

Theodore dreiser his novels and naturalism



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) was born in Terre Haute, Indiana and had immigrant roots. He grew up in a poor family with ten children. Dreiser's siblings had a reputation for being tough, wild and flirtatious. His father, although briefly successful as a wool manufacturer, was destitute after his factory burned down and he could not repay the debt for fleece and machinery brought on credit. Dreiser's fiction draws on this background: it breaks with conventional literary gentility, and it chronicles with accuracy and compassion the economic struggles and intimate lives of men and women. (Werlock, 2009: 199) Dreiser is primarily known as a novelist, but his best short stories show a sophisticated understanding of the short story form, perhaps because Dreiser worked in journalism throughout his life. After a string of odd jobs in Chicago, Dreiser finally escaped his family's poverty by working as a reporter. (ibid.) Dreiser's short stories and novels reveal such themes as the allure of big cities, the power of sexual desire, the appeal of money, and the erosion of traditional mores. (ibid.) Towards the end of the 19th century, an international movement dislodged a primary assumption of classic literary realism: the characters were autonomous agents, more or less responsible for their behavior. The "naturalists" wrote novels in which particular motives mattered less than conditions that dictated events. No longer did it seem appropriate to treat characters as if they were morally accountable, and the naturalists now imagined traits and circumstances that deprived individuals of responsibility. Th. Dreiser is considered to be one of the representatives of American naturalism. (Elliott, 1988: 525) The term literary naturalism is used to describe a body of literature that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The central concerns of naturalism are the forces that shape and move humanity and our inability to control them.

Naturalism has its origins in the work of the French writer Emile Zola, who saw the naturalist as a scientist describing human behavior as a product of the forces that conditioned it, and of Charles Robert Darwin, whose *On the Origin of Species* (1859) postulated that humans evolved from lower animals and were therefore controlled by the same basic instincts. Darwin's theories led to the survival-of-the-fittest concept of human social evolution. (Werlock, 2009: 475-476) American naturalism began in the 1890s and Theodore Dreiser was one of its representatives. He chose to address themes of human existence in a more determinist way than the realists who preceded them. In contrast to realism, which attempted to capture ordinary American life as it unfolded in cities and rural areas in the middle and late 19th century, naturalism employed harsher outdoor settings and placed characters in trying situations where they often confronted natural forces. A typical protagonist of naturalism fails to heed warnings because of his/her own egotism and his/her disregard for nature's power and its indifference to human suffering. (ibid.: 476) By the turn of the century Theodore Dreiser was one of the writers who began rejecting certain illusions about individual choice- illusions elaborately sustained in the popular tradition of literary romance. Instead, he depicted experience in completely materialist terms. Those terms varied from writer to writer, given their divergent understandings of determinism, and yet the work of such writers defines the movement we know as American literary naturalism. (Elliott, 1988: 534-535) Naturalism in America was not the same movement as naturalism in Europe. Like European naturalism it was inspired by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and adhered to the doctrine that men, being part of the animal kingdom, were subjected to natural laws. However, theories and doctrines

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

were not the heart of it. The American naturalists turned to Europe; they studied concepts of naturalism because they were rebelling against an intolerable situation at home. What bound them together into a school or movement was the native rebellion and not the nature of the help that they summoned from abroad. (Bloom, 2004: 49) As a concept, American naturalism has two approaches to its definition. The first is that since naturalism comes after realism, and since it seems to take literature in the same direction as realism, it is primarily an "extension" or continuation of realism—only a little different. The second, almost inevitable approach involves this difference. The major distinction between realism and naturalism, most critics agree, is the particular philosophical orientation of the naturalists. A traditional and widely accepted concept of American naturalism, therefore, is that it is essentially realism infused with a pessimistic determinism. ¹ The common belief is that the naturalists were like realists in their fidelity to the details of contemporary life, but that they depicted everyday life with a greater sense of the role of such causal forces as heredity and environment in determining behavior and belief. (ibid: 81-82) Naturalism's treatment of female sexuality in different centuries and countries highlights the underlying gender bias of the genre, but the changes in the representation of its sexualized stock figures also signal the subtle ideological, aesthetic, and cultural shifts in naturalism across temporal and national boundaries. Though naturalism is often seen as a 19th century European literary reaction to the industrial and Darwinian revolution, the 20th century witnessed a renaissance of naturalist forms in North America at a time when modernism, with ¹ Determinism is the philosophical idea that every event or state of affairs, including every human decision and action, is the inevitable and necessary

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

consequence of antecedent states of affairs. (Online 6) Its format and generic experimentations, was about to establish itself as the dominant paradigm of literature. (Gammel, 1994: 1) The 19th century naturalism established itself as a literature with the right to articulate the “truth” on sexuality; the 20th century American naturalism continued this tradition at a time that witnessed radical changes in sexual behavior and norms. Naturalism’s ideology and aesthetics were undoubtedly shaped by the historical changes that announced the advent of the 20th century: the large-scale deployment of an urbanite consumer market (that appealed primarily to women and was accompanied by a new pleasure ideology), the arrival of the New Woman (who claimed her sexual and professional rights at the turn of the century), and the ensuing crisis of masculinity (with its defense of traditional forms of male sexuality and power). Thus, 20th century naturalism became a field in which these changes in sexual mores were not just translated into literary conventions, but were also debated and negotiated. In this process, naturalism’s traditional character types and motifs were recontextualized in new forms and given new ideological twists, at the same time that the genre’s boundaries also served as a frame to contain what may have been perceived as women’s “excessive” rebellion and threatening demand for change. (ibid.: 3) Dreiser was deeply influenced by the social philosophers of the day and his work is often considered part of American literary naturalism. However, Dreiser’s fiction does not describe only determined lives. He also portrays with great compassion the inchoate yearnings of characters who are pushed and pulled by the forces of desire, nature and society. His fiction offers astute, realistic and moving representations of the desires and lives of ordinary people. (Werlock, 2009: <https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

200) Theodore Dreiser was one of practitioner of American naturalism, and his important works elude classification as “ pessimistic”, “ optimistic” or “ reform”. The first major American writer raised on the wrong side of the tracks, Dreiser was also the first Catholic, the first to hear a foreign language at home, the first whose family was impoverished and disreputable. Such a background brought him as a child to realize the irrelevance of middle class standards. In Dreiser’s novels, impersonal energies always engulf desire. Success and failure merely form opposite sides of the same coin, and while some of his characters live comfortably, even virtuously, none possess traits that might sustain a consistent self. Because everyone acts directly in response to a sequence of impulses and temptations, no one is left able to deliberate or choose. Settings no longer constrain desire, but now express it fully, if only to confirm in the end that desire itself can never be satisfied. And in identifying desire with urban settings, described in unprecedented detail, Dreiser became the greatest chronicler of America’s cities. (Elliott, 1988: 542-543) His first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), stuck such a blow at contemporary expectations that for more than a decade it was virtually ignored. The novel *An American Tragedy* (1925) presents youths much like Carrie in background and psychology who drifts from place to place, person to person, as they are influenced by circumstances and disposition. Clyde Griffiths is shaped by a culture that images his desire for success in sexual terms. (ibid.:

543) Randolph Bourne² wrote: “ Dreiser has done a real service to the American imagination in despising the underworld and going gravely to the business of picturing sex as it is lived in the personal relations of bungling, wistful or masterful men and women. He seemed strange and rowdy only because he made sex human, and American tradition has never made

ithuman.” (Iljin, 1981: 170)Th. Dreiser wrote his novels based on what he saw himself. His own sisters had runaway to the city where one was deserted with a stillborn child and the other eloped with anembezzler who was already married. All these events are depicted in his novels. In youngCarrie Meeber his own excitement is felt when he comes to the big city. (Brooks, 1952: 183)Being the wandering journalist, he drifted from city to city- Chicago, St. Louis, Toledo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh- before he settled in New York in 1895 as a free-lance writer and editorof magazines. He met a lot of wealthy people in the lobbies of the great hotels, that later weredepicted in his novels. He was dazzled by the beautiful women and struck by the contrasts ofpoverty and wealth. (ibid.: 182)In the city news-room where Dreiser was at home the mask was always off and life washandled without gloves in a rough-and-ready fashion, whereas the magazine world was allcompact of illusions, as it seemed to him. At any rate, lawyers and doctors were alwaysvirtuous in this world and marriage was never marred by erratic behavior. There was noconsistency in American prudery and it was not to be forgotten that Havelock Ellis’s Studiesin the Psychology of Sex was published in America when it was prohibited in England. Thefate of Sister Carrie was symptomatic, nonetheless, and the eventual triumph of this vigorousnovel broke the taboo for others of its kind. (ibid.: 182-183)In his works, Dreiser turns to sexuality as the major driving force in life, holding it up asa force of progress endlessly engaged in battles against sexually repressive social conventionsand institutions. An American writer and literary critic Alfred Kazin in the introduction to theunexpurgated edition of Sister Carrie (1981) wrote: “ To the always alienated and radicalDreiser, Carrie represents the necessity of transformation, sex as revolution.” (Gogol, 1995: 32)2 Randolph Bourne - a <https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

notable American journalist, social critic, and political activist of the early 20th century. (Online 4) Surrounded by an aura of what Dreiser often calls a “pagan” sensuality, many of his female characters paradoxically also exude a strange sense of sexual abstinence, almost chastity. A critic Philip Fisher has commented on Carrie Meeber’s absence of sexual desires and eroticism in her love relationships at the same time that she enacts desires and eros very successfully on the theater stage. (ibid.: 31) In the novel *An American Tragedy* Roberta Alden briefly electrifies the protagonist Clyde Griffiths with her “poetic sensuality”, only to haunt him and the reader for the rest of the novel in the image of the corpse recovered from the depths of Big Bittern Lake, whose sexuality and desires are re-created in strangely intimate detail by pathologists and prosecutors in a spectacular murder trial. (ibid.) The example of Dreiser reveals that the strength often found in a naturalistic novel rests in the writer’s commitment to the distinctive form of his naturalistic beliefs and in his ability to transform these beliefs into acceptable character and event. We are moved by stories of such characters as Clyde not because they are independent of Dreiser’s deepest beliefs but rather because they are successful narratives of man’s impotence in the face of circumstances by a writer whose creative imagination was all of a piece. (Pizer, 1993: 68) In 1930, Vernon Louis Parrington, an American historian, labeled Dreiser the “Chief of American Naturalists”; in 1941, a critic Oscar Cargill described Dreiser’s work as “the very quintessence of Naturalism”; and in 1995, Robert Spiller had Dreiser’s naturalism coincide with “America’s second literary renaissance”. (Gammel, 1994: 5)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN SISTER CARRIE AND AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

Th. Dreiser’s novels *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* are not only a literary work; the novels and the

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

writer give detailed information about the time period and place when and where the action is set, therefore historical and cultural context takes a great deal of the novels. Dreiser would be the first to insist, the culture that Sister Carrie reflects is grounded in economic conditions. (Online 1) The novels capture the origins of modern life that is so familiar for us- people of 21st century. The story takes place in the late 19th century- the beginning of 20th century in America, particularly in growing cities such as Chicago and New York. Particular time and place captures the aspects of the Progressive Era, industrialization and growing urbanization. Among the most sweeping changes registered in the novels are the economy's shifting from an agricultural to an industrial base, the erosion of traditional values following the Darwinian revolution, and the changing relations of men and women. (ibid.) Both novels *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* transform the genre of *bildungsroman*. The genre itself charts the protagonist's actual or metaphorical journey from youth to maturity. (Online 7) Stories of *Sister Carrie* and *Clyde* belong to the genre in the sense that both of them mature into adulthood by learning how to gain their dreams by any means necessary. The Progressive Era and the formation of industrial America In 1840 America was still a rural society, a nation of farmers. The time from 1790 till 1840 is the time when America was built. Already by 1840 the percentage of Americans engaged in farming had dropped. Only about six out of ten made their living out of soil. The number of people living in towns and cities had risen to almost 11 per cent. Nearly 10 per cent of the labor force was working in factories in 1840. In 1790 the first factories were just being built which in nearest future changed the formation of American cities. (Garraty, 1982 : 291) As factories came to the life of America, so did the immigrants from <https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

Europe- England, Ireland, Germany to find the better life. (ibid.: 302) Soon after the canals and steamboats were formed, in 1830s came a still more significant technological advance- the railroad. The railroads gave the economy a great boost. Most importantly they caused various businesses to expand. Remote areas boomed once the trains reached them. Farmers expanded output, land prices rose. (ibid.: 311-312) The time period from 1830s through the 1850s was truly the Age of Reform. Everything was changing due to the rapid growth of the country. Machinery was taking over the country. (ibid.: 396) American cities, springing into life out of mere villages, often organized around nothing but the mill, the factory, or the railroad, peopled by a heterogeneous and mobile population, and drawing upon no settled governing classes for administrative experience, found the pace of their growth far out of proportion to their capacity for management. (Hofstadter, 1955: 175) The Progressive Era was a time period in American history lasting from the 1890s through the 1920s. At the turn of the century, America was experiencing rapid urbanization and industrialization. Waves of immigrants were arriving, many from southeastern Europe. As a result of these processes, countless city dwellers were crowded into tenement slums, with high rates of disease and infant mortality. (Online 2) Progressivism began as a social movement and grew into a political movement. (Online 3) Between the Civil War and 1890, the United States underwent a great transformation. Formerly a small, rural nation, whose ordinary people almost all earned their living from agriculture, it changed into a large nation with many city dwellers who earned their living in business and industry. Between 1860 and 1890, the population of America doubled, from 31.4 million to nearly 63 million. Besides cities grew much more quickly than rural areas. As

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

lateas 1870, only 21 cities had populations of more than 50, 000. By 1890 three cities had morethan million residents (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia). In sum, 44 cities had populationsof more than 50, 000, for the total of nearly 12 million Americans residing in cities ofsignificant size. “ The United States was born in the country,” as eminent historian RichardHofstadter wrote, “ and has moved to the city”. (Jaycox, 2005: 5-6)From 1860 to 1910, towns and cities sprouted up with miraculous rapidity all over theUnited States. Large cities grew into great metropolises, small towns grew into large cities, and new towns sprang into existence on vacant land. While the rural population almostdoubled during this half century, the urban population multiplied almost seven times.(Hofstadter, 1955: 64)Americans moved from the countryside to the city primary in the search of employment. They also came for the conveniences, opportunities and marvels of an urban lifestyletheatres, restaurants, large stores and most importantly- electric lighting. However, they werenot the only ones searching for the better life in cities, as Americans were joined by the largenumber of immigrants who had the same goals. By 1890 several major cities – Chicago, New10York, Milwaukee, Detroit- had populations of which more than 80 percent were eitherimmigrants or the children of immigrants. (Jaycox, 2005: 6)However, as cities mushroomed, so did urban problems. The new city dwellersoverwhelmed housing and sanitary facilities, other public and social services, and municipalgovernment itself. In 1890 most cities remained unpaved. Unpaved streets were almostalways dirty and the fact that horses still powered much of the transportation on city streetsdidn’t make the cleaning of streets much easier. The most critically inadequate public servicewas sanitation. Both sewer lines and garbage disposal were sorely

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

lacking. The water supply was constantly in danger of becoming contaminated. (ibid.: 6) By the 1890, America underwent rapid, dramatic and unprecedented economic growth. In mere 25 years the United States became an industrial giant. This astonishing economic growth was accompanied by an increasingly obvious gap between the rich and the poor. On the one hand, a new group of tremendously wealthy entrepreneurs and capitalists appeared. This social class displayed their wealth openly. They spent dazzling sums of luxurious life, including on lavish balls and parties. And increasingly, the details of their lifestyle and social events were dangled before the public in the popular press. On the other hand, a new army of poorly paid industrial wage workers had been created by the tremendous expansion of industry and manufacturing. (ibid.: 9) In preindustrial America, workers in small factories were likely to live where they might have a small garden and a cow, whereas in industrial America workers lived in crowded cities. The only thing that stood between them and starvation was uninsured weekly wages. Unfortunately, even with full employment, unskilled workers could not support the bare minimum needs of a family, unless their wives and children also worked for wages and even then it was a daily struggle. At the same time farmers found it difficult to get into the new business-like thinking and were in increasing financial distress. "The system which makes one man a millionaire," wrote Knights of Labor union leader Terence Powderly, "makes tramps and paupers of thousands." Soon people started talking about "class-conflict". (ibid: 9-10) The impact of industrialization on farming At the same time not only cities were growing; between the end of the Civil War and 1900, the number of farms in America more than doubled. Farm productivity- the yield of each acre of farmland-

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

almost doubled as well. However, the nature of farming during these years underwent many important changes. As railroads stretched across the country, farmers began to send crops to distant markets, allowing them to specialize more and grow large quantities of one cash crop. They bought new, drudgery-reducing- but expensive- agricultural machinery; therefore, becoming large debtors, taking out mortgages in the West and crop liens in the South. As debtors they were forced not only to rely on credit and interest rates set by bankers in the distant cities, but also on crop buyers in faraway cities. (Jaycox, 2005: 20-21) Some farmers in the near-Midwest and on the Pacific coast adjusted successfully to the new conditions. However, the vast majority, especially in the plains and South, did not prosper. Especially distressing to farmers, the prices for farm products fell steadily. For example, corn fell from 78 cents a bushel to 23 cents by 1890, and the wheat from \$1.60 a bushel to under 50 cents. From the farmers perspective it took more bushels of corn to payback every dollar borrowed for machinery in previous years, when prices were a bit higher. As prices fell, farmers tried to raise more and more crops to keep their incomes steady. However, the larger supply in the markets only caused prices to fall more. (ibid.:

21) Unfortunately, many farmers did not fully understand the new economic world in which they lived. Many did not believe that the main problem was overproducing. Such paradoxical, yet very logical situation was commented by Kansas governor Lorenzo Dow Lewelling: "There were hungry people... because there was too much bread." Many farmers came to believe that they were at the mercy of distant and malicious forces. (ibid.) The whole cast of American thinking during the period of urbanization was deeply affected by the experience of the rural mind confronted with the phenomena of urban

life, its crowding, poverty, crime, corruption; impersonality, and ethic chaos. To the rural migrant, raised in respectable quietude and the high-toned moral imperatives of evangelical Protestantism, the city seemed not merely a new social form or way of life but a strange threat to civilization itself. The age resounds with the warnings of prophets like Josiah Strong that the city, if not somehow tamed, would bring with it the downfall of the nation. “The first city,” wrote Strong, “was built by the first murderer, and crime and vice and wretchedness have festered in it ever since.” (Hofstadter, 1955: 176)

Farms were strongly affected by the industrialization—both financially and morally. Th. Dreiser captures the rural mind’s attitude towards the city when he mentions Roberta’s family. As soon as the father finds out about his daughter’s death, he draws parallels with the sinful urban scene and a man who tempted her daughter: And at once, born for the most part of religion, convention and a general rural suspicion of all urban life and the mystery and involuteness of its ungodly ways, there sprang into his mind the thought of a city seducer and betrayer – some youth of means, probably, whom Roberta had met since going to Lycurgus and who had been able to seduce her by a promise of marriage which he was not willing to fulfill. (Dreiser, 2010: 537)

12 Reformation of gender in the late nineteenth century To understand the future changes of roles of men and women in the American society, what Progressive Era and industrialization bring, it is important to understand the situation before changes. In the middle of 19th century America was truly the country of man. Women could not vote, hold public office or sit on juries. In the eyes of the law they were in the same position as children and they were subject to control by their husbands. Single women actually were in slightly better position: they could manage their own property,

whereas married women had no control over their own property. Women could not get into most high schools and colleges. People believed that women's brains and nervous systems could not stand the strain of studying difficult subjects such as chemistry and mathematics. Even when the level of education of women was improved, the main goal of such studies was to prepare women for marriage and motherhood, not for a "masculine" career. Everything else except marriage and family life was considered to be male-dominated fields. Only some women got into such fields, for example, Elizabeth Blackwell, a teacher, who was determined to be a doctor and became the first woman licensed to practice medicine in the United States. (Garraty, 1982: 397-398) Another such professional, Sara Josepha Hale, became the editor of the leading women's magazine of the day, Godey's Lady's Book. The overwhelming majority of professional women of the period were elementary school teachers. By the 1850s Philadelphia had 699 women and 82 men teaching in its school system. Brooklyn, New York, had 103 women and only 17 men. However, nearly all the school principals were men, and male teachers were paid higher salaries. (ibid.: 399) Women had a role of guardian of the home in middle of 19th century, when men were beginning to leave the farms for the cities. Instead of the whole family working on one plot of land, the father became the "breadwinner" and the mother guardian of the home. Men were mostly away in factories six days a week and they no longer shared in most household chores. Now women did all works concerning household. (ibid.) Throughout the 19th century, most Americans believed that women and men occupied separate spheres of life. As believed, men were suited for the public sphere of politics, business and money-making, whereas, women occupied the domestic sphere and even

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

those who worked for wages, were assumed to be primarily suited for domestic labor. Most Americans believed that women were inherently altruistic, motherly and inclined to high moral character, natural qualifications for the maintenance of home and children. (Jaycox, 2005: 27)¹³ Women of middle- and upper- class who lived in cities were in different situation. City life and increasing prosperity meant more leisure time. These women had household servants to help them with their domestic chores. Therefore, they could develop their interests and activities. Many became involved in the reform movements of the day. These women were the one who protested against slavery and soon became aware of their own situation. This was the crucial time when first steps towards the true equality for females were made. (Garraty, 1982: 400) In 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton with Lucretia Coffin Mott organized a Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York. The delegates to the convention issued a Declaration of Sentiments modeled on the Declaration of Independence. "All men and women are created equal," it said. The history of mankind, in went on, "is a history of repeated injuries... on the part of man towards woman." The progress of such thinking went on, however, the vote was not yet theirs. (ibid.: 401) From the founding of the U. S. through the early 19th century, the economy had been primarily agricultural, with the individual household the center of production. Individual families consumed, for the most part, only what they could themselves produce. (Online 1) In 1890, the primary occupation of the majority of adult women was the care of their families and homes. Only some 20 percent, the vast majority of them young and single, worked for wages outside their homes. More than half of the women who did work outside the home were in domestic service. Most of the others were engaged in either

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

light industrial labor or in such new white-collar occupations as saleslady, office worker or telephone operator. Among educated and professional women, teaching was the primary occupation and nursing a second. Only a few women became doctors and a few trained in law, although the right had to be won slowly on a state-by-state basis. (Jaycox, 2005: 30) Between 1860 and 1900 the United States went through one of its most dramatic periods of change in its entire history. In 1860 about 80 per cent of the nation's 31 million inhabitants lived on farms. About 1.5 million, less than 5 per cent, worked in factories. By 1890s about 5 million Americans worked in factories. Small towns started changing into large cities, new industrial growth was visible everywhere. In 1900 about 40 per cent of America's 76 million people lived in towns and cities. (Garraty, 1982: 551) Factories and machinery were developed what increased the amount a worker could produce. This tended to raise wages and lower prices. Large factories had to be run like armies. (ibid.: 564-565) In 1865 most people lived much the same way as their parents and grandparents had. The lives of the people of 1900 were different- closer to what we know now. (ibid.: 575)¹⁴ Contrary to the model of stay-at-home wife and mother associated with the Victorian era, in the early economy, the labor of women was central. Women canned the family crops, spun cloth and crafted it into clothing and linens, made soaps and candles, and produced other essential goods. The transition from an agricultural economy centered in the family to an industrial order characterized by managerial capitalism depended on the development of factories throughout the 19th century. Factories demanded centralized labor, large groups of unrelated people leaving the home and working under one roof. With this shift, work necessarily moved outside the home, and as that happened, the

<https://assignbuster.com/theodore-dreiser-his-novels-and-naturalism/>

meaning of the family and the home also changed. Th. Dreiser grounds *Sister Carrie* in this factory-based capitalist economy, highlighting its effects on individuals and families. (Online 1) However, it is important to mention that at the turn of the century work outside the home for a woman was viewed, throughout most of the culture, as a sometimes necessary and always unfortunate way station along the road to marriage. For this reason, whether a woman was good at her work simply did not matter. Marriage was really the only plot women could enact in literature as well as life. (Gogol, 1995: 8) In 1890, one year after Dreiser imagines Carrie's arrival in Chicago, women made up seventeen percent of the national labor force, with women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four forming the largest proportion of this group. (Online 1) The novel *An American Tragedy* pictures Lycurgus, a city that demonstrates growing factories and women workforce: This enormous factory! So long and wide and high - as he had seen - six stories. And walking along the opposite side of the river just now, he had seen through several open windows whole rooms full of girls and women hard at work. [...] the high red walls of the building suggested energy and very material success, a type of success that was almost without flaw, as he (Clyde) saw it. (Dreiser, 2010: 182) The particular factory in Lycurgus is an example of typical factory of the early 20th century, where women make the big amount of workforce. " This plant is practically operated by women from cellar to roof. In the manufacturing department, I venture to say there are ten women to every man," says Gilbert, who is the son of the factory's owner. (ibid.: 238) The time of early 20th century in industrialized America is the main platform for the formation of business as such, international, the formation of equality between a man and a woman as workers." The men and women who work

for us have got to feel that they are employees first, last and all the time - and they have to carry that attitude out into the street with them," adds Gilbert. (ibid.)