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Reexamining *Babbitt*: A Critical Analysis Through Stiegler's Theory of Retention

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Abstract:

Babbitt is the masterpiece of Sinclair Lewis, and its unique artistic quality is largely reflected in the critic of American commercial society in the 1920s. Stiegler's retention theory provides readers with a fresh perspective on the relationship between time, memory, perception and technology. This paper explores how Babbitt, the protagonist of the novel, constructs his memory by analyzing his direct perceptions and experiences in the commercial society, his interactions with others, and the impact that material technology has on him. Interpreting Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* on the basis of Stiegler's retention theory can not only deepen readers' understanding of the novel's theme and ideological thought, but also enable them to have a richer and deeper understanding of retention theory itself.

Keywords **— *Babbitt*, Retention theory, Memory, Material technology**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sinclair Lewis, a cornerstone of American realist literature, delivers a searing critique of 1920s American materialism and conformity in his Nobel Prize-winning novel, *Babbitt* (1922). Through George F. Babbitt, a middle-class real estate broker in the fictional city of Zenith, Lewis masterfully exposes the spiritual desolation of consumer culture, portraying Babbitt's monotonous routines, fleeting rebellions, and inevitable capitulation to societal norms with incisive wit. This paper applies Bernard Stiegler's retention theory—encompassing primary, secondary, and tertiary retention—to dissect how Babbitt's perceptions, memories, and interactions with technology shape his fractured identity and mirror broader societal tensions. By analyzing key textual moments, this study evaluates Lewis's nuanced satire, which not only critiques the hollow pursuit of the American Dream but also underscores the enduring struggle for personal authenticity in a conformist, consumer-driven world, cementing the novel's philosophical and cultural significance.

II. PRIMARY RETENTION —BABBITT'S IMMERSION IN ZENITH'S CONSUMER CULTURE

Stiegler's primary retention refers to the immediate perception and sensory experience of the "living present" (Stiegler, 1998). In *Babbitt*, George F. Babbitt's daily life in Zenith embodies this concept, as his sensory engagement with the city's commercial environment defines his identity. Early in the novel, Lewis describes Babbitt's pride in his modern home, filled with "the best of nationally advertised and quantitatively produced alarm-clocks" and "standardized furniture" (Lewis, 1922, p. 13). These details reflect Babbitt's immersion in a consumerist world where material possessions signal success. His enthusiastic involvement in real estate deals, such as his aggressive pursuit of a cemetery lot sale, further illustrates how his

immediate experiences are shaped by the pursuit of profit and social status, constituting his primary retention.

Yet, beneath this conformity, Babbitt's primary retention reveals cracks in his satisfaction. His morning routine—waking to the "mechanical outrage" of his alarm clock and navigating a household that feels more like a showroom than a home—evokes a sense of alienation (Lewis, 1922, p. 14). His interactions with his wife Myra, marked by perfunctory conversations and a lack of emotional depth, underscore a disconnect between his external success and internal fulfillment. For instance, when Babbitt snaps at Myra over a trivial breakfast dispute, his irritation betrays a deeper unrest, signaling that his sensory engagement with Zenith's commercial culture fails to satisfy his unspoken desire for meaning. This tension, rooted in the text, sets the stage for Babbitt's later questioning of his conformist life, highlighting how primary retention captures both his immersion in and discomfort with consumerist values.

III. SECONDARY RETENTION—MEMORY, REBELLION, SOCIAL BONDS

Secondary retention, as Stiegler defines it, involves the imaginative recollection and reconstruction of past experiences, often shaped through social interactions (Stiegler, 1998). In *Babbitt*, this concept manifests in how Babbitt's memories and values are co-constructed through his relationships with his family, friends, and business associates, forming a "memory community" that both anchors and challenges his identity. His business dealings, such as his negotiations with clients like the Street Traction Company, rely on shared memories of past successes, reinforcing his role as a cog in Zenith's commercial machine. These interactions, laden with boosterish camaraderie, shape Babbitt's recollection of himself as a successful businessman, as seen when he boasts of Zenith's growth at a real estate board meeting (Lewis, 1922, p. 128).

A critical turning point occurs with the imprisonment of Babbitt's friend Paul Riesling, who shoots his wife Zilla in a moment of desperation. This event disrupts Babbitt's complacency, prompting a vivid recollection of their shared past—particularly their youthful dreams of artistic and intellectual pursuits, which contrast sharply with their current entrapment in Zenith's commercial culture (Lewis, 1922, p. 245). Paul's tragedy catalyzes Babbitt's brief rebellion, during which he pursues an affair with Tanis Judique and experiments with liberal ideas at the Athletic Club. These acts represent a reconstruction of his identity through secondary retention, as Babbitt imagines an alternative self unbound by societal expectations. However, his rebellion falters when his social circle—particularly his wife's illness and the disapproval of his peers—pulls him back to conformity. When Babbitt returns to Myra's bedside, his decision to "be decent" reflects how shared memories with his family and community overpower his fleeting desire for individuality (Lewis, 1922, p. 317). This textual evidence underscores the power of secondary retention to both inspire resistance and reinforce societal norms.

IV. TERITARY RETENTION

Stiegler's tertiary retention refers to externalized memory preserved through material technologies, such as media or communication tools, which extend and transform human experience (Stiegler, 1998). In *Babbitt*, technologies like telegraphs, newspapers, and advertising function as tertiary retentions, embedding Zenith's consumerist ideology into Babbitt's consciousness. Lewis vividly illustrates this through Babbitt's reliance on newspapers and advertisements, which bombard him with slogans like "Boost Zenith!" and images of idealized homes and products (Lewis, 1922, p. 47). These media shape his worldview, reinforcing his belief that material success equates to personal worth. For example, Babbitt's excitement over a new advertising campaign for his real estate business reflects how these technologies externalize and amplify his identity as a commercial player.

Moreover, these technologies serve as prosthetic extensions of Babbitt's memory, preserving his experiences and connecting him to a broader social network. His use of telegraphs to

communicate with distant clients, as seen in his correspondence with a Chicago investor, allows him to project his identity as a successful businessman across space and time (Lewis, 1922, p. 162). However, these same technologies also expose him to alternative perspectives that challenge his conformity. For instance, reading about labor strikes in the newspaper sparks momentary sympathy for workers, clashing with his boosterish loyalty to Zenith's business elite (Lewis, 1922, p. 209). This duality—technology as both a reinforcer of consumerist values and a catalyst for reflection—highlights the complex role of tertiary retention in Babbitt's life. By grounding this analysis in specific textual moments, we see how Lewis uses technology to critique the pervasive influence of commercial culture while hinting at possibilities for individual awakening.

V. CONSLUSION

Using Stiegler's retention theory to analyze Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* offers a unique perspective on the intricate relationship between humans, memory, perception, and technology. Babbitt constructs and preserves memories through direct environmental perception, social interactions, and material technology. By perceiving his surroundings, he accumulates knowledge and forms distinct memories. Through communication, cooperation, and conflicts with others, Babbitt refines his memories and gains new insights. Material technology also plays a key role in shaping his experiences. This analysis deepens understanding of the interplay between individuals, society, and technology in *Babbitt*, while providing fresh insights into the roles of memory, perception, and technology in modern society. It also urges us to consider the profound impact of rapidly advancing technology on how we remember and perceive.

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