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History 173

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Social Conformity: *The Sun Also Rises* and *Babbitt*

Conformity can be understood as the adjusting self as per accepted standards while social conformity, in particular, refers to that adjustment made by a person to fit in the prevailing nature of a particular group. In this understanding, social compliance can be the changing of one's behavior and other actions to reflect those of a social group, family, friends or community in general. In the two texts reviewed here, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemmingway and *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis, social conformity takes places at different levels and in various forms. Characters sometimes go against personal desires to live in ways that others will approve, and there are also those characters who at the one-point desire to go against the social norms and not conform, choosing instead to live as per their convictions. While going against social conformity feels liberating, it usually has negative feedback, especially where one changes their social conformation late in life or after a long time.

From the onset, one can tell that *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemmingway is not a plot which bolsters the idea conformity. Fundamentally, it is a love story but surprisingly does not have any outstanding love scene, unlike most love stories, it feels oddly bare and dry regarding romance. In fact, through most of the reading, one feels somehow frustrated with how the characters are unable to achieve the desires of their hearts. One reason for this is primarily due to one character's refusal to conform socially. Cohn starts the rebellion to social conformity by

asking his friend Jake “Don’t you ever feel that all your life is going by and you are not taking advantage of it?” (Hemingway, 19)

Brett, the only major female character, refuses to socially conform to the traditionally accepted norm of a female being faithful to one partner and making her sexuality toned down. In contrast, Brett has multiple loves, from Cohn, Mike, Romero and even some subtle relation with Jake. On her physical self, she is portrayed as outrageous and daring with a cropped hairstyle which was not common or accepted for girls to have. Her attributes, character, and actions also go against the grain of the widely accepted social norms. She is so open sexually up to the extent that she tells Cohn that she is not willing to give up he desires for an active sex life thus opting to relate with another man while still attached to Cohn (Hemingway, 26). Cohn on the other hand also suffers from an internal conflict perhaps as a result of a dilemma between conforming to life as a spouse of a nagging Frances Clyne, and deciding to be happy by travelling. Jake sums up his conformity struggle by noting that “You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another.” (Hemingway, 29)

Brett’s mannerism and language also defy the social norms that have come to be identified as proper for females. Referring to herself, she flippantly uses the word ‘Chap’ which is normally a reserve for males and masculine language (Hemingway, 32). Perhaps this tells a lot about how she is challenging traditional masculine and feminine roles and character. Brett is challenging the social code where males are judged less harshly by society for having multiple partners as opposed to females. This sense of independence appears to be liberating to her as she has the choice to be with different men as loves without suppressing her feelings and choices. However, with time, she starts getting the negative feedback that comes from the opposite pressure of non-conformity. She reveals to Jake that she is miserable and Jake notes that in a

way, she is still seeking conformity as she keeps calling up and seeking people for company. She also confirms that she does not conform socially and that it is a character which ultimately results in negative feedback. For example, Brett breaks up her relationship with Romero under the premise that her character of a strong-willed, independent, and non-feminine woman will be the cause of the downfall of Romero. Perhaps everybody in a way is a sad conformist until one decides to risk all the comforts that come with social agreement. Such can be interpreted from Jake's observation that "Nobody lives their lives all the way up, except bullfighters" (Hemingway, 3). The choice of conformity can therefore be said to also influence by social convenience not just one's personal or driving principles.

The same theme of not conforming to social norms is reflected in Harry Sinclair's book *Babbitt*. The protagonist, George Babbitt, lives a life that would to many be described as successful, stable, and happy. He is a successful middle-class entrepreneur in a lucrative real estate career, has a close circle of supportive friends, has no major problems or issues in his life, and has a supportive wife. It is, however, this very seemingly stable, secure, orderly and happy life that causes discomfort to Babbitt. In his words, he wishes, he could get out of "...the whole game". (Lewis, 3). His itch for not socially conforming to this acceptable life comes in the form of disrupting his marriage by seeking a fantasy relation with a fairy girl. Perhaps he is seeking to rejuvenate his sex life and add an excitement to his life in general. The problem comes however in the fact that his rebellion against the social grain comes a bit too late in life and negative feedback threatens to destroy him. As life continues, Babbitt reflects that his work may be rewarding but wonders "...what is the use of it?" (Lewis 47). This is a question of one who lives as a social conformist without living to the fullness of his heart and desires.

The interesting thing about Babbitt's rebellion against social conformity is that he is rebelling against a life that he created by conforming in the first place. While some of his endeavors and need for changes might be a result of the mid-life crisis, it is not possible that all of them are new interests or desires. His new excessive drinking, parting, company of hipsters and liberal political views must be projections of his original younger true self. It must have happened that through his desire to fit in the society, he changed who he was and became a robotic, career-centered, mainstream agreeable and politically correct person achieving a safe but false life that he had. For example, it is not possible that Babbitt changed his political ideologies all at once on such a fundamental idea such as supporting the striking workers against business such as his and that of his circle of friends (Lewis, 13). Maybe the mid-life crisis does help to open his eyes to his loss of self-identity through years of conforming to what will please society and cause the least trouble. Sadly, however, it is too late to change or not conform especially due to the already established social fiber in his life.

Not conforming to social norms often brings negative feedback especially after having lived for a long time in the society as a conformist. Being a member of the conformist community in his community of Zenith City means that Babbitt has cultivated a persona of established life which follows the norms, rules, and expectations of his peers, colleagues, neighbors, family, and associates. It is through conforming to their code, lifestyle and way of life that Babbitt has come to be accepted as one of their own. Introducing new ideas and change in lifestyle or ideology makes all these people feel threatened. It is the classic case of fear of the unknown, they only trust what they know and such a sudden revolution in his life threatens the beliefs that they have held on for so long. In the end, to protect their own worlds from the unknown and unfamiliar life leads to them shunning him and his company. Consequently, his business suffers losses and in

then end even threatens the stability of his family. It is a price he has to pay as a society which rejects those who rebel against the social way of life they have previously chosen. To this social conformity Seneca Doane states that "...what I fight in Zenith is standardization of thought..." (Lewis, 22). The eventuality here is an indication of how conformity and defiance both have rewards and loses that are attached to the decision made.

The resounding idea is that those who choose to join a conformist society or community as members suffer huge social problems which may spill over to other areas, such as economic ones, after rebelling against the conforming ideas. The evidence of this is best seen in the fate of Paul Riesling, another rebel against the social conformity. Riesling somehow did not follow through with his childhood desire to become a professional violinist and instead became a businessman focused on work and family (Lewis, 41). It, work and family are not negative or unattractive ventures, however lack of passion or interest in a lifelong occupation that is socially deemed acceptable breeds dissatisfaction, discomfort, self-hate and a rebellious spirit. When he rebels by seeking an extramarital affair, Riesling falls out with his wife and shoots her dead leading to imprisonment. Having abandoned his original love in music and choosing to an agreeable life breeds contempt for that very life, and when he attempts to fight back, he finds that social order is against him and even the conformist life is disrupted with a long-term prison imprisonment.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *The sun also rises*. Simon and Schuster, 2002.

Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt*. Bantam Classics, 2007.