



Exploring Social Pressures and Gender Identity: A Study of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

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ABSTRACT

This research contrasts *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser based on how the two works handle women's battles with society, money, and ambition. Lily Bart, who was reared in high society, is unable to establish economic security and meets a tragic fate, whereas Carrie Meeber, who begins in poverty, achieves fame but is emotionally unfulfilled. The novels point out how society condemns women severely and how success is not always accompanied by happiness. Wharton criticizes the cruelty of high society, and Dreiser illustrates the struggles of the working class. Both tales illustrate the influence of money and social pressures in the lives of women. This research explores the motifs of ambition, societal pressures, and economic hardships in *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser. Both novels examine the experiences of women in the early 20th century and illustrate how society influenced their decisions and possibilities. Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* battles to uphold her social standing but is without financial autonomy, resulting in her tragic decline. In comparison, Carrie Meeber in *Sister Carrie* begins with almost nothing but eventually attains fame and fortune, yet she continues to feel unsatisfied. The research is significant as it emphasizes the challenges women encountered in a society dominated by men. Lily feels confined by the belief that marrying a rich man is essential for her survival, whereas Carrie leverages her ambition to ascend the social hierarchy.

These figures represent the difficulties women encountered in achieving autonomy and recognition. The novels highlight the significance of money—Lily’s financial instability results in her demise, whereas Carrie’s achievements yield material riches yet fail to bring joy.

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Introduction:

Literature has consistently served as a means to delve into human conflicts, aspirations, and societal challenges. Two significant novels, *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser, depict the journeys of two women who encounter challenges in their pursuit of happiness, love, and achievement. These books were composed in the early 20th century and offer an accurate portrayal of how society regarded women, particularly regarding marriage, wealth, and status.

The House of Mirth, released in 1905, explores the life of Lily Bart, an attractive and clever woman navigating the elite circles of New York. Lily is cherished and respected for her charisma, yet she lacks any personal funds. In her society, women are anticipated to wed wealthy men to ensure their future, and Lily grapples with this pressure. She appreciates luxury but also seeks love and autonomy. Yet, her failure to make the correct decisions when needed results in her downfall. Rumors, misconceptions, and money issues drive Lily away from high society, leading her to a heartbreaking end. Wharton’s novel illustrates the impact of strict social norms and the obligation to marry for money on women’s lives in that era. Conversely, *Sister Carrie*, released in 1900, narrates the tale of Carrie Meeber, a young woman who relocates from a small town to Chicago seeking a more fulfilling life. Initially, she has difficulty securing employment and relies on men for monetary assistance. In contrast to Lily, Carrie seizes opportunities and ultimately achieves success as an actress. As she acquires fame and riches, she understands that financial success doesn't always lead to joy. Dreiser’s novel offers a contemporary and authentic perspective, illustrating how ambition and resolve can transform an individual’s life. Nonetheless, it also emphasizes the isolation that may accompany achievement.

Both novels revolve around women who must manage a society that restricts their options. Lily and Carrie begin with comparable aspirations, yet their journeys are quite distinct. Lily adheres to the conventional path of seeking a good marriage but does not succeed, whereas Carrie questions traditional



norms and carves out her unique path to achievement. Nonetheless, each character faces challenges—Lily endures pain due to societal pressures, while Carrie feels a sense of emptiness emotionally despite her achievements. These novels hold significance because they illuminate themes that remain pertinent today, including financial independence, societal expectations, and the quest for happiness. Numerous individuals, particularly women, continue to encounter difficulties in harmonizing their personal aspirations with societal demands. The novels illustrate how wealth and status influence individuals' lives, occasionally resulting in achievement and at times in failure.

Analyzing *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie* allows readers to better comprehend the evolution of women's roles and the ongoing impact of ambition, love, and financial difficulties on their lives. These narratives continue to resonate strongly as they mirror genuine hardships, establishing them as enduring classics in American literature.

Literature Review:

The House of Mirth

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) is extensively analyzed for its profound examination of social class, gender expectations, and economic hardships. Academics have frequently analyzed how Wharton challenges the strict social frameworks of early 20th-century New York elite society. Numerous critics contend that Lily Bart, the protagonist of the novel, symbolizes the constraints imposed on women, as she is anticipated to marry for wealth instead of affection. Literary analysts have also underscored the book's theme of societal pressure. Some research suggests that Wharton depicts Lily's decline as a reflection of how society penalizes women who do not adhere to expectations. Critics have drawn parallels between Lily and other literary tragic heroines, contending that her destiny is influenced not only by her personal errors but also by the severe scrutiny of those in her environment. A frequent emphasis in literary analysis is the significance of wealth and materialism. Academics propose that *The House of Mirth* challenges a culture that prioritizes wealth above ethics. Some believe that Lily's decline illustrates Wharton's caution regarding the risks of depending on social standing instead of individual autonomy. **Sister Carrie**

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) is regarded as a pioneering work in American literature due to its authentic depiction of ambition, social stratification, and the challenges faced by an autonomous woman. Researchers have extensively examined the themes, characters, and narrative style of the novel,



frequently highlighting Carrie Meeber's transition from destitution to achievement and the ways the novel questions conventional moral standards.

A key theme that critics address is Carrie's drive and rise in social status. Numerous literary academics consider Carrie to represent the contemporary woman who denies accepting her constrained position in society. In contrast to conventional female figures in literature, Carrie does not depend on matrimony to ensure her future. Rather, she seizes opportunities and cultivates a thriving career as an actress. Critics claim that Dreiser showcases a realistic perspective on how personal ambition, instead of ethics, frequently dictates success.

Themes

Both *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser examine significant themes that highlight the challenges faced by individuals, particularly women, within society. These books explore societal norms, economic hardships, aspirations, and the quest for joy. While the primary characters, Lily Bart and Carrie Meeber, choose divergent life paths, their narratives underscore comparable struggles that are still pertinent in contemporary times.

A key theme present in both novels is the societal pressure exerted on women. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is anticipated to wed a rich man since, as a female, she has limited alternatives for financial stability. Society evaluates her based on her looks, standing, and capability to secure a wealthy spouse. Nonetheless, when she does not fulfill these expectations, she faces rejection and descends into poverty. In contrast, *Sister Carrie* depicts a woman who defies conventional gender expectations. Carrie Meeber does not depend on marriage to enhance her life. Rather, she seizes chances and ultimately achieves success as an actress. Nonetheless, both Lily and Carrie encounter societal scrutiny—Lily for failing to find a husband and Carrie for chasing achievement in an untraditional manner.

Both novels emphasize the impact of money on individuals' lives. Lily Bart loves luxury, yet lacks her own riches, which forces her to rely on marriage to uphold her elevated social standing. When she is unable to find a wealthy spouse, she loses it all. This illustrates that in upper-class circles, affluence is valued more than traits such as compassion or intellect. In *Sister Carrie*, the theme of money is significant, yet it is depicted in a distinct manner. Carrie begins at ground zero but gradually ascends the social hierarchy. In contrast to Lily, she discovers methods to generate income and achieve



independence. In contrast, Carrie is very ambitious. She embraces challenges, seizes chances, and perseveres toward achievement.

Although her drive aids her in rising above poverty, she continues to experience loneliness and dissatisfaction, indicating that achievement by itself does not ensure happiness. Both books explore whether love and happiness can exist in a society focused on wealth and status. Lily longs for love but feels forced to wed for financial gain, resulting in a heartbreaking conclusion. Carrie attains wealth and recognition but discovers that material achievements do not lead to personal happiness. Both characters grapple with the challenge of discovering authentic joy in a society that prioritizes money over real connections.

Conclusion:

Both *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser examine the challenges faced by women searching for happiness, love, and success in a world that constrains their options. Despite Lily Bart and Carrie Meeber originating from distinct backgrounds and following different journeys, their stories reveal comparable struggles regarding societal expectations, economic difficulties, ambition, and self-fulfillment. These works provide a profound analysis of societal attitudes toward women and the challenges they face in gaining autonomy and fulfillment.

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart belongs to New York's elite society but does not have financial stability. She is anticipated to wed a rich man to preserve her social standing, yet she hesitates, wishing for both affection and financial security. Nonetheless, her failure to find a spouse and her unwillingness to alter her principles result in her demise. Rumors, money issues, and social exclusion drive her into destitution, and she eventually passes away in solitude. Wharton employs Lily's tragic outcome to critique the inflexible societal systems that dictated women's existence, demonstrating the challenges they faced in surviving without marriage, regardless of their intelligence or beauty.

Conversely, *Sister Carrie* offers an alternative experience. Carrie Meeber begins with nothing but slowly ascends to prominence and riches by seizing opportunities. In contrast to Lily, Carrie does not depend on marriage for stability; rather, she establishes a thriving career as an actress. Nonetheless, in spite of her monetary achievements, she still feels emotionally incomplete. Dreiser's novel implies that financial prosperity does not ensure joy and challenges the idea that ambition by itself can lead to genuine contentment. Carrie's narrative confronts conventional gender roles by demonstrating that a woman can



thrive independently; however, it also questions if achieving success without significant relationships results in genuine happiness.

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