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Babbitt

Sinclair Lewis · *1922 · original English text*

The towers of Zenith aspire above the morning mist, steel and cement, and George F. Babbitt wakes as a solid citizen of that city: realtor, booster, clubman, and a man who will one day try, badly, to be free. Lewis's 1922 novel is the portrait that named a type.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is left of a man who has succeeded at everything his city asked, and can a late rebellion, or a son's different courage, still mean anything?

"The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods."

The opening of Chapter I

Babbitt's days are offices, clubs, slogans, and a family he does not know how to speak to. A friend's fall, a restlessness, a foolish affair, and the city's pressure to conform again make up the middle. At the end he stands by his son—"The world is yours!"—having returned to the tribe and yet loosened one hand. This is Lewis's original English, PG #1156. The book is satire, and it is also a soul's comedy. For older students.

KEY CHARACTERS

George F. Babbitt
The Zenith realtor whose name became a type, and who remains a particular man.

Myra and the Babbitt children
The family he boosts and does not always see, including the son he finally sides with.

Paul and the old friends
The companion whose fall shows Babbitt his own cage.

the boosters of Zenith
Clubs, committees, and the city's cheerful police of conformity.

TOWERS OF STEEL AND CEMENT

> *"The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods."*
>
> Chapter I

Grades 10–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

Towers of Zenith

THE OPENING

The city is named in steel and limestone before the man is fully awake. Babbitt's morning ritual is already a social fact.

- The first sentence is exact: towers, morning mist, steel and cement and limestone.
- Zenith is a midwestern city of boosters, not a thinly veiled single town only.
- The satire begins in description, not in a joke.

> *"The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods."*
>
> Chapter I

02

A Solid Citizen

THE EARLY CHAPTERS

The office, the deal, the club, the church as a good connection, the family table. Babbitt is good at this life and almost content.

- Do not make him only a fool; his competence is real.
- The slogans are funny because they are believed.
- A friend's more honest unhappiness is already nearby.

03

A Crack in the Boosting

THE MIDDLE

Discontent, a scandal close to him, and a season of rebellion that looks like freedom and is mostly confusion: another crowd, a cheaper daring.

- The affair and the drinking are moral facts, not decoration; teach them with restraint.
- The city knows how to pull a man back.
- Lewis is exact about fear of being out of the tribe.

04

The Tribe Closes In

THE RETURN

Pressure, committees, a threatened livelihood, and Babbitt's return to the booster's straight road. The comedy hardens.

- The return is not a simple repentance scene.
- His courage fails in public and still leaves a private tenderness.
- The book's fairness is that the tribe is not only a monster.

05

The World Is Yours

THE CLOSE

Babbitt, arms about his son's shoulders, tells the boy the world is his, even if the father has gone back to Zenith's acceptable life.

- The line is exact: "The world is yours!"
- The last march into the living-room is both tender and ironic.
- A satire of success, conformity, and a late, small courage, for older students.

Conformity · Success · A City of Boosters · A Late Rebellion · Father and Son

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted text is Sinclair Lewis's original English (Project Gutenberg #1156). The opening is exact: "The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods." The close includes "The world is yours!"
2. The novel is a 1922 satire of business culture, clubs, and a man's failed bid for freedom. It includes drinking and an affair; teach those chapters with restraint, for older students.
3. Quote this page. Do not confuse Zenith with Gopher Prairie (Main Street is another Lewis novel, already mapped separately).

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1156, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/lewis-babbitt/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.