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Mariah Johnson

mariah.johnson@umconnect.umt.edu

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Mariah Johnson

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Clint Walker

### Satirical Perspectives: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

Since the time of Johnathan Swift, satire has been an important tool of governmental and societal critique. From old treatises to modern satirical news shows, websites, and newspaper comics, the use of satire has continued to provide people with a vehicle to express their concerns about government actions and societal trends. Further, use of satire is not a uniquely English-speaking phenomenon; many cultures across the world use satiric forms. As satire is such a widely used vehicle in public discourse across the world, it is worth examining and comparing the satires of different cultures to see how societal critique spans nations. Two novels especially suited to this task are the American novel *Babbitt* by Nobel Prize<sup>1</sup> winner Sinclair Lewis and the Soviet novel *Envy* (trans. *Зависть*) by Yurii Olesha. Both novels were published around the same time; *Babbitt* in 1922 and *Envy* five years later in 1927. Both nations were also experiencing a rapid pace of social and economic change during the decade in which these novels were released; Americans in the 1920s were faced with an increase in consumerism as the result of developing capitalism due to industrialization and mass production. The Soviet Union also experienced a push for industrialization in the wake of the 1917 Revolution. Soviet citizens

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair Lewis was the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. He was awarded in 1930.

were faced with this push to modernize amidst an uprooting of traditional ideals from the government takeover. The similar time periods and societal situations in which the two novels were created allow for a fruitful comparison of the satire of two different countries. The approach of this inquiry into the satire of the two differing cultures is three-pronged: first, historical contextualization provides the societal setting of each respective country which produced these novels; second, the satirical techniques of each author are examined and compared in order to learn what aspects of society each culture seems to satirize and how they go about doing so; third, sociological information provides context for the implications of the societal trends surrounding these satires in today's world.

Perhaps the most important historical event that shaped the political and economic situations in America and the Soviet Union in the 1920s was World War 1. As John Wickersham put it in his introduction to *Babbitt*, "Much of what occurred in the twenties in the areas of art, literature, and music-as well as the social, political, and economic climate of the period-was born in the trenches of World War I" (Wickersham viii). Nineteen twenty-two, the year of *Babbitt's* publication, is only 4 years after the end of the war, so its influence is recent. However, as Wickersham also notes, the war had a very different impact on America than Europe, where the battles took place. The war essentially destroyed the infrastructure of Europe. Not only was American infrastructure not damaged by war efforts, but its involvement in the war was for a significantly shorter time; yet it was long enough to still experience a boom in manufacturing. Thus, America took the lead in the world's economy, being the only participating Western country with functioning infrastructure and manufacturing capabilities. Even with this newfound economic prosperity, however, Americans were experiencing what Niall Palmer calls "a growing sense of social disorientation" (Palmer 10). The 1920s was the decade of intense technological

innovation while at the same time being the decade of restrictive laws such as Prohibition. Wickersham puts it nicely: “It was a decade of dizzyingly unrestrained freedom and ruthless, standardized conformity” (Wickersham ix). Many social liberties were being taken in the 1920s; flapper culture grew, where young women dressed in clothing that in previous decades was considered scandalous, drank, and partied; due to Prohibition, speak-easies opened around the country to supply alcohol despite the law; and businessmen regularly made shady or outright illegal deals to make more money. On a more legal and societally accepted note, a growing middle class found that they now had the money to purchase the new technologies and products that were being produced. However, such a market requires a steady supply to meet demand. The need for a steady supply comes with a need to standardize to optimize production. In short, a consumer economy requires standardization to keep up with demand. This standardization, being a factor in the social disorientation as it changed the social and economic landscape, is what Sinclair Lewis satirizes in *Babbitt*.

The increasing homogenization and standardization of American society is something that Sinclair Lewis viewed with disgust. In his thinking, the “blind, unthinking acceptance of the standard...needed to be revealed” (Wickersham xiv). He wishes to bring attention to the increasing lack of individuality. To this end, Lewis goes about satirizing the idea of standardization of culture and the people involved in such a culture. His technique in doing so falls under what linguist Victor Raskin terms as “Exposure of National Traits.” Raskin defines this idea of political humor as “opposition...between the script for what the targeted national group or national entity is supposed to be and the negation of that script” (Raskin 230-31). In other words, the humor of this satiric style lies in people or characters presenting or perceiving themselves in one way while acting in a way contrary to their façade, thus showing how they are

in reality to comic effect. The contradictions provide not only humor, but an awareness to a group of how they are really acting without the cover of things like personal perception and propaganda. Lewis's character of George F. Babbitt is a prime example of a character whose mentality and actions expose national traits. In this case, the trait is consumerism and the standardization of not only goods but thoughts that it brings about. In the beginning of the book, Lewis characterizes Babbitt as a man who "made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay" (Lewis 2). Immediately, readers get a sense of this character and the world in which he lives. Babbitt is a real estate salesman; he has very marketable skills, skills that make money and nothing else. He sells things to consumers, contributing to the consumer culture. This consumer culture buys things they want, even if they can't afford them. Therefore, Babbitt lives in a world which focuses primarily on the exchange of goods for money, without a care on the seller or purchaser's part whether there is enough money to exchange; the seller is going to sell and a consumer will buy. While giving a speech at a gala dinner celebrating the victory of the business-supporting candidate for mayor of his town Zenith, Babbitt describes the ideal citizen, which includes some inklings of this consumerist bent:

"I picture him first and foremost being busier than a bird-dog...not kicking about things that are none of his business...[at night] he goes happily to bed ...having contributed his mite to the prosperity of the city and to his own bank account. In politics and religion this Sane Citizen is the canniest man on earth; and in the arts he invariably has a natural taste which makes him pick out the best, every time."  
(Lewis 188-9)

This is the script of the working men of Zenith like Babbitt; this is, in Raskin's terms, "what the targeted national group or national entity is supposed to be." According to Babbitt's speech, the ideal man is one who is always working and only concerns himself with that which directly concerns him. A good and happy citizen is one who makes money for himself and the city in

which he lives. These ideal citizens also have a discerning eye for politics, religion, and art. They can choose the best art, implying an ability to analyze and critique it, as well as choose the best religions and politics, implying an ability to seriously consider, analyze, and form informed opinions about the subjects at hand. This is how Babbitt perceives himself, as this ideal citizen. It is the image he wishes to project to the world. The satire, however, lies in how far he is from this ideal.

The negation of the script of the ideal citizen lies in Babbitt's actions. He considers himself to be among the ranks of the ideal citizens. The crux of the ideal citizen, more than making and spending money, is his discerning eye in art, religion, and politics. Were Babbitt indeed one of these ideal citizens belonging to the group of what people are supposed to be, he would be informed about politics, religion, and art, forming his own opinions and debating those opinions with other people; instead he does the exact opposite. While sitting on a train with his best friend Paul Riesling on their way to a vacation in Maine, Babbitt strikes up a conversation with other people in the compartment. In the course of this conversation, "Which of them said which has never been determined, and does not matter, since they all had the same ideas and expressed them always with the same ponderous and brassy assurance. If it was not Babbitt who was delivering any given verdict, at least he was beaming on the chancellor who did deliver it." (Lewis 143) As exemplified by the conversation on the train, Babbitt has no opinions of his own; nor does any other participant in the discussion. Rather, they all say variations on the same ideas and agree with each other while patting each other on the back for being so eloquent. Here becomes apparent the standardization which Lewis is satirizing; not only are goods and services becoming standardized, but thoughts and opinions are as well. Babbitt does not take in new information at will to create his own opinions or amend the ones he already holds. In fact, the

opinions he holds are not his own at all. While Babbitt considers himself a man of strong moral composition, the upstanding, well-informed ideal citizen that pays his dues to society, readers see that in fact he does not have any opinions which are not given to him by the people, clubs, and groups around him. His lack of formation of personal opinions is even stated directly when Babbitt is asked his opinion on Shakespeare by his wife. Babbitt ponders that “he felt that on the subject of Shakespeare he wasn’t really an authority. Neither the *Advocate-Times*, the *Evening Advocate*, nor the *Bulletin of the Zenith Chamber of Commerce* had ever had an editorial on the matter, and until one of them had spoken he found it hard to form an original opinion.” (Lewis 77) Of course, not being able to form an original opinion until one has seen an editorial on a given matter is a contradiction, fitting for Wickersham’s idea that the 1920s were “a decade of paradoxes” (Wickersham ix). Babbitt has personal opinions, but those opinions, paradoxically, are not personal at all; instead, they are fed to him by his go-to media. Babbitt is no intellectual. Rather, he is a victim of standardization. His ideals and opinions are those of the ‘in’ crowd - he holds the opinions that those in power tell him are best. In reality, these opinions reflect the best interest of business and the wealthy. The consequence of standardization, then, that this satire brings attention to, is the loss of creative thought. As Seneca Doane, a liberal politician visiting Zenith quipped, “[Zenith] has standardized all of the beauty out of life” (Lewis 102). The only skills that are valued in Zenith society are those that are marketable. Arts are only valuable so far as they can be used to market things. An example of this is the character of Chum Frink, the so-called poet in Babbitt’s social circle. He works as a writer creating an article called “Poemulations” and is the creator of a program called “Ads that Add.” His work is “humorous and easily understood by any child of twelve...[and] set not as verse but as prose” (Lewis 115). Frink’s work is simplistic, and used to sell things, if his program “Ads that Add” is any

indication. He creates not for the sake of making something beautiful, but for the sake of generating capital for himself and the companies he advertises for. Standardization, as the satire shows, has lowered art and the ability to creatively think to a disturbingly low level, as well as eliminating appreciation for beautiful things in the drive to create and gain capital. The lack of appreciation for art is a sentiment seen in Yurii Olesha's work as well.

Just as in America, World War I provides the context for the social and economic development of Soviet Russia. However, unlike in America, battles did take place on Russian soil. As a result, Russia was in much worse shape coming out of World War I than America, especially economically. Even during the war, the Russian economy did not receive the same boost from wartime manufacturing as America did. Rather, quite the opposite happened. Up to the point of the war, the Russian autocracy was struggling with an increasing number of strikes, demonstrations, and a rise in revolutionary sentiment. The war, while uniting the nation temporarily, eventually caused more problems than it did good. According to Warren Bartlett Walsh's history of Russia and the Soviet Union, "Shortages developed early and grew steadily worse so that life was an ordeal in Russian towns and cities by 1916... That familiar trio of shortages, enlarged demands, and the increased buying power of certain groups helped build up inflationary pressures." (Walsh 369-70). The economic conditions were just right to insure short supply and unaffordability for the common people. The immense amount of discontent with economic and social conditions formed the perfect environment to foment revolution, leading to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War. At the end of this war that occurred right on the heels of World War I, the Bolsheviks won, and inherited a broken state. In 1924, Vladimir Lenin, the leader and face of the Revolution, died, and Joseph Stalin took full control of the Soviet government in by 1927. This period, as described by Charles Ziegler, "was a time

of great expectations and cultural experimentation...[However,] few Bolsheviks were enthusiastic about...new art forms. They believed that art should be accessible to the masses, promote communist values, and not be too complicated – in other words, art should serve political purposes.” (Ziegler 74-5) Much like the value of art to the characters in *Babbitt* is only as a tool to create capital, the Soviet idea of the value of art in society extends only so far as art can be used to further the aims of the revolutionary ideals. This is the sociopolitical climate in which Yurii Olesha wrote *Envy*.

The loss of art through the push to industrialize the Soviet Union is the main concern of Yurii Olesha. Olesha “considered that art had the moral function of aiding men to recover from alienation. He demanded that Communism develop as a moral system, a human system, not merely as an economic system, and was convinced that it was the artist’s role to be the guardian of the humanist ethic which envisages the Communist future as the time of the achievement of man’s wholeness.” (Beaujour 10). As iterated above, the Bolsheviks were not fans of art for art’s sake or of art as a method for healing of the psyche or soul. Art, to them, was solely a political tool. Olesha, however, believed that art was the key to keeping a human spirit alive. The loss of this human spirit, being the human being in alienation from his or her surroundings, is Olesha’s fear for Soviet society. Thus, what he satirizes is the perceived need of the Soviet Union to modernize and innovate at the cost of all else. The technique that he uses to do so is what Raskin terms as “Denigration of a Political Idea.” He describes this type of political satire as one in which “an abstract idea, credo, motto, or slogan...is denigrated.” He goes on to say that there are two types of Denigration of a Political Idea. One is “pointedly and directly iconoclastic: its message is that an idea or a slogan is actually the exact opposite of what it purports to be.” The second is “usually allusive, at least to the content of the ridiculed idea.” (Raskin 229) Olesha

employs this first type. Like the theory of Exposure of National Traits, the first type of Denigration of a Political Idea creates a dichotomy of opposites; the idea, just like the national trait, presents itself as something totally different than what it is in action. The techniques, in this regard, are similar; the only difference is the type of social, economic, and political phenomena being satirized; the base of Lewis's critique is business, while the base of Olesha's critique is the ideological control of the government. However, the subject in the end is the same: concern over the loss of elements of artistic freedom in the face of rapid industrialization. Olesha's critique even starts with a character who takes inspiration from *Babbitt*.

The character which represents the innovation, modernization, and industrialization pushed by the Soviet government is a man by the name of Andrei Petrovich Babichev. Babichev, of course, is taken at least in part from the name of Lewis's leading character, George F. Babbitt. The goals of the two men are vastly different, however. Babbitt wishes to accrue as many status symbols as possible to be like the rest of the wealthy crowd; he wants to fashion himself in his vision of the ideal citizen, and in doing so loses his individuality and appreciation for variance. Babichev, on the other hand, wishes to create a way to make sausage quickly and affordably so he may open a restaurant. He is pushing for the innovation of technology over all else. Another interesting thing to note about his name is his patronymic, or middle name, Petrovich. Petrovich comes from the name Pyotr, a name holding much significance in Russian culture because of Peter the Great. The name's association with this tsar gives it a symbolism of power and authority, suggesting that Babichev is a man of import and power. He is called by one Commissar, "one of the most remarkable men in this country" (Olesha 238). Immediately readers see where the idea of innovation stands in the country of the Soviet Union. It is held high above all else. Babichev's stated goal is "the industrialization of the kitchen" (Olesha 239).

Cooking, like writing, is an art. People can come up with new dishes, create them, perfect them, and share them with other people just like a book or a painting. Further, homemade food is traditionally a source of human comradery. The loss of such comradery will contribute to the alienation that Olesha so fears. The character that is the opposite of Babichev's desire to industrialize is a man by the name of Nikolai Kavelerov. The name Kavelerov is derived from the word cavalier. Most commonly, the word cavalier refers to a mounted knight – a romantic idea from an era long past. Cavalier could also refer to the tradition of Cavalier poetry in England, which would be especially fitting for Kavelerov. Kavelerov meets Babichev because the latter takes him in out of pity when he finds Kavelerov drunk in the gutter one night. Kavelerov is the opposite of Babichev; he is an unknown, poor man with seemingly no professional education. Society seems not to value him, and readers soon find out why. Kavelerov is prone to fits of poetic lyricism in a very 19<sup>th</sup> century style; this is a product of what the current government considers a bygone and frivolous age, hence the reference to cavaliers, a bygone form of soldier. One example of Kavelerov's lyricism is when he quips, "I often think about this century. We live in a brilliant age. And it's a splendid fate, isn't it? I mean when the youth of the century and the youth of a man coincide." (Olesha 251) It is a very high metaphorical concept to compare the youth of a man to the youth of a century, as well as a high philosophical style to consider fate in such a way. Such styles of writing and thinking recall the romantic literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as that of the quintessential Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such prosodic musings as Kavelerov's would have been valued and celebrated. However, in the current time, such musings are met with responses such as the one that Babichev gives to Kavelerov: he ignores him. The whole time that Kavelerov is delivering the small monologue from which this quote is excerpted, Babichev ignores him. Babichev's

mind is on his plans for his restaurant and other such things, showing where art stands in this new government. Herein lies the satire. The new government purports itself as innovative, modern, and as the force to create a new world for humanity. Yet, Olesha's argument is that one cannot have humanity without art free from state ideological control. Therefore, this government cannot be as interested in the good of humanity as it purports because it ignores art, something integral to humanity. The joke, then, is that true brilliance is being ignored although it is right in front of their eyes. Of course, Denigration of a Political Idea is not the only satiric technique which Olesha includes in his novel.

Being from the Soviet Union and writing about the Soviet Union, there is a satiric technique that appears in Olesha's work that is unique to Soviet satire. This technique occurs especially prominently in the first two pages of the novel's publication of the original Russian. There is a particular set of Soviet humorous inventions that Raskin says "denigrates the idea of socialism and communism as a whole" (Raskin 240). Olesha employs these particular humor markers of Soviet satiric style in his initial characterization of Babichev, his stand-in for the ideas and motivations of the Russian government. Though there are many examples of his critique in the first two pages, one phrase in particular embodies the spirit of Olesha's Soviet satire. In the introduction of the character of Andrei Petrovich, he is described as "образцовая мужская особь (trans. "exemplary/model masculine individual") (Олега 7). On the surface, this seems a commendation. Here is this man, who is an adroit businessman and respected participant in the Soviet system. It would seem that he is indeed exemplary, the goal every Soviet citizen should strive for: an innovator contributing to the advancement of society. Deeper analysis of the language used in the description, however, reveals quite a different picture. Readers are first presented with the word "образцовая." This adjective comes from the word образ, meaning

image. This word is also the old word for an icon, the images of saints and holy figures present in Russian Orthodox churches. It is a word which carries heavy religious symbolism, and the use of a word deriving from such religious importance is no accident on Olesha's part. He could have easily used other adjectives such as 'outstanding' or 'perfect.' However, he uses this word connected with religious symbolism. Religion was not a part of the Soviet aims for society, and they did what they could to quash religion out of the citizens. God instead was replaced by the idea of the 'new Soviet man,' a citizen much like Babichev who works selflessly for the improvement of society. The use of a word deriving from the word for a religious icon is by Olesha seems an attempt to intentionally introduce ambiguity between the secular and the religious. Additionally, icons are a form of art, and one that the Soviets tried to eliminate because it did not further their political aims. As Olesha is focused on the preservation of art, the use of a word that also refers to a form of art provides commentary that the Soviets haven't eliminated art, but rather replaced it with their own cheap imitation: a soulless icon of the industrial complex rather than an icon for the enrichment of the soul. The third word in this description is perhaps the most important for understanding Olesha's critique of communism and the fear which prompted his satire. To refer to Babichev as a being, he uses the word "особь." This word is used to refer to an individual in the biological sense; therefore, it could apply not only to a person but to an animal or a plant. Perhaps a more accurate translation of this word, rather than individual, is specimen. This dehumanizes Babichev and alienates him from the whole of humanity in the same way that Olesha fears the absence of art in communism will dehumanize and alienate the population. Thus, in just one short phrase, Olesha includes both a humorous and scathing critique of communism, especially as it applies to minimizing art.

Though both of these novels were written almost a century ago, the concerns that they raise are perhaps more valid than ever in modern times. As analysis of the satiric techniques shows that both Lewis and Olesha are worried about a loss of creative thought and appreciation of art in an age of industrialization. Today, that worry again is relevant as the arts come under fire once more, especially in the United States. Recently proposed federal budgets aim to cut the National Endowment for the Arts, which is the main funding body for creative endeavors in the United States. The proposal instead diverts money to other government agencies, mostly military and security in nature. (CNN) This situation very closely mimics those present in both novels. Attention is being turned away from individual expression and artistic creation in favor of other endeavors that are considered more vital. In *Babbitt*, art becomes secondary to business and consumerism. In *Envy*, art is ignored for technological innovation and the push to industrialize. In modern times, it seems that art is being ignored for the military-industrial complex. However, the loss of art could in fact have detrimental effects on the human brain. Art helps the brain develop from childhood: “The arts are not just expressive and affective, they are deeply cognitive. They develop essential thinking tools — pattern recognition and development; mental representations of what is observed or imagined; symbolic, allegorical and metaphorical representations; careful observation of the world; and abstraction from complexity.” (Sousa) Arts, in other words, helps people develop essential cognitive abilities – the ability to recognize and create patterns, the ability to see things abstractly and symbolically, and the ability to glean information from complex concepts. Without these abilities, humans would not be able to perform so many other skills. For instance, without the ability to recognize patterns, it would be near impossible to conduct experiments where data is extracted because no one would see similarities enough to test hypotheses. Without the ability to see things symbolically, not only

can humans not understand metaphors, but they also would not be able to perform complex higher math, which is almost entirely symbolic. Further than being neurologically significant, art is also an integral part of the human experience. It is one of the surest ways for a person to express their individuality and contribute something beautiful to the world. Without art life becomes mechanical, as George F. Babbitt's does:

“With [no one] before whom to set his face in resolute optimism, he beheld, and half admitted that he beheld, his way of life as incredibly mechanical. Mechanical business – a brisk selling of badly built houses. Mechanical religion – a dry, hard church, shut off from the real life of the streets, inhumanly respectable as a top hat. Mechanical golf and dinner parties and bridge and conversation.” (Lewis 241)

There is something missing from Babbitt's life. This something missing is the very thing that Olesha fears the loss of: the sense of community with one's fellow man and the spiritual essence of humanity. George F. Babbitt, having no capacity for creative thought, is living a life he is discontented with without knowing why. He is blocked off from so much of the experience of humanity that everything becomes a mechanical motion. It is this mechanical quality of a life without art, a life focused only on industrial progress or consumerism, that will bring about the alienation that Olesha fears. Without art, not only does humanity lose an important developmental tool, but humanity loses something integral to the experience of being human as well. Without art, humanity loses something beautiful. Both Lewis and Olesha express concerns in this regard through their satires of national traits and political ideals respectively.

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