CHAPTER VI
The Man Behind His Work
Dreiser has created pictures of recognizable reality by shaping, reorganizing and fictionalizing his own personal experiences. In each novel, he tells us something about his own life, his ambitions and frustrations. Unlike Henry James who embellishes the external facts by his knowledge of man's life, magnifying them by different imaginative source and giving to the story a glow of reality even though its characters and events were the figment of his imagination, Dreiser has described the realities of life as he had personally experienced them.

Dreiser's novels are his personal impressions. The almost unvarying theme of all his novels is an individual crippled by unfavourable social environment and helplessly tossed by impersonal, mechanical and chemical forces.

Dreiser is himself involved emotionally with his characters. He had always insisted that in life there was no black and no white; there were only victims. Dreiser's themes of slow growth, of gradual personal disintegration and the crucial events of his stories are the result of the passage of
time and innumerable prior experiences. He had often pondered the tragedies of his youth, the injustices which ignorance and passion and circumstances had played on some of his sisters.

His own sister Emma who in 1886 had eloped with Hopkins from Chicago became Sister Carrie, Hopkins became George Hurstwood and Chapin and Gore, the truly 'swell saloon' where Hopkins rifled the safe, became Fitzgerald and Moys. This incident gave poignancy to Dreiser's handling of the theft at Fitzgerald and Moys by Hurstwood which is considered to be one of the most telling scenes of all his works.

Dreiser had translated his own experience into the desperate, hopeless yearnings and strivings of his characters in almost all of his novels. In Sister Carrie, he was simply telling a story much as he had seen it happen in his life. In Terre Haute, the Dreiser had gained a reputation as a 'chaotic, hard-pressed clan, often behind in their bills, whose older sons were wild and whose older daughters were flirty.'

Dreiser had personally seen the contrast between affluence and poverty. The Dreisers, he saw were different

from other people - poorer. They were looked down upon by others. It was humiliating to wear rags, to sneak coal from the railway tracks. He used to stare through iron fences at the luxurious palaces of the wealthy.

Dreiser grew up among tensions. His father and mother were diametrically opposed to each other. There was a sharp schism between his mother's way of life and that of his father. The former was a pagan; the latter was a puritan. His sister, a pretty blonde of sixteen had fallen a prey to the lustful fancy of a prominent lawyer. She had eloped with her lawyer-lover and returned to her mother weeping when she was left a pregnant woman with £50 given by her lover to hire the services of a doctor to get herself aborted. This had immensely shocked the sensitive heart of Dreiser. That is why this is the recurring theme of all his major novels.

Dreiser had seen the influence that the money-barons wield in a materialistic society. The rich exploit the poor. The poor, though wronged, do not have the courage to speak against them. Society always sides with the men of affluence and influence.

In Jennie Gerhardt, Jennie was first married to Senator Brander who died after some time leaving her pregnant to face the horrid
realities of this unsympathetic world. She was, in fact, a fictionalized version of his own sister who also had to face a similar situation when she was deserted by her Attorney lover. One has the feeling as if Dreiser had deliberately introduced this episode because he was unable to overcome the shock that he had suffered by the thoughtless action of his sister. Jennie's submissiveness and politeness became a source of trouble to her for they helped her seduction as in the case of his own sister. In *An American Tragedy* also this incident has been described in detail. When we read about the elopement of the sister of Clyde with a rich young man who also left her a pregnant woman. The mother of Clyde did not tell anything about this mishap and arranged a separate flat on rent for her. She strictly kept this secret for fear of social scandal but Clyde came to know about this when he saw his mother in the dingy lane where his sister lived. It is this personal touch which makes Dreiser's realism more poignant and heart-touching. The frantic search of a doctor or even a quack to perform abortion when Roberta became pregnant has a personal touch and reminds us of the desperate efforts which Dreiser's mother had to make in hunting out a doctor.
Dreiser became a potential menace to the prevailing American ideals because he advocated immorality as a way of life through his novels, though he himself was not conscious of the fact that he was creating a revolutionary work when he wrote *Sister Carrie* in 1900. He wrote with a tolerance for transgression which was transmitted by his mother who had accepted immorality as a fact of life, to her offsprings. Some of his sisters had been immoral in the eyes of the world. He himself believed that the so-called immorality was not immoral at all but was necessary and that conventional morality was a fraud. Dreiser was of the opinion that Children should be brought up by the state. He thought the average American mother as unfit and the average American home as a 'fetish' injurious to children in surrounding them with sentiment of reality:

"Within a Century", he said, "I believe we will have turned to the idea of making a child the property of the state, which will exercise supervision over the homes, taking the children away when they find surroundings bad."  

The impression that the novels of Dreiser give is simply one of truth, Dreiser had so deeply identified himself with the story of his novel that there was scarcely any hope for him to offer his personal comments. His Sister Carrie, which acted like "a cake of soap in a geyser" was not written with an intention to shock the people of the genteel society. Carrie was his own sister. Dreiser had his own sister in mind while describing Carrie's struggle for survival, her materialistic dreams, her fall and rise. Sister Carrie is far more naturalistic than Tess of Hardy. Hardy, though he wrote in the preface to his novel Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891) that a novel is "an impression, not an argument," was unable to restrain himself from commenting upon his characters. The old fashioned turn of the prose in all its complex urbanity is an effort to interpret the story, to accommodate it to the author's own tradition of thought. Dreiser, on the other hand, tells the story with a startling directness and sincerity.

Just as Gustave Flaubert once said that he was Madama Bovary, it can be said of Sister Carrie that Carrie was Dreiser himself. Dreiser's romantic love for the big cities, his passivity and ambition have been very well summed up in the

character of Carrie. There is a personal and compulsive quality in the novel. The book is felt rather than observed from outside. There is no arid documentation of events. The book is based on the dreams of a poor young girl who craves for wealth, social recognition, nice clothes and the spectacle of big cities. Unlike Frank Norris's McTeague which had been 'a conducted tour of the depths, Sister Carrie was a cry from the depths, as if McTeague had uttered it.'

Dreiser described Hurstwood as 'altogether a very acceptable individual of our great American upper class - the first great below the luxuriously rich.' Hurstwood and, in fact, his creator (Dreiser) belonged to a new class that threatened the older American Culture.

Heredity and social environment played a vital role in shaping the mind and imagination of Dreiser. His poor upbringing, the rootlessness of his early life and the shocking misadventures of his sisters had deeply affected his attitude towards life and the prevailing mores of his contemporary

society. Carrie Meeber's going off with Hurstwood from Chicago to New York was based on similar episode in the life of one of his sisters. Jennie Gerhardt's having an illegitimate child was based on the story of his another sister. When Jennie was left an unwed mother, she was socially ostracized and was supported by her mother, Mrs. Gerhardt. Dreiser has modelled Mrs. Gerhardt after his tender-hearted all-forgiving mother who had also helped her daughter when she was in distress and cared for her child.

In his 'affectional relations', Dreiser was a 'varietist.' He was obsessed by women both as a man and as a writer. He loved the beauty of girls - the delicate curves of their body:

"A face piquant in its delicacy, with pink cheeks, light on dark eyes, long lashes - how I tingled at the import of it. Girlhood ravished me. It set my brain and my blood aflame."

Looking into his works and his chequered life, one gathers the impression that the erotic exploits of Dreiser

were merely a calculated research to furnish him with literary material from real life. The painter John Sloan disliked "Dreiser's carelessness about women whose hearts were wrecked by an artist's desire for experience." ⁷

The character of Eugene Wylie in The Genius was a self-portrait of Dreiser. What he wrote of Eugene Wylie could be safely applied to him:

"All his life he had fancied that he was leading a more or less fated life, principally more. He thought that his art was a gift, that he had in a way been sent to revolutionize art in America or carry it one step forward ......" ⁸

Eugene Wylie in The Genius was not only a genius in art but a genius in making love to different types of women also. The exploits of Cowperwood in The Financier and The Titan tell us vividly about acts of over indulgence by Dreiser in his personal life.


Dreiser's avowed purpose in fiction was to render the broad truthful outlines of life. In each novel he is telling us something about himself and his personal life. He found that life at bottom is a tragedy. It is dominated by invincible material forces, and of these, the drives for power, money and sex were primary. His novel An American Tragedy described American values which he found materialistic to the core. The money ideal has been exposed as the great motivating factor of life in America. The brutal forces governing life dictate that any achievement permitted to a human creature be diluted by dissatisfaction. Clyde's insatiable lust for money and sex tells us something about woman-hungry Dreiser who "was thrown into ecstasies by his first view of an actress in tights."9 "About this time", he later recalled, "I fell into the ridiculous and unsatisfactory practice of masturbation."10

Dreiser would have pursued women, had he been a plumber, but since he was a writer he gladly used all his material in his novels. Like Dreiser, Clyde could not easily withstand the appeal of sex. He used to be easily inflamed by 'the Chemistry of sex and the formula of beauty.'11

Clyde's own masochistic yearning for Hartense smacked something of Dreiser's own yearning for women. The Eta-episode in this novel is entirely based on the misadventure of one of Dreiser's sisters. Despite her guarded upbringing and the seeming moral and religious fervour which at times appeared to characterize her, she too, like one of his sisters, was just a sensuous, weak girl who did not by any means know yet what she thought. Despite the extremely puritan and religious atmosphere in which she moved, she was, certainly, not of it.

One has the feeling as if Dreiser was describing his own life with its high hopes and frustrations, likes and dislikes, the disappointment with the way of life of his extremely religious parents who were always hard up and the shock that he had suffered from the elopement and desertion of his sister, in the person of Clyde, after reading the story of his life in this novel. Dreiser had so much identified himself with Clyde that there is a willing suspension of disbelief in the reader over their separate identities. Clyde was Dreiser. Like Dreiser, Clyde too felt embarrassed at being compelled to participate in the religious ways of his parents who looked cheap and less than normal in his eyes and like him too, he was constantly thinking
of how he might better himself, if he had a chance, places to
which he might go, things he might see, and how differently
he might live. Clyde's longing for fine clothes and pretty
girls tell us how deep the spell of these things was on
Dreiser.

Dreiser believed that sex vagaries were not as
uncommon as the majority thought and should not be accorded
too sharp a punishment if strict justice were to be done at
all. The punishment that was meted out to Clyde was unjust
in the eyes of Dreiser. The tragedy of his life was an
American tragedy as it showed the sharp difference between
the American image and actuality.

The contemporaries of Dreiser like Sherwood Anderson
and Dorothy Dudley hailed him for his progressive views. His
writings provoked the members of the genteel society for their
unconventionality and advocating transgression. Dreiser was
conscious of this unconventionality himself:

"The world, as I see it now, had trussed itself up
too helplessly... with too many strings of convention, religion,
dogma......... Is it every business to get married
and accept all the dictates of conventional society - that
is, bear and rear children according to a given social or religious theory? And, furthermore, I am inclined to suspect the monogamous standard to which the world has been tethered much too harshly for a thousand years or more now is entirely wrong. I do not believe that it is Nature's only or ultimate way of continuing or preserving itself.  

Dreiser did not regard his protagonists as sinful for their transgressions and adopting unconventional means for success. There is no such thing as absolute detachment. The author as a 'meddler' could be seen in the works of Dreiser. Dreiser made practical use of his experience with different kinds of women in his short stories and novels. The 'Sketches' of women in a 'Gallery of Women' and 'This Madness' were all based on his own romantic affairs. According to WC Lengel, "The women in this collection are among the most universal heroines in American fiction. All of them were drawn in one way or another from the colourful fabric of Dreiser's own experience."  

Dreiser was aware of the aspiring women like Elizabeth Cady, Stanton, Margaret Fuller and Anne Bradstreet of his times. "Olive Brand" describes the rebel woman, Emma Goldman, who was Dreiser's contemporary. Dreiser was a 'headonist, a voluptuary, and a varietist,' in his personal life. His characters are unable to transcend their physicality because they are the creations of such a person. His stories also reveal the double standard of men in their relations with women. The double standard morality could be traced to Dreiser's own views which were 'loose in formulation, and inconsistent.' Dreiser himself practised double standard in his approach towards love and women even though he vehemently criticized the double standard of men. Lengel observes:

"He displayed a casual indifference towards women. He was a headonist, a voluptuary and a varietist - but he did believe in double standard. While he was a free agent and let his fancies roam, the girl who was the temporary object of his affection had to be, as Caesar's wife, beyond suspicion."  

15. ibid. p.VII.
17. Lengel. op.cit. p.VII.
The stories in A Gallery show the relationship between men and women and reflect what Lengel saw of Dreiser, the man; The forces of heredity are suppressed because of the ambitious pursuits of women which force them out of their religious hereditary background. Women's quest of happiness through money and social recognition is matched by the libidinous search of men, in these stories. One cannot understand the conduct of such men as Dan of 'Rella', Doane of 'Esther Norn', McKail of 'Ellen Adams Wynn' unless one knows the views of Dreiser on sex expressed in Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub:

"What actually is true is that via sex-gratification or perhaps better, it's ardent and often defeated pursuit comes most of all that is most distinguished in art, letters and our social economy and progress generally. It may be and usually is 'displaced', 'referred', 'transferred', 'substituted by', 'identified with' desire of wealth, preferment, distinction and what not but underneath each and every one of such successes must primarily be written a deep and abiding craving for woman, or some one woman in whom the sex desires of anyone person for the time being are centred. 'Love' or 'Lust' (and the one is
but an intellectual sublimation of the other) moves the seeker in every field of effort." 18

The characters of Dreiser take love as an 'intellectual sublimation' of lust. Their insouciance towards the self-sacrificing and devotional aspect of love shows the effect of the materialistic social environment of an industrial age. Dreiser himself had caught the banality of his age. Despite his puritanical background, he could not resist the influence of the forces of social environment in which material prosperity was the summum-bonum of life and love was confused with free sex. In the symbol of his own drive for success and in the tragic careers of so many individuals in his own family, we have in his novels the suggestion of truth through the use of fact. We may conclude with Kazin:

"Dreiser is a particular example of the kind of mysterious strength, the strength with which a writer assimilates his environment, then recoils from it in order to tell a story." 19

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