

CHAPTER THREE

THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORKS

Carl Van Doren wrote about a submerged American world, "instinctive and undisciplined which literature had passed over". It is a gray region dominated not by active misery and violation but stagnation and unsucces from which Theodore Dreiser emerged to signalize a decisive change in the tone of fiction. Dreiser has rejected and turned his back against any 'decencies' of society and fiction as nothing in his background has calculated to inspire any respect toward it.' (The American Novel in The Literature of American People, 1951 : 847)

Theodore Dreiser came from a poor German immigrant family. His father, John Dreiser -- once a successful person -- had struck by a series of misfortune shortly before baby Theodore was born. Even as an infant, young Dreiser had learnt the difficult lesson of poverty, chance and morality. As the parents was too poor to support their children, the family moved from town to town from Terre Haute, Indiana where Theodore was born, as opportunities of employment or the pressure of debts impelled them.

Due to the parents' religious bigotry, the children reacted sharply. Theodore's elder brother who adressed himself as Paul Dresser, succeeded as a vaudeville actor and popular song writer. Paul's mis-

It was out of these intellectual resources that Dreiser wrote his first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900). The substance of the story laid within his hands. His sister was a working girl like Carrie and just like her, had runaway with a man who could offer her a better economic life. His father's decline in social scale had provided some hints for the decline of Hurtswood, and his brother's success, was as meaningless as Carrie's. At that time, the novel can be considered shocking as it presented stark realism and pessimistic view of life. *Sister Carrie* was met with censorship on the ground that it was too sordid or pornographic.

In his second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), once again Dreiser gave a sympathetic picture of a 'sinful woman'. He flouted genteel assumptions by picturing woman of 'easy virtue' as morally superior to the technically good people of the book. Jennie, was a character who had the backbone to make a decision against her own will and interest.

Next, Dreiser proceeded to portray a gaudy and unscrupulous tycoon, the actual Charles T. Yerkes in an intended trilogy which the third part, *The Stoic* was published after his death. The trilogy itself -- *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947) were a colossal study of an American business man. The main character, Frank Cowperwood was a man who clawed his way up from the poverty to wealth and position. As for Dreiser himself, although had his sympathy laid for

the underdogs, but also had an intense appreciation for the victors of life.

His next novel was about an artist. *The Genius* (1915) centered upon a painter -- Eugene Witla -- who was the fictional combination of Dreiser himself with an artist who had fascinated him and a bright young editor who committed suicide. The data that interested Dreiser were exclusively the material reward of genius and the women that were unable to withstand its lure. What Dreiser sees as a characteristic of achievement in the art are precisely the flashy advantages that accrued his brother as a successful writer of popular song and nothing more. For him all rewards were external.

For the decade between 1915 and 1925 Dreiser produced no more novels but experimented with short stories, dramas and autobiographical sketches. *Free and Other Stories* (1918) and *Twelve Men* (1919) contains some of his best writing, *A Traveler at Forty* (1913), *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), the play *The Powerful Hand of the Potter* (1919), essays on philosophy -- *Hey Rub a-dub-dub : a book of essays and philosophy* (1920), prose vignettes -- *The Color of A Great City* (1923), autobiography -- *A Book about Myself* (1922). In middle life he began to take an active part in the social movement and was arrested during a civil liberties investigation. Dreiser also studied The Soviet Union at first hand -- written in his travel report : *Dreiser*

looks at Russia (1928).

Dreiser had not really achieved a wide range of audience until the publication of his most extended and perhaps his masterpiece -- *An American Tragedy (1925)*. The novel was based on an actual murder case of Chester Gillette who drowned a girl named Grace Brown in Adirondacks back in 1906 and was electrocuted in 1908. The story itself exhaustively traces the events leading to a stupid murder and to the legal execution of the feckless youth who has committed the crime. Clyde Griffiths is actually a very ordinary boy who dreams romantically of attaining wealth and social position without any conception of how such things are achieved, Clyde was indicted for drowning his pregnant mistress, but whether he intentionally contrives her death or just makes no effort of saving the drowning girl was not clear as Dreiser is rather indicting the society. It is the society that has erred Clyde with its fascinating luxurious life, after all.

He is promptly indicted for murder and after a sensational trial where all the pretense of decency is lost in the clamor of publicity, is condemned and executed.

Although it was met with censorship, *An American Tragedy* is undoubtedly one of Dreiser's best. Compared to his earliest novel, *Sister Carrie* which is also considered Dreiser's best, we will see that there are some similarity between the character of Carrie and the

character of Clyde. Both of them have the similarity of traits usually found in Dreiser's works. The characters are adrift in a 'stormy sea of fate', unable to steer their way but to accept whatever fate comes to them.

The pessimistic tone of *Sister Carrie* with its central theme -- the effect of misguided and misdirected American Dream -- is the central theme also highlighted by *An American Tragedy*. However, here lies the difference between *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. Carrie rising to the top, almost reaching the understanding that material success is an illusory dream. The tragedy is that Carrie fails to understand that all of the luxurious things she owned can never buy her happiness. Carrie's tragedy is the tragedy of success.

Clyde, on the other hand, never reaches the top. He remains a futile pursuer of American dream until his death. He tries to escape poverty, driven to murder by social forces of the society around him he can not resist. It is the social forces of the society characterized by narrow and conventioned moral doctrines on one hand and the deification of material success on the other hand. Clyde's tragedy is the tragedy of failure.

Just like *Sister Carrie*, the material for the writing of *An American Tragedy* laid within his hands. The character of Clyde was not merely the picture of the

character of Chester Gillette, but was not it the portrait of young Dreiser's own character? Clyde's longing for material success, his dreams of escaping poverty, and his American dream, was not it the same dreams belong to Theodore in his youth? Clyde's family religious bigotry was perhaps the picture of the author's own family.

Nevertheless, it was in his novel appeared a year after his death, *The Bulwark* (1946) that Dreiser attempts to express the pathos of his father's rigid religiosity. The main character is a stern Quaker named Solon Barnes who prided himself as a bulwark of the faith, yet some of his children revolted on the parents' efforts to control them.

Many readers were at first repelled from Dreiser's novels because of his clumsy and blundering workmanship. Dreiser himself has already known by his incredibly bad writing. Apparently the man was completely insensitive to the values of words and indifferent to the construction of sentences. (1951:850)

Interesting is the fact that Dreiser steadily refused to revise his works when his mistakes were pointed out. This fact showed the critics as the evidence of the author's massive honesty. One would have to accept this as variation from normal usage just like one would have to accept the same phenomena on the part of dialect writer. Just such a picture, in just such words, it is how life presented to his imagination.

Critics could take it or leave it.(1951:850)

Book like *An American Tragedy* can not be read as an ordinary novel about an individual hero. Literature of American People says that the subject of the novel is not the fortunes of the wretched Clyde Griffiths, but the nature of modern materialism which drives men like senseless particles to their doom. (1951 : 850) Dreiser no longer looks for special qualities in the individual who illustrates his thesis. He regards the spectacle of human behaviour as the recording angel might view it if he possessed an exceptionally powerful microscope. All distinction of strong and weak, good and evil, wise and foolish are obliterated by the immensity of the cosmic perspective and no need to focus on a particular character such as Macbeth or Lear when any specimen of the race will do as well. (1951:850). It was a distinctive quality of Dreiser to take for his subject the nature of mankind in large.