CHAPTER 1

LITERARY AND BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND
"Dreiser came to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind and to our stuffy domesticity, gave us the first fresh air since Mark Twain and Whitman"¹, so said Sinclair Lewis praising Dreiser the novelist, whose novels established a "link" between the nineteenth and twentieth century American literature. Being born and brought up in the nineteenth century, he matured as a novelist in the twentieth century. In fact, for his works, he took the nineteenth century social milieu, especially the last three decades, as the background; and among many literary traditions of nineteenth century American literature, the realistic and naturalistic traditions particularly underwent a thorough development in his works. Further, realism and naturalism, two indistinguishable literary trends of writing grew out of the congenial soil

of the nineteenth century background. Therefore, it is imperative to have a glance at the conditions that were prevalent during this period.

Literally, America was discovered for the second time in the mid-nineteenth century. Due to the advent of the Civil War and the frontier issues, there occurred, swiftly moving but far-reaching changes in the socio-economic, political and philosophical life of the United States. The traditional civilization and culture was reset by new ways of living and thinking, and a revaluation of established codes of life started. This changed attitude towards life evoked different critical comments among the critics of life and letters, and they called this period with sneering zest "The Gilded Age", "The Brown Decades", The Wasted Generation", The Dreadful Decade (1870-1880); and "The Frontier Period". All these terms, no doubt reveal the actual tone of the age. But each of these terms except the last, reveals a critical bias, and partly for this reason, only the last term seems a satisfactory designation for this period. The Frontier had been a dominant factor in American life since the first settlement of the nation. And it was only in the last third of the nineteenth century that the power of the frontier in all aspects of American life became paramount above all other influences, both for good and for evil. The repercussions of the frontier movements were also felt in the first few decades of the twentieth century.
Therefore, the "Frontier" seems to be the prime factor for the changes and it was productive of other factors. The causes of the Civil War were inherent in the frontier issues. The great war would not have taken place at that time, and the way it did, if there would not have been critical controversy over the exact status of the new states and territories created by the extension of the frontier line. The ever changing dividing frontier line made a distinction between the settled East and the unsettled West, and the anxiety over the question of slavery invited the dire events of the war. The war, in turn, had its reaction upon the Westward movement of the settlement. Thus, the War and the "frontier" unitedly invited other two factors — immigration and scientific advance. The increasing immigration changed the character and tempo of American life. The progress of science and scientific invention was responsible in great part for the change, not merely for the new industrialization that followed the War but for the changed character of the Westward movement itself. Thus, these four most indispensable factors were intertwined and they interacted one upon another producing many bitter effects changing the nation as a whole.

The opening of the frontier in the sixties signalized prosperity for Americans. "Frontier" was nature's plenty: its vast mountain region was filled with minerals and other natural resources, and its fertile Prairie land promised heavy yielding of crops. So people from inland East and outland Europe came
here dreaming of immense possibility of wealth and free-land. New industries cropped up, transcontinental railroads were built to promote trade and commerce; and scientific inventions pushed life for a better living. America turned to "Modern America" and the national life, for the time being was hopeful and optimistic, so long as it was not aggravated by the corroding effects of immigration, industrialisation and urbanisation.

Though it is difficult to say exactly when the effects of these forces of change accentuated and altered the life completely, it is obvious from history that the postwar years witnessed a steady change and before the closing of the century the national life was altered upside down.

The seventies and eighties was a period of rapid industrial growth. The result of industrialisation was the growth of big cities and the rural population moved towards the cities which resulted in neglect of agriculture and the countryside. At this critical juncture, the influx of immigrants from the various parts of Europe, consisting of illiterate masses further created problems in cities. The growth of slums contributed towards a fall in moral standards. Crime and disease were widespread. These surroundings formed the raw material for Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Street*, Hamlin Garland's *Son of Middle Bower*, Frank Norris's *McTeague* and Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt*. 
Another consequence of industrialisation was the rise of the "financial giants", who made a separate predatory class and started exploiting the labour class. Hence, there arose a wide gap between the poor and the rich. The financiers were the real men of power. Though comparatively small in numbers, these "captains of industry" controlled both — business and politics. Among the financiers who in those days accumulated large fortunes, were Jay Gould, Corvelius Vanderbilt, Leland Stanford, John D. Rockefeller and Jay Cooke. Most of these men rose from poverty and small beginnings to worldly splendour and wealth; their idea of success was largely material. Dreiser appropriately summed up their business ethics: "They were all hawks...they were all tigers facing each other in a financial jungle...they were none the less...wolves at one moment."  

Towards the close of the century there was tremendous railroad expansion. Bribing the politicians and the government officials, the railroad companies monopolised railroad transportation and increased the fare. This created particular problem for the settlers of the Middle West. Before hand, by various methods of propaganda the rail road encouraged settlement in the vast, unpopulated areas of the West. Pamphlets telling future settlers of free-land and reduced fares were circulated. Thousands of settlers from the East, lured by the vision of free-land poured into the last frontier area. Some

   (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912)  
   pp. 354-55.  
   All subsequent references to the novel in the text are to this edition.
among them received their land by virtue of Homestead Act. But, the laws were rather liberal. The settlers fell easy prey to the crooked land agents and middlemen. In addition, nature played a vital role in changing the fate of these settlers. Droughts, Locust pests and Prairie fires sometimes devastated their promising crops. Life for them became monotonous without entertainment which cost a lot for them. Many ruined men took the backward trail to the East, and others revolted against these conditions, particularly against the railroad monopoly. To protect their interests the farmers were united and made one organisation, "The Grange" which got control of the state legislatures in the Middle West. But the "Granger Movement" failed without giving any solution to the problem. Thus, these conditions destroyed the optimism of the settlers and led them to despair and dejection. By this time the frontier was also gone and free-land was exhausted. The then social historian Frederic Jackson Turner, the writer of the epoch-making paper on "The significance of the Frontier in American History" described the condition as follows:

"This, then, is the real situation: a people composed of heterogeneous materials, with diverse and conflicting ideals and social interests, having passed from the task of filling up the vacant spaces of the continent, is now thrown back upon itself, and is seeking an equilibrium. The diverse elements are being fused into national unity. The forces of
reorganization are turbulent and the nation seems like a witch's kettle.\textsuperscript{3}

Thus, social life was throbbing with several problems, and people in society were like a cat on a hot tin roof seeking repose. The onslaught of industrialisation changed the old agrarian culture to merchantile culture. Old values and morals tended to collapse and materialism gained ground.

Coming to the intellectual level, similar type of change in ideas and ideals were discernible in America. Development of science and new scientific hypothesis, particularly Darwin's theory of evolution contributed a lot to the intellectual unrest and "in some respects" says Richard Hofstadter, "the United States during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century was the Darwinian country. England gave Darwin to the world, but United States gave Darwinianism an unusually quick and sympathetic reception".\textsuperscript{4} Indeed, the publication of the Origin of Species (1859) and The Descent of Man (1871) challenged the validity of established truth and traditional ways of thinking. The faith that the Universe was a static creation of God was superseded by the belief in a constantly changing universe. Man was no longer a divine being, but an individual devoid of free will and "probably arboreal in habits". This concept of Darwinianism


was made popular by Herbert Spencer. He was the man, "who of all men made the most ambitious attempt to systematize the implications of evolution in fields other than biology itself, was far more popular in the United States than he was in his native country". He studied society applying the theory of evolution and coined expressions: "the survival of the fittest" and "struggle for existence". This suited best to the then American thought and imagination.

Though Darwinism had a good hold upon American thought and imagination, it faced a considerable resistance from the traditional religious belief. Darwinism inspired secular literature. A Book like Washington Gladden's Who Wrote the Bible was a plausible threat to Christianity. Religious leaders raised their voice against it and openly denounced science and the theory of evolution. Some people wanted to have a compromise, but for others it caused bewilderment and despair, and created a philosophy of doubt and uncertainty. Such an enigma found expression in an editorial in the Arena:

"Nothing is more apparent at the present time than the rapid growth of revolutionary spirit in almost every department of thought..."

5. Richard Hofstadter, op.cit., p. 5.
To the thoughtful student of man's progress who believes in the ever onward march of life, the present conflict is rich in promise. He notes the significant fact that the general unrest and signs of growth are along the whole line of human development...

In the religious world, there is in progress a wonderful quickening of conscience, a determined revolt against the old-time accepted letter of the law, against form, right, dogma, and ostentation, which, while they may awe the ignorant, necessarily offend the cultured...

This religious revolution now assumes such gigantic proportions that it can justly be compared to the Reformation, which in the sixteenth century was regarded with such universal indignation and alarm by the dominant thought of the age. In all civilized countries the same spirit of growth and unrest is visible, yet at the present time American seems to be the storm centre. 7

Thus the temper of American thought changed.

Against such a pseudo-scientific and turmoiled social background realism was born and took its root. And when realism reached maturity, it expanded into a branch named naturalism.

The gilded age was barren of poetry and drama. The simplicity and purity of life was disappearing making it more

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complex and hard bound with fact and facts only. Poetry was incapable of giving a better expression of life in literature. The novel was the only form of literature to carry cargo of variegated experiences of modern life. Therefore, the new era shut its eye to poetry and the novel became the dominant literary form of the age. Thus, the rise of realism made the novel chief among the literary means and novelists most popular among the artists.

Before the Civil war, American literature was under the spell of romanticism. Then, romantic idealism and optimism were the shaping forces of American life and letters. But the demands of the frontier, the crisis of the civil war and the rise of new scientific theories put an end to romanticism and opened the door for realism. Realism moved step by step making distinct phases of development. In the early sixties writers like Whitman, Whittier and Beecher Stow unconsciously responded to realism. Their works transcended the bounds of romanticism by dealing with the "here and now" themes and the detailed presentation of contemporary American scene. The abolitionists tradition of Whittier and Beecher Stow, the plea for democracy in Whitman laid the foundation for early realists like Mark Twain, Henry James and William Dean Howells.

Realism as a new trend of literature began in the seventies and eighties by the conscious allegiance of Twain, James and Howells. They did not simply portray life and
society as they saw it, but formed certain principles to distinguish between realism and romanticism. They made a break from traditional romanticism, and invited a long battle between romanticism and realism. The main point of conflict was on the principle of "effectism" and "veritism". These American realists were not fighting the battle alone. By this time, realism had already started as a world-wide literary Movement. Abroad, writers like Zola, Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant, Turgenev, Dickens and Hardy had also sensed the effects of realism in their novels.

Twain, James and Howells, were different from one another both in personality and predominant interests. But they were alike in insisting upon realism as opposed to romanticism. Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age* (1873) was perhaps an early attempt to give a realistic picture of American society embodied with artificiality and corruption. His later works, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, Old Time On the Mississippi* and *The Mysterious Stranger* were tinged with "local color" description of frontier life in Hannibal and Missouri, and experiences on the Mississippi river. He innocently laughed at the shallowness and commercialism of the society. He was a curious combination of humourist, romancer and realist. He stands apart from Howells and James only in his humour.

James and Howells were realistic novelists of equal status. But James' long absence from the American literary scene and his acceptance of citizenship in England made Howells'
position secure as "the father of American realism". Both the novelists ventured to present a realistic picture of society and life. Their skillful treatment of psychological problems of characters in the complex society was unprecedented. The "conflicts" in their novels were psychological as well as social. Realism for them was partly an influence of the foreign writers, yet they felt the social and economic inquietude of their time. James was interested in depicting psychological problems of the characters. He was not competent and prolific in delineating social problems, it was Howells' who championed the cause of society and emphasised the moral and ethical side of life. Among his forty novels, Howells' The Rise of Silas Lapham, A Hazard of New Fortunes, Through the Eye of the Needle, A Traveller from Altruria, and A Modern Instance boldly tackled the problems of society as well as individuals. But in his later novels, Howells shifted his chief interest from individual character to the study of social and economic ills. This special interest in society and man inaugurated American Realism as an anti-romantic movement. Like Emile Zola, he preached the sermon of realism from the pulpit of Harper's review as a self-schooled journalist. He innovated realism as a new technique, dealt with contemporary themes but with much restraint and timidity. His novels more or less bore the testimony of traditional ideals and moral values as he was bred and brought up among the works of Hawthorne and Melville. His realism was "genteel". Along with Howells, the young writers who were born during the early seventies and matured
in the later part of the nineties, like Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris and Stephen crane revolted against such "genteelity" add timidity of Howells. As a result, American realism gathered momentum as a literary movement in American literature, and paved the way for naturalism or "stark realism".

Naturalism was a revolt against the "genteel tradition" of realism. It was not a separate movement. It was a movement within a movement. The factors responsible for the rise of realism also shaped the naturalistic movement during the nineties. The naturalistic movement was accelerated by two influences. Firstly, there was no more the native influence of traditional romanticists as Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Lowell, whitman and Whittier were dead. Secondly, the influence of the foreign naturalists. The early realists had only second-hand influence of the foreign realists and naturalists. But, by the end of the century translations of Modern French, Russian, Scandinavian and German literature poured in increasing numbers into America. The young realists imitated these foreign writers, being fascinated by the newness of style and theme. Maurice Thompson, a contemporary writer observed this foreign influence:

"Just now we are trying to be French; yesterday we were cultivating the Russians; last week the English had us under their thumbs. Daudet and Maupassant, despite Mr Howells's eloquent plea for Tolstoi, are influencing (to a surprising degree) the currents of American fiction at this moment, while Scott and Thakeray and Dickens are powerless. It would be
interesting and deeply instructive if all thinking Americans
could see with absolute vision just how this Latin influence
has reached the centres of taste in the United States... .
Naturally the fiction that we read shapes in some degree the
fiction that we write".8

This shows that the American novelists were only experi-
menters in realistic or naturalistic tradition. Hence we can
call them experimenters of naturalism in American fiction
instead of naturalists proper.

As soon as, Naturalism entered into American literature,
there arose an aesthetic battle between realism and naturalism.
Now, the controversy was no more between "veritism" and
"effectism", it was only on the issue of choice of subject-
matter for their works of art. The early realists were reticent
about the somber aspects of human life and experience. But the
naturalists used these aspects as subject matter with a plea
for a broader realistic representation of life in literature.
However, the naturalists came out victorious, when its value
was realised in the fictional works of Hamlin Garland, Stephen
Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, Ambrose Bierce and Theodore
Dreiser, and naturalistic fiction moved on.

In fact, American experimenters of naturalism followed
the French naturalists in themes and their treatment in their
novels. The French naturalists ransacked every walk of life

8. Maurice Thompson, "Foreign Influence on American Fiction",
for the subjects of their novel and had broadened the scope of the novel. Chiefly they chose such aspects of life as had been forbidden or considered unworthy of artistic treatment. They wrote about modern themes drawn from faithful observation of contemporary life. They had a predilection for subjects like the awakening of sex, the physical side of love, free love, prostitution, all kinds of social misery and pathological cases. In the case of the American experiments in naturalism, these themes became archetypal with the new colour of Americanism. They recorded themes like conflict between capital and labour, corruption in politics and the slums of big cities. If they dealt with old themes, they treated them in a new way. For instance, poor people were no longer described in the manner of Dickens; marital incompatibility, though an old theme, was treated in a new and daring way. Prostitution or seduction motif was characteristic of early sentimental and romantic novelists, but the naturalists dealt with this in a different manner, exposing frankly the pros and cons of sex. Above all, the desire to expose social conditions and social evils was a common theme in all American naturalistic novel.

Émile Zola, the French naturalist was most frequently discussed and commented upon in America in the eighties and nineties. He exerted a more substantial influence on the American experimenters in literary naturalism than any other French writer. In various ways and to varying degrees the works of early naturalists in America exhibit similarities in
technique, philosophy, and motifs to Zola's work. Like Zola, all the American naturalists adopted the naturalistic technique of documentation and thorough study of physical reality. Almost all of them were journalists turned into novelists. Details of their extensive tour in America and abroad, and their encounter with people were rendered fictionally in their minutest details. They were, however, like Zola, anxious to get the right atmosphere, the correct terms, the authentic details and the exact setting for their novels and stories. Garland was a farmer's son and had actually lived as a farmer before he wrote Main-Travelled Roads and in order to write the political and economic novels like A Spoil of Office and A Member of the Third House he went to the Middle West and to Washington to study the actual conditions and to collect notes. Crane had thoroughly observed the Bowery life before he wrote his slum stories, and so also Norris who knew well San Francisco, particularly the Polk Street environment, before he composed McTeague. Ambrose Bierce wrote about War, since he served sometimes in the army during the Civil War. Jack London travelled widely about the United States and Canada before he wrote adventure fiction set in the Klondike.

It is not always true that American naturalists were only imitators of Zola and American naturalism was only the virtual image of French naturalism. Inspite of their similarities, American naturalists were distinctly individual artists having their own response to life and literature, therefore, they demand attention individually.
Hamlind Garland came next to Howells in propounding a new theory of realism. As Howells had defined the literal form of realism in his essays gathered together in *Criticism and Fiction*, so Garland expounded the next step in his *Crumbling Idols*. Garland's new theory, which he called "Veritism", raised many of the issues which Howells had avoided. Being concomitant to realism, he was the first author to present the Middle West realistically in his most popular book — *A Son of the Middle Border*. He recorded the harsh realities and hardship of farm life in the *Main-Travelled Roads*. He was convinced that realistic fiction was necessary to improve agricultural conditions, therefore, he wrote *Jason Edwards*, a defense of the Single tax; *A Spoil of Office*, an exposure of political corruption; and *A Member of the Third House*, a depiction of the legislative power of the railroads. With bitter indictment of the social follies, and sympathy for the victims of the society, his works anticipated proletarian novels of the nineteen thirties. He was well read and acquainted with evolutionary thought, and references to Darwin and the theory of evolution are to be found here and there in his early works. Garland's study of these determinists had taught him that man had no free will. His experiences in the Middle East and his contact with literary determinism had confirmed him in his belief that man's will was enslaved. Unlike the French naturalists he did not express this belief by means of depicting degeneration or degradation; none of
his principal characters were ruined by sexuality, drink or debauchery in a depressing slum environment. Instead, he showed how the desolate prairie and the toil made almost beasts of individuals. He was too reticent in the treatment of sex like Howells. He voiced his distaste for obscenity of sex in modern literature. As an evolutionist, this tendency of literature towards sex, he called a return to "monkey morality" rather than progress. Thus, he was a naturalist who probed deep into life without showing ugliness in terms of sex.

Stephen Crane was the American Keats in the sense that having the talent and possibility of a perfect artist, he died of tuberculosis in young age. Unlike Garland he was more an artist than a reformer. His first novel, Maggie : A Girl of the Streets was considered as the first American naturalistic novel. It took the slums of New York Bowery as setting and was a sympathetic study of the causes which led a poor girl to become a prostitute. It is an irony of time that the book found no publisher and when Crane published it privately, it remained unsold for its unconventional theme of sex. Howells, who was noted for his selective realism which avoided sexual and sordid things, tried to get it published. This was a characteristic phenomena with almost all the naturalistic novelists of America who dealt with sex as a theme. Crane had not dealt with sex as frankly as Zola, but in Maggie : A Girl of the Streets, it was the theme rather than the treatment of sex that was shocking to the American reader of the nineties. He did not describe the
awakening of sex in Maggie, and the seduction was mentioned only in passing. She was victim of the taboo-ridden society and the male sex-hunger.

Crane was on the same trail as Henry James, in his realistic psychological war novel *The Red Badge of Courage*. It was a description of war with the ruthless stripping of romance from war. War was a complex machine in which the soldiers had become entangled, and the army was a gigantic trap, serving as the instrument of fate. The soldiers moved aimlessly around according to no rule or pattern. Blind forces were supreme and man was caught in their grip. Henry Fleming, the hero was not a brute but he had kinship with brute nature. The crisis of the war aroused the brute in him. His cowardly behaviour was revealed through the behaviour of a squirrel. Crane's short stories, like his novels dealt with the themes of poverty, innate cruelty and fear of death — naturalistic in a sense. But, he was more an artist than a Zola - type naturalist.

Frank Norris was also similarly dissimilar in his attitude towards sex like Crane and Garland. To him sex was often synonymous with "Vice". But, like Zola he preferred to depict the awakening of sex, which he dealt with more or less frankly in *Mc Teague, Moran of the Lady Letty, and Vandover and the Brute*. In *Mc Teague* love was looked upon as a physiological phenomenon which struck blindly as a natural force. *Mc Teague* and Trina could not help being drawn to each other. When Trina felt the awakening sexual urge, she was frightened,
for to her love was a desire which could not be escaped. The awakening of sex in Trina was looked upon as something natural and pure. But, while sex was natural in Trina, it was something impure, an inherited evil in McTeague. Their love was one of the "Mysterious instincts" that bound them irrevocably together and ultimately caused destruction. Sex as a destructive force was also prominent in Vandover. Thus, McTeague, Trina and Vandover were Norris's most typical studies of naturalistic degeneration.

Like Zola, Norris modelled his "trilogy of the Wheat" in three parts — The Octopus, The Pit and The Wolf. In these three books he described the production, distribution and consumption of wheat in epic dimension, which later on inspired Dreiser to write his "Cowperwood Trilogy". Norris adopted Zola's tenet in all his novels and short-stories to determine the fate of his characters. He showed man devoid of free will, helpless in the face of biological and social forces or a victim of fate. Thus, fatalism and determinism were woven into the fabric of his work.

Jack London's naturalism was marked by the "cult of red blood". He was a confessed Spencerian evolutionist and Marxian socialist. The socialism of Karl Marx provided the theme for his two early novels The Iron Heel and The Valley of the Moon. The heroes of most of his novels were red-blooded Nietzschean supermen, like Wolf Larsen of The Sea Wolf, the prize fighter Joe Fleming of The Game or the journalist of Smoke Bellow. Sometimes his leading characters are dogs, as
in his most popular book, *The Call of the Wild*, and also in *White Fang* and *Jerry of the Islands*. Sometimes they were half-man, as in his fantastic novel of primitive man *Before Adam*. Always, he showed that the struggle for supremacy was more or less on the animal level. His pessimistic conclusions in the novels revealed him as more of a hard and fast determinist than Norris, Crane and Garland.

Thus, what these American experimenters of naturalism did was that, they extended the realistic movement by inserting science into literature. Believing in science, they considered human life as the manifestation of nature and natural laws. This belief in science demanded analysis of data and a frank discussion of the abnormal, the sordid and the socially unjust aspects of human experience. They did it, but could not provide a final philosophy of life which emerged out of such a naturalistic interpretation of life. With this inability to realise the possibilities of naturalism, the first and experimental period ended. Therefore, it remained for Dreiser, J.T. Farrel and Steinbeck to grapple more significantly with the problems raised by their predecessors, and they cap the climax in the rise of American naturalism.

Generally the personal life of an author affects his writing. But for the realistic and naturalistic writers personal life was essentially needed for their writings since they write from their own experience and observed reality. Therefore, any interpretation of works of these authors
requires a biographical study. Especially in the case of Theodore Dreiser, his biography provided the basis for a realistic depiction of events and characters in his novels.

Theodore Dreiser, a self-made man having a self-effacing character walked into the American literary scene willy-nilly. Initially, he had a tough-time; he was a prey to severe criticism for his undaunted representation of gross animality in novels. But subsequently the dark cloud of criticism was swept away and he got recognition among the American men of letters. His early life was spent in ignominy due to poverty and privation. In those days Dreiser's family was constantly on the move to different parts of Indiana and Chicago. Father John Paul Dreiser was a fervent catholic German immigrant, who reached America in the early Eighteen forties to escape military service and his waspish mother; and instantly fell in love and got married to Sarah Maria Schanab, a farm girl living near Dayton, Ohio. Mother Sarah was of Bohemian Mennonite background; somehow inferior to Dreiser's religion. To this parentage was born Herman Theodore Dreiser as thirteenth child on the morning of August 27, 1871, in Terre Haute, Indiana.  

John Paul Dreiser, "a thin grasshoper of a man" was honest, worthy and defiant by nature. His days of prosperity as a successful weaver ended before Theodore was born. With

the burning of his Woolen Mill he was reduced to poverty. He took up different jobs as carpenter, bricklayer and handyman and barely managed to run the family. Sarah also took up all kinds of jobs from washing clothes to operating a lodging house to keep the family kitchen running. So late as 1878, after a succession of shiftings to smaller and shabbier quarters here and there in Terre Haute, the Dreiser family was broken up. Father Dreiser along with the older children looked for work in one direction. While Sarah with the other three children including Theodore went in another direction to seek some kind of domestic service to maintain the family. Sarah first went to Vincennes Indiana, stayed with one of her friends for three months. After a few days, one of her older daughter, Mary Frances joined her there, who tearfully confessed that she was made pregnant by a Terre Haute lawyer, who refused to marry her. Sarah shielded her daughter from the prying eyes of society and on a dark midnight Mary gave birth to a stillborn child. At midnight, Sarah herself dug a grave near the house and buried the baby. This incident made a permanent impression on the eight year old Theodore. Later on, it was presumed that Dreiser took this episode as stuff for his novel Jennie Gerhardt.

Then, Sarah left for Sullivan and stayed there for four years. John Paul visited them periodically. The family condition was at its lowest ebb economically. The Dreiser children ate cornmeal mush fried because there was no milk for it. At times they went about in torn and shabby clothes,
and one day Theodore and his brother were put out of school because they lacked shoes. They used to gather coal along the railroad tracks in winter. Until he was forty, Dreiser was reminded of his childhood sufferings and wrote: "For years, even as late as my thirty-fifth or fortieth year, the approach of winter invariably filled me with an undefinable and highly oppressive dread, and that at periods when I need not to be in dread of anything that winter and poverty, or the two of them together could do to me". 10 It is necessary to remember this for an understanding of Dreiser's work and his sympathetic attitude towards the poor. According to Clifton Fadiman, "the fear of poverty is the central drive behind his entire career as an artist". 11 Again, poverty bred in Dreiser a yearning for wealth, material possessions, and weakness for gaudy and flashy clothes. Thus, his early childhood provides one of the major themes for his novels.

Dreiser's family, in his own words, was of a "peculiarly nebulous, emotional, unorganized and traditionless character ...". 12 All the members who belonged to this family were restless, determined, half-educated..." 13 His brothers and sisters were wilful in their own way and the earnest attempts


All subsequent references to this book are from this edition.


of John Dreiser to impose some kind of a discipline and an
ordered pattern of life on his wayward sons and daughters
failed. They were rebellious and went their own ways. Paul,
the eldest son of the family was arrested three times before
he finally ran away from home in his teens. Marcus Roman,
ext to Paul was a complete failure in life and three daughters
Mame, Emma and Claire, all became mothers before they became
wives. Moral disintegration set in and the family fell apart.
Hence father Dreiser had a strict look on Theodore to reform
and discipline him. At this early stage Dreiser developed a
different attitude toward his parents which shaped his view of
life. His father was a fanatically religious man who imposed
his out-dated ideas on his unwilling wife and children. He had
no warmth to draw his children to him. He had a rigid and
narrow notion of how his children should behave and would not
tolerate even the simplest of pleasures and recreation. For
him "God was blazing reality", 14 and he had a conviction that
"there was refuge in religion, more and more self-humiliation
before a creator who revealed Himself through the forms and
ceremonies of the Catholic Church," the least neglect of which
was sufficient to evoke the disfavour...of the Universal
Ruler". 15 But mother Sarah had no faith in such a creed. She
was loving, tolerant, liberal, and she was "beyond the(Church)
or behind so called good and evil. Neither moral nor immoral,

15. Ibid., p. 25.
she was non-moral, intellectually, emotionally, temperamentally. A strange, sweet dreamy woman, who did not know how life was organized. She had no religious sense of rectitude and propriety and was often defending her children from the wrath of their stern father. Therefore, most of the Dreiser children were emotionally drawn towards their mother than their father. They adored her and kept coming back to her in after life, even the married ones.

Dreiser's relationship with his mother was the most significant he ever knew. In contrast to his father, his mother was a marvel of understanding. She was tender, graceful and resourceful. She ministered to dying neighbours, sheltered unwed mothers, fed itinerant priests, and took in the little farm girls to ready them for first communion. She was the very embodiment of nature and was compliant to the flow of nature. While his mother represents "nature", his father stands before him as "social code" and tyranny. When nature and social code conflicted, Theodore used to take his stand with "nature". To him, his mother was security. He was a "motherly boy"; as he says, "I was a mother's child hanging to her skirts as much as I was permitted to until I was seven or eight years old". He leaned on her heavily and loved her so much that one day seeing her put on a pair of torn shoes, he smoothed her shoes and cried. Her response to this touched Dreiser so much that years later he would recall; "her taking me up and holding me

16. DAWN, p.,10
17. Ibid., p., 20
up and holding me affectionately against her breast and smoothing my head—...that was the birth of sympathy and tenderness in me". Thus, Dreiser had inherited the traits of charity and sympathy from his mother and these were ingrained in his writings. As will be seen later in this study, Dreiser is seldom the uncompromising naturalist, believing in the inevitability of struggle and conflict, that he is generally supposed to be.

At the age of six Theodore was admitted into the Parochial school at Sullivan. Instead of liking his school as a change from the drab home atmosphere, he was terrified by the strict discipline of the narrow minded school authority. The rules and the lessons on religious instructions were a sort of binding for him. To the little boy the school became an extension of his father's image in the persons of the nuns and priests as Dreiser put it "an outrageous survival of a stultifying medievalism which should be swept away to its last detail". This was the growth of his aversion for organised religion and was intensified with sufficient reasons in his youth.

In Dreiser's early teens the family led by his mother spent a few months in Chicago. There, Theodore took a job as cashboy in a dry goods store, but his mother ended the experiment when she found him frightened and mentally confused at his first entrance into hard realities of the world. Soon

after the family fled back to the pleasant Central Indiana town of Warsaw. His father along with his run away brother John Paul once again reunited with them. There, Dreiser had the good fortune to enter into a public school. As a boy he was shy and bashful by nature but friendly with all in the school. Inspite of his timidity, he was encouraged by his sympathetic teacher Miss Calvert and read books of Shakespeare, Herrick, Dryden, Defoe, Fielding, Pope, Goldsmith, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Irving, Hawthorne, Cooper, Emerson and Kingsley. They, all fed his imagination, but Irving's The Alhambra with its Aladdin fantasies, particularly enticed him. It was while reading The Alhambra that Dreiser had a typical clash with his father who considered his reading other than books on Christianity as wasteful. Dreiser expressed his father's mentality saying:

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

Dreiser felt dormant inwardly. His life at Warsaw also became poignant when his two sisters Sylvia and Emma became

pregnant. Whole Warsaw buzzed with the infamy of the family. He decided to break off his schooling and set off for Chicago. There he saw dazzling material prospect but he was not eligible for some good jobs as he was technically untrained. In desperation, he took a job as dishwasher in a restaurant and then in a hardware house. While working in Chicago he came in contact sexually with many girls like Clyde Griffiths of *An American Tragedy*, but one among them, Christian Aaberg a bitter diane, assured him that the "mind" was the key to success. And Dreiser began to believe in the attainment of his dream of success.

When he had abandoned hope of higher academic education after joining the hardware house, help came unexpectedly from his teacher Mildred Fielding, who arranged everything and sent him to Indiana University in 1888. He did a lot of reading while he was enrolled. Lev Tolstoy made a particularly strong impression on him and under his influence the seventeen year old young Dreiser was struck by the notion, "almost as a new thought, that it would be a wonderful thing to be a novelist. If a man could write like Tolstoy and have all the world listen to him!"²¹ He also read history and philosophy. But this College education put him in a quandary. He was appalled by the new vistas of life and began to reflect: "Here this great, flashing, extended, mysterious world, as I saw it, and it was these common places of living and salary and some little

²¹ *Dawn*, p. 555.
reputation that interested almost all."\(^{22}\) However, successfully he spent one year in the University, but his benefactress was no more. Her tenderness was no less than that of his mother. Though he was away from his family and his mother, he did not find his mother less important to him. She was and remained for ever the "Central and centripetal star"\(^{23}\) of his world. Her peculiar emotional and vital relationship with Dreiser made him life long dependent on women irrespective of age.

With the coming of adolescence there came as Dreiser described in *Dawn*: "The first powerful strings of sex and the first sense of wonder and beauty of life, a wonder and beauty which I could feel in nature, in poetry and in the face of a girl, but which I as yet could neither understand nor articulate."\(^{24}\) From the age of fifteen he had found the feminine alluring. He was enticed by many girls but the contact was fumbling. The pastimes of prosperous college class-mates had quickened in Dreiser also an interest in sex. But like Clyde Griffiths he was psychologically nervous before women. Such nervousness pulled him back, yet invariably he insisted on sex with different women of varying ages to discover the mystery of sex as the "Warp and Woof of life".

At the end of his year at Indiana, Dreiser again returned to Chicago and held a series of miscellaneous jobs,

\(^{22}\) *Dawn*, p. 470.
\(^{23}\) *Dawn*, p. 440.
\(^{24}\) *Dawn*, p. 30.
including one as an assistant to a real estate agent and another as a bill collector for an installment farm. Low salary and congestion, at times, made him depressed. But, yet, the newly grown, and materially prosperous Chicago city installed in him a strange illusion of hope and happiness. Like his fictional character Carrie he felt "a veritable miracle of pleasing sensations". It was this Chicago which inspired him to be a novelist of city life. As he himself said: "The spirit of Chicago flowed into me and made me ecstatic. Its personality was different from anything I had ever known; it was a compound of hope and joy in existence, intense hope and intense joy. Cities, like individuals, can flare up with a great flare of hope. They have that miracle, personality, which, as in the case of the individual is always so fascinating and so arresting". 25 Thus, Chicago was among the many formative influences on Dreiser the novelist.

The years between 1890 and 1892, Dreiser lacked direction and led a bohemian life. Once again family disintegration set in when his mother died. She was the only adhesive force to combine a disciplinarian religious father and wayward children into one family. He was not worried for others as much as for his mother's death. The unpleasant incident of his beloved mother's funeral shocked him more rather than her death. Sarah died without the last rites. When the priest was summoned

before her burial, he refused to perform any service for her and declared her barred from Church ceremonies. The sight of his dead mother in his arms, his old father weeping and begging, the heartless priest refusing the sacrament, was permanently engraved on Dreiser's mind. Such bigotry and superstitious belief of the church people enraged Dreiser's hatred for them and he became the sworn enemy of the church.

However, young Dreiser was not ready to believe in religion which was bound with a rigid, stern code of conduct, and was devoid of sympathy, charity, understanding and forgiveness. He experienced the import of such religion which had nothing to do with life as he had seen in the case of his father. His father adhered to such codes and led a life strictly in accordance with the dictates of the church but in the long run he suffered and was ridden with hardship. As a result of his early schooling, Dreiser had somehow come to harbour the notion that spiritual integrity and material well-being were closely related, and believed that there must be some point in being good. But soon he was to find the meaningless of any such connection. As he saw it, poverty and religion, on the contrary, went hand in hand to prevent one from having the good things of life, and as Robert Elias put it, "the existence of poverty among the righteous and of wealth among those devoid of charitable feelings was for Dreiser evidence enough to refute religious doctrine".  

to be noted that much of Dreiser's bitterness and opposition was to the crippling dogmas, creeds and customs of the church and its priests but not against the basic religious teachings and Christian Virtues of love, sympathy and forgiveness. He disliked the "religious obsession" of his father which checked him from exercising his "free will". Even as a young man he found it impossible to give up completely any belief in Christianity and his mind was "still swashing around among the idealistic maxims of Christ and the religionists and moralists, controlling them hourly, as it were, with selfish materialism of the day." 27

Young Dreiser, as his autobiography reveals was highly emotional, sensitive, romantic, lonely and had an artistic soul with an unquenchable thirst for beauty and good things of life; though he was thrown amidst unredeemed poverty, ugliness, brutality, selfishness and narrow religious fanaticism. He was a dreamer, imaginative because of his basic reading of romantics like Hawthorne, Kingsley and others. Kingsley's Water Babies appealed to him strongly for its suggestive metaphysical traits and mystic impulses of life. He craved for sentimentalism as an unconscious realist and he said,

"In short, I have since thought that for all my modest repute as a realist, I seem, to my self-analyzing eyes, somewhat more of a romanticist than a realist. The wonder of

All further references are from the same edition.
something that I can not analyze! The mystic something of beauty that perennially transfigures the world! The freshness of dawns and evenings! The endless charges of state and condition in individuals! How these things grip and mystify! Life itself so unstable, water-slippery, shift, cruel, insatiate, and yet so generous merciful, forgiving. How like all or nothing it seems, according to one's compound and experiences! Yet never would I say of any picture of it, realistic or otherwise, that so much as fragmentarily suggests its variety or force that it is dull. The individual himself—the writer, I mean—might well be a fool, and therefore all that he attempts to convey would taste of his foolishness or lack of wisdom or drama, but life, true life by whomsoever set forth or discussed, can not want utterly of romance or drama, and realism in its artistic and forceful form is the very substance of both. It is only the ignorant or insensitive who fail to perceive it.  

This passage serves a double purpose—firstly, it shows young Dreiser's inclination for romance; secondly, it tells what realism is according to Dreiser. In fact, Dreiser's novel Jennie Gerhardt shows, how he combined romance with realism. Here was the young artist who preferred to "meditate than to pause and enquire closely" and was "horribly pestered by thoughts of love and beauty...the rains, clouds, fogs...sunlight, moonlight, trees, grass, flowers, birds."  

drab and unpoetic surroundings through which he had grown had not deadened his sensibilities and it was this zest for life which sustained him through the worst fits of depression when he was destined to suffer for the most part of his life. His brooding and endless contemplation of the mystery of life was added by his loneliness and lack of sympathy and love. He had no close friend and with the death of his mother he had no one whom he loved and who loved him. Therefore, he developed a meditative bent of mind and this enabled him to feel and sympathise more deeply. This disqualified him from thinking rationally and critically — two basic requirements for any thinker, more so of a scientific thinker which Dreiser had aspired to be. Moreover, his brooding pity and tenderness, especially for the poor and down-trodden, never really allowed him to believe wholeheartedly in the doctrine "survival of the fittest". He, like so many others of his age had accepted the evolutionary doctrine as a valid explanation and as the law of nature.

Dreiser was dissatisfied with his poverty and humble station in life. He, like many of his fictional characters, was ambitious and dreamt of wealth and worldly success skipping from one to another low-paid jobs. Dreiser described this phase of life thus:

"Spiritually I was what might be called a poetic melancholic, crossed with a vivid materialistic lust of life. I doubt if any human being, however poetic or however material
(sic) ever looked upon the scenes of his world, material or spiritual, so called, with a more covetous eye. My body was blazing with sex, as well as with a desire for material and social supremacy — to have wealth, to be in society — and yet I was too cowardly to make my way with women readily. 30

Thus, dream of material success, spiritual anguish and obsession with sex characterize Dreiser's personality as a young man.

With such contradictory and opposing traits in his own character, and against the background of his time and home, Dreiser entered into the newspaper world as a reporter and started his readings of the scientists and philosophers. In search of a true vocation, at the age of twenty one, he embarked on the career of a journalist. Completely inexperienced as a newspaper man, he believed nevertheless that the worldliness and excitement of the reporter's life were for him. By dint of luck and perseverance, he was finally taken on by one of the poorer Chicago papers, the Daily Globe. It was the starting point in his journalistic career. He gathered experience and sought a position with the prestigious St. Louise Globe-Democrat. His simultaneous reporting in St. Louise for the Globe - Democrat and the Republic, played an extremely important role in his development. The heavy assignment of reporting enabled him to observe the life of the late nineteenth century American city in all its fullness. He toured extensively and reported

intensively about murders, robberies and catastrophes. He also interviewed many eminent visiting personalities and wrote drama reviews and paragraphs. His interview with the Indian theosophist Annie Besant was most significant for him. He admired Besant's talk on "transmigration and Nirvana", but he did not take it seriously then. In the last years of his life he was reminded of these when he wrote The Stoic and the Bulwark.

Having worked restlessly for sixteen months in the St. Louise papers, he became disgusted with the native bourgeois journalism. He found that to the newspaper what mattered was profit, not adherence to facts or truth. He also realised that the newspapers were subservient to the wealthy masses and were controlled by wealthy interests. Therefore, he thought for an impartial and unbiased journalistic career. He moved on to Pittsburgh and the Dispatch for a better prospect in this field. In New York with the help of his song-writing brother Paul Dreiser, he edited a magazine named Ev'ry Month. His years in New York were spent reading in the Carnegie Library. Here, the first to attract Dreiser's attention was the French realist, Balzac. From the complete set of Balzac's work, he picked up The Wild Ass's Skin and was at once struck by the similarity he saw between himself and Balzac's Raphael. His reading of Balzac's Cousine Bette and Pere Goriot; the story of individual failure and success in a great city gave him the impression to create a novel like Sister Carrie after a few years. He also
discovered in the French novelist the social implications: the contrast between poverty and wealth, the depiction of life as amoral and indifferent to the fate of the individuals, the scenes of sexual passion and overt criticism of Catholicism. Apart from this, he was familiar with the early American realists. He read fervently Howells, Norris and H.B. Fuller, and admired Fuller as the only person who could be regarded as "the father of American realism", instead of Howells.

Along with these realists, he read evolutionists and philosophers like Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley and Henry Drummond. Huxley's Science and Hebrew Tradition and Science and Christian Tradition made him believe that the Christian doctrine was just another dogma and there was little justification in judging human conduct by the standards prescribed by the scriptures. The old and the new testaments were after all, only collections of experiences of individuals and not Revealed Truth. Dreiser was disillusioned and shaken partly, but his reading of Spencer's First Principle filled the rest. Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy — an amalgam of nineteenth century beliefs and evolutionary science — argued that there was no authority in supernaturally sanctioned moral codes. Man was simply a stage in evolution, a tiny creature surrounded by larger outer forces over which he had no control. Man developed naturally through the struggle for existence,

31. Theodore Dreiser, "The Great American Novel"
whether this struggle occurred in nature or in society, was beneficial. What affected Dreiser most profoundly by his reading of Spencer has been summed up by his biographer W.A. Swanberg very precisely:

"This was a climactic moment in his life, one that affected him permanently. Spencer destroyed beliefs which he held... Spencer snatched God away, turned him into an impersonal force... obliterated justice as Dreiser had conceived it... slain his individuality and therefore his dreams... equated him with the amoeba and the ephemeral... . He never outlived his dismay. The bitterness was indelible. He would continue to despair that nature or the creative force had failed to build a more perfect universe." 32

Such was the intellectual preparation of Dreiser for a promising career as a novelist.

In New York during the year 1894-1895 he passed through hardship and depression without a job, until he was inducted into the editorship of Ev'ry month magazine. He not only edited the magazine but contributed, frequently under a pseudonym, a wide variety of material to it. The most important of these miscellaneous contributions was a monthly column named "Reflection" which was his early attempt, where he tried out the ideas which he had been gathering both from his reading and his experience. After two years of editing Ev'ry month he

desired for a broader opportunity in Free-lance magazine writing. He contributed to the *Success* and *Ainslee* and quickly made his mark in this field. He was also helped by his close friend Arthur Henry for his free-lance writings.

After six years engagement with Sara Osborne White, a school teacher, who was a few years older than him, Dreiser married her in 1898. Although Dreiser and Sara White were passionately in love, her strict moralism prevented any consummation of their love through a six-year engagement. And Dreiser himself found that he was engaged to a girl he wished to possess rather than to marry. Out of these contradictions between the socially required and the felt, there emerged several of Dreiser's early fictional preoccupations. Soon after marriage he wrote his first novel *Sister Carrie*, finished by 1900 but in the prudish American Victorian days it found no publisher for its licentiousness till 1907. The suppression of his first novel led him to depression and psychosomatic illness because of which he could not write for free-lance magazines. He buffeted from place to place in search of a job, doing many odd jobs like attending health camps and working on the rail road as daily labourer.

However, after a few months he regained strength for writing and was installed as editor to *Smith's Magazine* in 1905. Again fortune favoured him, from *Smith*, he left for *Broadway Magazine*. By his journalistic skill and able
editorship he increased the popularity of both the magazines. Success after success, he was asked to become editor of Butterick's Delineator, the most popular magazine for women of its days. This was high time for Dreiser, he got wealth and position. Eminent men of letters stretched their hands of friendship to him. H.L. Mencken and Frank Norris pleaded for the lifting of the ban on *Sister Carrie*. He started working on *Jennie Gerhardt* when the "artist" in Dreiser was active in search of beauty in art, the "man" in Dreiser sought beauty in woman, particularly in teenagers. He ran the risk of his position in Butterick's Delineator and became infatuated with the eighteen year old Thelma Cudlipp, daughter of a contributor to the Delineator. Soon the matter came ahead and he was pulled down again to free-lance writing and poverty. His "Varietistic" interest in woman also wrecked his married life. Sara, his wife, who was away from him, now came and stayed with him to tame Dreiser sexually. But Dreiser as his biographer Swanberg says, "sexually was in a category with Chimpanzees." He knew no bounds for sex and went on satisfying woman like Kirah Markham, Helen Richardson and others successively. Sara though sensuous was puritanical in her attitude towards sex, separated from him for ever as she lost her hold on him. This provided Dreiser themes for his novel *The Genius*. He, like Eugene Witla, the artist, suffered in the hands of a moralistic wife and conventional society.

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Having reached this peak, Dreiser began to think of returning to fiction writing. The years between 1907 and 1915 was most productive and he finished four major novels, *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914) and *The 'Genius'* (1915). He also finished his travel memoes *A Traveler at Forty* (1913). His principal autobiographical works, *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), *A Book about Myself* (1922) and *Dawn* (1931) were written during early twenties along with his philosophical work *Hey-Rub-A-Dub Dub* (1920) and plays like *Plays of the natural and the Supernatural* (1917), and *The Hands of Potter* (1919). The work which climaxed his productive decade and a half in Dreiser's career was *An American Tragedy* (1925). The publication of this novel gave financial security to Dreiser. And hence he tried to devote more time for touring foreign countries and doing social work. He started his work on *The Bulwark* (1945) in the twenties but he did not have time to finish it. So also *The Stoic* (1947), which remained unfinished till the last year of his life and left it for his wife Helen Dreiser to finish and finalise it for publication.

During the 1930's Dreiser was preoccupied with two fundamental problems: how to make America a better place in which to live and how to describe the hidden truths of existence. The centrality of these two thoughts lies in two events of 1927 and 1928. He visited the Soviet Union in 1927 to observe the Russian experiment and its applicability to America. Then, in 1928 he visited Woods Hale experimental biology station in
Massachusetts where he talked with scientists and observed their works. His interest was less in details of their experiment than in their beliefs about the fundamental process of life. These two observations obsessed him highly with abstract and scientific questions about the nature of man and reality. This led him to write thousands of pages of "Notes on life" which remain unfinished till today and they are now on file at the University of Pennsylvania. These notes reveal his attempt to give order and meaning to his life and his universe, a final attempt to explain the meaning of his years of struggle. He hoped to prove his inconsistent mechanistic thoughts about man and universe. It is inconsistent because, he accepted those ideas and principles which he was trying to reject in his life time — the acceptance of Christianity and Communism. He sought equanimity in the face of both the world's — pain and beauty like Solon Barnes and Berenice Fleming. And in 1945 Dreiser's mortal life ended to survive immortally in our hearts for works he had created.

Thus, Dreiser the journalist turned into novelist drawing inspiration from his own experience and extraneous knowledge derived from evolutionists. His novels recorded the truth of his life and time, and realism, as such moved on in his novels in varying degrees and mellowed as naturalism. Characters and places of his novels were real, and at the same time, coloured by his imagination. As one reads his novels, one, however, can not fail to notice the significant trends — naturalism, humanitarianism and spirituality, though warring with each other, are balanced. The succeeding Chapters of this
study examine his works (particularly novels) to establish this view.