The American literary scene, until the end of the nineteenth century, was dominated by a series of talented writers or by schools of fiction overshadowing, if not entirely suppressing, other schools and their representative writers. Cooper, Howells, Mark Twain, and Henry James dominated the scene at various times. But during the last one or two decades of the nineteenth century there was an abundance of fiction being published; and, what is even more important, novels of different genre reached such a high standard, that it is difficult to point out the popular school or the dominating novelist. The last twenty years of the last century saw the publication of books as differing in matter, method and style as Balzac's *Ben-Hur* (1880), Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Margaret Deland's *John Ward, Preacher* (1888), Stephen Crane's *Maggie* (1893), and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, which was published in 1900, though it was withdrawn as offensive, to be reissued in 1907. Most of the novels of the period cannot be reduced to any simple classification. They are widely divergent in style, construction and philosophy. Some of them are even a mixture of incongruities. Every age has its own
peculiarity. Creative writers, who are both its interpreters and recorders of its spirit, try to embody the ideas of the age in their creative work. But there were so many currents and cross-currents flowing tumultuously that it would have been a matter of surprise if one type of novel had ousted the rest in production or popularity. But, broadly speaking, it may be conceded that the trend in American fiction was towards simplicity and realism. Comparatively more writers in America were interested in depicting American life realistically than in other countries, though this influence too, like many other influences, was foreign. Naturally, many of the novels lose significance unless they are read in the context of the problems which produced them.

Life, both cultural and artistic, was ruled to a great extent by inherited values, by what was called the Genteel Tradition — a phrase first used by George Santayana in his essay contributed to the Adelphi in 1931. The Genteel Tradition was marked by idealism in metaphysics, morality in art, sensibility in life, discipline in craftsmanship and restraint in expression. But the tradition was dying.

The reasons are not far to seek, but they are complex. The chief among them are the theories of Evolution, the psychological theories propounded by
Sigmund Freud, the theory of Art for Art's sake and European influences, especially French. The evolutionary theory, with its support for the "struggle for existence", justified ruthless competition. Freud made sex into an utterly absorbing subject. "... The old-fashioned didactic presuppositions gave way to aestheticism. Art for Art's sake was never a very positive credo, but it aided in releasing the artist from ulterior constraints — particularly the taboos of sexual reticence." To this was added the enthusiastic welcome given to the realistic and naturalistic theories of Art from France.

Jack London took Darwin's theory of the "struggle for existence" as the basic principle for the actions of his characters. He, however, overplays the aspect of Nature "red in tooth and claw". The Call of the Wild (1903) and The Sea-Wolf (1904) are the more famous of his books.

Realism found its champions in Howells and Hamlin Garland. Frank Norris was its staunchest champion. He intended to write a series of three novels — The Octopus (1901), The Pit (1903) and The Wolf (never written) — meant to represent a symbolic struggle between primitive forces of the fertile earth on the one hand and the non-organic force of the machine on the other. The series deals with the social and economic

Implications of life.

It was in fact social and economic problems that were the main concern of the realistic writers. The emotional possibilities of life were examined socially, the motives of action psychologically and the whole of it depicted realistically. Some of the novels have a touch of satire. Upton Sinclair pointed out economic and social evils in his *King Coal* (1917), *Oil* (1927) and others. Sinclair Lewis boldly satirised modern materialism and middle-class village life. He satirised the small town in *Main Street* (1920), and the city and its businessmen in *Babbitt* (1922). He pointed out the drabness of the culture and life of the times. The vogue of satire affected even fine artists. Hemingway, whose motif is anything but sociological problems, wrote *To Have and Have Not* (1937), where he is satirical at the cost of the rich.

Naturalism which may be, in a way, distinguished from realism by its accent on the power of environment, its treatment of man as a superior animal rather than as an individual soul, and its stress upon the elemental motives of man, had its American representatives in Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser. Crane's *Maggie* (1893) is a very good example of a girl's life being shaped by environment. Dreiser introduced a new frankness in his novels *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911).
deal with "kept" women. He blames economic conditions for this irregularity. The hero of his most famous novel, *An American Tragedy* (1925), is a victim, too, of economic inequality. Dreiser's approach is that of naturalism — human beings are biological pawns who cannot be held responsible for their actions. His characterization is unimpressive. He is half socialist and half pessimist. The moral conclusions he draws from the novel are perhaps questionable. "That young men can grow up in America with no higher ideals than those of a Clyde Griffiths is a national disgrace if not a national tragedy." 2

Dos Passos is interested in the issue between an individual and society. He feels that modern life has been dehumanised. His *U.S.A.* (1930) trilogy is an ambitious dissection of American society. His technique of documentation, which consists of biography, newsreel and the camera eye, is very well suited to describe the aimlessness and frustration of his characters. A sense of general doom overhangs society.

But the most powerful naturalist that America has produced is James T. Farrell. He holds character to be a social product. He writes as if he does so under

moral compulsion. He achieves his effect by giving overwhelming details and by a literal representation of facts.

But the number and the weight of realistic and naturalistic novels could not suppress, even if they did excel, the romantic novels in quality and exceed them in number. The romantic tradition was persistent, and historical novels continued to thrive. Winston Churchill was probably the most popular of the romantic novelists. Well known and popular books about cowboys were written at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hollywood helped to make the cowboy famous all over the world. The Frontier and the South continued to supply the subject-matter for romantic and adventurous novels. Even foreign countries — Japan for Lafcadio Hearn and China for Pearl Buck — supplied the raw material for quaint, exotic and fantastic treatment. Another kind of romanticism expressed itself in indulging in the tendency to "primitivism".

The nineteen-twenties had been, as mentioned earlier, a period of mounting despair and disintegrating values. Loud music and forced hilarity were only a means of escape. Some, with the help of Freud, shed their inhibitions and revealed their frustrated selves. The theme, usually, was bewilderment, bitterness and a revolt against civilization. It was a cry for liberty from social restrictions, a reversion to "primitivism". To this school
belong Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner, Caldwell and others. H. S. Commager considers Hemingway a "primitivist", which he, no doubt, was in the early stages. Anderson is a typical "primitivist". He "was the D. H. Lawrence of American literature". He was conscious of the loss of values in modern life and his heroes naturally try to return to the more authentic life of rural America. They are social misfits but not evil. That they are so is due to their contact with a conventional and organized society which has warped them. *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) is a set of connected stories dealing with such persons. *Four White* (1920) deals with the destruction of a farming town by the encroachment of industrialism. *Dark Laughter* (1925), his most well known work, compares the temperaments of the Negroes and the Whites, to the disadvantage of the latter who suffer from sexual frustrations and social inhibitions.

There are writers in whose work these romantic and naturalistic elements are to be found together. A good example is Hemingway. One finds realistic details in his work as in a realistic or naturalistic novel. There is a frankness about sex. There is an attempt to reduce language

to its bare essentials. But romanticism inevitably tinges the atmosphere of his books.

World War I was a great shock to young Americans. The Russo-Japanese War and the Balkan Wars had been rather far away. But this war was too complex, deadly and spectacular. It finally appeared to them as a conflict between good and evil. They participated in it as in a crusade for democracy. Many novels on war were written but the more famous of them were naturally published after the war was over by participants who underwent a terrible disillusionment. *Three Soldiers* (1921) by Dos Passos, *The Enormous Room* (1922) by Cummings and *Soldier's Pay* (1926) by Faulkner "debunked" war. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) centres around the Caporetto retreat. The hero suffers from injury, disillusionment and the tragic death of his fiancee. His earlier novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), dealt with the expatriates who lived in France after the war. Jake's peculiar injury is symbolic of the "lost generation". Hemingway dealt with the inability of the demobilised soldiers to settle down to normal life in one of his short stories, "The Soldier's Return". In these novels, it is a case of "defeat in victory".

The problem of social adjustment was a serious one. It was a period of disintegrating values. War had been inevitably followed by disillusionment, and industrial
expansion by economic depression. However, the tradition of faith in individual integrity continued to be strong.

Edith Wharton's basic convention was that the only remedy for a degenerate society lay with individual members. She wrote forcibly and sympathetically of "illicit" emotions. A profound sense of moral values marks her novels. She had a compassion for the victims of social traditions and change. Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow consistently laid stress on the struggle of sensitive souls against the impersonal forces of environment. They loved human qualities, and no social order would endure or be human unless the men themselves were just and humane, Scott Fitzgerald searched for values too and discovered that wealth was a fortress which Gatsby could not pierce (The Great Gatsby, 1925). He showed, in Tender is the Night (1934), how a man disintegrates from too much wealth.

Behind the deep bitterness and apparent cynicism of his early books and the desire for exotic experience which is evident in the books written in the middle period, one can feel Hemingway's sincere love for the values of personal integrity and love of humanity. This becomes more obvious in his later books. More than many other American novelists he stayed aloof from the problems of American society. He drank in Paris, watched bullfighting in Spain, hunted animals in Africa and lived in Cuba.
Except a few of his short stories and *To Have and Have Not*, no book of his is about America. He has been often criticised for this reticence regarding the social problems of the time: "... he almost persuades us to look no further until we realise how restricted is his canvas, how understandably, to avoid uplift, he has strayed into a quite amoral sensualism, sinking, from want of intellectual vigour into the most insipid romanticism". But the psychological need for Hemingway to participate in violent sports like boxing, fishing, bullfighting and hunting has not been properly appreciated. That is his way of preparing to act with "grace under pressure". His idealism finds lyrical expression in the beautiful *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).

This love for idealism and search for values led some of the novelists into an apparently minor but really significant avenue leading back to Christianity. Hemingway had his share of this too. Quite a few novels have been written about Jesus Christ, his times and his influence. Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (1880), Lloyd C. Douglas', *The Robe* (1942) and *The Big Fisherman* (1948), Ladys Schmitt's *David the King* (1946), and Florence Marvyne Bauer's *Behold Your King* (1945) were some of them. The popularity of Douglas' novels

was simply phenomenal. All these novels had the romantic glamour of history and distance. But more important are the novels which deal with the problems of living a Christian life in the modern world of complexity and tensions. Douglas' *Forgive Us Our Trespasses* (1932) and *Green Light* (1935) belong to this genre. The four outstanding novels on this subject are Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and Faulkner's *A Fable* (1954). *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* was not expected to be a success at all. A bridge fell in Peru in 1714, and some people were killed. Around this incident the story is built up. A Franciscan is supposed to investigate into the kind of life the victims had led to find out whether there was any justice in this act of God. Wilder naturally cannot come to any definite conclusions. But the novel is so artistic that it "was read by everybody". Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is based on the lives of two prelates. The story is based on historical documents, but with her artistry, the novelist has infused life into the story. More than the incidents, it is the quiet heroism of the persons which is captivating.

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is allegorical to a great extent. It is a beautiful piece of art, though slight. It shows Hemingway's evolution away from primitivism and violence. Faulkner's *A Fable* is the author's greatest achievement, which, Dr. K. R. Shrinivas Iyengar says, "is the culmination of his career as a novelist, as it is also the crest of the movement of the modern American novel". It is the story of Christ in modern dress and under modern circumstances. And like Christ the French Corporal is "crucified", his head falling on a coil of barbed wire.

Style is a personal thing, but one finds a trend towards directness and simplicity in the modern American writers. Plain style is not something new to America. It had been the ideal of the Puritans who had discarded rhetorical flourishes. But with the moderns it was as much a psychological need as a search for a new music of language.

Faulkner and Hemingway are the two great American novelists of the twentieth century. As has been seen, there is plenty of diversity in American fiction. But

whatever form it may take it has three distinctive features: (i) imagination, (ii) the love of human liberty, and (iii) integrity, which usually finds a frank and direct expression. We find these characteristics well illustrated in Ernest Hemingway.