

'It's Called Hoeflation': The perturbing American crisis of masculinity in Lewis Sinclair's *Babbitt* and contemporary online subcultures

Emily Zou June 6 2023 American Studies 301-3

Anonymous (ID: Ca7VJfG) 
Hoeflation is real
07/02/22(Sat)18:38:58 No.384884867



535 KB JPG

- >Must be 6 feet tall
- >Must make 100k a year
- >Must look like Chad
- >Must have college degree
- >Must have 6 pack abs
- >Must work high status job
- >Must do the housework
- >Must have 9 inch D

meanwhile women are obese 30 year old roasties

my 5'8 grandad was a bricklayer and got to marry an early 20's virgin who stayed faithful to him and bore him 6 children.

Modern men have to work 5x harder than their grandfathers did for women 20x worse than what their grandmothers were.

Its called hoeflation. and its destroying western men's desires to be providers and protectors.

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- 1] Incel: A portmanteau for "Involuntary" and "Celibate", an initially self-described label for men unable to attract women.
- 2] Chad: The "Chad" is the foil to the incel, it is used to describe men successful with women, due to possessing superficial genetic traits.
- 3] "D": Refers to male genitalia
- 4] Roastie: Derogatory slang for women, due to the (erroneous) belief that womens' vaginas become worn out and appear similar to roast beef after being sexually active.

"Hoeflation is real" is an anonymous text post from popular online forum 4Chan, in which the author details their frustrations with increasingly unattainable standards for men, coupled with the ostensibly declining quality of women over time.¹ Notably, the author's resentment against women is rerouted from anxieties over finance and appearance. The rhetoric in "Hoeflation is real" is emblematic of the larger, well-documented

¹ Anonymous. "Anon discovered hoeflation." *Reddit*, June 6, 2022.
https://www.reddit.com/r/greentext/comments/vpx6tx/anon_discovered_hoeflation/

phenomenon coined by scholars as the "manosphere." The manosphere is a network of online communities that emerged in the early 2000s, dedicated to the belief that men are oppressed by modern feminism.² I contend that the contemporary discontent propagated by the 'manosphere' is fundamentally a response to American deindustrialization, particularly regarding changing labor norms and conditions. In defending this view, I will show how "masculinity" has been destabilized and subsequently updated in the wake of broader economic and social shifts by comparing modern manosphere rhetoric to Sinclair Lewis' 1922 novel *Babbitt*. I argue that *Babbitt* captures a similar moment in American history through its intricate portrayal of the effects of American industrialization on masculinity. Although fictional, I assert that the concerns raised in *Babbitt* address real, ongoing questions, which is further upheld by Lewis' propensity to evoke the "sociological imagination."³ While gender in the American mainstream has been thought of as a normative, unchanging fact of human existence, I posit that the uneasiness surrounding masculinity displayed in *Babbitt* and the manosphere demonstrates that gender in practice is intuited to be dynamic and ever changing.⁴ Additionally, upheavals of social institutions, and especially with one as deeply entrenched as gender, are rarely straightforward. I illustrate how men have sensed masculinity's vulnerability, and then opted to (re)affirm their masculinity through misogyny.

To this end, I will begin by providing an overview of the extensive literature on American masculinity, which largely stems from critical feminist theory and the historical and literary fields. I will also describe the recent work on the manosphere and networked misogyny and emerging theory on its links to labor. After establishing this context, I then split my analysis based on two themes I observe in "Hoeflation is Real" through its list of purported male standards. The first theme revolves around *financial* anxieties ("Must make 100k a year, must have a college degree, must work high status job") and the second pertains to *appearance* anxieties

² Valerie Dickel and Giulia Evolvi. "'Victims of feminism': exploring networked misogyny and #MeToo in the manosphere," *Feminist Media Studies*: 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2029925>

³ Stephen Conroy. "Sinclair Lewis's Sociological Imagination." *American Literature* 42, no.3 (Nov 1970), pgs 348-362. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2923910>

⁴ Gail Bederman, *Masculinity and Civilization*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

("Must be 6 feet tall, must look like Chad, Must have 6 pack abs, Must have 9 inch D"). Though these categories are by no means the only male social pressures, they are certainly prevalent, and I will show how each underlying insecurity is rendered in *Babbitt*. I will then use the unique social and economic circumstances of each time period to interpret these instances of masculine uneasiness, focusing largely on post industrialization in the 1920s and post deindustrialization in the 2020s. By outlining the sustained arc of this social phenomenon, I will further substantiate my claim that the very *content* of gender happens through labor, a relation that has been keenly felt, but not fully understood throughout American history. This is additionally validated by the diverging responses by the men in *Babbitt* and "Hoeflation is Real"; as I will show that it is not just gender anxieties that emerge from larger economic changes, but practices of coping as well.

Theoretical and Historical Context

In "Hoeflation is real", the author claims that "Modern men have to work 5x harder than their grandfathers did for women 20x worse than what their grandmothers were," and that this consequently is "[...] destroying western men's desires to be providers and protectors." The tension here is evident: to be a man, one must "provide" and "protect" women, an uncomplicated practice in the past, but disintegrating in the present. However, masculinity has never been as stable as nostalgia would make it seem. "The Crisis of Masculinity" was a concept first coined by historians in the 1960s, observing concerns around cultural constructions of masculinity in the 1890s, a period of pronounced change in the United States, including a new era of American imperialism⁵. Amy Kaplan argued that the mythos of the (white) American man was centrally forged through conflict with Native Americans, and that the shift to overseas conquest in turn required a reimagination of

⁵ Thomas Winter. "Crisis of Masculinity," *SAGE Publications*, (2004), pg 117-119.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412956369.n59>

American manhood.⁶ Auxiliarily, with the closing of the frontier, men "spent their days in offices or factories, not on farms or trekking through the woods to establish new homesteads," which Caren Town contends led men to wonder if they still "really were men."⁷ These anxieties continued to resonate and were amplified in the 1920s, with the development of women's suffrage, but also due to rise of a consumer culture: "the consumer culture's ethos of pleasure and frivolity clashed with ideals of manly self-restraint, furthering undermining the potency of middle-class manliness."⁸ Interestingly, the significance of consumer culture in regards to masculinity was presciently theorized by sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 essay "Conspicuous Consumption", where he describes the turn of the ideal man from a "successful, aggressive male– the man of strength, resource and intrepidity" to, instead, a "gentleman of leisure."⁹ Evidently, masculinity has never been a cogent notion, rather, it has consistently been in flux. Scholars continued to refine the theory of the crisis of masculinity past the 1920s, most notably with the diminishing image of the breadwinner following 1960's stagflation, civil rights and counterculture movements in the 1970s, and a critical reworking of the field by feminist scholars in the late 1980s¹⁰. Relatively less has been written about the influence of American deindustrialization and masculinity.

Deindustrialization in the United States was a broad transformation scholars generally agree began in the late 1970s, referring to a significant decline in the American manufacturing industry. The sector's share of the workforce fell from 22 percent, its peak in 1979, to 9% in June of 2019.¹¹ One significant factor among many was the onset of globalization, as the "Reaganomics" era of the American government promoted deregulation,

⁶ Amy Kaplan. "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s." *American Literary History*, 2(4), (1190), 659-690. <https://sci-hub.se/https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/2.4.659>

⁷ Caren Town. "'The Most Blatant of All Our American Myths': Masculinity, Male Bonding, and the Wilderness in Sinclair Lewis' *Mantrap*." *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 12 no.3, (2004), pgs 193-205.

<https://sci-hub.se/https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3149/jms.1203.193>

⁸ Gail Bederman, *Masculinity and Civilization*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), pg 13.

⁹ Thorstein Veblen. "Conspicuous Consumption" in *A Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

¹⁰ Thomas Winter. "Crisis of Masculinity," *SAGE Publications*, (2004), pg 117-119.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412956369.n59>

¹¹ Katelynn Harris. "Forty years of falling manufacturing employment." *Beyond the Numbers*, 9 no. 16, (Nov 2020).

<https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-9/forty-years-of-falling-manufacturing-employment.htm>

incentivizing companies to export labor to outside countries for cheaper wages.¹² As was the case with American industrialization, American *deindustrialization* had marked effects on the integrity of masculinity. Sherry Linkon argues that, for working-class men, the meaning of their labor had permeated into their families, communities, languages and customs such that, "Deindustrialization did not simply put many working-class men out of work; it undermined the resources that they relied upon to construct their identities."¹³ Concurrently, the rise of two-earner households in both working-class and professional populations further troubled the idea of the breadwinner as a defining aspect of masculinity.¹⁴ The significance of this, as asserted by Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, was in expanding the sphere of female responsibilities beyond reproduction and domestic work, though they were still expected.¹⁵

Images of the Rust Belt and American manufacturing still carry a dramatic force relevant in the contemporary political and cultural stage; the cultural consequences of deindustrialization are long lasting. In May 2023, President Biden stressed his commitment to expand manufacturing jobs to North Carolinians at a manufacturing event.¹⁶ Further, Leonardo Baccini and Stephen Weymouth found in a 2021 study that, in areas distressed by deindustrialization, white voters were more likely to vote for Republican candidates, while Black voters more so for Democratic ones. Baccini and Weymouth argue that deindustrialization threatens dominant

¹² Jeffrey Schieberl and Marshall Nickles. "Outsourcing U.S Jobs Abroad: Why?" *International Business and Economics Research Journal*, vol 13 no. 2, (Mar/Apr 2014). pgs 253-258.

<https://www.clutejournals.com/index.php/IBER/article/view/8439/8455>

¹³ Sherry Lee Linkon. "Men without Work: White Working-Class Masculinity in Deindustrialization Fiction." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol 55, No. 1 (Spring 2014). pgs 148-167.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43297950.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A00af3e48dc74e7a692682a8d104675e5&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=

¹⁴ Patricia Fernandez-Kelly. "Reforming Gender: The Effects of Economic Change on Masculinity and Femininity in Mexico and the U.S." *Women's Studies Review* (Fall 2005), pgs 69-128.

<https://lcw.lehman.edu/academics/inter/women-studies/documents/reforming-gender.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Tamara Keith. "Biden plans a big push in the elusive state of North Carolina in 2024. Here's why." *NPR*, May 28, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/28/1178452256/biden-north-carolina-2024>

group status, leading white voters to support candidates they believe will defend the ostensible racial hierarchy.¹⁷ Meanwhile, deindustrialization's threat to male dominance, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Jack Bratich argue, manifests in the manosphere phenomenon. They ask, "What happens when the masculinized forms of waged labor change, when some men no longer can realize capacity for labor? When [...] men don't receive what they feel entitled to (specifically by virtue of being male, and often also by virtue of being White), how does disappointment express itself?"¹⁸ Banet-Weiser and Bratich posit that women are expected (and often fail) to be a recuperative resource, and that these frustrations that comprise the manosphere. As I will show, these claims resonate to a greater extent when examined in conjunction with its earlier iteration in *Babbitt*.

Frustrations over *Manual Labor*

In "Hoeflation is real", the author, rather offhandedly, reports that their grandfather worked as a bricklayer, but still managed to "get to marry" a woman. This is drawn in contrast to the modern man, who supposedly must "make 100k a year, have a college degree, and work a high status job." Under the broader rhetorical arc of "Hoeflation is real", the bricklayer sustains "western men's desires to be providers and protectors." This ultimate assertion of masculinity is unsettled by higher education and/or professional jobs, or at minimum, the pressure to pursue them. The tenuous relationship between masculinity and office work outlined in "Hoeflation is real" is nothing new, unfolding from a wider and sustained undercurrent of American masculine insecurity. It is accordingly reflected in *Babbitt*.

¹⁷ Leonardo Baccini and Stephen Weymouth. "Gone for Good: Deindustrialization, White Voter Backlash, and US Presidential Voting." *American Political Science Review*, Vol 115 Is 2, (March 2021), pgs 550-567. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000022>

¹⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser and Jack Bratich. "From Pick-Up Artists to Incels: Con(fidence) Games, Networked Misogyny, and the Failure of Neoliberalism. *International Journal of Communication*, 13 1-26 (2019), https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1865&context=asc_papers

Babbitt as we meet him is utterly sedentary, "He was forty-six years old now, in April, 1920, and he 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."¹⁹ Babbitt is situated at the end of a longer trend between the 1870 and 1910s, when clerical work began to dominate the labor market.²⁰ This shift contradicted established modes of masculinity, which, "defined in large part by bodily strength, [...] no longer seemed relevant for the professional occupations in which most middle-class men engaged."²¹ Crucially, manual labor was a site of a cultural production for men to produce masculinity itself. However, this being the case, the path of upward social mobility then diverged from the affirming process of manhood, which was a contradiction acutely felt by Babbitt.

Working in the real estate market in a managerial position, Babbitt's malaise stems from more than just the docile office setting; his labor does not create anything— for Babbitt, "the one purpose of the real-estate business was to make money for George F. Babbitt."²² Because Babbitt cannot affirm his identity through his work, he is haunted by an inscrutable sense of deficiency: "Normally he admired the office, with a pleased surprise that he should have created this sure lovely thing... but today it seemed flat... He looked down the relentless stretch of tiled floor at the water-cooler, and assured himself that no tenant of the Reeves Building had a more expensive one, but he could not recapture the feeling of social superiority it had given him."²³ Significantly, material goods serve as Babbitt's referent to said "feeling of social superiority," but unable to generate masculinity through physical labor, Babbitt turns to reassure his identity instead through the things that he does and does not own. "He had no cigarette-case. No one had ever happened to give him one, so he

¹⁹ Sinclair Lewis. *Babbitt*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1922). Pg 3.

²⁰ Melissa Dabakis. "Douglas Tilden's Mechanics Fountain: Labor and the 'Crisis of Masculinity'" *American Quarterly*, Vol 47, No 2 (Jun 1995), pgs 204-235, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2713280.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Af4cc24e004de697548b26314ad9f4403&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sinclair Lewis. *Babbitt*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1922). Pg 43.

²³ Lewis 34.

hadn't the habit, and people who carried cigarette-cases he regarded as effeminate."²⁴ As masculinity and wealth accumulation were both regarded as virtues, the procedure to achieve them needed to be coherent. The ostensible status-conferring capacity of objects was one means to this end. Another is exhibited in Babbitt's initially denigrating attitude toward the working class and labor unions, in convincing his son to pursue the humanities instead of engineering, Babbitt admonishes, "Which would you rather do: be in with a lot of greasy mechanics and laboring-men, or chum up to a real fellow like Lord Wycombe, and get invited to his house for parties?"²⁵ Despite his extensive insecurities suggesting otherwise, Babbitt must believe that true masculinity lies beyond "greasy labor", that it is wealth that makes a "real fellow" a *real fellow*.

Babbitt's conversation with his son on the value of a humanities education in relation to masculinity is somewhat ironic today, further demonstrating the evolving nature of the concept. I want to first point out that the strain between manhood and office work has never quite been resolved. "Hoeflation is real" hints at this, with the comparison to the author's bricklayer grandfather. However, the author draws this distinction to make a very particular point, that the most notable difference between making six figures and a bricklayer job is that modern women require the former— that the occupation gap is only meaningful because of untenable female criterions. Nonetheless, the valorization of the manual laborer today is much more fragile than in the era of Babbitt. The mythos of the quintessential self-made American man is made flimsy since the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs and rise of the service industry, which extraordinarily impacted less-educated men. Since 1980, more than a third of manufacturing workers were men with a high school degree or less²⁶. Since then, the manufacturing sector's share of the workforce fell from 22 percent, its peak in 1979, to 9% in June of 2019.²⁷ White-collar jobs

²⁴Lewis 10.

²⁵Lewis 310.

²⁶ Kerwin Kofi Charles, Erik Hurst, and Mariel Schwartz. "The Transformation of Manufacturing and the Decline of US Employment." *NBER Macroeconomics Annual*, Vol 33, (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1086/700896>

²⁷ Katelynn Harris. "Forty years of falling manufacturing employment." *Beyond the Numbers*, 9 no. 16, (Nov 2020). <https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-9/forty-years-of-falling-manufacturing-employment.htm>

made up 59.8% of the total workforce in 2020²⁸, and on average made 25 dollars an hour (around 100,000 dollars a year) while manual labor jobs averaged at 15 dollars (around 31,000 a year).^{29,30} Importantly, the average living wage for a family of four in the United States is \$25.02 an hour, \$104,077 a year— meaning that the \$100,000 income standard put forth in "Hoeflation is real" is the minimum, livable requirement to maintain a family, notably, with two children instead of six.³¹ Here, the financial burden is construed to only be real in that it is imposed by women, when it is a lived economic reality.

From *Babbitt* to today, masculinity and wealth accumulation are still upheld as ultimate virtues and intrinsically linked. Babbitt's crisis is that he cannot understand what he is lacking in the first when he has demonstrably attained the second. As Babbitt rebels against and acquiesces with the seemingly unshakeable importance between status and identity, the true nature of this existential angst becomes clear. However, as masculinity is ever defined by its historical context, so too are the crises it spawns. In both instances, men lack avenues to practice masculinity as they understand it through labor, with the facet explored here being manual labor. For Babbitt, the path of wealth accumulation leads away from traditional modes of manhood, and so in order to make sense of himself and the world, American masculinity needs to be reincarnated. But while his struggle is to live with the new, the modern struggle is about a return to the old. "Hoeflation is real" illustrates this through a sort of secondhand nostalgia, a longing for a past the author can sense is inaccessible, which is figured through the image of the grandfather bricklayer. But as I have shown, the ever diminishing social

²⁸ Department for Professional Employees. "The Professional and Technical Workforce: By the Numbers." September 2021. <https://www.dpeaflcio.org/factsheets/the-professional-and-technical-workforce-by-the-numbers>

²⁹ ZipRecruiter. "Professional Salary" Retrieved June 1, 2023. <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Professional-Salary#:~:text=As%20of%20May%2025%2C%202023,be%20approximately%20%2424.79%20an%20hour>.

³⁰ ZipRecruiter. "Manual Labor Salary" Retrieved June 1, 2023. [https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Manual-Labor-Salary#:~:text=As%20of%20May%2026%2C%202023,percentile\)%20across%20the%20United%20States](https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Manual-Labor-Salary#:~:text=As%20of%20May%2026%2C%202023,percentile)%20across%20the%20United%20States).

³¹ Amy Glasmeier. "2023 Living Wage Calculator." *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. Feb 01 2023. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/articles/103-new-data-posted-2023-living-wage-calculator#:~:text=An%20analysis%20of%20the%20living,in%20the%20United%20States%20is>

influence and capital of manual laborers in the United States contradicts the older imagined patriarchal architectures, leaving men with little recourse to (re)produce masculinity in the future. While Babbitt's dysphoria was forward-facing, the modern crisis of masculinity is in retrograde, and unable to explain why it is that men cannot be bricklayers anymore, it can only assert itself through hatred against women. The worldview of the manosphere remains intact when the troubling reality of inflation is reformulated instead as a *Hoeflation*.

Frustrations over Appearance

As the ideological soundness of American manual labor declined, it also follows that the male body itself would also be troubled. Historians of masculinity observe a period of "embodied" masculinity emerging from the transition toward sedentary work, in which middle-class men further ideologically emphasized physical strength as its practical significance declined.³² Though the body is seldom interpreted as such, reading it as a site "and nexus of cultural signification" is exceptionally striking.³³ Of particular relevance here is the idea that "the discrepancy between self and ideal is only problematic if men believe that those closest to the ideal reap certain benefits not available to those further away."³⁴ This sense is reflected in "Hoeflation is real", particularly in the author's fixation over height— other than being a bricklayer, the author's grandfather is also related to be five feet eight inches tall, as compared to the "over six foot" standard for modern men. Additionally, the ostensible benefit here is especially telling, as the author's grandfather nonetheless "got to marry an early 20's virgin who stayed faithful to him and bore him 6 children." Notably, failures to meet masculine beauty standards are construed to come from *women* and not internally, not from men. Further, its significance only has bearing insofar that it

³² Ava Baron. "Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian's Gaze." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No 69 (Spring 2006), pgs 143-160.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27673026.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A2bf48665c2f619a3c7890192702c1893&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Marc Mishkind, Judith Rodin, and Ruth Striegel Moore. "The Embodiment of Masculinity: Cultural, Psychological, and Behavioral Dimensions." *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol 29 Is 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027648602900500>

limits access to women. Crucially, however, the unfairness of these standards only arises because modern women *also* fail to meet their respective beauty standards– “meanwhile women are obese 30 year old roasties.” What exactly, then, are the implications behind the male individual's failures to meet beauty standards and how does it inform how they observe the failures of the women around them?

In *Babbitt*, Babbitt himself is far from the ideal of the ideal muscular man, “his face was babyish in slumber, despite his wrinkles and the red spectacle-dents on the slopes of his nose. He was not fat but he was exceedingly well fed; his cheeks were pads, and the unroughened hand which lay helpless upon the khaki-colored blanket was slightly puffy.”³⁵ The state of his entire body is also unflatteringly illustrated through his morning routine, in which: “He creaked to his feet, groaning at the waves of pain which passed behind his eyeballs. Though he waited for their scorching recurrence, he looked blurrily out at the yard.”³⁶ This cinematic force of this description is enhanced by the dream Babbitt presently wakes up from, featuring a recurring “fairy child”: “Where others saw but Georgie Babbitt, she discerned gallant youth [...] She was so slim, so white, so eager!”³⁷ Her unreal, adolescent appearance is contrasted with that of Babbitt's wife, Myra Babbitt, who is “definitely mature [...] She had creases from the corners of her mouth to the bottom of her chin, and her plump neck bagged [...] She was in a petticoat now, and corsets which bulged, and unaware of being seen in bulgy corsets.”³⁸ Important here is not the image itself, but the purpose the differing appearances serve for Babbitt. Though Myra herself is rather impolitely introduced, she is also described as “a good woman, a kind woman, a diligent woman.”³⁹ She thoroughly fulfills the role what *Babbitt's* narrator characterizes as the *Good Wife*, “She was loyal, industrious, and at rare times merry. She passed from a feeble disgust at their closer relations into what promised

³⁵Sinclair Lewis. *Babbitt*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1922). Pg 3.

³⁶Lewis 5.

³⁷ Lewis 3.

³⁸Lewis 8.

³⁹Lewis 8.

to be ardent affection, but it drooped into bored routine. Yet she existed only for him and for the children."⁴⁰

And yet, Babbitt is unsatisfied, indifferent and at times outwardly resentful toward her, having not even looked at her for weeks. Why then, is the imaginary fairy child a source of comfort for him while his wife is something he seeks to escape from?

As cultural constructs, masculinity and femininity are fundamentally defined by the other, as such, the process of affirming manhood necessarily includes the process of affirming femininity. Here, sufficient practicing of gender requires more than fulfilling domestic and maternal duties— beauty is also an aspect. Then, a woman's appearance reflects the level of masculinity of the man who has obtained her. If one's woman perfectly does womanhood, then one can be assured that their manhood is indeed durable. Part of Babbitt's broader unhappiness is that he has done everything he believes that men are supposed to— and here, his wife is too— which makes the dysphoria that haunts him even more potent, as he has no recourse, no internal referent to make sense of *what he actually wants*. This later manifests in his numerous affairs, particularly with Tanis Judique, but his hypersexual behavior is no panacea, and at the conclusion of the novel, Babbitt ends up returning to his wife. In a final moment of introspective clarity, Babbitt looks at his wife, and sees "her face sallow and lifeless in the morning light," but does "not compare her with Tanis; she was not merely A Woman, to be contrasted with other women, but his own self, and though he might criticize her and nag her, it was only as he might criticize and nag himself, interestedly, unpatronizingly, without the expectation of changing."⁴¹ In a tentatively optimistic instance, Babbitt is finally able to locate his discontent— within.

Babbitt is fictional, but his anxieties are not. This is partly informed by Sinclair Lewis himself, who "often felt uncomfortable and awkward when he first met women in a social situation. He was odd-looking and

⁴⁰Lewis 90.

⁴¹ Lewis 384.

somewhat ugly, tall, lanky, with thinning bright red hair and severe acne that later developed into skin cancer."⁴²

In Sally Parry's examination into Lewis' wives in life and in fiction, Parry concludes that "In his personal life Lewis had trouble dealing with assertive women, but in his fiction he was able to empathize with women and portray their problems in an understanding manner," which in part explains the relative grace with which Babbitt comes to terms with himself and his wife. Nevertheless, the anxieties Lewis captures in Babbitt still remain relevant and, more critically, unresolved today.

The tacit understanding of beauty as a social obligation on par with raising children and fidelity is evident in "Hoefflation is Real": the author aims to compare inadequate modern women with his exemplary grandmother through the roles that they do and do not fulfill. Strikingly, while the author takes care to relate that their grandmother was "an early 20's virgin who stayed faithful to him (the author's grandfather) and bore him 6 children," all the author says about modern women is that they are "obese" and in their 30's. In the rhetoric proliferated by the manosphere, but also to some extent in the mainstream, the intrinsic value and cultural meaning of beauty does not need to be explicit. The significance of female appearances and its import on masculinity is a thematic throughline between *Babbitt* and today, but the means and responses to make sense of this relationship have drastically changed. This is in part informed by the measurable shift in gendered power relations since the 1920s, while continuing to privilege men, has undeniably granted women more social leverage and capital. This has marked effects in the cultural imagination, reflected in the larger philosophy of the manosphere, which tells its adherents that feminism has victimized men to the point of oppression. As such, a new avenue to cope with crises in masculinity emerges, when men can no longer affirm their manhood, it can be explained as the malicious work of women. As is the case in *Babbitt*, meeting criteria for manhood is still formulated around the subsequent access to women. What is different, however, is how failure is rendered. As

⁴² Sally Parry. "The Changing Fictional Faces of Sinclair Lewis' Wives." *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol 17 No 1 (Spring 1989), pgs 65-79. DOI: 10.1353/saf.1989.0005

older methods of masculinity become obscure, in practice and in the rewards it promises, it betrays its logic of domination. Then, the only way it can be made tangible is through the denigration of women, sustaining gender roles through their failures. To that end, the project of the manosphere works in the opposite direction of Babbitt, reifying masculinity as they understand it through insisting on its crisis. After all, unmet standards are still standards, and it is easier to believe that when the world does not meet your expectations, that it is the world that must change, and not your expectations.

This persistent impulse, so artfully articulated over a century ago by Sinclair Lewis, is crucial for us, as scholars of history, economics, and the human condition at large, to understand. The stakes of this research are urgent— the rage fermented in the online manosphere is frequently expressed through offline violence against women, directly causing 50 fatalities between 2014 and 2020.⁴³ Since then, a 2022 United States Secret Service report identified the manosphere as a public safety threat,⁴⁴ and in an even more recent instance, the gunman in the May 2023 Texas mass shooting was later found to have self-identified as an "incel".⁴⁵ In order to better prevent and mitigate future tragedies, we cannot examine misogyny in a vacuum, because misogyny as a phenomenon is much more complex than a mere hatred of women.⁴⁶ Effective approaches must go beyond and assess the social environments misogyny emerges from, which has been the impetus of this and future work.

⁴³ Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro. "Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43, Iss. 7 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1751459>

⁴⁴ National Threat Assessment Center. "Hot Yoga Tallahassee: A Case Study of Misogynistic Extremism" *Department of Homeland Security*. (2022).

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⁴⁵ Josh Campbell. "Authorities believe Texas mall shooter was an incel. Hear what that means." *CNN*. (May 5, 2023).

<https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2023/05/09/exp-texas-mall-shooting-motive-cambell-live-050902pseg3-cnni-us.cnn>

⁴⁶ Dominique Vink, Tahir Abbas, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage and Richard McNeil-Wilson. "Because They Are Women in a Man's World': A Critical Discourse Analysis of Incel Violent Extremism and the Stories They Tell." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2023.2189970>

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