

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the two protagonists in The House of Mirth and Sister Carrie, I would like to draw some conclusion. Both of the authors take the Gilded Era, an era in the late 19th century America where they lived, as the setting for their stories. Although Wharton and Dreiser expose different classes, high class and low class, the whole atmosphere of the this Era is affected by hedonism. All people fight to get rich or richer, because being rich is believed to be closely associated with one's success and happiness. Since this era is closely related to hedonism, these two stories revolve around a person who makes big efforts to get pleasures in their lives.

The protagonists of the novels are both women. Lily Bart in The House of Mirth is an upper-middle class woman. When her family gets bankrupt, she gets into a difficult economic condition, yet she still wants to maintain her previous glamorous lifestyle. The other protagonist, Carrie Meeber in Sister Carrie, is a girl from the lower class, as her family is poor. Nevertheless, she goes to Chicago to realize her dream of having a better life, something which she knows that she cannot achieve if she stays in her town. At the beginning of the story, they have two similar characteristics, which are beautiful in appearance and hedonistic.

Since they are hedonistic, they adore pleasures very much. Pleasures for them mean having much money and a lot of material things, as well as living in a luxurious place.

When they have to face their economic problem, each of them uses their other characteristics to cope with it. Lily uses her beauty to attract rich men, which makes her a manipulative woman. She does not mind marrying for money. Carrie does not differ much from Lily. With her strong ambition, she is willing to do anything to get wealth, material things, and be an artiste. She does not miss a chance when there are men with money who are attracted to her.

Although the two protagonists are similar, they do have some differences. Wharton creates Lily as a dynamic character, while Dreiser creates Carrie as a static character. In the middle of the story, Lily changes her characteristics and she becomes sincere and no longer hedonistic. She does not consider wealth and material things as the most important thing in life anymore and she no longer uses her beauty as an easy way to get what she wants. As a static character, Carrie does not experience any changes in characteristic. She still has the same personality at the end of the story as she does at the beginning. This significant difference leads each of them to the different fate. Lily fails to get what she really wants and dies of overdose at the end of the story. On the other hand, Carrie gets the pleasures and the better life she dreams of.

I believe the different fate among these two protagonists is related to the fact that Wharton is a realist, while Dreiser is a naturalist. In realism, the character is portrayed just the way the character is with his or her own characteristics, but in naturalism, the characteristics are determined by the environment or hereditary.

“The Evolution Theory of Charles Darwin provides the greatest influence to naturalistic writers. That is why stories from naturalistic writers espoused the view that one’s bloodline and environment determine a person’s character. Realism presents the character exactly who he or she is.” (Cuizon). Moreover, realism gives more emphasis on the events which happen based on the character’s choice, while naturalistic view considers that everything that happens have been determined. “In realism ... the moral or ethical choices facing the character become the crux of the story. In a naturalistic novel, the writer will temper the realistic portrayal of events to show the effects and significance of a deterministic universe” (Pru). Therefore, Wharton really shows Lily’s true characteristics in the novel and the tragic ending that comes to Lily is the consequence of her choice. But, Dreiser creates Carrie with characteristics that are shaped by her surroundings. Thus, in the end, like any other successful people at that time who have hedonistic and ambitious characteristics, Carrie also becomes successful in the end.

Wharton and Dreiser have different concepts and styles of writing, but I conclude that both of them intend to satirize the Gilded Era society through their works, although they convey this idea in different ways. Wharton uses a dynamic character with an unpleasant ending, while Dreiser uses a static character with a happy ending. Both of them satirize the values of the society at that time that consider physical appearance as most important and that that people should love all the pleasures that life offers them and get them. In getting the pleasures, they are allowed to do anything, although it is bad.

From how the authors convey their purposes, I prefer Wharton's way. In my personal opinion, it is more effective and the message is much better conveyed to the readers. They would be able to directly see and understand how life can really change if they do not live in accordance with the values that society holds. The readers are also given a clear example of one who becomes the victim of the society. In my opinion, this way of criticizing is more convincing than Dreiser's. He seems to be using a safer way to criticize society by creating a character that is portrayed as following the values that everyone else holds with a happy outcome. Still, through their works, Wharton and Dreiser have proven Mark Twain's expression for that era, that glittering appearance covers its own badness. "Mark Twain called the late nineteenth century the "Gilded Age." By this, he meant that the period was glittering on the surface but corrupt underneath" ("Learn About Gilded Age").

I encourage those who want to know deeper about the Gilded Era to read these two novels, which give them more information about the real life and how people think in that era. They may also learn about the power of money that is able to control people's mind, moreover it can affect the society. Furthermore, these novels will open our mind about the truth that money is important, but it is not the most important thing in life and on top of that, money is not the measure for one's happiness.