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BABBITT AS A LATENT HOMOSEXUAL

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. (Babbitt, 225)

Few will argue that Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt (1922) is about the distorted values and misplaced priorities of a middle-class American businessman. Indeed, the term "Babbitt" is still used to describe such a person, though in the past two or three decades the book has gradually fallen from the canon. Its diminished popularity may account for why, in an era where the role of homosexuality in American literature has attracted considerable scholarly attention, few, if any, commentators have addressed the very strong suggestions of latent homosexuality in this major novel by America's first winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.¹ However, when we regard Babbitt's deep love for his best friend, Paul Riesling, a new framework emerges for Lewis's representation of a man who has traded his own definitions of fulfillment and success for society's. From this point of view Babbitt's greatest failure is not his substitution of materialistic consumer capitalism for the altruistic liberalism

¹My review of the MLA Bibliography did not find any articles discussing this topic.

he felt as a young man, but his denial, even to himself, of his emotional and sexual preference. His repudiation of these basic aspects of his identity creates a spiritual void that Babbitt tries unsuccessfully to fill with the values of middle-class American consumerism.

Lewis makes it clear that Babbitt loves Paul, his former college roommate, more than any other character in the novel. Like Babbitt, Paul had married a woman he did not love, Zilla, and soon afterward abandoned his youthful aspirations of a more fulfilling career; he had wanted to become a concert violinist. Babbitt "was an older brother to Paul Riesling, swift to defend him, admiring him with a proud and credulous love passing the love of women." (51, my italics)

In Paul's presence Babbitt "was awkward, he desired to be quiet and firm and deft." (52) At their club they eat apart from his regular group of dining companions, even though "At the Zenith Athletic Club, privacy was very bad form. But he wanted Paul to himself." (52)

Babbitt wants Paul to himself because only when they are privately together does Babbitt lose his insecurity about being judged and allow his innermost self to emerge. He becomes more self-accepting and more honest about himself. At lunch Babbitt confesses his vague sense of being unfulfilled, something he does not acknowledge to anyone else, often not even himself. "Kind of comes over me: here I've pretty much done all the things I ought to....And yet, even so, I don't know that I'm entirely satisfied." (53)

Though there are no clear indications of physical desire of

Babbitt for Paul or vice versa, Babbitt often behaves like a doting lover. He arranges for Paul and himself to go away to Maine together much as he might have arranged a tryst with a woman, fabricating a business trip to New York rather than admit to his wife, Myra, that he wants to spend time alone with Paul. When he encounters Paul and Paul's mistress in Chicago, Babbitt behaves jealously, demanding to know if Paul is staying alone in his hotel and then gaining access to Paul's room, where he waits for three hours in order to confront his friend upon his return. After they reconcile and make Zilla their scapegoat, they have several drinks and Paul becomes "embarrassingly jocular and salacious." Later, the episode greatly moves Babbitt: "In the taxicab Babbitt incredulously found tears crowding into his eyes." (211) So great is Babbitt's attachment to Paul that he places most of the blame on Zilla after Paul nearly murders her, and he offers to commit perjury on Paul's behalf (221). When Paul is convicted, "Babbitt returned to his office to realize that he faced a world which, without Paul, was meaningless." (222)

With Paul gone, Babbitt again becomes aware of his spiritual dissatisfaction. Our first awareness of this dissatisfaction comes at the beginning of the book, when we first encounter Babbitt asleep and dreaming of running away with the fairy child who regularly inhabits his reveries: "Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth. She waited for him, in the darkness beyond mysterious groves....His wife, his clamoring friends, sought to follow, but he escaped, the girl fleet beside him....She was so slim,

so white, so eager! She cried that he was gay and valiant...." (6)

The fairy girl expresses Babbitt's unconscious desire to feel loved, admired, and desired. She represents an acceptance by others that enables Babbitt to accept himself, as well as the possibility of escape from social constraints and the reinvigoration of a dull life that has become routine and unexciting. "He who had been a boy very credulous of life was no longer greatly interested in the possible and improbable adventures of each new day." (7) Babbitt's vague sense of spiritual dissatisfaction expressed in these dreams explodes into a rebellion against his society after Paul departs for jail.

"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." (230, 231) The seeds of Babbitt's spiritual dissatisfaction go back to his youth, when he married not from love, nor even from sexual passion, but from a vague sense of duty, and when he gave up his dream to be a crusading lawyer to follow a lucrative career in real estate.

However, Babbitt does not consciously appreciate the extent of his dissatisfaction until Paul Riesling goes berserk and shoots his wife.

Upon Paul's conviction Babbitt asks himself, probably for the first time ever, "What did he want? Wealth? Social position? Travel? Servants? Yes, but only incidently. 'I give up,' he sighed. 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." (225)

Until this point, Babbitt's unconscious desire for love and

acceptance found expression only through his dreams about the fairy girl and in his comradery with Paul. In this respect, Babbitt's association of Paul with the fairy girl makes sense, since these were the only two entities that made him feel admirable, lovable, and desirable as he was, without his having to assume the persona of the successful, well-liked, back-slapping, booster-businessman.

Therefore, after Riesling is incarcerated and effectively dead to him (230), no other outlet remains in Babbitt's conscious world for his inner self to express itself or for Babbitt to explore himself and feel loved and accepted while he discovers what he really wants and enjoys. Thus, with Paul no longer able to appease it, Babbitt's inner need for self-expression and self-exploration begins to manifest more directly in his life. Babbitt returns to Maine where he and Paul had vacationed a year earlier. "He was dwarfed and dumb and a little awed, but that insignificance freed him from the pomposities of being Mr. George F. Babbitt of Zenith: saddened and freed his heart. Now he was conscious of Paul, fancied him (rescued from prison, from Zilla and the brisk exactitudes of the tar-roofing business) playing his violin at the end of the canoe. He vowed, 'I will go on! I'll never go back!'" (244) But subsequently, "it came to him merely to run away was folly, because he could never run away from himself....'But I'm going to -- oh, I'm going to start something!' he vowed, and he tried to make it valiant." (247)

In this new frame of mind Babbitt becomes experimental. He befriends the radical lawyer Seneca Doane on the train home and

becomes publicly liberal during a general strike that is dividing the city. He begins his affair with Tanis Judique and becomes involved with her free-spirited circle of friends. As a result of his exploration Babbitt's view of his world alters significantly.

For instance, Babbitt now regards the Doppelbraus, fun-loving neighbors whose sportive lifestyle he had previously criticized, as "respectable people, industrious people, prosperous people, whose ideal of happiness was an eternal cabaret." (277)

In this brave new world, Tanis replaces Paul as the person Babbitt now associates with the fairy girl. In fact, she is introduced into the novel in the sentence after Babbitt concludes his visit to Paul in jail and recognizes that "Paul was already dead" and that he, Babbitt, no longer feared public disfavor. (230-231)

Tanis fits the role of the fairy girl, at least initially, because she accepts Babbitt for who he is, treats him as a lovable, physically desirable, figure of admiration, and encourages his suppressed libido. "The assurance of Tanis Judique's friendship fortified Babbitt's self-approval." (270) Physically, Tanis is slender like the fairy girl, she seems to be young to him (276) and she brings out "a note of gallantry" (231) that the fairy girl also perceives in him (6). After they have consummated their affair, Babbitt exults, "I've found her! I've dreamed of her all these years and now I've found her!" (270-271).

But Babbitt becomes torn between his station within the community and his attachment to Tanis, who becomes more and more possessive and leads him into a life of dissipation. Moreover,

Tanis's fast-living group, the Bunch, quickly becomes as demanding and suffocating as Babbitt's clique of businessmen. Thus, when Babbitt re-dedicating himself to his wife after her appendectomy, we do not especially mourn the loss of a close soul-mate. However, we do feel that Babbitt's period of self-exploration has ended and that he has closed off future opportunities for his inner spirit to express itself in the external world. "Instantly all the indignations which had been dominating him and the spiritual dramas through which he had struggled became pallid and absurd before the ancient and overwhelming realities [of Myra's illness]." (311) He tells his wife, with whom he has never shared any kind of deep intimacy, "I've been worried by business and everything, but that's all over now, and I'm back again." (313)

Whatever positive insights Babbitt may have gained through his experimentation become shunted away from his conscious world, along with the follies he committed. He readopts the Republican Party line, reconciles with his business friends, and resumes his old life, somewhat more appreciative of Myra, but otherwise not significantly altered. Babbitt dismisses his period of exploration as a mid-life crisis, "his last despairing fling before the paralyzed contentment of middle age." (314) The only lasting effect of Babbitt's experience appears in his support of his son Ted, who has followed his heart by renouncing college in order to do more satisfying work as a mechanic and by eloping with Eunice, Ted's childhood sweetheart who embodies many of the fairy child's attributes. Babbitt tells his son, "I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole

life!...But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it." (326)

Babbitt is clearly a story of spiritual unfulfillment, of someone who failed to cultivate self-knowledge or to consistently guide his life in harmony with the self-knowledge he did possess.

Most obviously, it is intended as a critique of materialism and the new values that accompanied the culture of consumer capitalism that was emerging after World War I.² However, the novel also raises another question. Had Babbitt and Paul Riesling lived in a world in which same-sex coupling was easily and completely accepted as a viable lifestyle, might they have lived happier, more constructive, more uplifting lives as a male couple?

This is difficult to answer with certainty, because no signs of physical attraction between Babbitt and Paul appear in the novel.

But then, even heterosexual sexual attraction is handled with subtlety and remove. For instance, we are never told that Babbitt

²In his social critique Lewis is not subtle: George Babbitt suffers because he has completely bought into the materialistic system of values promulgated by the American middle-class business community. His complete identification with capitalist-inspired materialism has left him spiritually bankrupt. He has become a worshipper of the new American trinity: the "God of Modern Alliances" (8), the God of Progress (11), and the Great God Motor (19). Babbitt has relinquished his opinions and submerged his identity in this new secular religion. He borrows his ideas from conservative newspapers and from his next door neighbor, who is a respected professor of economics. Advertisements also shape his views: "...just as the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined his every religious belief and the senators who controlled the Republican Party decided...what he should think about disarmament, tariff, and Germany, so did the large national advertisers fix the surface of his life, fix what he believed to be his individuality." (81-82)

and Tanis have made love, only that "As they fell silent the room was stiller than a country lane....warm, secure, insulated from the harassing world," and that when Babbitt returns home at dawn, "the rapture had mellowed to contentment serene and full of memories." (269).

Nonetheless, suggestions of an unconscious, or latent, homosexual desire abound. The strongest evidence appears in the passage quoted above, in which Babbitt unconsciously associates Paul with the carnal embodiment of the 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." (225)

Moreover, despite Paul's propensity for womanizing, which may or may not have masked homosexual insecurity, Paul is described in largely feminine terms. He is frail, sensitive, aesthetically inclined, and "distressingly clean" (126). His life's ambition had been to be a violinist, and he does not fit easily into male society.

For instance, when they are on the train to Maine, Paul becomes moved by the beauty of an industrial scene he observes from the window.

But when he marvels that "it's lovely the way the light pulls that picturesque yard, all littered with junk, right out of the darkness," the other men stare at him and Babbitt feels obliged to defend Paul's manhood to the other listeners. (121)

Here and elsewhere, Babbitt casts himself as Paul's defender, a role he perceives as brotherly, but which may in fact be more possessive. When Babbitt verbally assaults Zilla at dinner, he

attacks her for "taking advantage of being a woman" and asserts his primary claim on Paul. Calling Riesling "the finest boy God ever made," Babbitt finally demands, "Who the hell are you that a person like Paul should have to ask your permission to go with me?" (114, author's italics)

On their trip to Maine the men draw closer to one another. Alone together in the wilderness, they confess their mutual affection as forthrightly as they can, given the social taboo against homosexuality. Lewis sets what, between a man and a woman, might easily be read as a romantic scene. "The sun roared on the green jungle but in the shade was sleepy peace, and the water was golden and rippling. Babbitt drew his hand through the cool flood...." (127) When Paul declares how their getaway has invigorated him, Babbitt answers:

"I hope so, old boy." Shyly, "Say, gosh, it's been awful nice to sit around and loaf and gamble and act regular, with you along, you old horse-thief."

"Well, you know what it means to me, Georgie. Saved my life."

The shame of emotion overpowered them; they cursed a little, to prove they were good rough fellows; and in a mellow silence, Babbitt whistling while Paul hummed, they paddled back to the hotel. (127)

Read as the tragedy of two latent homosexuals who were so imbued with the social taboo that they could not even admit their love to themselves, much less to each other or to the world at large, Babbitt remains a novel about misplaced values and self-deception. But in this reading, Babbitt's greatest hypocrisy is not the emptiness of his boosterism and materialism, but his inability to acknowledge his true sexual and emotional preference and act upon it. The social taboo forbidding all but the most suppressed expressions of a man's love for another man leaves Babbitt incapable of structuring his life around the object of his deepest love and the source of his greatest satisfaction. Having settled for loveless, passionless marriages, Babbitt and Riesling quickly abandon their most heartfelt professional aspirations as well. Into this spiritual void slips the heavily advertised, widely acclaimed values of boosterism and consumerism that Babbitt adopts so enthusiastically but that ultimately fail to satisfy him.

Works Cited

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