

Guneshwor Ojha

**Transition Phase of the American Society  
in *An American Tragedy***

**A Naturalistic Approach**



**Anchor Academic Publishing**

*disseminate knowledge*

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to – Samaira Khanal Ojha, my daughter whose love inspires my life and to Sabina Khanal, my wife and my life force.

I am grateful to Professor Yoshifumi Kato for his warmth, kindness and long-standing supports!



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## Introduction

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) was born as the ninth child to Paul and Sarah Schanab Dreiser in Terre Haute, Indiana. His parents were of German descent. Father ran a wool mill which caught fire and the family plunged into poverty. Financed by his high school teacher Dreiser went to Indiana University for one year. Later he joined newspaper and rose to be an acclaimed naturalist writer. Dreiser was brought up in a devout religious family. As a journalist he was confronted with the stark reality and harshness of life. Dreiser himself was better acquainted with poverty. He is said to have stolen money from a company (before joining journalism) to buy an overcoat. As his realm of knowledge increased in pace with his journalistic work he developed hatred for religion in his quest for the knowledge of human existence and the universe. He is regarded as the pioneer of Naturalism in American literature. However, his later works like *The Stoic* and *The Bulwark* bear spiritual marks. Dreiser turned to spiritualism in his later years.

Dreiser's projection of deity onto the atoms seems likewise remarkably reminiscent of Heckel's endowment of the atom with 'soul.' 'Even the atom,' Heckel had written, 'is not without a rudimentary form of sensation and will, or as it is better expressed, of feeling (aesthesia) and inclination (tropesis) – that is, a universal 'soul' of the simplest character.' And Dreiser's curious assertion that the divine love contained in matter-energy caused the attraction of hydrogen and oxygen as well as the attraction of the opposite sexes... (1)

However, Dreiser retains the strong image of a naturalist. His worth lies in his naturalistic writings. His first novel is *Sister Carrie* (1900) whereas *An American Tragedy* (1925) is considered his masterpiece. During his period, America was witnessing a significant change

of industrialization and modernization following the Civil War and World War I. Was the shift from the genteel tradition to modernization easy for the American society? As we shall see in these two works of Dreiser, it was not. The main tragedy (Clyde's ultimate execution) in *An American Tragedy* is interpreted as to show how such a tragedy occurs when an ambitious person from lower social strata desperately tries to climb the social ladder in a largely capitalistic society. What supports this notion is also the fact that the novel is based on a real incident and that Dreiser had recorded several such incidents before finally sitting to write the novel with the tragic theme. As a naturalist, Dreiser also conveys through Clyde that human life is regulated by instinctual, psychological and environmental circumstances and is thus deprived of free will.

It is well known that Dreiser disliked Puritanism. Here in this work, I will discuss Dreiser's distaste for Puritan/Victorian practices in *An American Tragedy*. This aspect seems to have drawn least attention in research works involving Dreiser's masterpiece. I also discuss how during the transition phase or in the shift to modernization, American society had to bear several pains.

I chose Dreiser among his contemporaries because in his works I find the best reflection of American society of that period. I fully agree with the sentiment of Irving Howe that, "No other novelist has absorbed into his work as much knowledge as Dreiser had about American institutions: the mechanisms of business, the stifling rhythms of the factory, the inner hierarchy of a large hotel, the chicaneries of city politics, the status arrangement of rulers and ruled." (2) Mostly, in *An American Tragedy*, one can see the whole facet of the then society which covers history, religion, politics, economics, morality and ethics. Some critics have also called it a historical document. In the words of Robert Penn Warren, "We also feel in this book, the burden of a historical moment, the moment of the Great Boom which climaxed the period from Grant to Coolidge, the half century in which the new America of industry and



finance capitalism was hardening into shape and its secret forces were emerging to dominate all life.” (3) I shall mainly deal with Dreiser’s masterpiece also discussing his first work alongside.

Not only is Dreiser the pioneer of naturalism but also a forerunner of modernism in the American literary arena. He is regarded as a trailblazer. He boldly worked to break the chain gate of genteel tradition paving way for literary modernism. Thus, Sherwood Anderson says, “The feet of Dreiser are making a path for us, brutal heavy feet. They are tramping through the wilderness, making a path.” (4) Likewise, Donald Pizer says, “To read the criticism of Dreiser is to receive an education in the ways in which art and society interact when an artist devotes most of his career to attacking the prevailing assumptions of his society.” (5) However, Dreiser had to pay a heavy price for his daring efforts of heralding the American literary movement to a new era. Advocates of the genteel tradition tried to suppress his first work, *Sister Carrie* and he even suffered a nervous breakdown. Yet, Dreiser pursued what he conceived as the truth with reckless abandonment. Commenting on Dreiser’s bold steps, Alfred Kazin states,

To the young writers of the early twentieth century, Dreiser became, in Mencken’s phrase, the Hindenburg of the novel – the great beast who pushed American life forward for them, who went on, blindly, unchangeably, trampling down the lies of gentility and Victorianism, of Puritanism and academicism. (6)

In Chapter one, I shall mention about the relationship between Dreiser and American naturalism. I shall also sketch an outline of *An American Tragedy* and shall draw a comparison between *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* as Dreiser’s naturalistic works. By depicting the then American social classes and their characteristics, I shall also discuss factors marking the transition/modernization of American society as seen in Dreiser’s these two works in