

Unhappy with ideas passed down from parents: characters from babbitt and the age ...

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According to Swiss philosopher Henri-Frederic Amiel, it comes easily to accept radical ideas like prejudice as a means of not worrying yourself with more troubling, rational, ideas. Amiel attributes this to an unwillingness to reflect and is suggesting that a community with a higher standard of education and thinking can be a community with less or perhaps entirely without prejudice. Amiel was not an unintelligent individual, in fact, quite the opposite, and his views support the previous claim. The artistic works *Babbitt* and *The Age of Innocence* reflect this quote through their individual uses of literary devices as well as certain themes and instances in each book. Both novels, in their relative time periods, portray people who are unhappy with blindly living the rigid, strict lives that they live and live based on ideas passed down to them from parents.

In Sinclair Lewis's 1922 Horatian novel of social criticism *Babbitt*, the reader follows George Folansbee Babbitt, resident of Zenith, Ohio, and middle-aged real estate salesman with a state college education, as he attempts to please everyone by living out his painful conservative life day by day in the roaring twenties. In trying to live for others, Babbitt finds himself adopting prejudice based on the sophisticated "traditional" men that he tries to emulate. One prominent recurring conservative institution that stimulates George's prejudice in the novel is the Zenith Athletic Club. This club, and others of this nature in Zenith were open to particularly successful white males with clout who hold conventional thoughts. The watering hole of orthodox societal views that they called a club was nothing more to Babbitt than a place of gossip and as such he found himself molded there regularly. Approaching the end of the novel, Babbitt finds himself being influenced by rather than a

conservative, a liberal by way of Seneca Doake. Doakes status leads Babbitt to rather blindly follow him and now adopt liberal prejudices, similarly to how he had with the conservative businessmen, as Babbitt finds it easier to follow others radical beliefs rather than to contemplate thoughts for himself and form a less biased opinion..

Lewis's use of literary the devices of foreshadowing and irony strengthen Amiels quote as well. For example Babbitt admits that early in the novel that he had wanted to be a lawyer, but when a friend of his is incarcerated near the middle of the novel, he finds himself asking lawyers to commit acts of perjury and other immoral behavior. This irony, based on Babbitt's surroundings and what is best suited for him at the time of his actions fortifies Amiels view further. A second device used is foreshadowing, Babbitts blind willingness to accept the conservative prejudiced views foreshadows his eventual acceptance of the liberal views later in the novel.

Edith Wharton's 1920 novel of social criticism *The Age of Innocence* follows the young Newland Archer as he lives in the gentry and generally doesn't enjoy his lack of freedom in life. The book takes place in New York City during "The Gilded Age" as coined by Mark Twain where Archer, a member of the gentry is stuck in a monotonous fake life where he is forced to live based on the ideals of his ancestors. As such he is virtually forced to take up whatever prejudice his family has held before him. For example, Ellen Olsenska, a countess, is attempting to leave her husband which in the gentry is considered taboo and as a result Newland is expected to believe that Ellen is committing a naughty act. Another particular instance where Archer had a

prejudice that his family basically forced him into accepting was gender roles, placing a prejudice against women throughout the entire novel as the men work in the firms and the dainty women remain at home.

Literary devices employed by Wharton to amplify Henri Amiel's ideas include irony and symbolism. To identify irony look no further than the title, *The Age of Innocence*. The story is so very obviously drenched in prejudice against women, lower class humans, and even members of the gentry, making *The Gilded Age* anything but innocent. The novel also employs a hefty amount of symbolism, including flowers, particularly yellow roses which Archer gives to Ellen as a symbol of friendship, despite the fact that Archer and all of the rest of the gentry is obligated to despise Ellen and hold prejudice against her.

Henri Amiel was a well educated man and his views support that, equally as much as much of historical literature supports his ideas. Amiel was a man that knew that prejudice is adopted as a means of negligence to common sense and contempt for fairness. His proposed solution is a simple one, which is to employ knowledge and in doing so to eliminate the stupidity required to allow prejudice.