The second half of the nineteenth century has witnessed radical changes in society and literature. There was a ceaseless flow of immigrants resulting in a westward push. The continuous exploitation of the mineral rich regions, consumption of vast strands of timber, rapid expansion of cities have brought about profound changes while the flourishing technologies converted the country's huge natural resources into industrial products to support the fast increasing population and the foreign markets. It has been observed that:

Before the civil war, America had been essentially a rural, agrarian isolated republic whose idealistic, confident, and self-reliant inhabitants for the most part believed in God; by the time the United States entered World War I as a world power, it was an industrialised, urbanised, continental nation whose people had been forced to come to terms with the implications of Darwin's theory of evolution as well as with profound changes in its own social institutions and cultural values.1

The Civil War proved costly in terms of money and manpower. Though the war was morally traumatic, it had
quickened technological development introducing new methods of organisation which however helped subsequently industrial modernisation on a large scale. The sweeping changes were marked in every sphere of activity:

The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; industrial output grew at a geometric rate, and agricultural productivity increased dramatically, electricity was introduced on a large scale; new means of communication such as the telephone revolutionised many aspects of daily life; coal, oil, iron, gold, silver, and other kinds of mineral wealth were discovered and extracted to make large members of vast individual fortunes and to make the nation as a whole rich enough to capitalize for the first time on its own further development.2

This growth of industrialization and the four trans-continental railroad lines completed by 1885 transformed the earlier methods of trade. There was the emergence of a very small number of men who controlled all the profitable industries of oil, steel, railroad and meat-packing industries. These captains of industry accumulated vast wealth and power. Twain castigated the nefarious acquisitiveness in The Gilded Age, 1873. By the end of the First World War, one half of American population lived in about a dozen cities. Roughly ten million factory workers contributed to the explosive industrial expansion,
but at a huge social cost. Frank Norris gave a graphic description of the extremely miserable plight of the countryside farmers who were ruthlessly exploited by the land speculators and absentee landlords. Farmers and urban labourers were not organised, the wages were low and there was no way to pursue their own interests. There was wholesale political corruption which was helpful to soulless exploitation of the poor by the business and the industry. The "muckrakers" revealed the ugly nature of the age of "the Great Barbecue."

II

The social changes had their impact on literature, which became rich in great abundance and variety. During this half century, themes, forms, subjects and authors became entirely new. Even the regions and the audiences became new in fostering literature. The spirit and substance of American literature were transformed beyond recognition. The solemnity, the politeness and the moralistic concern no longer characterized literature. The fiction portrayed industrial workers, the rural poor, the ambitious businessmen, vagrants, prostitutes and unheroic soldiers as major characters. There was also a sudden spurt of standard works in sociology, philosophy,
psychology marked by a spirit of reform. The great literatures of the world especially the European (in translation) began to exert welcome influence as Tolstoy, Chekov, Ibsen, Zola and Verga were reviewed in the leading literary journals of the era. Mark Twain, William Dean Howells and Henry James became the arbiters of literary taste. Their acute awareness of the moral, mental and material squalor of postwar industrialized America formed the crux of their work. Twain's masterpiece *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is regarded as the fountainhead of American colloquial prose. Twain was able "to capture the enduring, archetypal, mythic images of America before the writer and the country came of age." Howells, who authored close to one hundred books during his sixty year professional career, realized the need and called for a literary realism that would treat commonplace Americans truthfully. Advocating the imperative that the writer should use language to probe the deepest reaches of the psychological and moral nature of human beings, James came to insist that the artist should not simply hold a mirror to the surface of social life in particular times and places, but go beyond to be a realist of the inner life. Twain, Howells and James defined and realised in their literary output the realistic portrayal of the landscape
and social surfaces exploring in vernacular style the literary possibilities of the interior life. They set the tone for modern fiction. The literary situation soon gave way to the writers who professed realism and naturalism. Although it is difficult to define these terms of generalization precisely, it would be helpful to bear in mind some of the chief traits concerning them.

The publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and *Descent of Man* in 1870 put forth the hypothesis that man had evolved from lower forms of life. The survival of humans was merely the result of their successful adaptation to changing environmental conditions and of their ability to pass on genetically their survival-making characteristics. This was a strong challenge to traditional conceptions of man, nature and the social order. Literature reflected its response to the challenge. It began to use the negative implications of evolutionary theory to account for the behaviour of characters which were conceived as more or less complex combinations of inherited attributes and habits conditioned by social and economic forces. Emile Zola put it clearly in his *The Experimental Novel*:
In short we must operate with characters, passions, human and social data as the chemist and physicist work on inner bodies, as the physiologist works on living bodies. Determinism governs everything. It is scientific investigation; it is experimental reasoning that combats one by one the hypotheses of the idealists and will replace novels of pure imagination by novels of observation and experiment.3

This patently pessimistic form of realism has been called "naturalistic" view of man, and it has manifested in a variety of ways in different modes of writing. For Stephen Crane, environment largely determined human fate. He believed that nature was flatly indifferent to man. The world of panic and chaos always surprised him, and it failed to show him any order below its confused surface. He was however convinced that man trapped in a world of chance and violence was a sure victim of death, and only by sympathetic identification and by practising solidarity one would realise the deeply felt human connection. In its absence, human nature is "as meaningless as wind, sharks and waves."

Theodore Dreiser was puzzled by the simultaneously enchanting, exciting, ugly and dangerous metropolis.

Edith Wharton concerned herself with the moving depiction of human isolation.
Jack London was fascinated by the hopeful socialism of Marx, the dark and grim views of Nietzsche and Darwinism, as he struggled to wrest meaning out of the chaotic nature of life. The evolutionary necessity of the survival of the strongest individuals offered him the support he was craving for. London's deep involvement in the socialist movement could be easily sensed in *The People of the Abyss* (1903), *The Iron Heel* (1908), *The War of the Classes* (1905) and *Revolution* (1910), while *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *The Sea Wolf* (1904) have effectively dramatised the law of survival and the will to power. The complex personality of London comes to the fore in *Martin Eden* (1909). In view of the many intellectual, artistic and social movements and the clash of ideas at the time London was writing, he was not fully successful in reconciling his contradictory views of man's nature and destiny.

Stephen Crane was influenced by the realist credo of Hamlin Garland. His keen perception of psychological and social reality is vividly revealed in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. The novel sharply departed from the tradition of easy romances which provided the mass audience escape, distraction, and easy pleasure obscuring and falsifying the social, emotional, and moral nature of
life. Crane reflected on the complex and ambiguous fact of personal identity and often chose for his subject matter man's physical, intellectual and emotional responses under extreme pressure, focussing on the indifference of nature to the fate of humanity. The theme puts in perspective the need for a sympathetic but unflinching demand for courage, integrity, grace and generosity in the face of a grim and callous universe. Though naturalism offered great possibilities, the authors failed to harness them fully. However, the first experimental phase in American fiction has charted future directions however vaguely. Robert E. Spiller remarks:

... the demand of science that human life be reconsidered as the manifestation of natural laws has led these experimental story tellers in two quite contrary directions. The method of science suggested a further development of realism toward analysis of data, and the frank discussion of all -- and especially the abnormal, the sordid, and the socially the unjust -- aspects of experience. On the other hand its attendant philosophy of dispassionate force stimulated new generalizations and created new symbols to represent the basic drives in man and in nature -- thereby developing a new form of romance. Neither impressionistic realism in Garland and Crane nor the romance of power in Norris and London proved adequate to its demand.
NOTES


2. Ibid., p. 1.
