CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Dreiser made his debut on the literary stage amidst a storm of protests from the genteel society. In the genteel novel, we have fixed standards of personal conduct and an ordered social status. The writings of the genteel tradition were devoid of sex. The role of women in the fictive world of Mark Twain was confined to that of law-givers rather than sexual partners. Charlotte and Sophia, the two sisters in Huckleberry Finn 'gentle and sweet like a dove' were no more than glimpsed. Huck was perhaps too young to take romantic interest in girls. James Fenimore Cooper in his Leather stocking series and Melville in Moby-Dick do not attach any importance to the love of man and woman.

We have an incomparable rendering of the American dream of pre-industrial culture in the works of the writers of the 19th Century. The romantic fiction still found favour with the reading public. R.L. Stevenson's Treasure Island in 1884, Francis Hodgson Burnett's Little Lord Fauntleroy and H. Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines and She: A History of Adventure were the best sellers.
The conflict between romance and realism can be noticed in the periodicals of the times which were replete with charges and counter-charges. Stevenson, Haggard and F. Marion Crawford defended the idealistic romantic tradition. They believed that the purpose of literature was to entertain, to refresh and to instruct. The romantic genre fulfils this purpose by taking the reader out of the real world and placing him in an imaginary one, where love, adventure and morality could all be intensified. Romantic fiction thus provided escape.

But with a dramatic suddenness consequent upon the cultural revolution and the emergence of literary radicals such as Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks and H.L. Mencken, American literature 'came of age' between 1910 and 1920. The nineteenth century forms, ideas and habits, were being increasingly discarded by the people. Van Wyck Brooks observed that the pulpy quick of American life, and the self critical vitality were in a state of 'strange ferment.'

2. ibid. (Quoted in The Cycle of American Literature by Robert Spiller).
William Dean Howells observed that most romantic writers were not really interested in morality at all. They were simply interested in 'bouncing' the reader, in awakening at all cost.......... vivid and violent emotions, which (supposedly) do credit to the invention, and originality of the writer." Howells wrote in Criticism and Fiction:

"romantic novels hurt because they are not true - not because they are malevolent, but because they are idle lies about human nature and the social fabric, which it behoves us to know and to understand that we may deal justly with ourselves and with one another."

The early American authors refuted the puritan charge that the novel was simply a pack of lies. Howells defended the realistic novel because it informed man on something that he should know.

Howells provided the critical rationale for Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the streets, Frank Norris McTeague and Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie with the statement:


4. idem.
"We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else," he wrote, "Is it (the novel) true? — true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women? This truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry — this truth given, the book cannot be wicked and cannot be weak."  

The naturalistic movement which began in the eighteen nineties and had been stalled by the forces of convention was lent momentum by the bounce and rebellious nature of the writings of Dreiser. Dreiser became a dominant writer of his times for debunking hypocrisy and showing respect for natural law. There had been naturalists like Stephane Crane, Frank Norris and Jack London who preceded Dreiser but the beginning made by them was rather timid. Norris and London excelled in examining the brute in man and in presenting the kinship between humanity and the jungle. Frank Norris' McTeague (1899) and Jack London's The Call of the Wild (1903) and The Wolf (1904) were primitivistic in nature. But these writers, since they were still bound by the British Tradition, could not bring the movement into focus as Dreiser did.

5. ibid. p. 86.
By their unconventionality and utter disregard for the prevailing ethical standards, Dreiser's works provoked a great deal of antagonism and scathing criticism in a society which was still wedded to the Genteel Tradition. His free and frank depiction of the realities of life was shocking to the people of the Victorian Society. The Genteel Tradition seemed more oppressive than even during the early nineties. "The young girl" and "the family center table" determined the standard of literature during the eighteen nineties.

Human nature is described from the standpoint of genteel good taste in the genteel novel. The vagaries of fortune are seldom taken into consideration by the novelist. The novels of Dreiser are, in fact, a reaction against the conventional ways of regarding human nature.

The publication of his first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) acted like 'a cake of soap in a geyser.' Dreiser was severely criticized for awarding success to its heroine despite her acts of transgressions and flagrant violation of the code of conduct of the genteel society. The fierce animosity that was aroused by this novel horrified its publishers.


Doubladay & Page so much that Page tried to persuade Dreiser to withdraw it. The novel was written in a mood of acquiescence to natural law but it contained no obscenities and very little profanity.

Stuart P. Sherman in his article "The Barbaric Naturalism of Theodore Dreiser" (1915) criticized Dreiser for his 'mixed ethnic' background which stood in the way of his understanding the higher beauty of the American Spirit. Sherman tried to scuttle Dreiser on intellectual grounds also by satirizing his poor craftsmanship and philosophical weaknesses. He denied him any standing as a realist because he worked from "a theory of animal behaviour" rather than "human behaviour."[9]

Alexander Kern also criticized Dreiser for his poor craftsmanship and faulty style and was of the view that Dreiser was at his worst when his style was least natural.

In an interview given to the editor of New York Times, published on 15th January, 1901, Dreiser refuted the charge of poor craftsmanship as baseless. His Sister Carrie


was not intended as piece of literary craftsmanship but as a picture of conditions.

"To sit up and criticize me for saying "vest" instead of "waistcoat", to talk about my splitting the infinitives and using vulgar common places here and there, when the tragedy of man's life is being displayed, is silly."10

Dreiser who was left in the dustbin by the critics of the genteel tradition made his mark in the late nineteen twenties. Mencken, a great admirer of Dreiser did much to restore the lost glory to Dreiser by launching attacks on traditional reticence and convention and by his appreciation of Dreiser. Mencken's A Book of Prefaces (1917) was a direct attack on American gentility which was 'the requiem for the nineteenth century.'11

The real worth of Dreiser was realized in the late twenties. To the young writers of the twentieth century, Dreiser became in Mencken's phrase 'the hindenberg of the

novel.' The works of Dreiser were in fact, a departure from Victorian timidity and gentility to 'honesty, boldness and passion for life.'

Dreiser has been condemned for his poor craftsmanship and has been branded as an 'inconsistent Mechanist.' He has also been criticized and appreciated for his naturalism. There are studies of Dreiser's naturalism and technique. There have also been attempts to study his tragic realism and the themes of his novels. But no satisfactory effort has been made to examine the role of heredity and social environment in the novels of Theodore Dreiser.

Man is not only a product of his heredity but also a product of his social environment and as suggested by Balzac develops his characteristics according to the life around him. The potentialities of heredity are realized within a proper environment. Life and environment are, therefore, co-relates. Although it is difficult to say which is a greater determinant - heredity or social environment - in man's life since both are inter-related, an attempt has been made to study their

role and their effect in determining the texture of the lives of Dreiser's characters and their attitude towards life.

Hereditary and social environment play a vital role even in matters of love and sex in the novels of Theodore Dreiser. Dreiser did not believe in the repression of sex and was conscious of the importance of sexual urge in human life. No authentic or rounded picture of human activity was, therefore, possible without taking cognizance of its pressure. "Love or lust (and the one is but an intellectual sublimation of the other) moves the seeker in every field of effort," Dreiser wrote in Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub (1919). Dreiser's approach towards the problems of love and sex was, in fact, the same in all of his novels from 1900 to 1925. His characters do not experience love; they experience sex.

Sex in the novels of Dreiser has been treated as a prop for getting social recognition, besides biological urge. The characters of Dreiser used their love-objects as catapults for acquiring money which brings social respectability in a materialistic social environment. Carrie in Sister Carrie passes from one lover to another because they promise her

fresh prospects of gilded life. The meek submission of Jennie in Jennie Gerhardt, first to Senator Brander and then to Lester Kane is a sad commentary upon the values of the American materialistic society which compels a poor innocent girl brought up in a religious atmosphere to part with her chastity, in order to live. Heredity is, therefore, relegated into the background before unsympathetic social environment in the case of Jennie.

Heredity had always figured in shaping Dreiser's characters. Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, Clyde Griffiths and Cowperwood are what they are largely because, they were born to be either hardy weeds or fragile blossoms. In his play The Hand of the Potter in which a sex criminal cries for exoneration 'I ain't made right.' "......... can you blame a man when he ain't right." Heredity is blamed. But environment was equally responsible for this. The Chicago in which Carrie was plunged to sink or swim can be credited with the direction her life takes. In An American Tragedy, the extremes of hereditary influences are avoided, leaving Clyde Griffiths neither mentally crippled deviate of The Hand of the Potter nor Squid devouring the Lobster of The Financier.

What happens to Clyde will happen not only because of the
drives with which he has been naturally endowed but because of the influences which mould him.

Dreiser was the first to portray the dismal depersonalization of the individual which results from urbanisation and intense societal pressure to conform. The individual is shrivelling up before brutal social and economic forces in his novels. The forces of heredity are suppressed by the powerful forces of social environment. The protagonists of Dreiser fall an easy prey to the lure of money and sex. The tragedy of Clyde's life in An American Tragedy is the tragedy of an average American who falls victim to the contemporary American dream of acquiring success through money.

Dreiser described life as he saw it. He had not tourned the smiling aspect of life unlike William Dean Howells. He was very much influenced by the French naturalists Emile Zola, Flaubert and Balzac in their photographic presentation of life. The characters of Dreiser rise or suffer according to their capacity to adjust themselves with the environment of different cities. Hurstwood suffers because the environment of New York, does not suit him; Carrie rises because she can
adjust herself with the environment of New York. The forces of heredity and social environment combine in her success as an actress.

Heredity and social environment are also responsible for intensifying the sense of loneliness and alienation that the characters of Dreiser feel when they are at the acme of material prosperity. Carrie does not feel happy and is extremely lonely despite her meteoric rise. Senator Brander and Lester Kane in Jennie Gerhardt feel very much lonely and alienated in spite of their material affluence.

One has the feeling that in describing all this, Dreiser was describing his own experiences. Dreiser shared a personal affinity with his characters as he himself was the victim of the forces of heredity and social environment. His characters are more sinned against than sinning. They fall an easy prey to the false values of the prevailing social environment. In most of the cases, heredity is suppressed by the deterministic influence of social environment as was in the case of Dreiser himself.

Randell Stuart who criticized the novels of Dreiser for their amorality was doubtful whether the term 'hero' can
be applied to the protagonist or the chief actor of his novels. He argued:

"Being a puppet of forces, man can hardly appear in a heroic light, and one may question whether the term 'hero' can properly be applied to the protagonist or the chief actor, in a work of naturalistic fiction. The term 'hero' suggests a morally responsible actor, and suggests, too, that certain adverse forces are being overcome by wilful endeavour." 14

But even Randell had to admit that 'no one else, before Dreiser or since, has presented before our eyes, the American experience in such raw, astounding bulk, or has done such justice to such tremendous forces which play upon us." 15

In the following pages, therefore, an humble attempt has been made to re-assess the novels of Dreiser against the background of the forces of heredity and social environment which play a vital role in shaping the destiny of Dreiser's characters. They experience happiness in life when the forces

of heredity and social environment combine in them and suffer when the forces of heredity and social environment are in conflict with each other.