

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In the late 19th century, after the Reconstruction era, the United States of America experienced a new era of modernism. This era was thought as the nation's golden era; but since what was seen on the outside did not show the true image of the American society (High 81), it is called the Gilded Age by Mark Twain, who saw how the real social condition was behind the glittering appearance. On the one hand, the industrial revolution at that time contributed magnificent growth to America in every sector, including economy, education, technology, and population. There were many great factories and mansions built, universities established, and leisure places developed. "During Gilded Age, every man was a potential Andrew Carnegie" ("Gilded Age"), so everyone fought to be rich or get richer in any way. This progress created a lot of newly-rich people, urbanization, immigration, and labors, but on the other hand, there were undeniable realities, such as conspicuous differences between the poor and the rich, poverty, mass strike, business corruption, political scandal, and materialistic society.

Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser lived in this period of time and they made it the setting of their novels, The House of Mirth and Sister Carrie. In The House of Mirth, the protagonist comes from an upper-middle class society, but when her family goes bankrupt, she faces a difficult economic condition. As she still wants to stay inside the rich circle, she intends to marry for money to cope with this serious matter. In Sister Carrie, the protagonist is a poor woman who dreams of a better life, so she goes to Chicago to look for a job. Both protagonists try to survive in big cities, which are influenced by wealth and social status.

Edith Wharton was a successful American writer and many of her works have become best-sellers. The major discussion of her fiction deals with manners, mores and social changes in the American life (Wharton VI). The House of Mirth is her first major work and it describes the life of New York's upper class. Because Edith Wharton also grows up in this milieu, she gives exact descriptions about life in this class and boldly shows the bad side of it, which is often hidden behind fine appearances. This novel is considered as a novel of manners, which "often shows a conflict between individual aspirations or desires and the accepted social codes of behaviour" ("Novel of Manners").

Theodore Dreiser was once a reporter. This experience enabled him to tell his stories honestly with detailed explanations and descriptions; the details which make people understand and see the real life in America from both good and bad sides. His first novel, Sister Carrie, describes how lower-class people view the life of upper class and how they try to become a part of it. The story is inspired by Dreiser's sister's experience and by what he has heard and seen in his life (Dreiser 469).

As the stories revolve around these protagonists, I think it is best to discuss characters in this thesis. According to Beaty, character is “a person (or personified or anthropomorphized animal, object, or deity) who acts, appears, or is referred to in a work” (604). Thus, I analyze the portrayal of the protagonists in The House of Mirth and Sister Carrie using formalism.

Statement of the Problem

The thesis discusses these questions:

1. How are the protagonists portrayed in the novels?
2. What are the authors’ purposes in creating such characters?

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of the thesis are:

1. to show how the protagonists are portrayed in the novels.
2. to show the authors’ purposes in creating such characters.

Method of Research

In writing my thesis, I use the method of library research. I begin the study by reading the primary texts, which are Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth and Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie. Then I read some references from the Internet and the books that are relevant to the topic to support my analysis. The information and the knowledge that I have gathered are then used to analyze the texts. Finally, I draw a conclusion from the research I have made.

Organization of the Thesis

I divide the thesis into four chapters, preceded by the Abstract, the Acknowledgement, and the Table of Content. In Chapter One, I present the Introduction, consisting of the Background of the Study, the Statement of the Problem, the Purpose of the Study, the Methods of Research and the Organization of the Thesis. In Chapter Two, I analyze the Portrayal of the Protagonist in Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth. In Chapter Three, I analyze the Portrayal of the Protagonist in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie. Chapter Four is the Conclusion. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and the Appendices, consisting of the Biography of the authors and the Synopsis of the novels.