Chapter Two

POWER AND THE GLORY

At the turn of the twentieth century between 1880 and 1930 a conspicuous aspect of society, consumerism – came into existence in America and Europe which conditioned and affected everyday experience of individuals, social formations, and the very shape of knowledge and understanding. In such a society, as Alan Trachtenberg argued, citizens “met a new world of goods: not goods alone,” he continued, “but a ‘world’ of goods, constructed and shaped by the store into objects of desire” (130).

From the founding of the United States through the early nineteenth century, the economy had been primarily agricultural, with the individual household being the centre of production. Individual families consumed, for the most part, only what they could themselves produce. The transition from an agricultural economy that centered on the family to an industrial order characterised by managerial capitalism, depended on the development of factories throughout the nineteenth century. Factories demanded centralised labour, large groups of unrelated people leaving the home and working under one roof. With this shift, work necessarily moved outside the home, and as that happened, the meaning of the family and the home also changed. Dreiser grounds Sister Carrie in this factory-based capitalist economy, highlighting its effects on individuals and families.
Sweeping economic change marked the period from the Civil War to the close of the nineteenth century. This transformation depended not only upon the factory system and a labour force centralized in cities, but also on a vast infrastructure of technology as well as communications and financial systems. Prior to the Civil War, individual state banks, as many as thousand five hundred of them, had issued their own currencies; only with the 1864 National Bank Act did the United States establish a national currency of paper money. Five years later, competing brokers were consolidated into the New York Stock Exchange. The telegraph was in commercial use by 1847, the transcontinental railroad completed in 1869, the telephone commercialised in the 1880s. Financial and technological innovations such as these allowed for an increased volume and speed of business. A striking example concerns the time it took to move freight from Philadelphia to Chicago: “nine weeks in 1849, three days in 1859” (Chandler 122). Since the capitalist economy depends on quickly moving goods from producer to consumers, speed became the order of the day. Human life was similarly set to the clock: because the railroads needed precisely synchronised schedules to operate effectively, time zones were instituted in 1883; meanwhile, “scientific management,” the brainchild of Frederick W. Taylor, devised time-motion studies to regulate every moment of a worker’s day.

David Landes, in his Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World, has argued that the remarkable transformation of human life at the turn of the twentieth century is comparable to the “Neolithic revolution” the “shift away from hunting and gathering made possible towns and cities, with all that
they yielded in cultural and technical exchange and enrichment” (41). The Neolithic revolution, had at its “core,” Landes says, “an enhancement of the supply of energy, because this feeds and changes all aspects of human activity” (40), just as the advent of finance capital made power – in the forms of electricity – a ‘consumable’ good.

In a consumer society people consumed goods and services beyond necessity, beyond luxury, and even beyond what Thorstein Veblen described in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* as the “non-industrial upper-class occupations . . . government, warfare, religious observances, and sports” (27). A chief feature of this state of affairs is the fact that consumption had become for people ‘symbolic’ in that a consumable good is vaguely felt to possess what Walter Benjamin calls an “aura”. Goods provoke an insatiate desire while at the same time creating the feeling that the desired object is necessary to one’s well-being, one’s sense of self, and one’s place in the world. Yet when the “need” is fulfilled, the lack at the heart of desire still remains vague and intangible. A second chief feature of this state of affairs is the silent ubiquity of the market system that pervades all aspects of experience, understanding, and social relations. In *Modernism and the Culture of Market Society*, John Xios Cooper states:

Societies organised around the activities of exchange . . . taking the market as the institutional embodiment of those activities, generate a distinctive culture, with its own ethos, from the organisation of the self and its narratives, the unique potencies and organisation of its science or magic, its visual arts, social structures, and,
inevitably, its own unique sense of time and space. . . . Exchange encompasses both material and nonmaterial commodities, i.e. laser printers and the feeling of well-being you can purchase from a therapist. (5)

Such ubiquity presents the powerful juxtaposition of what Jean Francois Lyotard, in his essay “Defining the Postmodern,” has called “the division of mankind into two parts: one part confronted with the challenge of complexity; the other with the terrible ancient task of survival” (173). And he concludes that “this is a major aspect of the failure of the modern project which was, in principle, valid for mankind as a whole” (173). The market system is ubiquitous and complex – and especially it is able to create a sense of ‘non-material’ reality, the ‘magic’ Cooper mentions, that is not apprehended as supernatural – is most powerfully represented in utilities, the public distribution of power, transportation and communication.

With the relative abundance of the second Industrial Revolution the experiential, intellectual, and social bearings of existence seemed to shift. Complexity replaces simplicity but not altogether, desire replaces needs, and there arises, a new sense of limitless desire. This sense of desire made mass production and mass consumption a respectable goal. In 1890 an economist named Alfred Marshall noted in his *Principles of Economics*:

> It is an almost universal law that each several want is limited, and that with every increase in the amount of a thing which a man has, the eagerness of his desire to obtain more of it diminishes; until it
yields place to the desire for some other thing, of which perhaps he hardly thought, so long as his more urgent wants were still unsatisfied. There is an endless variety of wants, but there is a limit to each separate want. (II: 238) 

Such a sense of endless wants are closely related to desire, as Jacques Lacan describes it, and is situated between biological need and cultural demand: he asserts in his *Feminine Sexuality* that it is “neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting” (81). 

The sense of desire is free-floating, with neither a definite lack nor a definite stable object. Moreover, it is the result of a consumer society. It can be found at the heart of the institutions of finance capital – trusts, absentee ownership, and the advertising agencies that came into being at the end of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century in America. All of these institutional changes condition changes in the very experience of life. In his book *The Law of Civilization and Decay* Brooks Adams argued that “as societies consolidate they pass through a profound intellectual change. Energy ceases to vent through the imagination, and takes the form of capital” (297). Capital, as Karl Marx and others have told, is a remarkable phenomenon to represent, exemplify, and generate wealth at the same time. 

The decade of the 1920s was a period marked by an exciting acceleration in the tempo of American life. Industrialism produced financial giants, industrial proletariat and the degeneration of morality and distortion of comprehensive
philosophy of the world or of human life. The word “American dream” became a representation of that age. It was a common view that average Americans believed that, “the possession of money would certainly solve all earthly ills. You could see it in the faces of the people, in their step and manner. Power, power, power, – everyone was seeking power in the land of the free and the home of the brave” (Dreiser, *A Hoosier 172*). And even Dreiser himself “was dreaming of love and power, too” (172).

American abundance created what Simon Nelson Patten, in his book *The Consumption of Wealth*, described as “the transcendence of the universe of nature by the universe of artifice” (113). Patten argued that, “the United States had passed from an ‘era of scarcity’ to an ‘era of abundance’ characterized by a never-ending stream of mass-produced goods and amusements” (113). Moreover, the artifice Patten asserts by the transformation of economy of need into economy of desire can be seen in the transformation of classical economics into neoclassical economics in the late nineteenth century. Thorstein Veblen, describes value as conditioned by social forces rather than individual need in his categories of “conspicuous consumption,” “invidious distinction,” or “trained inability” (Diggins XX).

Simon Patten registers the permeation of America’s new culture of consumption even to the homes of the working classes. In *The New Basis of Civilization*, he explains that “the working-man’s home is crowded with tawdry, unmeaning, and useless objects,” but each “is loved” as “the mark of superiority and success, and its enjoyment energises the possessor” (139). It is not the
production of objects, but their accumulation and display that generates the feel of success. Self-fulfillment resides not in the act of making things, but in the act of buying things. Dreiser’s fiction exhaustively illustrates the “drama of desire” as Neil Harris in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* has called it, a “play without end, a performance where no curtain fall” (198).

The transformation of nature to artifice – or need to desire – becomes what Benjamin calls in a different context the “aura” of a commodity. In *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen describe a ‘transcendental’ sense of the consumption of things. “The ability to buy . . . goods in America” the Ewens write of an immigrant servant, “was not just an objective act of consumption; it was an act of transcendence, and the realisation of a new social status” (28). Such a status, the Ewens go on to argue, follows the mechanism of “turning people’s attention to the consumer marketplace as a source of self-definition” (65).

The Ewens describe “the individualism of a consumer society” (160), onto the level of individual desire. The greatest of the effects of corporations is simply the abundance of goods they produced in the second Industrial Revolution. “The success of the industry,” the Ewens write, “in its capacity to produce and distribute standardised goods, laced with the lingo of individual choice and self-expression” (167) creates the very sense of “transcendence” and momentary fulfillment afforded by consumption.
Dreiser’s interest in things proceeds from life during a time when the United States began mass-producing them. He came of age as a novelist in an industrialising country which was growing and producing material goods in quantities, varieties, and speeds never before seen. Efficient large-scale manufacturing – that is, mass production – became possible in America only after the Civil War. Operating machines and plants were introduced on a regular basis. These innovations contributed to the production of standardised goods at lower costs and higher profits. The development of electricity in the 1880s provided a more stable and flexible power source for factories. These industrial shifts were part of the changes in the United States.

Between 1890 and 1910, the country’s population increased fifty percent, partially from adding thirteen million new immigrants. The western frontier closed, and the United States became a colonial power. Nationwide corporations and monopolistic trusts loomed over the economic landscape, and the national government became more active to check their power. These great corporations, led by titanic industrialists like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Charles Tyson Yerkes [the model for Dreiser’s financier Frank Cowperwood], created great fortunes, widening the gap between the rich and the poor and creating a new bureaucratic hierarchy which gave business its recognisably modern form.

The United States became less rural, less agricultural, less ethnically homogenous, and less divided into distinct male and female spheres of work – all the while growing more imperialistic, more industrial, and more racially,
ethnically, and religiously diverse. At the same time, people were being brought together by a thickening web of railroads along with the new standardised time zones introduced to coordinate railway schedules, and by the distance-collapsing invention of the telephone. A revolution in mass communication had also begun: new publishing technology made books more affordable; newspapers grew in size, circulation, and influence; and motion pictures became widely available. By 1920, the United States had become an industrial powerhouse, with growing cities teeming with factory labour: not only recently arrived immigrants, but also people like Roberta Alden in *An American Tragedy*, who leaves the family farm in search of greater opportunity.

Industrial Revolution brought American people a value crisis. The nineteenth century was the time of industrialisation. Continuous changes in lifestyle made people feel they were conquering the world and obtaining their treasures. The surprising development made people feel too close to wealth and happiness. There appeared small number of industrial giants and a large number of poor people. American value became materialistic to the core. Living in such a society with such a value system, the human individual is obsessed with a never ending, yet meaningless search for satisfaction of his desire.

Theodore Herman Albert Dreiser was the ninth of ten surviving children in a family whose perennial poverty forced frequent moves between small Indiana
towns and Chicago in search of a lower cost of living. In 1943, he wrote to one of his friends:

Unlike yourself I am biased. I was born poor. For a time in November and December once I went without shoes. . . . And for this reason . . . I regardless of whom or what, am for a social system that can and will do better than that for its members – those that try, however humbly – and more, wish to learn how to help themselves, but are none-the-less defeated by the trickeries of those who believe that money distinguishes them above all others.

(Letters III: 846)

Therefore, Dreiser’s own harsh experience of poverty as a youth and his early longing for wealth and success became dominant themes in his novels, and the misadventures of his brothers and sisters in early adult life gave him additional material on which to base his characters. Dreiser well knew that most people lack access to money and power, and his writing explores the desperation of the poor. He wrote with feeling about capitalism’s losers, drawing from memories of his own poverty as both child and adult. Dreiser was also taken by the charisma and longings of the rich and powerful. His treatment of the social forces, which produce the murderers and prostitutes, as well as the business successes, is still relevant.

Dreiser saw American society expanding as if to burst – wealth rising like mercury in the glass, the bitter shambles of revolt, the fight for power. Dreiser deals with the desire of wealth, social status, and material things which are
represented by money. Everything related to influence, prestige, power, is commanded by moneyed people. What Dreiser learned from that world was that men on different levels of belief and custom were bound together in a single community of desire. Dreiser was swept away by the sheer intensity of the passion for accumulation. When Theodore Dreiser wrote a sketch about “Christmas in the Tenements” he wrote about the longing for things. The sketch exhibits a “wealth of feeling and desire,” but both are expressed “through the thinnest and most meager material forms” (280).

Dreiser presents in his novels desires including the desires of women: Carrie Meeber’s for kid gloves, steak with hash browns, a chance to explore the “mysteries” of the city; Jennie Gerhardt’s for warmth, security, and respectability for herself and her illegitimate daughter. He took men’s wants a little too seriously, sometimes lapsing into sonorous vacuity when he attempted to describe them: the financier Frank Cowperwood wants money for the cosmic “Force” it will bring him; the artist Eugene Witla wants “Life” – which at first means gritty urban experience, later accumulation and display; and the status-striving Clyde’s feelings expressed feverish yearning for sex, status, possessions and power, rather than fulfillment.

Dreiser devoted himself to documenting the physical details of his time. He presents a world where the material environment is a culture that dictates desire. Carrie, an ambitious woman, longs for material wealth which represents power. She can be seen as a symbol of money. The heroine, Carrie Meeber, leaves the poverty of her country home and moves to Chicago. Carrie is anxious
to reach Chicago, in order to realise the much spoken and widely accepted American dream, that an ambitious novice may climb systematically the ladder of wealth, power and status. She is completely honest about her desire for a better life: clothes, money and social position.

Carrie, after a dreary round of job-hunting, secures her first job and yet she is not relieved. She is also, despite being disappointed by her weekly wage of four dollars and fifty cents, somewhat titillated: “This was a great, pleasing metropolis after all. Her new firm was a goodly institution. Its windows were of huge plate glass. She could probably do well there” (Sister Carrie 27). Her happiness soon dwindles into a sense of being lost and a feeling of depersonalisation in the swarming city. So, later, with her blind aspiration toward something more glittering and real, she is an easy prey first to Drouet and then to Hurstwood, who stands at a higher level than Drouet, closer to some centre of power, wealth and joy that Carrie cannot actually conceive but merely senses.

Dreiser’s vivid portrait in Sister Carrie of his heroine looking with amazement and longing at the bedecked city shop windows captures the moment of creation of new desires for a new abundance of commodities. Early in Sister Carrie, Carrie visits a department store for the first time and Dreiser narrates the intangible promises and desire of a consumer society: “There was nothing there which she could not have used – nothing which she did not long to own. The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair-combs, purses, all touched her with individual desire” (22). Consequently when Carrie loses her only source of money, her factory job, she
drifts into the relationship with Drouet, since it offers the possibility of actualising her nagging yearning for clothes and jewellery.

The department stores became the locus of seeing asset of status, something to be consumed in public. American department stores beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, as Trachtenberg has argued, specialised in cultivating both the “desirability” and the “consumability” of goods. They specialised not only in “selling multiple lines of consumer goods but in the presentation . . . of such goods as desirable, as necessary” (Trachtenberg 130). Chicago’s department stores woo Carrie with their persuasive pleading in the “language of the stones” (Sister Carrie 92). And on Carrie’s another visit to the store, Dreiser tells:

Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. The voice of the so-called inanimate! Who shall translate for us the language of the stones? “My dear,” said the lace collar she secured from Partridge’s, “I fit you beautifully; don’t give me up.” (92)

Right from the outset of the novel Dreiser shows Carrie as a person interested in clothes, money, theatre and other luxuries in life. Carrie is conscious of the clothes worn by her and others and estimates the personality of others by the garments they wear. Drouet’s wardrobe first attracts Carrie to him, just as Hurstwood’s imported suits spur her later dissatisfaction with Drouet. Dreiser uses clothes in his fiction, as symbols of varying levels of aspiration, taste, and
success. In transcribing the allure of goods for Carrie, Dreiser makes fictional use of his own youthful desire at the onset of the age of conspicuous consumption. He described those ambitions in *Dawn*:

I was beginning to be caught by the American spirit of material advancement. Here was no land or day to be satisfied with well enough. Anyone could legitimately aspire to be anything in America, and nearly all aspired. Not to want to be rich or to be willing and able to work for riches was to write yourself down as a nobody. Material possessions were already the goal as well as the sum of most American life, and so one could not help feeling the state of isolation and indifference which accompanied a lack of means. (293)

Money is both the embodiment of social relations and the symbol of transcendence, for it is not only the medium of exchange but the medium through which one exchanges one’s social location for another. Money is the object of adoration. People strive and yearn for money all day long to acquire the desired things. In *Sister Carrie* money plays a central role. In order to understand the book clearly, it is essential to understand the important role that money plays in it. To the characters, money is a mystery. Drouet, a salesman, discovers that money comes easily. He sells goods. When an order is signed, he is paid a commission. It comes almost effortlessly – and is spent accordingly. To Carrie, a poor and yearning country girl going to Chicago, money is the means for getting everything in life which she aspires for. To Hurstwood, in his pleasant and established life,
money at first is not even a problem; later it is the instrument that will permit him to satisfy his passion for Carrie; in the end, it is the means to keep his body and soul together – and he must beg for it on the street.

Carrie, a poor country girl, is a typical victim in the forceful American world. She comes to the big web of Chicago in order to pursue a happy life. She is soon brought up short by the bleak world of her sister’s home and a grim job in a shoe factory. When Carrie finds situations hard to her, she cannot have her actions controlled by her will: “She felt the flow of the tide of effort and interest – felt her own helplessness without quite realising the wisp on the tide that she was. She cast about vainly for some possible place to apply, but found no door which she had the courage to enter” (Sister Carrie 25).

Being a wisp in the wind of social forces, Carrie has to have her desire respond to every hint the circumstance gives. Drouet tells Carrie: “Chicago is a wonder. You will find lots to see here” (10). Even Carrie’s sister tells her, “You will want to see the city first” (13). And Carrie responds, “I think I will look around to-morrow” (13). The commodities in the shop always said to her, “I fit you beautifully; do not give up” (92). The prosperous parties, lights, dinners and theatres attract her. Almost every spot she touches is filled with strong attraction to human desire for money and sex. Deep in her idea, there is an unconscious desire to hold the prosperity. Her view to money is “Money: something everybody else has and I must get” (59).
Carrie’s life is motivated by strong desires for wealth and pleasure. Drouet becomes her first ladder. When Drouet gives her money for the first time, she hesitates. She knows clearly that no deep, sinister soul with ulterior motives could have given her fifteen cents under the guise of friendship, since “nature has taught the beasts of the field to fly when some unheralded danger threatens” (60). However, deep in her mind, there is a strong desire for better clothes, jewellery, dining in halls and plays in the theatres. To actualise her dreams, she becomes a mistress of Drouet.

The lure of Carrie’s relationship with Drouet is money. Upon receiving the first two ten dollar bills from Drouet, Carrie “felt that she was immensely better off for the having of them. It was something that was power in itself” (59). Carrie is proud of her fine clothes and money and devoted attention flowing from Drouet. Yet in riding out with Mrs. Hale along Lake Michigan toward Evanston and in witnessing the mansions there, seeing private carriages with footmen, the broad lawns, the rich interiors glowing with lamps, Carrie feels her unsatisfied yearnings rise again:

She was perfectly certain that here was happiness. If she could but stroll up yon broad walk, cross that rich entrance-way, which to her was of the beauty of a jewel, and sweep in grace and luxury to possession and command – oh! how quickly would sadness flee; how, in an instant, would the heartache end. (104-5)

When Carrie realises that Drouet does not want to marry her, she longs for a more “glorious” life better than the life she is living, not the life she had lived in
the countryside. The appearance of Hurstwood stimulates her new hope and desire. It is the new hope and desire that compels her actions. Hurstwood becomes her ladder to climb to the stage of the upper class.

Hurstwood is a fascinated man, who has excellent grace, tact and ornate appearance. He is a person of high position and a lot of wealth. Hurstwood’s grace and wealth stimulate Carrie’s materialistic desire. As soon as she sees Hurstwood, she evaluates his worth – his wealth, position and sexuality – by his “rich” plaid vest, pearl buttons and soft black shoes polished only to a dull shine. Carrie is attracted by Hurstwood’s superior social position compared to Drouet’s, to his fine clothes and elegant manner.

Dreiser reflected the upper class of society through his interpretation of Hurstwood. Through the example of Hurstwood, Dreiser showed the Americans belonging to the upper echelons of the society. Hurstwood represents the modern, capitalist authority. His identity is largely derived from his role as manager of Fitzgerald and Moy’s. As the manager, he is able to accumulate a rather large income. This income makes him rich, thus carrying the symbol of wealth. As a man’s desire for money is fulfilled, his desire for sex appears, since his position gives him great enchantment to women. Carrie becomes a prey to his wealth and position.

According to Dreiser, man’s desires will respond to every sparkle of material and sexual needs. Like Carrie, Hurstwood is also described as a man filled with desires. Human desire often ranges from the physiological need for food to need for safety, love, and self-fulfillment. Each satisfied need releases a
new and higher need, making insatiable desire. Hurstwood, a man with a large
sum of money, a graceful social status, has a strong desire for sex. Carrie is just
the apple in his eyes; Carrie’s innocence and beauty stimulate the libido hidden in
his mind. He quickly falls in love with Carrie.

Hurstwood is tired of the one type, selfish, ignorant and flashy women like
his wife. His desire naturally spreads to ‘pure’ Carrie Meeber. Hurstwood sees in
Carrie a delicious avenue of escape from his shrewish wife and social-climbing
children. Hurstwood’s keen desire for Carrie strengthens his mind to steal the
money from the safe. Though Dreiser produces an accident, it shows that
everything is determined by a complex of internal chemism and by the forces of
social pressure.

Dreiser makes a vivid analysis on how Hurstwood’s desire is stimulated
and controls his mind. First, Dreiser produces a special atmosphere and when
Hurstwood finds the safe unlocked, there is a slight waverling in his mind. Then
he tries to describe the exciting conflict between “thou shalt” or “thou shalt not”
(234). In face of so much money, his first response is to tell it to the cashier, but
after a while, he changes his mind. His curiosity leads him to look at the money
in the safe: “He did not know why he wished to look in there. It was quite a
superfluous action, which another time might not have happened at all” (232).

Hurstwood’s first hesitation emphasises the human desire which may lead
people to do something immoral unconsciously. Then, Dreiser produces a more
intensive conflict of reason and desire. Hurstwood gets wine in his veins which
also have coloured the possibilities of ten thousand for him: “He could see great
opportunities with that. He could get Carrie. Oh, yes, he could! He could get rid of his wife” (233). His ardour upon Carrie fills his mind. He takes the drawer with money quite out and “for the first time he was tense, as if a stern hand had been laid upon his shoulder” (234). He decides to put the money back to the drawer. Dreiser’s comment shows vividly Hurstwood’s psychological conflict:

To those who have never wavered in conscience, the predicament of the individual whose mind is less strongly constituted and who trembles in the balance between duty and desire is scarcely appreciable, unless graphically portrayed. Those who have never heard that solemn voice of the ghostly clock which ticks with awful distinctness, “thou shalt,” “thou shalt not,” “thou shalt,” “thou shalt not,” are in no position to judge. Not alone is sensitive, highly organised natures is such a mental conflict possible. The dullest specimen of humanity, when drawn by desire toward evil, is recalled by a sense of right, which is proportionate in power and strength to his evil tendency. We must remember that it may not be a knowledge of right, for no knowledge of right is predicated of the animal’s instinctive recoil at evil. Men are still led by instinct before they are regulated by knowledge. It is instinct which recalls the criminal – it is instinct which gives the criminal his feeling of danger, his fear of wrong. (234)

Desire, being a human instinct, is difficult to be controlled. Hurstwood steals the money and decides to make his try for “paradise” by spiriting Carrie off to
Montreal and New York with the help of a ruse and the weakness of her will to resist.

Dreiser, as a naturalist, regards man as merely an animal driven by greed and lust in a struggle for existence. Only the fittest, the richest, the most ruthless person can survive. Dreiser throws great sympathy on Carrie and Hurstwood, who do immoral things to satisfy their desires. Desire is connected firmly with circumstance. As Dreiser holds, environment is like a chemical drop which will easily affect chemical reagents like human beings. In the materialistic world of America, human individual is obsessed with a never ending desire. Social value system affects human desire. With the industrialisation of American society, American people form a material-based value system. In such a society with such a value system, people are easy to conform to social idea.

Hurstwood once was a person of both money and affairs. His high position gives him a dignified manner, which is of great attraction to women. Then he has a strong libido for beauties. But after he is refused outside the rich man’s garden because of stealing, he becomes no man. Being a small fish in the social sea of whales, his instinct tells him to survive, that is, to hold back the money and status. Dreiser describes the situation like this:

The great create an atmosphere which reacts badly upon the small.

. . . Little use to argue that of such is not the kingdom of greatness, but so long as the world is attracted by this and the human heart views this as the one desirable realm which it must attain, so long, to that heart, will this remain the realm of greatness. So long, also,
will the atmosphere of this realm work its desperate results in the soul of man. It is like a chemical reagent. One day of it, like one drop of the other, will so affect and discolor the views, the aims, the desire of the mind, that it will thereafter remain forever dyed. A day of it to the untried mind is like opium to the untried body. A craving is set up which, if gratified, shall eternally result in dreams and death. (260-61)

In New York, Carrie has a new spectacle to differentiate the stages of wealth. Having a glimpse of the life enjoyed by the wealthy, her desire is stimulated again. When she meets Mrs. Vance, Carrie longs for the dainty decorated, beautiful clothes and genteel manners: “What a wonderful thing it was to be rich” (284) is the powerful voice from the bottom of her heart. With the degradation of Hurstwood, Carrie would not endure losing her dreams. Therefore, she decides to leave Hurstwood, who could not find a place in the New York society.

Years later, as Carrie anticipates her first hundred and fifty dollars, she imagines the magic door to wealth opening: “What a door to an Aladdin’s cave it seemed to be. Each day . . . her fancies of what her fortune must be, with ample money, grew and multiplied. She conceived of delights which were not – saw lights of joy that never were on land or sea” (404) her own. When Carrie has “in hand” a hundred and fifty dollars, Carrie Madenda the actress finds herself rich beyond belief, and for a moment happy. From the beginning to the end, Carrie is just like a machine controlled by the desires for better existence. “Better” implies
endless desire. It leads to an endless struggle; Carrie is tired at last but still dreaming her impossible happiness.

Man’s behaviour is dominated by instincts [desires, needs and fear] and environment [cities and consumerism] and chances. Man is not able to control his instincts completely. Dreiser places a special emphasis on desire and need which are confined by conventional ethical codes. He is a pioneer in the transitional stage between a producer society and a consumer society.

Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt highlights the irresistible attraction towards the American Dream of prosperity and accomplishment. Jennie Gerhardt, the protagonist of the novel, who belongs to a poor Lutheran family of six children with a low-waged head, is attracted by the seeming glitter of the materialistic society. In Theodore Dreiser: His World and His Novels, Richard Lehan observes:

The Columbus hotel is significantly the starting point for both Jennie and the novel. The hotel exposes her to a larger kind of life. Like Carrie . . . Jennie sees the limitations of her life more fully when she is in public places that reveal what money can buy. (83)

Jennie and her mother work at a local hotel in order to provide for the younger children in the family. There Jennie is for the first time exposed to the material splendour of the rich which provokes in her an indelible desire to be a part of it. On her first day as a working girl in a posh hotel, Jennie is thrilled by the beauty
of the hotel and wants to possess it – an ambition much more far-reaching than Carrie’s:

. . . the glamour of the great world was having its effect upon her senses. She could not help giving ear to the sounds, the brightness, the buzz of conversation and laughter surrounding her. . . . It touched the heart of the innocent working-girl with hope . . . she could only think that all of this was very fascinating, and wish that a portion of it might come to her. (Jennie Gerhardt 7)

Jennie longs for the American dream of luxury and a sophisticated life. When Jennie meets Brander for the first time it is his “gold-headed cane” (7) that steals her attention. She is impressed by Senator Brander, a fifty-two year old man. She finds him a “fine-looking man” (7) and cannot take her eyes off him. The innate sense of appreciation in Jennie is aroused by the luxury and comfort surrounding Brander. The magnetic force he is radiating makes her feel that life ought to be lived as he lives it.

George Sylvester Brander, the ex-Senator, finds himself more and more interested in Jennie. He feels “exceedingly” young as he talks to her. He keenly enjoys “this new entrance into the radiant world of youthful happiness (42). But one thing that disturbs him is the occasional thought that he is not doing right. Brander’s love for Jennie precipitates a moral crisis that parallels Hurstwood’s at the safe door. Brander wavers between the strict fulfillment of justice and duty and the great possibilities for personal happiness which another line of conduct seems to assure. The old struggle is replayed and again desire is the victor.
Jennie, who has known only bleak poverty, has a keen sense of life’s potential for beauty. When she observes the spectacle of wealth in the hotel and the imposing houses nearby, she is filled with “half-defined emotion” (8). The “daughter of poverty” fantasises about the glittering life-style of the rich: “How beautiful life must be for the rich” (29), she thinks by observing the imposing elegance of the Columbus house with its warmth, light, colour and music. The relaxing sound of a piano being played before the dinner hour in a parlour at the hotel fills her with hope that she might someday experience firsthand the comfortable world that the music signifies. While helping her brothers and sisters steal coal from the railroad yards to provide winter warmth for the family, Jennie reacts with silent wonder at the sight of a passing passenger train, its drawing-rooms and plate glass windows revealing travellers in comfortable chairs.

When Brander leaves for Washington promising marriage on his return, Jennie is overjoyed and mulls over the prospects of marrying a rich ex-Senator. She expects that it will improve their social status and be a blessed release from poverty. Her relationship with Brander is merely an act of poverty-alleviation, nothing more or less:

She went out into the night, thinking. No doubt he would do as he said. She dwelt, in imagination, upon the possibilities of a new and fascinating existence. Of course, he would marry her. Think of it! She would go to Washington – that far-off place. And her father and mother – they would not need to work so hard any more.
And Bass, and Martha – she fairly glowed as she recounted to herself the many ways in which she could help them all. (79)

Jennie seeks a marriage of convenience – a way out of poverty to enjoy wealthy and comfortable life. There is nothing noble or platonic in Jennie’s relationship with Brander. It is solely on the purpose of material benefits.

Jennie’s second lover Lester Kane, the son of a rich carriage manufacturer, is the product of “an age in which the impact of materialised forces is well-nigh irresistible” (132). His relationship with Jennie becomes known, initially to Chicago friends and acquaintances and then to his family – first Louise, then Robert, and finally Archibald Kane himself. The old Mr. Kane violently opposes Lester’s relationship with Jennie and threatens to disinherit him. Lester is to receive his full share of the estate if he leaves Jennie, a small legacy if he marries her, and – after three years – nothing at all if he continues to live with her outside of marriage. The newspaper account attempts “to frame up a Romeo and Juliet story in which Lester should appear as an ardent, self-sacrificing lover, and Jennie as a poor and lovely working-girl, lifted to great financial and social heights by the devotion of her millionaire lover” (285).

Lester’s response to the pressures stemming from the disclosure of his relationship with Jennie is a permanent indecision. A solution finally offers itself in the fortuitous reappearance of Letty Pace Gerald, an old admirer of Lester, at the point when he realises that he must make a decision within the three years permitted by the will. Now a wealthy widow, Letty appears to offer the best of both worlds: a woman of cultivation and warmth, she is also eminently eligible
and a suitable social match. Beleaguered by his family and by Letty, who has always wanted him, he makes the inevitable decision to sacrifice feelings for social and financial position.

The “kaleidoscopic glitter” and the “vastness of the panorama of life” have left Lester uncertain of everything. When the chance to better his position at what he deems a fair price presents itself, Lester succumbs. Spurred by his desire to return to society and affluence, he leaves Jennie for the socialite Letty, whom he had known in his youth. In spite of his innate goodness and unbounded love for Jennie, Lester is tempted beyond his endurance, and at last he succumbs to that material pull, money.

Theodore Dreiser’s works generally depict the real-life subjects in a harsh and gritty manner. An American Tragedy, his most commercially successful novel, tells the story of a young man searching for success and fame. An American Tragedy is told from a naturalistic and deterministic point of view. Determinism deals with an individual’s fate being determined by his environment and heredity. This ideal is based on Charles Darwin’s views and it shows the dark side of the American dream. All his novels are concerned with social history, the social processes of evil. Ambition, yearning, aspiration – all these revolve around this problem, and it in turn revolves around the role of money. He has related social causation – the basic social and economic factors that play a casual role in society – to individual patterns of destiny.
Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* is a detailed portrayal of the dark side of the American Dream – the story of what can happen when an ordinary man’s desire for wealth and status overwhelms his moral sense. *An American Tragedy* is nothing less than what it purports to be – the harrowing story of a weak-willed young man who destroys himself, a villain who is also a victim of the values of a deceptive, materialistic society. Dreiser pours his own dark yearnings into the character of Clyde Griffiths, while grimly charting the young man’s pitiful rise and fall as he pursues empty ambitions to wealth, power and satisfaction. In *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser examines the flip side of the American Dream.

*An American Tragedy* is a reflection of the dissatisfaction, envy, and despair that afflicted many poor and working people in America’s competitive, success-driven society. As American industrial power soared, the glittering lives of the wealthy sharply contrasted with the drab lives of ordinary farmers and city workers. Clyde Griffiths wants to walk through “the Gates of Paradise” (*An American Tragedy* 43) – which lead to the lake resorts and other playgrounds of vacuous small-town elite. The feelings he most often aimed to explore were erotic in the fundamental etymological sense – they expressed feverish yearning for sex, for status, for possessions, for power, rather than fulfillment.

Clyde Griffiths, the hero or “anti-hero” has the same dream as Carrie: he thinks money and success will bring him happiness. Material things such as clothes meant a lot to him because they were a sign of wealth and prestige. Clyde Griffiths’ dream is not complex but he is not bright enough to think out what he wants. In its elementary form, the dream consists of rising in business until he
can have the money, luxuries, pleasures, and, especially, woman he wants – “a good time” as Clyde thinks of it; “the better things” according to Dreiser. Clyde would like to resemble his uncle, who owns a factory in Lycurgus, New York or to resemble his cousin, who will one day inherit it and meanwhile drives a car of his own. He would like to sport about with a wealthy, glamorous girl like Sondra Finchley.

Clyde, born in the slums of weak parents, romanticises the idea of wealth, associates it with beautiful women, and longs for the life of riches and pleasure. Clyde’s world gets more luxurious as he moves through the novel. The scenes in the novel whet his appetite; and the more Clyde sees, the more he wants. When Clyde first sees the Green Davidson Hotel, he is overwhelmed by what in reality is ostentatious and gaudy wealth, and finds the hotel “more arresting, quite than anything he had seen before” (27). When Clyde first sees Sondra Finchley, he again reacts in a mechanistic way, and “her effect on him was electric – thrilling – arousing in him a curiously stinging sense of what it was to want and not to have” (225).

The world of the hotel seems to Clyde “a realisation of paradise” (35), “a marvelous – marvelous realm” (36). And there “was music always – from somewhere” (31). It symbolises for him not just aesthetic perfection, but also “social superiority” (40). “Such grandeur” for Clyde “was what it meant to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world – to have money” (43). In Clyde’s imagination, beauty and wealth become linked. The world of the hotel is fantastic and it is used many times throughout the novel. The people in it
are “so very different from most of the people in the streets or anywhere, as he saw it” (41).

The lure of materialism is not solely the acquisition of wealth and goods, but the attraction such wealth and goods holds over people. The corrupting influence of power is evident from the moment Clyde aspires beyond his parents’ spiritually-defined lifestyle. Upon moving to Lycurgus to work at the collar factory, Clyde is treated poorly by his own cousin Gilbert Griffiths under the guise of professional conduct but really out of jealousy and anger towards Clyde. Clyde envies Gilbert’s wealth and assurance and begins to believe that he can readily acquire these qualities because he so closely resembles Gilbert and because others associate him with Gilbert. Yet though Gilbert shares Clyde’s looks and vanity, the two young men are separated by an immense gulf of class and heredity. Gilbert is innately stronger than Clyde and resents Clyde because Clyde is a potential usurper of his role and identity.

Clyde, some three years after the automobile accident, appears more polished and assured in Chicago. A series of miscellaneous jobs and life on his own have lent him a surface confidence and a strong desire to get ahead in the world. He believes, too, that he has profited from his Kansas City misadventure – that he can now recognise and resist temptation. Yet basically he is still the same Clyde. When Ratterer, his Kansas City mentor, arranges a job as a bellhop at an exclusive men’s club, he accepts eagerly despite his earlier resolution that he would never again become involved in hotel work. And once installed in his new position, he again begins to dream. If he works steadily and with sobriety at his
post, he muses, some wealthy guest will take a fancy to him; offer him an important job in his firm, and so “lift him into a world such as he had never known” (172). The fortuitous arrival of Clyde’s wealthy uncle, Mr. Samuel Griffiths of Lycurgus, appears to confirm both the myth and its values, particularly after Clyde wins Mr. Griffiths’ approval with his earnest statement that he wishes to “get in with some company where there was a real chance to work up and make something of myself” (176).

Although Clyde gladly accepts his role as a novice, he finds himself under intolerable pressures within this role. On the one hand, he has an unpromising manual job in the basement shrinking room of the factory and a bleak boarding house existence. On the other hand, he admires the beauty and luxuriousness of Wykeagy Avenue homes of the Lycurgus rich. He is particularly struck by the Griffithses’ house, a structure which eventually becomes “the same as a shrine to him, nearly – the symbol of that height to which by some turn of fate he might . . . hope to attain” (311). This second world appears available to him not only because it is so physically near in the small compass of Lycurgus but because Clyde’s identity as a Griffiths suggests to the town that he is indeed a dweller in this world. Although the Griffithses themselves resolve to consider Clyde an ordinary employee until he proves himself, to the rest of the town he is a nephew of Samuel Griffiths and hence worthy of deference on the assumption that he will soon assume his birthright of wealth and position. When he is promoted, Clyde uses his role as a manager to help persuade Roberta to have sex with him. Later on, Clyde thinks that his relations with Roberta are “not of sufficient import or
weight to offset the temperamental or imaginative pull of such a girl as Sondra and all that she represented” (319).

If Clyde views Roberta initially as a charming example of bucolic openness, she conceives of him even more mistakenly as an example of wealth, prominence, and experience to be found in the city. From the first, she never forgets that he is a Griffiths and a supervisor, roles which make him attractive but also formidable and dangerous. Just as Clyde is to imagine Sondra as a gateway to a paradise of wealth, position, and comfort, so does Roberta see Clyde as a dream fulfilled, as an escape from the poverty, hardship and bleakness of both her girlhood on her parents’ farm and her factory hand’s existence in Lycurgus. Clyde’s superior position, however, constitutes a danger as well as a hope:

The moment she heard that Clyde was so highly connected and might even have money, she was not so sure that he could have any legitimate interest in her. For was she not a poor working girl? And was he not a rich man’s nephew? He would not marry her, of course. And what other legitimate thing would he want with her? She must be on her guard in regard to him. (261)

Moreover, she also realises, as does Clyde:

There was a local taboo in regard to factory girls aspiring toward or allowing themselves to become interested in their official superiors. Religious, moral and reserved girls didn’t do it. And again, as she soon discovered, the line of demarcation and
stratification between the rich and the poor in Lycurgus was as sharp as though cut by a knife or divided by a high wall. (257)

There are other characters in the novel besides Clyde and Roberta who are motivated by the lure of success. The word “dream” is used over a hundred times in the novel and suggests the motives behind a number of lives. Roberta Alden leaves Blitz in the hope of realising her “dream” in Lycurgus; Mason, the prosecuting attorney, comes from a background as poor as Clyde’s and aspires to a judgeship; even Swenk, the arresting officer, blazes “with a desire to arrest and handcuff someone,” and is lured on by “great dreams of being the one to capture the murderer” (576).

Clyde and Roberta, being poor, have their lives stripped naked to the public glare. Finchleys can escape in anonymity. Sondra, through the influence of wealth and power, is known only as “Miss X.” Her true identity is shielded from the newspapers, played down by the trial attorneys. Powerful forces, both economic and political at work determine who shall be exposed and who shall be protected – money, position and influence are the major determinants.

Doctor Glenn, whom Roberta consults in the hope of getting an abortion, piously lectures to her on medical ethics. There are, he admits, doctors here and there “who take their professional ethics a little less seriously than I do; but I cannot let myself become one of them” (423). But even as he dismisses Roberta with this sermon, he is conscious of having a number of times in the recent past performed abortions for “young girls of good family who had fallen from grace
and could not otherwise be rescued’’ (416). ‘Good family’ is the key phrase; it means, of course, families of wealth and social status.

Clyde’s attorneys lend patient ears to Clyde’s story. But their hardheaded practical experience leads them to reject the tale as an impossibility in terms of legal defense. In its place they concoct a plea of insanity, which they deem a possibility for saving Clyde’s life. The option is summarily rejected by the wealthy Griffiths because it might threaten to taint their own family line. An unambiguous struggle for survival is under way. Everyone has himself to protect. No one really cares – or can afford to care – about Clyde. Of course, the mother’s final struggle to save her son from the electric chair is no more effectual than her earlier struggle to preserve him from the corrupting taint of materialism. American society persists in organising itself the way it has. The world, having lured Clyde into transgression, exacts his tribute.

The media fanned rising expectations and unreasonable desires. From the movies that enchanted young Clyde to the newspaper articles about Sondra and her friends, Clyde is moulded by what the media tells him is desirable, provides a template by which he shapes his own ambitions. Thus, it is no surprise that he takes his cue for Roberta’s murder from a newspaper article he reads. Ultimately, the media proves his undoing as well, painting him as a killer of the worst sort. Obviously, Dreiser believes that Clyde is not really guilty. Society and its false moral code are far guiltier.
Dreiser had always been a dreamer of large dreams and intensely ambitious for financial security, material comforts, social acceptance, and the glamour of the writer’s career. He employs a variety of terms to describe and translate desire. At times he refers to a mystic longing, an unreasoning passion, or a chemic compulsion, but always the reference is to the fact that his characters’ desires are unquenchable.

Eugene Witla in *The “Genius”* is a dreamer, and his dreams centre on wealth, fame, art, and women. Eugene is in love with packaging – “he was easily touched by exterior conditions” (*The “Genius”* 102), and this is not only the case with women, but this also characterises his appreciation of architecture, industry, street crowds, home decor, art, and even job prospects. For Eugene, all these exteriors contain nothing but the reflection of his highly individualistic dreams and the promises that they will come true, which in turn provokes Eugene to pursue people, opportunities, and material things as if they were all of a kind. In fact, and perhaps most importantly, what Eugene seems to desire is to enter into a genuine mode of desire, but he fails at this repeatedly, longing for, rather than possessing, an object that sparks him. Once he possesses the desired woman or car or apartment, it quickly loses its appeal – there is little or no satisfaction in actual possession; for Eugene and so many other consumers, the bitter-sweet sensation of wanting stands in as the next best thing, the only available alternative to productive desire.

Eugene is attracted to ideas of luxury, pleasure, and self-aggrandisement. He is decidedly not prompted to aesthetic reverie when he encounters spectacles
of luxury and wealth that appear to be beyond his reach. He sees beauty and magnificence, but these scenes evoke in his character deeply-felt envy and a heartfelt recognition of the inequalities inherent to a system that favours only a few. In Chicago, Eugene is awed by the “splendid houses,” and “astonished at the magnificence of their appointments, the beauty of the lawns, the show of the windows, the distinction of the equipages. . . . For the first time he saw liveried footmen. . . . It made him see . . . what the world really had to offer – or rather what it showered on some at the top” (42-43).

Eugene’s artistic appreciation of the urban vicinity seems noticeably dampened in the presence of such extravagance: “It subdued and saddened him a little. Life was unfair” (43). And when Eugene arrives in New York City, he realizes that, though “he had marveled at wealth and luxury in Chicago . . . here it took his breath away. . . . It curled him up like a frozen leaf, dulled his very soul, and gave him a clear sense of his position in the social scale” (103). Confronted with images of splendour and display of the rare fruits of capitalism, Eugene does not want to render their likenesses artistically. He wants “to tear wealth and fame from the bosom of the world” (150).

Eugene wants to be an artist and hopes to become rich. A purely financial incentive pushes Eugene to pursue his art in such a mercenary manner: “He was most impressionable to things advantageous to himself, and this chance to rise to a higher level out of the slough of poverty in which he had so greatly suffered nerved him to the utmost effort” (420). Eugene clearly aspires to be a man of talent; he wishes to be admired, coddled, and paid handsomely. He has quite a
specific notion of the artistic lifestyle: he wants “to get out the ranks of the commonplace; to assume the character and the habiliments of the artistic temperament as they were then supposed to be; to have a refined, semi-languorous, semi-indifferent manner; to live in a studio; to have a certain freedom in morals and temperament not accorded to the ordinary person – these were the great things to do and be” (50-51). Near the end of his reverie, Eugene remembers, “Of course, art composition was a part of this. You were supposed ultimately to paint great pictures or do noble sculptures, but in the meanwhile you could and should live the life of the artist” (51). Likewise, there is no such thing as art that is independent from the influence of capital: one may have the leisure to become an artist having achieved capitalist success in other fields, or one creates art that is profitable in the capitalist marketplace. Eugene’s understanding of art as a means to an end – a vehicle that will deliver him at the doorstep of the bohemian, hedonistic life which he desires, makes him the ideal advertising man.

When Eugene first moves to Chicago, he quickly abandons his initial hopes of easing into a newspaper job and is glad for any work that will provide enough income for food and shelter, and his expectations regarding the latter two are modest. His first job has him brushing rust off of second-hand stoves for six dollars a week, and when he moves on to a second job “posting up the ‘For Rent’ signs in the windows” (42) for eight dollars a week, Eugene feels he has improved his lot, and is perfectly content with this occupation and its prospects: “Eugene might have stayed there indefinitely” (42), had the real estate company not failed. His desires are similarly modest and utilitarian; he wants nothing other than one
suit of clothes, a winter coat, and a single room. Though Eugene is awestruck by
the ostentatious spectacles of luxury he first witnesses in Chicago, at this point he
seems to have no notion that similar practices of conspicuous and superfluous
consumption could ever be his own.

Significantly, it is Eugene’s venture into art school that alerts him to the
possibilities of non-essential consumption. As Eugene learns the basic lines and
strokes of sketching, he is simultaneously alerted to the aesthetics of clothing and
behaviour, and subsequently adopts the dress and mannerisms of his art instructor:
“He had taken to a loose, flowing tie and a soft round hat which became him. He
turned his hair back loosely and emulated the independent swing” (73) of his
teacher. When he begins to associate with other local artists, Eugene catches on
to their bohemian style of living and is nearly overwhelmed with the purchasing
possibilities to which their company introduces him:

New York gets me dizzy. It’s so wonderful! . . . It’s so compact of
wonderful things. I saw a shop the other day full of old jewelry
and ornaments and quaint stones and clothes, and O Heaven! I
don’t know what all – more things than I had ever seen in my
whole life before. (139)

As Eugene begins to find his way to financial success, he is tutored in
matters of consumption by his boss Mr. Summerfield, the President of the
Summerfield Advertising Agency. When Mr. Summerfield sees Eugene’s modest
apartment in an unfashionable district, he says, “You know, I believe in spending
money, everybody spending money. Nobody gets anywhere by saving anything.
Pay out! Pay out – that’s the idea. . . . You’d better move when you get a chance soon and surround yourself with clever people” (427). Eugene responds to this near-threat promptly; he begins looking for a new apartment and also buys new clothing that he thinks better suits his position and his aspirations: “The soft hat had long since been discarded for a stiff derby, and Eugene’s clothes were of the most practical business type he could find” (428); they were “clothes of the latest cut,” which he accessorised with “a ring of oriental design on his middle finger, and pins and ties which reflected the prevailing modes” (433). He now “looked more like a business man than an artist” (433). Likewise, when Eugene finds a more upscale flat, his home interior purchases depart from his earlier attempts at bohemian eclecticism, aiming now for the kind of ostentatious luxury touted by mainstream fantasies of wealth. The result is glaringly nouveaux riche:

He had the apartment redecorated in white and deft-blue and dark blue, getting a set of library and dining-room furniture in imitation rosewood . . . set a cut-glass bowl in the ceiling where formerly the commonplace chandelier had been. . . . Attractive sets of bedroom furniture in bird’s-eye maple and white enamel were secured, and the whole apartment given a very cosy and tasteful appearance. (428)

Eugene is now working for a publishing company, the United Magazines Corporation. He is head of the advertising, literature, and art divisions, and the accompanying salary ensures that Eugene is firmly established in the upper stratum of the capitalist wealth pyramid. Eugene once mused wistfully, “If he
were only rich – how peacefully he would paint” (230). After becoming rich when Angela reminds him of his artistic passions and his original intent to return to his art as soon as he had the barest means to do so, Eugene replies, “Art doesn’t appeal to me so much as it did once. . . . I’ve lived too well” (462).

After a few more years in the advertising business, Eugene has had the time to accumulate both a fortune and a more refined knowledge of upper-crust consumerism. Mr. Colfax, his boss in The United Magazines Corporation, continues to “teach” him consumer habits proper to his new station in life. Colfax would “feel the latest suit Eugene might be wearing, or comment on some pin or tie he had on, or tell him that his shoes were not as good as he could really get, if he wanted to be perfect in dress” (486). Furthermore, “he was always telling Eugene little details of social life, the right things to do, the right places to be seen, the right places to go, as though Eugene knew little or nothing” (486). Eugene pays close attention to these bits of advice and takes them quite seriously. He invests in a plot of land outside the city, becomes a member of the Baltusrol Golf Club, the Yere Tennis Club, and the Philadelphia Country Club respectively, and purchases an automobile. He and Angela move onto Riverside Drive into an apartment consisting of “nine or eleven rooms and two baths. . . . The chambers were beautifully finished in old English oak carved and stained after a very pleasing fifteenth century model” (474), and “green-brown tapestries representing old Rhine Castles for his studio” (474).

Eugene’s visions of empire first inspired by Summerfield’s brutal executions of capitalist discipline have become more powerful. Finally having
the means by which he can extend his “empire” beyond the boundaries of the United Magazines Corporation, Eugene establishes his place in another trend and branches out into real estate. He hopes to plan, develop, and market an enormously ambitious seaside resort – an endeavour that will require millions in investments, the transformation of marshlands to solid beach, and a very effective sales pitch.

Eugene Witla becomes a materialist for whom the best in clothes, houses, furniture, and automobiles comprises “the true heaven – that material and spiritual perfection on earth, of which the world was dreaming” (488). His career culminates with his investment in “Blue Sea,” a dream of “empire” and a promise of $250,000. Eugene is thoroughly seduced by the physical and material comforts.

In Dreiser’s naturalistic universe there is no place to be up without putting others down. Society in his view was not different from nature. It experienced the same turbulent change. It threw up myriad members of a group in order that one member should survive and prosper. Its combinations were inherently unstable and inevitably gave way to younger and more energetic forms. It was natural that individuals should oppose others, both singly and in groups, to achieve their own satisfactions.

Dreiser was eager to turn his attention to more explicitly masculine themes. He was becoming obsessed by the attributes of successful men – their insatiable lust for conquest in the bedroom and on the stock exchange; their capacity to refine raw desire into ambition. He focused The Financier on the
career of the street-railway magnate Charles Yerkes. Dreiser predicted that the novel would “interpret the American man of affairs and millionaire as he has never yet been interpreted. . . . It’s a big theme, too big for a little handling, too big to look at from any one angle. . . . All I’m after is the source of his inevitability – why he is what he is” (Lingeman 267).

Dreiser was fascinated by the spectacular career of Charles T. Yerkes, the most dazzling financier of his day, whose reckless energy and demoniac thirst for money spelled the highest ambition of his culture. Power had become not an instrument but a way of life. For Dreiser the business tycoons of his time represented the common soul’s most passionate hopes made flesh. Ordinary men and women were inspired by the success stories of business men who struck it rich. They considered the successful business tycoons as their beacons. The symbols of power had become monumental, stocks and bonds blown feverishly into imitation – French Chateaux, the luxury of yachts, and conquerors’ trips to Europe.

Businessmen, Veblen in an essay entitled “The Limitations of Marginal Utility” says, “habitually aspire to accumulate wealth in excess of the limits of practicable consumption, and the wealth so accumulated is not intended to be converted by a final transaction of purchase into consumable goods or sensations of consumption” (172-73). Instead, as he argues throughout their career, such economic activity aims at the creation and maintenance of institutional social power. This is clear in Dreiser’s fiction of institutional power, especially in the three novels tracing the life of the financier, Frank Algernon Cowperwood, based
upon the real-life Chicago street-rail magnate of the 1880s and 1890s, Charles Tyson Yerkes.

The society with its hierarchy of money deeply influences Frank Algernon Cowperwood who was born to a respectable middle-class family in Philadelphia, in the same generation as John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. As a child, he moves into three new houses as his father progresses from clerk to teller to vice-president, each house being one storey higher than the other. The older position was discreetly dropped, with every upward progression in status. When his tellership arrived he is not so familiarly greeted, except by those who are much superior to him financially.

Society values people in terms of money they possess. Cowperwood, very early in his life discovers a genius for finance. Dreiser presents Cowperwood’s early years and points out the young boy’s interest in banking. It is an early incident upon seeing a squid and a lobster in a tank together that makes the biggest impression upon young Frank, forcing him to wonder just “how is life organised? The squid couldn’t kill the lobster – he had no weapon. The lobster could kill the squid – he was heavily armed. There was nothing for the squid to feed on; the lobster had the squid as prey. What was the result to be?” (The Financier 5). Cowperwood learns early that if one is going to thrive, he must aim to be the lobster and not the squid.

Cowperwood sees that money holds power, and so he embarks on a number of early business ventures where he views the men he works for as “nothing more than characters in his eyes” and does so without malice. In fact,
Cowperwood is not malicious at all – he is just indifferent towards anything that does not immediately benefit him. He simply has a sense of entitlement and no personal reservations about looking down on others. Looking to satisfy his own immediate interests, he is not someone pondering the country’s current issue with slavery or any issue outside himself. Philip L. Gerber in his ‘Introduction’ to the Trilogy of Desire summarises the character of Cowperwood:

Cowperwood epitomises Spencer’s vision of man impelled by “certain agencies which we call desires.” Desires. A complex of them activate the financier, desires for self expression, for wealth, for possession, for beauty, for status, for power, for immortality. From Spencer’s reiterated definition of human motion as man acting to satisfy his desires comes Cowperwood’s motto, “I satisfy myself.” In this principle of driving desire, Dreiser found the unifying title for his trilogy. (XV)

Cowperwood strikes his first coup at the age of thirteen: he buys a lot of Castile soap at a bankruptcy auction for thirty two dollars borrowed hastily from his father, and then sells them for sixty two dollars making nearly hundred percent profit. He gets a legacy of fifteen thousand dollars from his uncle and sets himself up in business. In the jungle of finance he soon finds his own world view corroborated by the machinations of others. But he realises that in order to succeed, he must appear to be what he is not, to deceive his victims. He never looks back and lives above moral considerations. He wants money, power, and the love of women. He bribes, cheats, and lies. When Cowperwood needs a city
property to extend a streetcar line and when its owner refuses to sell, Cowperwood sends work crews to demolish the building and challenges the owner to sue him, tangling his victim in the delays of law. By following his genius and adhering strictly to his own self-interest, he becomes a millionaire through a series of exhaustively financial transactions.

Cowperwood thrusts his independent way forward in post-Civil War Philadelphia. The lure of quick money is too much for Cowperwood. He strikes a deal with the city treasurer: the treasurer will lend him money from the city treasury at nominal rates – and with this money, Cowperwood will build fortunes for them both. With all the treasury money at his disposal, he finds it hard to resist the temptation even though his own sense of manhood is violated by it. Cowperwood finds himself maximally exposed on the day that the Chicago Fire of 1871 collapses financial markets across the country. Cowperwood emerges after a little more than a year – just in time for another crash, the famous Jay Cooke crash of 1873. This time Cowperwood is not exposed. He is able to sell short – and in a few hours of frantic work, recoups a fortune of more than a million dollars.

Cowperwood sees men on the stock exchange as mere gamblers. In back of them he knew were the men with resources: mines, railroads, mills. But Cowperwood does not want to be an agent; he wants to be ‘a real man’: “A man must never be an agent, a tool, or a gambler – acting for himself or for others – he must employ such. A real man – a financier – was never a tool. He used tools. He created. He led” (The Financier 28). He realised this, Dreiser tells us, “very
clearly, at nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one years of age” (28). The intelligence, personal force, and all that he possesses do not free him entirely from the position of an agent. His stock market manipulations for which he illegally used city money were intended to give him control of the streetcar companies.

Cowperwood on contemplating the source of satisfaction in life decides “force was the answer – great mental and physical force. Why, these giants of commerce and money could do as they pleased in this life, and did” (80). Real force could come only from material resource. The hard side of this worship of force is its bent toward power and control. What distinguishes the financier from others is his attitude towards money. Dreiser announced in an aside:

Few people have the sense of financial individuality strongly developed. They do not know what it means to be a controller of wealth. . . . They want money, but not for money’s sake. They want it for what it will buy in the way of simple comforts, whereas the financier wants it for what it will control – for what it will represent in the way of dignity, force, power. (121-22)

Frank Cowperwood triumphs over his competitors precisely because he wants money “for money’s sake” and not “for what it will buy” (121).

At thirteen, Cowperwood drives his first bargain and dazzles his father and uncle. His interest in “money” is considered “a good trait” (9) by his highly respected uncle. By eighteen, others are taking note of him too. “That’s a smart young fellow” (32), says Tighe. “He’ll make his mark” (32), thinks Rivers. Judged by the standards of his own society, Cowperwood succeeds miraculously.
He makes money in plenty. By the time he is thirty-four years of age, he has “a banking business estimated at nearly two million dollars” and “personal holdings aggregating nearly half a million” (93). Cowperwood feels “significant” through the accumulation of wealth: For, in his society, fame went with great wealth greatly achieved.

The institution of the American corporation is the locus of seeing the asset of power become as Veblen puts it, something to be accumulated and “consumed” in a way, that it does not abate the degree of power possessed by its owner. The corporation – and finance capital more generally – accomplishes this by holding great public works – such as utilities of transportation, communication, and power [the street-rail company Dreiser represents in *The Titan* or the electric companies] – in private hands.

Cowperwood made his fortune in the public utility of the street-rail transportation, but the most representative utility of the early twentieth century is the harnessing of electricity. Norbert Wiener in his *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* argues that “the great change-over in engineering,” is “between mechanical connections and electrical connections” (194). “The period of electrification,” as Wolfgang Schivelbusch notes in *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, witnessed “the transformation of free competition into corporate monopoly capitalism” (73), and Schivelbusch offers “an analogy between electrical power and finance capital”: “The concentration and centralisation of energy in high-
capacity power stations,” he says, “corresponded to the concentration of economic power in the big banks” (74-75).

At the height of Cowperwood’s power in controlling the street-railways of Chicago, described in The Titan, one of Cowperwood’s street-rail lines, Dreiser writes, “had a market value which gave the road an assured physical value of about three times the sum for which it could have been built” (The Titan 473). Cowperwood’s control of its finance allowed him, Dreiser says:

Millions in loans that did not appear on the books of the companies he had converted into actual cash, wherewith he had bought houses, lands, equipages, paintings, government bonds of the purest gold value, thereby assuring himself to that extent of a fortune vaulted and locked, absolutely secure. (473)

Cowperwood “knew instinctively what could be done with a given sum of money – how as cash it could be deposited in one place, and yet as credit and the basis of moving checks, used in not one but many other places at the same time” (The Financier 66). He intuitively understands that “the thing for him to do was to get rich and hold his own – to build up a seeming of virtue and dignity which would pass muster for the genuine thing” (81). He takes efforts to preserve the semblance of conformity in his personal and business affairs by way of public benefaction. He donates an observatory to the University of Chicago, and this in fact is motivated by a need to enhance his reputation with other financiers and thus to facilitate the loans he seeks in New York and in London: “On such repute undoubtedly rise money . . . the whole world would know him in a day. . . . The
gift was sufficient to set Cowperwood forth in the light of a public benefactor and patron of science” (*The Titan* 372).

Cowperwood, after his initial success, took a “keen interest in objects of art, pictures, bronzes, little carvings and figurines for his cabinets, pedestals, tables, and etageres” (*The Financier* 64). He has a mounting desire for the possession of art – painting, sculpture, tapestries, and rare carpets. The obsession with art is a recurrent peculiarity of the money king’s psychology. The acquisition of art, like public benefaction, is tainted with the Midas touch. Cowperwood’s dealer suggests that great pictures invariably increase in value; an investment of a few hundred thousand cannot help but result in a profit of millions. His financial acumen tells him that the dealer is correct. Accordingly, with one beady eye on the cash register and another on aesthetics, Cowperwood crumbs his lavish mansion with the conspicuous loot of his travels until it is more a museum than a home.

In addition to the art gallery Cowperwood in *The Stoic* is increasingly concerned with another donation for the benefit of mankind: a hospital in the Bronx. His primary concern is with ulterior achievements he could retire from business and use his wealth to “maintain his art gallery, organise his charities, build the hospital to which he had given much thought in the past, and at the same time leave to all to whom he felt obligated an unquestionably satisfactory reward. The dream enticed him” (*The Stoic* 200). Cowperwood of *The Stoic* finally got tired of repeating the ‘tricks’ of the game.
The force of possessing, and of possessions, is ubiquitous throughout Dreiser’s work. Dreiser deals in the secrets of power, in the Cowperwood novels, which focus on a hero of power. It is not insignificant that Dreiser calls his trilogy – *The Financier, The Titan, and The Stoic – Trilogy of Desire*. There is connection between Carrie Meeber, George Hurstwood, Lester Kane, Clyde Griffiths, Eugene Witla and Frank Cowperwood; Dreiser is attempting to circumscribe the ordinary economy of materialism and meaning to accomplish particular ends of fiction, desire and power.

Of the infinite desires of man, the chief is the desire for power. An extraordinary expansion of wealth has transformed the attitudes and expectations of masses of people. Wealth and prosperity have achieved unprecedented proportions with all the temptation and danger they bring. Wealth has been viewed as a blessing and as a curse; as a prerequisite of virtue and an embodiment of vice; as an expression of merit and of fault. People strive and yearn for money all day long to acquire the things they want in order to fulfill their needs and make them happy. They experience disappointment after having acquired these things and go into denial that they still are not fulfilled and at peace. So they put up an act and pretend that having these things is some sort of an accomplishment and that it really means something. So the game goes on, the act perpetuates itself and the more money they get the emptier they feel, the emptier they feel the more money they seek. It is a vicious circle that is destined for total collapse.

The aspirations of Dreiser’s characters to rise in the world, to be a success as measured by money and social position, were stimulated and sanctioned by the
twentieth century capitalist society. In their attempt to achieve American dream of success, they stumble and fall. Dreiser has little respect for conventional sexual morality. In his novels Dreiser clearly showed that the desire for money and sex had their common source in the desire for power, 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 next chapter analyses how sex is a dominant force in the life of Dreiser’s characters who live in American cities.