Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Society is a system whereby people live together in organised communities. Herbert Spencer viewed society as similar to the living body. Just as the human body is made up of organs like kidneys, lungs and heart, society is made up of institutions like the family, religion, education, the state and the economy. Institutions are there to guide, regulate, control and to improve the activities of people: family to improve human relationship; religion to regulate human-beings; education to shape the characters of an individual and to promote status; the state to safeguard law and order; and the economy to satisfy the basic needs of humanity.

American society is an open society and achieved status is one of the features of American society. Vertical social mobility is a fundamental aspect of American social system. Class system in America is based upon wealth, income, occupation, skill and family reputation. The higher class holds and exercises the effective power whereas the power diminishes class by class downwards. Social stratification is a device by which American society sees that the most important positions are filled by most qualified persons. Since upper strata consists of high economic and social power, people from lower and middle strata made their best efforts to reach this strata. When people from lower and middle strata are denied legitimate opportunities these people are likely to follow illegitimate means also
to achieve high economic and social power. This creates social tension and paves the way for social disorganisation in America.

When society loses its control due to various factors like economic depression, promoting false heroes, ideas and dreams, celebrating materialism and showing privilege to the upper class at the expense of the other classes, the deprived individual involves in Machiavellian means to achieve upward mobility. There is always a high chance for an individual to indulge in criminal activities. The false standard the society promotes has an adverse effect especially on adolescent individuals. They become juvenile delinquents. Most of the delinquents in the United States of America are from the lower class. One of the major reasons for this is their urge to attain the privileges of the privileged class. Yet another reason is the prevalence of broken families. There are many broken families and insecure children; the family seems uprooted and unstable scarcely performing its traditional functions.

The anxiety of the lower class children always crops up from the insecurity of their parents about themselves and the society. Some child experts speak of the “good child in the bad culture” as a result of bad societal situations and pressures. There were enough troubled and sick-minded children coming out of the lower classes, especially from the economically “deprived strata”. Living on a thin economic margin, moreover, the working-class children had a necessary role in the family as helpers in a common struggle, and in larger families the older children had the added function of caring for younger ones. Theodore Dreiser’s Jennie hails from such a family.
The child is taught both in the family and by peer groups to be resourceful, industrious, persuasive, friendly, popular, an easy mixer, strong of purpose, inventive and self reliant. The emphasis, in a mobile society built on immigration, is on outdoing one’s parents – getting a better education, marrying into a better social stratum, making more money, living in a better neighbourhood and with higher living standards. The traits stressed are merciless determination and utter practicality. These traits, inculcated and renewed in each generation, take on a cumulative strength in the culture. They leave little room for the withdrawn and the reflective personality who may be detached from the competitive struggle. In fact, when American parents or teachers find these traits in a boy, they may regard them as signs that he is “badly adjusted” and in need of therapy. The stress in popular thinking about personality and career is not on the limits but on the potentials of development. Andrew Carnegie motivated the young Americans to be a king in their dreams and say to themselves their place is on the top.

The young American grows up to see life as a cornucopia spilling its plenty into the lap of those who are there to take it. Within the limits of his family’s income, and sometimes beyond it, there are few things denied to the growing son and daughter. Their attention is focused on what they can “get”, first out of their parents, then out of life. In fact, their levels of aspiration stretch to infinity. The society blamed for this pliancy and indulgence with its sense of plenty, contains the same principle of infinite possibility. It tells the boy that if only he wants something hard enough, even the presidency of the nation, he can achieve it. This spurs his striving but it also sets unrealisable goals, since his
capacities may not equal the tasks he sets himself, or his class and status handicaps may be too crippling. Thus he misses the sense of security which one gets from the compassable. No limits are set to his goals, and often he reaches for incompatible sets of goals. Rarely does he learn the tolerance of deprivation or the recognition of limits which are a matter of course in less dynamic cultures and which exert a lesser psychic toll than the sense of infinite possibility.

Heroism is dreamed and admired; riches envied and strived for, tight lipped resolutions made, “values” crudely formulated by the youth of America. The emotional life awakens in all its tumbling confusion, the imagination ranges far, the lights and shadows of the moral life are accented, the shapes of good and evil take on their intense forms. Anything is possible, and everything is wrought with far-reaching meanings. There is a sense of limitless potentials, of obstacles to be overcome by a surpassing display of energy and talent or by hook or crook. At home as in school, the stories told are the success stories. There is a constant demand for vitality, in season and out of it, regardless of whether it is charged with meaning. The emotional dangers that the young American runs are not those of apathy or despair but of anxiety about success or failure. He finds it hard to keep from wondering whether he is swift and strong enough to win so exciting a race. Growing up with the assumption that he will “make his mark” and “knock them dead” he is rarely allowed to forget that he lives in an expanding civilization in which he must accomplish “bigger and better” things. Just as a young American is enveloped by the sound of cars, trains, planes, so the symbols investing his life are those of speed and movement, violence and power – the
symbols of competitive drive. They don’t have to be preached to him: they come through the culture in action. He picks them out of the air – from how his family behaves, from what his teachers and schoolmates say and what he reads and hears, from the men and careers held up to him for emulation. Inspired by the success stories they hear, they are filled with the dream of success and walk out prematurely without any corresponding growth in the confidence of their own strength. This resulted in a large number of youth without parental ties crowding the cities with lost hopes.

A passage in Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again* describes the desolate emptiness of the youth in American cities:

. . . those straggling bands of boys of sixteen or eighteen that one can always see at night or on a holiday, going along a street, filling the air with raucous jargon and senseless cries, each trying to outdo the others with joyless catcalls and mirthless quips and jokes which are so feeble, so stupidly inane, that one hears them with strong mixed feelings of pity and shame. (404)

Wolfe asks “what has happened to the spontaneous gaiety of youth,” and answers that these youngsters “are without innocence, born old and stale and dull and empty. . . . suckled on darkness, and weaned on violence and noise” (404). In his *Studs Lonigan* novel sequence James Farrell shows similarly the social violence and cultural emptiness which condition the emotional bleakness of an individual’s life on the city streets. Dreiser is one among the novelists who portrayed the sordid reality of the American society.
Theodore Herman Albert Dreiser’s (August 27, 1871 – December 28, 1945) fictions as well as his other writings exhibit his consciousness of the American society. He is a mixture of a historical, autobiographical, social, material and naturalistic writer. He spins his story taking materials from the society, his life, and his personal ambitions. His novels and other works present the conflict of the rich and the poor, the power struggle, the aspirations of the poor to become rich and the rich to become richer. In the power struggle the noble qualities like love and friendship are not respected or adored. Dreiser does not seem to point his accusing finger at the individual who struggles for survival, rather he condemns the society that aids and abets the greed and promiscuity in the individuals. He is astonished by the political and technological power that privileged a few individuals at the expense of the suffering mass. Dreiser himself is unable to grope with his desire for money.

Dreiser’s family background forms a strong base in all his novels. He was born as the eleventh in a family of thirteen to a German father named John Paul Dreiser and Sarah Mary Schanab. His parents, brothers, and sisters take forms in his novels. Dreiser’s father was once a prosperous businessman but fell into bad times and lost his business. An accidental hit on his head affected his mental capacities. It resulted in an irreparable brain damage. His business partners took advantage of it and cheated him. Finally he lost his business and became a street preacher. Dreiser’s father, a staunch Roman Catholic, could not recover from his loss. Poverty ruled the family. Dreiser considered his father partly responsible for the sorry plight of the family. He thought that his father with his impractical
religious dogmas was unfit to live in the American society. In his autobiography, *A Hoosier Holiday*, he details his father’s obsession with religion:

My dogmatic father . . . was a Catholic and a bigot. I never knew a narrower, more hidebound religionist, nor one more tender and loving in his narrow way. He was a crank, a tenth rate . . . Francis of Assisi, and yet a charming person if it had been possible to get his mind of the subject of religion for more than three seconds at a time. He worked, ate, played, slept, and dreamed religion. . . . He was constantly attempting to drive a decidedly recalcitrant family into a similar point of view. (284)

Dreiser’s hatred naturally turned towards the church, religion, and its dogmas for his father’s intolerable narrowness. He attacked organised religion and its exasperating interference in the life of common man:

I have no deadly opposition to religion. . . . It is only when in the form of priestcraft and ministerial conniving it becomes puffed up and arrogant and decides that all the world must think as it thinks, and do as it does, and that if one does not one is a heretic and an outcast, that I resent it. (182)

Though Dreiser hated his father, he loved his mother for her selflessness, expediency and warm devotion to her poverty stricken family. Dreiser in his early years was a victim of poverty and suffering. He was desperately in need of a change of his situation. This finds expression in his presentation of the early
days of his protagonists who hail from poor background. In *Dawn* he bitterly reminisces his boyhood days:

I . . . recall long, dreary, grey cold days, meager meals [only fried potatoes or fried mush at times], and my mother and father going about in shabby clothes. Life has long since schooled me in its bitter aspects . . . I can never look on crowded tenements or small, shabby cottages in cheap, mean streets, without reverting in thought to this particular period in our lives and wishing . . . life might be different. (22)

There was always a clash between the father and the children. This was a blessing in disguise for Dreiser. He engrossed himself in the world of books. He voraciously read Shakespeare, Herrick, Dryden, Defoe, Fielding, Irving, Hawthorne, Cooper, Emerson and Kinsley. This helped him later in his career both as a freelance writer and a fiction writer.

Dreiser’s job as a newspaperman helped him to be aware of the underside of the cities. When he practised as a freelancer in Chicago, he was exposed to the other side of the cities. Chicago was teeming with flop houses, saloons, brothels and slums. Dreiser uses his observation deftly in all his novels.

During Dreiser’s time the change in the American economy was dramatic as the country was fast changing from an agricultural nation to an industrial one. It was a tumultuous period and many important trends characterised this period. The country was connected by railroads during the late 1800s. It had great impact on the economic growth. In the late nineteenth century, the railroads represented
the first ‘big business’ that employed the majority of labour in the United States and helped standardise America economically, socially and culturally.

The United States embraced a ‘laissez faire’ in the economy during the 1920s. Warren G. Harding, the President of the United States of America between 1921 and 1923, followed hands-off policy – the government did not intervene with people’s business and helped them profit. Anti-trust laws were avoided and the United States was in debt from the First World War. The Secretary of Treasury, Andrew Mellon, tremendously reduced taxes, which moved the economy because there was more money to spend. Eventually, the United States profited in more money to pay off the enormous debt. The United States also enforced a huge tariff that would encourage Americans to buy domestic products instead of buying imported goods from foreign nations.

The United States of America became industrialised resulting in mass production. Factory owners were able to produce more goods than the market would absorb. They, therefore, had the compulsion to push off their goods to customers. To motivate the potential customers, the industries indulged in various techniques like brand names, trade marks, guarantees, slogans, celebrity endorsements and other business gimmicks. The estimated expenditure on advertising rose from $682 million in 1914 to almost $3 billion in 1929.

The growth of gigantic corporation – referred to as ‘Trusts’ dominated the industries, various strategies like vertical integration and horizontal integration were adopted by the big industrialists in their attempt to monopolise. Industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie in steel and John D. Rockefeller in oil
built enormous economic empires with control centralised in their hands. Thus the economic power came to be controlled by individuals.

Dreiser’s time also witnessed mass exodus of population from the rural to the urban. People left rural homes for opportunities in urban areas. Fascinated by the plethora of opportunities the cities could offer, young men and women flocked to the cities searching for jobs. The urban population was growing in an alarming rate. Between 1860 and 1910 the population of cities with two thousand five hundred or more residents climbed from six million to forty six million. About eleven million Americans moved to cities from rural areas. In short, American society, culture, politics, economics, etc., were becoming urban. It continued and by the end of nineteenth century less than one in four Americans lived in a rural area.

Since the nineteenth century is a period of rapid growth and change in America, it was a century of westward expansion and the building up of muscular new cities like Chicago. Immigrants brought their cultural tradition to their adopted land. The last three decades of the nineteenth century were marked by relentless capitalism, corruption, vulgar tastes and ostentatious displays of wealth and while the rich wore diamonds, many other Americans wore rags. In 1890, eleven million of the nation’s twelve million families earned less than $1200 per year.

There were three new social classes in America during the nineteenth century. The first two were the industrial capitalists which included men like Andrew Carnegie. The third class was the working class. Immigrant women and
the poor American-born women had no choice but to work. They worked in factories that were crowded and poorly ventilated. Lacking education or special training, they had to work with their hands and at low wages.

The cities demanded unskilled labourers in masses. The mechanised factories employed increasing number of semi-skilled or unskilled labourers. The Ford Motor company, for example, founded in 1903 with a few hundred employees, employed forty two thousand workers in one of its plants by 1924 and its another plant employed sixty eight thousand employees. The need for the skilled employees decreased and women and children were also employed in factories and industries for lower wages. Women’s employment doubled between 1880 and 1900 and by 1900 one fifth of manufacturing workers were women.

Homelessness was yet another evil all across America and many people were living without shelter and sleep on American Alleyways, under freeways and even more detrimental, these individuals often lived without hope. The condition worsened from 1929 to 1940 when America experienced the Great Depression. The Great Depression had a deep impact on the history of the United States. As a result, a substantial portion of American people were deprived of homes and savings and lost confidence in their capacity to support themselves. By 1932 the number of unemployed had risen to over twelve million and over five thousand banks were closed, thirty two thousand commercial firms were closed, farm prices touched the ever lowest point in history, the national income came down to forty billion from eighty billion in 1929. People’s faith in democracy
and capitalism was shaken, and a large number of people showed willingness to forego freedom in the hope of economic security.

The process of urbanisation and industrialisation affected the culture and society of America. Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* describes the process of industrialisation and its effects on American culture and society during the Gilded Age. According to Trachtenberg, “economic incorporation wrenched American society from the moorings of familiar values . . .” (7). The moral consciousness is fast on the decline, substituted by material consciousness.

Traditionally, Americans have sought to realise the American Dream of success, fame and wealth through thrift and hard work. The industrialisation of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries began to erode the dream, replacing it with a philosophy of “get rich quick”. In a society dedicated to capitalism and the maxim that, “the one who dies with the most toys wins,” the ability to purchase a big house and a nice car separates those who are considered successful from those who are not. For many Americans the formula is one of instant, albeit elusive, gratification. Rather than adhering to a traditional work ethic, far too many Americans were pinning their hopes on what they perceive as “easy” money. Instant wealth has not always been a major component of the Dream. Americans have traditionally centred their efforts on thrift and hard work. During the Colonial Period, Benjamin Franklin counselled the people on “the way to wealth”. *Poor Richard’s Almanack* advised that “Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise” (83). The key to wealth was industry: “Industry pays debts”, insisted Poor Richard. Americans of the early Republic expanded
Franklin’s notion of industry into a labour ideology. For many, the goal was not extravagant wealth, but rather economic independence and the opportunity for social advancement through financial gain. Abraham Lincoln insisted that the greatness of the American North was that industry allowed all men to prosper:

> The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labours for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labours on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This . . . is free labour . . . the just and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all. (Lind 142)

The attitude of the religious priests towards the accumulation of wealth changed drastically. Once money was considered the root cause of all evil, it was limited to be earned to only satisfy one’s corporeal needs. During Dreiser’s time money and wealth were considered a blessing. The pursuit of money was considered a meaningful secular activity performed at the will of the divine. The Catholic and Puritan asceticism was looked down upon; Tawney in his *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* quotes Richard Steele:

> The begging friars and such monks as live only to themselves and to their formal devotion, but do employ themselves in no one thing to further their own subsistence or the good of mankind . . . yet have the confidence to boast of this their course as a state of perfection; which in very deed, as to the worthiness of it, falls short
of the poorest cobbler, for his is a calling of God, and theirs is none. (200)

Success in business is looked upon as a sign of God’s favour. According to Tawney, “success in business is in itself almost a sign of spiritual grace, for it is proof that a man has laboured faithfully in his vocation, and that ‘God had blessed his trade’” (204). Cotton Mather finds a connection between business activity and religion:

A Christian at his Two callings, is a man in a Boat, Rowing for Heaven; the House which our Heavenly Father hath intended for us. If he mind but one of his Callings, be it which it will, he pulls the Oar, but on one side of the Boat, and will make but a poor dispatch to the Shore of Eternal Blessedness. . . . Yea, a Calling is not only our Duty, but also our Safety. Men will ordinarily fall into horrible Snares, and infinite Sins, if they have not a Calling, to be their preservative. . . . The temptations of the Devil, are best Resisted by those that are least at Leisure. . . . An Occupation is an Ordinance of God for our safeguard against the Temptations of the Devil. A Bird on the Wing is not so soon catch’d by the Hellish Fowler. A man is upon the Wing, when he is at the Work, which God hath set him to do. (24-25)

In the midst of industrialisation following the Civil War, many Americans experienced profound hardship in the changing economic landscape. They found solace in the tales of Horatio Alger, whose characters overcame adversity through
industry, perseverance, self-reliance and self-discipline. The ubiquitous “rags to riches” legend became the cornerstone of American Society; anyone could succeed and achieve wealth if they worked hard. The commitment to industry illustrated by Alger’s characters, Lincoln’s ideals of free labour, and Franklin’s practical maxims were further solidified in the American mind by the addition of a religiously based, Protestant “work ethic”. Many believed that hard work allowed one to not only achieve financial success, but through the success, revealed God’s grace.

Historians attribute this shift away from the traditional American work ethic to the rise of industry. Consumed by desires for status, material goods, and acceptance, Americans apparently had lost the sense of individuality, thrift, hard work, and craftsmanship that had characterised the nation. The people no longer entertained a vision for the future that included time, sweat, and ultimate success. Rather, they covet the shortcut to wealth. Americans were told again and again that the road to the financial success of the American Dream is more a matter of crook, and luck and not hard work.

The myth of transcendence through accumulation of wealth – the success myth – was a late nineteenth century transformation of the traditional American work ethic. Like the frontier, success has been a compelling metaphor in the national psyche. Most often it has been translated into the pursuit of money, into undisguised greed. The success ethic had its origins, however, in the self improvement doctrines of the Puritans and the early libertines. Emerson translated it into self-reliance. Horatio Alger converted it into social and
economic mobility. Andrew Carnegie interpreted it as the gospel of wealth and Norman Vincent Peale called it the power of positive thinking. John. G. Cawelti has traced the metamorphosis of the success myth in his scholarly study on popular culture, *Apostles of the Self Made Man*.

Dreiser realised the importance of social factors in determining the nature of man’s life in the world. The newspapers of the time reported daily a host of crimes committed. The newspapers reflected the paltry state of the social conditions in America. People employed machiavellian measures to achieve their goals. A man was valued and respected by the social position he held. Young men believed in unscrupulous means and ways to realise their dreams. Reports of murder, robbery, and corruption were common. The competition to rise in social position and status was desperate. Dreiser was shocked by the state of affairs of his country and eventually society became the central theme of all his novels.

Dreiser’s criticism of the American society is of the same as that of Matthew Arnold’s regarding the Victorian society. In fact, both societies failed to promote moral consciousness among its citizens. As Dreiser told Dudley, his hope as a writer was “to see mind and body united again,” for “nothing counts without mind and taste” (Dudley 403). Similarly, the essays in *Hey, Rub-A-Dub-Dub* were written in the hope of promoting “a sounder approach to life than is now voiced” (405). According to Dudley, “he prized above everything . . . the hope of a social fabric, backed by learning and imagination – what he called ‘artistic vision’” (433). Dreiser’s concern is both with the human condition and
the social condition. He was concerned with a society that deprived its members of a sound, emotional and intellectual development.

Dreiser did not believe that the individual had an entity apart from his social milieu. He held that the intellectual level of the individuals in a society was determined according to the general level of civilisation of the social order. This interconnection between the artist and his society is presented in “The problem of Genius”:

A man of genius, like every other human being is limited by his environment, hence by the ideas and knowledge of the times; he cannot perform miracles. He can only excel, and usually in a unique and creative manner, in a function which others master to a lesser degree. . . . And the environment of its day may as readily frustrate as further it. (177-78)

In an essay entitled “Some Aspects of Our National Character” in Hey, Rub – A – Dub – Dub Dreiser complained that America had lost sight of its originally stated goal:

We were to do tremendous things, not for the human pocketbook but the human mind and soul. Our children and our children’s children were to be free, progressive, fearless, mentally and spiritually alert, entirely loosened from the trammels and chains of superstition and the degradation of poverty and want. . . . The truth is that America has not as yet had an intelligence or a culture
worthy the name. It has no visible intellectual purpose, unless it be
that of getting money. (54)

In another essay, in *Hey, Rub – A – Dub – Dub* entitled “Life, Art and
America”, he reiterated the charges:

To me the average or somewhat standardised American is . . .
absolutely devoid of true spiritual insight, correct knowledge of
the history of literature or art, and confused by and mentally lost
in or overcome by the multiplicity of the purely material and
inarticulate details by which he finds himself surrounded. (252)

In another essay “America and the Artist” he expresses his concern over
the America of his times. He insists upon the responsibility of an artist in leading
the people in the right path:

I will say that for one not incorruptibly fevered with artistic
convictions, standards, desires, and ideals, the material and sensual
gauds of America this day – the enormous prices offered for
shoddy as opposed to silk and fine wool and linen – certainly tend
to wean him from more serious efforts. . . . But when ever has the
true artist failed to adhere desperately and without shadow of
turning to that which is true and beautiful? For these shall he not
put aside kin and country, and with these only as his guides – his
pillar of cloud by day, his beacon of fire by night – go forth? (236)
Dreiser attacked the trusts for creating social disharmony in America and spoiling the economic balance. In an essay entitled “More Democracy or Less? An Inquiry” in *Hey, Rub – A – Dub – Dub* Dreiser comments:

... America as yet certainly is neither a social nor a democratic success. Its original democratic theory does not work, or has not, and a trust – and a law-frightened people, to say nothing of a cowardly or suborned, and in any case helpless, press, prove it. ... In what country even less free can a man be thoroughly browbeaten, arrested without trial, denied the privilege of a hearing and held against the written words of the nation’s Constitution guaranteeing its citizens freedom of speech, of public gathering, of writing and publishing what they honestly feel? (228)

Dreiser was severe in criticising the American democracy controlled by the privileged families, and corrupt legislatures and politicians, and the bureaucracy that improved solely the lot of rich capitalists at the expense of the masses. The common people were burdened with unscrupulous taxes:  

When one considers the history of American commercial development, the growth of private wealth, of its private leaders – the Rockefellers, Morgans, Vanderbilts, Goulds, Ryans, et al., indeed all the railroad, street-car, land and other lords – a [until the war] practically stationary wage rate, an ever-increasing rising cost of living, cold legislative conniving and robbery, before which the people are absolutely helpless. Tammany Hall, the New York
street car monopoly, 753 different kinds of trusts that tax people as efficiently and ardently as ever any monarchy or tyranny dreamed of doing – I should really like to know on what authority we base our plea for the transcendent merits of democracy, and I am as good a democrat as most Americans, if not more so. (229)

The longing for money and social position, Dreiser considers, is not the fault of the individual, rather it is the fault of the society that sets the standard of success. In his novels he condemns the society for invoking the wrong standards.

Dreiser has penned eight novels, four collections of short stories and sketches, four about travel, two of autobiography, one of poems, one of plays and four books scattered with science, autobiography, politics and social problems. All his books are interconnected as they reveal each other. His novels are *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), *An American Tragedy* (1925), *Trilogy of Desire* which comprises the three Frank Cowperwood novels: *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947), *The “Genius”* (1915), and *The Bulwark* (1946). The researcher has selected all the novels except *The Bulwark* for study.

*Sister Carrie*, Dreiser’s first novel, tells the story of Caroline Meeber, an ordinary girl, who rises from a low paid wage earner to a high paid actress. Caroline Meeber, known as Carrie, left her home at the age of eighteen and took the train to Chicago. She found life in Chicago as harsh as it ever was back in Wisconsin. She understood that money and commodities are what count, and the men she met taught her that physical attractiveness is a commodity fully
negotiable. She exploited the commodity and rose to the level of a star. Though
she became a toast of the town, she was not happy in her success. She was
invited to give performances abroad. But Carrie became unhappy with her state
in the world and wished that she could perform in a serious play rather than a
comedy.

*Jennie Gerhardt*, the second novel of Dreiser, tells the story of a young
girl who is beaten by the forces of life. She was the eldest of the six children of a
poor, hard working German family in Columbus, Ohio. Jennie and her mother
worked at a local hotel in order to provide for the younger children in the family.
There she met a fifty two year old Senator named Brander. He was struck by her
beauty and charm. Brander seduced Jennie with a promise to marry her. Before
marrying her he died unexpectedly on a trip to Washington. Jennie became
pregnant and was disowned by her father. She gave birth to a child named Vesta.
She became a maid in the house of Mrs. Bracebridge. One of the rich guests of
Mrs. Bracebridge named Lester Kane was attracted towards her. Meanwhile Mr.
Gerhardt lost the use of both of his hands in an accident. Once again Jennie
became the bread winner. She decided to accept Lester’s help. In turn, she
became his mistress as well.

Lester wanted to marry Jennie. Lester’s father’s will left him to choose
between Jennie and his inheritance. Lester, much against his wish, chose the
latter. He made a decent settlement for Jennie and her daughter Vesta and
married a widow named Mrs. Letty Pace Gerald. Vesta died of typhoid leaving
Jennie alone. She adopted two orphaned children. Lester on his death bed sent for Jennie. She attended Lester throughout his last illness.

*An American Tragedy* is probably Dreiser’s most conspicuous novel. The title itself is of course significant. Dreiser believed that Clyde’s downfall was due to the American economic system, and he presents a strong indictment against the system. If Clyde had the privileges of wealth and social position, he would never have been tempted to a moral decision and his consequent ruin. The novel is a powerful document on the theme of social inequality and lack of privilege.

Clyde Griffiths was born to Asa Griffiths and Elvira Griffiths, the poor evangelists who run a mission in a shabby part of the Kansas City. From the beginning, Clyde was antagonistic towards his parents’ beliefs and activities. He was entranced by the material world that his parents shun. His troubles began when he took a job as a bellboy in a local hotel. The boys introduced Clyde to the world of alcohol and prostitution. He fled to Chicago after a stolen car, he and his friends travelled, killed a little girl. In Chicago he met his uncle, Samuel Griffiths, and was employed in his uncle’s collar factory in Lycurgus, New York.

Although Clyde vowed not to consort with women in the way that caused his downfall, he was attracted to Roberta Alden, a poor and innocent farm girl working under him. Clyde coerced Roberta into sex. His ambition forced him to realise that he could never marry her. He liked to marry the elegant Sondra Finchley, the daughter of a wealthy Lycurgus man and a family friend of his uncle’s. As developments between him and Sondra began to look promising, Roberta discovered that she was pregnant. Having unsuccessfully attempted to
procure an abortion for Roberta, Clyde decided to murder Roberta in a fashion that would seem accidental.

Clyde took Roberta for a canoe ride on Big Bittern Lake in New York. He struck Roberta in the face with his camera, and upset the boat to the point that it capsized. Unable to swim and Clyde unwilling to save her, Roberta drowned while Clyde swam to the shore. The narrative is deliberately unclear as to whether he acted with malice and intent to murder or if his striking her was merely an instinct. The trail of circumstantial evidence pointed to murder, and the local authorities were only too eager to convict Clyde. Clyde was found guilty and sentenced to death.

Dreiser’s *Trilogy of Desire: The Financier, The Titan, and The Stoic* deals with the tragic end of Frank Algernon Cowperwood who is given to the false impression that force governs the world.

*The Financier* is the story of the early life of Cowperwood, the son of a low level banker who realised his skill at finance and business. He was able to make a rather large fortune through stock speculation and purchases of shares in the growing street railway industry. He married an older woman named Lillian Semple and had two children. He used his riches to become socially prominent. Things began to crumble when he fell in love with Aileen Butler, the daughter of a politically prominent Irish industrialist. They had an affair, which was discovered just when Cowperwood’s business was under great duress as a result of a financial panic caused by the great Chicago fire. Pressed to cover large loans, Cowperwood engaged himself in some legally questionable acts. When
they were discovered he was abandoned by his political allies. This was further complicated by the animosity of Aileen’s father. Cowperwood was put on trial for larceny. He was convicted and sent to prison, but pardoned after a year. He then proceeded to recoup his fortune and eventually left Philadelphia with Aileen for the greatest promise of the west.

*The Titan* deals with the story of Cowperwood in Chicago. Cowperwood moved to Chicago with Aileen. He had letters of introduction from the most influential people – a bank president named Mr. Addison, for a start. Cowperwood was presented to others – lawyers, businessman, and judges. In the beginning, not one of them knew he had been incarcerated, and he wondered if that knowledge would affect their attitude towards him. He finally confessed his recent history to Addison and decided to establish his new company in Chicago. He carefully and thoroughly scrutinised the conditions for establishing a wealth that would be envied by powerful men and selfish women. As Cowperwood set out to ultimately conquer this new world, his past foibles overcame him again – his desire for beautiful women, his acquisition of unbelievable wealth, his need to be accepted and understood and revered. His genius for social and financial manipulation failed him in politics.

*The Stoic* the third novel of the trilogy that includes *The Financier* and *The Titan* completes the story of Frank Algernon Cowperwood. As in the other two novels, Cowperwood, a man of great force and vitality, is interested only in material things – making money, having attractive mistresses, and building monuments to perpetuate his name. Cowperwood, nearing sixty, had lost his long
struggle to gain a fifty year franchise to control the transportation system in Chicago. Cowperwood promised to finance the construction of the London underground. So he went on a fund raising tour. His tour was successful. Back in London, Cowperwood was ill and doctors diagnosed it as Bright’s disease. He succumbed to a severe attack a few months later. Though Cowperwood died rich, the pending law suits eroded the money.

*The “Genius”* is the story of Eugene Witla, an artist haunted by a search for beauty which leads him to fall in love with many women during his life time. The novel contains a great deal of social detail in its pictures of the world of art and publishing in general, and of New York life in particular, in the early years of the century. Another theme is the tendency of money and commerce to corrupt art. Eugene left Chicago to seek his artistic fortune in the wider world of New York. In New York, Eugene’s work impressed M. Anatole Charles, manager of a distinguished firm of art dealers. M. Charles held an exhibition which was a great success and this marked Eugene as a powerful and rising young artist. Along his career he had affairs with several women like Margaret Duff, Ruby Kenny, Miriam Finch, Christina Channing, Angela Blue, Frieda Roth, Carlotta Wilson, and Suzanne.

Eugene seduced Angela and then married her. He became greatly successful, both financially and socially. His marriage life was hollow. Although Eugene has money enough to retire, his financial success had bred in him a desire for greater financial success, and he had lost the will to paint. His artistic lassitude was matched by the emotional emptiness of his marriage.
About this time Eugene met Mrs. Emily Dale’s eighteen-year-old daughter, Suzanne. Soon Eugene and Suzanne confessed their love for each other. Suzanne was willing to become Eugene’s mistress. But Mrs. Dale did not approve. Angela, when she discovered the affair, decided that the only way to hold Eugene was to have a baby, despite the fact that doctors had warned her against having children. When Eugene tried to follow Suzanne to Canada, Mrs. Dale was able to have him fired from his job.

Eugene, having lost both his job and Suzanne, returned to comfort Angela during her ordeal. Angela died giving birth to a daughter, also named Angela. Eugene began to paint again and became a popular and fairly successful artist. He began to weave romantic dreams around his daughter Angela. In spite of his new awareness of man’s inability to control his fate, Eugene’s emotional impulse toward beauty was still strong enough to keep him fashioning impossible dreams for himself and his daughter.

Theodore Dreiser in all his novels exposed social problems and personal reactions. He was influenced by Darwinian thought and the related philosophical doctrine of determinism, which views individuals as the helpless pawns of economic and social forces beyond control. American society has one of the most comprehensive and complex types of social structure in today’s world. The pressure the society puts on an individual is overwhelming and the reaction has far-reaching effects on the society.

Dreiser’s works capture the reality of the American society. Being an open society, achieved status is one of the features of American society. Struggle
for vertical mobility is ubiquitous and the race to reach ‘the top’ is tricky, unpredictable and fatal mostly. The tension American society creates in an individual prompts him to adapt dubious, wicked and questionable means to achieve the end. It dupes individuals into believing that the end justifies the means. They react under the duress of the society and commit murder, embezzlement, adultery and other acts of crime. The society creates in an individual compulsion and leave with no other options except to react, get caught and executed. Even if the individual comes out victorious, it is only a pyrrhic victory.

Most of Dreiser’s protagonists are young men and women. They waste or lose their life falling a prey consciously or unconsciously to the traps laid by the society. Such of the characteristics of Theodore Dreiser made the researcher work on the social tension observable in his works which also explicitly portrayed the personal reaction of the individuals in the novels.

The first chapter titled **Introduction** introduces the title of the thesis: “Social Tension and Personal Reaction: A Reading of the Select Novels of Theodore Dreiser.” The American society, as it was growing, threw up a lot of challenges to its people. The cities became industrialised; America which was rural is fast becoming an industrial country. The invention of machines and the raise of technical knowledge had brought out vast changes in the society. The Industrial Revolution gave birth to new productive and economic systems based on machines. With the Industrial Revolution, the American society passed yet another threshold to a new level of social organisation.
The emergence of an industrial order brought in its wake many other changes. The ability to read and write, limited to a small minority in Agrarian societies, became an essential skill in advanced industrial societies and led to the growth of educational institutions. Many activities, once the responsibility of families, were relinquished to other institutions. Science and technology assumed paramount roles in social life and their development was rationally pursued by businesses and universities. Traditional religion lost some of its once unquestioned moral authority. Hastening these changes were the emergence of large-scale bureaucracies and formal organisations in both the private and public spheres, producing ‘big’ businesses, unions, universities, hospitals and government. Paralleling these developments was the rise of super-sized cities such as Chicago and New York, and in due course the burgeoning sprawl of strip cities, or megalopolises. The cities are very large with populations of tens and hundreds of millions of people.

Industrialisation broadened the concept of privilege, prestige and power. Status is achieved rather than ascribed according to family of birth. People come to be divided along class lines. Wealth consists not only of land, cattle, and dwellings, but also of money, interest bearing notes, and socially recognised claims on the new means of production. Family background and wealth count far less than they did a generation or so ago. Simultaneously, individual ‘personality’ and ‘gregariousness’ have taken on greater importance.

The society laid an unprecedented tension on an individual. Heroes were celebrated and honoured. The poor and the have-nots were left to take up mean
jobs or end up in streets. There was an urge for an upward mobility with the men and women of America. The society promoted the quest for social respect, admiration, and recognition. It showed the men the ‘end’ but not the ‘proper means’ to achieve it. Men and Women competed to achieve power, privilege and wealth. They took up different means to achieve their goal. Those who took the narrow path suffered and never achieved the goal and those who took the wide path seemed to rise but were doomed.

Dreiser is a representative of his time. All his characters are pawn in the hands of the society. They are goaded with the quest for power, wealth, sex and privilege. Some achieve, but the achievement does not give them satisfaction or happiness, rather they end up as waifs. There are other characters whose vaulting ambitions are checked and they lose their lives. The introductory chapter gives a brief introduction to the succeeding chapters of the thesis.

The second chapter entitled **Power and the Glory** deals with the obsession of Dreiser’s characters with power. The pursuit of wealth and power is a glorious mode of existence and the resultant fall from glory. All his male characters have an unquenchable thirst for power and they like to bask in its glory. They move from one rung to another propelled by their quest for power. They struggle, commit crimes, adapt machiavellian methods to amass wealth or gain power in the society. For them amassing wealth is gaining power in the society.

The development of industrial society in the nineteenth century led to a competing idea: a “gospel of wealth” that exalted money making and was used to
justify the unprecedented economic power of the captains of industry. In *A Hoosier Holiday*, an autobiography, Dreiser says that in every other American city he visited the average American believed that the possession of money would certainly solve all his earthly ills. It could be seen in the faces of the people in their step and manner. Everyone was seeking power in “the land of the free and the home of the brave” (Dreiser, *A Hoosier* 172).

Life is dominated by invincible material forces and of these the drives of power, money and sex were primary. All his novels describe American values for what he had found them to be – materialistic to the core. He exposes the American idea of money – the motivating purpose of life. Affluence decides the comfort, prestige and social power one enjoys. Individuals with eyes fixed on goals like money, power and sex claw their way upwards, and raise by means fair or foul. One goal is achieved only to reveal another more magnetic in appeal and obviously the pursuit continues.

The America in which Caroline Meeber prospers is the same America in which Frank Cowperwood schemed his way to the top, the same America in which young Dreiser wandered from city to city observing with wonder and dismay the accumulation of wealth. A lust for wealth and power was in the air. Clyde Griffiths’ aspirations were stimulated and sanctioned by twentieth century capitalist society. To rise in the world, to be a success as measured by money and social position becomes his buzz word. In *The “Genius”* Dreiser clearly showed that the desire for power is the common source of desire for money and sex. It is
found in an ego that needed to transcend others, to conquer the very secrets and mysteries of life, including those locked in a woman’s heart.

The third chapter titled *Sex and the City* studies the association of the sex and the city. All the novels of Dreiser are set in cities. Dreiser associated the city with money and the promise of success. This chapter also deals with the theme of the American Dream and how this dream is corrupted by the sins of adultery. The themes of the power of sex and the lure of the beautiful join to produce Dreiser’s most characteristic expression of man’s tragic nature. Dreiser’s own youth is haunted by sexual desire. Just as Dreiser desired money, so did he desire sex too. Sex is equated with money and power.

Dreiser’s strength as a tragic writer resides in part in his ability to identify himself with the victims of desire in his fiction. In *Dawn*, Dreiser depicted sexual desire and family love as two of the compelling emotions of his own youth. He described the sexuality of his boyhood in Warsaw as “the molten, sputtering main theme pulsating and winding like a great river within the depths of inner self” (Dreiser, *Dawn* 210).

The moving from one place to another, the shame of the poverty and inefficiency of the parents, especially the father; the sister who was made pregnant and then deserted; the young Dreiser’s burning sexual hunger frustrated by moral codes and a later understanding that sex was less a matter of morality than the question of convenience and animal desire or the acquisition of a lovely symbol provided with Dreiser enough stuff to deal skillfully with the theme of sex in all his works.
Dreiser identifies sex as the most powerful yet destructive emotion in his novels. Sex is a dominant, uncontrollable force in almost all of Dreiser’s principal male characters. His female characters make use of or become the victims of the sexual impulse of these men. Love for aesthetics and quest for beauty often culminate or they are diverted towards sexual fulfillment. When Hurstwood loses the means to support Carrie, he also loses the right to sleep with her. Sex is being something Carrie believes should be paid for. In *The “Genius”* the libido takes the form of an insatiable desire which is sexual and yet incurably aesthetic. Dreiser speaks of sex as a “chemism” as the “sex lure or appeal”.

Frank Cowperwood develops an obsessive interest in women and Dreiser’s trilogy literally becomes one of desire – Frank’s desire for wealth and sex. *The “Genius”* has for its theme the conflict between artistic dedication and the carnivorous destructions of the unbridled sex drive and of materialism. Any confrontation with a beautiful girl whose manner suggests even the most remote possibility of her being approachable is sufficient to tumble Eugene into utter infatuation. Witla and Cowperwood share common traits as both take a series of mistresses. Dreiser makes the failure of Cowperwood’s two marriages turn upon his sexual prowess; Cowperwood is irresistible as a lover and could not be content with one woman at a time. Lust for power and sex drags Dreiser’s characters to their tragic fall.

The fourth chapter titled *Labour Lost* analyses the failure of the American Dream that is not achieved through thrift and hard work. Dreiser is
ironic in presenting power and the glory, his characters believe that they are moving forward but actually they are moving in a circle. His characters driven by desire and other motives pursue their interest fervently, find out the vanity of their pursuit and find themselves in the place where they have started. The accumulation of wealth and rise to powerful positions end up with nothing more than restlessness, death, or penitence.

Dreiser tried his whole life to explain the world in which he lived. He began to feel that the Christian ideals of love, charity, humility and poverty had little or no relationship to his times. Since man is limited by time, success becomes a tenuous matter. One is left vulnerable in a world where life destroys life. One seemingly rises to fall. The pattern of rise and fall and the journey from success to failure obsessed Dreiser from his earliest days.

Since Dreiser was obsessed with the theme of man’s limits he worked this theme into all of his novels beginning from *Sister Carrie*. Even the superman has limits while he may try to rise above the ordinary man – may lust for inordinate wealth and power, may feel he is beyond good and evil – the masses well restrain him with their more ordinary lives and with their rigid moral values. Whether one is as seemingly self-sufficient as Frank Algernon Cowperwood or as seemingly helpless as George Hurstwood, he functions within the limits of these dynamics. All men live within circumscribed contexts, which are the result of antithetical forces at work.

Dreiser’s characters are the victims of their vaulting aspirations that were in conflict with time and society. They aspire to goals that are transient
and beyond their grasp. They are victims of their temperament, of time, of society that they cannot fully accept or totally reject, victims of a world that is in constant struggle. The protagonists of Dreiser fail in their pursuit of American Dream. Carrie, though successful, understands that success is bound to be empty and meaningless. Eugene Witla in his search for beauty among women and art at last committed himself to the task of raising the infant his wife has given birth. Clyde Griffiths ends up being executed. Cowperwood dies of Bright’s disease and after his death his assets are liquidated and his art collection is dispersed at auction.

The last chapter is Summation. It sums up the whole thesis. Dreiser believed that the American Dream and the precepts that safeguard it put before American’s false goal which estranged them from Nature and left them unfulfilled; the passion with which he wrote from that conviction dominated all his work. Pessimism in Dreiser’s works habitually contends with recrudescent hope. He could not find Nature, without provocation, hostile to man.

Man’s plight was social, and not fated, and to struggle against it with some hope of victory, was his prerogative and duty. Society lures its men and women with the possibilities of achieving power by accumulating money or having control over the public utilities by fair or foul means and to bask in the resultant glory. The next chapter entitled Power and the Glory analyses Dreiser’s characters in this light.