CHAPTER-TWO
AMERICAN NATURALISM
AND
THEODORE DREISER
1890's were the years of social Darwinism in America when the strong wave of determinism deeply permeated the imaginative literature. Richard Hofstadter brilliantly analysed the effect of Darwinism in America:

In some respects the United States during the last three decades of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century was the Darwinian century. England gave Darwin to the world, but the United States gave to Darwinism an unusually quick and sympathetic reception.¹

Darwin repudiated in the *Origin of Species* (1859) the concept of purpose in the universe.

In the Darwinian world God does not exist and man is subjected to all the natural forces of the universe. Darwin’s comparison of species and world-family living in evolution paved the way for development of the naturalistic ideas and determinism. The heroic ideal noisily encouraged by the romantic fictions had become harder and harder to sustain. The myth of heroism was dependent on free will. But what Darwin had seemingly taught was that man was trapped; that he was the unsuspecting victim of genetic, psychological and evolutionary forces. While Marx spoke of economic determinism, Darwin expounded his theory of biologi-
cal determinism. These new forces of heredity and evolution were peculiarly stacked against the old Jeffersonian belief in a personal self control. Romantic individualism soon soured in the decades after the civil war to a documentary pessimism. Before 1860 a brilliant minority that included Hawthorne and Melville had opted for pessimism. But now under the Darwinian influence there were mass deserters from romantic optimism. In the novels of Stephen Crane, we find an attempt to present a fragile dignity, a nervous integrity for man.

William Dean Howells admired Zola and his documentation technique. Within a generation the drift to determinism and naturalistic technique seemed complete. Man was found desperately groping for self-fulfilment in a world that is controlled by principles of hereditary determinism. The novelists of the period emulated Zolaesque technique for depicting life against the background of the aggressively commercial and glamorous city especially the boom cities of the Gilded Age, New York and Chicago, where man was to find his ambiguous liberation.

Thus the period in which Herman Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) penned his novels was a heyday for the naturalists, the period between 1890 to 1940. The principles of naturalism based on hereditary and environmental determinism were expounded by Emile Zola the fountainhead of the Naturalistic movement in France. Naturalism has been defined as scientific principles applied to literature. According to Zola the main task of the artist is to represent reality which he obtains by making an analytical study of character motives and behaviour of man. In the naturalistic novel of Zola the workings of the laws of heredity
are shown. In the Preface to *La Fortune des Rougon* Zola states the basic principles of naturalism. His ideas were mainly derived from Hippolyte Taine and Claude Bernard concerning the influence of heredity and environment on the individual. Fundamental to Zola's naturalism is the conviction that man is determined physically or by some other forces outside himself. As animals were transformed by the surroundings to which they adapt themselves, in the same manner the individual was refashioned by the environment in which he lived.

Eighteenth century naturalism as elaborated by the thinker Holbach was

a philosophical system that saw man living solely in a world of perceived phenomena, a kind of cosmic machine which determined his life as it did nature, in short, a universe devoid of transcendental metaphysical or divine forces.²

Diderot wrote of the naturalists as those who did not admit God but who believed instead in material substance. Saint Beauve in 1839 bracketed naturalism with materialism. The naturalists have the fundamental belief that art is in essence "a mimetic objective representation of outer reality"³ and this may be contrasted with the "imaginative subjective transfiguration practised by the Romantics"⁴ The naturalists were inspired by the new art of photography invented by Saint Victor in 1824 and developed by Daguerre in 1839. The naturalists' view of man is directly dependent on the Darwinian picture of his descent from the lower animal which stands in sharp contrast to the idealization of man by the Romantics. The natural-
ists "deliberately reduce man to animal level stripping him of higher aspiration."⁵

To the naturalist, man is an animal whose course is determined by his heredity, by the effect of his environment and by the pressures of the moment. The terribly depressing conception of naturalism robs man of all free will and all are merely the inescapable result of physical forces and conditions totally beyond his control. Richard Chase also points out rightly that

Naturalistic doctrine assumes that fate is sometimes imposed on the individual from the outside. The protagonist of a naturalistic novel is therefore at the mercy of circumstances rather than of himself, indeed he seems to have no self.⁶

Harry Hartwick maintains that the determinism of the naturalists was so pessimistic that they conceived of nature as a vast horrible indifferent mechanism,

a contrivance of wheels within wheels man is a piece of fate caught in the machinery of Nature.... Man's only duty is to discharge his energies and die at the same time expressing his individuality as best as he can.⁷

George W. Mayer goes to accept Zola's distinction between fatalism and determinism. Now to separate fatalism from determinism is to deny the "monism of the cosmos" which is the foundation rock of naturalistic theory. In theory, Zola recognises neither God nor human will — but only law, and law is neither optimistic nor pessimistic.
Naturalism tends to present as Malcolm Cowley points it out, "case histories rather than tragedies in the classical sense". To the naturalists a writer should be more like a doctor experimenting, observing and analysing as if in a laboratory in total neutrality, the behaviour of man as the machine is determined by heredity, milieu and environment. For the naturalists a man is, as Taine called, a machine with an interacting mechanism of wheels. The evil man is on the same plane as the good and therein lies the amorality of the naturalists. Taine described Stendhal as "naturalistic and as a physician." Zola was irked by the charge of immorality since he regarded his novel as a scientific study and the reproach of immorality is irrelevant in the sciences. Zola insisted on the stock-in-trade of the naturalists — the mental analysis of the observed facts. Working like a doctor with a purely scholarly interest, Zola was engaged in the study of a strange physiological case.

Zola's famous novel *L' Assommoir*, for example, is a study of effects of drink on the moral and social conditions of the working class in Paris. In this novel Zola stressed on the terrible sway of environment on human life. Like Flaubert, Zola also began by posing as an impersonal transcriber of reality that is hard and brutal. "Zola did not want to admit of anything occult" wrote Lars Ahnebrink. Zola denied the principle of free will. He looked upon man as a victim of forces beyond his control and the struggle for life was tragic in the face of things. In novel after novel, Zola pessimistically showed man being defeated by the world because of social conditions or inner urges. Man is regarded to be chemical product that can be mixed and mingled. The novels including
*Les Rougon Maquart* show a process of dissolution and degeneration. Ahnebrink rightly points out that to be sure to life the naturalistic author had to take up subjects that also depicted the seamy side of life with all its brutality. J. J. Weiss called this art of fiction "la litterature brutale." As a naturalistic writer Zola did not have confidence in religion or social government. Everywhere vice, malice and wickedness stare his characters in the face. The outcome of life was usually hopeless sorrow, sometimes stolid resignation. Philip Walker wrote:

> Like thousands of his thoughtful contemporaries he (Zola) had taken refuge from the extreme metaphysical confusion of the times in little, firm empirical facts and scientific certainties.¹⁰

In going to compose his novels Zola stressed on the enormous importance of the collection of human documents. Upon these documents Zola based his novels. He studied manuals and scientific works, read articles; consulted people well versed in the subject on which he intended to base his book. Before writing *La bete humaine*, for example, he made a journey on a locomotive to study accurately the function of the engine, technical details to feel the warmth from the boiler and to observe the landscape passed by at a high speed. We can thus compare Zola's note "sur mon vayage an locomotive" with the parts of the completed novel dealing with the locomotive and it is interesting to see the proximity of description.

American naturalism has followed only broadly the principles of Zolaesque naturalism, reflected to a great extent in the novels of William Dean Howells and Stephen Crane. James T. Farrel
extended the philosophy and technique of naturalism. It is not deterministic but descriptive and psychological. In the novels of Frank Norris, however, naturalism touched the highest peak. The all pervading influence of the Zolaesque naturalism in America, in fact, turned a writer like Frank Norris into an observer and experimenter, who applied scientific methods to literature. He showed man to be devoid of free will, looked upon man as a victim of forces beyond his control. The struggle of man’s life in the novels of Norris is tragic in his hopelessness. What emerges clearly from his writings is that the universe is controlled by the mechanistic laws of causation and the individual is impotent in the face of things. He is defeated by social condition or inner urges. Norris, the exponent of American form of naturalism, gave enormous importance to the collection of human documents and scientific observations of the events of life. Norris, for instance, studied the production of wheat at Santa Anita Rancho and turned to the files of the San Francisco Chronicle to get data concerning the Mussel slough affair which was to be the central episode of *The Octopus*. Early in 1901 Norris went to Chicago and for some time absorbed the atmosphere of LaSalle street and the wheat pit. He studied the technical detail of the subject. He also consulted with G. D. Moulson of New York for a better understanding of the technical difficulties of the theme dealt with in *The Pit*. Such articles as “Man Proposes”, ‘Suggestions’ and “A Deal in Wheat” are nothing but draft for *McTeague*. Norris also used scenes from Zola’s novels.

The readers can easily find resemblances between *L’Assommoir* (The Dram-Shop) and *McTeague*, especially in the marriage scene of Trina and McTeague. The marriage scene of
The Pit is also reminiscent of the Zola novel. The scene in both these novels are based on factual details. As a naturalist novelist Norris has stressed the theme of the Zola novels—the slow but inevitable course of man towards degeneration and destruction. In the naturalistic novels McTeague, Vandover and the Brute, The Octopus and The Pit environment and circumstances are the cause of downfall and disintegration of the characters while temperament and heredity hasten their final ruin. In both the novels of Zola and Norris there is a conscious attempt to reduce to a minimum the role of the imagination. The carefully controlled observation of laboratory workers is reflected in the narrative of their novels.

The experimental novels of the naturalist writers were the outcome of the scientific advance. The study of abstract metaphysical man is replaced by the story of natural man subject to physico-chemical laws and determined by the effects of his milieu. Now many of the novelists of the late 19th century America such as Edward Bellamy, William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair and Jack London had one characteristic in common: they being intolerant of human misery expose the vices of society. Daniel Aron observes:

Stephen Crane's sketches of human misery, Frank Norris's unclinical studies in degeneration, Upton Sinclair's stomach-turning description of the Chicago stockyards and Jack London's catastrophic visions of revolution...... documented some of the unsmiling realities.11

Thus we find that American naturalism arose out of social and economic problems. Nevertheless, there was no such group
as such in the United States. Nor the writers got united by common manifestos and aims of naturalism. Darwinian determinism took only a slow and partial root in America. What is still more important, naturalism was not primarily a literary concept in America despite all the enthusiasm and curiosity about the Zolaesque novels of the experimental type.

Mencken did not like to use the term 'Naturalist' for Dreiser. In his study of the novels of Dreiser Mencken made freedom and individualism the bed-rock on which human dignity asserts its importance. According to Menken man possesses a tendency to control the antagonistic universe, but it does not mean that he really controls it. The desire to control is all the more important and it seems that a moral order is absent from the Universe. But in the absence of such moral order the strength of man becomes a matter of perennial interest in the struggle for existence. This intensity of tragic suffering of man makes Mencken compare Dreiser's novels with Greek dramas. What is important is that in this glorification of individualism Dreiser owes greatly to the viable tradition of individualism. According to Mencken the 19th Century American writers such as Walt Whitman, Emerson and Mark Twain were individualists standing apart and above the general stream of American literature. Dreiser, in his opinion, subscribes to Emersonian individualism more than to his spiritual idealism. At least he accepts the Emersonian observation that the state is secondary while the individual is primary. Emerson's individualism was based on divinity of man who could effect a direct relationship between his soul and god. What emerges most important is the Emersonian faith in the value of the individual who can transcend all forms of communi-
cation with reality. This is beyond the capability of the naturalists since they do not believe in the "heightened consciousness of self." In the *Smart Set* (June, 1914) Mencken wrote:

> the aim of a genuine novel is not merely to describe a particular man but to describe a typical man, and to show him in active conflict with more or less permanent and recognizable environment — fighting it, taking color from it, succumbing to it.\(^{12}\)

From this point of view Dreiser's novels had the aim of a genuine novel in which he described not "a particular man" but "a typical man" and showed him not as a poor wretched victim of the environment but as one in 'active' conflict. In *The Prefaces* Mencken interpreted Dreiser's aim as an artist:

> his aim is not merely to record, but to translate and understand; the thing he expresses is not the empty event and act, but the endless mystery out of which it springs, his pictures have a passionate compassion in them that it is hard to separate from poetry.\(^{13}\)

Thus as an artist Dreiser attracted Menken for his attempt to depict man not as an instrument in the hands of deterministic forces of the universe but as a creature possessing will power, as a man of will against the forces of his fate. This is indeed the aim of all great fictions of the world which instead of providing mere photographic record of life involve a process of selection and an ordering of reality. This is something very much different from the methods of naturalistic writers. A great writer is often the victim of popular misunderstanding. To call Dreiser a Naturalist and to explain his
novels in terms of naturalism is to make him such a victim of misunderstanding. Even an eminent critic of the stature of Charles Child Walcutt who analysed American literary naturalism in elaborate details could not ignore it when he says:

one writer excludes Drieser from the naturalistic movement, whereas another finds its epitome in his works.\textsuperscript{14}

Naturalism is not in itself a vague term, but the attempt to find it in writers of opposite school is at the root of all confusions. Thus while transcendentalism is opposed to naturalism, all attempts to define one in the light of the other are bound to end in failure. While a writer subscribing to the transcendentalist view upholds individualism, a naturalist regards man as devoid of individuality and freedom. In going to trace out the naturalistic elements in Dreiser's novels Walcutt faced serious problems. He had to divide the four stages of Dreiser's naturalism and the result of all the hair-splitting analysis is the expected conclusion:

Dreiser's greatness as a novelist cannot be accounted for by his naturalism. His greatness is in his insight, his sympathy and his tragic view of life.\textsuperscript{15}

Walcutt has analysed all the four stages and to his dismay found "the fourth stage of Dreiser's naturalism is not naturalism"\textsuperscript{16}