
UNIT 1 THE LITERARY CONTEXT

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
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- 1.3 Naturalism: The European Legacy
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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will discuss the social and political situation in America at the turn of the twentieth century. The significance of Theodore Dreiser lies in the fact that he captured the inner conflicts of American society at a time when the modern America was being shaped. He also invented a new idiom to narrate the nature of this emergent reality. To fully comprehend his achievement it is necessary to know the socio-political context that produced him. Since he was influenced by European naturalism its legacy will have to be analysed briefly. The major voices in American fiction before Dreiser also merit attention. Dreiser obviously learnt many things from them. Dreiser's contribution as a novelist will have to be assessed against the prevailing traditions in American literature.

1.1 THE CHANGING AMERICA

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed major transformation in every aspect of American life. From a predominantly agrarian country America turned into a major industrial power. Large-scale urbanization changed the basic structure of American society. The population increased from 23 million in 1850 to 76 million in 1900. It was a period of massive commercial expansion. Factories sprang up in urban areas, particularly in the North which was getting heavily industrialized. Railroads that linked various parts of the country opened up new modes of transport and communication. All this meant new opportunities and possibilities. America was still the New World which attracted several migrants from outside, particularly Europe.

The civil war that happened between 1861 and 1865 was a turning point in American history. America was divided into two camps on the question of slavery. While the Northern States (Union) opposed slavery, the Southern seceded states (Confederacy) justified it. Several factors such as regional conflicts, the moral indignation aroused by those who wanted the abolition of slavery ("abolitionists"), and disagreements regarding federal control of states' rights contributed towards the civil war. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 ended slavery but the Civil War dragged on for three more years till the seceded Southern States conceded defeat. The Union victory was tinged with grief as President Lincoln was assassinated on 14 April, 1865. The Civil War has had a deep impact on the psyche of American nation. The South had to come to terms with its defeat while the country as a whole had to suffer the deaths of more Americans than in any other war. After the abolition of their slavery, the Afro-Americans entered a new phase of their history. The period between 1866 and 1877 is known as the period of Reconstruction when the South ravaged by the Civil War was brought under the federal control and steps were taken to ensure

civil rights for the blacks. However, the racial tensions continued to plague American nation.

The massive industrialization that went on throughout the 19th century altered the social structure of America completely. Clear divisions between the rich and the poor, the Whites and the Blacks, the industrialized North and the Agrarian South became visible now. The great expansion of American nation during the period between 1810 and 1865 had left a trail of violence in its wake. The Native American Indians were removed from their land forcibly, and on many occasions, exterminated. Slavery spread from Virginia to Texas deepening the racial divisions in the country. With the advance of market capitalism the household economy characteristic of an agrarian society went into decline. American psyche had to come to terms with the violence and guilt engendered by these events. It has been argued that the growth of evangelical religion was a reaction to the deep-rooted anxiety that plagued American nation during its formative period. Evangelical religion gave rise to several reform movements and also led to antislavery sentiments.

The developments in socio-political field have their impact on intellectual domain. The remarkable expansion of the public forum is reflected in the spread of the print media. The number of magazines increased from 100 in 1825 to 600 in 1850. Commenting on the growing popularity of newspapers C.F. Briggs remarked in his *Broadway Journal* in 1945 that 'nine-tenths of the population read nothing else'. By 1833 there were three times as many newspapers being published in the United States as in France or England. Through this impressive reach of the print medium a new sense of belonging was created in the reading community which comprised of workers, women, children, farmers and professionals from various fields. Issues of public interest found articulation in the powerful medium of the newspaper which now helped the people to come together and formulate their views.

The North and the South did not agree on many issues because of their separate histories and social structures. Garrison's *Liberator*, a journal which appeared first on January 1, 1831, soon became a platform for those who argued in favour of the abolition of slavery. By the 1850s the North-South divide on the question of slavery was deepening into a major conflict. The prose writings of this period such as diaries, letters and newspaper articles present the picture of a divided nation. It was during this period of American history that the myth of a lazy, decadent and barbaric South was born. As opposed to it, North was civilized, cultured, enterprising and vigorous. This stereotype of a benign North and an evil South has played a significant role in narrating the American nation. The South was identified with the Blacks. Charles Eliot Norton referred to the South as "transatlantic Africa". The Northerners saw both the White masters and Black slaves in the American South as black. The North was "progressive" while the South was "barbarous". These cultural stereotypes were reinforced during the middle part of the 19th century through historical narratives, travelogues and fictional works.

As we move from the first half of the 19th century to its second half, we find major changes in the status of writing and writers. In the next section we would briefly discuss the group of authors described as Transcendentalists. Here it may be mentioned that this group of authors who rose into prominence in the 1830s and 1840s still wrote in the shadow of English romanticism. In the early 19th century literary writing is not a fully institutionalised activity in America. Publishing houses and literary magazines which help authors to live on writing are yet to be founded on a large-scale. Of all American writers only one, James Fenimore Cooper, was able to make a living by writing prior to 1850. Authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) did not enjoy wide readership, initially. The authors were not clear whom they were addressing. Hence a Walt Whitman chooses to address everyone while an Emily Dickinson addresses none in particular.

We find a complete transformation in the cultural scene in the post-Civil War period. American authors are in demand now. Best-selling women authors such as Susan Warner and Maria Cummins have a large readership. Literary periodicals such as *Harper's Monthly*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Century* enjoy wide circulation. The mainstream literary culture that now gets defined has been described as genteel. It has its roots in the native Protestant culture. It shapes the literary sensibility of the age. Through schools and libraries it gets disseminated to a larger audience. The American classics become well-established in the minds of a large population, laying the foundation for a coherent national literary culture. This literary culture allowed writers respectability and ensured their security and survival. Authors like Mark Twain (1835-1910), William Dean Howells (1837-1920) and Henry James (1843-1916) were the products of this environment. American realism of the late 19th century is the achievement of this high culture of letters. Three of its best known texts – Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, James's *The Bostonians* and Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* were all published in *The Century* in 1884 and 1885.

Even as the values of this literary high culture were getting transmitted through various organs of the cultural establishment the processes of capitalist industrial development was transforming every aspect of American life. Its impact on the cultural life of the country can be seen in the rise of a new bunch of commercial magazines. In the late 1880s and early 1890s magazines such as *Lady's Home Journal*, *Munsey's*, *McClure's Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan* became even more popular than the earlier group of literary magazines. Since they accepted advertisements, they were cheaper and made more profits. Such magazines became a medium for verbal and visual entertainment which in turn helped the manufacturers gain access to the attention of a wide readership. Here we can see the beginning of a popular domain of culture which is different from the elitist domain of culture we found above. Both were trying to control the reading habits of the population at large, and influence their cultural values.

By the 1890s the cultural scene has become more complex. The older literary establishment has become more reactionary and stubborn. The commercial, popular culture has risen in stature and has become a viable alternative for the elitist culture. An author like Theodore Dreiser was made possible by the culture of the popular press. It was Chicago's popular newspapers which helped him establish himself as a writer. Throughout his life Dreiser was associated with the commercial, popular press as a reporter, a columnist or editor. He wrote feature articles for such popular, commercial journals as *Ainslee's*, *Demorest's*, and *Success*. Later he became managing editor of *The Delineator*, a fashion-pattern magazine. It will be shown later that Dreiser's major works were influenced by the classics of the 19th century. But we have to bear in mind the fact that his imagination and mental world were also influenced by the environment of his daily work.

1.2 THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THEODORE DREISER

In the last section we saw the political and cultural scene in America during the 19th century. In this section we shall discuss the literary context of Theodore Dreiser. We shall trace the evolution of American literature through its major phases in the 19th century, with special reference to fiction. The broad outline of American Renaissance which will emerge in this discussion will help us understand its major achievements. The search for a well-defined American identity is a recurring theme in the writings of the century. What is described as 'American Renaissance' is the emergence of a national literature which examines American experience from various points of view.

In the place of British models, American modes of thought and expression are evolved and perfected during this time.

The transcendentalists provide a good example of this trend. They re-interpreted the British Romanticism in American context. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister and Henry David Thoreau, his close associate were the major exponents of transcendental ways of thinking. They believed in the primacy of intuition and imagination. The Romantic idea of the artist as a prophetic seer is central to their concept of the world and art. For them the inspired artist is a greater source of spiritual vision than the priest or the church. They challenged the prevailing orthodoxies in religion and society. There is a strong reformist element in the idealism of their philosophy. Their assertion of intuitive understanding owes much to the German ideas of Kant and English Romantic poetry. Truth is accessible to every individual who communes with his own inner spirit. The liberating aspects of transcendentalist thinking can be seen in the renewed efforts for the abolition of slavery. In "American Scholar" Emerson declared that America should look within, and not depend on Europe for inspiration. In "Self-Reliance" Emerson declares his faith in the uniqueness of each individual. He who conforms to the given norms of the society will never create anything new. Emerson advocates non-conformism and individualism. Henry David Thoreau put into practice many of the ideas propagated by Emerson. Thoreau's *Walden* is an account of his secluded life in the words by the Walden Pond, supporting himself without any assistance from the outside world. Thoreau strongly disapproves of the materialistic values which were gaining wide currency in American society. Thoreau feels that human progress should not be measured in terms of material comforts or prosperity. He is also against excessive control of social life by the government. His essay, "Civil Disobedience" is a landmark in the American thought of the 19th century.

The achievements of the transcendentalists are primarily in non-fictional prose and lyric poetry. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) who discovered the structure and form of the modern short story is a major figure of the first half of the 19th century. His aesthetic theory stresses the idea of beauty. He believes that the beautiful has a universal appeal. According to him a sense of the Beautiful issues from the human instinct for harmonious perfection. The intensity and elevation of poetic style has an impact on the emotions of the reader. Poe's aesthetic of taste and beauty had a great influence on the French symbolists later. Here it may be noted that American writers like Hawthorne were also deeply influenced by him.

When we examine the development of the 19th century American literature we are struck by the fact that despite the general mood of optimism and the American emphasis on action and success, there is a brooding sense of agony and evil in the major writers of the 19th century. This can be seen in Hawthorne, Melville, Poe and Mark Twain. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was a friend of Emerson but was not a transcendentalist. His best-known novel, *The Scarlet Letter* tells the story of sin, and retribution. Hester who commits adultery refuses to name her accomplice, Dimmesdale, a priest, in public. The novel portrays the undercurrents of desire, guilt and remorse that torment the main characters. It has been observed that Hawthorne has portrayed a liberated woman in Hester. The novel has also been read as a moral allegory representing the conflict between good and evil. Hawthorne described his novels as romances. Making a distinction between the novel and romances. Hawthorne held that the novel aims at "a very minute fidelity; not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience", while the romance allows greater room for deviation from realistic details.

Herman Melville merits attention for his contribution to American fiction. He was born in a middle class family in New York. He worked as a sailor in several ships and undertook some adventurous journeys. All these experiences found their way into the books he wrote in 1840s. Among his best known works are *Typee* (1846), *Red Burn* (1849), *White Jacket* (1850) and *Moby Dick* (1851). He was a close friend of

Hawthorne and in Hawthorne he found the same concern with the questions of evil and retribution as he had found in Shakespeare. *Moby Dick* which is now recognised as an American classic, explores the mystery of human mind with profound insight. Ishmael's quest is for his own identity. In Ahab we have one of the most mysterious characters in American fiction. Ahab is obsessed with the white whale which he pursues with an animal-like single-mindedness. The thematic organisation of *Moby Dick* shows that Melville was trying to exorcise the Ahabian element in himself and his culture by giving it full expression. The presence of Ishmael gives it a rational perspective. Melville's fiction is notable for the menacing presence of evil it communicates. His psychological intensity makes his narratives parables on some of the basic conflicts in human life.

Mark Twain whose real name was Samuel Clemens had a varied career as an apprentice printer, river pilot, journalist, editor and publisher. He is remembered for his episodic narratives, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* which are set against the great river of Mississippi. His travelogue *The Innocents Abroad* was greatly popular. During his life he was greatly acclaimed as a public speaker and newspaper columnist. In his novels he made use of rustic speech in all its local colour. He portrayed his characters through their picturesque local dialects. His novels could be read as a theatre of varied voices that capture the essence of their ordinary lives. The great Mississippi river becomes a central symbol in his major novels, suggesting the vastness and mystique of nature. His novels have a strong undercurrent of satire as he directs his social criticism at the adult world of greed and folly.

The above-mentioned writers have substantially contributed towards defining the mainstream tradition of American fiction in the 19th century. Thoreau's *Walden*, Melville's *Moby Dick* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* have in common a deep exploratory tone that investigates the inner life of man. What American fiction gained during the 19th century was the ability to conceive of man as a complex social organism. In the concluding decades of the 19th century realism as a literary mode became popular with several writers. In fact regionalism and realism which overlap in several ways can be traced in many works of the period. In the vernacular writing of Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett and Hamlin Garland, there is consistent treatment of questions of race and class, thus highlighting the historical moment of the author. Both realism and regionalism can be seen as responses to the massive transformations that have changed the social structure of America. By the end of the 19th century, land has become commodified and agrarian values have disappeared. Large-scale migration of people from the rural to urban areas have displaced them both culturally and socially. The complex nature of the emergent reality demanded new modes of expression. In Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser there is a fascination with the city as in Charles Dickens, Feodor Dostoevsky or Emile Zola. The city becomes mysterious because of its economic, social and aesthetic organisations. In the next section we shall discuss the European legacy of realism and naturalism as a preface to Dreiser's texts.

1.3 NATURALISM: THE EUROPEAN LEGACY

In order to appreciate Theodore Dreiser's contribution to American fiction it is necessary to place him in the context of naturalism. Since it is an essentially European literary movement we shall discuss the legacy of European tradition of naturalism in this section. The word 'naturalism' has been used for several centuries to describe various writers ranging from Shakespeare and Rabelais to Byron and Shelley. This only means that the term has been used in the literary contexts to specify various phenomena. In the 18th century, naturalism signified a philosophical system that defined man in purely materialistic terms. It denied the possibility of transcending human existence to any higher metaphysical or divine realm. In the 19th

century art criticism, the word 'naturalist' meant a painter who reproduced an exact replica of natural objects on the canvas. The term entered literary criticism from the field of fine arts. It was Emile Zola who used the term for the first time in the modern sense, in the preface to the second edition of *Therese Raquin* (1867).

It is necessary to distinguish between 'naturalism' and 'realism' for a clearer understanding of these terms. Realistic fiction in the 19th century was considered distinct from romantic fiction. M.H. Abrams notes that "the realist is deliberately selective in his material and prefers the average, the commonplace, and the everyday over the rarer aspects of the contemporary scene". Hence there is a marked preference in realistic fiction for the middle and lower classes, and their struggles in life. It is pertinent to remember that 'realism' was used in the 19th century primarily to refer to a group of writers (Balzac in France, George Eliot in England and William Dean Howells in America) whose works showed some of the tendencies mentioned above. What the practitioners of realism and naturalism have in common is an unwavering faith in the capacity of the written word to represent reality. For both art is basically mimetic. Some critics like Harry Levin and L. Deffoux have argued that naturalism is an intensification of realism. While realism implies a commitment to the mimetic idea of art, naturalism has its own clear social philosophy. According to this philosophy, human actions are determined by two kinds of natural forces namely heredity and environment. Man is acted upon by social and economic forces in the family, class and society he lives in. The following comments by M.H. Abrams will help us understand the attitude of naturalists better:

Zola, and other naturalist writers, such as the Americans Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, and James Farrell, try to present their subjects with an objective scientific attitude and with elaborate documentation, often including an almost medical frankness about activities and bodily functions usually unmentioned in earlier literature... The end of the 'naturalistic' novel is usually "tragic" but not, in classical and Elizabethan tragedy, because of a heroic but losing struggle of the individual mind and will against gods, enemies and circumstance. The protagonist of the naturalist plot, a pawn to multiple compulsions, merely disintegrates, or is wiped out.

This is a broad generalisation but will help us understand the general direction in which a naturalistic novel moves. Here it may be added that 'naturalism' is a term used in the context of fictional works while 'realism' may be used to characterise whole or parts of a poem or a play.

The emergence of Naturalism has been variously traced to the impact of industrialisation on human consciousness, the effect of the newly established sciences and their empirical attitude to external reality. As we have seen above, the process of industrialisation ushered in a new social structure in the Western world. As it brought prosperity on an unprecedented scale, it also subjected millions of urban workers to subhuman existence. Naturalist writers depicted the plight of the urban working class in their fictional works. Zola's *Germinal* and Hauptmann's *Die Weber* describe scenes from workers' strike. In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* we shall come across a similar scene.

Naturalism can also be understood as a reaction to Romanticism. Naturalists investigated the objective world of phenomena and described it in minute detail based on their observations. The development of the scientific method in the 19th century seems to have influenced their world-view. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) had strongly argued that man had evolved from lower forms of animals. The naturalists were greatly influenced by the Darwinian concept of man as a creature shaped by the forces of environment and heredity. R. Chase has observed: "The protagonist of a naturalistic novel is at the mercy of circumstances rather than of himself, indeed he often seems to have no self". One of the criticisms directed against

naturalism as a literary movement is that its concept of man is highly limited as it does not recognise any metaphysical or transcendental potential in man.

Naturalism was not a single, unified movement with uniform characteristics. Each country had its own separate features with writers in the same group adhering to their own separate styles of writing. It flourished in France in the 1870s and early 1880s while it made its appearance in England in the late 1890s and lasted well into the 20th century. In America it enjoyed a long period of patronage from the late 19th century to the 1930s. In the next section we would look at American naturalism in greater detail.

Naturalism originated in France. Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert are often considered pioneers of this movement. In their choice of commonplace themes, stress on heredity and environment and objective depiction of social life, they were closer to naturalists. However, it was Emile Zola (1840-1902) who came to be identified with Naturalism. Among his close associates were Paul Alexis (1847-1901), Henry Ceard (1851-1924), Leon Hennique (1851-1935), Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) and Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). In depicting the darker side of everyday life they were reacting to the sentimentality of the Romantics. Zola was accused of immorality in his novels but he claimed his novels to be scientific studies of human society and as such beyond the question of immorality. Naturalists argued that they were natural in their approach as they were working like doctors or scientists who studied an object dispassionately. It was in the preface to *Therese Raquin* that Zola presented his views on naturalism as a literary movement. His arguments were repeated with greater emphasis on *Le Roman Experimental*. Here he views naturalism as an attempt to internalise the methodology of sciences in the study of man. He says: "The study of abstract, metaphysical man is replaced by the study of natural man, subject to physico-chemical laws and determined by the effects of his milieu". Naturalists came in for harsh criticism for their exaggerated emphasis on the banal aspects of reality. Writers like Maupassant and Huysmans moved away from the Naturalists group by the 1890s.

In England, there was no Naturalist movement. In *Mimesis*, Auerbach has argued that the mainstream literary tradition of England has a strong undercurrent of realism. The great novelists of 19th century England among whom are Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, Trollope, George Eliot, are all realists. This wide acceptance of realism seems to have prevented the emergence of a well-defined Naturalist movement in England. However, a few minor writers such as Gissing, George Moore, Morrison and Whiteing produced novels which closely followed the continental models of Zola and Flaubert. These works never won wide acclaim which seems to have dampened the interests of the readers and writers in this movement.

1.4 AMERICAN NATURALISM

In contrast to England where naturalism did not strike roots, America responded to this mode of writing favourably. This may have something to do with the massive socio-economic transformation that changed the country totally during the second half of the 19th century. Such sweeping changes did not take place in England. The victory of the North over the South in the Civil War also meant the defeat of agrarian economy by the forces of industrial capitalism. The new cities that became centres of great economic power concealed vast areas of corruption, squalor and cruelty behind their glitter. The advance of capitalism created a new social order which needed to be described in order to be grasped. Labour disputes, strikes and violence followed economic depression. For those who had migrated to the cities in search of their dreams, this meant widespread disillusionment. Thus, naturalism in American fiction is better understood as a response to the local conditions that developed in the second half of the 20th century.

In America, Naturalism held sway for a longer period. It is possible to speak of two groups of naturalist writers, one succeeding the other. The first group consisting of Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris were influential during the period from the mid-eighties to the closing years of the 19th century. The second group consists of Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), Jack London (1876-1916), John Steinbeck (1902-68), Sinclair Lewis (1885-1950), Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) and Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941). The individual writers of these two groups also have marked differences between one another. This gives American naturalism greater range than the French movement. Very often it is indistinguishable from realism. Hence American naturalism of the twentieth century has also been described as the new realism. It may also be added that outstanding poets such as Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg also contributed substantially towards the ideology of naturalism.

We have mentioned in the earlier sections that there were strong regional traditions in American fiction in the 19th century. Bret Harte portrayed the life of the Californian mining camps in his famous book, *The Luck of Roaring Camp*. Joel Chandler Harris wrote about the South in his *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, which contained stories and tales from Negro-life. Mark Twain's fiction brought alive the manners of common people he encountered in daily life. W.D. Howells, as a very influential editor, strongly rejected the tradition of romance and argued in favour of 'Truth and Sanity' in fiction. His own works are well known for their realistic portrayal of life.

Stephen Crane also subscribed to the tenets of realism. Though we have grouped him as one of the first generation naturalists, he was known as a 'veritist' in his own time. Veritism was a creed which asserted an underlying unity between aesthetic and practical life. It held that art is mimetic and great art has its base in the personal experience. His well-known novel *The Red Badge of Courage* is set against the background of American Civil War. The ironic awareness of Henry Fleming about his own cowardice even as he is being feted as a hero imparts this novel a psychological realism which is not seen in American fiction earlier. Here we also note that Crane aims at the articulation of a higher truth through his depiction of reality.

During the 19th century several slave narratives appeared in America. Though all of them do not merit attention, as a group, these narratives are strongly autobiographical and realistic. A book like *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, published in 1845, with a preface by William Lloyd Garrison, describes in minute detail the dehumanising aspects of slavery in a dispassionate tone. This book may be read as a social document on slavery in America. The relevance of this kind of slave narratives to the history of realism and naturalism needs to be underlined. An Afro-American novel such as *The House Behind the Cedars* by Charles Chestnutt (1858-1932), published in 1900 can be seen as a continuation of the tradition of Afro-American fiction which begins with slave narratives.

The above comment on Afro-American initiatives in the world of fiction is meant to underline the varied sources of realistic and naturalistic traditions for American fiction. In effect, something fundamental about American life gets articulated through these traditions. Hamlin Garland wrote in *Crumbling Idols* (1894) demanding a native literature free from all imitation and distinguished by such "quality of texture and background that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native". American naturalism was attempting to respond to this call by creating a literature that would represent America in all its complex details even as it searches for a native voice and identity.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit I have focused on the socio-political and cultural situations in America during the 19th century. Dreiser's works can only be understood against the

background of the social transformation taking place in America in the late 19th century. The impact of the civil war, the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation and the rise of a well-defined public-sphere have been discussed in this unit in detail. The discussion of Naturalism as a literary movement brings out the nature of literary response to the far-reaching changes in the social and intellectual life of the 19th century.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. What were the major changes that happened in American society during the 19th century?
2. Examine the socio-political factors that contributed towards the emergence of Naturalism as a literary movement.
3. What do you understand by the term 'American Renaissance'? Outline its major achievements.
4. Show how American literature in the 19th century is engaged in the quest for American nationhood.

1.7 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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UNIT 2 THEODORE DREISER: THE MAN AND THE WRITER

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 The Life of Theodore Dreiser
- 2.2 Dreiser's Major Works: An Overview
- 2.3 The Reception of Dreiser's Works in America
- 2.4 The Writing of *Sister Carrie*
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will provide comprehensive information on the life and works of Theodore Dreiser. The emphasis will be on the making of Dreiser's art and vision of life. His complex relationship with his parents and brothers seems to have left a mark on his vision of life. His intellectual interests were determined by the current debates in society and culture. The nature of his reception in America is of relevance as it traces the impact of his ideas on the reading public. *Sister Carrie* came to be appreciated and understood only through decades of debates. We will review his career as a novelist and also comment on his legacy. The story of writing of *Sister Carrie* will prepare us for a close reading of the novel in the next section.

2.1 THE LIFE OF THEODORE DREISER

Theodore Dreiser was born in Sullivan, Indiana, as the ninth of the ten children. Dreiser's father, John Paul Dreiser was a German immigrant who worked as a weaver. He married Sarah Schanab, daughter of a Moravian farmer. John Dreiser raised enough money by working as production manager in a mill to set up a woollen mill of his own. However, tragedy struck the family when the mill was destroyed in a fire. Reduced to penury, the family moved to Terre Haute, where Theodore was born on 27 August 1871. Faced with the task of bringing up ten children – five boys and five girls – John Dreiser found himself drifting from one job to another. They had to constantly move houses, each time to a smaller one, as they could not afford rent. The poverty of his family in the long years of childhood left a deep impression on Dreiser's mind. With father unable to find a regular job, the family lived in constant dread of destitution. Dreiser as a young boy even had to steal coal from railway yards to help the family survive the winter. Dreiser had a clear view of society from the lower end of the social spectrum, at a very young age. In 1871, the family had to split up as they found it was impossible to survive as one large group. Theodore accompanied his mother to Vincennes and then to Sullivan, Indiana.

By the time Theodore was born, his father had already been reduced to an embittered, unsuccessful man. John Dreiser was a devout and conservative Roman Catholic, who would not make any concessions in matters of religion. His children defied him as they found him despotic and ruthless. Theodore has described his father as "a morose and dour figure, forlorn and despondent", and also as a "narrow bigot". It was his father's fanaticism that drove Theodore to atheism and communism later. It was to Theodore's credit that when he portrayed his father in *Jennie Geshardt*, he kept his

bitterness in check. In later years he even came to appreciate him despite their obvious differences in attitudes to life. Theodore was a mother's boy who adored her. She was a strong woman of quiet confidence and strong will who radiated love and cheerfulness. Children became dependent on her as they got increasingly estranged from father, as years went by. Theodore was strongly attached to "the silver tether of her affection, understanding, sweetness, sacrifice". After her death in 1890, he felt lost for years like "a lone barque on a lone sea". The character of Jennie in *Jennie Gerhardt* is considered to be a portrait of his mother as a woman of understanding and sacrifice.

Dreiser's education was erratic as the family moved from town to town. He strongly resented the suffocating atmosphere of the Catholic schools he had to attend in his childhood, at his father's instance. Theodore attended Indiana University for a year, thanks to the generosity of a teacher, Miss Mildred Fielding, who had recognised his talents in high school. He was self-taught, from life and also from his readings. His brother Paul made a name for himself as a writer of popular songs and also a performer. The delinquency of the younger brother, Rome, and the rebellious behaviour of his sisters added to the miseries of the family. At the age of sixteen, Theodore left for Chicago with the six dollars his mother gave him from her hard-earned savings. There he found employment as a dish-washer in a restaurant and then in a large wholesale hardware store. An year at Indiana University at this point only sharpened his awareness of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. When he returned to Chicago in 1890, he worked as a salesman in a real estate office. With his mother's death in 1891, he became a lonely man drifting in the city of Chicago, doing low-paid jobs of various kinds. They provided him with rich material later for his career as a novelist.

In 1892, Dreiser joined the *Daily Globe*, one of the lowest ranking newspapers in Chicago, as a reporter. For the next decade, he would remain a reporter and an editor, moving from one publication to another. From the *Daily Globe*, he moved to the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* from where he set out to the East, his destination being New York, through a series of short-lived jobs in cities like Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo and Pittsburgh, on the way. In New York he was employed by Pulitzer's *World* on a temporary basis. His brother Paul who had made a name for himself in the field of musical-comedy helped him get the post of editor in *Ev'ry Month*, a new music periodical. In 1898 he married Sara White whom he had first met in 1893. This marriage was unhappy. Dreiser separated permanently from her in 1909, but never sought a divorce. In his life Dreiser carried on affairs with several women, confirming his principle that a man is primarily driven by his sexual drive. He spent the summer of 1899 in Arthur Henry's home where, at the insistent request of his friend, he began writing fiction seriously. He began writing *Sister Carrie* without any clear idea of what he was going to write about.

When Dreiser submitted his first novel to Double Day, Page & Co., it was strongly recommended for publication by Frank Norris. However the publisher Doubleday developed cold feet when his wife conveyed her distaste for it, after reading the manuscript. Finally, he brought it out, fearing a law suit, with great reluctance and did nothing to promote the book. Through the efforts of Frank Norris the book received critical attention but it was not distributed. Dreiser suffered a mental breakdown and had to be sent to a "rest camp" for treatment. After this bitter experience he did not publish a novel for more than ten years. He became an influential editor in magazine journalism, editing such popular journals as *Smith's Magazine*, the *Broadway Magazine* and the *Delienator*.

After resigning from the Butterick organisation in 1910, Dreiser turned to writing fiction full-time. In quick succession *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) and *The Financier* (1912) were published to much critical acclaim. *The Financier*, *The Titan* (1914) and *The Stoic* (1947) form a trilogy. By now, Dreiser was separated from his wife. The publication of *The Genius* (1915) established his reputation as one of the major

novelists of America. It was an autobiographical work that investigated the sources of his own creativity and the crisis it precipitated. During this period he met and fell in love with Helen Richardson, whom he would eventually marry in 1944 after the death of his first wife in 1942. *An American Tragedy* published in 1925 was a massive volume of 840 pages chronicling the life of an American boy from birth to death. The twenties were the decades of great achievements and also of frustrations. When *An American Tragedy* did not receive Pulitzer prize and also when Sinclair Lewis was chosen for the Nobel Prize in 1930, Dreiser felt deep pangs of disappointment. Now he devoted all his energy to the completion of *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic* both of which came out posthumously. He died in Hollywood, California on 28 December 1945.

2.2 DREISER'S MAJOR WORKS: AN OVERVIEW

Apart from novels, Dreiser has written stories, plays, poetry, anthropological works, a travelogue and several occasional, non-fictional pieces for periodicals. Of these the eight novels he wrote form the basis of his reputation as an American writer. These novels capture something essential about American life in the opening decades of this century. His sharp observations of the manners and mind-set of people, the portrayal of conflicts between various classes and the depiction of complications that arise out of man-woman relationships make his novels relevant even today for those interested in American society and culture. *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* have attained the status of classics in American fiction. We shall briefly review his works here so that you have a clear picture of his *oeuvre* as a writer. We shall, of course, not discuss *Sister Carrie* here as it will be extensively analysed in later units.

Jennie Gerhardt is a study in human character that Dreiser distilled from his own observations of life around him. In his sisters and mother Dreiser had found qualities of compassion, gentleness, a yielding softness and generosity which made them highly vulnerable in ordinary life. The novel is mostly based on his own family. William Gerhardt resembles his orthodox, ill-tempered father. When Jennie is seduced by Senator Brander, taking advantage of her poverty, William drives her out of the family home. Later Jennie meets Lester Kane, a rich man of great social standing, now in his mid-thirties, at the house of the Brace Bridges where she works as a maid. Lester takes an immediately liking for Jennie. Lester and Jane move to New York where, to the horror of his family and friends, they set up their home. Lester is ready to pay the price for breaking the social code of class privileges. But when, at his father's death his will threatens to disinherit him of his due share in the ancestral property, Lester deserts Jennie despite his strong feelings of guilt. Jennie not only forgives Lester but is able to grasp the dynamics of social and personal conflicts that make such decisions imperative. A dying Lester sends for her and she keeps him company knowing well that she will always be an outsider in his world. The novel is notable for the insights it provides into the subtleties of human character. Jennie rises above her personal tragedies to achieve a philosophical attitude to life as a whole, thus escaping from the disintegration of her personality. In the predatory world of commercial capitalism, she sustains the reader's faith in goodness and love.

In *Jennie Gerhardt* a remorse-stricken Lester once tells Jennie:

it isn't myself that's important in this transaction [that is, life itself] apparently; the individual doesn't count much in the situation. I don't know whether you see what I'm driving at, but all of us are more or less pawns. We're moved about like chessmen by circumstances over which we have no control.

Lester's words express a basic line of thought in Dreiser's fiction. In his trilogy which was meant to be a *Trilogy of Desire*, based on the life of Charles T. Yerkes,

Dreiser traced the inner world of a superhuman figure whose "shark-like" intensity sets him apart from other common people. The financier interested Dreiser as a character because he saw him as one of the lucky few Nature has favoured. The world of money and power intrigued Dreiser. Cowperwood is endowed with all physical and mental qualities that make him a natural leader. In the competitive world of big business what mattered was will power and ruthlessness. In the Trilogy Dreiser also wanted to prove that not even these superhuman figures could outwit nature. Nature uses them and discards them when their function is over. In the larger scheme of things all human beings turn out to be victims.

The trilogy is notable for Dreiser's use of facts in fiction. He researched his novel extensively by ransacking newspaper files, interviewing people and visiting places that figure in the narrative. The parallels between the real life of Charles Yerkes and the fictitious figure of Cowperwood are kept throughout the narrative to minute details. The social vision that makes the narrative possible is Dreiser's own contribution. He gives us insights into the manner in which the huge financial empire in the modern capitalist society works. Dreiser has said that his purpose was "to draw man as I see him - And when I get through with him he'll stand there, unidealised and uncursed for you... to take and judge according to your own lights and blindness and attitude towards life."

"The Genius" (1915) is considered another autobiographical novel where the central character is a self-portrait of Dreiser himself. It is one of his weaker novels as he failed to objectify his personal life sufficiently. Eugene Tennyson Wilt is a painter in the novel but embodies the aspirations and disillusionments of Dreiser. His search for perfect beauty leaves him perennially dissatisfied. He oscillates between peaks of creative energy and depths of depression. The first part of the novel, "Youth" resembles Dreiser's own early life. In the second book, "Struggle" we see his unhappy married life with Angela Blue. Dreiser draws heavily on his own frustrating marriage with Sallie White. Eugene's pursuit of love outside marriage complicates his personal life. He is torn between the conflicting pressures of art and fame. Eugene has a mental break-down and spends several months in an asylum before he regains mental health. After this dark period, he gets a job in an advertising agency. A meteoric rise in the world of fame and wealth follows. In the third book "Revolt" we see his infatuation for Suzanne Dale, the 18-year daughter of a friend of his employers. At the very moment when he feels he is at the height of his powers, when everything he wanted appeared within reach, things begin to go wrong. Eugene loses both his wife and lover: his wife dies in child-birth and his lover leaves him. He loses money he has invested in business. Eugene comes out of the illusory world he lives in, and returns to his art in a mood of philosophic open-mindedness, once again Dreiser sees the individual's heroic struggles come to nothing, in a world where life is regulated according to the mysterious rules of nature. "The Genius" is not a fully accomplished piece of art as it suffers from several structural flaws. Still it carries the stamp of Dreiser's social vision.

An American Tragedy (1925) is still rated as one of the best American novels to be written in the 20th century. The novel is based on a real life incident in which a young man named Chester Gillette drowns his pregnant lover, Grace Brown as he found her a barrier to his progress in the world. From his years in the newspaper office, Dreiser had heard of several such incidents. Dreiser took almost three years to write the novel. He traced the life of Clyde Griffith, from birth to death in minute detail. The novel, divided into three parts, is a voluminous 830 pages. It was not just a fictionalised version of a crime, but a detailed sociological investigation of the seamy side of the American dream. Dreiser had visited every locale associated with the original crime and even gained entry to the death row in the jail disguised as a journalist to reproduce in graphic detail the environment of the story. As a boy, Clyde wanted to escape desperately from the squalor of his surroundings which was made even more unbearable by the religious orthodoxy of his parents. While drifting from one low-paid job to the other he became aware of the gulf between the Christian

mission of his parents and the glittering world of luxury outside. In Chicago he becomes acutely aware of his low social status. His secret affair with Roberta Alden results in her pregnancy. Meanwhile, he has become infatuated with Sandra Finchley, who moves in the affluent sections of the society due to her upper class origin. Sandra wakes him up to the possibilities of upper class life. Now he finds Roberta an obstacle on his path to the dream world of luxury and power. Dreiser's treatment of the crime is sensitive to the sociological and psychological aspects of the event. The social environment that has shaped Clyde leaves him very little option. When Roberta drowns in the lake, Clyde makes a vain attempt to convince himself that she has died in an accident in which he has no part. The third part of the book deals with the capture, trial and execution of Clyde Griffith. The conflict between the material and the spiritual and the gulf between the personal aspirations and the social constraints have never been demonstrated earlier in an American novel with such telling effect. Clyde Griffith's tragedy becomes an 'American' tragedy because it brings out the moral failures of America as a nation and a society.

The Bulwark (1946), the last novel Dreiser completed, is about Solon Barnes, a Quaker. Dreiser's interest in Quakerism was largely due its innate idealism in a grossly materialistic society. Such idealist attitudes are not easy to sustain in the material world of temptations. Solon Barnes is constantly tormented by guilt even as he grows rich in a world where austerity and sacrifice have no place. The transactions in which he makes huge profits cause him mental agony as he has no will to cut himself off from such a world. His attempt to raise his children in an insular world untouched by the temptation of wealth and luxury ends in disaster. In tracing the varied careers of Solon's five children, Dreiser demonstrates once again that it is the social environment combined with the innate "chemisms" of an individual that determines his course of life. While in *An American Tragedy* Dreiser emphasised the role of childhood in the shaping of one's personality here he seems to suggest that the influence of home environment is not crucial. Nature finally regulates all changes in individual and society.

2.3 THE RECEPTION OF DREISER'S WORKS IN AMERICA

It was with the publication of *An American Tragedy* that Dreiser became a household name in America. When he wrote his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, he was unsure of its reception. When it was rejected by Harper and Brothers, he gave it to Doubleday, Page and Company. Frank Doubleday asked the young novelist Frank Norris, a reader for the firm, to comment on the book. He was greatly impressed by the novel and strongly recommended its publication. However, on reading the proof, Mrs. Doubleday, who was a social worker, found the book immoral and unworthy of publication. When the firm's attempt to stop its publication failed, they refused to circulate and promote the book. Of the 1008 copies printed, only 465 copies were sold despite favourable reviews by many critics. However, when the book was brought out in England by Heinemann, 1500 copies were sold out in no time. In 1907, at the instance of Dreiser, the firm of B.W. Dodge reissued *Sister Carrie*, to an enthusiastic reception. We shall have more to say on the factors that contributed towards the divided opinion on *Sister Carrie*. Here it is to be noted that the initial resistance to its reception was due to the novelty of its subject matter and the naturalism of its narrative style.

Jennie Gerhardt and the first two novels of *A Trilogy of Desire* were acclaimed by critics and they established Dreiser as one of the major American novelists. The publication of *The Titan* has an eventful history. Harper's withdrew it from publication after printing it. Dreiser could have invoked the contract and asked them to bring it out, but he wanted a better publisher who would not resort to censoring the

book. After being refused by some of the most prestigious publishers of America, the book was finally published by John Lane and Company. Its publication, however, evoked no protest.

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The "*Genius*", Dreiser's autobiographical novel dealing with the artist's quest, was welcomed by critics who also warned in their reviews that the book might not find favour with the conservative sections of the readership. While some reviewers compared Dreiser to Dostoevski and Tolstoy, some others denounced the novel as immoral. After a full year of its publication, in 1916, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice accused the book of obscenity and blasphemy. The book was removed from most book stores in Cincinnati and in New York the publisher withdrew the book temporarily. What followed was a long drawn-out struggle against the blatant censor of a literary publication which culminated in a court case. A panel of five judges, despite 478 signatures from leading American writers in support of the book, refused to grant permission for the re-issue of the book. The book was finally republished five years later by Horace Liveright. This incident alerted American intellectuals to the real danger of state intervention in the domain of writing. The question of writer's freedom was debated in public extensively and helped mobilise opinion against suppression of literary works.

It was mentioned above that Dreiser established himself as a major American novelist with the publication of *An American Tragedy*. The reception of *An American Tragedy* also shows how much America has changed between 1900 and 1925. While *Sister Carrie* and *The "Genius"* faced censor and suppression, *An American Tragedy* was greeted with unanimous acclaim. H.G. Wells described the book as "one of the very greatest novels of the century". J.W. Krutch termed it "the great American novel of our generation". Initially, the book was banned in Boston but this time the verdict of the readers was overwhelmingly in favour of Dreiser. Seven editions came out within a year. The dramatised version was also a great success. Dreiser was paid \$90,000 by Paramount's Famous Players for granting them the rights to make a film version of the book. Dreiser now was a national figure whose comments on any issue were eagerly reported by the press. Publishers were eager to bring out anything he wrote. And in the ensuing years a series of books – poems, memoirs, travelogue, commentary – were published. However, he was greatly disappointed when *An American Tragedy* was not given the Pulitzer Prize for fiction that year. The Swedish Akademy also ignored his claims as a pioneer of naturalism in America when they gave the Nobel Prize to Sinclair Lewis in 1930.

After the death of Dreiser his reputation has only grown. His integrity and compassion as a writer have been recognised. He is one of the few American novelists to expand a clear philosophy of life through his fiction. He is the great narrator of the urban civilization of America. His compassion for the downtrodden has also been recognised as a major factor in his reputation as a novelist.

2.4 THE WRITING OF *SISTER CARRIE*

Since we are making a detailed study of *Sister Carrie* in the coming three sections, it would be instructive to know about its conception and execution. What were the factors that prompted the writing of the book? Dreiser came from an immigrant, working class background and had very little formal education. His formidable talent as a narrator could draw upon the resources of his first hand experience in the streets where he had seen hard days. What makes *Sister Carrie* a compelling narrative is his defiance of prevailing literary tradition which can only be described as "genteel". In an interview given in 1907, Dreiser told Otis Notman:

Well, the critics have not really understood what I was trying to do. Here is a book close to life. It is intended not as a piece of literary craftsmanship, but

as a picture of conditions done as simply and effectively as the English language will permit. To sit up and criticise me for saying 'vest', instead of 'waistcoat', to talk about my splitting the infinitive and using vulgar commonplaces here and there, when the tragedy of a man's life is being displayed, is silly. (Donald Piza, ed., 1970: 475).

Stuart Sherman in an essay in the *Nation*, in 1915 commented that Dreiser's German background prevented him from understanding the finer aspects of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Dreiser was well aware of the compulsions of the genteel tradition in American literature but deviated from its demands under the pressure of his accumulated experience. As an immigrant's son who had lived in abysmal poverty, Dreiser could see the gulf between the mainstream tradition in American fiction and American reality.

Some of the central episodes in *Sister Carrie* were taken from his personal life. One of Dreiser's sisters had been supported in Chicago by an architect and had then been attracted by the manager of a well-known eating and drinking establishment. By the time she discovered that he was married, their affair had progressed to a level where he was ready to elope with her. He stole fifteen thousand dollars from his employers and then returned most of the money after being stricken with remorse. He, along with Dreiser's sister, settled in New York under an assumed name. It is obvious that Dreiser altered the details to lessen the harshness of reality he had witnessed. When *Sister Carrie* was charged with immorality Dreiser could see that his critics lived in an insular world of make-believe. He commented in a piece titled "True Art Speaks Plainly" published in *Booklover's Magazine*:

Immoral! Immoral! Under this cloak hide the vices of wealth as well as the vast unspoken blackness of poverty and ignorance; and between them must walk the little novelist, choosing neither truth nor beauty, but some half-conceived phase of life that bears no honest relationship to either the whole of nature or to man... The extent of all reality is the realm of the author's pen, and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not. (Donald Pizer, ed., p.474).

Dreiser had lived through the scorn and humiliation heaped on his family when his sisters failed to conform to public morality.

It was at the age of sixteen that Dreiser came to Chicago first. F.O. Matthiessen has observed that "in her excited discovery of Chicago, Carrie is essentially Dreiser himself". It was impossible to miss the social disparity between the rich and the poor in the teeming city. Dreiser was able to see that poverty is a form of invisible violence that worked through deprivation, exclusion and rejection. In all his novels he dramatised the conflict between the affluent and the downtrodden. Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt and Clyde Griffiths – all of them are victims of the unequal social structure which reduce them to desperate course of action. At Indiana University, Dreiser had experienced the same exclusion in many ways. This only confirmed his conviction that all modern American institutions have internalised the logic of social inequality.

The field of journalism exposed Dreiser further to the darker sides of American society. It is significant that during his early life, Dreiser mostly worked in small time newspapers and magazines which had only local circulation. This sphere of popular culture had a great influence on Dreiser's mind and art. The newspapers he worked for were careful not to offend the rich and the powerful. While working at the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, his editor asked him not to touch on labour problems. He added: "We don't touch on scandals in high life. The big steel men here just about own the place, so we can't... We have to be mighty careful what we say."

While at Indiana University, Dreiser read Darwin and Huxley. At a very crucial stage in his life, he was guided by his reading of Herbert Spencer. He has written:

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At this time [i.e. around 1893] I had the good fortune to discover Howley and Tyndall and Herbert Spencer, whose introductory volume to his *Synthetic Philosophy (First Principles)* quite blew me intellectually to bits. Hitherto, until I had read Huxley, I had some lingering filaments of Catholicism trailing about me, faith in the existence of Christ, the soundness of his moral and sociologic deductions, the brotherhood of man. But on reading *Science and Hebrew Tradition* and *Science and Christian Tradition*, and finding both Old and New Testaments to be not compendiums of revealed truth but mere records of religious experiences, and very erroneous at that, and then taking up *First Principles* and discovering that all I deemed substantial... all questioned and dissolved into other and less understandable things, I was completely thrown down in my conceptions or no-conceptions of life. (Dreiser, *A Book About Myself*, p.70).

This intellectual transformation is reflected in the social vision projected by *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser, in late 1890s, is torn between conventional moral philosophy and a scientific, rational philosophy about man's evolutionary nature. In the eighth chapter of the novel Dreiser discusses the problem of choices Carrie faces, in philosophical terms. Dreiser uses fiction as a medium for philosophical speculation about man's role in society and the impact of environment on man.

The first serious advice Dreiser received regarding writing was from H.B. Wandell while Dreiser was working at *Republic*. Wandell introduced Balzac to Dreiser, and also told him: "Write it strong, clear, definite, and remember Zola and Balzac". He read Hardy, Tolstoy and Zola besides Balzac. On his way to New York he had met a young editor in Toledo named Arthur Henry, who, like Dreiser, had literary ambitions. Dreiser had thought of becoming a playwright but it was Arthur Henry who suggested that he should try fiction. When Dreiser settled down in New York, Arthur Henry invited him to come and stay in his house if he needed solitude to write a novel.

Finally Dreiser and Sallie went to Ohio to spend the summer of 1899 with the Henrys. Under Henry's constant prodding, Dreiser wrote a few short stories which were well received. Henry had started work on his first novel and wanted Dreiser to attempt something similar. Thus, at the age of twenty eight, in September 1899, Dreiser wrote on a yellow sheet of paper the words "Sister Carrie", which turned out to be a pioneering work in literary naturalism.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit was meant to familiarise you with the life and works of Dreiser. An outline of his life and an over-view of his works will help you notice the shaping influences on Dreiser's career. He was a product of the American milieu at the turn of the 20th century and a pioneer of the realistic/naturalistic tradition in American fiction. In recounting the nature of resistance his early fictional works met with, we underline the originality of Dreiser's views. It took American society more than twenty five years to recognise and accept him as a major writer. The writing of *Sister Carrie* which marked a turning point in American fiction results from an intellectual breakthrough on Dreiser's part. The nature of these intellectual currents will become more clear in the coming units.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. Do you consider the immigrant, working class background of Dreiser of crucial significance to the development of Dreiser as an artist? Give your reasons.

2. What are some of the common themes that recur in the novels of Dreiser?
3. Give an account of Dreiser's reception in America. What were the major objections raised against his novels?
4. Discuss the intellectual currents in the late 19th century that shaped the literary sensibility of Dreiser.

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Aaron, Daniel, *Writers on the Left*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961.

Gerber, Philip L., *Theodore Dreiser* (Twayne's U.S. Authors Series), New York: Twayne, 1964.

Dreiser, Helen, *My Life with Dreiser*, Cleveland: World, 1951.

Lingman, Richard, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907*, New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1986.

Elias, Robert H., *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949.

Hoffman, Frederick J., *The Twenties*, New York: Viking, 1955.

Matthiessen, F.O., *Theodore Dreiser*, New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951.

UNIT 3 *SISTER CARRIE*: A CRITICAL SUMMARY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Chapters 1 to 9 of *Sister Carrie*
- 3.2 Chapters 10 to 19
- 3.3 Chapters 20 to 28
- 3.4 Chapters 29 to 38
- 3.5 Chapters 39 to 47
- 3.6 The Chronology of *Sister Carrie*
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 Suggestion for Further Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

You will have to closely read the text of *Sister Carrie* more than once to master its thematic and stylistic intricacies. This unit is meant to guide you in the close reading. It will emphasise the progression of the narrative through various stages. The multiple levels of action and their ideological implications will be stressed. By the end of the unit you should be able to grasp the organisation of the plot and its finer points of characterisation, description, dramatisation, elaboration and focalisation. All the references to the page numbers in the text are to the Signet Classic edition of *Sister Carrie* published by the New American Library.

3.1 CHAPTERS 1 TO 9 OF *SISTER CARRIE*

The opening paragraph firmly establishes the time and place of the narrative. Caroline Meeber is leaving for Chicago in search of better prospects in life. She is 18 years old, intelligent but timid, "full of the illusions of ignorance and youth". It is August, 1889. Dreiser follows his protagonist closely and documents both her inner and outer worlds. But the emphasis is on the details of the outer world which now start piling up, as Caroline begins her journey. The city's possible effect on a novice like Carrie could be benign or disastrous because the city 'has its cunning viles'. On board the train, Chas H. Drouet, a travelling salesman makes her acquaintance. With ironical straight forwardness, Dreiser introduces this character with the words: "Lest this order of individual should permanently pass, let me put down some of the most striking characteristics of his most successful manner and method" (p.10). It is obvious that Dreiser is presenting a social type from the newly emergent urban society which believes more in appearances than meaningful existence. 'The philosophy of clothes' (p.10) is a recurring metaphor in the novel.

In her sister's flat in Chicago Carrie feels the 'drag of a lean and narrow life', mired in poverty and conservation. She realises the urgent need to secure employment. The very next day she goes round the busy commercial region of the city looking for a job only to feel intimidated by the vastness and complexity of Chicago city.

Carrie gets employed in a shoe factory for four and a half dollars a week. Her work was monotonous and tiresome but she had no choice. In the fourth chapter Dreiser gives us a glimpse of the human assembly line that functioned like machines under the most trying environment, in the manufacturing industries. The fifth chapter that

follows provides a complete contrast in that it takes us into the upper class world of Hurstwood and Drouet. When Drouet makes a casual mention of Carrie ("I struck a little peach coming in on the train tonight") in his conversation with Hurstwood, we are being prepared by the novelist for the inevitable tragedy that will befall Carrie in Chicago. There is nothing in the novel at this stage that suggests that Carrie will emerge a survivor in the predatory culture of the city. In her sister's flat Carrie is aware of her isolation and her own incompatibility with the views of Hanson and Minnie. In his characteristic manner Dreiser comments on Carrie's culture shock in the alien environment of the metropolis: "Transplantation is not always successful in the matter of flowers or maidens". With no warm clothes, she was worried about the approaching winter. She fell ill and lost her job at the shoe factory as she could not attend her work for three days.

Her sister is not in a position to retain her if she cannot find another job. During this period of uncertainty, Carrie runs into Drouet in a Chicago street. He treats her to an expensive lunch in a fashionable restaurant and persuades her to accept a gift of twenty dollars. She has no choice but to move in the direction in which Drouet leads her. In a reflective passage on the power of money (at the beginning of the seventh chapter,) Dreiser notes that Carrie had no clear understanding of the power of money. She is incapable of perceiving the complications that would come in the wake of such a gift. She cannot see it as a bait used by Drouet to trap her. Indeed, her view of Drouet at this stage admits of no criticism of his moral character. Dreiser also makes it clear that Drouet cannot be termed a villain. He says: "he was vain, he was boastful, he was deluded by fine clothes as any silly-headed girl" (p.64). In his pursuit of pleasure he is just obeying the dictates of his inborn nature. Having seen the glitter and pomp of Chicago, Carrie is not in a frame of mind to return to the provisional life of Columbia city. Carrie's mind is in a state of agitation and indecision. When Drouet suggests that she move into a room of her own and leave her sister's flat, she is forced to accept it by the compulsion of her circumstances. Carrie leaves a note for her sister before walking out of the flat to strike out on her own in the metropolis of Chicago.

Now Carrie is sucked into the swirl of Chicago life. The seduction of Carrie by Drouet is not an elaborate affair. Dreiser comments: "Carrie had no excellent home principles fixed upon her. If she had, she would have been more consciously distressed" (pp. 78-79). Now Drouet has taken complete control of her life. The only distressing note is sounded by the description of a nightmare that occurs to Minnie. In the dream Minnie sees Carrie descending into a deep coal-pit in an old basket tied by a worn-out rope.

Drouet even introduces Carrie to Hurstwood. Since Hurstwood is going to be the third main character in the novel Dreiser spends the whole chapter 9 detailing his background and character. His family life was far from happy. While he was affluent and lived in comfort he was not devoted to wife. Mrs. Hurstwood was vain, ambitious and insensitive. There was an undercurrent of tension in their married life which constantly smouldered in their verbal exchanges, without really becoming an open confrontation. Dreiser has this to say on their loveless life: "such an atmosphere could hardly come under the category of home life. It ran along by force of habit, by force of conventional opinion. With the lapse of time it must necessarily become dryer and dryer - must eventually be tinder, easily lighted and destroyed" (p.89).

3.2 CHAPTERS 10 TO 19

Carrie's character is being delineated further in the chapters that follow. She is shrewd enough to realise that sooner or later her relationship with Drouet will have to end. He is evasive when she mentions marriage. This only confirms her resolve to think ahead. Once she sees the girls from the shoe factory on the road. This reminds

her of what is in store for her if Drouet's protection is not available to her. It is at this point that Hurstwood, a friend of Drouet, "more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways" walks into the life of Carrie. He goes out of the way to please her. He is more successful and affluent than Drouet. When they indulge in a game of euchre, Hurstwood sees to it that Carrie wins the money. Needless to add, Carrie is pleased with the attention showered on her.

Carrie is a quick learner. From Drouet's occasional comments she gathers what pleases him and what constitutes fashionable manners. Though Carrie is not stunningly beautiful, Hurstwood finds her charming and he is infatuated with her. When Hurstwood invites Drouet and Carrie to watch a play in his company, she feels elated. In the expensive box in the theatre, in the company of the elite of the society, Carrie feels thankful to Hurstwood. Dreiser shows how Carrie's attention is slowly shifting from Drouet to Hurstwood: "She instinctively felt that he was stronger and higher, and yet withal so simple. By the end of the third act she was sure that Drouet was only a kindly soul, but otherwise defective. He sank every moment in her estimation by the strong comparison" (p. 108). Drouet is not intelligent enough to notice that in his very presence, Carrie is being wooed and won by his own friend.

Mr. Hurstwood's relations with his wife were coming under greater stress. The mutual antagonism between them increased as Hurstwood began to show greater irritability with her. Meanwhile, Carrie, under the influence of her neighbour and friend, Mrs. Hale, sets her eyes even higher in the social ladder. This makes her restless with desire and anxiety. When Hurstwood pays her a visit in Drouet's absence, they feel drawn to each other even more. While describing their meeting, Dreiser comments: "When the distraction of the tongue is removed, the heart listens" (p. 115). When he drives away from her house, Hurstwood tells himself: "She likes me all right; that I know" (p. 117). The nature of this attraction is analysed by Dreiser in the thirteenth chapter. What seems to have caught his attention was her innocence and vulnerability: "She came fresh from the air of the village, the light of the country still in her eye. Here was neither guile nor rapacity... She was too full of wonder and desire to be greedy... Hurstwood felt the bloom and the youth. He picked her as he would the fresh fruit of a tree" (pp. 119-120). His irresistible attraction towards Carrie has an element of mystery about it. Dreiser would attribute it to nature and its designs. When Hurstwood declared his love to Carrie and asked her to reciprocate, he did not know that he was entering a turbulent period of his life. He had a secure job and an undisturbed home life, despite his increasing differences with his wife. He behaves like a careless youth when throws caution to wind in making his affection for Carrie public. At the end of the fourteenth chapter, there is an interesting detail that should be noted. Hurstwood, Drouet and Carrie are coming out of the theatre when a poor man in the street begs for the price of a bed. The gaunt-faced man of about thirty looked "the picture of privation and wretchedness". Drouet not only notices him but hands over a dime, while Hurstwood scarcely notices the incident. This scene becomes significant in the light of what happens to Hurstwood later in the novel. Dreiser is a conscious artist who plots his narrative carefully. The technique of omniscient narrator allows Dreiser to comment freely on the action of the characters. The social dimension of the action becomes apparent from these comments. We shall have more to say on this when we discuss the language and style of Dreiser.

Hurstwood was moving deeper into a domestic crisis as he had begun neglecting his family. His shrewish wife had become more demanding and she was eager to be seen moving in the fashionable circles. Hurstwood was under the impression that his duplicity would never be discovered. He wrote to Carrie everyday. Carrie was now more confused than ever. She wanted pleasure and position but she was not sure of her own course of action. The sight of poorly clad girls reminded her of the fate that would befall her, once she was outside the security of her lovers. Dreiser comments: "Her sympathies were ever with that underworld of toil from which she had so recently sprung, and which she best understood" (p. 140). She was physically more

mature and self-assured. She told Hurstwood that she would like to move out of Chicago if she married him. She was willing to elope with him even if it meant a sudden journey to an unknown destination.

In Dreiser's scheme of things, chance plays an important role. A friend of Drouet asked him to suggest the name of some young lady who could participate in some theatricals he was organising. It struck Drouet that Carrie could do that role if she tried. Carrie had some innate taste for imitation. She of her vanity led her to believe that given a chance, she could excel in theatre. Here we see Carrie sitting on a rocking chair by the window, lost in reveries. The image of the rocking chair recurs in the novel. In fact, the novel ends with this very image of Carrie sitting in a rocking chair, dreaming alone. Carrie is given the role of Laura in Augustin Daly's *Under the Gas Light*. In the rehearsals, she did her role so well that everyone praised her performance. On the day of the show both Drouet and Hurstwood sat in the audience watching her perform. She appeared nervous to begin with but recovered in the course of the play to win the applause of the audience. As the play progressed, she emerged as a real actress. Drouet was surprised to discover this new potential in her. Hurstwood felt elated and was determined to pursue his love even more vehemently. His state of mind is described in these words: "He walked away from the drummer and his prize at parting feeling as if he could slay him and not regret" (p. 182). Dreiser uses the episode of Carrie's performance in the amateur theatre to focus on the complex nature of the emotional relationships that are unfolding. Carrie's performance itself brings out something essential about her "pathos" and her "sympathetic, impressionable nature" (p. 484). Hurstwood's passion for Carrie now reaches a flash-point where he is ready to forsake his own family for her. At the same time, Carrie's affection for him cannot be described as blind passion. She is still in search of something she is only vaguely aware of. It is this sense of groping in the dark that makes her character both convincing and enigmatic.

3.3 CHAPTERS 20 TO 28

In Dreiser's agreement with Doubleday, the first publisher of *Sister Carrie*, the title of the novel appears as "The Flesh and the Spirit". At a deeper level, the novel may be read as an allegory where the forces of eros or desire overwhelm conscience or moral sense. But such a reading will not justice to the complexity of Dreiser's characterisation. The struggle between flesh and spirit is not seen as a conflict between good and evil. As mentioned above, Carrie's sense of discontentment is not seen in moral terms. Similarly Hurstwood's passion is not considered immoral. In his epilogue to the novel Dreiser in fact comments: "Not evil but that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason". In the middle chapters of the novel, the focus is on Hurstwood. Both the chapters 20 and 21 are titled: "The Lure of the Spirit: The Flesh in Pursuit". They are largely concerned with the complications that come to the surface out of the entangled relationships between Carrie, Hurstwood and Dreiser. Dreiser is alerted to the increased frequency of Hurstwood's visits to Carrie's house in his absence. When Hurstwood tells Carrie that he cannot wait any longer her answer is, "When will we be married?" By now Hurstwood's wife has come to know about his affair. She confronts him with a direct question: "So you stay here and trifle around with someone-else?" When Hurstwood storms out of his house that morning he knows that his marital life is in crisis. Meanwhile Drouet confronts Carrie with the evidence of her interest in Hurstwood. When he informs her that he is a married man, she feels cheated. In the bitter, acrimonious exchange that follows she holds Drouet responsible for her present situation. Carrie knows that she has nowhere to go if she leaves the sanctuary provided by Drouet.

The turning point in the life of Hurstwood which is also a high point of drama in the novel comes in the 27th chapter. Hurstwood is in a state of panic. His own family has

shut him out of the house. He is in fear of losing Carrie who has stopped writing to him. Dreiser says: "His whole nature was vigorously and powerfully shaken up, and he was finding what limits the mind has to endurance" (p. 223). He spends his nights at Palmer House, as he is no more welcome at home. He is desperately waiting for a letter from Carrie. He receives a legal notice from his wife threatening to sue him for divorce and alimony.

After Drouet walked out of her flat in anger Carrie brooded on her present and future. The option of marrying Hurstwood was now closed. She still felt that she could count on Drouet for help. She made no attempt to contact him or Hurstwood. After her encouraging performance on the stage, she felt that her potential as an actress could now be given a trial. She went round many theatres in Chicago, but received no positive offer. Dreiser describes her state of mind in these words: "Evidently she would be facing the world in the same old way within a day or two. Her clothes would get poor. She put her two hands together in her customary expressing way and pressed her fingers. Large tears gathered in her eyes and broke hot across her cheeks. She was alone, very much alone" (p.237).

The scene now shifts to Hurstwood who sees Drouet at the Palmer House and concludes that he is estranged from Carrie. He calls on Carrie but discovers that she has gone to the theatre. He spends the evening drinking at the club. When he goes back to office at the closing hour to see whether everything is safely closed up for the night, he finds that the daytime cashier has forgotten to lock the safe, a thing that has not happened before. He looks in casually and sees bundles of notes. He counts the bundles and sees that there are more than ten thousand dollars. The temptation to take the money and begin a new life with Carrie strikes him suddenly. He remembers that all his property would go to his wife in the event of a divorce, which now looked certain. The desire to commit theft is forced on him by the circumstances. He takes the money but then wants to put it back. He pushes the door of the safe in excitement when it clicks shut. Here Dreiser makes it clear that behind all moral dilemmas is the human instinct for survival. As he puts it: "Men are still led by instinct before they are regulated by knowledge. It is instinct which recalls the criminal – it is instinct which gives the criminal his feeling of danger, his fear of wrong" (p.245). Once Hurstwood knows that he has taken the money and cannot put it back, he acts fast. He goes to Carrie and asks her to accompany him on the pretext that Mr. Drouet is hurt and is in the hospital. Only on the train to Detroit does Hurstwood inform Carrie that they are on their way to Canada. Carrie sees that once again she has been cheated and trapped in a situation from where she cannot escape easily. She kept repeating "I'll not have anything to do with you", knowing fully well that her options are limited. She feels better when Hurstwood promises to let her come back if she wants to do so. By noon they are in Detroit and soon board the train to Montreal. Hurstwood knows that the police would be on his track but, once he is in Canada it would take some time for them to catch up with him. He is nervous, but tries to appear calm and composed.

These chapters focus on the basic conflicts Dreiser is trying to discuss in the novel. The society he portrays is one where there are no moral standards available. As F.O. Matthiessen says, "it is a society in which there are no real equals, and no equilibrium, but only people moving *up* and *down*" (Donald Pizer, ed., 1970: 487). Dreiser clearly suggests that his characters are pawns in a larger game, the rules of which are not set by them.

3.4 CHAPTERS 29 TO 38

Structurally, *Sister Carrie* can be divided into two parts: the first part takes place in Chicago while the second part is set in New York. With Chapter 29, we leave Chicago behind. Carrie does not know about the theft committed by Hurstwood. When they check into a hotel in Montreal, Hurstwood is worried about the

consequences of his crime. When he meets an acquaintance in the lobby of the hotel, the whole conversation proves a trial for him. Soon he discovers that his movements are being watched by a detective. Later, the detective knocks at his door and enquires whether he is going to send back the money. Now Hurstwood understands that this would be his last chance to escape criminal proceedings against him. He writes a letter to Fitzgerald and Moy, his employer, explaining the circumstances under which he acted in this manner and conveys his regrets. He pays back 9500 dollars, keeping 1300 dollars for his own use. Then he moves to New York, with Carrie.

The opening sentence of the 30th chapter, "The Kingdom of Greatness: The Pilgrim Adream" sets the tone for the long struggle Hurstwood and Carrie have to face in Chicago: "Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York" (p.273). Hurstwood has to begin from the scratch. In Montreal he had got himself formally married to Carrie. In New York, he rents a flat and begins looking for a business opportunity. He becomes a partner in a bar which fetches him about 100 dollars a month. Life is not luxurious and comfortable as Carrie has become accustomed to, in Chicago. Carrie has to curtail her purchase of clothes and entertainment. Hurstwood is now stricken by remorse and knows that he will never know the kind of luxury and security he has known in Chicago. He is afraid that he would run into some of his old acquaintances from the Chicago days.

Carrie gets used to the environment of New York quite fast. Dreiser notes that "being of a passive and receptive rather than an active and aggressive nature", Carrie accepts her altered situation without any complaints. Hurstwood now earns more from business. Carrie behaves like an ideal house-wife, never making excessive demands on him. He also appears to take her for granted. The fact is that Carrie never loves him deeply or passionately. She makes the acquaintance of the Vances who occupy the neighbouring flat. She also goes out occasionally with Mrs. Vance. A walk along the Broadway through the fashionable crowds makes her aware of her own inferior status in life. A visit to the Broadway makes her moody and dissatisfied. Dreiser comments: "Such a crush of finery and folly she had never seen. It clinched her convictions concerning her state. She had not lived, could not lay claim to having lived, until something of this had come into her own life" (p.291). A dinner in an expensive restaurant and a visit to a theatre in the company of the Vances and their friends leave Carrie even more dissatisfied with her own state of things. She wants to be rich and famous. She can see that Hurstwood is changing for the worse. He has become ill-tempered and brooding. His profits have decreased. Carrie's only friends, the Vances move out around this time. When Hurstwood decides to rent a new house which has less number of rooms, Carrie becomes even more distraught. Dreiser describes her state of mind in these words: "She began to feel that she had made a mistake. Incidentally, she also began to recall the fact that he had practically forced her to flee with him" (p.309).

The owner of the building where the saloon partly owned by Hurstwood functioned decides to sell his property, and the new owner is not willing to renew the lease. This means the end of Hurstwood's business. It is almost four years now since Carrie and Hurstwood settled down in New York. Carrie knows that her future is uncertain. Hurstwood who knows of the imminent termination of his business at Warren Street saloon, takes to hunting for a job. He has become more gloomy and Carrie is now deeply worried about her survival in the city of New York. His daily round of New York streets brings him no cheer. At the age of forty-three, having been a prosperous manager once, it is not easy for him to stoop to the level of being a clerk or a bartender, the common jobs available. He spends all his spare time reading newspapers.

It is humiliating for Hurstwood to seek the job of a salesman, but he goes through it and is politely denied the job. He wanders in the streets of New York aimlessly. A chance meeting with one of the old Chicago acquaintances proves an ordeal because he does not want to remember his past. Dreiser meticulously describes the decline

and fall of Hurstwood. He becomes indifferent to his own appearance and insensitive to the demands of Carrie. Since his savings are limited, he becomes cautious with money and, in the process, hurts each other's self-respect, through petty remarks. Carrie could see that he has no strength left to build a career or begin a new life of his own. When she decides to sleep alone, he accepts it stoically, with no protest. Now they have begun drifting apart as there is nothing that binds them.

The act of reading the newspaper is raised to the level of a ritual in these chapters. It not only frames the passiveness of Hurstwood but indicates his gradual loss of control over his life. His immersion in the make-believe world of the newspaper is the first indication that he lacks the inner strength to face reality. When Mrs. Vance drops in to meet Carrie, she is appalled to see the confused state of Hurstwood. Carrie and Hurstwood exchange bitter words and their relationship is now at the breaking point. The disorientation of Hurstwood is reflected in his compulsive gambling where he loses some of his precious savings. When he is down to his last hundred and ninety dollars, he can see the darkness that lies ahead.

Carrie is convinced that she will have to live on her own, sooner or later. Dreiser writes: "It didn't matter about him. She is not going to be dragged into poverty and something worse to suit him" (p.345). She decides to explore the possibility of getting work in theatre. Her persistence finally pays off when she is hired by the Casino, a theatre company, to be part of the chorus. Hurstwood now depends on Carrie for his survival. He still talks of finding employment and returning the money he borrows from Carrie. But it is obvious that his strength is ebbing and the tragic part of his journey downhill is about to begin.

3.5 CHAPTERS 39 TO 47

The concluding chapters portray the gradual disintegration of Hurstwood, which is juxtaposed with the emergence of Carrie as an actress. Dreiser is unsparing in documenting the compulsive drift of Hurstwood towards a state of complete alienation from the world around him. Hurstwood still maintains that he is going to get work soon and life will change for the better. Carrie has only contempt for him but still helps him with money. When the grocery man calls on them to demand the unpaid bill, Carrie knows that she will have to support both of them.

Hurstwood makes a valiant effort to find work as a temporary motorman during the workers' strike. The chapter "The Strike" has some of the most realistic scenes in the novel. As a reporter, Dreiser had covered several such events and the details are obviously drawn from his memories of those days. On the fourth day of the strike Hurstwood took out his railcar amidst tight security in a tense atmosphere. On the second day, he gets hurt and narrowly escapes further injuries. From now onwards he does not even pretend to make an effort to seek work. When creditors pester them for unpaid bills, Hurstwood hardly feels any sense of shame. Meanwhile, Carrie's performance on the stage has already drawn favourable notice from the audience and managers of theatres. She is shrewd enough to see that henceforth Hurstwood would be a liability for her. When her friend, Miss Osborne invites her to stay with her she accepts her offer. One day, when Hurstwood returns to the flat from his daily round of wanderings, he finds a note from Carrie which says:

I am going away. I'm not coming back any more. It's no use trying to keep up the flat; I can't do it. I wouldn't mind helping you, if I could, but I can't support us both, and pay the rent. I need what little I make to pay for my clothes. I'm leaving twenty dollars. It's all I have just now. You can do whatever you like with the furniture. I won't want it. Carrie.

The tone of the note is abrupt and unfriendly. Carrie has finally left Hurstwood to his own fate. When a lonely Hurstwood sits in the rocking chair, staring at the floor, he tells himself, "I tried, didn't I?"

Carrie gets her first major break when she is offered the role of a country maid in a play. When she is paid thirty dollars a week it looks an enormous sum. Still, Carrie knew that she counted for nothing in the huge metropolis where the world of wealth and distinction was not within the reach of a struggling actress. She got raving reviews for her performance in the play. With her success comes increased salary of 150 dollars a week and a contract for one year. Carrie cannot believe her luck, but now she knows that some of her dreams are going to be real. Down in a third-rate Bleecker Street hotel, Hurstwood reads about Carrie's success on the stage and knows that she has finally made it. He thinks: "Ah, she was in the walled city now! Its splendid gates had opened, admitting her from a cold, dreary outside". Carrie is now taken seriously by her colleagues and superiors. Now she moves into a more luxurious and spacious accommodation. When she meets Mrs. Vance on the road, she knows that she is as good as her now. She receives letters from her admirers and is interviewed by a theatre critic for the newspaper. Amidst all this success, Carrie still feels lonely.

Drifting from one cheap hotel to another, Hurstwood, finally is reduced to a beggar in the street. He moves about the street sizing up the passers-by before asking them for alms. He even goes to Casino with the intention of meeting Carrie to beg for some money. He has lost all his sense of self-respect and human dignity. He stands among the street-beggars waiting for charity that would ensure the night's bed. Around this time Drouet meets Carrie. He is now in New York as the manager of a branch. He makes an attempt to enter her life once again but is rebuffed by Carrie who has no desire to complicate her life further. Once, on her way to Casino, she encounters Hurstwood who has been waiting for her. At first she did not recognise the shabby, baggy figure. When she recognised him, she asked him what was wrong with him. She gives him all the money she had with her. This marks the furthest stage of Hurstwood's degeneration as a person. Dreiser's account of Hurstwood is devoid of any sentimentality. Hurstwood has no will left to live. As a tramp, living on charity, he goes without supper on many days and sleeps in a fifteen cent flop-house. Dreiser describes his condition in these words:

He was beginning to find, in his wretched clothing and meagre state of body, that people took him for a chronic type of bum and beggar. Police hustled him along, restaurant and lodging-house keepers turned him out promptly the moment he had his due, pedestrians waved him off. He found it more and more difficult to get anything from anybody.

From this stage it is only a small step to the final scene where he opens the gas jets in the room before lying down to sleep. His final words are, "What's the use?"

Carrie is not even aware of Hurstwood's death. Her life with all its promise of fame and money is haunted by a sense of loss and vacancy. Bob Ames, a young engineer takes interest in her but it looks unlikely Carrie will be tempted to fall in love again. The sense of unreality that follows her now deepens into a permanent state of anxiety. At the end of the novel we see her sitting in her rocking chair, looking through the window into the darkness outside. Dreiser writes:

It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.

3.6 THE CHRONOLOGY OF *SISTER CARRIE*

The opening paragraph of *Sister Carrie* mentions the year 1889. The following chronology of the actions in *Sister Carrie* is reproduced from the Norton critical edition of *Sister Carrie*.

August, 1889:	Carrie arrives in Chicago
Fall, 1889:	She begins to live with Drouet at Ogden Place
Summer, 1890:	Carrie and Hurstwood elope to New York and take a flat on 78 th street.
Late, 1892:	Carrie meets Ames, who is visiting New York
Mid-1893:	Carrie and Hurstwood move to 13 Street
February, 1894:	Hurstwood loses his Warren Street saloon
June, 1894:	Hurstwood is down to his last fifty dollars
Summer, 1894:	Carrie gets a job in the chorus of the Casino theatre
October, 1894:	Carrie moves to the chorus of Broadway theatre
January, 1895:	Brooklyn street car strike
	Carrie gets a speaking part in her show at Broadway
Early Spring, 1895:	Carrie leaves Hurstwood
May, 1895:	Carrie in a new show at the Casino and is a great success
September, 1895:	Carrie's show goes on the road
Fall 1895-Feb., 1896:	Hurstwood works at the Broadway Central Hotel
June, 1896:	Carrie goes to London with her show
Winter, 1896-97:	Carrie in a new Play; Hurstwood commits suicide in January or February, 1897.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit is meant to give you an outline of the main narrative of the novel. You must have noticed that the characterisation of the protagonist is complex and her relationship with other characters is not developed along the line of a romantic story. The cities of Chicago and New York are not mere external settings but permeate the narrative with all their vitality, variety, gaiety, squalor, violence, crowds, railroads, factories and class conflicts. Dreiser's narrative portrays his characters from the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator. There is a surfeit of details which overwhelm our consciousness when we read the text. Please read the novel at least two times before you attempt the following questions which are meant to test your comprehension of the text.

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Describe Carrie's experiences in Chicago in the first week of her arrival.
2. How did Carrie get her first opportunity to act on the stage? How was it received?
3. Briefly narrate the events that take place between the theft of money by Hurstwood and the arrival of Hurstwood and Carrie in New York.
4. Describe the city of New York as it is portrayed by Dreiser in the novel.
5. Give an account of the last days of Hurstwood based on your reading of the novel.

3.9 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

You may use any standard edition of *Sister Carrie*. The page numbers used in this unit are from the Signet Classic edition of the New American Library published in 1961. Another very useful edition is Norton Critical Edition edited by Donald Pizer and published by W.W. Norton and Co., New York, London, 1970.

UNIT 4 *SISTER CARRIE*: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE MAJOR THEMES

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Treatment of Gender
- 4.2 *Sister Carrie* as a City Novel
- 4.3 Dreiser's Critique of American Society in *Sister Carrie*
- 4.4 *Sister Carrie* as a Novel of Ideas
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggestions for Further Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

Having read the text of *Sister Carrie* carefully, we are now in a position to analyse it critically. In this unit we shall analyse the novel thematically to highlight Dreiser's treatment of various themes such as gender, man-woman relationships, class conflict, family, and the urban reality. Questions regarding the dichotomies between free will and determinism and self and the world will also come up for discussion in these pages. Please note that there is no absolute division between substance and style or theme and narrative. Dreiser's social vision is inseparable from his use of language. Hence, this analysis of *Sister Carrie* will also deal with nuances of language, imagery and dialogue.

4.1 TREATMENT OF GENDER

It was pointed out in Unit 1.3 that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* met with disapproval, in its initial stages, from an American readership that could not understand his radical social perspective. It is instructive to compare this resistance to a similar reception that Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* received in France in 1857. Hans Robert Jauss, in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* points out that in 1857, the year of publication of *Madame Bovary*, another novel namely Feydeau's *Fanny* had dealt with the same theme of infidelity in a bourgeois, provincial society. While *Fanny* went through thirteen editions in one year, *Madame Bovary* took several years to capture the imagination of the French readership. According to Jauss this difference in reception may be traced back "to the question of the effect of their narrative form" (Hans Robert Jauss, 1982: 27). While Flaubert's use of the impersonal narration shocked the audience, "the inviting tone" of *Fanny* turned it into a 'confessional novel' that did not question the basic assumptions of the morality prevailing in society. Jauss writes:

As *Madame Bovary*, however, became a worldwide success, when at first it was understood and appreciated as a turning point in the history of the novel by only a small circle of connoisseurs, the audience of novel-readers that was formed by it came to sanction the new canon of expectations; this canon made Feydeau's weaknesses – his flowery style, his modish effects, his lyrical-confessional clichés – unbearable, and allowed *Fanny* to fade into yesterday's bestseller. (Ibid.: 28).

Jauss's discussion of the differences between *Fanny* and *Madame Bovary* helps us understand the nature of problems encountered by American readers in *Sister Carrie*.

Doubleday's wife outrightly rejected the novel on grounds of immorality and vulgarity. Obviously, there was something radical about Dreiser's treatment of man-woman relationships. The genteel tradition in American fiction had certain 'regulatory conventions and taboos' which Dreiser had ignored (Dreiser, 1961: 471). According to these conventions seducers must either be punished or reformed. In Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) the heroine suffers disintegration and death after she loses her 'virtue'. Drouet who lures Carrie into the dream of a comfortable, upper class life, remains unrepentant till the end of the story. He is more prosperous when he moves into New York. Dreiser makes it clear that Hurstwood's tragic decline and final suicide have nothing to do with the moral nature of his actions. This treatment of gender relations in which the fallen woman is not viewed as a victim, obviously, went against the expectations of the conventional readership.

If we revert to Jauss's argument once again we will discover that the naturalist narration of *Madame Bovary* had turned "a predicated question of public morals back into an open problem" (Jauss, 1982: 44). This was largely achieved through the impersonal tone of narration. A similar case may be made out for *Sister Carrie* which dealt with the question of the fallen woman in a refreshingly radical manner. Convention demanded that Carrie, as a woman who goes astray, be subjected to misfortunes and suffering. The novel traces her gradual rise to fame and fortune. She is not haunted by any sense of guilt. Her actions are not guided by any passion. William Thorp notes:

Already in love with the gauds of the big city, unable to find work which will provide even her minimum wants, she falls like a ripe plum into Drouet's kind hands. There is no struggle. There is no passion. A steak dinner and "two soft, green handsome ten-dollar bills" do the trick. (Ibid.: 471).

What made such a representation of gender relations uncommon was the complete absence of any suggestion of Christian sin. F.O. Matthiessen comments:

Carrie not only escaped punishment – Dreiser did not even regard her as sinful; and this was the crux of his defiance of late 19th century conventionality. Only he hardly thought of it then as a defiance. (Matthiessen in Donald Pizer, 1970: 478).

Dreiser, obviously, was following life. He had first hand experience of the complex ways in which urban life in America was fast changing. He understood the predatory quality of the capitalist society that was emerging. It was oppressively patriarchal in character. The peculiar nature of desire bred by this patriarchal set-up was captured by Dreiser in his narrative.

Though there is no reason to suppose that feminist ideas have directly influenced Dreiser's concept of gender relations, they were very much part of the cultural debates in the late 19th century. Anti-slavery movements obviously inspired and influenced early feminists. Frederick Douglas writes in his autobiography: "When the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, women will occupy a large space in its pages, for the cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman's cause" (Miriam Sehneir, 1992: 83). The relation between reform movements and realistic writing may be noted here. The first organised movement for women's emancipation was founded in 1848 in the U.S. By the end of the century, voluminous writings on various issues such as suffrage and the oppressive nature of the family and marriage have already accumulated. Miriam Schneir comments: "In the late 18th and early 19th centuries many early feminists identified marriage as a primary instrument of woman's oppression" (Ibid.: xvii). In an article published in 1872, Tennessee Claflin argues that the economic dependence of women forces them to suppress their own natures and become little more than 'sexual snares' for men. She writes:

As things are in the world at present, women have not equal chances with men of earning and winning anything; men hold the purse and women are dependents and candidates for election to place. They must entice, and seduce, and entrap men, either in the legitimate or in the illegitimate way, in order to secure their portion of the spoil. (Ibid.: 150).

This graphically illustrates Carrie's plight in the novel. The significant contribution of the 19th century feminist writings is that they locate the root cause of gender inequality in the materialist forces of history and society. Dreiser could not have been unaware of their major arguments.

Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr. has observed that 'desire is the protagonist of *Sister Carrie*' (L.E. Hussman, Jr., 1983: 18). Carrie arrives in Chicago "dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy" (p.4). She is taken in by appearances, particularly by clothes. Early in the novel Dreiser comments that one of the things a woman fully comprehends is 'the philosophy of clothes'. Throughout the novel, clothes signify status, power, authority and class. While Carrie is moving with Drouet, she sees one of the working girls on the road and almost recoils in horror:

Suddenly a pair of eyes met Carrie's in recognition. They were looking out from a group of poorly dressed girls. Their clothes were faded and loose-hanging, their jackets old, their general make-up shabby (p.77).

Their shabby appearance instils fear in Carrie because she is also vulnerable. She understands that to be a woman is to be powerless. Gender relations imply, Dreiser suggests, power relations.

In her sister's flat she feels depressed and lonely because the shabbiness of the underprivileged lower middle class pervades the house. As Carrie drifts into a relationship with Drouet she is not perturbed by the moral implications of such an act. Dreiser suggests that she has very little choice in the matter. This is where he advances a materialist view of human actions. Dreiser holds that the lower forms of life which may not be blessed with intellectual abilities have the advantage of intuition and instinct:

Carrie was unwise, and, therefore, like the sheep in its unwisdom, strong in feeling. The instinct of self-protection, strong in all such natures, was roused but feebly, if at all, by the overtures of Drouet.

This denies agency and subjectivity to Carrie. Dreiser repeatedly comments on Carrie's passivity. Though much of the narrative is focussed on Carrie, we hardly have any clear understanding of her inner life.

Mattheissen has pointed out that Dreiser manages to crystallise Carrie's essential quality only when she gets a break in theatre where she reveals something of "the sympathetic, impressionable nature" and 'the pathos' of a true actress. On the one hand we have the picture of Carrie as a passive drifter who is vaguely aware of the need to move on and on the other, we have Carrie who is a fast learner. She is deeply agitated when she learns that Hurstwood is married. This does not correspond to the earlier impression of Carrie as an ignorant drifter who, like a pilgrim, moves towards an undefined goal. How do we account for the contradictions in Dreiser's portrayal of Carrie? The emotional centre of *Sister Carrie* is not her relationships with the men but her own awakening subjectivity. She begins as an ignorant woman unaware of the ways of the world but does not end up as a victim. Somewhere along the way, she comes into her own and emerges as an assertive woman. Her work in the theatre marks the turning point in her life. Her discovery of her own inborn talent coincides with her deepening awareness of the patriarchal nature of society. Consider this sentence which sums up Hurstwood's attitude to Carrie: "Hurstwood did not seem to realise that she had a right to anything". As Hurstwood loses his job and withdraws

from his responsibilities as a householder, Carrie is able to grasp its implications for her own future. The power relation between them is now altered, and this is reflected in their sexual relationship. She begins to sleep alone, this indicating her resolve to live alone. Long before she moves out of the flat, she has begun to assert her right to privacy and individuality. What makes Hurstwood's fall poignant is Carrie's refusal to shelter him and take care of him. In other words, Carrie refuses to sacrifice herself for his sake. This reveals the assertive side of Carrie who no more wants to be at the mercy of men. This is what makes her the first modern woman in American fiction.

Carrie is not portrayed in the novel as a woman in love. Carrie lives in such social and financial insecurity that she could not have indulged in romantic revelries. When Drouet makes an attempt to re-enter her life, she makes her disgust towards him quite apparent. The changes brought about in Carrie by experiences are clearly indicated by Dreiser:

No longer the lightest word of a man made her head dizzy. She had learned that men could change and fail. Flattery in its most palpable form had lost its force with her. (p.398).

What Carrie rejects is domesticity itself. If she now chooses to have any relationship with a man, it will be on terms of equality. She is impressed by 'the kindly superiority' of Ames but she is unable to share his idealism. At the end of the novel, we see Carrie ruminating in a pensive mood. In her moment of success, she is lonely. This is the price to be paid for individualism in a capitalist society. Dreiser, while tracing the forward movement of Carrie, never records any attempt on her part to reach out to her parents or her sister. When Carrie sees her pictures in the papers, she cannot think of anyone 'she knew well enough to send them to'. Dreiser's emphasis is on the alienating nature of urban reality. If city enables Carrie to discover her hidden self it also denies her a sense of fulfilment. As a part of the unpredictable world of the commercial theatre, she will remain tormented by uncertainties. The final image of Carrie sitting near the window in a rocking chair, dreaming alone, underlines the limitations of her new-found self. Her tragic self-awareness reflects the haunted nature of the woman's subjectivity in a highly patriarchal society.

4.2 *SISTER CARRIE* AS A CITY NOVEL

We have already noted that the cities of Chicago and New York are not mere settings in *Sister Carrie*. The novel captures the conflicts and contradictions of these large urban centres in their early phase of emergence. Dreiser himself had a love-hate relation with the cities he patronised. He spent long years in New York as he rose to fame and success. But he had known the seamy side of the city, as a struggling reporter in Chicago and many other towns. He had known the vitality of the cities as great centre of art, culture and commerce. He had also experienced the ruthlessness and violence they were capable of.

Dreiser portrays the city from the perspective of an outsider. What makes his portrayals insightful is his critical eye that looks for the contradictions behind the pomp and the glitter. As the son of impoverished German immigrants, Dreiser had tasted poverty and failure. In the early 1890s his reading of Herbert Spencer and Balzac confirmed his own vague feeling that man was not the favoured creature of divine guidance, 'but an insignificant unit in a universe of natural forces' (Donald Pizer, 1985: 385). The great advances in the fields of science, technology and commerce do not necessarily bestow security and happiness to the struggling individual. Dreiser was quick to realise that the city was essentially a colonial economic system which influenced and regulated the lives of individuals through its vast network of invisible forces. Donald Pizer notes:

Yet the city itself, as Balzac had amply demonstrated, was exciting and alluring, and not all were crushed who sought to gain its wonders. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser was to write, "Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind."

Not all survive the brutal, impersonal laws of the city. The second half of the novel juxtaposes the steady decline of Hurstwood with the gradual rise of Carrie into stardom. As noted in the earlier section, the city affords the possibilities of self-discovery.

Here it may be noted that the city novel is a distinct genre with its own internal history. Balzac's Paris, Dickens' London, Joyce's Dublin and Saul Bellow's Chicago come alive on the pages as these writers are able to combine the factual and the fantastic in the city. They are fascinated by the "carnivals of emotion and ambition" offered by the city (Isa Kapp, 1980: 87). American writers have always been attracted by the cosmopolitan charm of New York. Isa Kapp comments:

Most of America's major writers came to New York at some time during the productive period of their lives, many of them from small towns in the Midwest – like Dreiser, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway – and their great urge was to escape the narrowness and bigotry of provincial life. (Ibid.).

New York accommodates culture as well as counter-culture, conservatives, neo-conservatives as well as radicals. The sensual and the intellectual segments are not separated here.

The city induces a state of longing in its inhabitants. Dreiser shows how his characters live in a constant state of desire. The first time Carrie enters Chicago, the magic of the great city overwhelms her. Mattheissen notes that "in her excited discovery of Chicago, Carrie is essentially Dreiser himself" (Mattheissen F.O., 1970: 481). There is also something of Dreiser in Drouet's hedonistic quest for luxury and pleasure. Dreiser is able to invest his characters with life mainly because he projects himself into their situations. He has gone through the acute sense of insecurity bred by modern cities. The life of the city is constantly in flux, ever changing. His reading of Balzac and other European realists has taught him that the surface reality has historical value. While introducing Drouet, Dreiser comments: "Lest this order of individual should permanently pass, let me put down some of the most striking characteristics of his most successful manner and method" (p.10). Dreiser knew that man was his milieu.

In a society which was subject to constant change, money becomes central. It is the only value that acquires a sense of permanence. Dreiser conveys the mystique of money several times in the novel. The seventh chapter begins with these observations:

The true meaning of money yet remains to be popularly explained and comprehended. When each individual realises for himself that this thing primarily stands for and should only be accepted as a moral due – that it should be paid out as honestly stored energy, and not as a usurped privilege – many of our social, religious, and political troubles will have permanently passed. (p.10).

Dreiser documents the city in great detail. The interiors of Minnie's flat, the various items displayed in the department stores, the life style of the rich, all these are documented in minute detail. When Drouet hands money over to Carrie, their relationship enters a new plane which has both moral and social implications. Drouet feels: "She felt bound to him by a strange tie of affection now" (p.62). This bond develops into a bondage which slowly deprives her of her own subjectivity.

The theme of money figures in greater detail when Dreiser documents the tragic decline of Hurstwood. One of the central scenes of the novel deals with Hurstwood's theft of money in his office. Here Dreiser makes it obvious that he had no intention to steal. But the lure of a happy life with Carrie away from his present state of wretchedness forces him to commit the theft. Desire is at the root of this act though Hurstwood himself is in a confused state of anxiety and excitement:

The manager floundered among a jumble of thoughts. Now all the entanglement of the day came back. Also the thought that here was a solution. That money would do it. If he had that and Carrie.

And later:

With it once out and before him, it seemed a foolish thing to think about leaving it. Certainly it would. Why, he could live quietly with Carrie for years.

Ironically enough, he soon discovers that money does not ensure happiness. He feels miserable now though Carrie is with him:

His condition was bitter in the extreme, for he did not want the miserable sum he had stolen. He did not want to be a thief. That sum or any other could never compensate for the state which he had thus foolishly doffed. It could not give him back his host of friends, his name, his house and family, nor Carrie, as he had meant to have her. (p.258).

Hurstwood, thus, wakes up to the limitations of money and the tragic side of desire. In the concluding chapters of the novel his depleted savings, now getting progressively reduced, become symbolic of his loss of control on life. Money is a source of power and authority. When Hurstwood loses his source of steady income, Carrie decides to break away from him.

Dreiser is highly critical of the growing social disparity in the cities. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the new industrial cities in America were bursting on their seams with immigrants from Europe, all of whom were in search of a new life. The quest for better living conditions, security and material prosperity becomes the overriding concerns of those faceless millions that throng the cities. As the son of an immigrant family which moved from affluence to abject poverty, Dreiser saw the city as Janus – faced, offering possibilities of progress as well as ruin. In the second part of the novel the journeys of Hurstwood and Carrie are juxtaposed mainly to highlight the Janus – faced quality of the city. In urban society social inequality is institutionalised in its very economic structure. Mattheissen comments: "It is a society in which there are no equals, and no equilibrium, but only people moving *up* and *down*". This vertical organisation of class differences permit the privileged ones to live in blissful ignorance of the plight of the underprivileged. Hurstwood refers to the "walled city" where Carrie finally gains entry with her success even as he is being pushed down to the street. This image of 'a city within the city' effectively captures the social divisions within the American urban society:

"I guess she's struck it", he thought, a picture of the old shiny, plush-covered world coming back, with its lights, its ornaments, its carriages, and flowers. Ah, she was in the walled city now! Its splendid gates had opened, admitting her from a cold, dreary outside. She seemed a creature afar off – like every other celebrity he had known. (p.413).

If there is one image that stands out in Dreiser's portrayal of the city, it is that of the newspaper. As Hurstwood loses control on his own life, he becomes obsessed with

the newspaper. Initially he looks for possible positions he can apply for but, gradually he immerses himself in the newspaper to escape from reality:

He buried himself in his papers and read. Oh, the rest of it – the relief from walking and thinking? What Lethean waters were these floods of telegraphed intelligence! He forgot his troubles, in part.

The newspaper becomes a mirror image of the city's diversity, variety and plurality. Arts, commerce, sports and business find their separate space in the newspaper. Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities*, notes that what makes the newspaper significant as a cultural product is "its profound fictiveness" (Anderson, 1983: 33). The events that are reported on the same page have no intrinsic connection. What brings them together is the fact that all of them happened on the same day. This element of calendrical coincidence must have attracted Dreiser's notice as he attributes much significance to the element of chance in life. The newspaper is part of the economic organisation of the city. Its relationship with the market makes it a "one-day best-seller" (Ibid.) that reflects the pulse of the city. The reading of the newspaper is a modern secular ritual that brings the members of a society together, giving them a sense of identity and togetherness. Here Dreiser's own close association with several newspapers and periodicals as a reporter, columnist and editor may be remembered. Some of the great novelists of the 19th century such as Dickens and Dostoevsky had also worked in the same capacities. Through the image of the newspaper Dreiser is able to signify the sur-realistic quality of the complex urban reality, its essential vitality and bewildering plurality.

4.3 DREISER'S CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN SOCIETY IN *SISTER CARRIE*

Sister Carrie communicates the felt quality of a historically located society. The American society of the late 19th century comes alive on the pages of the novel. Dreiser's representation of this society underlines the social divisions of this society and the consequent conflicts between various groups and segments. In analysing Dreiser's depiction of social change, which is done both in covert and overt terms, our purpose is to clarify his social vision. The very nature of his descriptions and narration evoke certain view-points regarding the nature of society his characters live in. For instance, the detailed description of all the things Carrie put in her small trunk in the very opening paragraph of the novel places her in a certain social frame. Similarly the clothes worn by Drouet, the interiors of Minnie's flat and the working conditions of the girls in the shoe factory forcefully establish the disparities in social class. Outward appearances or external details are important for they mark the socially ordained limits of their existence. Donald Pizer comments:

Dreiser's ability to capture the tangible commonplace of everyday existence powerfully suggests that the commonplace and everyday are the essence of experience, particularly since he returns again and again to the unexciting details of the furnishings of an apartment or the contents of a meal. (Pizer, 1970: 570).

The normal world of ambitions, aspirations and frustrations appear as primary, solid and unalterable. In Dreiser's world there is no way of transcending one's inherited world. If Carrie climbs out of her lower middle class sphere it is through a series of coincidence. Dreiser makes it obvious that Carrie has very few choices at each point in her life.

The authenticity of Dreiser's world-view is derived from his attempt to transform his private experiences into art. Edgar Lee Masters praised Dreiser for his love of "low

company', which made him familiar with their mental world. The central episodes in the novel have close parallels in his own family history. F.O. Mattheissen says:

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When he began to develop Carrie Meeber's story, he remembered what had happened to one of his sisters, who had been supported in Chicago by an architect and then felt herself much more deeply attracted by the manager of Hannah and Hogg's, a well-known eating and drinking establishment. Only later did she discover that he was married, but by then he was enough in love with her to persuade her to elope to Toronto, explaining that while drunk he had stolen 15000 dollars from his employers.... The couple had settled in New York where they supported themselves and two children in part by renting rooms to girls whose habits they did not scrutinise.

Dreiser changed details in his novel, as Mattheissen says, to soften the actuality. Dreiser has used his own experiences as material in many novels. He understood that his sisters were rebelling against the religious orthodoxy of their father and conventional morality of their class. It is Dreiser's profound sympathy and compassion for them that enables him to portray their characters from inside.

Dreiser's characters are typical and unique at the same time. While introducing Drouet, he gives the impression that he is the representative figure of a new social order and may soon be overtaken by the fast-moving social changes. Maureen C. Howard notes that "the world of *Sister Carrie* is the world of motion – tragic and vertical motions of raising and falling, the motion of the rocking chair" (Maureen C. Howard, 2001: 4). The novel begins with a journey and a series of journeys are embedded in the main narrative. There are descriptions of street cars, railway systems, carriages and steamships. The people are shown to be perennially on the move. Drouet is a travelling salesman on the train routes of the Mid-west. Carrie and Hurstwood are shown searching for work in the vast cities of surging crowds and huge shopping arcades. Capitalist society has to generate a state of excitement and anxiety to sustain itself. The world of desire which directs the main characters shows the human mind in a flux. Dreiser notes that in American cities plate-glass windows were becoming fashionable for the first time during the late 19th century. The effect of these windows was "to awe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success both wide and deep". What the window reflects is a society polarised into the rich and the poor. Both Drouet and Hurstwood take special care to be seen with the right kind of people. When Drouet takes Carrie out to eat he selects a table near the window: "He enjoyed the changing panorama of the street – to see and be seen as he dined." This dinner marks the first stage of Carrie's seduction, and it is set against the theatrical nature of the urban scene. Carrie is an easy victim since her social location makes her vulnerable. The rocking chair in which Carrie often sits near the window glancing into the street outside signifies her own agitated self which is caught in a to and fro motion, against the flux of the spectacular urban scene.

In this world of change and desire, the individual cannot claim any solid identity. Critics have commented on Carrie's total disregard of her past. She never returns to her parents, not does she remember her sister after leaving her. Her vision is ever pointed towards future. Her identity is ever in flux as revealed by the constant change of names she undergoes. In the opening sentence of the novel, she is 'Caroline Meeber'. Drouet fondly calls her 'Cad'. Mrs. Hale and others in the building know her as 'Mrs. Drouet'. When she is given a role in the amateur production, her name changes to 'Carrie Madenda'. In the company of Hurstwood she is first Mrs. Murdock and later Mrs. Wheeler. Once she becomes an actress, she becomes Laura, Katishá, the Country Maid, the frowning Quakeress and many other characters. Dreiser frequently refers Drouet as "the drummer" and Hurstwood as "the dressy manager". However, once Hurstwood loses his standing in the society, he becomes "the ex-manager". When he is learning to drive the streetcar, Dreiser comments: "The ex-manager laid his hand to the throttle and pushed it gently, as he thought". In the name

of "Carrie" one may note her passivity "of being carried" through life by strokes of chance and fortune. "Wheeler" suggests Hurstwood's steady decline in social status.

If the social conflict is not visible on the surface it is because this society is organised according to hierarchy. At the bottom of this social hierarchy is the homeless poor who have no place to sleep. At the end of the fourteenth chapter we find 'a gaunt-faced man of about thirty, who looked the picture of privation and wretchedness' (p.134) begging for the price of a bed. Hurstwood does not notice him, but Drouet gives him a dime 'with an upwilling feeling of pity in his heart'. This is a prelude to an elaborate scene in the 45th chapter where 'an ex-soldier turned religionist' (p.432) stands at the corner of twenty-sixth street and Broadway to solicit charity for securing beds for the homeless. (It is an irony of fate that Hurstwood ends up among the homeless, on the streets of New York, waiting near this ex-captain). In social hierarchy, above this group of the homeless are the manual labourers. Dreiser understood that the bulk of the manual work in the industrial cities was carried out by poorly paid, unorganised workers. Carrie remembers her father whose head was covered by the white flour of the mill where he worked. Carrie worked in a shoe factory where the working conditions were inhuman. Hanson, Minnie's husband, is a lifelong toiler who leaves his home early in the morning. He is a cheerless, silent man. Above these manual workers we have salesmen like Drouet who make a living by selling manufactured goods to a large network of distributors and shopkeepers. Dreiser was right in noting that Drouet belonged to a group of intermediaries thrown up by the new capitalist order. When Carrie first meets Hurstwood he appears desirable because he is socially above Drouet. Hurstwood, as manager, exuded confidence and charm but once he loses his job his commanding appearance comes in the way to secure a barman's job. When he becomes a motorman, he moves out of his class which destroys his sense of self-respect and identity. When Carrie becomes an actress, she enters the "walled city" of privileged upper class people. She moves in an insular world which is not cluttered with hard labour and exploitation. The world of New York as depicted in the novel represents the brighter side of the capitalist society from which the ugly facts of factory production have been kept away.

The novel also shows the American family in a state of transition. The forces of industrialisation and urbanisation undermined the stability of American family as a social and economic unit. In traditional societies the family is a cohesive economic group as it takes part in the production of goods. This is particularly true of agricultural families. Dreiser grew up in an urban family which was constantly on the move in search of work and shelter. He has seen his brothers and sisters revolting against the rigid religious views of his father. In *Sister Carrie* we meet Carrie's sister Minnie and her husband Hanson who represent a working class family in the city. The interiors of their small flat represents their diminished social status:

Minnie's "flat", as the one-floor residence apartments were then being called was in a part of West Van Buren Street which was inhabited by families of labourers and clerks, men who had come and were still coming with the rush of population which was pouring in at the rate of 50,000 a year.

Minnie is a subdued woman who is totally dependant on her husband. Carrie notes the conservative attitude of Hanson, and Minnie. There is very little communication between Minnie and Hanson. Curiously enough, this is also true of Hurstwood and his wife who represent the upper class family:

There was no love lost between them. There was no great feelings of dissatisfaction... They did not talk enough together to come to the argument of any one point. In the accepted and popular phrase, she had her ideas and he had his.

Dreiser also shows that there is a widening gulf between the parents and children. Both Jessica and George are not devoted to their parents and Hurstwood has very little time for them.

Both these families lack intimacy or loving relationships. In the modern capitalist society an individual is encouraged to become enterprising and autonomous. The commitment to community that underlines the values of the family become redundant in a fiercely competitive world of individualism. Dreiser himself appears nostalgic about the traditional, close-knit family when he says:

A lovely home atmosphere is one of the flowers of the world than which there is nothing more tender, nothing more delicate, nothing more calculated to make strong and just the natures cradled and nourished within it.

Carrie's isolation at the end of the novel is largely because of her separation from her family. As we noted earlier, she has no family to go back to. When she shifted her allegiance to Hurstwood she did not know he was married. She feels cheated when she discovers that Hurstwood is a married man. This obviously means that she had thought of leading a normal married life. However, in New York, she seems to have abandoned all such hopes. Her love for Ames remains unexpressed and she is wary of further entanglement with men. She now lives in a state of longing which has no fixed direction or centre:

Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her. It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world.

She is a lonely individual who has broken away from her family and feels alienated and dissatisfied even when she has attained fame and fortune. The journey of Carrie from Columbia to New York traces the social transitions American society has witnessed in the last decade of the 19th century.

4.4 *SISTER CARRIE AS A NOVEL OF IDEAS*

Dreiser's discovery of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley effected a breakthrough in his intellectual view of the world. To what extent are his ideas central to his novels? In this section we shall discuss some of the ideas that he has articulated in *Sister Carrie* and examine whether these ideas are central to the fictional narrative. In other words, our purpose is to see how far the novel *Sister Carrie* succeeds in projecting a well-defined philosophy of life through its narrative. In his essay, "Manners, Morals and the Novel", Lionel Trilling argues that the primary responsibility of a novelist is to represent the manners of a society. By 'manners' he means "that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or un-uttered or unutterable expressions of value" (Lionel Trilling, 1951: 206). He goes on to say that each culture has a conflicting variety of manners, 'and one of the jobs of a culture is the adjustment of this conflict' (Ibid.). It is by constructing our version of reality that we articulate our attitude towards manners. It has been argued earlier that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is a critique of the genteel tradition in American fiction. Dreiser's critique is made possible by two factors. One is his own first hand experiences as a member of the lower-class family which went through deprivation and hunger. The second factor that enables Dreiser to present a critique of American society is his rational, scientific attitude towards human society. This is what makes an examination of his ideas imperative.

It is often argued that Dreiser's interest in ideas does not contribute to his achievement as a novelist. This is to say that his naturalism is a distracting

characteristic of his work. Lionel Trilling has been highly critical of Dreiser's attempt to incorporate ideas in the structure of his novel. Trilling writes:

To the extent that Dreiser's style is defensible, his thought is also defensible. That is, when he thinks like a novelist, he is worth following – when by means doubt cumulatively effective style, he creates rough and ungainly but effective characters and events. But when he thinks like, as we say, a philosopher, he is likely to be not only foolish but vulgar. (Ibid.: 17).

Trilling feels that Dreiser's ideas lack depth and he has been unable to integrate his ideas into the structure of the novel. Donald Pizer rightly points out that this hostility towards naturalism in general and Dreiser's use of ideas in the novel in particular may be traced to certain misconceptions. The naturalist novelists are considered philosophically inconsistent because their representation of characters very often does not subscribe to the determinist creed they profess. Their novels are also found to be artistically deficient. Trilling considers Henry James superior to Dreiser as a novelist because his (James's) novels are structurally 'organic'. Here it appears that Trilling is contradicting himself. In his essay, "Manners, Morals and the Novel" he says that "a shifting society is bound to generate an interest in appearance in the philosophical sense" (Trilling, 1951: 210). We have argued that Dreiser is dealing with a fast changing society where there are no clear land marks. His concern with the surface details of existence is born of an intuitive grasp of their significance in defining the essence of a society in transition. To say that his novels lack 'organic structure' is to forget that his revolt is against the romantic and sentimental elements in the mainstream genteel tradition.

Dreiser discovers Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin and Balzac at a crucial point in his intellectual evolution. We also have to underline the fact that Dreiser is the first major American novelist who came from the immigrant's stock. The critical perspective of the outsider was complicated by his rebellion against the rigid, religious beliefs of his Catholic father. Dreiser was seeking confirmation of his own vague ideas in the works of Spencer, Huxley and Balzac. The amoral determinism of a materialistic world is inherent in what Dreiser saw in Pittsburgh and Chicago. The impersonal economic system did not accommodate the will of the individual. The social forces assume superhuman power pushing the individual in a certain direction with the inexorable logic of a natural event.

Let us examine a concrete instance from *Sister Carrie* where Dreiser's statements of ideas figure prominently. In the opening paragraph of Chapter VIII, Dreiser writes:

Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilisation is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer guided by instinct; scarcely human in that it is yet wholly guided by reason. (p. 74).

This contemplation on the paradoxical state of man is occasioned by Carrie's plight. Carrie has left her sister's flat to move into a room rented by Drouet. Dreiser is departing from the predictable course taken by the 19th century novelist. Dreiser does not see the fallen woman as a criminal. He finds it essential to comment on Carrie's situation objectively so that it is not construed as the stock theme of the popular, sentimental novel. Carrie's dilemmas are, at a deeper level, emblematic of the duality inherent in human situation. Dreiser feels that unless man evolves further he cannot find harmony with the world around him:

As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not yet wholly learnt to align himself with the forces. In this intermediate stage he wavers – neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by

his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other – a creature of incalculable variability. (p.74).

Major Themes

If Carrie is buffeted by forces beyond her control it only brings out her essential humanity. Dreiser implies that in choosing to go with Drouet, Carrie cannot be equated with a fallen woman. By virtue of her reason, she is able to sense the "immorality" of her decision. At the same time, her instinctive needs gain an upper hand and dictate her choices. Her desire for love, comfort, clothing and shelter can be traced to her own instinctive world. Dreiser suggests that Carrie's indecision and mental turmoil are indicative of the pull in the direction of rationality which proves to be weaker. Dreiser makes it obvious that Carrie is not morally responsible for her choices as "she was as yet more drawn than she drew" (Pizer, 1970: 585). If we look further into the role of these philosophical comments in the fictional narrative we can see that they contribute substantially to the development of the fictional narrative as well as the representation of Carrie's character. The ideas of moral determinism, natural evolution and the effect of the material conditions on the consciousness of man are not reported as "ideas" but integrated into the fictional context to critique the prevailing moral assumptions of the society. To use Lionel Trilling's words, Dreiser is attempting to articulate "the half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value" which are inherent in American culture at the turn of the 20th century. Dreiser's moral realism succeeds in capturing the manners of American society.

In his book on Dreiser's fiction Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr. has argued that Bob Ames who appears in two extended scenes later in the novel, "appears to function as the author's spokesman in offering Carrie some perspective on her pursuits and pointing the way to what he thinks may be her higher calling" (Hussman Jr., 1983: 24). Carrie meets Ames for the first time at a pre-theatre dinner party at Sherry's restaurant. Ames, who is an engineer and inventor, works for an Indianapolis electrical company. Carrie is deeply impressed by the glamour and luxury of the hotel. However, Ames tells her that he would not care to be rich enough to spend his money in such a vulgar manner. This critical note interrogates Carrie's world-view. This must have been deliberately introduced by Dreiser to suggest that she has to move beyond the world of instinctive desire to the world of intellect and a secular form of spirituality. Dreiser's later novels assert that he himself moved towards such a world-view. Carrie's instant liking for Ames shows that she has hidden resources which need to be realised further through art and intellect. Haussman, Jr. comments: "In this first scene between the budding actress and the inventor, Ames is established as chief spokesman for Dreiser and as an incisive critic of American success formula" (Ibid.: 25-26). Ames is different from Drouet and Hurstwood. He is the first intellectual Carrie comes into contact with.

As a reporter, Dreiser had once interviewed Thomas Alva Edison extensively to find out the source of his success and also the nature of his ideas (Ibid.: 30-31). In the interview Edison had suggested that his only happiness came from the process of working on an invention. Once he has successfully completed an invention, he lost interest in it. Ames echoes this view of Edison when he underlines devotion to work. According to Edison the single-minded, focussed pursuit of an objective alone impart meaning to life. This has a parallel in the following advice Ames gives to Carrie:

The world is full of desirable situations, but unfortunately, we can occupy but one at a time. It doesn't do us any good to wring our hands over the far-off things. (p.446).

In the portrayal of Ames, we can see how Dreiser uses ideas in the novel. In being different from Drouet and Hurstwood, Ames questions the ideology of the American Dream which is founded on a materialistic pursuit of success and power. As opposed to Carrie's disquiet and desire, Ames communicates a humanistic ideal of giving and serving. In his later novels Dreiser developed these ideas further into well-defined positions. Ames is not an incidental, superfluous character who is used to project a

romantic ideal. Dreiser creates him out of his felt need to explore an alternative world-view. Dreiser disapproves of the materialistic excesses that have turned American society into an unjust and violent society. He is aware of the predatory instinct behind the glittering façade of capitalism. Carrie is seen at the end, poised between several options, afflicted by her own desire and ready to move on. Dreiser writes: "Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her. It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world."

The above discussion clearly establishes that Dreiser's ideas are not superfluous. They emerge out of his delineation of characters, descriptions of their interactions and contextualisation of their motives and impulses. In other words, they are well integrated into his fictional narratives.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit was devoted to a careful examination of some of the major themes in *Sister Carrie*. In his representation of gender, Dreiser deviates from the genteel tradition of the 19th century. One of his major achievements as a novelist is the manner in which he made the city available to narrative by formulating new fictional strategies. He not only documents American society as it appears to him but also provides a critique of its ideology. Dreiser was alert to the conflicts that plagued a class-ridden society. We have examined how these conflicts are propelled by the social changes taking place at that time. Dreiser was animated by several scientific and rationalist ideas. Every debate on Dreiser has to finally tackle the vexed question of the role of these ideas in his fictional narrative. We have tried to show that these ideas are well integrated into his fictional narrative.

4.6 QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you agree with the view that Dreiser, in his depiction of Carrie, absolves her from her actions? Give your reasons.
- 2) Evaluate *Sister Carrie* as a novel about life in the modern American city.
- 3) Comment on the nature of social conflicts that characterise the urban life in America towards the end of the 19th century.
- 4) Trace some of central ideas Dreiser uses in the novel. How far are these ideas integrated into his fictional narrative?
- 5) "Dreiser's self is reflected in the characters of Carrie, Drouet and Hurstwood". Discuss.

4.7 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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