Chapter Four

LABOUR LOST

Society is a masked ball – that beauty, dancing so gaily with that man, is an old woman, has false teeth, suffers from arteriosclerosis, and has a bad breath in the morning; and the gallant leading her may be a beggar, or a horse thief, or a rat catcher, or a clever rogue, so cleverly disguised that he can deceive even himself. (Vivas 6)

Dreiser believed that the world is dominated by forces that neutralise or nullify human achievements and ambitions. In a world of ‘chemic’ determination and mechanical resolutions life has little meaning:

Privately his mind was maelstrom of contradictions and doubts, feelings and emotions. . . . He figured life as a grim dark mystery, a sad semi-conscious activity turning aimlessly in the dark. No one knew anything. God knew nothing – least of all himself. Malevolence, life living on death, plain violence – these were the chief characteristics of existence. If one failed in strength in any way, if life were not kind in its bestowal of gifts, if one were not born to fortune’s pampering care – the rest was misery. In the days of his strength and prosperity the spectacle of existence had been sad enough: in the hours of threatened delay and defeat it seemed terrible. . . . [In the end, what one has, is death.] The abyss of death . . . aeons and aeons of nothingness. (Vivas 7)
Dreiser’s influence on the fiction of the first quarter of the century is perhaps greater than any other writer of his time. He was the first writer who criticised the futility of the American Dream in his novel so drastically. After him, there were some writers who also depicted the futility of the American Dream, among whom Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Bellow and a host of others were conspicuous. Although he had never won the Nobel Prize, Dreiser had greater influence than any other writer of his time did. He had an enormous influence on American literature during the first quarter of the century and for quite some time in American literature, he was the only writer worth talking about in the same breath with the European masters. Out of his passions, contradictions, and sufferings, he wrenched the art that was his salvation from the hungers and depressions that racked him.

The history of the American Dream began with the *Mayflower* in 1620. The *Mayflower* has a prominent place in American history as a symbol of early European colonisation of the future United States. With their religion oppressed by the English Church and government, the small party of religious Puritan separatists who comprised about half of the passengers on the ship desired a life where they could practice their religion freely. This symbol of religious freedom resonates in American society and the story of the *Mayflower* is a staple of any American history textbook. Americans whose roots are traceable back to New England often believe themselves to be descended from *Mayflower* passengers. The puritans from England, who wanted to escape from the political, economic
and religious persecution of the Old World, dreamed of building up a New World. That is the beginning of the American Dream.

America was considered a place where everyone had fair chance at making it big; the land of the free and the home of the brave, a place where the wildest of dreams come true. In the Declaration of Independence, the founding father of America stated, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Lossing 3). This sentiment was considered the foundation of the American Dream. Everybody tried to struggle for freedom and welfare. After the independence of the United States, Benjamin Franklin, one of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence, became both a spokesman and a model for the national character of later generations of Americans. Benjamin Franklin is often referred to as the first American, he is given this title with good reason, and it proves him more as an American hero, especially a hero for American youngsters.

In the monopoly period, modern values have transformed the American Dream’s pure ideals into a scheme for materialistic power and further, the world of high society lacks sense of morals and consequence. The disparity between the rich and the poor being serious, hedonism and money worship being overflowed, people would stop at nothing to get what they wanted. Benjamin Franklin’s way to wealth had been out of date. The American Dream has become the pursuit of material prosperity that people work more hours to get bigger cars, fancier homes, the fruits of prosperity for the families but less time to enjoy their
prosperity. In Dreiser’s times, the content of the American Dream was to yearn for more money and higher rank in society and it brought great hazards to the American society.

Dreiser was awestruck by what was happening around him. Dreiser’s novels and stories weigh the possibilities for happiness in money, possessions, power, society, sex, art, and beauty. His mixture of despair and idealism, of wonder and fear, of pity and guilt, of chemistry and institutions makes his novels the most powerful of the naturalistic tradition. He observed a world without meaning. Misery in any form moved the young Dreiser to tears. In his *A Book about Myself* he remarked: “I was honestly and sympathetically interested in the horrible deprivations inflicted upon others, their weaknesses of mind and body, afflictions of all sizes and sorts, the way so often they blundered or were driven by internal chemic fires” (142), Dreiser continued, “I was never tired of looking at the hot, hungry, weary slums” (212).

Throughout *A Book about Myself* one could read Dreiser’s sensitivity to the pain life inflicted in the form of hunger, weariness, uncertainty of fortune and the absurdity of life on the whole. Though he was curious about the industrial tycoons, he writes, “it was the underdog that always interested me more than the upper one, his needs, his woes, his simplicities” (372). Again and again in his autobiography, he broods over the impermanence of life and absurdity of labour, his conviction is that only living is of absolute value:

I could see the tiny sands of my little life’s hourglass sifting down, and what was I achieving? Soon the strength of time, the love
time, the gay time, of colour and romance, would be gone, and if I
had not spent it fully, joyously, richly what would there be left for
me then? The joys of a mythical heaven or hereafter played no
part in my calculations. When one was dead one was dead for all
time. Hence the reason for the heart-break over failure here and
now; the awful tragedy of a love lost, a youth never properly
enjoyed. Think of living and yet not living in so thrashing a world
as this, the best of one’s hours passing unused or not properly used.
Think of seeing this tinkling phantasmagoria of pain and pleasure,
beauty and all its sweets, go by, and yet being compelled to be a
bystander, a mere onlooker, enhungered but never satisfied! (200)

This longing could be found in all of his works. Dreiser found out that man
laboured in vain and the seemingly usefulness of labour was pretentious. Man,
however rich or famous, was not in control of his destiny:

Most of these young men looked upon life as a fierce, grim
struggle in which no quarter was either given or taken, and in
which all men laid traps, lied, squandered, erred through illusion; a
conclusion with which I now most heartily agree. (72)

In all his works both in fiction and in autobiography, Dreiser has defined
success, power, place, religion, art and wealth as an “illusion” – impulsively
necessary and attractive – worth nothing. Though his protagonists are aware of
the transitory nature of their pursuit they cannot but follow it. All his protagonists
are the victims of this search for the illusory, the society promptly aids and abets.

James Farrell is also of the same view:

To him [Dreiser] evil is social: all his novels are concerned with social history, the social process of evil. Ambition, yearning, aspiration – these all revolve around this problem, and it in turn revolves around the role of money. He has related social causation . . . to the individual pattern of destiny. (26)

Dreiser’s central characters are ‘pathetic’. For all their differences, Carrie, Hurstwood, Eugene Witla, Jennie Gerhardt and Clyde Griffiths come to feel essential the same thing that the superman Cowperwood does: “. . . the pathos of the discovery that even giants are but pygmies, and that an ultimate balance must be struck” (The Titan 551). Dreiser’s characters are ruled by forces or emotions governed by the society over which they have no control. Their emotions lead them and they simply are puppets. For them infinite yearning for complete but unattainable victory over others is an exquisite form of suffering. The tragic figures of Dreiser attempt to reach an accommodation with their world by conquest, and suffering is endless, never to be transcended ceasing only in death.

Dreiser in his novels was expounding his conviction of the essential purposelessness of life. Expounding the purposelessness of life is the backbone of his first novel, Sister Carrie. Carrie Meeber, an eighteen year old simple country girl, comes to city to seek her fortune. At the beginning of her excursion into the city, a world of wealth makes her think that the visible show of the
wealthy reflects inner contentment. The search for fulfillment through the American Dream was proving inadequate while it was still far from attainment. Carrie fails to discover what haven it is she seeks – riches or simple life of old:

At her window, she thought it over, rocking to and fro, and gazing out across the lamp-lit park toward the lamp-lit houses . . . too pensive to do aught but rock and sing. . . . She longed and longed and longed. It was now for the old cottage room in Columbia City, now the mansion upon the Shore Drive, . . . She was sad beyond measure, and yet uncertain, wishing, fancying. (*Sister Carrie* 105)

First she thought she would be happy if she had nice clothes. After meeting Mrs. Vance it vanishes into the air. Its only for a time the novelty of her life with Hurstwood enables to stay complacent. Then she appraises the style of Mrs. Vance and senses the superficiality of Hurstwood’s manner:

Her situation was cleared up for her. She felt that life was becoming stale, and therein she felt cause for gloom. The old helpful, urging melancholy was restored. The desirous Carrie was whispered to concerning her possibilities. (273-74)

When Hurstwood discloses Carrie that their marriage is not valid, she finds herself taking roles of any kind. In life as well as in the play in which she has procured a part, she is nothing. The renewed patronage of Drouet, and even of Mrs. Vance, now constitutes no enticement. Dreiser confides: “it does not take money long to make plain its impotence, providing the desires are in the realm of affection” (405). Carrie eschews the obvious comforts that prosperity and fame
can provide. Dreiser here points unmistakably to the failure of the American Dream to requite her needs:

Chicago dawning, she saw the city offering more of loveliness than she had ever known, and instinctively, by force of her moods alone, clung to it. In fine raiment and elegant surroundings, men seemed to be contended. Hence, she drew near these things. Chicago, New York; Drouet, Hurstwood; the world of fashion and the world of stage – these were but incidents. Not them, but that which they represented, she longed for. Time proved the representation false. (443)

Carrie Meeber is a complaint against the goals of American life and their deleterious influence on the character of men and women who mistake it for real happiness. Carrie has failed to find happiness in the attainment of these goals not because she has forfeited her virtue to attain them, but because the goals themselves were unworthy; the fault then is not hers but society’s. She understands this much at the novel’s end. She is one of the few survivors of the ordeal American society imposes on the aspiring poor.

Carrie’s misplaced belief in materialism is the fault of the society she lives. She adopted its goals because appearances and social pressures led her to believe happiness lay in their attainment:

Here was Carrie, in the beginning poor, unsophisticated, emotional, responding with desire to everything most lovely in life, yet finding herself turned as by a wall. Laws to say: “Be allured, if
you will, by everything lovely, but draw not nigh unless by righteousness.” Convention to say: “you shall not better your situation save by honest labour.” If honest labour be unremunerative and difficult to endure; if it be the long, long road, which never reaches beauty, but wearies the feet and the heart; if the drag to follow beauty be such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather the despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the first stone? Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. (443-44)

In expectation of being “lifted into that which is best” (444) Carrie struck an amoral relationship with Drouet and then with Hurstwood. She considers them as ladders to success. When she finds them useless she never hesitates to ditch them. Dreiser sees Carrie as “an illustration of the devious ways by which one who feels, rather than reasons, may be led in the pursuit of beauty” (445). Carrie’s dream of salvation remains clouded by doubts: “. . . she wanted pleasure, she wanted position, and yet she was confused as to what these things might be” (130). Her stunning performance in an amateur theatrical reveals new possibilities, yet on the streets, amid her satisfaction, she is “pained by the sight of the white-faced, ragged men who slopped desperately by her in a sort of wretched mental stupor” (130).

Ames regards the glittering pleasure of the city with distrust out of a sense of the self-defeating qualities of desire. He tells Carrie that everyone is more or less dissatisfied and no one has exactly what the heart wishes. It is Ames who
creates an awareness of the euphoria of the American materialism. He alone touches upon a possible explanation for her inner discontent. But he cannot offer a blue print for happiness. In the closing passage of the book, Dreiser suggests that Carrie may never know personally the happiness she dreams of. Dreiser discloses: “In her walks on Broadway, she no longer thought of the elegance of the creatures who passed her. Had they more of that peace and beauty which glimmered afar off, then were they to be envied” (444).

Carrie’s drive for success can be related to Dreiser’s own compulsive drive for success. Along with this drive there was an ambivalent criticism of success, even a rejection of it, a conviction that success is bound to be empty and meaningless. Success is sought so desperately only as a compensation for some fundamental and irremediable deprivation or failure, and that no success can, in the end, ever be surrogate for what has been denied. So Carrie is unfulfilled despite her own dramatic charisma, gowns, carriages, influential friends, substantial income, applause and publicity.

The rocking chair symbol used throughout the novel alludes to the inner discontent. Carrie at the end of the novel comes to near knowledge of the emptiness of the material state to which she aspires. Her realisation that material achievements could not satisfy her leaves her feeling discontented. When Carrie reaches her immediate goals of prosperity and renown, she pauses to consider further what she needs to be happy. Carrie has everything but nothing could satisfy her, and the rocking chair – motion without progress, life spent in mere
repetition, a hypnotic dream without content – is a perfect image of the success that “got nowhere”:

Oh Carrie, Carrie! Oh blind strivings of the human heart!
Onward, onward, it saith, and where beauty leads, there it follows.
Whether it be the tinkle of a lone sheep bell o’er some quiet landscape, or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places, or the show of soul in some passing eye, the heart knows and makes answer, following. It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. Know, then that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel. (445)

Dreiser’s characters are displaced. Their desire for self-fulfillment is in conflict with the environment. They yearn in a world of limits; their struggle seems to bring into operation destructive counterforce. They believe that they are independent creatures of free will, but they are victims of their appetites, of physical needs, of other men, and of the universe. They are men of romantic illusions, often duped by a sense of power and strength they do not have, much like the doomed characters of tragedy. They often blindly co-operate in the process of events, which bring them to a fate they try to avoid.

Hurstwood is one of the tragic characters. His desire for Carrie is overwhelming and his passion is no longer coloured with reason. He decides to
make his “try for Paradise” (183) by spiriting her off to Montreal and New York with the help of a ruse and the weakness of her will to resist. Hurstwood’s history is the ruinous power of the American Dream. Dreiser offers a careful account of Hurstwood’s decline. As Carrie withdraws into one kind of isolation, Hurstwood withdraws into another. Hurstwood plummeting from the pinnacle of success is more pathetic. Hurstwood steals $10,000 from his office and takes Carrie with him to Montreal. Even as the train carries him away from Chicago he is remorseful. It shows that Hurstwood lacks true force. His rebellion, after all, is not rooted in his passions but in his dissatisfaction with his social goals.

Hurstwood arrives at New York a man self-condemned; nothing in New York could change that. He had seen himself as a man of substance in Chicago and had liked the role. He arrived in New York shorn of the reputation and identity that went with his old life, yet unequipped to understand what the pattern of his new life should be. His sense of loss leaves him unable to face up to the exigencies of his new life. Although he has Carrie, the prize he believed would make up for all other lacks, he is far from being fulfilled. Significantly, the manager’s grip on life loosens as soon as he begins to suffer a diminishing of future oriented desire. As his sad odyssey unfolds in New York, he begins to brood more and more over “the good olden days,” luxuriating in pleasures of the past that he had turned his back on.

As Hurstwood declines, his waning enthusiasm and a yen for seclusion are accompanied by a growing conservatism about money, symptomatic of his fading sense of affluence and his losing expectations. His manner of graciousness
declines. Not only does his manner lapse, but his appearance does, too. He neglects to shave or bathe, and strews his clothes about indifferently. The loss of sex urgency is reflected in his now lustless eye. When Carrie denies him her bed, he makes no complaint. Even without money, Hurstwood might have kept Carrie had he kept his self esteem. Devoid of it, the man who awed Carrie had ceased to exist. She tries to goad him into some response, but even insults stir no vestige of pride. He sinks into the role of menial attending to domestic chores like cooking, shopping and bartering with clerks while Carrie supports him.

Hurstwood makes a final, desperate effort at rehabilitation offering him as a strike breaker in a street car strike. Although a lingering pride makes him reluctant even to ask for a meal ticket, Hurstwood’s fitful longings for new life lead to a disastrous denouement. As he is drawing nearer to sordid death – Hurstwood ruminates his past:

Constant comparison between his old state and his new showed a balance for the worse, which produced a constant state of gloom or, at least, depression. Now, it has been shown experimentally that a constantly subdued frame of mind produces certain poisons in the blood, called katastates, just as virtuous feelings of pleasure and delight produce helpful chemicals called anastates. The poisons generated by remorse inveigh against the system, and eventually produce marked physical deterioration. To these Hurstwood was subject. (292)
As Carrie begins to climb to success in the theatre, transcending her role as harem slave, Hurstwood approaches his final degradation sinking to the slave like role of being auctioned off on a street corner. Hurstwood stands motionless on the street corner waiting to move only at the will of another. Here is an ironic code to his material ambitions. Carrie’s appearance in Under the Gaslight in Chicago, for the first time aroused in Hurstwood the determination to possess her. In a squalid flophouse, Hurstwood sniffs out the gaslight and lies down to await the bliss of annihilation. Hurstwood’s story was meant to complement Carrie’s story, to show how precarious is the ideal she pursues. Through Hurstwood, Dreiser strikes at those goals of American life which bade men live half-empty lives, or lured them to ruin. His emotional commitment of the American Dream failed him. He died not of his love for Carrie, but for the love of his old illusions.

Like Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt is concerned with the pretty young women of the 1880s. Like Carrie’s, Jennie’s liaisons defy the established conventions of the day. Both Carrie and Jennie progress in knowledge and sophistication under the tutelage of the men in their lives. Both women ultimately fail to achieve fulfillment, each is finally puzzled by her experiences. Jennie helped her mother scrub floors in a posh hotel in Columbus, Ohio, where the two have been assigned odd jobs. When she observes the spectacle of wealth in the hotel and the imposing houses nearby, she is filled with “half-defined emotion” (Jennie Gerhardt 8). While collecting laundry at the hotel, Jennie meets the United States Senator, George Brander. She is interested in his influence and wealth. She finds herself late one evening in his hotel room awaiting his return.
from the jail where he has arranged the release of her brother, who had been arrested for stealing coal. Responding to Brander’s own supplications, Jennie yields to him sexually. Senator Brander dies leaving her pregnant. Forced to look for work, she finds it as a maid for a well-to-do family in Cleveland. There she meets the second man in her life, Lester Kane, the thirty-six-year-old son of a prominent Cincinnati family.

Lester Kane is committed to inheritance to the American Dream of an age in which “the impact of materialised forces is well-nigh irresistible: the spiritual nature is overwhelmed by the shock” (132). He is “the natural product of a combination of elements – religious, commercial, social – modified by that pervading atmosphere of liberty . . . which is productive of almost uncounted freedom of thought and action” (133). When he meets Jennie, he is magnetically and chemically drawn by her beauty, but above all by her purity of spirit and her attitude towards sex which is “bound up with love, tenderness, service” (144).

Even after Lester possesses Jennie, he remains restless fearing that his relationship with her will cost him his material comforts. Lester’s father dies, leaving a testament stipulating that if Lester abandons Jennie he will receive his full inheritance; if he marries her, he will receive $10,000 a year for life, but he will lose his share of the family fortune. Lester has three years to decide. Loath to hurt Jennie, he procrastinates but weds Letty Pace Gerald, a wealthy widow and an old admirer. Marriage to Letty would be a most attractive solution to Lester’s dilemma, but in the end he realises that Jennie’s love is the only happiness he will ever know in a life that he finds increasingly meaningless.
The war that goes on between self and society is the source of Jennie’s and Lester’s dilemma and their loss of free will. Outside forces negate volition. The coercive strength wielded by society and economics works upon Lester and he thinks of the retribution that may follow night and day if he chooses Jennie:

In this world of ours the activities of animal life seem to be limited to a plane or circle. . . . A fish, for instance, may not pass out of the circle of the seas without courting annihilation; a bird may not enter the domain of the fishes without paying for it dearly. . . . In the case of man, however, the operation of this theory of limitations has not as yet been so clearly observed. . . . When men or women err – that is, pass out from the sphere in which they are accustomed to move – it is not as if the bird had intruded itself into the water, or the wild animal into the haunts of man. Annihilation is not the immediate result. People may do no more than elevate their eyebrows in astonishment, laugh sarcastically, lift up their hands in protest. And yet so well defined is the sphere of social activity that he who departs from it is doomed. Born and bred in this environment, the individual is practically unfitted for any other state. (238)

Men or women when they stray away from the sphere, to which they are acclimatised, meet with disaster. Lester Kane has to choose between “disaster” and existence. If he marries Jennie Gerhardt, he will become a social outcast and will lose his father’s property and thus meet disaster on the physical plane. He
chooses physical existence, rather than a life in a spiritual plane. He likes to enjoy the labour of the physical rather than the spiritual. Lester looses Jennie to retain his accustomed wealth and to be active in his father’s business and to maintain the influence exerted by his family and the polite society which wants him to be “respectable”. Lester realises the worthlessness of his choice rather late. In one of his meetings with Jennie he philosophises:

I was just as happy with you as I ever will be . . . all of us are more or less pawns. We’re moved about like chessmen by circumstances over which we have no control. . . . After all, life is more or less of a farce. . . . It’s a silly show. The best we can do is to hold our personality intact. It doesn’t appear that integrity has much to do with it. (401)

Lester realises the greatness of Jennie, and he is constantly pricked in conscience for the wrong he has done to Jennie. It haunted him even to his death bed. He found that the physical comforts his status in the society offered is of no match to his spiritual companionship his Jennie could offer. Happiness fled from him. He confesses to Jennie at his death bed:

I haven’t been satisfied with the way we parted. It wasn’t the right thing, after all. I haven’t been any happier. I’m sorry. I wish now, for my own peace of mind, that I hadn’t done it . . . . It wasn’t right. The thing wasn’t worked out right from the start; but that wasn’t your fault. I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you that. I’m glad I’m here to do it. (422)
Lester dies in remorse for not marrying Jennie. His compromise with the world of materialism at the expense of his spiritual solace in the company of Jennie pushes him to the world of illusion and depravity.

The American society that had become materialistic to the core, glittering with blandishments for the young encouraged them to pursue “the dream of success.” In Herkimer county New York in 1906, a young man named Chester Gillette found his pregnant sweetheart to be an intolerable barrier to his hopes for rising in the world. He lured her with the prospect of a lovers’ outing to Big Moose Lake and drowned her. The victim’s name was Grace Brown, and her murderer was almost immediately discovered, apprehended, tried, convicted and executed. It was not a stray incident in America. It had a string of other incidents often reported in American newspapers that scared the public. Dreiser being familiar with such incidents, thanks to his role as a reporter, found it a suitable theme for his novel he named *An American Tragedy*.

Clyde Griffiths is a sensitive youth who longs for material and sensual pleasures of life but lacks the strength and guile necessary to gain them. Clyde’s aspirations to rise in the world, to be a success as measured by money and social position, were those stimulated and sanctioned by the twentieth century capitalist society. Clyde inwardly rejects the religious work and poverty of his parents. During the street corner services in which he is an unwilling participant, he keeps “saying to himself that he did not wish to do this anymore, that he and his parents looked foolish and less than normal” (*An American Tragedy* 7). Indeed, “the principal thing that troubled Clyde up to his fifteenth year, and for long after in
retrospect, was that the calling or profession of his parents was the shabby thing that it appeared to be in the eyes of others” (8). He feels certain that “people . . . looked down upon him and his brothers and sisters for being the children of such parents” (8).

Clyde’s dissatisfaction and his inferiority complex stem from the false values of the society. Clyde, even in his early years, showed sensitivity to the judgments made on the basis of society’s materialistic standards for measuring a person’s significance. It resulted in alienation from his family and its life. Being “as vain and proud as he was poor” (12), Clyde “was one of those interesting individuals who looked upon himself as a thing apart – never quiet wholly and indissolubly merged with the family of which he was a member” (13).

When Clyde applies for a job at the Green Davidson, he contrives diplomatic talk and an ungratiating smile because it occurred to him that if he wanted to get on, he ought to insinuate himself into the good graces of people and do or say things that would make them like him. In the same manner, he tries to imitate the style and dresses of his cousin, the son of wealthy Samuel Griffiths, Gilbert. It is Eddie Doyle, from among his fellow bellboys, whose clothes Clyde studies and duplicates. He takes Hortense, to Frissell’s on dates because of its evident reputation. Clyde starts buying flowers for Hortense and then seeks to obtain her sexual favours by purchasing gifts. He feels himself different from what he was – more subdued, less romantic, and more practical, certain that if he tries now, imitates the sober people of the world and with those only, some day he may succeed.
When Clyde has the opportunity to meet with Samuel Griffiths in the club, he employs his characteristic approach to make a good impression. He makes a claim that he has always thought he would be suitable to the shirt and collar business, and makes his most direct appeal by describing his intense eagerness to join some company where there is real chance to work up and make something of himself. In the words of Paul Orlov, Clyde “feigns an interest in fine shirts and collars so that he may play roles that will permit him to wear such articles as part of the “clothing” of an achieved ideal identity” (140).

Even while Clyde is at Kansas City, his initial experiences teach him the importance of being conversant with popular fads aside from dressing, drinking and dancing. At the instance of Hortense, he acquires the skill of dancing so that he may be accepted as one of her admirers. Dreiser carefully tells us that Clyde does not find dancing intrinsically enjoyable. Instead, he responds to the activity as something that is expected of him if he is to fit into the higher circle. In order to attract a girl like Hortense to whom dance is a major concern, he learns to dance as a means to social success. He also learns to swim, dive and canoe in the hopes that some day the Griffiths will acknowledge him socially:

And there, because he was always thinking that if by chance he should be taken up by the Griffiths, he would need as many social accomplishments as possible, and by reason of encountering a man who took a fancy to him and who could both swim and dive, he learned to do both exceedingly well. (An American Tragedy 262-63)
Clyde, the underprivileged boy, becomes a victim of American class discrimination and economic inequality. As the “poor relation” of Samuel Griffiths, owner of a collar factory, his sole ambition is to get ahead in society. Attending parties and dances becomes the only satisfying activity to him. The idea of tying himself to the pregnant Roberta, who has lost all her charms, horrifies him, when his affair with the beautiful, wealthy and socially prominent Sondra Finchley is making unexpected progress.

Dreiser examines the foolishness of Clyde’s hopefulness. Clyde’s future in the factory is not exactly bright. His career is bound to end with old Mr. Griffiths’ death or retirement. Clyde dreams of marrying Sondra and being taken into her father’s business, thus escaping Gilbert’s power. But this too is an unsound hope. Sondra herself is reluctant to discuss marriage and her parents are wary of Clyde. In all of the ‘open gates’ that Clyde thinks are before him at various times, he is deceived. Clyde labours under delusion.

*An American Tragedy* suggests the American’s belief in solutions. Dreiser attacks the popular belief that no matter how complex, how unfortunate a dilemma, a solution is always possible. Young men found marriage with rich girls an easy way to climb up the social ladder. They considered it a golden opportunity to realise their dream. Mrs. Helen Dreiser in her *My Life with Dreiser* remarks that Dreiser “had been forced on his mind not only by the extreme American enthusiasm for wealth as contrasted with American poverty, but the determination of so many young Americans . . . to obtain wealth quickly by marriage” (72).
Clyde finds Roberta a spoilsport, a hurdle to his final entry into the upper class. He makes arrangements for a premarital honeymoon with Roberta. Though he has no guts to carry out what he has planned, he hires a boat in the method of a reported crime in newspaper. He persuades Roberta to an isolated lake, Big Bittern. He is totally upset and in a state of dilemma. Worried by his grim countenance, Roberta moves towards him. Clyde gets irritated and pushed out at her with the camera. As she is struck, she screams; Clyde tries to help her but his impulsive movements inadvertently capsize the boat. Roberta gets hit by the gunwale and cries for help when she is sinking. Clyde turns a deaf ear to her and swims back.

The sunken camera and the hidden tripod lead police to Clyde Griffiths. Clyde’s residence is searched and the police discovered the pleading letters of Roberta. Clyde is arrested and put to trial. The public opinion is much against Clyde. The evidence against Clyde is overwhelming, even though the question of guilt is so complex that not even Clyde is certain about whether or not he actually murdered Roberta. As things turn out he does not have a chance; the jury convicts him of murder in the first degree, and he is sentenced to the electric chair. All appeals fail and Clyde makes his last walk. Dreiser writes:

Now it was here; now it was being opened. There it was – at last – the chair he had so often seen in his dreams. . . . He was being pushed toward that – into that – on – on – through the door which was now open – to receive him – but which was as quickly closed
again on all the earthly life he had ever known. (An American Tragedy 852)

The worldview that Dreiser sets forth in An American Tragedy is the deterministic view that a person’s fate is sealed from birth, determined by his or her particular heredity and environment in tandem with the animal instincts that affect all humans. This philosophical and literary view is based on the observation of Charles Darwin and other scientists that only those animals that are born with attributes that make them well-suited to their environment are able to survive and thrive. This idea is often referred to as “the survival of the fittest”. Hence, Clyde Griffiths and Roberta Alden are destined to fail in their attempts to better themselves economically and socially. Born poor and powerless, they will die that way, and they can do nothing to change this. In fact, it is their efforts to improve their circumstances that bring about their deaths. It is as if nature punishes them for trying to subvert that natural order.

Dreiser’s An American Tragedy contains many autobiographical elements. Dreiser, like Clyde, grew up poor. His circumstances were even dire than those of his fictional counterpart. His family was not only poverty-stricken, it was combative and unstable. His household splintered, regrouped and careened from one place to another. Although religion played a role, as it does in Clyde’s family, in Dreiser’s family that role was neither predictable nor dependable. There was no emotional or moral centre.

Dreiser modelled Clyde’s parents partly on his own. His father was disabled and inept; his mother played the martyr. The episode in which Clyde’s
sister Esta is seduced, impregnated, and abandoned by an actor mirrors a similar event in the life of one of Dreiser’s sisters. Like Clyde’s family, Dreiser’s family spawned multiple scandals. Clearly, Dreiser’s heredity did not mark him for success in the competitive, fast-changing, industrialised society into which he was born. He did not even get a solid education, partly because of his family’s instability and partly because of his own unwillingness or inability to profit from formal education. Dreiser looks very much like Clyde Griffiths, the character he invented to show the futility of efforts at economic and social self-improvement.

The similarities between Dreiser and Clyde Griffiths do not end in family background or childhood alone. Like Clyde, Dreiser had a strong sex drive and lacked an equally strong moral orientation that might have controlled it. Dreiser was unfaithful not only to his wife but to his mistresses. In a dozen different ways, Dreiser flouted social convention and generally accepted ethics. He aligned himself with communism, a political system that the vast majority of Americans condemned. By behaviour as well as by birth, Dreiser seemed destined for failure. Indeed, for lesser offenses than his own, he punishes his characters in An American Tragedy because that is what the worldview predicts: those who break the law of the jungle, whether the jungle is a jungle or a small town in New York or American society at large, should pay the price.

Dreiser holds and promotes in his writing a worldview that so badly contradicted his own experience of the world. Many scholars argue that all the success and money that eventually came to Dreiser failed to erase his bitter memories of childhood poverty, instability, and humiliation. Perhaps he
repeatedly recreated them in his fiction as a way of making the world acknowledge his own earlier suffering. He was more altruistic than self-centered and wrote this way to call attention to the similar suffering of others. In any case, by his very success, he did not help his cause of convincing others that human beings are pawns to nature and the merciless law of the jungle. In the long run, life and the American society that he indicts in An American Tragedy were both kind to Dreiser. He became one of the most acclaimed writers of his generation. He lived well, and when he died in Hollywood, the epitome of all that glitters, he was buried among other celebrities in Forest Lawn Cemetery. He could hardly have been more successful.

There was one fact in Dreiser’s life that casts a slight shadow over his gleaming achievements. He was denied first the Pulitzer Prize and later the Nobel Prize in spite of the fact that many of his influential contemporaries thought he deserved one or both. Interestingly, the man who in his fiction portrayed the futility of trying to change fate campaigned for the prizes, especially the Nobel. His personal correspondence provides a record of his unsuccessful attempts to gain the Nobel Prize, and these efforts provide, in a limited sense, a parallel to Clyde’s desperate efforts to win the similarly unattainable Sondra Finchley.

Dreiser in his novels went on to study the impact of the society and its conspicuous tension on the lives of individuals. Money is the most important social yardstick and if the individual is to rise, he must, somehow, gain possession of enough of it to secure him a place in the class he desires to enter. The pursuit of glamorous life reduces men to animal existence. In the massive struggle for
survival, human beings stumble and fall. Dreiser’s characters are often victims of ambition to have all the worldly luxuries within their reach. Carrie Meeber, Hurstwood, Lester Kane, Eugene Witla, and Clyde Griffiths are the victims of the same “condition” that afflicted Cowperwood. Entirely immersed in the values of their society, they think and act within the framework of the well-liked mendacity.

_The “Genius”_ describes the conflict between artistic dedication and the distractions of the unbridled sex drive and of materialism. Eugene Tennyson Witla was born in Alexandria, Illinois. He is a creature of dreams. His dreams are made of material possessions and status. His artistic mind has an intense sense of beauty that leads him into a number of difficulties: “He admired girls, – was mad about them, – but only about those who were truly beautiful. . . . He invested them with more beauty than they had; the beauty was in his own soul. But he did not know that” (The “Genius” 12).

Eugene is bewitched towards doom and destruction by this “illusion” of beauty. A sight of a beautiful girl can trigger in Witla an unquenchable thirst to possess her. It started with Stella Appleton when he was seventeen, whose ‘beauty like a tightened bow’ (12), shoots love into his heart. Many other girls fall a prey to his passion – Margaret Duff, Ruby Kenny, Angela Blue, Christina Channing, Frieda Roth, Carlotta Wilson and Suzanne Dale. Except Christina Channing and Carlotta Wilson all fall under the age group of eighteen and below. Witla gluts upon his illusions prodded by his uncurbed appetites lacking the least semblance of self-discipline. Eugene desires for fame and dreams of all that it
could offer him. He likes to become famous while he is still young and healthy to enjoy carnal pleasures:

   The hope of fame – what hours of speculation, what pulses of enthusiasm, what fevers of effort, are based on that peculiarly subtle illusion! . . . Fame partakes of the beauty and freshness of the morning. It has in it the odour of the rose, the feel of rich satin, the colour of the cheeks of youth. If we could but be famous when we dream of fame, and not when locks are tinged with grey, faces seamed with the lines that speak of past struggles, and eyes wearied with the tensity, the longings and the despairs of years!

   To bestride the world in the morning of life, to walk amid the plaudits and the huzzahs when love and faith are young; to feel youth and the world’s affection when youth and health are sweet – what dream is that, of pure sunlight and moonlight compounded. A sun-kissed breath of mist in the sky; the reflection of moonlight upon water; the remembrance of dreams to the waking mind – of such is fame in our youth, and never afterward. (223)

   Eugene Witla explains the inevitability in a society designed to serve material ends. As a youth Eugene Witla “liked to lie in the hammock at home, spring, summer or fall, and look at the blue sky showing through the trees. A soaring buzzard poised in speculative flight held his attention fixedly. . . . The beauty of a bird in flight, a rose in bloom, a tree swaying in the wind – these held him” (11-12). While Eugene’s earliest feeling has been “an intense sense of
beauty” (12) there coexists within him a desire for material well being, a longing for fine clothes, vehicles and attractive women. He goes to Chicago as much to make money as to become an artist, trying to satisfy the demands made on him by society.

Dreiser as a purveyor of “reality” presents the dreams of Eugene in the light of the day to show us how paltry they really are and how destructive of Eugene’s talents. In addition to this question of wasted potential, there is also the concern that Eugene’s commercial success is not for good. Just when the dream seems to have been realised, the “heartache” returns. As Eugene finds out, the apartment on Riverside Drive cannot provide complete happiness.

Unfortunately, “the road downward” described in Sister Carrie is dangerously close to it and is a constant threat. As Colfax tells Eugene in The “Genius”: “I want to tell you something! You’re going in there now with full authority, but don’t you fall or stub your toe or get sick or make any mistakes. If you do, God help you! if you do, I’ll eat you alive” (478). Eugene “felt as though the red cap of a cardinal had been put upon his head, and at the same time an axe suspended over him” (479). He feels that the assistants under him “could turn on him as lions on a tamer and tear him to pieces” (509). Eugene is unable to see the real nature of the publishing concern, so overwhelmed is he by the battle. However, while he considers himself to have given “the best fight,” the cause, according to the narrator, does not deserve it, for the publishing concern deals in nothing but “mental pabulum” (476).
After a prolonged siege of mental disorientation, Eugene works his way up the corporate ladder to the position of art editor with a ten thousand dollar salary. Significantly, at this clearly dangerous apex of financial success, for the first time in the novel Eugene’s capitalistic and romantic aspirations run parallel. While he is making money at rapid speed with Universal Magazines and risking it all on wild real estate speculation on the side, he simultaneously embarks on a romantic venture with Suzanne that threatens to undo his marriage, his social standing with the New York elite, and his position at Universal Magazines.

Suzanne is the daughter of an influential friend of the Universal Magazine Corporation. Eugene loses his position at the Universal Magazine Corporation because of the scandal elicited by his romance with Suzanne. Eugene has almost no financial resource, since all of his assets are tied up in the quickly-failing seaside resort. And finally, Suzanne loses interest in Eugene and returns to her mother. Eugene sees that he is “in danger of complete social and commercial extinction” (669).

Eugene questions the substance of the aspirations that have guided most of his adult life: “His shimmering world of dreams was beginning to fade like an evening sky. It might be that he had been chasing a will-o’-the-wisp, after all” (667) and he ultimately describes Suzanne as “a mirage dissolved into its native nothingness” (678). By society’s standards, Eugene Witla is completely destroyed. He responds childishly, stubbornly clinging to the desires that have brought him so little satisfaction and such a great deal of frustration and failure.
Eugene is deprived of his job, his wealth, his social position, and his lover, and finally his wife dies in childbirth.

Dreiser’s insistence on the economic aspect of life may seem repetitious. Dreiser, however, thought that the pursuit of wealth had become a national obsession and he considered this preoccupation utterly degrading and pathetically wasteful of human potential. Theodore Dreiser’s Trilogy of Desire is intended to show the futility of desire. The novel provides a unique key to an understanding of the author’s changing philosophy. The theme that finally emerges from The Stoic, published posthumously in 1947, is hardly prepared for the two preceding volumes, The Financier (1912) and The Titan (1914). The logical and perhaps the aesthetically most satisfactory conclusion of the trilogy would seem to be with the dissipation of Cowperwood’s fortune and the complete failure of all his grandiose and altruistic plans. Such was the outcome of the striking career of the businessman Charles T. Yerkes, the real-life model for Dreiser’s fictional portrait of the American financier.

Dreiser had planned his Trilogy as another study in futility. If the moral of Carrie Meeber’s life can be summarised in the words of the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Ecclesiastical 1: 1), the same text may yield an apt commentary on the life and work of Yerkes: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and behold: all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun” (2: 1). Indeed, the career of a powerful tycoon would seem a better illustration of the
theme of futility than that of the drifting and aimless Carrie, “A Waif amid Forces” (Sister Carrie 3).

Dreiser was amused by man’s futile and meaningless struggles. He had declared himself as an involved participant, and the books that followed speak not only of a marked change in attitude but also of commitment. Dreiser’s earlier uncritical fascination with the American financier which had found its expression in Hey, Rub – A – Dub – Dub has disappeared from the pages of later non-fictional works like Tragic America (1931) and America Is Worth Saving (1911). When he writes about political graft, the establishing of frontline construction companies or the buying of newspapers, and when he discusses the effect on the “little person” of “corporation greed in connection with railroads, streetcars, and buses” in 1931, his attitude and his approach are radically different. He is now criticising, even castigating, where he previously was merely looking on. This muckraker approach is continued in America Is Worth Saving which has chapters like “What Are The Objectives Of American Finance?” and “Have English And American Finance Co-operated With Hitler To Destroy Democracy?”

In Europe in 1911, when Dreiser was collecting material on Yerkes, the financiers of ancient Italy fascinated him. Compared to the Renaissance financier Dreiser found something lacking in his twentieth century American descendent: even though he had certainly been a ‘Giant’ or a ‘Titan,’ artistically thus far he is not much to survey. Dreiser tries to make amends for this in his Trilogy of Desire by making Cowperwood an artist in the realm of finance: “Cowperwood was innately and primarily an egoist and intellectual. . . . We think of egoism and
intellectualism as closely confined to the arts. Finance is an art” (The Financier 80). Cowperwood is generally not seen as acting from petty mercenary motives. He does not want money for its own sake nor “for what it will buy in the way of simple comforts” (121), but “for what it will control – for what it will represent in the way of dignity, force, power” (122). He rejects every religious principle that might impede his progress.

Cowperwood is indicted on charges of embezzlement and larceny and is sentenced to penitentiary. Dreiser drew with unusual care his account of Cowperwood’s imprisonment. It produces in him a sense of castration, implying a loss of the very source of force. While in prison, Cowperwood is given the chance to reflect on his material goals. He looked up at the stars and material goals, as cosmic waif, “thought of the earth floating like a little ball in immeasurable reaches of ether” (278). Here, for a rare moment, though the mood is brief he sees his own life as trivial in comparison. Though Cowperwood seems to be a man born to rule and govern, the closing paragraphs of The Financier voice forth the spirit of the last few paragraphs of Sister Carrie that in the attainment of his material goals, Cowperwood finds that happiness still eludes him. Even after all his achievements he feels a mysterious lack. However, he is to be the “master and no master, prince of a world of dreams whose reality was disillusion” (299).

Despite his ruthlessness, the protagonist of The Financier is a victim of the American Dream. He has married to advance himself, he has speculated to advance himself; but neither venture has prospered. In The Titan, however,
Cowperwood is ruthless, selfish and invulnerable. Cowperwood’s imprisonment has destroyed whatever humanity he possessed earlier. Dreiser does not want his reader to forget, even in the midst of Cowperwood’s business successes that powerful forces militate against man’s happiness. The tragedy of Aileen is a counterpart to the decline of Hurstwood. At times Aileen’s story surpasses that of Hurstwood in poignancy. She gave up more. She loved more. Her sex was frailer though her expectations had been greater. She falls from the pinnacle of youth and not from the treacherous crags of middle age. The break with Aileen disturbs Cowperwood more than the knowledge that he has turned the whole social element in Chicago against him. What it stirs up however is not animosity but inner perplexity. He “harboured . . . a kind of sorrow over the inevitable consequences of his own un-governable disposition, the will to freedom within himself. Change! Change! the inevitable passing of things” (*The Titan* 320).

Cowperwood moves from woman to woman seeking some mysterious fulfillment. And paralleling his frequent changes of mistress are his changes of locale, houses, clothes and artistic enthusiasms all, in a way, a part of his quest for beauty. He moves in an ascending spiral, constantly reaching out into the beyond, and stirring to fill his lacks as they appear. The power, mansions, art treasures, endless riches, and glory, which come from his Chicago and London ventures, all turn to “the ashes of Dead Sea fruit” (*The Financier* 299) because Cowperwood becomes the victim of “an understanding that could neither be inflamed by desire nor satisfied by luxury; a heart that was long since wearied by experience; a soul that was bereft of illusion as a windless moon” (299).
At the close of *The Titan*, only in his passion for beauty does hope exist that Cowperwood will someday let go his hold on materiality, seeking, if not knowledge, then a kind of comfort found neither in wealth, nor fame, nor power but in the mothering embrace of beauty. The wish to create something lasting that would transcend the money grubbing aspects of his life is present in Cowperwood from the early stage of his career. Throughout *The Titan* he showed a growing concern for his art collection and his New York mansion, and towards the end of his Chicago venture he began to see beauty as the ultimate end of his quest for power and fame. In *The Financier* and *The Titan* financial manipulations hold the centre of the stage; in *The Stoic* they are out in the wings.

*The Stoic* is the story of Cowperwood’s gradual extrication from the morass of the American Dream. He is not in America during much of the closing phase of his career. For Cowperwood, the absence fosters detachment. Through the questing, metaphysical spirit of Berenice, he is drawn steadily into deeper involvement with the aesthetic and spiritual. In the attainment of many successes, however, and in the experience of certain failures, he came to see that fulfillment did not lie in material things.

In 1927 Dreiser wrote to the Russian critic Sergei Dinamov that he had “no theories about life, or the solution of economic and political problems. Life, as I see it, is an organised process about which we can do nothing in the final analysis” (8). Although Cowperwood is not an old man in *The Stoic* [he is not much more than sixty when he dies] Dreiser starts preparing the reader for his
death early in the novel. In the first paragraph of *The Stoic*, his age is brought up as the first of two problems confronting him at the time of his Chicago defeat:

He was nearing sixty, and while seemingly as vigorous as ever, it would be no easy matter, he felt, with younger and equally resourceful financiers on the scene, to pile up the great fortune which assuredly would have been his if his franchise had been extended. (*The Stoic* 1)

Cowperwood is increasingly prone to reflections on the passage of time: “Time! Time! Time! Always the erosive process at work” (41). Before he is aware of any serious ailment, Cowperwood begins to tire easily. Reflecting on his difficulties he felt that “his position in almost all of its aspects was care-full and trying. He was fagged, and disconcerted. Perhaps the first premonitory breath of the oncoming winter of age” (154). At the death of Caroline Hand, one of his Chicago mistresses, he cannot avoid reflecting, “How much more was there for him” (185). Still, however, he felt confident: “He was getting along” (185). Then come his own sudden illness and the doctors’ death sentence, and from this point, thoughts of death and the purpose of life naturally command the centre of Cowperwood’s imagination.

Cowperwood plans to build a grand tomb for himself and Aileen, even before the full realisation that the end was only a year away, beside the art gallery and the hospital as his final bid for immortality. The first impulse to have a tomb erected came to Cowperwood when visiting the Pere-Lachaise cemetery. The sight of “ribbon-tied bouquets of roses and lilies” on the grave of Chopin “caused
Cowperwood to question the likelihood of flowers being strewn over his own grave, even a year after his death” (225). He is yet more deeply moved by the “obviously refined and very attractive woman” who strews “multicoloured blossoms” (226) on the tomb of Heloise and Abelard:

This colourful and moving incident set up a train of thought in Cowperwood’s mind which related to himself and the Aileen of his earlier days. . . . Suddenly there flashed into his mind the idea of a tomb for the two of them, a beautiful and enduring resting place. Yes, he would employ an architect, secure designs, he would build a beautiful tomb which would commemorate the fact that at least at one time he had cared for her as much as she cared for him. (226)

Thoughts of beauty and love retain their hold on Cowperwood to the very end. The old Cowperwood, however, remains as immune to religion and thoughts of transcendence as the young do. With Cowperwood’s awareness of the passage of time and of his own approaching death, there is a growing sense of the futility and senselessness of not only his latest financial venture but also of all life:

And now they were within its walls, graced and made respectable, the noble dead! Was any man noble? . . . He was scarcely prepared to believe it. Men killed to live – all of them – and wallowed in lust in order to reproduce themselves. In fact, wars, vanities, pretenses, cruelties, greeds, lusts, murder, spelled their true history, with only the weak running to a mythical saviour or god for aid. And the strong using this belief in a god to further the
conquest of the weak. And by such temples or shrines as this. He
looked, meditated, and was somehow touched with the futility of
so much that was still so beautiful. (137)

On the way home to New York for the last time “Cowperwood felt alone,
spiritually alone, at last admitting to himself that neither he nor any man knew
anything about life or its Creator” (247), but such faint stirrings of religiosity are
never allowed to shake his naturalistic philosophy. However, after his last
meeting with Aileen, he is “left with a sense of the probable futility of it all”
(262). The premonition that all his plans for the use of his vast fortune may
disintegrate with him gives him no desire to see it through himself. On the
contrary, he has become “bored and spiritually dubious of the import of life
itself” (262). This pessimistic view of life is quite consistent with the basic
philosophy that has governed Cowperwood’s life from the beginning and which
occasionally surfaced when “in his leisure moments – those free from practical
calculation, which were not many – he often speculated as to what life really was”
(The Titan 11).

As far as the career of Cowperwood is concerned, Dreiser held closely to
the original blueprint, and the eventual dissolution of his fortune parallels that of
Yerkes’: the newspapers print articles on how his millions “‘had faded like a
dream.’ In fact, one article was headed ‘What Availeth It?’ and painted Frank as
a complete failure” (The Stoic 303). In this respect, Dreiser had indeed written it
just that way. Before his death, Cowperwood laid aside all concern for the things
that had meant most to him, his financial ventures as well as the monuments to his memory provided for in his will.

*The Stoic* seems to be Dreiser’s most meaningful commentary on the failure of American Dream to satisfy the needs of the human spirit. When Carrie Meeber scaled the heights of her modest ambitions, Dreiser was there to insist that success had not brought her happiness. When Griffiths let his dreams entangle him in mortal complications, Dreiser was there to state that his goals, from the start, had been illusory. And Dreiser assures us that Hurstwood, Lester Kane, and Eugene Witla all turn at last from the American Dream with none of their expectations realised. Cowperwood differs from Dreiser’s other protagonists only in that he pursued, on a vaster scale, the same goals they pursued and had the drive and acumen the others lacked.

As death approaches, Cowperwood surveys his achievements and ponders on the vacuity of material success. For Cowperwood, the building of houses or art galleries constituted a renewal of the search for happiness that eluded him in mere material accomplishing. His will stipulates that his fortune be used to establish a chain of orphan asylums across America. His body has to be smuggled into his own home at one o’clock in the morning, where it lies unattended in stately isolation, strikingly signifying Cowperwood’s orphanhood – until Aileen discovers it and is reconciled. In his plans to benefit the world out of the fortune he has accumulated, Cowperwood is not successful. His estate is preyed upon by the greedy. His art collection is dispersed at auction. Judge Severing presides over the liquidation of his business holdings. Money
designated for a charity hospital vanishes before the hospital can be built. Aileen dies a few years later as a lonely bewildered woman.

A fortune of some $12,000,000 is quickly eaten away by taxes, assessments, litigation and more litigation. His great house and art collection are auctioned to pay off claims. There is no money to build the hospital he had arranged to build in the city of New York. Aileen is put out of her house, forced to take an absurdly small settlement, and dies of pneumonia without ever adjusting herself to the uncertainties of living in the shadow of continual litigation and nothing is known of what happens to the great London underground unification. Cowperwood is treated somewhat unkindly by the press as his enormous fortune and influence evaporate when he is no longer present to maintain them. He has made no permanent impression on the society.

The nine hundred and fifteen pages of notes Dreiser gathered on Yerkes include comments on the situation after his death, “his fortune plucked to the bone by ‘legal vultures,’ his whole world come to ashes” (Lehan 101). Richard Lehan remarks that the notes “end on the same anti-climactic and poignant note as The Stoic” (101). The career of Cowperwood closely follows that of Yerkes also in the final dissipation of his fortune.

The death of Cowperwood does conclude “Victory,” a short story Dreiser published in Chains: Lesser Novels and Stories in 1927. In his ruthlessness J. H. Osterman, who had accumulated his large fortune after he had passed the age of forty, bears resemblance to both Yerkes and Cowperwood. Osterman, however,
lacks both the sexual vitality and the intellectual capacity of Cowperwood. Unlike Cowperwood he does not have children:

His last years are empty and meaningless. At first it had seemed wonderful to be able to go, do, act, buy and sell as he chose, without considering anything save whether the thing he was doing was agreeable and profitable. He had thought that pleasure would never pall, but it had. . . . And what was the import of his success, anyhow, especially to one who had no children and no friends worthy of the name? There was no such thing as true friendship in nature. It was each man for himself, everywhere, and the devil takes the hindmost. It was life that used and tossed all aside, however great or powerful one might be. There was no staying life or the drift of time. (Dreiser, *Chains* 332)

Such are Osterman’s thoughts on life, and his general sense of futility is similar to Carrie’s as she sits in her rocking chair by the hotel room window. Osterman, however, is vaguely troubled by his conscience and in an attempt to give some meaning to his life of acquisition through a final act of altruism, he decides to will his fortune to the establishment of a nationwide chain of orphanages. Before the will is signed, Osterman collapses. Lying in his bed recovering from the stroke he asks to be left alone with his lawyers. A writing board is called for but Osterman is too weak to sign and his wife, fearing that her interests are threatened, also tries to intervene: “. . . he leaned forward and tried to grasp the pen. When he found he couldn’t he actually groaned. ‘The-the-I-I-I
want to-do something for-the-the’ Then he fell back, and the next moment was dead” (336).

As late as 1937 Dreiser told Robert H. Elias that “we were all at the mercy of glandular reactions and sense perceptions and that since one’s physical state controlled one’s activity . . . one’s will was set at naught” (Letters II: 533). Man’s lack of freedom to act according to his own will was one of the basic tenets of Dreiser’s view of life at the time he wrote this story. Osterman’s attempts to bring his life to a meaningful close are finally frustrated by fate [as suggested by the Quija board] or by the chance malfunctioning of his ‘physical state.’ Dreiser underscores man’s essential helplessness: “Just an ounce or two more of strength in that old codger’s system, and think what would have been done with those millions” (Dreiser, Chains 336). Thus, Dreiser’s notes on Yerkes as well as the short story “Victory” suggest that he had planned the last volume of his trilogy as an ironic comment on the futility of life. The end of Osterman and Cowperwood are very similar, but by the time, Dreiser came around to completing his Trilogy he had changed his mind about too many things to let his final statement be on the futility of the strivings of mankind.

*The Stoic* is as much as Berenice’s novel as it is Cowperwood’s. From the beginning, Berenice is given almost as much attention as the financier himself and the last fifty pages are hers alone. At the outset she seems to be an unlikely character for the role she is given to play in the conclusion. She is in no sense a foil for Cowperwood’s character. On the contrary, she is closely associated with the main driving forces in his life: desire for power and desire for love and beauty.
When Berenice came to him after the Chicago defeat Cowperwood felt that at last “he had the love of a woman who could truly support him in his quest for power, fame and prestige” (*The Stoic* 2). His last bid for power was inspired by Berenice who had first suggested him to look into “the traffic situation in London” (11).

Berenice is as amoral as her lover is. Indeed, even Cowperwood is at times troubled by her ruthlessness in pursuit of her aims. It was, after all, Berenice who had first suggested the possibility of providing Aileen with a male companion: “He had seized upon it as the only way to happiness with her, and so it was. Still, what of a mind that could think so shrewdly and ruthlessly? Might it not one day be turned on him? And then, what, since he cared so much” (148). At times the girl, with whom Cowperwood felt he could have “a genuine union of understanding and affection” (2), appears a scheming and calculating woman as when she considers the pros and cons of a possible match with Lord Stane.

Berenice’s aestheticism also relates her to the financier who was an artist in his own right. For Cowperwood she was the one woman who “had brought something besides passion and cleverness into his life, something sensitively involved with beauty and creative thought” (184). Where Cowperwood, however, “desired money in order to release its essential content, power, to be used by him as he pleased, Berenice appeared to demand the privilege of expressing her decidedly varied temperament in ways which would make for beauty and so satisfy her essentially aesthetic ideals” (6). Indeed, Berenice seems self-centred, her vision limited, compared with Cowperwood. She likes to have money and
power not to build huge houses but to surround herself with an “exquisite” environment. Where he is the artist, she is merely the aesthete:

She desired not so much to express herself in a given form of art as to live so that her life as well as her personality should be in itself an art form. She had more than once thought, if only she had great wealth, very great power, how creatively she would use it. She would never waste it on great houses and lands and show, but rather surround herself with an atmosphere which should be exquisite and, of course, inspirational. (6-7)

And as aestheticism is basically amoral, so Berenice claims, “I am more interested in the lovely things money can accomplish than I am in how it is made” (179). Berenice’s attitude to religion is essentially that of the younger Dreiser. She thinks of religion, at one point, as a possible pacifier for Aileen, as literally “a bandage for sore brains,” (Letters I: 337) as Dreiser had characterised religion and morality in a letter in 1921. When she goes to church, it is to satisfy an aesthetic need rather than a religious one, “more to dream over the simple architecture and agreeable service than to plead with God” (The Stoic 19). Berenice, for Cowperwood is “evasive, elusive, mysterious. . . . What would Berenice be like when next he saw her? He could not tell. And Berenice, conscious of this strangeness in herself, could not enlighten him or any other” (7).

Nevertheless, the first suggestion of a change in Berenice’s character seems sudden and unprepared for. At Canterbury, Cowperwood is restored from his pessimistic reflections by “occasional glimpses of Berenice, poised attentively
over a cross or religious inscription. . . . There was about her at such moments a seemingly non-material as well as mentally contemplative grace which brushed aside the tang of that pagan modernity which at other times gave her the force and glare of a red flower in a gray rock” (137). Later that day Berenice muses on:

. . . the mystery and immensity of voiceless time and space. Ah, to have understanding, knowledge! To think earnestly and seekingly for some reason or excuse for life! Was her own life merely to be one of clever, calculating, and ruthless determination to fulfill herself socially, or as an individual? What benefit could that be, to her or to anyone? What beauty would that create or inspire? (138)

Berenice’s vague longing for something outside her own self is merely an indication of the change that is to come, and even in the period after Cowperwood’s death she is rooted in aestheticism: “. . . as she saw herself, then and before, she was wholly concerned with the beauty of life, and such creative achievements as tended to broaden and expand its experiences” (275).

The transcendent quality of Cowperwood’s drive for power was strongly suggested towards the end of The Titan when he at last “saw clearly, as within a chalice-like nimbus, that the ultimate end of fame, power, vigour was beauty, and that beauty was a compound of the taste, the emotion, the innate culture, passion, and dreams of a woman like Berenice Fleming. That was it: that was IT” (The Titan 470). In The Stoic his passionate quest for beauty and love centres on Berenice. In a delirious vision before he dies, Cowperwood again relates her to something divine, and sees her as “Aphrodite! Goddess of the sea! Immaculately
white” (*The Stoic* 263). In her spontaneous response Berenice expresses her own wish to qualify for such a role. But Berenice must go beyond the limitations of her egocentric aestheticism before she can express the supreme value of life and represent the full content of the chalice of Cowperwood’s earlier vision.

Berenice’s search for understanding and knowledge takes her to India and the Guru Borodandaj in Nagpur, who promises her that she “will lose the suffering that comes from desire” (290). When she asked him about beauty which “so many people worshipped . . . in all its forms” and “were slaves to,” the Guru answered, “Even in the lowest kinds of attraction there is the germ of Divine Love” (297). But the Guru and his eastern religion can only help her on part of the road she has to travel, as Berenice realises when confronted with the social ills of India on her way home:

She was spiritually lacerated, and there sprang into her mind the assurance of the Gurus that God, Brahman, was All Existence, Bliss. If so, where was He? The thought stayed with her until it became all but unbearable, when suddenly there flamed the counterthought that this degradation must be met and overcome. And was not the All in All God speaking and directing her thus to assist, aid, change, until this earthy phase of Himself would be altered or transmuted into the exchange of evil for good? She wished so with all her heart. (301)
Such a transmutation would seem to call for no less than a universal social revolution, but Berenice seeks to do her part through charity. Berenice realises Cowperwood’s dream of a children’s hospital in the Bronx and becomes a nurse:

As she now searched her conscience, what place had charity ever had in her life? What had she ever done to help others? What had she ever done to justify her right to live? True, Cowperwood had not only conceived the idea of founding a hospital for the poor, but he had done everything humanly possible to bring it into existence, even though his plans had failed. But she – had she ever had a desire to help the poor? Not that she could recall. Her entire life, as she realised – with the exception of the past few years – had been spent in the pursuit of pleasure and self-advancement. But now she knew that one must live for something outside of one’s self, something that would tend to answer the needs of the many as opposed to the vanities and comforts of the few, of which she herself was one. (305-6)

Thus, it is through Berenice that the apparent blindness of Cowperwood’s desire can be converted to something meaningful. The longing for beauty may be seen behind the vague desires of Carrie as well as behind those of the more forceful young financier from Philadelphia, but the eventual metamorphosis of such desire as interpreted by Berenice is hardly suggested in Dreiser’s early work:

And as she walked about arranging the flowers in a bronze urn on the steps of the tomb, she thought that Cowperwood must
know, if he had not when he was here in the flesh, that his worship and constant search for beauty in every form, and especially in the form of a woman, was nothing more than a search for the Divine design behind all forms – the face of Brahman shining through. (305)

In Pere-Lachaise Cowperwood had seen the fresh flowers on the graves of Abelard and Heloise, an emblem of their greatness in art and love respectively as well as of their lasting influence on human lives. When Berenice carries her flowers to Cowperwood’s tomb after her return from India, the parallel is obvious [although perhaps not successful]. Where he had failed, she may be able to succeed for him: “She must go on, she must grow, she thought, and acquire, if possible, a real and deep understanding of the meaning of life and its spiritual import” (310).

In 1919, Dreiser was asked to read an advance copy of the Norwegian novelist Johan Bojer’s *The Great Hunger*. He found that it “evidences a love of and a hunger for Beauty, which is its greatest merit” (*Letters* I: 257), but continues: “Having said so much I must add that it fails with me intellectually. . . . Because in the end it is turned into a religious tract. His great discovery at last, the ‘satisfaction for his long hunger,’ is the Sermon on the Mount! . . . In my judgment, a novel should not be a religious tract. . . . The artist has but one duty: to present life ‘in the round’” (I: 258). Nothing could be more indicative of the change Dreiser had undergone than the fact that he let his last novel end in a religious tract. Even though the religion in the conclusion is supplied by India
rather than by Palestine, his text could well have been taken from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

Dreiser’s novels exemplify the spiritual vacuum in material success. His personal observations and experiences in life made him realise the futility of worldly success and pleasures. The first four novels *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *The Financier* and *The Titan*, are reflections of his realisation that material success was bound to lead to disillusionment. *Sister Carrie* is the story of a poor village girl, Carrie Meeber and her pursuit of material success. Her aim in life is money, luxury and success, but when she has her gowns and carriage, her furniture and bank account, her inner feeling is still one of longing and incompleteness: “Amid the tinsel and shine of her state” (*Sister Carrie* 444), she is lonely and unhappy.

By contrasting the attitude of the two characters – Jennie Gerhardt and Lester Kane – Dreiser’s second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt* illustrates Dreiser’s realisation that material success leaves one with discontentment and dissatisfaction. Jennie is simple, unselfish and kindhearted. She does not luster after money and material success; she sacrifices her life for the welfare of others. Even though conventional society does not recognise her noble heart and ill-treats her, she has no ill feeling towards people. However, Lester, her lover, gives importance to wealth and luxury and finally expresses his dissatisfaction and unhappiness over the achievement of these aims. Dreiser further illustrates this idea by portraying the life cycle of Cowperwood in *The Financier*, *The Titan* and *The Stoic*. These three novels reveal that even the strong are not free from
disillusionment if they give importance to material success and pleasure in their life. Material success is “a mulch of darkness” (The Titan 552) and in it “are bedded the roots of endless sorrows” (552).

Dreiser’s realisation of the futility of material goals led him to believe in the existence of a superior force but he was not able to decide whether the external force is well intentioned or malicious. After more conflicts and observations, he began to believe in a benevolent creative force. This belief made him still more emphatic in his view that material success would not only lead one to disillusionment but also to destruction. In The “Genius” Eugene Witla realises his error in pursuing pleasure in wealth and sex after his wife’s death in childbirth. He begins to understand the meaning of life. He discards the view that God is malicious, and believes in the benevolence of the Supreme Being and regains his peace.

Dreiser’s belief in the benevolent Supreme Being is confirmed in An American Tragedy too. The introduction of deeply religious characters like Elvira Griffiths and McMillan, the emphasis on repentance, salvation, and the employment of Biblical quotations are the result of his later belief. Dreiser shows in this novel that the pursuit of wealth and pleasure is the cause of the tragedy and emphasised the need for repentance for salvation. The last few chapters are completely devoted to the task of making Clyde accept the existence of a benevolent God. Clyde’s doubt and his later belief are in no way different from Dreiser’s own.
The years that followed the publication of *An American Tragedy* were the most important years in Dreiser’s life. He began to see order and meaning in all creation and had come to understand the limitations of science. He became tolerant even of organised religions. He saw the presence of God in each and everything. Dreiser’s deep faith in God and his advocacy of universal love are reflected and confirmed in his novel *The Stoic*.

In all the novels taken for study Dreiser makes it clear that the American Dream of Success if not pursued adapting proper means will not lead one to realise durable ends. Dreiser’s protagonists adapt questionable means to achieve material success. They are either destroyed in the process or left depressed and dejected even after they realise their material pursuits. Their achievements fail to give them the happiness they thought would accompany their successes.