

Introduction to the excerpt: In his novel 'Babbitt', Sinclair Lewis portrays the Middle America of the 1920s. Mr. Babbitt is an important man in a small US American town called Zenith in the 1920s. The extract below is what follows one evening in Babbitt's house, right after dinner.

Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951)

Babbitt (excerpt from chapter 6)

In the living-room, in a corner of the davenport, Ted settled down to his Home Study¹; plain geometry, Cicero, and the agonizing² metaphors of Comus³.

"I don't see why they give us this old-fashioned junk by Milton and Shakespeare and Wordsworth⁴ and all these has-beens⁵," he protested. "Oh, I guess I could stand it to see a show by Shakespeare, if they had swell⁶ scenery and put on a lot of dog⁷, but to sit down in cold blood and READ 'em — These teachers — how do they get that way?"

Mrs. Babbitt, darning⁸ socks, speculated, "Yes, I wonder why. Of course I don't want to fly in the face of the professors and everybody, but I do think there's things in Shakespeare — not that I read him much, but when I was
10 young the girls used to show me passages that weren't, really, they weren't at all nice."

Babbitt looked up irritably from the comic strips in the Evening Advocate. They composed his favorite literature and art, these illustrated chronicles in which Mr. Mutt hit Mr. Jeff with a rotten egg, and Mother corrected Father's vulgarisms by means of a rolling-pin⁹. With the solemn face of a devotee¹⁰, breathing heavily through his open mouth,
15 he plodded¹¹ nightly through every picture, and during the rite he detested interruptions. Furthermore, 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 Commerce¹² had ever had an editorial on the matter, and until one of them had spoken he found it hard to form an original opinion. But even at risk of floundering¹³ in strange bogs¹⁴, he could not keep out of an open controversy.

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"I'll tell you why you have to study Shakespeare and those. It's because they're required for college entrance, and that's all there is to it! Personally, I don't see myself why they stuck 'em into an up-to-date high-school system like we have in this state. Be a good deal better if you took Business English, and learned how to write an ad, or letters that would pull¹⁵. But there it is, and there's no tall, argument, or discussion about it! Trouble with you, Ted, is you always want
25 to do something different! If you're going to law-school — and you are! — I never had a chance to, but I'll see that you do — why, you'll want to lay in¹⁶ all the English and Latin you can get."

"Oh punk. I don't see what's the use of law-school — or even finishing high school. I don't want to go to college 'specially. Honest, there's lot of fellows that have graduated from colleges that don't begin to make as much money as
30 fellows that went to work early. Old Shimmy Peters, that teaches Latin in the High, he's a what-is-it from Columbia and he sits up all night reading a lot of greasy books and he's always speling about¹⁷ the 'value of languages,' and the poor soak doesn't make but eighteen hundred a year, and no traveling salesman would think of working for that. [...]"
(574 Wörter)

Quelle: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1156/1156-h/1156-h.htm>

¹home study homework – ²agonizing here: very difficult – ³Comus play by the famous English poet John Milton (1608-1674) – ⁴William Wordsworth famous English poet (1770-1850) – ⁵has-been (ifml.) sb. who was once famous and important but no longer is – ⁶swell (AE, ifml.) very good – ⁷to put on a lot of dog to put on a showy performance – ⁸to darn to repair a hole in a piece of clothing – ⁹rolling-pin cylinder-shaped object that is used for rolling out dough for pizza, pancakes etc. – ¹⁰devotee person who strongly supports and follows sb. or sth. – ¹¹to plod to work slowly but steadily – ¹²Chamber of Commerce local organization that supports the interests of businesses – ¹³to flounder to move helplessly or clumsily – ¹⁴bog soft, wet ground, or an area of this; swamp – ¹⁵to pull here: to be successful – ¹⁶to lay in to get all you can – ¹⁷to spiel about sth. to talk in length about sth.

Aufgaben

1. Briefly outline what different attitudes the members of the Babbitt family show towards the English author William Shakespeare. (*comprehension*)
2. Analyse behaviour and language of all characters. Considering the way the characters are portrayed in this excerpt, do you think the author seriously agrees with any of his characters? If so, which and why? (*analysis*)