Realism and Naturalism were the two most popular literary trends prevalent in nineteenth century American literature. Realism as a literary movement, and distinct literary trend had its beginning in W.D. Howells, and it continued as a standard of novel writing in writers like Henry James, Frank Norris, Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane and Jack London. The Realistic movement in fiction was a revolt against Romanticism. When the Realistic movement gathered momentum, it culminated in Naturalism, and was called "stark-realism". The naturalists revolted against the "timidity" and "genteelity" of the realists in their presentation of day-to-day life in literature. The realists dealt with surface reality and did not ignore the bright-side of human life and experiences, whereas the naturalists probed deep into life and dealt with the generally unprobed aspects of life like sex and crime. Hence, there arose a critical controversy between the Realists and the Naturalists. Theodore Dreiser came to the American literary scene at this critical moment, and has been associated with both these trends. While some critics acclaimed Dreiser as the "chief spokesman for the realistic novel", others called him the "wheelhorse of American naturalism". Thus, a debate exists among critics as to whether Dreiser is a realist or a naturalist. The present study is a step in this direction of a clearer understanding of the novelist.
It is generally acknowledged that Dreiser was the shaper of the literary movement of the nineties and a "bellweather of modern fiction". In fact, he combined both the trends, and the realistic movement reached its perfection in his novels. He is the "go-between", who established a "link" between the nineteenth and twentieth century literary traditions. In spite of severe criticism, he was, perhaps, the only writer who preserved his artistic integrity and limited himself to what he knew of life through his own experience. He recorded things honestly and truthfully in his writings, keeping his eyes fixed on observable reality. His novels are reflections of contemporary American life and culture. Therefore, an attempt has been made in this study to examine his novels against the background of the basic tenets of the Realistic and Naturalistic movements in fiction-writing, to arrive at the world-view of the author. Inevitably, such a study needs classification of themes, characters, and method of characterization adopted by the author.

This study comprises of six chapters. The first one is a study of the background; the first-half of the Chapter describes the general social milieu and literary conditions of mid-nineteenth century America, which shaped the Realistic and Naturalistic movements, and the second-half presents the biography of Dreiser based on the books written by him and by others to show his development as a novelist.

The second and third chapters are devoted to the discussion of Realism and Naturalism. It is generally said
that Realism and Naturalism are two indistinguishable trends in literature. Here, in this study, an attempt has been made to distinguish between Realism and Naturalism in two separate chapters. Realism and Naturalism theoretically differ from each other on certain principles, but, practically, distinctions are hard to make when a novelist follows both the trends in writing a novel.

While Chapter two and three describe theories postulated by the Realists and Naturalists; Chapter four and five study the novels of Dreiser in relation to these theories. The approach has been, in the main, textual. In the process of detecting elements of Realism and Naturalism, long passages have been quoted from the novels to show Dreiser's response to Realistic and Naturalistic trend. Individual characters are studied with least comments, except the novelist's comment, because the novelist speaks better than critics.

The concluding Chapter makes statements in support of Dreiser as an artist, whose works transcend narrowbounds of classification and standardization. He is a seminal artist, he stands apart from others, therefore, he must be judged alone.