

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The Gilded age was the period that lasted from 1880-1910 in America. "America's Gilded Age was a period of intense economic and social change . . . Americans closed the frontier, shed their agrarian roots, and embraced new technologies" (Davis). Because of the opportunity of economic and social changing, New York upper class society in this period were "perfectly willing to live stacked on top of one another" (Bear). Gilded Age was the period that "glittered on the surface but corrupted underneath . . . a period of greed and guile" (Mintz and McNeil). The New York upper class society will compete with each other and do anything just to be richer and more successful in order to show their pride and power. The New York upper class society in this era were also "hiding the truth about human sexuality - and punishing those who tried to talk about it and this is part of America's 'puritanical' morality" (High 111). In order to show their perfect life, they were not only hiding the truth about human sexuality but "they believed that the civil government should strictly enforce public morality by

prohibiting vices like drunkenness, gambling, ostentatious dress, swearing, and sabbath-breaking" (Heyrman). The nineteenth-century New York society also adopted a double standard in both public and private moralities, which means people had to "talk one way while acting in a completely different way" (High 111). During that period New York was full of double-faced and corrupted people that made others who had different desires and thoughts from the society had to sacrifice their happiness to keep the social pride and stability.

One of the American authors in the Gilded Age is Edith Wharton. "Edith Wharton was in an ideal position to view the social ambitions of the newly rich of the Gilded Age" (Dwight, Winner, and Curators). It is seen from the fact that "whatever their origins, new comers had to master - or manipulate - the snobberies of New York to be accepted" (Beckert). She knew exactly how the upper class society lived as ". . . she was the ultimate insider, born into the New York upper crust" (Ryan). She is "a great American writer who has received much praise for her works" (Lee). *The Age of Innocence* (1921), for example, has brought her to be "the first woman who won The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction" (Gale). Most of her works are "set in the puritanical world of the upper classes" (High 111) and her stories usually talk about "the problems of women in upper-class society" (111). Many of Wharton's novels are about "the life and custom of upper class society. But angry social criticism is not far beneath the surface" (112). Edith Wharton wrote in a style called "social realism, a style of writing that developed in the later portion of the nineteenth century" ("Edith Wharton Literary/Historical"). Realism is "a style of writing that gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life" (Khuman 78) while social realism is "the depiction in

literature of social reality as it is; there should be a point one to one correspondence between the societies depicted in literature and the real actual society" (83). Those styles of Wharton's works as mentioned above can be seen in some of her famous novels like *The Age of Innocence* (1921), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *House of Mirth* (1905). The content of those novels represents Wharton's criticism towards society in the nineteenth century, which are "the confinement of marriage, especially for women; women's desire for and right to freedom in general, and particularly sexual and economic freedom, and the reality that, usually, the desire and right are thwarted" (Ammons).

In my thesis, I choose *The Age of Innocence* to be analyzed. This novel tells the life of Newland Archer, a young lawyer from a well-known family who lives among the rigidity of the New York upper-class society where people will do anything to keep their reputation intact. Archer marries May Welland, a woman he does not love, just because it is considered acceptable by the society. He ignores his true feeling for Ellen Olenska, the woman he loves. This novel prominently shows how strong the society's influence is in determining each individual's action. In order to be accepted by the society one should act according to the valid traditions and social codes, which means one has to sacrifice his/her individual desire, happiness, and freedom for the sake of society's honor.

In order to reveal Wharton's criticism against New York upper class society, I think it is relevant to analyze the conflicts in the novel. "Conflict is the struggle between the opposing forces on which the action in a work of literature depends" (Flanagan). According to Harry Shaw, in his book *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, there are three types of conflicts: social conflict, the struggle

between man against man and man against society; physical conflict, the struggle between man and the physical world like forces of nature, the difficulties and dangers; and inner conflict, the conflict between desires within a person (39). In this thesis I will only focus on analyzing the social conflicts as they are the most significant in the novel. I believe those conflicts can reveal Wharton's criticism towards New York high-class society.

Statement of the Problem

The problems I am going to discuss are:

1. What are the social conflicts in the novel?
2. What is the cause of each conflict?
3. What is the resolution of each conflict ?

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of my discussion are as follows:

1. To show the social conflicts in the novel.
2. To show the cause of each conflict.
3. To show the resolution of each conflict.

Method of Research

I use library research in writing my thesis. First, I read the novel that I have chosen. I then search for some printed and online sources to support my discussion. In the end, I draw a conclusion from the whole discussion.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis consists of three chapters, which are preceded by the Acknowledgements, the Table of Contents, and the Abstract. Chapter One is the Introduction, which consists of the Background of the Study, the Statement of the Problem, the Purpose of the Study, the Method of Research, and the Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two is the Analysis of Social Conflicts in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. Finally, Chapter Three is the Conclusion. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and the Appendices, which contain the Synopsis of *The Age of Innocence* and the Biography of Edith Wharton.