CHAPTER-SEVEN

THE SUBVERSION OF ROMANCE PATTERN:

AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY
Chapter VII
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*An American Tragedy*

Dreser realized that the old illusion had lost its hold and as a narrative artist he felt the need of creating a new image of experience to project a new vision of reality. In fact, this is why he cannot be categorized as a naturalistic writer as his fictions provide a complex structural pattern as well as a complex perception about society and life. In fact, the discovery of an adequate system of reference or pattern in *AAT* was not simply an aesthetic necessity but also a keenly felt personal need. Dreiser’s experiment with the use of the romance pattern in his novels for communicating the sense of disillusionment was fully successful in *An American Tragedy*. In this novel Dreiser succeeded in throwing a searching light on the startling antithesis between what men hope for and what they realize in the end. In *AAT* Dreiser appears to be a romantic writer whose romance quickens the reader’s sense of life and involves him in a questioning of values and attitudes and imposes a pattern on experience that deepens its meaning. Dreiser’s portrayal of Clyde in the opening chapters of *An American Tragedy* is a subtle dramatization of the ways in which a distinctive temperament eager, sensitive and emotional yet weak and directionless — interacts with a distinctive social reality. It cannot be fully branded as doctrinaire study in heredity and environmental
determinism. Clyde struggled hard to get a job for him and his amazement in the interactions with reality is narrated by the author:

Clyde stared even while pretending not to. And in his state of mind, this sight was like looking through the gates of Paradise. (AAT 46)

His ambition is almost romantic:

And they were always of such gorgeous textures, as Clyde saw them. Such grandeur. This, then most certainly was what it meant to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world to have money. The other people, like himself, waited upon you. That you possessed all of these luxuries. That you went how, where and when you pleased. (AAT 47)

When Clyde earned five dollars and a half in the Green-Davidson hotel. He felt a kind of elation:

And of all this as he then knew the need only hand Mr. Squires one—no more, Hegglund had said — and the rest, five dollars and a half, for one evening’s, interesting - yes, delightful and fascinating — work-belonged to himself. He could scarcely believe it. It seemed fantastic Aladdinish, really. (AAT 53)

Clyde’s desire for a place, for a position and for a luxurious livelihood clearly distinguishes him from the other boys of the hotel:

To think now, at last he actually had such a place. To think that he could earn this much every day, may be .... And now all he
was thinking was that he could only need to work from noon until six, when he should be free until the following morning at six. And then he would make more money. A lot of it to spend on himself. (AAT 53)

Clyde was not be seen as a victim and there is a constant stress on it in the narrative:

He (Clyde) began to sense the delight of personal freedom — to sniff the air of personal and delicious romance — and he was not to be held back by any suggestion which his mother could now make. (AAT 57)

The psychological conflict in Clyde’s mind is beautifully highlighted by Dreiser:

These other fellows were not disturbed by the prospects of what was before them. They were very gay. They were already beginning to laugh and kid one aother in regard to certain funny things that had happened the last time they were all out together. But what would his mother think it she knew? His mother! He dared not think of his mother or his father either at this time, and put them both resolutely out of his mind. (AAT 62)

Clyde was a sensitive boy. He felt in his own way. The disturbances caused by the materialistic ventures and interactions with reality are narrated minutely by Dreiser:

At the same time, being confronted by this problem of how soon they would be wanting to go to a place into which he had never ventured before, and to be doing thing which he had never let
himself think he would do in just this way. He was just a little disturbed. ... He could hear his mother lecturing concerning all this — yet with scarcely any direct knowledge of any kind. And yet, as an argument per contra, here were all of these boys in nowise disturbed by what was in their minds or moods to do. On the contrary, they were very gay over it all and amused — nothing more. (AAT 63)

Dreiser’s presentation of facts of real life was not photographic. He outgrew the fumbling methods of composition in An American Tragedy. He was not to waste time in building up a great weight of environmental forces that are to crush the characters in his novels. Thus while using the murder case reported in the papers, the drowning of Grace Brown by Chester Gillette in Moose back, New York, in 1906. Dreiser has given mountaneous information about Clyde’s early life which in no way can be called relevant to explain the murder.

Critics do not agree on the fact or the degree of Clyde’s guilt or innocence. Since Clyde strikes Roberta unintentionally he was really innocent of murdering Roberta. Legally also, clyde was not guilty of the specific crime. The analysis of Clyde’s mind is attempted by the narrator:

But good god! what he thinking of any how? He, clyde Griffiths? The nephew of Samuel Griffiths! What was “getting into” him? Murder! That’s what it was. This terrible item — this devil’s accident or machination that was constantly putting it before him! A most horrible crime, and one for which they electrocuted people if they were caught. Besides, he could not murder anybody - not
Roberta, any how, Oh, no! Surely not after all that had been between them. (AAT 461)

A few lines later there is another interesting part of the narrative:

Murder! Or upsetting a boat at any rate in deep water, which of course might happen anywhere, and by accident, as at Pass Lake. And Roberts could not swim. He knew that. But she might save herself at that—scream—cling to the boat—and—then—if there were any to hear—and she told afterwards! An icy perspiration now sprang to his forehead; his lips trembled and suddenly his throat felt parched and dry. To prevent a thing like that he could have to—to but no—he was not like that. He could not do a thing like that—hit any one—a girl—Roberta—and when drowning or struggling. (AAT )

One of the major features of Dreiser's art is that it presented multidimensional sides of reality. The photographic realism of Zolaesque novels replaced by a prismatic hue of imagination. Reality was fictionalised rather than clinically anatomised and dissected. Dreiser has stressed on an ambiguity of Clyde's decision throughout the novel. The crisis of mind appears to be more important than the action committed. Noticeably absent from the narrative are Dreiser's characteristic authorial interpolations and digressive comments. He was determined that this piece above all his other novels, could tell its own story. The story from a newspaper report was real but the way he presented it was wholly artistic. He selected events and provided a huge amount of details not for recording reality as it is but for showing as it may be. This
element of 'probable improbability determines the quality of art. In fact, the fact of murder is represented in such a fictionalised way that even critics get confused enough to remark that Clyde in real life could not be convicted on the charge of murder.

*An American Tragedy* requires a thorough analysis for understanding the nature of perception and the pattern of Dreiser's novels as a whole. For, here we find Dreiser's personal involvement which distinguishes the novel from the Zolaesque novels in which we find objective appraisal of life and the logical classification of human documents and the most dispassionate scientific way of a laboratory worker. On the contrary, in *An American Tragedy* we see an effort of the novelist to identify himself in his fiction with his characters who are his idealized self-portraits. Nevertheless, there is the artistic perception of Dreiser manifested in the symbols and imagery pattern which convey the meaning of the novel. Dreiser creates a pattern and imposes the reality he has attempted to portray in its wholeness.

Lehan Calls *An American Tragedy* "a major work of art"\(^1\) He goes to the extent of calling it "a supreme narrative accomplishment"\(^2\) Dreiser fictionalized the famous Gillette-Brown case by selecting one out of many such stories published in the newspapers of the day. He was interested in the story because of the same urge to portray reality in the form of an anti-romance or counter-romance. The main idea that emerged there from the events in the life of the protagonist is the delusion fostered by wealth which ultimately precipitates the crisis and corruption of the ideal.

The Grace Brown - Chester Gillete case began on July 12,
1906 when Grace's body was found in seven-and-a-half feet of crystal-clear water, one-hundred-and-sixty-feet from the South Shore of Big Moose Lake in the Adirondack mountains in Upper State New York. Dreiser stuck closely to the actual facts of the case but made a few changes. One significant change was the portrayal of Clyde's character. Clyde is a victim of illusions. The agonies of desire for wealth and heightened life elicited Dreiser's ambivalent response. He wanted to find meaning in a horrible mess in which he found himself entangled. We can closely identify Clyde with Dreiser himself. Dreiser explored the story of Clyde in *American Tragedy* chiefly because he was interested in revealing an essential helplessness of man in an overpowering and alien world and in developing an understanding of the society and an emotional complex towards it in the disillusioning process of discovery.

In the first version of the story Dreiser modelled Clyde and Clyde's father on himself and his own father. Asa Griffiths, for example, becomes a composite of John Dreiser and Dreiser himself. When Asa leaves home, he becomes a dish washer in a restaurant - just as Dreiser washed dishes in John Paradiso's restaurant after he had left home. Dreiser modelled Asa primarily upon his own father. He began with a history of Clyde's father whose family owned a prosperous hardware store from which he was disinherited because of his ineptness just as Dreiser's own father lost his wool mill when it burned down and he was too inept to rebuild it. Like Dreiser's own father, Asa Griffiths also moved from New York to Pennsylvania. The family drifted from Chicago to Kansas city. In the early version Clyde first came of age in Kansas city. Clyde was lured like Dreiser himself by the sense of a new life
in a big city and wanted a larger life. Dreiser makes Clyde more of a dreamer and he models him too closely upon himself. He makes Clyde a tragic character but not a victim of his environment by keeping him always on the alert about the limitations of life around him. His dreams expand under pressure, with accidents of life bringing out the essential self. Clyde is trapped between his early poverty and a world that lures him. Dreiser was in search of a system that would adequately explain life. His awareness of the new requirement of fiction and his response to the challenge underlines an important aspect of his fictional technique.

H.L. Mencken rightly remarked in *A Book of Prefaces* that

to fit him into the unrolling chart of American or even of English fiction is extremely difficult.³

Robert Penn Warren looks at the novel from another viewpoint:

Over and over again in his fiction Dreiser develops such moments of psychological depth. And in *An American Tragedy* in Clyde at the death of Roberta, we find his masterpiece of psychological analysis.⁴

H.L. Mencken was also not ready to categorise Dreiser in the existing groups of fiction writers. Mencken attributes the source of Dreiser's naturalistic philosophy not to Zola, Flaubert and Angler but to the Greeks. Mencken emphasised and rightly did it to emphasize that

Dreiser never believed in the complete animality of man.⁵
Clyde seems to be lost in the sexual whirlpool but here sex is more motivated by the desire for money that is power, the source of all values. This has also been true of Jennie. Both Clyde and Jennie wanted to overcome the limits set by their environment with the help of money. In this equation of money with dream, Dreiser seems to be a precursor to Fitzgerald. In his quest for a fresh and untraditional form, Dreiser had proved himself to be the predecessor to the romantic tragedian Francis Scott Fitzgerald who also used the romance mode to depict the dreams of wealth, and accommodated a constant subversion of the mode. He took a great step towards the evolution of a new fictional mode by exploring the basic contradiction of social life. Like Fitzgerald in a later period, Dreiser also lived intensely in a society that offers the dreams of power and glory and simultaneously petrifies and destroys them. The use of romance mode in their writings was necessitated by the failure of the mimetic novels to provide a true critique of the society and explore the inner contradictions. Later in Fitzgerald’s novels the characters also are found to equate money with power. In the novels of Fitzgerald money is both dynamic and static, promising an optimistic and romantic resolution but ironically cutting this short into a tragic end. We may refer here to the narrative design and perception of Fitzgerald as I have found it and discussed in my book on Fitzgerald:

The typical world depicted in the novels of Fitzgerald has two dimensions: on the one hand there is the Cinderella pattern of story dealing with the romance of acquisition of wealth and on the other hand, this pattern is ironically inverted implying the
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delusions fostered by wealth which ultimately precipitates the
crisis and corruption of the ideal.6

In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald also dealt with the tragic
tHEME OF DISILLUSIONMENT. The material world promises to fulfil the
imagination’s deepest longings but gradually the idealism fades.
Gatsby’s tragedy lies in the transformation of the transcendental
promise into mere materiality — the destruction of the Emersonian
and Whitmanesque idealism into a mere voice that has the ring
of money. The similarity of the narrative methods employed by
Dreiser and Fitzgerald in their novels is really astonishing. Their
novels are thematically also very close to each other.

The Buchanans of the *The Great Gatsby* stand for the very
rich” — the modern American upper class embodying a materialism
which is totally cynical, undirected by idealism or transcendental
hope. Tom is panicky over the decay of civilization which
according to him is going to pieces. The culture of Gatsby’s
society was in decline because human imagination in that society
was conditioned by money. This was a frightening materiality,
similar to what Kismino Washington feels at the end of “The
Diamond as Big as the Ritz”, one of Fitzgerald’s great short stories.
Kismino could no longer think of the stars “as great big diamonds
that belonged to some one.”7 This is the horrible irony that confuses
everyone in the Gatsbyean world. The theme of material and
spiritual waste continues in the story of the Wilsons who represent
the resources of human energy and hope that are drained in order
to feed the materialistic orgy which American transcendentalism
has inevitably become. It is Myrtle’s vitality of course which
attracts Tom Buchanan. Myrtle's death becomes a metaphor for human resources wasted in pursuit of and exploited by unregenerative materialism. Thus one cannot but interpret *The Great Gatsby* of Fitzgerald in terms of the materialism that had beset the American dream. Like Dreiser's Clyde, Gatsby also comes of a poor family background, his parents are shiftless and unsuccessful farm people.

Gatsby's expectations like those of Clyde are all concerned with wealth, prestige and the possession of a beautiful popular girl — the very symbols of success that Fitzgerald himself like Dreiser pursued with great diligence. Daisy Buchanan, the object of Gatsby's aspirations and the unwitting agent of his destruction symbolizes the tyranny of material possessions over men's imaginations. Fitzgerald romanticises wealth but he does so to lay bare the glaring despair that the possessors of wealth experience in the end. Fitzgerald goes as far as is reasonably possible in exposing the unreality of the dreams of wealth. Here we find great similarities between Dreiser and Fitzgerald. Both of them have made a thorough exploration of the question with all the mysterious ambiguity it actually assumes, not merely in the contemporary social life, but also in narrative pattern of its fictional representation. Dreiser's characters seem to move in a fairytale world. The romance of wealth is highlighted only to emphasise the distopic vision. The exploration of great expectations in the novels of Fitzgerald is linked to the optimistic and romantic resolution of the Cinderalla archetype. This is also true of the Dreiser novels. Far from being simple reworkings of a fairy folk-tale archetype, the novels of Dreiser present a problematical
view of reality demanding of the reader a critical discourse with the texts themselves. Like Fitzgerald’s Gatsby, Dreiser’s Carrie, Jennie and Clyde are all over-reachers. They yearn for things than they can ever acquire. Dreiser’s view of ‘free will’ was reflected again and again through the expectations of these characters. In his ‘Notes on Life’ quoted from Schopenhauer, Dreiser wrote:

if a stone projected through the air had consciousness, it would believe it was moving of its own free will. I add only to this that the stone would be right.8

Clyde in An American Tragedy had his great expectations and wanted to have money to see its power explored. It is not a case of victimisation but of romantic egoism. Here we can again refer to Fitzgerald’s story ‘The Swimmer’ in which a character Charles Wiese anatomises the role played by money:

Money is power....Money made this country, built its great and glorious cities, created its industries, covered it with an iron network of railroads. It’s money that harnesses the forces of nature, creates the machine and makes it go when money says go and stop when money says stop.9

As in a Fitzgerald story, in Dreiser’s writings too money prevails. This mystique of money also haunts Clyde. James Lundquist in his book Theodore Dreiser compares Clyde to Aladdin: “And like Aladdin in the Arabian Nights, Clyde is bewitched by beauty, love and wealth.”10 The world of the hotel seems to Clyde “a realization of paradise, a marvelous realm”(AAT 49-50). It symbolizes for
him “not just aesthetic perfection, but also : social superiority” (AAT 54). The world of the hotel is fantastic and “Aladdinish” : “Such grandeur. This then most certainly was what it meant to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world—to have money.” (AAT 58). Clyde writes to his mother after his accident, “I want to do something, in this world. I want to be successful ... I got to get on in this world.” (AAT 182).

F.O. Matthiessen also explains the over-whelming lure of money-values in the American society and refers to the word ‘American’ in the title. Clyde’s tragedy is the tragic struggle against illusions. Lundquist rightly points out:

Like all tragic heroes his fight ultimately must be seen as the struggle against the illusions. Dreiser attacks: wealth, power, love and most tragically, the self.¹¹

Clyde from the very beginning accepts sex as a reflection of ambition. Sex becomes a medium to acquire a partial reward for having achieved a goal. Charles Shapiro wrote,

Sex is the material result of buying gifts and flattering; and as Clyde moves up the social ladder, his sexual adventures reflect his progress¹²

That is why he could not establish any lasting relationship with any woman. Sex becomes a curious part of the American Dream, as Shapiro rightly stresses it: “not a driving force of love, but a symbol of achievement.”¹³

As in Jennie Gerhardt, in An American Tragedy too, Dreiser suggests the presence of a Creative Intelligence, the expression of faith. Jennie was convinced in such a faith, so was Clyde who earlier
in the novel could not accept his mother’s beliefs. He was visited in prison by Revered Duncan Mcmillan, who echoes Clyde’s mother’s fervor and succeeds to a degree, in reaching Clyde. He reads aloud Psalm 51 and Clyde listens with astonishment reminding us of the disbeliever hero of Albert Camus’ The Outsider who was eager to see somebody to visit in the prison and listens to the Bible with astonishment. However, Dreiser far from being an Existentialist pinned his faith in some positive ideal if not clearly in a divine ower. When Clyde is in trouble after Roberta’s pregnancy he consults a druggist who would not “trifle against the laws of God”. (AAT 377). Shortly after arriving at Lycurgus, Clyde was introduced to a typical church scene “semi religious, semiethical and semi-emotional.” (AAT 210). When Clyde says farewell to his mother he almost implores her to believe:

“Mama, you must believe that I die resigned and content. It won’t be heard. God had heard my prayers. He has given me strength and peace. (AAT 809). Clyde’s parents like Jennie’s were religious extremists and Clyde as a boy could not regard himself as a part of their world. But life’s multi-fold experiences have convinced him that his “mission of life was dreary; it was as though there was an insurmountable wall... built by the lack of understanding.” (AAT 806).

Clyde knew that his mother who was a simple religious-minded lady was not able to understand his craving for luxury, beauty and love. But she was after all his mother. Clyde was callow and inexperienced in the ways of the world. He himself ran counter to his sense of practical and social morality and persuaded Roberta to do so. He was ready to aspire for Sondra Finchley even at the cost of Roberta’s love. One thing is clear that Clyde Griffith’s love
represents American inspiration. In the critical moment of his life while dying Clyde contemplates life. He encounters death boldly recalling “the few, brief, intense, moments. His desires for more.” (AAT 804). A dreaming Clyde came to Lycurgus. His rejection of the early acquaintances for the better ones is indicative of the quest for the unattainable. If we judge Clyde’s plotting the murder of Roberta from this point of view, we feel sympathetic to Clyde. He cannot be called a downright criminal. The real tragedy of Clyde is the tragedy of romantic impossibility. It is not inevitable, but it is explainable in terms of his sensitivity, his selfishness and his weakness, a weakness which Dreiser ponders and explains, which is able to visualize the American Dream but is unable to make it a reality. Clyde’s pursuit of Sondra may be linked to America’s pursuit of an ever-receding frontier. Clyde’s tragedy lies in the transformation of that transcendental promise into mere materiality, the destruction of the Emersonian and Whitmanian idealism into merely a voice which has the ring of money. The Griffiths and Finchleys stand for “the very rich”—the modern American upper class embodying a materialism which is totally cynical, undirected by idealism or transcendental hope. The culture of Clyde’s society is in decline because human imagination in this society is conditioned by money. Doody Terrence rightly draws the comparison between Clyde of An American Tragedy and Jay Gatsby of The Great Gatsby both published in 1925, an era of official national optimism. Both novels rise from the story of a young man who changes his name as he leaves home and heads East, not West to escape his history and fashion a destiny for himself. Clyde and Gatsby are both naive, self-centered and not very sensitive young men on the make in
a society where “making it” is an idiom of both sex and commerce. However, crimes do not pay in either novel and both young men die proving that the American dream does not always come true. Sondra Finchley, the object of Clyde’s aspirations stands for the sway of wealth over men’s imagination and proves to be the cause of Clyde’s fall. In this respect, if could be said that An American Tragedy tells another part of the story Fitzgerald recorded in The Great Gatsby. The analogy need not be carried too far, but Clyde Griffiths, as do Sondra Finchley and Daisy Buchanan. Clyde and Gatsby pursue the same dream, the dream of an orgastic future embodied in a beautiful girl with voice like the sound of money, both pursue it passionately but illicitly and with similarly disastrous results.

Dreiser feels that it is the writer’s task to examine, explore and communicate motives, perspectives and causes. In going to explore Clyde’s tragedy Dreiser used the romance form to subvert it. Robert Weimann points out that by questioning the traditional romance subjects, the novelist involves the reader to creatively perceive the contradiction between matter and meaning, between traditional symbols and their new significance. He refers to the heightened awareness of both the links and the distinctions between the playful illusion of art and the realistic sense of life.14

The naturalistic mimesis of the fictions of the earlier period such as those of Zola or Norris is important as a critique of the society but it ultimately fails in representing the problematic nature
of reality. The use of romance by Dreiser within mimetic realism is a logical culmination of the rise of the novel. Through this use of romance he is able to adequately explore the myth of man. The most significant truth that emerges from the earlier novels from *Sister Carrie* to *An American Tragedy* is the paradoxical nature of money. Money offers the dreams of power and glory but at the same time petrifies and destroys it. In his novels, Dreiser deliberately discards the linear plot pattern in favour of a more complex circular pattern of structure where the imagined and metaphorical world face each other and become models for the exploration of the realities of real life. There is a Cinderella pattern of romance dealing with the acquisition of wealth which is ironically inverted for implying the delusions fostered by wealth which ultimately heightens the crisis and causes the ideal to die.

While using the romance mode to depict the dreams of wealth, there is a constant subversion of this mode through the structure and the very rhetoric of romance. The trenchant critique of the society which consists in this subversion of the romance mode actually defines the limits of mimetic realism of the novel. Arnold Kettle refers to such revelation of the fundamental contradictions of the contemporary socio-economic life in Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* or in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Kettle calls it the non-realistic aristocratic literature of feudalism. 15

Both Rabelais and Cervantes tried to accommodate in the existing mode, the new mode of anti-romantic romance by adopting the process of subversion. Arthur Heisermann (1977) defines the
new genre as “a story whose material is fresh, untraditional.”\(^{16}\) Dreiser’s fictional mode is also fresh and untraditional in the sense he has employed in his novel a contradiction between reality and romance or what Weimann calls, “a tension between socially accepted truths and fictionally created images.”\(^{17}\)

Dreiser’s disadvantage was that he himself belonged to the world of romance and yet he had to offer a critique of the illusion. He being no less a victim of the illusions, however, had to maintain a constant detachment and triumphed in distancing himself from the mess he was in. Thus to think of Dreiser was to think of the world of romance he created, the utopia of dreams and dazzle and to think simultaneously of a distopia generated by awareness and wisdom. In \textit{An American Tragedy} Dreiser used a kind of montage to represent an organisation of reality crossing spatial and temporal determinations. Fitzgerald admired Dreiser particularly in 1924 immediately before the publication of the novel. He considered Dreiser and H.L. Mencken “the greatest men living in the country today.”\(^{18}\) In his letter to Maxwell Perkins in 1920 he showed his disgust at the agitation against Dreiser: “What in hell is the use of trying to write decent fiction if a bunch of old women refuse to let anyone hear the truth.”\(^{19}\)

It is really interesting that the young Dreiser read Whitman but he was not able to appreciate the value of his works until later years. In \textit{Dawn} he regretted that he was not introduced to Balzac at that time. But he was keenly interested in writers like Tolstoy who taught him to see life in its entirety. He was thrilled by life’s grandeur and infinite variety. Yoshinobu Hakutani wrote:

In all these years, writers such as Tolstoy seemed to have taught
Dreiser that the artist must see life as a whole, not transcribe nature in its detail. 20

Dreiser was learning to observe life from a retiring perspective where all life seemed beautiful. He was seeking and was to find a new voice — one which detached from life would echo through it. By the time he reached his adulthood, Dreiser had learned to see beauty in the sordid and meaning in the simple - a vision that later characterized his art.

Dreiser's complexity of vision is reflected in his own description of Clyde:

Indeed the home life of which this boy found himself a part and the various contacts, material and psychic which thus far and had been his did not tend to convince him of the reality and force of all that his father and mother seemed to certainly to believe and say .... And his father and mother were constantly proclaiming the love and mercy and care of God for him and for all. Plainly there was something wrong somewhere. He could not get it all straight (AAT 17-18).

Thus Dreiser's interest was variegated and he revels in the variety of life. It is not irrelevant here to point out that he tried to discover in the precarious life of human beings:

a sweet welter... how rich, how tender, how grim, how like a colourful symphony. (TG 104).

Toward the end of that novel he said about Eugene Witla:

Great art dream welled up into his soul as he viewed the sparkling deeps of space. (TG 736)
This desire to transcend the visible world, the world that is too mundane and earthly lurked in the deep recess of Dreiser's mind. It is not surprising that he reposed faith in God or quakerism in later life. Dreiser's distinction with the naturalists is clear from his faith in God. Asked later in 1940 if he believed in God and the immortality of soul, Dreiser remarked.

I am thrilled by life's endless grandeur and genius as it presents itself in time and space.21

This realization did not suddenly dawn upon him. From the days of youth he had his deepest conviction about life. He took keen interest in the romance of life, in its infinite possibilities and diversities. One cannot limit him to the contours of a Zolaesque novel or naturalistic fiction, even though he was aware of the mechanistic conception of things and as late as 1936, he held a Zolaesque attitude, Dreiser wrote:

...... I am very much inclined to believe in a mechanistic conception of things in general.22

He also goes to the extent of saying:

My studies of life cause me to conclude that individuality is a myth -there is no such thing any more than there is an individual automobile, aeroplane, typewriter or suit of clothes. There are always slight differences but the construction and operating principles are sufficiently alike to make so-called individuality a compliment.23
But whatever he says about individuals, his treatment of characters and was decidedly more personal and subjective than a naturalist like Zola or realist like Balzac. Before he wrote *Sister Carrie*, Zola’s name had been unknown to him:

I never saw or heard of *McTeague* or *Norris* until after the novel had been written or turned in to Harper and Brothers who promptly rejected it with a sharp slap.\(^{24}\)

Even when he took interest in Balzac’s realism he did not show much interest in his objective way of delineation of life. He was an idealist and he never rejected personal sentiments and ideals for which Zola had a strong dislike. Dreiser presented himself in various ways but always kept distance. The ‘I’ is the distancing self, the alter-ego of the writer. Literary influences on him — there were plenty but they only enriched his own vision, own passions and own literary self. In Dreiser the idealist mingled with the realist into a singleness. This wholeness of vision makes *An American Tragedy* a great work of art not merely of American literature but of world literature as a whole. It was passionate but intimately tied to the reality of his own life. It accommodated all the possible tensions that life offered to Dreiser.

All major writers of the world delineate the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in human condition and civilization, Dreiser achieved no less success in portraying life in its entirety. He transcended the journalistic experience of his newspaper days and the evolution that occurred in his writings was towards a complete understanding of life. Dreiser was romantic and his romantic vision
quickened the reader's sense of reality, involving him in a critical questioning of values and attitudes, imposing a pattern on experience that added a new dimension to its meaning. Dreiser once wrote: "Amid so much life, the sea seemed safe."25

In a good many stories including "Nigger Jeff", he created patterns for weaving signs of hope with architectonic skill. Dreiser did not believe in a world of facile optimism as much as he disbelieved in an illustration of life observed in terms of deterministic philosophy. In "Nigger Jeff" Dreiser highlighted the view that a conflict between father and daughter could be adjusted. Since man's unreasonable environment was being ameliorated, man could learn. Here Dreiser believed in the process of revelation. This is also true of An American Tragedy. Clyde's story takes place against the backdrop of an industrializing America when excesses of Gilded Age splendour jarred against extreme of grim deprivation. Being steeped in the Horatio Alger ambitions of his time he fought to enter the threshold of a materialistic paradise by drinking the elixir of love. This story had in it a dream world, the material equivalent "of all the luxury that his mind was capable of holding". The idea of superman that Dreiser was to introduce later in the novels such as The Financier or The Titan was found in An American Tragedy. Irving Howe wrote:

While the earlier novels dealt with somewhat limited aspects of American life, An American Tragedy enormous in scope and ambition requires to be judged not merely as an extended study of the American lower middle class during the first years of the 20th century but also as a kind of parable of our national experience.26
Dreiser’s novel, which in Joseph Wood Krutch’s opinion “the great novel of our generation” was radically different from a James or Conrad novel. Richard Lehan rightly stressed:

In *American Tragedy* Dreiser solved the problem which vexes all naturalistic novelist: how to relate harmoniously a large panorama of realism with a sharply-contoured form.27

Clyde wants all that he sees, and the more he sees, the more he dreams and the more he dreams, the more he wants. Richard Lehan explains that Clyde becomes “a victim of youth’s hopeless desire”28 Not only Clyde, all human beings are victims of these desires. The theme of inevitability has acquired a double meaning or can be read in a double context. Dreiser’s narrative is interesting. The two selves of Clyde clash and cohere. Clyde is pushed toward the electric chair but a second self accompanies him: “his feet were walking but automatically, it seemed.” (AAT 810)

A little earlier Dreiser describes Clyde’s approach to the electric chair:

his voice sounded so strange and weak even to himself, so far distant as though it emanated from another being walking along side of him, and not from himself, (AAT 810).

This second self of Clyde had been distinguished from his automatic self, this desire is separated from the machine - like a sequence of events. Here Clyde overcomes his victimisation. He is distinguished from a character of the Zolaesque novel like *L’Assommoir* in which characters are found absolutely under the influence of environment, heredity and other ‘chemisms.’
Lehan rightly says:

In no other novel was Dreiser more fully in command of the idea and method, theme and literary technique.29

Dreiser's unique perception is reflected in the unique pattern of his novels. *An American Tragedy* beautifully reveals the greatness of Dreiser. While in the earlier novels Dreiser uses this new pattern of fictional writing, in *An American Tragedy* and in the novels written afterwards, his vision became more distinct and his pattern became more mature in its finesse.