorative boy” (Lewis, 2010, p. 19), as if his actions were inoffensive. Another character who epitomizes such funny descriptions is Howard Littlefield. He is the community’s great scholar, so his physical appearance is in congruence with his occupation: “Littlefield was old for a man of forty-two. He was tall, broad, thick; his gold-rimmed spectacles were engulfed in the folds of his long face; his hair was a tossed mass of greasy blackness; he puffed and rumbled as he talked” (Lewis, 2010, p. 22). Though Littlefield is a “fine character”, he is prematurely old. Many characters are thus depicted in words that arouse laughter, as if the narrator intended to alleviate the biting nature of his criticism.

In Lewis’s satire, the onomastic plays a fundamental role, since characters often have names that are obviously meant to make the reader laugh, and are occasionally useful to complete their portrayal. This has been noticed by J. Tuttleton (1990): “What other writer has come up with character names like Rippleton Holabird, [...] Grover Butterbaugh and Opal Emerson Mudge ?” (p. xvii). This latter character for example, who appears in *Babbitt*, has indeed a strange and funny name, but this name is closely linked to her physical appearance and her function in the novel. She is “the field-lecturer for the American New Thought League” (Lewis, 2010, p. 293), which is an alternative religion that blends oriental philosophy, transcendentalism, and a nebulous set of other mental practices. The name Opal – a precious stone – conveys the exoticism and translucent nature of that special person. Even more interesting is the name Emerson: by making her a namesake of the prominent transcendentalist American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lewis mockingly draws a parallel between her “New Thought” and the Emersonian concepts which still had several devotees in the USA in the early XX<sup>th</sup> century. As for the name Mudge, it is meant to mock her appearance and her behavior: “She was pony-built and plump, with the face of a haughty Pekingese, a button of a nose, and arms [very] short” (Lewis, 2010, p. 294), so she is a conflation of a *midge*, “a small or diminutive person”, a *podge*, “a short chubby person” and a *fudge*,

“empty, foolish talk; nonsense” (*Collins Online Dictionary*). As we can see, this active onomastic can usefully carry satirical meaning.

The comical element also emerges in the descriptions of places and institutions. It often lies in antithetic phrases and sentences as “the Glen Oriole acreage development [is] glenless, orioleless” (Lewis, 2010, p. 38) or “The Zenith Athletic Club is not athletic and it isn’t exactly a club, but it is Zenith in perfection” (Lewis, 2010, p. 46), or “a somewhat musicianless musicians’-gallery” (Lewis, 2010, p. 50). In fact, it is the loftiness (i.e. fake superiority) in some Midwestern cities that is criticized here, in a funny way. The Zenith Athletic Club’s depiction is exemplary in this respect. Everything in that place bears witness that the architect intended to impress, but only achieved ridicule: “The entrance lobby of the Athletic Club was Gothic, the washroom Roman Imperial, the lounge Spanish Mission, and the reading-room in Chinese Chippendale” (Lewis, 2010, p. 49). On the same page, we see a fireplace which is “not only larger than any of the fireplaces in European castles but [...] also much cleaner, as no fire had ever been built in it.” (Italics ours) It is hard not to smile at this international mixture of architectural orders, or at this strange fireplace. Underneath the smile, though, the reader ponders the folly of Zenithites.

The type of narrator chosen by Lewis plays an important part in the effectiveness of these comments. To be able to point out every single detail of events, Lewis uses a heterodiegetic narrator throughout the novel, usually focalized on Babbitt, but sometimes nonfocalized. This narrator knows everything about the characters, and has an overview of the events, thoughts and deeds. He is thus able to notice the discrepancies between what people pretend and what really is. The heterodiegetic narration is particularly effective in satire for it allows a more widespread use of the external comments and the psychological insights about the characters. When the narrator points out for example that “no fire had ever been built in it”, the reader is thankful to that omniscient narrator for providing this fact accounting for the cleanness of the Zenith Athletic fireplace. Similarly, in this passage: “ ‘And another thing we got to do,’ said the man with the velour hat (whose name was Koplinsky), ‘is to keep these damn foreigners out of the country’ ” (Lewis, 2010, p. 121), the satire basically rests on this ironical precision that the xenophobe’s name is Koplinsky, which is not the average American’s name.

After the analysis of *what Lewis says* of his characters and events, let’s now analyze the comic in *what they say* and *what they do*.

## **1-2. Satire in speech and action: a burlesque parody**

Humour in *Babbitt* hinges partly on the speech of characters and the comic of situations. When Lewis’s characters speak, there is often a ludic dimension. The comic of characters’ speech usually works on two opposite engines: their grandiloquent tone and their slang. In both cases, Lewis draws upon a heavy caricature of their ways of speaking to poke fun at his fellow Americans. As a matter of fact, several *Babbitt* characters are very voluble and have pretensions to oratory. At the Boosters’ Club, there is always an occasion for a verbose outburst, which often has a tone like the following: “...when friend and foe get together and lay down the battle-ax and let the waves of good-fellowship waft them up the flowery slopes of amity, it behooves us, standing

together eye to eye and shoulder to shoulder ...” (Lewis, 2010, p. 151). At the Church, Reverend Drew’s sermons adopt the same grandiloquent tone, when he talks about “stormy the sky and laborious the path to the drudging wayfarer, yet the hovering and bodiless spirit swoops back o’er all the labors and desires” and ends up with “dolorous clouds the mighty mass of mountains—mountains of melody, mountains of mirth, mountains of might!”, to which Babbitt answers: “I certainly do like a sermon with culture and thought in it” (Lewis, 2010, p. 172).

There is indeed a great amount of parody in these imitations of the pomposity that often rages in churches and business gatherings. As a realist, and even a naturalist, Lewis used to observe and note with scrupulous attention the ways and practices in the milieus which he depicted, as but as a satirist, he always added the funny and caricatural touch to his writing. That is why it has been said that “Lewis’s wide knowledge of the businessman’s habitat of booster and lunch clubs and hell-raising conventions and the glee with which he pursues his prey contribute to a remarkable achievement” (Serafin, 1999, p. 667).

In the written discourse of Zenithites as well as the oral, there is room for the satirist’s mockery. Still harassing the grandiloquence of Americans, Lewis presents the reader several times the prose of Miss Elnora Pearl Bates, society editor of the *Advocate-Times*, Babbitt’s favorite newspaper. She presents “the billiard room where one could take a cue and show a prowess at still another game than that sponsored by Cupid and Terpsichore” (Lewis, 2010, p. 19), or again “...the Ceylon dinner-dance given last evening by Mr. and Mrs. Charles McKelvey to Sir Gerald Doak. Methought as we—fortunate one!—were privileged to view that fairy and foreign scene [...]. Though he is too modest to admit it, Lord Doak gives a cachet to our smart quartier [...]”. (Lewis, 2010, p. 165). The parodic intention is evident in these passages, since we can easily recognize the motifs of this mock-imitation: hyperboles, outdated terms and structures, French inserts and references to mythology. The comic derives here from the contrast between the all-modern, ahead-looking American society and the rococo sophistication of those columns. We can even associate this parody to the burlesque, following the practice of Franklin R. Rogers (1960): “I have used the term *parody-burlesque* or simply *parody* to designate that type of burlesque in which the principal means of achieving humor is a ludicrous exaggeration of the target author’s stylistic mannerisms” (p. V). In *Babbitt*, the burlesque is also militant since it aims to mock, and hopefully to reform the ways of his fellow Americans.

Another engine of the humor in the characters’ speech is the caricatural use of slang. Lewis was much acclaimed as “the ingenious satirist of the American middle-class, mimicking its speech [...] with what seems to be photographic realism” (Hart, 1995, 473). However, the enthusiasm was also toned down as follows: it “is actually more or less good humored caricature” (ibid.), or an “exaggeration of speech through mimicry and slang” (Tuttleton, 1990, p. xvii). These critics seem to forget, though, that one major component of the satiric genius is caricature. Reproducing a behavior or a type of speech, while going beyond the mere reality to bring out and capture the ugliest or funniest aspects: this is what is expected of a caricature. As a peculiar art form, caricature achieves its aim only when its object is brought down to its simplest and funniest expression, hence its definition: “a drawing or description of [people] that exaggerates their appearance or behaviour in a humorous or critical way” (Collins Online

*Dictionary*). Besides, the comic of slang is enhanced by the contrast between the un-natural grandiloquence that characters affect publicly, and their thorough use of colloquialism in casual conversation.

This slang sometimes consists in onomatopoeias, like “yump” , “tut, tut” , “gosh”, or phonetic transcripts like “whadi write” , “Junno” , “jever” , or foreign language inserts like “*comprenez-vous,*”, and several other oral devices. The result is what Tuttleton notices when he says that “[Lewis’s] characters do not merely talk, as has been frequently noted, but rather whinny, boom, chirp, bumble, warble, carol, gurgle, and yammer in Lewis’s inimitable slang” (Tuttleton, 1990, p. xvii). The use of slang allows the characters to be natural in their story-telling and joking, which are major components of the fun in *Babbitt*. Characters keep telling jokes about one another in the novel. For example, when Barnabas Joy, the undertaker, promises a donation, Boosters whisper: “I can think of a coupla good guys to be buried if his donation is a free funeral!” (Lewis, 2010, p. 217). Such jokes – “stunts” in Lewis’s words – are certainly tastier in natural speech. There are also several anecdotes and stories in the novel, as for example the hilarious story told in full slang by the man in the Pullman car about his misadventures at the Rippleton Hotel (Lewis, 2010, p. 116-117). This ever-presence of oral speech is testimony of the influence of oral story-telling on *Babbitt*. As stated in the following assertion on American novels,

One force which shaped much of our humor – including that of sketches, short stories, and novels – from the start kept on doing so – oral story-telling. [...] The framework structure and the mock-oral tale, both with the long stretches of vernacular narration [...] continued to offer proof that oral story-telling continued to be an influence (Blair, 1978, 460).

This statement rings true when one reads Sinclair Lewis’s novels, and singularly *Babbitt*.

Lewis uses dialogues extensively to elicit laughter and mockingly criticize, and by that token, the narrator manages to distance himself from his characters, and makes them express their ugly state of mind in an amusing way. One scene particularly exemplifies this method, wherein some “Regular Citizens” are chatting about various issues, and they have racist comments like “I don’t know what’s come over these niggers, nowadays. They never give you a civil answer”, or “The old-fashioned coon was a fine old cuss—he knew his place [...] We ought to get together and show the black man, yes, and the yellow man, his place” (Lewis, 2010, 102-121). The comic arises when they hypocritically add: “Now, I haven’t got one particle of race-prejudice. I’m the first to be glad when a nigger succeeds”. The obvious contradiction makes these angry white males ridiculous, and the satire of racism, treated here in a casual conversational manner, is nonetheless efficient. Interestingly, the fact that Sinclair Lewis, in his dialogues and monologues, or “narrative of words” (Genette, 1980, p. 162), extensively resorts to the *mimesis* speech rather than the *diegesis* one<sup>4</sup>, is a deliberate choice of a satirist. The ever-present dialogues and monologues allow the reader to discover by himself and with the exact tones the functioning of American people’s

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<sup>4</sup> “diegesis and mimesis in the Platonic sense“, i. e. the distinction between ‘narratized speech’ and the identical reproduction of speech without a narrator’s mediation (Genette, 1980, p. 162 – 185).

minds. Likewise, his “narrative of events” is often to help bring out the ridicule that might go unnoticed in people’s speech.

Another way for the novelist to bring out satirical meaning consists in what his characters do. The novelist stages the situations so that most of them end up with pity for a character or the ridicule thereof. Such situations abound in *Babbitt*. For instance, to satirize unfaithful husbands, Lewis pictures his protagonist trying to date a young foreign manicure named Ida Putiak. Predictably, he is quickly rebuked by the young girl and the narrator mocks his frustration: “He wanted to spank her. He brooded, ‘I don’t have to take anything off this gutter-pup! Darn immigrant!’ ” (Lewis, 2010, p. 242). When reading those passages, we are bound to agree with Arthur Pollard (1970) when he says:

[...], we detect in the novel not the search after effect through form as through tone. The author so conceives his subject (and the same is true of the drama) that he then *arranges* his characters and incidents in relation one to another with the object of obtaining the maximum satirical effect (p. 28. Italics ours).

Indeed, an important satirical feature of *Babbitt* is that the whole plot is subservient to the purpose of the writer which is to mock and criticize. This plot is so thin that it mainly consists of vignettes, or sketches which may have a loose connection to one another. Many of them occur for specific satirical purposes, and give this feeling of *arrangement* that Pollard talks about. Thus, the scene of the dinners is arranged to picture a funny example of class struggle through social courtship. The Babbitts have dinner successively with the wealthy McKelveys and then with the lower status Overbrooks. The narrator uses the rhetorical device of parallelism to depict that rat race which ends up ironically in failure. The Babbitts’ disappointment is then portrayed with perfect symmetry as follows: “They did not speak of the McKelveys again”, and later “They did not speak of the Overbrooks again” (Lewis, 2010, pp. 204-207).

After this analysis of the comical elements in *Babbitt*, it seems necessary to acknowledge its Horatian nature. *Babbitt* is an amusing novel in which the writer takes advantage of his natural gift for mockery to hold a mirror up to his contemporaries and try to reform their behavior. Even for an issue like racism, Lewis shuns the scolding tone and prefers ridicule. By doing so, he joins an ancient tradition of satirists who preferred to “rally” their contemporaries rather than “rail” them, that is to make them smile at their own shortcomings rather than to aggressively scold them with sharp invectives. That view of satire was particularly valued in the golden age of satire, the Augustan period (Elkin, 1973, preface)<sup>5</sup>.

Nevertheless, even in the Augustan age, authors like the British Joseph Trapp sometimes advocated the Juvenalian method, a more violent type of attack, wherein the writer is horrified by what he sees in society and writes in turn to arouse feelings of anger and disgust. The main argument was that “the genteel Jokes of Horace, how ingenious soever, are less affecting than the

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<sup>5</sup> The term Augustan generally refers to two different periods: one is the reign of Roman emperor Augustus (from 27 BC to 14 A.D), and the other is the satirical heyday in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in France and the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England. We are referring here to the second Augustan age (Elkin, 1973, preface).

poetic Rage, and recommendable Zeal of Juvenal” (Elkin, 1973, p. 162). The satirist poet John Dryden expressed a similar view: “Some diseases are curable by lenitives; to others corrosives are necessary” (Elkin, 1973, p. 160). In the light of that assertion of J. Dryden, we are compelled to look again at *Babbitt* in order to determine if Lewis used Horatian satire exclusively, or if he also made use of the Juvenalian vision in his criticism.

## **2- The Juvenalian side of the novel**

There is much happiness and fun in *Babbitt*, indeed. Even the protagonist’s predicament in the last part of the novel where he tries to rebel against his clan, does not arouse the reader’s anger or shock, but only his laughter and pity. However, darkness sometimes falls on the novel in an unexpected way. When this happens, the reader can hear the angry and powerful voice of Juvenal. This voice is heard in the novel through the narrator himself and the characters as well.

### **2-1. The narrator as Juvenal**

When the narrator departs from his jolly tone, his voice becomes alternately dramatic, tragic, prophetic or gloomy. This can be seen in the passage when the narrator casts an overall glance on the city of Zenith, as Babbitt blissfully sinks in slumber. What he sees is not amusing at all. First he pictures a cocaine peddler who is murdering a prostitute. After that, we read about a politician and a businessman scheming to “cattle the herd” of Zenithites. The next scene is the sad description of the suicide of a young man, depicted in the following words:

At that moment in Zenith, three hundred and forty or fifty thousand Ordinary People were asleep, a vast unpenetrated shadow. In the slum beyond the railroad tracks, a young man who for six months had sought work turned on the gas and killed himself and his wife (Lewis, 2010, p. 85).

The reprobation is felt in the tone and the choice of vocabulary in this passage. It may be despairing and pitiful to see Zenithites’ conformism, but it is shocking and revolting to read about the death of this young man. The narrator’s resort to rhetorical pathos is testimony of a change of mood: this is a tragedy, the dark side of a city that pretends to be a heaven. All the more revolting is what the narrator presents as the cause of this suicide: unemployment. It happens because of greedy businessmen who maintain the masses in a state of dependence and want, as revealed in these lines: “the presidents of banks and of factories, the land-owners, the corporation lawyers, the fashionable doctors,[...]. All of them agreed that the working-classes must be kept in their place” (Lewis, 2010, p. 321).

The same condemnation is heard in another paragraph, as the narrator’s tone departs the comic and irony he has throughout the novel, and becomes seriously disapproving. After the deathly description of the Eathorne house, he pictures the Eathorne class as a “somber oligarchy [which controls] banks, mills,...”. It is a “still, dry, polite, cruel Zenith” for which “the other Zeniths unwittingly labor and insignificantly die” (Lewis, 2010, p.178). In a funny satire like *Babbitt*, terms like *cruel* and *die* are very rare and are testimony to the writer’s change of mood:

from the light Horatian subtleties and the “militant irony”, the criticism gets darker. Another comment shows the narrator’s outright blame of the state of democracy in America: talking about a veteran of the Civil War, we read that “[h]e had never ridden in a motor car, never seen a bathtub, never read any book save the Bible, McGuffey’s readers, and religious tracts; and he believed that the earth is flat, that the English are the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, and that *the United States is a democracy*” (Lewis, 2010, p. 81. Italics ours). This means that only a primitive like this veteran can believe that America is a democracy.

These passages point out two characteristics of the Juvenalian satire in *Babbitt*: the tone and the choice of matter. There is a causal link between topic and tone in *Babbitt*: when the narrator addresses issues that he believes are more serious, like the fate of the poor in the affluent American society, or the threats to American democracy, we notice a change of mood. However, we also notice that he is biased as far as “serious” issues are concerned. For example, the problem of racism that he addresses in the Horatian manner could possibly have deserved a Juvenalian treatment.

## 2-2. Characters as Juvenal

Sometimes, a dissatisfied character also takes over the Juvenalian narrator’s voice and enhances it in order to shout out some awful truths. This convergence of narrator and character serves Lewis’s satirical purpose, thus inscribing *Babbitt* as a novel where the “monologic authorial consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 23) transpires throughout. The strongest of these voices in the novel is certainly Paul Riesling’s, when he suddenly decides to reveal to Babbitt the hypocritical and dangerous nature of the Zenithite model: “In fact you’re so earnest about morality, old Georgie, that I hate to think how essentially immoral you must be underneath” (Lewis, 2010, p. 53-56). Babbitt desperately struggles to defend his values, but Paul goes on: “All we do is cut each other’s throats and make the public pay for it!”. The violence and rage of the attacks leave Babbitt defenseless. Paul goes on talking about “mysterious suicides” among businessmen and their “miserable” lives. Death is ever-present in his three-page diatribe: killing people, death of businessmen, suicides. During the dialogue, Babbitt feels “elephantishly uneasy”, but feels “a curious reckless joy”. This joy is testimony to the contagious nature of Paul’s rage.

In fact, the voice of Juvenal is like a spirit, an unknown entity that suddenly seizes characters and makes them bluster against the evil that they see. After Paul, Babbitt himself is caught up, when the Good Citizens’ League decides that they “want [him] to join!” (Lewis, 2010, p. 306). We learn that “something black and unfamiliar and ferocious sp[eaks] from Babbitt” when he assumes the Juvenalian role. He is possessed, and shouts: “I’m damned if I’m going to be bullied into joining anything, not even by you plutes!”. Later, he tells his wife: “I know what the League stands for! It stands for the suppression of free speech and free thought and everything else!” (Lewis, 2010, p. 308), and “I’m a free-born independent American cit[izen]”, etc. Here again, Lewis expresses his concern for the threats against American democracy and citizens’ individual freedom. In such passages, there are no jokes or comic, but only anger and revolt.

### 3- Menippean satire in *Babbitt*

Northrop Frye (1957) described Menippean satire in the following terms :

Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes [...] The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry. . . . [Menippean satire] is not primarily concerned with the exploits of heroes, but relies on the free play of the intellectual fancy and the kind of humorous observation that produces caricature (p. 289).

Unlike the Horatian and Juvenalian, this form of satire is not characterized by its form, signaling the narrator's mood, but rather by its content. It generally criticizes problematic thought processes or pretentious language, rather than actions. Usually aimed at scholars, academics or the learned community at large, it can however castigate random acts of grandiloquence or pedantry within the general populace. The following section dissects Lewis's portrayal of some of those "diseases of the intellect" and "maddened pedantry" in *Babbitt*.

#### 3-1. The standardized mind

The Menippean nature of *Babbitt* first transpires in its critique of standardized minds. The people of Zenith have relinquished free thought, and the natural critical activity of the mind has been superseded by other "thinking" techniques. The first set is composed of commonplaces and mantras. Originally, the mantra is "a word or phrase repeated by Buddhists and Hindus when they meditate, or to help them feel calm". Figuratively, it refers to "a statement or a principle that people repeat very often because they think it is true" (*Collins Online Dictionary*). One of Babbitt's favorite mantras is a "sound business administration", a phrase that he keeps repeating throughout the novel (Lewis, 2010, pp.25, 47, 136), as a summary of his political thought.

A mantra can be borrowed from the collective reservoir of ideas, or from a person's original thinking. Its fundamental use is repetition. Babbitt's technique is quite simple, as Lewis explains: "he learned one good realistic-sounding phrase, and used it over and over" (Lewis, 2010, p. 58). By repeating one idea indefinitely, the individual can eventually persuade himself that it is true. Even the dumbest or the most outdated belief will thus appear as a truth, by dint of repetition. Babbitt for example is "fond of explaining why it was that no European ever bathed" (Lewis, 2010, p. 39). This statement, which is obviously untrue, is proof of the hazardous nature of the mantra.

Just like the mantra, the commonplace is an often repeated idea: it is a cliché. The cliché belongs to the community. It is generally true but too obvious, hence its definition: "an idea or phrase which has been used so much that it is no longer interesting or effective or no longer has much meaning" (*Collins Online Dictionary*). Almost everything Babbitt says has this flavor of déjà vu, sometimes proverbs, like "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" ( Lewis, 2010, p. 10, 77), or other ready-made expressions: "folks don't appreciate how important it is to have a good digestion"( Lewis, 2010, p. 20), which he hammers with the conviction of saying something

revolutionary. Lewis's satire of cliché-thinking is heir to a long tradition, in the company of Gustave Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*.

The Menippean intertextuality can also work forwardly, with Lewis's anticipation of darker thought distortions dramatized by George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In his dystopian satire, Orwell pictures a totalitarian regime that makes people distort their mind to fit the requirements of the "Thought Police". A major technique advocated by this state police is "Doublethink", consisting in simultaneously positing something and its contrary. Whenever a previously expressed truth seems to contradict another principle of the Party, it becomes momentarily false, until it becomes true again. This tricky technique had already been experimented by Babbitt in 1922, for conformist purposes. Babbitt has the ability of thinking something and its opposite, for example when he declares:

*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 fact, just between ourselves, there oughtn't to be any unions allowed at all; and as it's the best way of fighting the unions, every business man ought to belong to an employers'-association and to the Chamber of Commerce. In union there is strength. So any selfish hog who doesn't join the Chamber of Commerce ought to be forced to* (Lewis, 2010, p. 38. Italics mine).

This demonstration seems logical, but its introduction and conclusion are contradictory: it is absurd. This absurdity, characteristic of Doublethink, always serves an ideological purpose, and in *Babbitt*, it is to conform to the mercantile culture and foster the myth of the good businessman. In another example of Doublethink, he proclaims: "*We got no business interfering with the Irish or any other foreign government. Keep our hands strictly off. And there's another well-authenticated rumor from Russia that Lenin is dead. That's fine. It's beyond me why we don't just step in there and kick those Bolshevik cusses out*" (Lewis, 2010, p. 18. Italics mine). Similarly, he criticizes the "*punk service*" that the Street Car Company gives, and at the same time he notices that "the way these workmen hold up the Company for high wages is simply a crime", so consequently, "there's *remarkable service* on all their lines" (Lewis, 2010, p. 26. Italics mine). All these examples show that Babbitt's sole concern is to avoid expressing an unorthodox opinion, because failing to do so would entail what Orwell calls "Crimethink", actually enforced in *Babbitt* by the Good Citizens League, an anticipation of Orwell's Thought Police.

### **3-2. The highbrow paradox**

Another target of satire in *Babbitt* is the intellectual, or in Babbitt's words, *the highbrow*. In the novel, the highbrow is an ambivalent embodiment of Menippean satire. On the one hand, the highbrow is despised, and even feared. He is regarded as one who has a major flaw: the inability to be practical and "get down to brass tacks" (Lewis, 2010, p. 19). Talking about Kennett Escott, for example, Babbitt and Ted complain:

he might not understand. He's one of these highbrows. He can't come down to cases and lay his cards on the table and talk straight out from the shoulder, like you or I can."

"That's right, he's like all these highbrows."

"That's so, like all of 'em (Lewis, 2010, p. 201).

The highbrow is a "bookworm" (Lewis, 2010, p. 70), one who tries to escape the harshness of life by always thinking instead of doing. He is also feared because highbrow ideas sometimes lead to "socialism", which in Babbitt's sense means contesting the established norms. In the novel, the epitome of such highbrows is Seneca Doane, a lawyer who is constantly at loggerheads with Babbitt and his clan. Being highbrow is thus a shortcoming in Zenith. On the other hand, the highbrow is revered for his knowledge, which makes him an alien element in a world of ignorants. He is the one who provides the ready-made opinions to the Babbitts, and as such, he is never contested. This figure is embodied by Howard Littlefield, as explained below:

Littlefield's great value was as a spiritual example. [...] He confirmed the business men in the faith. Where they knew only by passionate instinct that their system of industry and manners was perfect, Dr. Howard Littlefield proved it to them, out of history, economics, and the confessions of reformed radicals (Lewis, 2010, p. 22).

These two aspects of the highbrow's perception by Zenithites constitute the highbrow paradox. It is indeed difficult for a highbrow to exist in Zenith. All highbrow ideas are mocked and dismissed, so highbrows have to apologize before issuing such ideas. Chum Frink for example, who is a poet, often has this attitude. When discussing with his friends one day, he says: "what I mind is their lack of culture and appreciation of the Beautiful—if you'll excuse me for being highbrow." (Lewis, 2010, p. 98). When he addresses the Boosters' Club, he states again: "some of you may feel that it's out of place here to talk on a strictly highbrow and artistic subject" (Lewis, 2010, p. 217). It is clear that the highbrow is a misfit.

It is even impossible to get credit for a highbrow achievement: "[Babbitt]'s friends had always congratulated him on his oratory, but in their praise was doubt, for even in speeches advertising the city there was something highbrow and degenerate, like writing poetry" (Lewis, 2010, p. 184). The association of highbrow and the pejorative adjective "degenerate" conveys an idea of negativity, but at the same time, Babbitt is very flattered to be invited to a dinner which is "not only 'a regular society spread but a real sure-enough highbrow affair, with some of the keenest intellects [...] in town' " (Lewis, 2010, p. 86). The consequence of this ambivalence in the mental representations of the highbrow is that intellectuals live under permanent scrutiny. They sometimes have to distort their intellect in order to conform to the collective dumbness, thus impoverishing their critical thought and depriving the community of a valuable asset.

Highbrows are conversely tempted to overdo the intellectual stance to appear more convincing for their audience of ignorants. Lewis repeatedly mocks the attitude of Littlefield who excessively uses his "science" to impress people. For example, during a friendly dinner, "Howard Littlefield produce[s] from his treasure-house of scholarship the information that the chemical

symbol for raw rubber is C<sub>10</sub>H<sub>16</sub>, which turns into isoprene, or 2C<sub>5</sub>H<sub>8</sub>” (Lewis, 2010, p. 103). The irony of this awkward and useless display of chemical symbols at a dinner is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s method in *Gulliver’s Travels*, wherein he overtly mocks the “scientists” of Laputa:

We had two courses, of three dishes each. In the first course, there was a shoulder of mutton cut into an equilateral triangle, a piece of beef into a rhomboides, and a pudding into a cycloid. [...] The servants cut our bread into cones, cylinders, parallelograms, and several other mathematical figures (Swift, 2018, p. 201).

The British satirist’s point was to mock the queer manners of some of his contemporaries, scientists too engulfed in their science to really care for humanity. The Menippean nature of Lewis’s satire can be inferred from the following statement: “the Menippean satirist from Rabelais to Burton to Swift and Sterne does not simply collect shining bits of obscure learning; he mock-pompously shows them off. Scholarship becomes spectacle” (D. Griffin, quoted in Maus, 2019, p. 71). Lewis thus exposes Littlefield’s funny scientism as a ridiculous flaw, while embedding a critique of intellectuals who fail to question society’s status quo and blindly follow the herd by sanctifying their outworn attitudes.

## CONCLUSION

With *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis wrote a total satire which encompasses the whole spectrum. To achieve that end, he deployed tropes whose potency is enhanced within satirical fiction. The most salient of those are heavily exaggerated caricatures, a thin plot that is subservient to the arrangement of comical situations, situational and verbal irony, burlesque speech and situations. The novel has Horatian fun, Juvenalian severity, interspersed with Menippean attacks on thought processes. In terms of rhetorical narratology, the Lewisian text abides by the rhetorical triangle. The authorial satirical intent effectively taps into the reader’s empathy with the topics developed. In Lewis’s total satire, the Menippean proves to be the most far-reaching and enduring one, finding echoes to this day in his home country, where the availability of knowledge paradoxically enhances herd-thinking, bigotry and prejudice. In that respect, *Babbitt’s* satire often has prophetic tones, foreseeing for example the recent ideological threats to American democracy, a concern that he later developed extensively in *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935).

Throughout the predicaments of his protagonist, Lewis makes it arduous to pinpoint his stance as a satirist in *Babbitt*. Alternately reactionary and revolutionary in its ideology, the novel eventually reveals a humanist who loves the individual and tries to reform him by freeing him from conformism, materialism and social conventions, as summarized in the following comment: “Like all the best satirists, Lewis had a code of values. If one word could sum up his basic message, it would be ‘liberation’ ” (Parini, 2004, p. 443).

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