

In the Sinclair Lewis novel *Babbitt*, the character of Babbitt is completely controlled by the power of conformity. Conformity is so powerful that even after Babbitt realizes the stifling nature of the society in which he lives he is powerless to change his fate as a member of conformist society.

George F. Babbitt is a man who is completely controlled by the conformist society in which he lives. Pressure to conform lies in all aspects of Babbitt's life. Relationships, family, social life, and business are all based on his ability to conform to Zenith's preset standards of thought and action. All of Babbitt's thoughts are controlled by society. Thoughts that are not those of society are frowned upon. "What he feels and thinks is what is currently popular to feel and think. Only once during the two years that we have him under view, does he venture upon an idea that is remotely original—and that time the heresy almost ruins him." (Bloom)

At first the reader sees Babbitt as a person more than happy to conform to the standards set for him by the rest of society. Babbitt goes about his normal routine praising modern technology, material possessions and social status as ways to measure the worth of an individual. In fact the readers first encounter with Babbitt sees him praising modern technology. "It was the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks, with all modern attachments, including cathedral chime, intermittent alarm, and a phosphorescent dial. Babbitt was proud of being awakened by such a rich device." (Babbitt pg.3) Babbitt praises the technology of his alarm clock only because it is a symbol of material worth and therefore social status.

All of Babbitt's actions and thoughts are controlled by the standards of Zenith. "His every action is related to the phenomena of that society. It is not what he feels and aspires to that moves him primarily; it is what the folks around him will think." (Mencken). All of Babbitt's thoughts are those of society, and thoughts that are not society's are ridiculed. Babbitt works simply to raise his social status by means of increasing his material worth. Babbitt belongs to many popular clubs, the purposes of which he does not even completely understand. Why does Babbitt do these things? Babbitt does these things to perform for the other members of society. He does everything expected of him even if he does not expect those things of himself. Babbitt does these things in hope of improving his social status. This conformist man is exactly who Sinclair Lewis wanted to show the reader, a man whose life is based on the ideals and standards of others. "Villages—overgrown towns—three-quarters of a million people still dressing, eating, building houses, attending church, to make an impression on their neighbors." (Lewis). This is what Lewis thought of American society and he used Babbitt to voice his opinions to his readers. In fact that passage was intended to be included in the original introduction of *Babbitt*, which was never published.

Babbitt does well in conformist society because in the beginning of the novel he accepts all the standards, goals, ideals, likes, and dislikes of society. Babbitt's thoughts mirror all those around him and he is therefore accepted in society. At first Babbitt lives in the illusion of happiness. The happiness Babbitt experiences is not genuine because he has replaced his desires with those of society. Since Babbitt is controlled by society his goals are also controlled by it. The goals set by society are economic and material worth, social standing, and conservative thought. Since Babbitt has achieved, at least in part, these goals he is in a sense fooled into believing he is truly happy. Babbitt's true desires however are not those of society he dreams of nature instead of modernization, young women instead of his wife, adventure instead of standardization, and he secretly sympathizes with certain groups he is supposed to despise because of their non-conformist nature. Babbitt can dimly see the flaws in his life but feels powerless to change his fate and become a better man. Babbitt feels the pressure of conformist society and begins to witness the control it has over his life.

The true awakening of Babbitt to the nature of conformist society springs

from his friendship with Paul Riesling. Paul is Babbitt's only true friend and is the extreme example of the stifling conformity in Zenith. Zenith's harsh conformity demands that people give up their dreams and goals causing them to become unhappy later in life. Paul is one of the only characters who can see Zenith for what it really is. Paul tells Babbitt that Zenith is a place of cutthroat competition and conformity. He says that the conformity in Zenith has ruined his dreams of becoming a fiddler, and instead forced him to become a tar roofing salesman. He makes a very important observation about the citizens of Zenith. "one third of 'em are sure enough satisfied with their wives and kids and their friends and their offices; and one third feel kind of restless but won't admit it; and one third are miserable and know it." (Babbitt pg.64-65). This statement is the most accurate description of Zenith in the novel. This portraits a place in which two thirds of it's inhabitants are unhappy with their lives due to the power that conformity has on their lives stifling their dreams. Paul realizes that these people are helpless to fight their unhappiness because conformity has trapped them into a life which does not satisfy them. Babbitt fits into the second class, those who are restless but won't admit it. Throughout the novel, however we will see Babbitt move into the third class of openly miserable people. Riesling already fits into that class. In an attempt to lighten Paul's spirits Babbitt suggests a trip to the woods of Maine where him and Paul will fish and hunt. Babbitt hopes that time away from Zilla will help Paul and that maybe the trip could help to cure the restlessness he has been feeling. This trip is when babbitt begins to realize that he is discontent with his life and must try to improve it.. The realization that he does not want to end up as unhappy as Paul prompts Babbitt to completely rebel against the conformist society in which he lives, and fight for the life he wants. When eventually Paul shoots his wife out of discontent Babbitt realizes he must rebel against society and prevent himself from suffering the same fate as Paul.

After the unfortunate incident between Paul and his wife Babbitt realizes that he must make an attempt to escape from conformist society, and attempt to improve his life. Babbitt can see that his life would be better without conformity. "This individual trapped in an environment, catching glimmerings of something more desirable beyond it, struggling to grasp them" (Schorer). Unfortunately the means that Babbitt chooses to rebel against society are poorly chosen. Babbitt's first attempt at rebellion is that he changes his political outlook and joins the political crusade of Seneca Doane. Next Babbitt supports workers in a strike. When this attempt fails Babbitt looks towards other women as a source of comfort and rebellion. Babbitt has always dreamed of romance and therefore starts an affair with Tanis Judique a member of a wild set called "the bunch". "His greatest adventure is his affair with Tanis Judique- and here he exercises his fancy, transforming her and her friends into persons the are not." (Light). Babbitt tries to convince himself that he is happier living a life of non-conformity. Babbitt's attempts of rebellion are poorly chosen. Babbitt's approach to rebellion is to radical, and causes him to be ridiculed, and cast out by the rest of conformist society. Babbitt loses many friends because of his non-conformist actions, and he begins to see the true power of conformity. Babbitt's friends and family turn away from him. Society rejects him because his new ideas do not fit their pre-conceived standards. Babbitt begins to feel trapped between his own ideals and goals and the pressure he constantly receives from family and friends to rejoin conformist society.

Late one night Babbitt's wife complains of pains in her side. Mrs. Babbitt is diagnosed with appendicitis. This tragic event is all that is needed to crumble the now weakened resistance that Babbitt has held against conformist society. Babbitt worried about his wife swears loyalty to conformity and all the values he had previously fought.

At the end of the novel Babbitt is almost the same man he was at the beginning of the novel, except for one major difference. Babbitt now has no hallucinations about his life. He accepts his fate as a miserable member of conformist society. Babbitt now realizes the terrible fate that Zenith sets for

it's citizens. When Babbitt's son asks him permission to quit college and elope Babbitt approves in hope that his son will fare better against the power of conformity than he has. "I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life! I don't know's I've accomplished anything except just get along.....maybe you can carry things on further. I don't know but I do get a sneaking kind of pleasure out of that fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it. Well, those folks in there will try to bully you, and tame you down. Tell 'em go to the devil! I'll back you. Take your factory job, if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all of Zenith. Nor of yourself the way I've been. Go ahead, old man! The world is yours!".(Babbitt pg 401) In this meaningful ending passage Babbitt admits his failure in life to his son, and tells him to go after his dreams. He hopes that his son will not fear life, himself, or Zenith the way he did. Babbitt realizes that fear is how conformity captures it's victims, and that without fear anything is possible.

In the city of Zenith the power of conformity is too strong to battle, and even when it's power is realized it is impossible to battle. Conformity traps the fearful into unhappy lives, and forces it's will upon them. Once captured by conformity it is impossible to escape it's grasp. Some Hope however exists for a newer generation including Babbitt's son to conquer conformity and aspire to carry out their dreams.