Chapter-i

INTRODUCTION
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The Novelist

LIFE AND WORKS

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) is considered to be one of the most controversial American novelists who lived during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. He is generally regarded as the novelist above all others who fought the battle of naturalism in American fiction. He presented various socio-economic trends. An analysis of these developments will be quite fruitful for the fullest understanding of Dreiser. He was very much influenced by the prevailing mood of the time which is quite obvious in his novels.
Theodore Dreiser was born at Terre Haute (Indiana) on August 27, 1871. He was the twelfth of the thirteen children of his parents. He has given an account of his life in his autobiography *A Book About Myself*. In spite of the shock he gave the reviewers, he decided not to leave anything out, however unpleasant it might have been. His father faced a number of misfortunes, and thus in place of the earlier prosperity, only utter poverty was left in store for him. The recollections of his days spent in abject poverty appear in his later fiction. "His dream of wealth ended there. He began to withdraw into himself, and tried to discipline his children into severe religious behaviour."

(*Matthiessen 05*)

Dreiser’s Roman Catholic father had no regular job during first six years of his birth. From time to time the family had to move to Evansville, Sullivan and Warsaw. In
Chicago, Dreiser undertook some small jobs but he was not satisfied. He also spent a year in Indiana University. After some time he started working for a newspaper 'Chicago Globe' and continued working in St Louis, Toledo Pittsburg and New York, and also tried his hand in professional writing. “Dreiser wrote hack fiction for Street and Smith and edited various Magazines” (Wagenkencht 283)

Dreiser experienced the turning point of his life at Warsaw where girls started hunting his imagination. Here one of the sisters got pregnant, bringing bad name to the family. This resulted in their social boycott by the neighbours. “He and his brother and sisters were not invited any more to the birthdays hay rides and skatting parties. Again they were under the old cloud for all his mother had tried to free them.”(Dorothy Dudley 50) It was here at Warsaw that Dreiser could pursue his studies at a public school without “catholic spectre.”(Ibid 51)
He studied History, Botany and Astronomy. His teacher, May Calvert, encouraged Theodore Dreiser in his studies: "I can’t tell you how beautifully you read." *(Dreiser A Hoosier Holidays 318)* Boys and girls studied here together. In his class Myrtle Trego, Maud Tuttle and other girls sat very close to him. Dreiser dreamed constantly of their hidden physical form. While seeing a picture of a woman in a book "my blood ran hot and cold." *(Dawn 209)* Not only this, "magazine pictures of semi-nude women inflamed him. His thoughts grew so lustful that he became alarmed and confessed them to the kindly priest." *(Swanberg 17)* The priest asked him to guard himself against such things.

During his short stay at New York, Dreiser worked in a Greek restaurant as a dish washer. He also worked in the shipping department of Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and
Company. We find these three partners of this company characterized in his *The Titan* as honourable hypocrites. Apart from these jobs in Chicago, he sold newspapers on the streets and a little later, he acted as a clerk, a car tracer, a driver of a laundry wagon and also as an installment collector. "These various jobs introduced him to many aspects of the city and familiarized him with many regions." (Flanagan 131) It was his vigilant nature to witness the life closely, which later provided material for his novels. The city Chicago went into his nerves and "the fascination ... remained with Dreiser all his life." (Millgate 73)

Despite the fact that Dreiser was deeply interested in girls, he was afraid of scandals. He had various rewarding experiences with girls but "he was bound to find them inadequate, for the ideal was perpetually out of reach..."
Eventually, desiring and unable to yield to desire, he could achieve a satisfactory union only in his dreaming mind, and in autocratic stimulation found for many years a sexual nirvana where all dreams were true,” (Elias, 22)

While in Chicago at twenty one, Dreiser had an affair with Alice, the girl of the Christian Eve Party. Dreiser traces this romance in A Book About Myself. Then there was another girl who was better placed than Alice. She appeared to be the fulfillment of his dream of high life. He had always envied such a nice life. He always found sex the quintessence of all beauty and connected it with courage and adventure.

In 1872, Dreiser started working for ‘Chicago Globe’ and he continued it in St Louis, Toledo, Pittsburg and New York. In all these places “he saw the working of political influence, the elastic ethics that allowed financial trickery
to go unchecked, the convenience that link wealth and privilege. The weight of his experience undermined family percepts, and left him to take refuge in a moral mechanic view of life.” (Claude 80)

His mother was a great attraction for Dreiser and he inherited “his mother’s emotional warmth and openness to life ---- his father’s dogged tenacity.” (Matthiessen 04) The mind of his father was “like an ancient hamlet encircled by German walls and hills........ The German Catholic asks for no other fire or excitement than which may come out of Catholic lore or ritual. He is a violent protestant against outside delights.” (Dudley 22). It was his father’s orthodox nature and stiff principles which forced children to turn materialistic and unreligious. His brothers and sisters began to enjoy liberty to the extent as was not accepted in a common American family. Dreiser
was grieved to witness all this and his apprehension was doubled when he found his family persistently suffering under poverty.

One of Dreiser’s sisters, Emma, who was earlier supported by an architect in Chicago, eloped to New York with the cashier of ‘Chapin and Gores’. Silvia, another sister, got pregnant with the child of a rich man who refused to marry her. She stayed with Emma. The child was sent home to be cared by the tireless Sirah Dreiser.

“When Dreiser wrote Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, he might look back on these complications and find material for fiction.” (Elias 19) In Sister Carrie, Emma appears as Carrie, and the cashier of ‘Chapin Gores’ assumes the name of Hurstwood. The incident of theft and elopement also find expression there, while in the other novel, Sylvia has been described as Jennie Gerhardt.
Poverty and need forced Dreiser’s sisters look for sources of income. But because of their nature, their entire earning was consumed in eating, drinking and being merry. The older girls Mame, Emma, Theresa and Sylvia contributed very little for the maintenance of their family. Amid such circumstances, their father so often discovered the source of their income and rebuked his wife “for her lax supervision but she retorted that he could not make a decent living for them ............ let him make a good living first and then talk.” (Elias 14)

The panic of 1877 left the Dreiser family under utter poverty and their misery was added further when Dreiser’s father remained jobless for more than a year. Forced by poverty, Dreiser children started stealing coal from railroad tracks. Theodore and Ed were penalized at their
school for having no shoes to wear. His mother with the three youngest children --- Tillie, Theodore and Edward --- shifted to a separate house.

Now to face the challenges of "poverty their mother took in boarders and did washing or whatever work was available." (Mattiessen 09) The sisters visited them occasionally. Even the death of a neighbour in utter poverty gave Dreiser the greatest shock of his life. Paul, his youngest brother, during their stay at Terre Haute went to jail for forging a note. The lover of one of his sisters was helpful in getting Paul released from the prison. Dreiser uses these experiences in his novel Jennie Gerhardt. This incident made Dreiser think that it was very difficult to draw a line of demarcation between good and evil in the world.
Dreiser was married in 1898 "under circumstances similar to those which obtained at Eugene Witla's mating in *The Genius* and his 'chemism' being similar to Witla's also, he later sought his freedom." (Wagenknecht 283) Through the early fall of 1890, the health of Dreiser's mother continued to deteriorate and ultimately she died on November 14, 1890. Before her death, she could not get the chance even to make confession regarding her sin, if any. Paul Dreiser explained to the priest that his wife had remained devoted to her religion. Ultimately, she was permitted to be buried in St Boniface Cemetery. Even Sarah Dreiser's illness and death ceremonies left his family in debt. But not a single member of the family came forward to contribute towards the repayment of the loan as the unifying influence had vanished, and most of members of the family objected to any sacrifices.
(B) HIS WORKS:

The bitter truths of life forced Dreiser to record them in his works. He tried his hands at all sorts of writings --- novel, drama, poetry, autobiography, character-sketches, short stories and essays. But today he is known chiefly as a novelist. "Out of the desert of American Fictioneering, so populous and yet so dreary, Dreiser stands up --- a phenomenon inescapably visible, but disconcertingly hard to explain." (Menchen 67) He faced a strong opposition from different blocks. It is an important fact regarding his novels that most of them are quite lengthy. Hence, Dreiser's novels are best read quickly.

_Sister Carrie_, the first novel of Dreiser was published in 1900 by Doubleday, Page & Company. But it raised much hue and cry in the literary world "because it was the
first of those twentieth century American novels which piled detail upon detail of a sordid nature, in order to present a picture of ‘life as it is’. " (Quinn 646) While reading the proof sheets, the publisher’s wife found that the novel could not be popular because of its central theme which was nothing but the success story of a kept woman. Mrs Frank Doubleday, wife of the senior partner of Doubleday, Page & Company objected strongly to the publication of this novel and was afraid that she might feel ashamed to face society afterwards. Moreover, she refused to make money in this fashion which was worse than scrubbing floors.

The story of *Sister Carrie* runs like this: Carrie Meeber goes to Chicago to find works and becomes Charles Drouet’s mistress. Later on, she meets George Hurstwood, the manager of a bar. He is a married man, but
elopes with him after being deceived by his trick. In New York, Hurstwood opens a bar. His theft is discovered, and he promises to return the stolen money. This ruins his career. The latter half of the novel deals with his decline. Carrie turns to the theater, and makes a mark as an actress. At the end of the novel, Hurstwood commits suicide on account of his remaining unemployed and poor. Carrie is established in an apartment in the Waldrof Hotel.

The truthfulness of the novel *Sister Carrie* startled many reviewers in America after its publication. But it acknowledged better response in England because “after it had been murdered in New York by Mrs Doubleday, the London reviewers received it with spring torrents of praise.” (Ford 224) As a matter fact, in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser incorporates his own life experiences. Carrie’s
search for job aimed at the luxurious life in city displays Dreiser's own experience in Chicago during his adolescence.

In Sister Carrie "Dreiser succeeds admirably in making central Chicago come to life." (Simpson 82) Most of the charms and dislikes of Chicago have been expressed through Carrie's experience. Carrie herself, Hurstwood and Drouet depend on forces beyond their control. The sense of fate is just like in Hardy's novels. It seems Hardy made a deep impression on him.

Sister Carrie experienced severe labour pains. The reason was that it did not follow the norms of traditional morality. Drouet, Carrie's seducer, makes quick progress from Traveling Salesman to Branch Manager which seems to suggest that personal character has nothing to do with business success. Hurstwood's crime was followed by his
long steady decline but the consequences are not viewed as the punishment for his sin. Still more offensive was the treatment of Carrie. She became the mistress of first one man and then the other, yet she is not made to suffer for violating social norms appropriate to the usual fictional heroines.

Theodore Dreiser being the champion of realism incorporates this note in his novel *Sister Carrie* very successfully. Carrie becomes an actress in spite of being a kept woman whereas Hurstwood suffers in spite of his virtues. "..... The careful preparation of each incident seems just 'what such a person in such a situation would do' arouses in reader great pity for the figures thus caught in a web of circumstances." (Wager 224) Also *Sister Carrie* is often taken as a landmark in American naturalistic fiction. Its technique is certainly one of the first
to use the method of piling up of massive details to give
the reader an impression of the novelist’s desire to present
life in all its totality.

Carrie in this novel is a natural being, not a social
being. In the beginning she thinks that wealth reflects inner
contentment. But later on, she discovers that human nature
requires more than mere the American dream of success
for its spiritual satisfaction. She actually desires “to
participate in the flux of nature,” (McAleer 76) but
American society misleads her into the American dream.
In the same city, Chicago, where Cowperwood is a
renowned name, Carrie is quite insignificant.

_Jennie Gerhardt_ (1911) was Dreiser’s second novel.
It was based upon the experiences of Dreiser’s another
sister who happens to be “again a kept woman, but this
time of a different sort. For Jennie, despite irregularities
of her life, is virtuous---at least if we accept Dreiser's definition of virtue......” (Wagenknecht 287) Dreiser's Jennie Gerhardt was highly appreciated by some critics. According to Mencken, “Jennie Gerhardt is the best American novel with the exception of Huckleberry Finn.” (Wager 224)

_The Financier_ (1912) and _The Titan_ (1914) are the business novels dealing with career of Frank Cowperwood. Cowperwood's original figure was Charles T Yerkes, one of the greatest industrialists of Dreiser's time. _The Financier_ includes much irrelevant material. The court proceedings in the trial of Cowperwood are mentioned with exactness. Its style is not very impressive, but “financial need had made Dreiser press on with it, at the sacrifice of style and content.” (McAleer 103)
Cowperwood in this novel, like Dreiser himself, looks for happiness through the feminine form.

While *The Titan* faced the problem of publication, *The Genius* (1915) made his marred life bitter. In the winter of 1914, Harper's after bringing *The Titan* to the binding stage, informed Dreiser that it was to be withdrawn from publication. Either the portrait of Emilie Grigsby (Benicia) in the novel was responsible for its suppression "or whether the novel in toto simply proved too strong meat to risk serving to a public more used to pabulum, will probably never be known." (Gerber 122)

In *The Genius*, Dreiser deals with the rise of Eugene, an artist --- "his marriage, his physical breakdown, his rehabilitation through hard labour, his rise to power and prosperity as editor and publisher, the loss of his position through his affair with Suzanne Dale, and his complete
redemption through the shock of his wife's death in childbirth and his love for his baby daughter.” (Wagenknecht 289) Eugene, the hero, is a great lover of beauty. Every beautiful object charms his soul. He is particularly attracted by the beauty of young girls. “He admired girls — was mad about them—but only those who were truly beautiful. There were two or three in his school who reminded him of poetic phrases he had come across......” (Dreiser 12) AH Quinn considers it a “chronicle of his (Eugene's) relations with women who yield to his order with a regularity which at first is startling but soon becomes ridiculous.” (Quinn 649)

Eugene in The Genius is an artist but Dreiser depicts “the conflict between artistic dedication and the carnivorous distractions of the unbridled sex drive and materialism.” (Gerber 112) Because of its explicit
presentation of the erotic, the book faced temporary suppression. When Dreiser came to know that The Titan was likely to be banned even from mail, he wrote in one of his letters that he was "perfectly willing to break the postal laws and go to jail myself. It will save my living expenses this winter." (Elias, ed 221) The New York society for the suppression of the voice brought even Rabelais Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Swift, Balzac, Zola and Hardy under fire.

Dreiser’s most popular novel *An American Tragedy* (1925), has "interested critics for its timeless qualities or eternal themes, and biographers for its significant position in its author’s career." (Elias 09) Clyde Griffiths, the hero, was having a chance to marry a rich girl but “finds himself blocked from doing so by pregnancy of Roberta Alden, takes her out in a row boat, and after their boat is
accidentally upset, abandons her to drown.” (Wager 224)

He is tried for murder and executed.

With the publication of *An American Tragedy* Dreiser’s reputation reached far and wide. He received letters from all sorts of persons -- persons contemplating suicide, persons in need of money and those involved in adultery. But in spite of its popularity, *An American Tragedy* was banned in 1927 in Boston by the Protestant Vice Society. It had the support of a Catholic judge and jury who proscribed it chiefly because of a reference to birth control.

*The Bulwark* (1946) was not exactly the product of his old age. As a matter of fact, he started working on this novel while he was collecting material for *The Titan*. It was actually a coincidence that it underwent various versions. When it comes to its final form, Solon does not
die, he survives. "But the book Dreiser was planning at that time was not the book that finally appeared. The original plan of having Solon die disillusioned was abandoned in response to the change in the writer's own ideology in later years." (Wagenkencht 292) During his later years, Dreiser was studying Thoreau and John Woolman, not Karl Marx. He had a great admiration for the Quaker philosopher, Refus M Jones. The Bulwark stands for Dreiser's quest for values. Religion is a source of consolation to Eugene in times of difficulty. Clyde Griffiths execution (in *An American Tragedy*) made McMillan doubt his faith.

**Concerned** with the Hindu thought in a major way, *The Stoïc* (1947) portrays the last part of Frank Cowperwood's life in London business affairs. Dreiser gives the solution to the questions raised in *The Financier*
and *The Titan* in terms of the philosophy of the *Bhagwat Geeta*. "It presents his death in New York, and also Berenice Fleming’s spiritual adventure. But the most memorable part of the novel is the account of Berenice’s flirtation with Yoga, her finding a spiritual way of life and her self-dedication to the service of humanity as a kind of memorial to her dead lover." (Wagenkencht 291)

Some of Dreiser’s Short stories were published in 1918 under the title *Free and Other Stories*, Which contained some of the earliest and latest of the short stories. *Married, The Second Choice* and *Free* yielded him from 600 dollars to 750 dollars. Though these descriptions of people and their relationships, Dreiser could prove nature has the upper hand in human life. The chief characteristic of his stories is that different characters have different obsession: "The obsession of one for money,
of another for excitement, of another for love or beauty, of another merely not to die.” (Dudley 386) In The Second Choice, St Columbia and the River, Chains and Typhoons, fate is prominent.

Dreiser’s autobiographies are as interesting as his novels. A Traveller At Forty (1913) was the first autobiographical work published in November, 1913. It is an account of his trip to Europe. In this work he speaks of life as “an expression of contraries.....I know there can be no sense of heat without cold.... not anything, in short, without its contrary.”(A Traveller At Forty 34)

His autobiographical works A Book About Myself (1922) and Dawn (1931) show that “the fascination of Chicago remained with Dreiser all his life: so did the fascination of business.” (Milligate 73) A Book About Myself which was later renamed as Newspaper Days
brings forth some shocking details about Dreiser’s newspaper days. Dreiser presents unvarnished truth in it. “The account is full and unashamed as to his family and bringing up; gives in detail his initial knowledge of the fact of sex, and other experiences of the kind in these years.” (Dudley 473)

Dreiser’s *The Hand of the Potter* (1918) is a “Four­Act play which anticipates the theme of *An American Tragedy*. It is a deep perforation of life.” (Dudley 388) In this play death, love, jealousy, murder, deformity, accident, dreams, destitution -- the commonplaces, over which we stretch the tight smooth skin of convention. They spring to view like inner organs after the surgeon’s indecision. This play was staged with average skill by the Province town theater.
Twelve Men (1919) and A Gallery Of Woman (1929) are character-sketches. The former contains keen biographies and presents a portrait of his brother Pal Dreiser, the song writer. The latter work is, however, more remarkable as it concerns itself with about fifteen women. In this book, Dreiser thinks that a woman surrenders to a strong man. Lucia prefers to have in her life “a strong compelling force whom I could love—before whose strength and temperament I could be humble.” (A Gallery Of Woman 149) All the women characters are studies in frustration. Dreiser’s women unconsciously long to give themselves to men, they are often duped. They anticipate Roberta Alden in An American Tragedy.

A collection of poems named Moods, Cadenced and Declaimed contains the poems like ‘Woodnote’, ‘Ye Ages’, ‘Ye Tribes’, ‘For a Moment the Wind Died, and
‘They shall Fall as Shipped Garment’. These poems are in a speculative and wistful mood. Dreiser’s ‘Hey-Rub-A-Dub-Dub’ (1920) “alone more consciously records philosophical impressions and the quest for values which was his ruling passion.” (McAleer 45) In it he schemed openly for social reforms. The title of the work “suggested that life was without meaning.” (Elias 211) It was subtitled A Book About Myself and Terror of Life. Here Dreiser also expresses his views about women. In relation to them, he considers himself a coward.

His two travel books: The Colour of a Great City (1923) and Dreiser Looks at Russia (1928) describe Dreiser’s experiences in Russia and his communistic belief. In Tragic America “he violently attacks on those Americans whom ...... he had previously portrayed as representing the most dynamic and productive force in
American society.” (Milligate 79) It was earlier entitled *A New Deal for America.*

He proposed business to be free from competition. He favoured government ownership of all utilities. This book “excoriates the whole capitalistic system and calls for a change of government.” (McAleer 53) *America is worth Saving* (1941) is an attack on capitalism. He alleged that the leaders were trying to evade the principles of justice. It was “a work both hurried and inexact.” (McAleer 62)

Before the end of the year, different organizations wanted to quote from it, but Dreiser refused.

Dreiser tried his hand at all sorts of writings but today he is remembered mainly as a novelist. His popularity as a novelist is also evidenced by the fact that his novel *An American Tragedy* was screened. However, Dreiser appealed to the Supreme Court of New York to restrain
Paramount from showing the 1931 version of *An American Tragedy* “On the ground that by not creating the inevitability of circumstance influencing Clyde, they had reduced the psychology of my book so as to make it a cheap murder story.” *(The Real Sins of Hollywood 06)*

The court upheld that the majority of people who composed the audience were interested in having justice prevail over wrong-doing, “Thus, the artistic and commercial license to alter literary texts receives its legal sanction.” *(Novels into Films 218)*

Thus, we see that Dreiser's writings are quite interesting. Many of his novels borrow characters and incidents from his own life. Dreiser makes use of his experiences and that is why his novels are full of life. Dreiser’s biography colours his works. Some of his novels are autobiographical. An important fact about his novels is
his interest in sex. This attraction for the opposite sex developed in Dreiser's early life. This is very evident from even a cursory reading of his novels. On the whole, Dreiser's biography presents important details and these details become the new material for his writings, particularly for his novels. He could write well about them because he had experienced them.