American fiction became established only after the American Revolution. *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), a tragic love story by William Hill Brown, is generally considered the first American novel. Charles Brockden Brown is among the best-remembered novelists of the period. His *Wieland; or, The Transformation* (1798) is a cleverly plotted horror story that emphasizes dark, supernatural visions. Other notable novels of the time include Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), a tragic romance that involves a young woman's journey from England to the colonies during the Revolution; Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants* (1793), the story of an English family whose life improves in America; and Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), a novel in the form of letters.

In the early 1800s America faced a difficult challenge: how to create its own culture. The religious and political writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offered some guidance. Cotton Mather, for example, had argued for the uniqueness of America's mission. But none of those writers could satisfy the growing American appetite for prose fiction focused on American issues and grown from American imaginations. Calls for an American literature began during the Revolution and became more frequent and urgent as independence was assured. Over the course of the nineteenth century the country
progressed from an agricultural economy concentrated on the Eastern seaboard to an industrialized nation that spanned the continent. With the dramatic changes in the nation came dramatic changes in its literature. When the century opened, only a handful of novels had been written, but by mid-century American fiction rivaled the best in the world.

Among the first manifestations of nationhood was the recognition that America had its own language and that American English differed from British English. Gaining independence also provided the United States with a history of its own. *History of New York* (1809) by Washington Irving offered a surprising twist on standard local history. A satire on the exaggeration and earnestness often found in local histories, this work seemed to reflect America’s desire to break away from established forms of writing and to engage more fully in the world of imaginative literature. Travel narratives became increasingly popular, especially as the country expanded westward. Biography and autobiography served the new nation’s sense of its history and its need for heroes in the 1800s. In some cases these genres worked explicitly, as did some histories, to develop a mythic stature for American heroes, and biography began to merge with legend.

The self-confidence and nationalism of the newly created United States of America energized fiction as well as nonfiction. Historical fiction took off first, influenced by Sir Walter Scott. Historical fiction was
an expression of romanticism in its probing of human nature and emotions and its romanticizing of the American past and the American frontier. The first generations of Puritans in New England, the Salem witchcraft trials, white conflicts with Native Americans, and the American Revolution provided popular subjects for American historical fiction.

New England writer Nathaniel Hawthorne was also a master of historical fiction. Influenced to some extent by transcendentalism, Hawthorne’s views of the movement were mixed. However, Hawthorne’s work, with its deep ethical concern about sin, punishment, and atonement, is less optimistic than most transcendental writing. *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a story of rebellion within an emotionally constricted Puritan society, is an undisputed masterpiece in its powerful psychological insights.

The first African American to publish a novel was William Wells Brown, who combined historical fiction, national legend, and the increasingly divisive subject of race. His novel *Clotel* (1853) is the fictional account of a child born to Thomas Jefferson and a slave. It was intended to point out the distance between American ideals of liberty and the actual living conditions of American slaves, who also were sons and daughters of that promised liberty. Harriet E. Wilson was the first African American woman to publish a novel. *Our Nig* (1859) focuses on
the injustices faced by free blacks in the North, a topic not readily acknowledged at the time.

Herman Melville, who was born in New York City, worked on a number of ships after his father’s financial ruin and death and based several novels on his voyages. Ironically, Melville’s popularity dropped after the publication of the book now considered a masterpiece of American fiction, *Moby-Dick* (1851). Edgar Allen Poe was another writer who inverted transcendentalist promises. In his disturbing prose and poetry, Poe explored the nature of humanity and frightened readers with what he found. His tales are obsessed with death, madness, and violence.

The sentimental novel is a major form of American fiction that grew out of the responses of white writers to the abuses of slavery. The most famous and historically most significant work of American sentimental fiction is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Sentimental fiction aimed to arouse pity for the oppressed and offered a natural form for novelists writing about the evils of slavery.

Post-Civil War America was large and diverse enough to sense its own local differences. With increasing urbanization and more accessible transportation, small, rural communities became a subject of literary interest. In the second half of the nineteenth century, issues specific to the industrial city also engaged writers of fiction, who
portrayed the sometimes hidden struggles of city life. Kate Chopin built her reputation on regionalist stories of Louisiana. She is, however, best remembered for writing one of the first important feminist novels, *The Awakening* (1899). The book realistically depicts Creole life in Louisiana as it tells the story of a young woman in a stultifying marriage who discovers a new sense of self when she takes a lover.

Realism entered American literature after the Civil War, soon followed by naturalism, an extreme form of realism. Naturalism had an outlook often bleaker than that of realism, and it added a dimension of predetermined fate that rendered human will ultimately powerless. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who wrote under the pen name Mark Twain, is sometimes called a regionalist for his vivid portrayals of Southern character and dialect. However, he also ranks among the great American realists because he scrupulously included so many sides of life in his works and refused to make the horrifying look palatable. Twain’s best-known works, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), are seemingly simple stories that also offer searing indictments of corruption at all levels of society. In addition to Twain, William Dean Howells, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris are notable late-nineteenth-century American writers in the realist or naturalist traditions.
During the twentieth century a communications revolution that introduced motion pictures, radio, and television brought the world into view – and eventually into the living room. The new forms of communication competed with books as sources of amusement and enlightenment. New forms of communication and new modes of transportation made American society increasingly mobile and familiar with many more regions of the country. Literary voices from even the remotest corners could reach a national audience. At the same time, American writers – particularly writers of fiction – began to influence world literature.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of modernism. Modernism responded to the world's complexity by asserting that the individual had the potential to achieve a broader perspective than that offered by any one society or its history. Although realism, naturalism, and regionalism were still viable modes of expression, they reflected the increasingly complex reality of twentieth-century society. Immigration and industrialization led to increasing urbanization, and, in turn, to class stratification.

Henry James was a key figure in American literature's transition from the 1800s to the 1900s. Although more of his novels were published before 1900 than after, his style, which was characterized by psychological rather than physical realism and his themes seemed a
long way from much of nineteenth-century American literature. Edith Wharton, whose works show the influence of James, was another key turn-of-the-century figure. Many of her novels take place among the wealthy and worldly elite of New York City and focus on the restrictions imposed on individuals by social definition and convention. As James and Wharton examined the sometimes complex psychology of America's elite, other writers turned to the psychological and physical reality of the labouring classes. Several American authors who are sometimes known as social realists looked at working conditions, often for the purpose of social reform. In 1906 Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, a novel that exposed the unsanitary and miserable working conditions in the stockyards of Chicago, Illinois.

II

Theodore Dreiser was praised as "the greatest living realist" of the early twentieth century. His novels were deeply imbued with an understanding of the brutal injustices of social class, and they rank as magnificent examples of twentieth-century American naturalism. They often reflect the tension between parents who immigrate to the New World and the children they raise under its shifting cultural and moral values. And although his works stand on their own artistic merit, Dreiser is probably almost as famous for the literary censorship that plagued him as much as for his writing itself.
Dreiser's characters are victims of apparently meaningless incidents that result in pressures they can neither control nor understand. He believed that human beings are helpless in the grip of instincts and social forces beyond their control, and he judged human society as an unequal contest between the strong and the weak. He based such novels as *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* on events from real life. He condemned not his villains, but the repressive, hypocritical society that produced them. He was more concerned with society's effect on a person than with man apart from his environment, and his treatment of the social forces, which produce murderers and prostitutes, as well as business magnates, is relevant even to modern society. Dreiser's own harsh experience of poverty as a youth and his early longing for wealth and success would become dominant themes in his novels, and the misadventures of his brothers and sisters in early adult life gave him additional material on which to base his characters.

The 1920s was a period marked by an exciting acceleration in the tempo of American life. Industrialism not only produced financial giants and industrial labourers, but also led to the degeneration of morality and distortion of comprehensive philosophy of the world or of human life. And the word "American dream" became a representation of that age. Average Americans believed that, "the possession of money would certainly solve all earthly ills. You could see it in the faces of the people,
in their step and manner. Power, power, power – everyone was seeking power in the land of the free and the home of the brave.¹

The American Dream, as one of the best known myths of American society had and still has a major impact on literature. The ideal itself as well as the portrayal of its fall has inspired a great number of authors. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* are perhaps the best studies of the mythology of the American Dream including both stories of success and stories of failure. They represent Dreiser's vision on the Fall of the American Dream. Dreiser's heroes embody the essence of the American career model and illustrate the effects of this mesmerizing myth.

Theodore Herman Albert Dreiser was born into a large and impoverished German-American family in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1871. He was the ninth of ten children. Dreiser's father, John Paul, had fled to America from Germany to avoid the draft twenty-five years before and through hard work became a man of wealth and position. Just before Theodore's birth, a series of misfortunes had struck the family, rendering them penniless. John Paul Dreiser, the father, was crippled shortly after his weaving mill had burned down. While he convalesced, his wife was cheated out of the remainder of the family property by creditors. The elder Dreiser was unable to secure employment to support his large family. Although the elder Dreiser had mastered
weaving in Germany, he found that employers in his new country did not appreciate his skill. Always a devout and orthodox Roman Catholic, he grew increasingly fanatical in his concern for salvation. Forever on guard to preserve the virtue of his children and to pay off his debts lest he die owing money, he became an unbearable despot and led the family into near beggary. Even as an infant, Theodore learned the difficult lessons of poverty, chance, and morality.

Dreiser's mother, in contrast to the stern religious fanaticism of the father, was full of tender sentiment and not subject to his adamant morality. Quiet by nature, sympathetic and gentle, she was nonetheless endowed with endless strength and patience. Sarah Dreiser was eager to be helpful and stood by to aid any child with whom the father was angry. The father's religious fanaticism, the mother's abiding tenderness, and the family's unbearable poverty worked together in shaping the young Dreiser. As a product of these conditions, Dreiser was possessed of a furious energy, a determination to succeed, and an unalterable will.

In 1879 it was decided that the family should split up. The three youngest children, including Theodore, went with the mother. Free now from the stern wrath of his father, Theodore roamed the open fields and played along the waterways and streams of Evansville, Indiana. He learned much from nature, perceiving in it many analogies to human
life. Passenger trains heading for Santa Fe, San Francisco, Denver, and Chicago fired his imagination of faraway places. The boy dreamed especially of Chicago, the magic city where young men and women of the Midwest sought their fortunes.

Appearing after a four-year absence, dressed in silk hat and fur coat, the oldest brother Paul, now a successful song writer, returned to lift the family out of its poverty. In the figure of Paul, Theodore found the concept of fortune in the affairs of men. The strangest of coincidence seemed to him to be the origin of a powerful, arbitrary, interfering fate. The concept of fate finds expression throughout all of Dreiser's novels, in which the loosest of coincidences play a decisive role in human existence.

As mentioned earlier, Mr. Dreiser and his wife, Sarah, of Moravian descent raised their family on very little money, with the stringent morals and rules of the old country. They communicated with each other in German and followed strict Catholic practices. Dreiser felt the influence of his older brothers and sisters who seemed to always find themselves in trouble.

Although he was a poor grammar student and barely passed in his studies, Dreiser read widely in the classics. His teacher was able to convince him, however, that he was worth something despite his own harsh judgment of himself. Although Dreiser was a serious student, he
never finished high school. The conduct of his siblings, especially the
sexual adventures of his sisters, entered into his decision to leave
school. Depressed over his family's poor social standing in the small
northern Indiana town of Warsaw, he decided at age sixteen to seek
work in Chicago. With the six dollars that she gave him, he took his first
steps on the long way to fame and fortune.

After innumerable setbacks and disappointments, he eventually
found work in a hardware store. Working closely with the sons of
wealthy Eastern executives, he came to hate the disparity between their
wealth and his poverty. Out of the comparison of his own lot with that of
those more fortunate, he came to see for himself how life was
organized. Through contrast of affluence and poverty, Dreiser thought,
individuals come to enjoy or disdain what they possess or do not
possess.

Through a stroke of fortune, which he believed to be fate itself,
Dreiser was given money by his former schoolteacher, Mildred Fielding,
to attend Indiana University at Bloomington. For the first time in his life
he felt important. But the university did not offer the opportunities for
learning he had so much hoped for. Life itself was destined to be
Dreiser's college. Books were of some value to him but they would
never supplant the direct observations of the human struggle that the
adolescent Dreiser was already used to. The university only confirmed
his notion that success in life came with luck and money and good clothes. He left the university after his freshman year. He soon became interested in journalism, but returned to Chicago and worked as a bill collector, real estate clerk, and laundry-truck driver.

Dreiser first entered the newspaper world by dispensing toys for the needy at Christmas for the *Chicago Herald*. He subsequently got hired as a cub reporter with the *Chicago Globe*. In June 1892, two months before his twenty-first birthday, he wrote his first news story for it. Later he went to St. Louis as a feature writer for the *Globe-Democrat*. Things took a turn for the worse when Dreiser accidently reviewed a theater performance in absentia even though it turned out the show was never performed. He left St. Louis and moved to Pittsburgh, working with the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*. In his autobiography, *Newspaper Days*, he recalls reporting a meeting addressed by Terence Powderly:

Some are silk purses and others sows' ears and cannot be made the one into the other by any accident of either poverty or wealth. Just at this time, however, after listening to Mr. Powderly (a significant man in connection with that movement) and taking notes on his speech, I came to the conclusion that all laborers had a just right to much better pay and living conditions, and in consequence had a great cause and ought to stick together - only I was not one of them.\(^2\)
As a journalist, Dreiser never came close to realizing his dream of having his own by-line, a column the public would read because his name appeared above it. But he showed enough talent to get decent assignments – as drama critic, special feature writer, investigative reporter – for the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, the St. Louis Republic, and the Pittsburgh Dispatch. Dreiser found material for his later fiction in his observations as a big-city reporter in the 1890s. He was adept at writing special feature stories, in which he was able to experiment with local colour settings, dialogue, and character sketches. He was known even then as, in the words of one editor who knew him, "a writing machine." Naturally, he was encouraged by his fellow newspapermen to write fiction. He wrote poetry; he worked on a script for a comic opera called "Jeremiah I," of which only a fragment survives; and he began to experiment with short stories. He continued to educate himself by reading widely in fiction, science, natural history, and philosophy.

After a brief stint in the World, Dreiser went to work in the office of Howley, Haviland & Co. – a music production firm that published the popular songs of his brother, Paul Dresser, remembered today mainly as the author of the Indiana state song, "On the Banks of the Wabash." Dreiser became the editor of the company's publication, Ev'ry Month, which billed itself as "The Woman's Magazine of Literature and Popular Music." As editor, he wrote reviews, editorials, and a "Reflections"
column. In all these forms he expressed for the first time his ideas about books, social problems, art, and philosophy. His columns reflected his general reading in world literature, particularly the writing of the High Romantics and Victorians; among the authors who had a special impact on him were the naturalist thinkers, such as Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Thomas Huxley, as well as the novelists Thomas Hardy and Honoré de Balzac.

In 1897 Dreiser left Ev'ry Month and spent the next three years as a free lance writer for national magazines such as Munsey's Metropolitan and Harper's Monthly. For O. S. Marden's Success he interviewed the celebrities of his day: among others, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Marshall Field, William Dean Howells, and Philip Armour. For other magazines he wrote articles on a wide range of subjects: America's fruit growing industry, the meatpacking business in Chicago, modern art, the making of stained glass windows, and the photography of Alfred Stieglitz. He continued to experiment with poetry and fiction. His early short stories — "Nigger Jeff," "Butcher Rogaum's Door," and "The Shining Slave Makers" — reflect both urban and rural life in the last decade of the century.

In 1898 Dreiser married Sara "Jug" Osborne White, a schoolteacher from Missouri, whom he had met when he covered the 1893 Columbian Exposition as a reporter for the St. Louis Republic.
With her encouragement and that of his friend Arthur Henry, a novelist and former editor of the *Toledo Blade*, Dreiser began writing his historic first novel, *Sister Carrie*. Among other sources for the novel was the story of his sister Emma’s affair with L. A. Hopkins, a married man who had run off with funds embezzled from his Chicago employer. In the pages of what is now considered the first great urban novel in America, Dreiser mixed philosophical speculations about the nature of existence together with scenes that presented much of the gritty details of city life. As even his first reviewers understood, Dreiser at the age of twenty-nine had created in George Hurstwood one of the most memorable characters in American literature. However, the novel was rejected by several publishers as “immoral.” Dreiser later moved to New York City, where he attempted to establish himself as a novelist. He was influenced by books by authors such as William Dean Howells, Frank Norris, Charles Edward Russell, and David Graham Phillips.

Dreiser worked for the *New York World* before Frank Norris, who was working for Doubleday, helped Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* to be published – in spite of Frank Doubleday’s strong objections – in 1900. As the owners disapproved of the novel’s subject matter (the moral corruption of the heroine, Carrie Meeber), it was not promoted and therefore sold badly. But writers like Frank Norris and William Dean Howells saw it as a breakthrough in American realism, and Dreiser’s
career as a novelist was launched. Floyd Dell got to know Dreiser during this period: "Theodore Dreiser – a large, cumbersome, awkward, thoughtful, friendly person, with no small talk but with a great zest for serious conversation. A brave lover of the truth, and a rugged, stubborn and gallant fighter for it. I respected him deeply, and laughed at him - a combination which he found it hard to understand."³

Dreiser continued to work as a journalist and as well as writing for mainstream newspapers such as the Saturday Evening Post, also had work published in socialist magazines such as the New York Call. However, unlike many of his literary friends such as Floyd Dell, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Max Eastman and Jack London, he never joined the American Socialist Party.

Dreiser’s second novel, Jennie Gerhardt, was not published until 1911. With the support of the literary critic, Floyd Dell, who considered Dreiser a major writer, Sister Carrie was republished in 1912. Arnold Bennett was one of the many critics who praised the book and described it as the “best novel that has ever come out of America.” This was followed by two novels The Financier (1912) and The Titan (1914) – both of which began his trilogy about the rise of Frank Cowperwood, a power-hungry business tycoon, and are based on the life of the transportation magnate Charles T. Yerkes. These books were influenced by Lawless Wealth: The Origin of Some American Fortunes,
a book about the American Tobacco Trust, written by Charles Edward Russell. This was followed by *The Genius* (1915), a sprawling semiautobiographical chronicle of Dreiser’s numerous love affairs. His autobiographical *Dawn* (1931) is one of the most candid self-revelations by any major writer. *The Bulwark* – a sequel to *The Genius* – appeared posthumously in 1946. He completed most of *The Stoic*, the long-postponed third volume of his trilogy on Yerkes, in the weeks before his death. His other works include short stories, plays, and essays.

Dreiser was highly critical of the capitalist system:

> In my personal judgment, America as yet certainly is neither a social nor a democratic success. Its original democratic theory does not work, or has not, and a trust and a law-frightened people, to say nothing of a cowardly or suborned, and in case helpless, press, prove it. Where in any country not dominated by an autocracy has ever a people more pathetically and ridiculously slipped about afraid to voice its views on war, on freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the trusts, religion – indeed, any honest private conviction that it has? In what country can a man be thoroughly browbeaten, arrested without trial, denied the privilege of a hearing and held against the written words of the nation’s Constitution guaranteeing its citizens freedom of speech, of public gathering, of writing and publishing what they honestly feel? In what other lands less free are whole elements held in a caste condition - the Negro, the foreign born, the Indian?"
Sister Carrie sold poorly, The Financer and The Titan began the Cowperwood Trilogy, but it was An American Tragedy (1925) which brought Dreiser fame. From his early days of journalism onwards Dreiser "began to observe a certain type of crime in the United States that proved very common. It seemed to spring from the fact that almost every young person was possessed of an ingrown ambition to be somebody financially and socially." 5 Dreiser described this as a form of disease. He added that he observed "many forms of murder for money...the young ambitious lover of some poorer girl... for a more attractive girl with money or position...it was not always possible to drop the first girl. What usually stood in the way was pregnancy." 6 This information inspired An American Tragedy (1925). The book was based on the Chester Gillette and Grace Brown murder case. One critic pointed out that the novel is a “story of a man struggling against social, economic, and environmental forces – as well as forces within himself – that slowly drown him in a tide of misfortune.” 7 Its highly critical view of the American legal system made him the adopted champion of social reformers. It is argued that the novel is an example of naturalism, an extreme form of realism, and had been inspired in part by the scientific determinism of Charles Darwin and the economic determinism of Karl Marx. According to Thomas P. Riggio:

Although the novel was a critical and commercial success (in fact, Dreiser's only best-seller), he was not yet finished
battling such literary vice crusaders as the Watch and Ward Society. The novel was banned in Boston, where the sale of the book led to a trial and an appeal that dragged on in the courts for years. This, however, was now an isolated instance. Dreiser seemed finally to have won over even his most severe critics, many of whom were now applauding the book as the Great American Novel.  

The novel was dramatized on Broadway and later sold to Hollywood.

Dreiser became involved in several campaigns against injustice.

His biographer, Jerome Loving, says:

Dreiser was an obstinate man. Once he set his mind to something, nothing could change it. As an adult, he also seems never to have admitted either regret or embarrassment over his actions, no matter how ridiculous or wrong-headed some of them might seem today.... His energy would go strictly to social causes, no matter how far afield they would take him from his life in literature or how unflatteringly they might cast him in the public eye.

In 1928 Dreiser wrote, “On thinking back over the books I have written, I can only say this has been my vision of life – life with its romance and cruelty, its pity and terror, its joys and anxiety, its peace and conflict. You may not like my vision but it is the only one that I have seen and felt, therefore, it is the only one I can give you.”

Dreiser visited Russia and was unimpressed, describing his observations in the skeptical *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928). Dreiser
wrote several non-fiction books on political issues. This included *Tragic America* (1931). In a meeting in April 1931 Dreiser argued that “the time is ripe for American intellectuals to render some service to the American worker.”\(^{11}\) During the Great Depression Dreiser wrote, “I feel that the immense gulf between wealth and poverty in America and throughout the world should be narrowed. I feel the government should effect the welfare of all the people - not that of a given class.”\(^{12}\) He published *America is Worth Saving* in 1941.

Dreiser joined the American Communist Party in July 1945. He summed up his reasons for his decision: “Belief in the greatness and dignity of Man has been the guiding principle of my life and work. The logic of my life and work leads me therefore to apply for membership in the Community Party.”\(^{13}\) Jerome Loving argues:

Dreiser may have also chosen to become a formal member of the party because of the harassment he had received from the FBI and what was to become the Congressional Committee for Un-American Activities. The latter was already looking askance at the movie industry for its alleged sympathies with communism.\(^{14}\)

Dreiser moved to Hollywood in 1939 and supported himself largely by the sale of film rights of his earlier works. He died there, in 1945, at the age of seventy-four. Henry L. Mencken, a great supporter of Dreiser during his lifetime, observes:
No other American of his generation left so wide and handsome a mark upon the national letters. American writing, before and after his time, differed almost as much as biology before and after Darwin. He was a man of large originality, of profound feeling, and of unshakable courage. All of us who write are better off because he lived, worked, and hoped.\textsuperscript{15}

An interesting event in Theodore Dreiser’s life was that he was one of the few prominent persons – including Guglielmo Marconi, Milton Hershey, J. P. Morgan, and Alfred Vanderbilt – who almost sailed on the allegedly sink-proof ship, the Titanic. There has been a persistent public fascination with those who just missed becoming a casualty of that massive catastrophe. What distinguishes Dreiser, who was crossing the ocean on another boat when news about the Titanic spread, is that he wrote about it, capturing the mood in the days immediately following among travellers who avoided the fate of those aboard that famous ship.

Homesick and nearly broke, Dreiser had just spent four months rambling through Europe to write travel pieces. research his novel \textit{The Financier}, and collect material for his memoir, 1913’s \textit{A Traveler at Forty}. One of the most gripping chapters in the memoir as it was originally published is “The Voyage Home,” an account of being out at sea and receiving the news that the “smart boat” had gone down.
When they were informed of the sinking of the Titanic, Dreiser writes, “… with one accord we went to the rail and looked out into the blackness ahead”:

The terror of the sea had come swiftly and directly home to all. I am satisfied that there was not a man of all the company who heard but felt a strange sinking sensation as he thought of the endless wastes of the sea outside—its depths, the terror of drowning in the dark and cold. To think of a ship as immense as the Titanic, new and bright, sinking in endless fathoms of water. And the two thousand passengers routed like rats from their berths only to float helplessly in miles of water, praying and crying!¹⁶

Dreiser had a long career, writing a total of twenty-seven works. He wrote successfully for years as a newspaper reporter. Yet readers appreciated his stories not for their exact reporting of the events, but for their relating of personal impressions about people, places, and happenings. Dreiser grew to understand that providing his readers with realistic impressions was his strength and began to cultivate it. When critics read his early fiction, they did not at first appreciate his truthful portrayal of life in America. Only later did they applaud this in Dreiser’s writing. Critics did, however, immediately praise his sensitivity and viewed it as a powerful storytelling tool. While reviewers did not particularly like his style of writing, they did like the content. The very characteristic that disturbed the public about *Sister Carrie* when
the book first came out is the same characteristic that critics now recognize as a strength in Dreiser’s work.

Ratan Bhattacharjee makes an interesting observation:

Theodore Dreiser was a fine writer of naturalistic novels. He began with *Sister Carrie* and ends with the trilogy. In *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* he revealed the problems of human nature in a typical social environment. But in a naturalistic novel, usually man is regarded as a creature having no individual will. Dreiser showed human beings to have their own will and capacity for realisation of idealism. The material pleasures and enjoyment of life gradually bring dissatisfaction and in the *Trilogy: The Financier, The Titan and The Bulwark* [sic] Dreiser developed the Renunciation theme of the *Bhagavad Gita*.17

III

The self-concept consists of three fundamental self-representations: the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self. In other words, persons seek to achieve self-definition and self-interpretation (i.e., identity) in three fundamental ways: (a) in terms of their unique traits, (b) in terms of dyadic relationships, and (c) in terms of group membership. The individual self is achieved by differentiating from others – i.e., the individual self contains those aspects of the self-concept that differentiate the person from other persons as a unique constellation of traits and characteristics that distinguishes the individual within his or her social context. The relational self is achieved by
assimilating with significant others – i.e., the relational self contains those aspects of the self-concept that are shared with relationship partners and define the person’s role or position within significant relationships. The relational self is based on personalized bonds of attachment. Such bonds include parent-child relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships as well as specific role relationships such as teacher-student or clinician-client. The collective self is achieved by inclusion in large social groups and contrasting the group to which one belongs, i.e., the in-group, with relevant out-groups. That is, the collective self contains those aspects of the self-concept that differentiate in-group members from members of relevant out-groups. The collective self is based on impersonal bonds to others derived from common, and often symbolic, identification with a group. These bonds do not require close personal relationships among group members.

The boundaries of the social world are often marked by major forms of social separation – race, income, residence, work, region, or age. In order to survive, human beings live in social worlds which create security, foster stable attachment between individuals and things, and regulate behaviour. In other words, we create a social reality – a reality of money, property, governments, marriages, and many more.

A study of the self in relation to the social world as presented in the novels of Theodore Dresier seems to be a pragmatic, if not an
exact, critical approach as it helps us explore one of the most important themes of Dreiser’s work and its creative articulation. This study is based on Robert Nisbet’s view that:

At the centre of any given style lies what can only be called a theme, or a cluster of themes. Theme carries with it a more active, positive, and dynamic character than does the word style. Implicit in any theme is at once a question being answered, more or less, and also an ordering of experience and observation in a special focus.  

The images of society that are reflected in Dreiser’s novels are complex and unified. As Joan Rockwell rightly observes:

…fiction is not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, and also paradoxically an important element of social change. It plays a large part in the socialization of infants, in the expression of official norms such as law and religion, in the conduct of politics, and in general gives symbols and modes of life to the population, particularly in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms, values, and personal and interpersonal behavior. The implication of this is that fiction can give us two types of information about society: first, in a descriptive way, facts about the state of technology, laws, customs, social structure and institutions. Second, more subtle and less easily obtained information about values and attitudes. These last become most visible when they are brought to the surface as the themes of literature in nodal periods when great changes are taking place in basic institutions of society. Changes, for instance,
in the structure and formation of the family or of economic life – changes which produce a conflict of values which finds it expression in literature.¹⁹

Even a casual reading of Theodore Dreiser’s novels shows that the narrative focus is on the self and the social world. If one does a close reading of Dreiser’s fiction, one can gather information about values and attitudes in these times when great changes are taking place in the basic institutions of society. The focus of the thesis, therefore, is on the various conflicts as expressed in his fiction.
REFERENCES


3. Quoted in “Theodore Dreiser,” www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Jdreiser.htm


8. Quoted in http://spartacus-educational.blogspot.in/2010/08/theodore-dreiser.html


