Chapter Three

SEX AND THE CITY

From the heavenly Jerusalem, “the City of God,” in the Judeo-Christian tradition to the golden city in Greek and Roman myths, the city in its conceptual aspect holds a celestial dimension reflecting an ideal dwelling place in eternity, as well as a terrestrial one as the center for economic and social activities promising affluence and a better life. With their hope of reaching “great cities and towns” the fifteenth-century European explorers crossed the Atlantic and encountered an unknown continent and its people; religious visionaries ventured into the “wilderness” to build a typological “City upon a Hill” in the New World Canaan. From the colonial period when the Europeans eagerly searched for the land of gold and gospel, America has provided the sites for both real as well as imagined heavenly cities. Since then “the City” in America has been conceptualised and idealised as well as invented and exploited by dreamers, seekers, and others who have crossed the borders from many parts of the world with their own visions, dreams and desires. Such historical backgrounds have endowed the cities in America with multi-layered meanings.

The 1890s and early years of the twentieth century were a turning point in American society. As the American economic system struggled to define itself, social unrest and violence, results of economic depressions, disgust with corruption in government, and overcrowded urban centres were common throughout the era. The agrarian way of life, so familiar and fundamental to
American thought and self-image was passing away into a nostalgic past. Historian Harold Faulkner in his *The American Way of Life: A History* observes that “Americans witnessed the passing of the frontier and the rise of the United States to a position of world power and responsibility which was to make any return to her old isolation increasingly difficult, if not impossible” (253). Old issues were dead or dying and efforts to revive it proved unavailing. Most important of all was the triumph of industry over agriculture. The Industrial Revolution had gone so far as to make turning back to the ways of a simpler agrarian society out of the question.

Charles Goodrich, the author of the city travel guide *The Family Tourist: A Visit to the Principal Cities of the Western Continent* marvelled that in Rochester, New York: “. . . in 1810 – twenty eight years since – not a single house should we have found standing upon it . . . but by 1838, it had become a city of 20,000” (211). This sudden and drastic rate of urban growth was not confined to new cities on the western fringe of settlement; cities that were already big got bigger at a much faster pace. In 1800, in a nation of over five million people, only 1,83,000 Americans lived in one of the six cities with a population over ten thousand. Between 1820 and 1860, the population of the United States tripled, growing six times faster than the world average, from ten million to thirty two million, but the urban population multiplied tenfold. The proportion of the population living in cities grew from six percent to twenty percent of the total population. Not only had population increased during the period 1860 to 1910
from 31.4 million to 91.9 million, but the percentage of Americans living in cities increased as well – by 1910, forty six percent lived in cities.

With population centering on urban areas, the questions of the city – the “good life,” crime, poverty, urban blight, and civic idealism – all came to the fore near the turn of the century. Many rural Americans believed in the classic definition of the city as the means to the “good life,” a life in which man could aspire to more than mere physical survival. The attractions of the city were many – restaurants, theatre, music, dancing and shopping. However, the real consumers of the city’s goods were not its residents. With the advent of improved transportation and roadways, the middle and upper-middle class retreated from the cities into the suburbs, leaving the less well-to-do and the downright poverty-stricken to the quickly decaying urban centre. The upper classes travelled into the city to attend to their business, consume the leisure activities contained therein, and then return to their comfortable and beautiful suburban homes. Jacob Riis in his *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, as early as 1890, has observed of New York City:

> Three-fourths of its people live in the tenements, and the nineteenth century drift of the population to the cities is sending ever-increasing multitudes to crowd them. . . . We know now that there is no way out; that the “system” that was the evil offspring of public neglect and private greed has come to stay, a storm-centre forever of our civilisation. (6-7)
As an early social reformer, Riis’ concern with the city was echoed by future reformers. The reformers who followed Riis were concerned less with the poor of the cities than with their own fear of the growing urban masses. Their concern can be understood in the context of the social upheaval centered on the city during the Gilded Age, beginning with Chicago’s Haymarket Riot of 1886 and followed by labour unrest just prior and just after the beginning of the 1893 depression – the Homestead strike of 1892 and the Pullman strike of 1894. The depression starting in 1893 lasted until 1897; its pain, division, and violence were a memory fresh in the minds of Americans.

The reformers of urban America were generally middle and upper-middle class, whose concern was with the potential violence of those left in the cities. In *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* Paul Boyer explains:

> The process of urbanisation functioned as a potent catalyst for social speculation and social action . . . social thinkers, reformers, philanthropists, and others whose assumption and activities seemed otherwise very different were often linked by a shared preoccupation with the city and, more specifically, by a common interest in controlling the behaviour of an increasingly urbanised populace. (vii)

The lower classes were living in squalid and significantly unhealthy conditions. The alleys and tenements of Washington D.C were in squalor. A square block of fine town houses and mansions enclosed a courtyard of buildings accessible by a small alley from the street – where poverty, crime, illegitimacy,
and tuberculosis swarmed over its inhabitants, unknown to the upper-class home owners who resolved to live in the urban centre. In 1897, three hundred and three of these alleys housed eighteen thousand nine hundred and seventy eight people. The conditions found in the city centre of Washington D.C were not unique. The squalor and hopelessness of city life for immigrants and the poor throughout the country has been recounted numerous times by writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Riis, and Frank Norris.

The middle and upper-class reformers who sought to remedy this situation did so, for the most part, out of their own fear. They knew that for their own safety and business viability something had to be done. They had to make the assumption that the poverty-stricken were somehow morally deficient, a point of view quite in vogue at the time, with the continuing popularity of Darwin’s theories of survival of the fittest and Spenser’s translation of these ideas into the social realm. Boyer observes:

Common to almost all the reformers . . . was the conviction – explicit or implicit – that the city, although obviously different from the village . . . should nevertheless replicate the moral order of the village. City dwellers, they believed, must somehow be brought to perceive themselves as members of cohesive communities knit together by shared moral and social values. (viii)

From 1870 to 1900, the American population doubled, and the population in the cities tripled. People were attracted by the conveniences, entertainment and cultural experiences, more and better paying jobs, and new forms of
transportations made it easier to get there. The city grew from a small compact one to a huge metropolis that required commuting in electric trolleys. Electricity, indoor plumbing, and telephones made city life more alluring. Department stores in New York and in Chicago provided urban working-class jobs and also attracted urban middle-class shoppers.

Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* told of a woman’s escapades in the big city and made cities dazzling and attractive. However, the mobility to urban areas produced lots of trash, because while farmers always reused everything or fed “trash” to animals, city dwellers, with their mail-order houses could simply throw away the things that they didn’t like anymore. In cities, criminals flourished; impure water, uncollected garbage, unwashed bodies and droppings made cities smelly and unsanitary. Worst of all were the slums, which were crammed with people. The so-called “dumb-bell tenements” were the worst since they were dark, cramped, had little sanitation or ventilation, and were obviously terrible. To escape all these, the wealthy of the city dwellers fled to suburbs.

Until the 1880s, most of the immigrants had come from the British Isles and Western Europe [Germany and Scandinavia] and were quite literate and accustomed to some type of representative government, but afterwards, this shifted to the Baltic and Slavic people of south-eastern Europe, who were basically the opposite. While the south-eastern Europeans accounted for only nineteen percent of immigrants to the United States in 1880, by the early 1900s, they were over sixty percent.
Many Europeans came to America because there was no room in Europe, nor was there much employment, since industrialisation had eliminated many jobs. They lacked capital to buy farmland or education to establish professions. America was also often praised to Europeans, as people boasted of eating everyday and having freedom and much opportunity. Profit-seeking Americans also perhaps exaggerated the benefits of America to Europeans, so that they could get cheap labour and more money. Many immigrants to America stayed for a short period of time and then returned to Europe, and even those who remained tried very hard to retain their own culture and customs. However, the children of the immigrants sometimes rejected their old culture and plunged completely into American life.

As cities grew larger, and especially as foreign immigration increased, urban poverty became a problem that was more and more difficult to ignore, forcing city dwellers to choose between rejecting the appeals of the needy and feeling as if they were encouraging pauperism. Poverty, and the attendant “wear and tear of conscience and heart strings” (Ross 109), was assumed to be a part of city life. If the discomfort produced by frequent encounters with the poor and sick was part of the urban experience, so was the threat of crime, which was thought to be encouraged both by the wealth on display in the city and by the anonymous nature of “a dense population [that] affords facilities for its commission” (Deleon 39).

If some “disorderly” parts of the city were a mystery to many citizens, other elements of urban disorder, particularly sexual disorder, were all too
apparent. The openness with which prostitutes plied their trade on the streets of America’s cities and the prominence of advertisements for abortionists and birth-control doctors in the cheap urban press contributed to the sense of “an emerging urban world in which sinners walked through the streets apparently unscathed by their sinfulness” (Homberger 103). The threat cities posed to the sexual virtue of the young, especially young women from the country, was highlighted by novels that were constructed around seduction plots. Cities posed a threat to male morality as well, although men were often depicted as being responsible for the depraved sexual state of urban America. Honourable young men from the country, after only a “few months in the wicked cities,” would become “the merriest libertine and the most ultra-fast one ever bred within the vicious atmosphere of the metropolis” (Thompson, Adventures 81). Sex was easily available in urban America. This was one of the obviously threatening and more easily sensationalising aspects of city life.

As city dwellers became more mobile, they were brought into contact with a broader cross-section of the city, including the wealthy, which gave rise to class envy or “imitation” which, “especially in the city, is the source of more misery and wrong, than almost anything else that can be named” (Chapin 64). As John Todd wrote in his The Moral Influence, Dangers and Duties, Connected with Great Cities, the “angel of woe” did not come to modern cities with fire and brimstone as he came to Sodom and Babylon, but “he now comes unseen, and cuts the cords which bind men to conscience” (46). The constant flux of urban life taught men that it made little difference whether they stayed in a city or not,
and “this very slight hold upon men, which we obtain in the great city, is a constant source of anxiety and jealousy, lest we lose all the hold we have” (80).

The diminished power of conscience to tie men together in the urban environment raised crucial questions about one’s responsibility to one’s neighbours. Living in a city implied a higher level of self-interest that existed in the country. George Thompson too vouchsafed the view in his *Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia*:

All was cold selfishness. Each individual seemed wrapped up in contemplation of his own actual or possible wants. . . . The struggle to live – the fight for existence amidst the dense throngs of such a city as this, had smothered all gentle sensibilities. To each, each seemed a foe, and even the common courtesies of life were submerged in the conflict to exist. (8)

This intense competition, heightened by the visibility of the extremes of success and failure on the streets of the city, was felt to be characteristic of city life. The young men and women who headed to the city in order to make their fortunes were ultimately disappointed, the men often descending into intemperance, poverty, and crime, and the women into prostitution. As Patricia Cline Cohen in her *The Murder of Helen Jewett* has written regarding commercialised sex in nineteenth-century American cities, “male sexual temptation was omnipresent” (231). Prostitutes – both brothel prostitutes and streetwalkers, in a wide variety of classes – offered the prospect of sexual
pleasure in exchange for money. As Gilfoyle in *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* has written:

This blatant commercialisation transformed activities and behaviour with little material ‘value’ into objects with exchange value. For the first time in American life, with the opportunity to resort to prostitutes on a massive scale, sex became an objective consumer commodity and a profit-making venture. (5)

Increasingly, through both the unavoidable presence of sexually available women on urban sidewalks and the proliferation of brothels, assignation houses, and such prostitution-specific zones as the third tier in most theatres, commercial sex became a prominent physical element of the urban landscape.

Nevertheless, the constant presentation of economic opportunity is a reason for moving to cities, regardless of whether or not it is fulfilled. Henry Ward Beecher in his *Lectures to Young Men, on Various Important Subjects* has written in this regard:

Covetousness breeds misery. The sight of houses better than our own, of dress beyond our means, of jewels costlier than we may wear . . . and rare curiosities beyond our reach, these hatch the viper brood of covetous thoughts; vexing the poor – who would be rich; tormenting the rich – who would be richer. (89)

The familiarity with the luxuries of urban life that proximity forced upon the urban poor creates “a kind of desire . . . for having them constantly” (Chumasero 52). Since “this they cannot honestly do, therefore temptation steps
in, aided by desire,” resulting in “crime born from the seed of urban emulation” (52). In an 1847 entry in his diary, Philip Hone wrote that New York had come to rival the large cities of Europe: “the two extremes of costly luxury in living, expensive establishments, and improvident waste are presented in daily and hourly contrast with squalid misery and hopeless destitution” (II: 293).

Ariel Ivers Cummings, the author of The Factory Girl wrote:

No one can enjoy the full amount of happiness which is attainable by mortals, until they believe themselves as well off as others, a happiness that was presented as almost impossible to achieve in cities where the poor could see not only their rich neighbours as they promenaded down Broadway or Chestnut Street or Washington Street, but also the outpouring of consumer goods arrayed in the show windows of the shops in these main streets that attracted the promenaders in the first place. (24)

The speed and intensity of city life were crucial aspects of the urban experience, and were keys to the view of the city as the ultimate test of character and endurance; as John Todd wrote, “Everything, in the great city, from the tire on the carriage-wheel, to the strongest moral and mental attainments, is tasked to its utmost limits” (71). George Lippard in his The Quaker City states:

In New York all is mud, flash, and uproar . . . Down Broadway! Churches like jails; houses like hospitals; women dressed in rainbows; men hurrying along as though running for their lives, or for the Doctor; lean supernumeraries, dressed in Turkish attire, and
holding forth tempting inducements of an ‘Exhibition of Model Artists’ up stairs; a sea of omnibuses and umbrellas, rolling from gutter to gutter, down the street, as far as the eye can see; beggars at every step, and of all sizes, and all shades of rags; a noise like Babel, the moment after the confusion of tongues. (48)

All of the other qualities that made cities “urban” – the opportunities for fun, freedom, and education, their density, speed, noise, and contrasts – all were seen as being the product of American cities’ fundamentally economic nature.

Money was seen as the one common bond that tied everyone in cities together, regardless of all their other differences. Charles Goodrich wrote of New Orleans that the entire population of the city, from “brown and yellow to jet black,” people from “every state, from Maine to Georgia,” all agree “in one point – the pursuit of money. Americans, English, French, Germans, Spaniards, all come hither to make money, and to stay only as long as money is to be made” (359). Cities were suffused not only with the spirit of making money but also with spending it, and cities increasingly became places of mass consumption, and Junius Henri Browne in his The Great Metropolis, a Mirror of New York noted that, “the impression one gets of cities . . . is, that everything in them is for sale” (92).

The city in Dreiser’s novels is much more than just a setting for human drama. It is a participating element, a siren that sings charming songs leading to disaster. Dreiser experienced time and time again the seductive forces of the city and now and then his dreams were crushed by its underlying cruelty and
indifference. These experiences are also found in the acts and moods of most of his protagonists.

Dreiser’s urban experience included growing up in a poverty-stricken immigrant’s family in local cities in Indiana, struggling to survive as a practically jobless youth in Chicago, witnessing squalor and corruption as a newspaperman in cities such as St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and New York, falling into destitution after the set-back in New York journalism, and contemplating suicide as a vagrant and failed novelist suffering from neurasthenia. Dreiser’s writings abound not only in expressions of humiliation, loneliness, and the anguish of being poor, but in those of excitement and fascination, feelings that both the author and his characters undergo as newcomers to the city.

In the summer of 1887, Theodore Dreiser, left a small town in Indiana and went alone to the rapidly growing Midwestern metropolis of Chicago as a sixteen year old boy to seek his fortune. He had to start, however, with taking his first job as a busboy at a seedy restaurant. Seven years later, in November, 1894, he arrived in New York where he struggled to establish himself as a journalist and would-be novelist. Once again, he experienced the harshness of life there. His sufferings in New York, which drove him to the verge of suicide, were even worse than in Chicago. When he wrote his first novel *Sister Carrie*, he drew on his experiences of these two metropolitan centres.

Metropolises, with their glittering theatres, imposing hotels and sumptuous restaurants, together with the wealthy in their fashionable apparel, represent the walled and gilded city to which Carrie seeks entrance. Described as the “Elf-
land”, “dream land”, or “the kingdom of greatness” in the novel, they have been luring a huge number of dream-makers to pour in by promising to satisfy those dreamers, every desire for wealth, for status and for influence. Carrie is just one of them. Living in the entrancing city, a materialist to the core, she can’t escape the consistent seduction from the superhuman tempter, and is lead in consistent pursuit of her unquenchable desire for perfect happiness. On the other hand, the luring metropolis provides Carrie with a suitable environment, for only in those amusing and magnetising cities can she satisfy at least temporarily her insatiable desire for pleasure and display her special theatrical talent.

Chicago forms a suitable living environment, necessary for Carrie’s rise. At the time when the novel was written, it was the vibrant centre of business, where the promise of fortunes hung in the air. To these green horns and the rustic, the big city is a shimmering mirage, promising not only economic opportunities but also a glamorous, exciting, and comfortable social life. However, this is just one side of the city. The other side of it is a rather an indifferent place, a merciless jungle-like industrial society. The city is Carrie’s playmate on the seesaw, pushing her up to the highest point of expectations only to let her down again on the hard ground of reality. She dreams of an attractive job, but is disillusioned time after time. She meets Drouet again, and he gives her new reasons to dream: “She was again the victim of the city’s hypnotic influence” (Sister Carrie 74). However, her relationship to the drummer soon becomes monotonous, and she starts dreaming of the city’s second ambassador, Hurstwood. The world he represents is fascinating for a while, but again the
grimness of the city strikes a balance, and they end up destitute and dismayed. But up she goes on the seesaw, again yearning for another stratum of urban society, the theatre, just to become disillusioned by its emptiness and superficiality.

The city plays the same dualistic role to Eugene Witla in *The “Genius”*. He falls in love with the “world of hope and opportunity,” which makes “the beginner dream dreams,” but, again like Carrie, he realises that “underneath, of course, was struggle” (*The “Genius”* 39). His yearnings are turned into disappointments only to be followed by new expectations. Eugene even makes this ever-changing equation the theme of his art. He depicts the charm of the city as well as its destructive spirit, the beauty as well as the ugliness. He sees the drama and the tension between the dreams and hopes of the individual, and the indifference of the city in fulfilling them.

Carrie is eager to enjoy various pleasures in life, especially ambitious to gain material well being. She looks forward to Chicago with mixed feelings of ignorance and youthful expectancy. Dreiser depicts her as “a half-equipped little knight,” who ventures to reconnoitre the mysterious city and dreams “wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy, which should make it prey and subject – the proper penitent, grovelling at a woman’s slipper” (*Sister Carrie* 4). At the very beginning, Carrie dreams wildly that she can gain fame and fortune and take the big city in her control. But the reality turns out to be quite the contrary. Instead of playing the role of the conqueror of the city, man has been moving about in the jungle-like city like driftwood caught in the ocean’s side. The imagery of the
overwhelming sea serves as an indispensable part of the jungle picture and reminds one of the cruel jungle struggle for existence.

Under the pervasive influence of the city’s hypnotic power, it is natural for one to fall as an easy prey to the captivating night in the city. It is in the metropolis, with its unbounded material commodities and numerous entertaining ways that the desire for material goods, for immediate pleasure provides man with the strongest impulse to act, as Carrie does in the novel.

New York is another important living environment which is instrumental in Carrie’s material rise. As an imperial metropolis, it is the origin of all wealth, power and fame, where the mysteries and possibilities of mystification are infinite. Dreiser opens the Chapter XXX “The Kingdom of Greatness: The Pilgrim a Dream” (260) with a brief discussion of the specific atmosphere created by the ultimate metropolis. The high and mighty atmosphere in New York is like a chemical substance: staying in the atmosphere for one day will completely affect and discolour one’s point of view and one’s desire which will thereafter remain forever dyed. One day of it to the never tried mind is equated with opium to the non-smoker. As a more powerful superhuman tempter, New York’s dreams are more destructive because they are more remote and unattainable than Chicago’s. New York is a place which seems to promise wealth and fame for those fortunate new comers like Carrie. This side of the city is irresistible, while the other side of the city is rather sordid. It is a place which bases everything on money, appearance, and reputation. It is such a powerful atmosphere that provides the proper environment for Carrie’s momentary success.
Chicago’s hypnotic power and entrancing night and New York’s mighty atmosphere effects upon Carrie’s fate: they incessantly lure her and awake her unquenchable urban life. The showy theatre has the most irresistible attraction for her in the city. It not only symbolises her dreamland and serves as a source of her happiness but also provides her with an excellent place to display her talent and makes her rise to material well being.

The two cities Chicago and New York provided Dreiser an inexhaustible source of material for his major novels as well as his more overtly autobiographical writings, so much so that he emerged as what might be called the founder of the American city novel. As Blanche Housman Gelfant in her *The American City Novel* puts it, “. . . in a way, all the assumptions and motifs of modern urban fiction were implicit in *Sister Carrie*. It was the generic novel of twentieth-century city fiction, just as Dreiser was its generic novelist” (64). She further continues to state:

Dreiser . . . stands out as a germinal figure in American urban fiction, a figure to whom later writers have turned for inspiration because they have found in his novels a fictional world that is familiar to them, that is the world they themselves have experienced. (93)

The usual literary assumption is that Dreiser’s achievement was that of a solitary pioneer of modern American literature, as if he could have shaped his urban themes without any aid or model, or his literature was nothing but putting down of his own experiences which were unique and new in themselves owing to
the fact that American society was transitioning into an unprecedented stage. Contrary to such an assumption, Thomas Riggio in *American Gothic: Poe and An American Tragedy* demonstrates that Dreiser turned to Edgar Allan Poe when delineating Clyde Griffiths’ psychological state of being possessed by the idea of murdering Roberta Alden, which leads to the fatal scene on the lake. An advocate of the doctrine of art for art’s sake, Poe might well be regarded as one of the remotest writers from Dreiser, though as a matter of fact the latter professed time and again his admiration for the former. In his concluding remarks, Riggio writes: ‘Dreiser’s subtle reworking of Poe . . . argues against the idea of Dreiser as a ‘primitive,’ an instinctual writer who has no literary or intellectual roots and who achieved powerful effects as a plodding recorder of ‘real’ experience” (532).

Dreiser gives expression to his own thoughts and feelings in dealing with the shocks he suffered in the city. In his treatment of the city as a literary subject, Dreiser resorted to at least three literary traditions: the formulaic seduction story of the sentimental novel in which he equivocally gendered the city, the novel portraying a young artist afflicted with alienation in the city, and the literature of slumming that was conducive to the aesthetics of the urban sublime which, remodelled from the pastoral tradition, served to foster proletarian literature.

In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie Meeber, coming to Chicago, is not only enthralled by the din and bustle of a great city but also intimidated by its overwhelming power. Perhaps, she is excited about the urban atmosphere not so much in spite
of her fear as because of it. When she goes out for the first time to find a job, the city seems to her as thrilling as it is terrifying:

The entire metropolitan centre possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep. . . . She walked bravely forward, led by an honest desire to find employment and delayed at every step by the interest of the unfolding scene, and a sense of helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force which she did not understand. (Sister Carrie 16)

The nature of the city is described at the very beginning of the novel:

The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye. (3)

Here the city is figured as a “tempter.” As for “the infinitely smaller and more human tempter” (3), there are numerous examples, from Drouet to interviewers of job applicants, to male co-workers at the factory, to Hurstwood, to profligate followers of the star actress Carrie Madenda. The city, however, is far more “cunning” than all of them. Whereas the seducer is endowed with the wickedness of the city according to the convention of the sentimental novel, in
Sister Carrie, it is the city that is endowed with the fascinating power of the seducer.

Dreiser sees small town or rural life for the most part as “narrow,” and pushes it away towards the edge of his fiction. That average human beings should be lured to the city and trapped there is the dilemma. And while aspects of their travail draw from Dreiser a certain pleasure and thoughtfulness, the spectacle as a whole arouses chiefly his involved, compassionate regret. In the city desire is increased, made furtive, and finally destroyed. And there is no way out. Dreiser’s individual is always at bottom adrift in the metropolis. He can only salvage some part of what he is born with, his emotive nature, and hope to give it a spasmodic expression.

In Dreiser’s fiction sexual relations become diluted from pure ends into means as well, largely meaningless for the women and sometimes compulsive for the men. Dreiser’s sexual drives and his womanising had earned him the censure of Jug and Mai Dreiser and his sister Claire. There was some feeling in the family that he was abnormal, they even talk that he should be sterilised. He had attempted to write about his strong sexual drive in The “Genius”, an effort that drew moral condemnation from literary conservatives. And gossip about his private life was fanned by his literary reputation as a writer of a banned book. Exaggerated accounts of his amours were circulating in New York literary circles.

Dreiser sought to tie together American sexual attitudes and censorship in an essay in Hey, Rub – A – Dub – Dub entitled “Neurotic America and the Sex
Impulse.” In it he accuses Americans of being both puritanical and ‘six struck’ citing the example of a Southern city he had recently visited — obviously Savannah — where books and movies are vetted by censors and the old-fashioned morality is dominant. And yet the young people flock to roof gardens, where they cling together in “suggestive dances” (Dreiser, Hey 129), after which they go off to lovers’ lanes to consummate their aroused desires. Their behaviour, however, is normal, he insists; what is neurotic is the official denial of the instinct driving them and the artificial conventions set up to regulate it. Sex is “an all but dominant force in life” (132), superior to man-made laws. The conflict between the “amazing super-impulses of sex” (141) and the rules of those who fear it has continued throughout history, generating all that is tragic in life.

Dreiser found Chicago “Symphonic”: “It was like a great orchestra in the tumult of noble strophes. I was like a guest at a feast, eating and drinking in a delirium of delight” (Dreiser, Newspaper 22). His pleasure was hardly confined to the culture of things: “if I was wrought up . . . by varying facets of the city, I was equally so about the delight of love” (22). Indeed, his “thoughts were always on the other sex” (11). Still, by repeatedly rendering a sexual desire aroused by physical form — “the arch of an eyebrow, the colour of an eye, the flame of a lip or cheek” (129) — he folds his philandering into the material culture of the city. The women he meets become part of the culture of things. Dreiser conflates his sexual passion with his other aspirations: “My body was blazing with this keen sex desire I have mentioned, as well as a desire for material and social supremacy” (128). Dreiser occupies his place as America’s great novelists of
desire because a host of passions – for success, for art, for power, for things – converge, and each is expressed with something like the physical ache of sexual desire.

The love that begins in feeling ends in fear of the “world’s opinion.” And that opinion, in the guise of conscience, easily invades the secret room. Conscience, in Dreiser’s view, is absolutely social. The loss of chastity and the stain on female virtue were widely decried, the assumptions that sex might be an object of commerce, that husbands and fathers might not be totally committed to the quiet life in the parlour, and that women possessed vibrant sexual natures are widespread. As Christine Stansell has written in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, this phenomenon very likely looked different from the perspective of working women as well:

. . . a commercial culture that depended on the exchange of money for amusement and pleasure at least had this effect: Its practices of heterosexual exchange implied a more contingent notion of men’s rights over women. Commercial culture promoted the assumption that women owed sexual favours in return for men’s generosity. From women’s perspective, this was hardly egalitarian, but it was an improvement on the view that women were legitimate targets for sexual coercion simply by virtue of their sex. Young women probably played an active part in promoting this sexual code. (99)

In Chicago, Carrie discovers that her sister and her husband see her as the means for their own economic security. In exchange for her small room, Carrie
must produce enough money to help her sister meet their rent. Carrie has few resources to produce this capital. Carrie discovers that she has capital in the form of sex. In a materialistic society, sex becomes a commodity, something that can be bought, sold, and exchanged for goods. In fact, Carrie uses sex to gain position for herself.

In her desire for material possessions and success, she begins and leaves two different illicit affairs. She sees nothing wrong in living with Drouet to get the clothes she wants and to have opportunities to move in Chicago’s affluent circles. Later, Carrie sees that Hurstwood can offer her an even higher standard of living. She ignores the fact that he is already married and the two of them will be committing adultery.

Carrie does not develop any emotional attachment with her men. When Drouet questions the relationship between Carrie and Hurstwood, she retorts: “You thought only of what would be to your satisfaction. You thought you’d make a toy of me – a plaything. . . . I’ll have nothing more to do with you at all. You can take your old things and keep them” (Sister Carrie 201).

Drouet is a serial womaniser, who often boasts of his success with women. He takes pleasure in doting after beautiful women. Whenever Carrie persuades him to marry her, he replies evasively. He is never in love with Carrie. In their very second meeting, Carrie understands Drouet’s preference and liking for beautiful women:

She conceived a true estimate of Drouet. . . . He gave her the money out of a good heart. . . . He would not have given the same
amount to a poor young man, but we must not forget that a poor young man could not, in the nature of things, have appealed to him like a poor young girl. Femininity affected his feelings. He was the creature of an inborn desire. (59-60)

Hurstwood, the manager of Fitzgerald and Moy’s, is a friend of Drouet. His graceful social position and luxurious urban life prompt him great enchantment to women. He leaves his family and joins Carrie not owing to his love for her but because of sexual jealousy:

Here sympathy sprang to the rescue, but it was not unmixed with selfishness. He wanted to win Carrie because he thought her fate mingled with his was better than if it were united with Drouet’s. He envied the drummer his conquest as he had never envied any man in all the course of his experience. (111)

On seeing Carrie who “came fresh from the air of the village,” Hurstwood feels “the bloom and the youth” (111). He picks her “as he would the fresh fruit of a tree” (111). He chalks out a plan and dupes Carrie into believing that Drouet is injured in an accident, and takes her to Montreal. There, he prevails upon her to marry him. When his business picks up in New York, he leaves Carrie all alone in the house and enjoys himself with his friends, thinking Carrie incapable of making new friends or forming new relationships. Drouet and Hurstwood treat Carrie only as a sex object, to possess and enjoy.

After living with Hurstwood for some time, Carrie realises she can no longer benefit from the arrangement and leaves him, too. Carrie Meeber advances
in social standing by using sex as a form of capital, while George Hurstwood falls from upper class status. Hurstwood loses the means to support Carrie and he also loses the right to sleep with her. Sex being something Carrie believes should be paid for.

Dreiser exposes the intersection of work and sex in an American city in his novels. In the novel *Jennie Gerhardt*, Jennie is treated as a sexual “commodity” by both her family and her first lover Senator Brander, and is later assumed to be sexually available by Lester Kane simply because she is a domestic servant. Dreiser endows Jennie with the same moving quality he had given Carrie – the wonder and excitement of an impressionable sensibility as it encounters for the first time the material beauty and splendours of life. The early chapters evoke with considerable power the emotional reality of two worlds – the Gerhardt home, with its sickness and poverty and eight people crowded into a few rooms, and the imposing elegance and plush of the Columbus House, with its warmth and light and its colour and music. “How beautiful life must be for the rich” (*Jennie Gerhardt* 29), Jennie thinks. Jennie’s response to Brander is like that of Carrie to Drouet and Hurstwood. His room to her is a place of “wonder” (14), and she associates it with the “heavenly” and “magical” (37). The richness of the carpet, the brightness and warmth of the room, the comfort and good taste of its furnishings – all to Jennie have the beauty of nature itself. Jennie finds Brander’s room a “home” for her spirit. She is “immensely taken with the comfort and luxury surrounding” (23) Brander.
Jennie apparently has no love for Brander. Her lovemaking with Brander is more of seduction on the part of Brander than the natural outcome of mutual love. Poverty drives Jennie to the doorsteps of Brander. She goes to him to seek his help to rescue her brother who has been caught and fined for stealing coal. She has no means of paying the fine to get him out of bars. Brander uses his influence to get her brother out of bars. Hence Jennie is filled with gratitude to Brander. Brander who has an intense need and desire for Jennie exploits this and seduces her with the promise of marriage.

Jennie’s seduction by Lester Kane has many of the same characteristics as her seduction by Brander. The Gerhardt family has moved from Columbus to Cleveland in order to begin a new life, and Jennie finds work in the cultivated, upper class home of the Bracebridges. Again, as with the Columbus House, her taste and awareness are improved by her contact with a new and “higher” world, but again a step upward in knowledge brings the danger of sex. One of Mrs. Bracebridge’s guests, Lester Kane, finds Jennie temptingly attractive. He pursues the chase with vigour and is aided by another Gerhardt’s family crisis, one caused by the accidental burning of old Gerhardt’s hands. Jennie is again placed in the sacrificial role of appealing for aid to a man who desires her, and again his aid is followed by her acceptance of the man as a lover. Being aware of the fact that Lester does not intend to marry her, she sacrifices her virtue because she feels that her family needs the offered help. She becomes the mistress of Lester and goes on a trip to New York with him. She allows Lester to establish her in an apartment in Chicago.
Lester Kane is an aggressively virile man of thirty-six. He is a vigorously possessive male. His “you belong to me” (130) to Jennie echoes exactly Brander’s statement and Lester means exclusive proprietorship. Lester’s powerful drive to possess and to hold is matched by Jennie’s instinctive desire to be possessed and to be held. His is the masculine principle of iron, hers the feminine one of softness. In a passage heavy with sexual imagery, Dreiser describes the inevitable attraction that a Jennie will have for a Lester:

It is a curious characteristic of the non-defensive disposition that it is like a honey-jar to flies. Nothing is brought to it and much is taken away. Around a soft, yielding, unselfish disposition men swarm naturally. They sense this generosity, this non-protective attitude from afar. A girl like Jennie is like a comfortable fire to the average masculine mind; they gravitate to it, seek its sympathy, yearn to possess it. (126)

Jennie “was the kind of a woman who was made for a man – one man. All her attitude toward sex was bound up with love, tenderness, service” (144), Lester thinks. And when Lester kisses Jennie for the first time, “She was horrified, stunned, like a bird in the grasp of a cat; but through it all something tremendously vital and insistent was speaking to her” (130). When Jennie agrees to give herself to Lester, she is “sorrowful” because of the illicit circumstances of her acceptance, but her “yes” is spoken “with a strange thrill of affection” (166). Though Lester delights in “the luxury of love” (128) which he finds in Jennie, he
reveals himself as a man powerfully conditioned by the assumptions of his class and sex.

Dreiser’s characters motivated by passion, dreams and stark reality try desperately to reach cities, in order to be rich, secure and influential. *An American Tragedy* is a story of corruption regarding the achievement of the American dream, money and status. The story had multiple settings but one of the main settings is New York in the 1920s. All over the country, people saw New York as the “city of dreams.” The 1920s is a time frame that was known as “the Roaring Twenties.” During this time, many people flocked to New York with a hope to attain their individual dreams as Clyde did in the story. Many Americans became very rich because of the booming stock market. The Americans who possessed an average income even became wealthier in worldly goods by being able to acquire cars and indoor plumbing. During this period, morals were not important. Prostitution, bootlegging, and racketeering were a sign of the times. Dreiser portrayed the characters in the story according to what occurred, no matter what the level of immorality was.

As in *Jennie Gerhardt* in *An American Tragedy* Dreiser makes sex an item of barter. With so much money around and so many things to buy, many Americans focused their life on getting rich and having fun. The cities in America of the 1920s had countless young men like Clyde Griffiths, who found themselves excited by and obsessed with a world that glittered with a thousand new pleasures. Some of these young men – even some who, like Clyde, were
born poor – did get rich, through some combination of intelligence, ambition, resourcefulness, hard work, sexuality and luck. Many others did not.

Sex has been cheapened in American cities; it is not a driving force of life but a symbol of achievement and a curious part of the American dream. Unlike Cowperwood who can make his way with women, Clyde is like Dreiser, who could say of himself: “I was too cowardly to make my way with women readily” (Dreiser, *Newspaper* 128); “rather they made their way with me” (Dreiser, *Dawn* 37). Hortense and Sondra ‘make their way’ with Clyde; each of them using him in her own way – Hortense for money, Sondra to spite Gilbert Griffiths. Roberta, too, in her own fashion, makes her way with Clyde.

Clyde Griffiths is a sensitive youth who longs for material and sensual pleasures. He goes doggedly after the goals clearly set in his path by his society: pretty girls, nice clothes, sweet foods, good times and the money and leisure to procure them. Dreiser presents the seeming gaudiness of Clyde’s wants:

. . . evening suit, dress shirt, high hat, bow tie, white kid gloves and patent leather shoes, a costume which at that time Clyde felt to be the last word in all true distinction, beauty, gallantry and bliss. To be able to wear such a suit. . . . To be able to talk to a girl. . . .

What a true measure of achievement! (*An American Tragedy* 24)

Clyde turns his back on the faith and Good Counsel of his godly parents. He conceals from his parents his going to theatres and motion pictures. He takes a job at a soda fountain, “for it would provide him . . . with all the ice-cream sodas he desired, free” (23) and the chance to drink in, along with the syrups, the ices,
and the fruits, “the beauty, the daring, the self-sufficiency and the sweetness” (23) of passing girls: “Then was he not well set upon the path that leads to all the blisses? . . . The secret handclasps, may be – an arm about the waist . . . a kiss” (24).

Clyde’s apprenticeship is his bellboy job at the Green-Davidson Hotel – “of all the influences which might have come to Clyde at this time . . . perhaps the most dangerous” (44). His fellow bellboys help him to see more complicated tricksters, such as the well-dressed gentleman who runs off leaving behind a sobbing “wife” to pay their bill. And they direct his attention to those who prey specifically on boys like himself: the nymphomaniac and the homosexual. Clyde is introduced to the world of prostitution by his fellow bellboys. They take Clyde to his first whorehouse. In Kansas City, Clyde has a relationship with a woman of loose morals named Hortense Briggs, who lures Clyde into buying her a fur jacket. As Clyde moves up the social ladder, he comes to know that sex is not a part of a meaningful relationship but something which has to be acquired as a result of buying gifts and flattering.

Clyde moves to New York in the hope of escaping his humble beginnings and starting a new life. He gets a job in a factory where he eventually gets promoted. Clyde considers his promotion to be a step up on the social and economic ladder. As the supervisor of his uncle’s collar factory Clyde is attracted towards Roberta Alden, who is prettier and more sensitive than most of the factory girls. He enters into a romantic relationship with Roberta and coerces her into sex. Soon the status striving Clyde is enthralled by Sondra, a wealthy and
beautiful young woman who “slipped a white arm under Clyde’s and he felt as though he were slowly but surely being transported to paradise” (334).

Clyde is attracted towards the pretty, sexy girls, the shiny cars, the dance rhythms, the parties, and sporting events which are common in city life. Dancing is an overt metaphor of sexual interest and a covert one of sexual activity. Clyde, when still a virgin, is asked to dance by a blonde prostitute on his first visit to a whorehouse, though he has not as yet learned how. He is taught by Hortense to dance. Clyde senses while dancing with Rita that she could readily be his, but his retreat from this easy conquest eventually leads him to reach Roberta to dance. And finally, it is Clyde’s prowess as a dancer – a prowess gained in part by frequent practice with Roberta – which initially attracts Sondra who uses him for her own social purposes. The bellboys and their girls frolic on the ice during their outing. Their games are basically those of sexual pursuit and capture, in which Clyde at last appears close to possessing Hortense and yet is faced with the frustration of her sudden interest in Sparser. Clyde associates his acquisition of various water skills with a preparation for the paradise of Sondra and her world.

However, Clyde after killing his pregnant girl friend Roberta becomes trapped in the consequences of his desires. In the eyes of the countrified folk of Cataraqui County, Clyde is “a member of the well-known social group of the big central cities to the south” (600). He is thus immediately cast in the role in which Roberta, herself a rural soul, had initially placed him, that of the city seducer of an innocent country maid. As the details of the crime unfold – Roberta’s pathetic
note to her parents, her “young and attractive” (522) body, her pregnancy, her simple, poor and respectable parents – and as evidence of Clyde’s appearance during his escape from Big Bittern is made known – “a smartishly and decidedly well dressed youth for these parts” (524) and “more like a young society man than anything else” (530) – the myth of the city seducer takes firm hold in the minds of the people of Cataraqui County. So when Roberta’s father learns of the circumstances of her death he is filled with contempt for Clyde:

. . . at once, born for the most part of religion, convention and a general rural suspicion of all urban life and the mystery and involuteness of its ungodly ways, there sprang into his mind the thought of a city seducer and betrayer – some youth of means, probably, whom Roberta had met since going to Lycurgus and who had been able to seduce her by a promise of marriage which he was not willing to fulfill. And forthwith there flared up in his mind a terrible and quite uncontrollable desire for revenge upon any one who could plot so horrible a crime as this against his daughter.

The scoundrel! The raper! The murderer! (537).

The residents of the Cataraqui County believe that because of Clyde’s “desire to marry a rich girl he had most brutally assaulted and murdered a young and charming working-girl whose only fault had been that she loved him too well” (598-99).

*The “Genius”* tells the story of the professional career and sexual exploits of Eugene Tennyson Witla. Eugene begins his career as an illustrator and
becomes a celebrated artist. He then gives up his art to become the well-paid executive manager of a magazine corporation, only to have his career destroyed by yet another extra-marital infatuation. Eugene “knew that his whole career was at stake, but it did not make any difference. He must get her” (The “Genius” 647). Dreiser produces an etiology for Eugene’s neurasthenia that is specifically sexual. Eugene’s overwhelming attraction to women – “the sheer animal magnetism of beauty” (274) – seems inseparable from the way, Eugene is “overawed by the material face of things” (105). He originally transposes this awe into the power of his illustrations and paintings, in love with “the thought of making the commonplace dramatic (89).

Eugene Witla’s artistic nature reveals itself since he becomes an artist by profession, not a writer, though the novel is Dreiser’s most overtly autobiographical work of art. Eugene’s style of painting suggests that he might have had a close connection with “The Eight,” a group of painters dubbed as “Ashcan school,” some of whom were friends of Dreiser since they were one-time newspaper illustrators. They were popular for their paintings about the American cities. It has been argued that Eugene’s life as an artist was modelled after one of the “Ashcan School” of painters, but, as Cyrille Arnavon states in his essay “Theodore Dreiser and Painting”:

Indeed several currents in American painting circa 1910 may be said to coalesce in the synthetic figure of Witla: impressionist influence, emphasis on the American scene, selection of apparently trivial subjects, and above all the opposition to academic art. (121)
Both Eugene and the “Ashcan school” painters take delight in rendering city scenes, especially its seamy side, or the beauty or the city’s ugliness. Exploring the relationship between Dreiser and painting, Arnavon, an obscure French scholar, gets at the kernel of his city writings:

The brooding meditation of a lonely spectator wandering through a large city, a characteristically Dreiserian theme, emerges for the first time; it evokes a feeling of utter loneliness in “atomistic” individuals as they are first confronted with a metropolis like Chicago in *Sister Carrie* or New York in *The “Genius”*. The description of this mood is perhaps one of Dreiser’s most original creations. (117-8)

The sense of exhaustion of the alienated and anonymous individuals in the midst of the clamour of the modern metropolis, the feeling of exhilaration like fever infected by the urban furore, triggered the modern arts. Dreiser was almost obsessed by this subject.

Dreiser’s infatuation with the city in particular, which runs parallel to a recurring depressed tone of alienation, renders a peculiar texture to his writings. *Sister Carrie* was Dreiser’s first attempt to fictionalise the spirit that lured hundreds of thousands from their rural retreats to the fast growing urban centres. The American city inspired the wildest hopes and dreams in people like Carrie, Cowperwood, Eugene, Clyde and the hundreds of minor characters in Dreiser’s novels who are carbon copies of the protagonists.
Carrie is always carried away by the splendour of the city and is attracted by the shops that displayed clothes and other accessories:

Carrie passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, stationery, and jewelry. Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. 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, and she felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase. (Sister Carrie 22)

Like Carrie, Eugene too wants to go to the city: “He did not think so much of Alexandria. Some time he was going to get out of it” (The “Genius” 23). Chicago evokes the complex of feelings in him. To the small town dweller, the big city is the “much larger world outside” (30), offering promises of wealth as well as sexual fulfillment. Eugene comes to believe that the love of a girl is somehow dependent on monetary status. When he finds that the girl he would like to befriend prefers a more prosperous boy-friend, he becomes conscious of his “position in the world” (31). The town dandies who wear nice suits and have money to make week-end trips to Chicago or Springfield seem to him to get all
the girls. The dreams of love and the dreams of wealth are intertwined in Dreiser. The woman and wealth need to be conquered as proof of a man’s virility.

In a passage, Eugene thinks of the city as a great battlefield. However, he alternates between moods of buoyant hopefulness and total impotence:

Here were Jay Gould and Russell Sage and the Vanderbilts and Morgan – all alive and all here. Wall Street, Fifth Avenue, Madison Square, Broadway – he knew of these by reputation. How would he do here – how fare? Would the city ever acclaim him as it did some? He looked wide eyed, with an open heart, with intense and immense appreciation. Well, he was going to enter, going to try. He could do that – perhaps, perhaps. But he felt lonely. He wished he were back with Angela where her soft arms could shut him safe. He wished he might feel her hands on his cheeks, his hair. He would not need to fight alone then. But now he was alone, and the city was roaring about him, a great noise like the sea. He must enter and do battle. (101)

Eugene’s dreams around the city are built on the evidence of magazines and newspapers. In his case, as in Dreiser’s own, the newspaper acts as the perpetrator. To be precise, in a scene reminiscent of Dreiser’s own departure for Chicago, Eugene’s journey begins. Like Dreiser’s and Carrie’s, his, too, is a spectacle but, as usual, a testing ground: “He must succeed. That’s what the world was made for. That was what he was made for” (36). Chapter IV of the novel describes Eugene’s approach to the city and his euphoria over it. Dreiser
resorts to his favourite strategy of generalising Eugene’s experience. The landlady, on seeing Eugene, thinks: “This was what Chicago did to the country; it took the boys” (39). To get into Chicago’s “great banks, great office buildings, great retail stores, great hotels” (39) – the four invincible fortresses in Dreiser’s fable land which overawe and abash his characters – is, however not for the incompetent: “Underneath, of course, was struggle. . . . This city demanded of you your very best, or it would have little to do with you. Youth in its search for something – and age – were quickly to feel this. It was no fool’s paradise” (39).

Eugene reacts to the heart of the business district and the luxurious homes of the rich just as Carrie and the young Dreiser did. They make him feel that “he was destined to be a failure” (40). As in *Sister Carrie* and the autobiographies, there are extended descriptions of Eugene’s visits to these areas of the city. The disparities between the rich and the poor are graphically presented. Eugene meets “shabby men, sunken eyed, gloomy, haggard” (43), and the sight teaches him that “the city could be cruel” and that “you could fail so easily” (43).

Overawed by his first glimpse of Chicago, Eugene seeks work there as a newspaper artist. It inspires in him a common feeling of what Chicago meant: “eagerness, hope, and desire. It was a city that put vitality into almost every wavering heart: it made the beginner dream dreams; the aged to feel that misfortune was never so grim that it might not change” (39). When Eugene encounters scenes in Chicago that appeal to his artistic ambitions, he feels sure that he can “make great things” of these sights. When Eugene visits a gallery to view a work by a much esteemed Russian painter, he is awed by the
“magnificence” of the painting, “the wonder of colour, the truth of character” and the painter’s “virility and insight . . . imagination and temperament” (51). Though he is able to appreciate the quality of the work, he is ultimately mystified by this artistic accomplishment: “Eugene stood and stared, wondering how such things could be done” (51).

When Eugene moves to Chicago, he takes with him vague notions of art along with his aspirations to wealth, but he does not go anticipating sexual experience. However, sex is one of the first things he encounters upon his arrival in the city. His success with a woman, a relationship which he conducts with “an air of superiority” (46) boosts his sagging confidence and make him feel that he might one day get to them:

    This was, in its way, his first victory of the sort, and it pleased him mightily. . . . What, he thought, did the silly boys back in Alexandria know of life compared to this? Nothing. He was in Chicago now. The world was different. He was finding himself to be a man, free, individual, of interest to other personalities. . . . That would be really a rise in the world. . . . His visions began to multiply. One could get up in the world by trying. The energetic delivery he had done for this laundry had brought him this. Further effort in the other field might bring him more. And he was young yet. (46-47)

Eugene’s search for recognition leads him to New York. In New York, he achieves his first significant success when he sells a painting to “Truth” magazine
for seventy-five dollars. But his startled discovery that artists are never “tremendously rich” leads him to doubt his choice of profession. After a prolonged siege of mental disorientation, he works his way up the corporate ladder. Although at the apex of his popularity he is earning a comfortable income as an artist in New York, when he watched “the handsomely dressed crowds,” witnessed the “carriages on Fifth Avenue,” and read “the constant talk of society functions in the newspapers,” Eugene “came to the conclusion that he was not living at all, but existing. . . . The prices he heard that tailors demanded – that dressmakers commanded, the display of jewels and expensive garments at the opera, made the poor little income of the artist look like nothing at all” (148).

When Eugene visits his home town, he finds “that his old world was no world at all” (59): “Of these fellows none knew the visions that were now surging in his brain. Paris – no less – and New York – by what far route he could scarcely tell” (59). He does not realise that “the difference was in him only. He was the one who had undergone cataclysmic changes” (59). Bristling with “vanity and deep egotism” (61), he lives in his dream world unmindful of the hurt he causes other people by using them as his tools. He uses Ruby Kenny to alleviate his sexual needs as well as to find companionship in a city he otherwise finds “artificial and cold” (75).

At a relatively young age Eugene “admired girls, – was mad about them, – but only about those who were truly beautiful” (12). Then at the age of seventeen Eugene meets Stella Appleton, who, cool and aloof, is also “very fair . . . with very blue eyes and a slender sylph-like body” (13). He is captivated by every
nuance of her physical appearance and his attentions border on obsession. One evening he and Stella sit next to one another at dinner, and “if her lips moved he noted just how. When her teeth showed he thought they were lovely. A little ringlet on her forehead beckoned him like a golden finger” (17). They engage in a brief, immature romance; her attention is soon diverted by another boy, and Eugene is devastated. Though once he leaves Alexandria, he moves on to many other conquests, Eugene never quite overcomes the bitterness he felt at this initial slight.

Eugene meets his first adult girlfriend, Margaret Duff, a young woman who works for the laundry company for which he is a driver. She is also the first woman with whom he has a sexual relationship, and he finds himself to be not just an enthusiastic amateur, but actually distressed by over intense desire: “. . . growing by what it fed on, his sex appetite became powerful. In a few weeks it had almost mastered him,” it was “disrupting and disorganising” (44). Yet after only a few more weeks, Eugene’s feelings have changed dramatically. He is no longer in awe of Margaret’s feminine charms, but rather, “he knew that this girl he was trifling with could not hold him. She had lured him, but once lured, he was master. . . . He was beginning to feel that he could get along without her, – that he could find someone better” (44). A beautiful woman incites Eugene’s desire; he is overwrought with this desire until, one way or another, he convinces the woman to engage in a sexual relationship with him, after which disillusionment quickly sets in.
Eugene’s character is only capable of self-love. The influence of a capitalist order privileges selfishness and Eugene is incapable of feeling sorry for anyone other than himself. When Eugene is bored with one woman and is ready to pursue another, he aesthetises the entire relationship, removing the human element almost altogether. He glosses over Ruby’s despair at being abandoned, remarking that “he cared for her as one might care for a girl in a play or a book – her life, her surroundings, her misfortune in loving him, constituted an artistic composition. He thought he might be able to write a poem about it some time” (136), but what he is not able to do is to confront Ruby, end their relationship face-to-face, or express any sympathy for her sadness.

Eugene is deeply flattered by, and eventually married to Angela, because “hers was a loving disposition and Eugene was the be all and end all of her love” (199). To Angela, Eugene is a “figure of heroic proportions. . . . His talent was divine fire” (199). She is convinced that “no one could know as much as Eugene,” and “no one could be as artistic . . . he was a man of genius” (199). For Eugene, the beauty of these women lies in their capacity and willingness to reinforce his own belief in his imaginary self – his “genius”.

Eugene considers Margaret Duff the best he can afford to “own” on his current salary as a laundry driver. He is motivated to seek more lucrative employment, so that he may upgrade the caliber of women available to him. And when Eugene establishes himself as one of New York City’s wealthy socialites, he easily attracts the beautiful eighteen-year-old daughter of a wealthy widow. Entirely obsessed with young Suzanne, Eugene worships her not as a paragon of
human beauty, humour, and intelligence – though she embodies those things, but rather “she was somewhat like a delightful toy to him, and he held her as reverently in awe as though she were a priceless vase” (555). Eugene regards Suzanne as an object to be played with for his own pleasure. When Suzanne’s mother asks Eugene to end the adulterous affair, he replies to Mrs. Dale: “You are asking me something that is utterly impossible. . . . I must have her and I will. She’s mine! She’s mine! She’s mine!” (620) he yells, and the outburst is not over: “His thin, lean hands clenched and he clicked his teeth. ‘Mine, mine, mine!’ he muttered, and one would have thought him a villain” (620-21).

Eugene enters into each and every new pursuit genuinely and absolutely convinced that this particular woman is the unique and final answer to all of his wishes and desires. As he falls in love with Angela, he says to himself in all seriousness, “Nothing more lovely will ever come again” (133). While he is engaged to Angela, he falls in love with a beautiful singer, Christina, and during the time they spend together, “Eugene reached a curious exaltation of spirit different from anything he had experienced before” (159), and “he concluded that she was the most wonderful being he had ever known” (161). After he is married to Angela, he meets young Frieda who prompts him to reflect that “the fact that he was married to Angela was a horrible disaster” (282) because “Frieda’s face was ever before him, a haunting lure to love and desire” (284). Eugene subsequently has an affair with his landlady’s daughter, Carlotta; when she “threw herself on him, kissed him sensuously scores of times, whispered her desire and affection,” Eugene realises that it is in fact at this point that “he had never seen anything
more lovely” (342). He later becomes infatuated with Suzanne, and Eugene attributes to her his feeling that “Life has opened anew for me. You are the solvent of my whole being. . . . I feel as though I had never lived until now” (542). Eugene is absolutely sincere in each of his testaments. These women are perfectly cast as so many shiny, beautiful objects, merely reflections of Eugene’s shallow desires. Dreiser comments on Eugene’s obsession with eighteen-year-old girls:

The beauty of youth; the beauty of eighteen! To him life without it was a joke . . . a work-horse job, with only silly material details like furniture and houses and steel cars and stores all involved in a struggle for what? To make a habitation for more shabby humanity? Never! To make a habitation for beauty? Certainly! What beauty? The beauty of old age? – How silly! The beauty of middle age? Nonsense! The beauty of maturity? No! The beauty of youth? Yes. The beauty of eighteen. No more and no less.

(295-96)

Priscilla Perkins in her *Literacies: Reading, writing, Interpretation* observes that, “though he favours eighteen-year-olds, he doesn’t look at such women in terms of their child-bearing potential. Just like him, they are perfect human specimens, evolutionary end-points” (241). Perkins adds that, “what matters to Eugene is his genius’ right to mate with any woman who highlights his own social value. . . . He needs a woman who can enable the textual, not sexual reproduction of his name and image” (241). And though Eugene’s wife wants a
child badly, her reasons are more consistent with Eugene’s position: she views her potential offspring as a bartering tool, believing that she will be able to buy back Eugene’s long absent affection and attention if she bears his child. Angela conceives secretly, but finds that she had miscalculated: the newborn is not enough to revive her husband’s affection.

Eugene is a potential artist whose talent goes to seed because he adopts the standards of his society as to what constitutes achievement. Instead of being able to say ‘no’ to the temptations and the pseudo-challenge of the “walled city,” he gets “overwhelmed” by its magnitude. The result is that inanimate things take over the role of an adversary and make him visualise life in images of bitter struggle:

He had marvelled at wealth and luxury in Chicago, but here it took his breath away. It was obviously so much more fixed, so definite and comprehensible. Here one felt intuitively the far reaches which separate the ordinary man from the scion of wealth. 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. He had come here with a pretty high estimate of himself, but daily, as he looked, he felt himself crumbling. What was he? What was art? What did the city care? (The “Genius” 103)

Frank Cowperwood is yet another Dreiserian hero who develops an obsessive interest in women and the Trilogy literally becomes one of desire – Cowperwood’s desire for wealth and sex. Cowperwood “was concerned only to
see what was of vast advantage to him, and to devote all his attention to that” (*The Financier* 51). What is of advantage to him is the explosive growth of northern cities – including his home town, Philadelphia. As always in Dreiser, the city is the locus of longing, the place where the profoundest desires have at least a shot at being satisfied. Seeing the city spilling over its boundaries, Cowperwood envisions the money to be made from speculation in street railways and is quickly en route in becoming “one of those early, daring manipulators who later were to seize upon other and ever larger phases of American natural development for their own aggrandisement” (94). He divorces his first wife Lillian Semple, and moves to Chicago to begin a new life with Aileen Butler.

*The Titan* follows Cowperwood’s career in Chicago, the city that Dreiser believed offered limitless possibilities. The novel dramatises Cowperwood’s successful campaign to control the street-railway system. When Cowperwood arrives in Chicago, like Carrie, he is moved by the city skyline, and Dreiser interjects several exuberant passages of tribute to the vitality of the new metropolis and its pilgrims “hungry for something the significance of which, when they had it, they would not even guess” (*The Titan* 6). Chicago is a fitting backdrop for Cowperwood’s rise to power. Once Cowperwood gains his transportation franchises through all manner of trickery and treachery, his fortune accumulates to twenty million dollars, his extensive art collection becomes the most important in the nation, and his power becomes virtually unchecked.

The cities are the perfect places for Cowperwood to make his financial as well as sexual conquests. The conventional rules of morality are done away with
in cities. As the lover of sixteen women over the course of *The Financier* and *The Titan*, Cowperwood is clearly incapable of following the “accustomed path” of monogamy. He finds no value or relevance in “this one-life, one-love idea” (*The Financier* 80), disregarding even the evolutionary significance of the monogamous relationship to social development, of which he has some awareness:

> How had it come about that so many people agreed on this single point that it was good and necessary to marry one woman and cleave to her until death? He did not know. It was not for him to bother about the subtleties of evolution, which even then was being noised abroad, or to ferret out the curiosities of history in connection with this matter. He had no time. Suffice it that the vagaries of temperament and conditions with which he came into immediate contact proved to him that there was great dissatisfaction with that idea. (80)

Cowperwood’s relationships with women are impermanent – “People outgrew each other” – and with no moral guilt – “he saw nothing wrong in the sex relationship. Between those who were mutually compatible it was innocent and delicious” (179).

Cowperwood’s search for the feminine ideal is rooted in his social ambitions. He feels keenly the rebuffs of high society, though he realises that elite circle tend to shut out the new rich. Dreiser frequently exposes the stupidity of such social pretensions in the novel, but his own envy of exclusive wealth and
respectability helped him to empathise with and motivate Cowperwood in his desire for a worthy woman whose credentials might still gain him entree. When Cowperwood’s “bright young bird” (48), Aileen, begins to age, his thoughts stray to younger women.

Dreiser has Cowperwood realise that the sex drive of a strong man endures through old age, but it cannot be satisfied by older women. *The Titan* deals mostly with the tycoon’s affairs with a series of mistresses at least twenty years younger than he. Dreiser explains that these affairs are the product of a “chronically promiscuous” (*The Titan* 201) nature connected with an appreciation of art. Cowperwood needs “the novelty of a new, untested temperament, quite as he must have pictures, old porcelain, music, a mansion, illuminated missals, power, the applause of the great, unthinking world” (201).

Like Eugene Witla’s quest for the perfect woman in *The “Genius”* Cowperwood’s search is characterised by excessive expectation followed by disillusionment. Each time Cowperwood, like Eugene Witla, discards a mistress because she lacks some necessary trait, his level of expectation rises until he discovers the ultimate “perfect girl.” The fervent quest for the feminine ideal in the novels interconnects with other of Dreiser’s fictional themes of expectation and disillusionment that are derived from his own experiences in the secular city.

Cowperwood’s search begins to reap dividends after a series of short intrigues with totally insufficient temperaments. When he meets Rita Sohlberg, a twenty-seven-year old former art student and the wife of a Danish violinist, he discovers qualities that help him define his ideal. She paints and plays the piano.
Her moodiness is irresistible. Her role in the novel is to add artistic talent to the set of requirements Cowperwood is developing. Dreiser also portrays her as much more mentally aware than Aileen. When the financier shows her through his art collection, they pause before a nude by Gerome. She reveals that she does not care for Gerome because of certain artificiality in his work, though the painting is “very pretty” (118). Unaccountably, Cowperwood finds this a “sweet insight which sharpened his own” (118). Again, she observes that the blue of the old man’s coat in “Adoration of the Magi” is “be-yoot-i-ful” (127). Cowperwood rewards this judgment with a burst of overwrought appreciation, calling her “clover blossom” and “sprig of cherry bloom” and “Dresden china dream” (127).

A year into Cowperwood’s affair with Rita, he sets up another liaison, this time with his secretary, Antoinette Nowak, a “fine dark, brooding girl” (129), whose appeal is “mere sex attraction” (130). After Aileen discovers these two affairs she physically throttles Rita and secures Antoinette’s banishment, thus winning Cowperwood’s admiration and temporary fidelity. Cowperwood’s search for the perfect woman soon begins anew, and after a series of relationships which Dreiser passes over as “names merely” (202), he meets Stephanie Platow a ‘brilliant’ Russian-American Jew from the Southwest with a penchant for art, literature, philosophy, and music. Stephanie at eighteen has already developed the requisite artistic moodiness. Furthermore, “the rhythmic outline of her body” reminds Cowperwood of “a letter S in motion” (208), and of course she is younger than Rita. She also surpasses her predecessor in sophisticated sex gratification. Having indulged in sex at young age, she has developed generosity.
Yet paradoxically, Cowperwood regrets that she is not a virgin. Since “the evil” had already been done, however, he chooses to overlook it until he discovers that Stephanie is having a simultaneous affair with a young poet named Forbes Gurney.

Cowperwood, feeling hurt by Stephanie’s unwillingness to devote herself entirely to him, confronts the “lying prostitute” (228) along with Gurney in her room and advises her to stick to her profession and renounce free love. Having given up on Stephanie, Cowperwood is next enthralled by Mrs. Hosmer Hand, the wife of another financier. She is “young, debonair, sufficient – a new type” (265). He appreciates her superior social graces, assertiveness, and ambition, but he is troubled by her shortage of “heart.” Dreiser paints this and Cowperwood’s preceding affairs with a degree of comic irony based on the financier’s vulnerability and his application of moral standards in his mistresses’ behaviour that are totally missing in his own.

While on a business trip to Louisville, Cowperwood meets the keeper of a brothel, Hattie Starr, whose sexual passion had cut her off from her moneyed background. This combination of passion and background has helped to form in her daughter, Berenice Fleming, the composite of qualities for which Cowperwood has been searching. Cowperwood instinctively knows that she is his “pole-star” when he sees a photograph in Hattie’s room of the fifteen-year-old girl a “delicately haggard child with a marvelously agreeable smile, a fine, high-poised head upon a thin neck, and an air of bored superiority” (347). Cowperwood discovers in her all of the qualities of his previous loves plus several
that they lacked. She has the highest “artistic tendencies” (392) – tendencies which flower in a “soul” eager for “romance and art and philosophy and life” (394). By the close of the novel, Cowperwood sees 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” (470).

The first two hundred pages of the novel *The Stoic* concern Cowperwood’s efforts to gain control of the London street-railway system. The mixture of business and sex which structures *The Titan* also patterns this segment of *The Stoic*. While the financier plots the purchase of railway lines, he also contrives to bring together his wife, Aileen, to whom he has remained married only for the sake of appearance, and a gigolo named Bruce Tollifer. While Tollifer and Aileen are occupied with each other, Cowperwood dallies with other women including Arlette Wayne, a singer of great intellect and beauty, Caroline Hand, a society woman who had played a role in *The Titan*, and Lorna Maris, a sensual, nineteen-year-old dancer. But these affairs are carried forward in spite of Cowperwood’s knowledge that only the unutterably perfect Berenice can command his absolute idolatry. Much of the tension in the first two-thirds of *The Stoic* is created by the financier’s recognition of Berenice’s superiority, his intellectual preference for fidelity to her, and his urge to test other temperaments. Dreiser ascribes Cowperwood’s confusion to a “consuming and overwhelming force,” the desire for “youth and beauty and sex” (*The Stoic* 169).
Cowperwood and Eugene Witla share common traits as both take a series of mistresses. Dreiser makes the failure of Cowperwood’s two marriages turn upon his sexual prowess; Cowperwood could not be content with one woman at a time. To him the possession of sexual beauty symbolises the acquisition of some social status of great magnitude. In all the novels of Dreiser, lust for power and sex drags his characters to their tragic fall and the cities make a perfect stage for the tragedy.

In “A Young Man of the Provinces in New York,” a chapter in his critical biography of Dreiser, Matthiessen states: The city Dreiser discovered for himself was “so huge and powerful and terrible” (43) that it added further to his feeling of uselessness. Yet it fascinated him, too, it was “so varied and alluring, if, above all, so hard” (43). Dreiser would wallow one moment in the joys of the city life only in the next to be depressed about the melancholia and destitution of the metropolis. Dreiser’s ambivalence toward the city is apparent in all his major works. His literary response to the city seems to shift from naive excitement to mature animosity. In A Hoosier Holiday, Dreiser declares, “After a long year spent in the heart of New York, I was sick of the city – any city” (71). Taking into account Dreiser’s inclination to treat the city as if it were female, Mortan and Lucia White in their The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright aptly characterise its effect upon the younger Dreiser as that of “a tantalising girl,” and upon the older Dreiser as “a cruel, unsatisfying woman,” presuming this difference to be “a measure of Dreiser’s disappointment with the American city of his dreams” (137). Dreiser’s subject is not only the
“mystery and wonder” but also the “terror” of the city. This terror derived from his anger at debilitating urban forces and social injustices and from his sense of uncertainty and anxiety. He wrote his novels delineating his own predicaments as well as the miserable living conditions of other social outcasts in the city.

Dreiser’s characters are overtaken by the splendour of the glorious life they witness in the cities. They strive hard to achieve the objects of their desire be it riches or women. They spend their time and energy in seeing to it that their dreams come true little realising that their labour will end up in utter dismay. The next chapter studies Dreiser’s presentation of the crumbling hopes of his ambitious characters. In fact, their eyes open very late to the doom of their labour.