Chapter Five

SUMMATION

Theodore Dreiser occupies a conspicuous position among the American novelists who portray American society without any inhibition. The son of a German immigrant, Dreiser was the ninth of ten surviving children and grew up in poverty. He spent a year at Indiana University before becoming a newspaper reporter in 1892. His reading, especially of T. H. Huxley, John Tyndall, and Herbert Spencer, and personal experiences led him to a pessimistic view of human helplessness in the face of instinct and social forces.

The initial failure of his first novel, Sister Carrie (1900), the story of a kept woman whose behaviour goes unpunished, plunged him into depression, but he recovered and achieved financial success as editor-in-chief of several women’s magazines. In 1911 his second novel, Jennie Gerhardt, was published. It was followed in 1912 by The Financier and in 1914 by The Titan, two volumes in a projected trilogy based on the life of the transportation magnate Charles T. Yerkes. The “Genius” (1915), a sprawling semiautobiographical chronicle of Dreiser’s numerous love affairs, was censured by the New York society for the suppression of vice. In 1925 he published his novel, An American Tragedy. Based on a celebrated murder case, it brought him a degree of critical and commercial success he had never before attained. Its highly critical view of the American society made him the adopted champion of social reformers. He
completed most of *The Stoic*, the long-postponed third volume of his trilogy on Yerkes, in the weeks before his death. His other works include short stories, plays, and essays.

Dreiser’s depiction of his characters in his novels is the result of his deep study of the conditions and fate of the individual in the social set-up of his time. The social set-up was mainly responsible for the making of his characters. This can be seen in their behaviour, attitudes and ideas. As a journalist, Dreiser had the opportunity to observe and record events that actually happened. With keen observation, he could realise that an individual’s attitude to life was coloured chiefly by the society of his time, particularly, in matters of money and morals. Then he formed his own impressions of human character and behaviour and presented them imaginatively in fictional form. Dreiser’s portrayal of his characters in his novels is the result of his social, evolutionary and political philosophies and his insight into human character and psychology.

The present thesis entitled “Social Tension and Personal Reaction: A Reading of the Select Novels of Theodore Dreiser” discusses in detail the conspicuous social tension observable in Dreiser’s works which also explicitly portrayed the personal reaction of the individuals in the novels.

The first chapter titled **Introduction** discusses the title of the thesis. It also gives a brief summary of the novels of Dreiser and the succeeding chapters of the thesis. American society is replete with various factors that affect individuals directly and indirectly causing tension. The individual reacts to it in different manners. Dreiser has presented in his novels the society with its observable
tension. His protagonists are thus the representatives of the individuals of his time.

Society is an extended social group having a distinctive cultural and economic organisation. The origin of the word ‘society’ comes from the Latin ‘societas,’ a “friendly association with others.” ‘Societas’ is derived from ‘socius’ meaning “companion” and thus the meaning of society is closely related to what is social. Implicit in the meaning of society is that its members share some mutual concern or interest in a common objective. As such, society is often used as synonymous with the collective citizenry of a country as directed through national institutions concerned with civic welfare. Social tensions have a direct impact on social welfare by threatening social cohesion.

American society has one of the most comprehensive and complex types of social structure in today’s world. The pressure the society puts on an individual is overwhelming and the reaction has far-reaching effects on the society. The nation is incurably materialistic and respects man not for the intrinsic worth in him but only for his wealth. This attitude to life naturally conditions the minds of individuals. As a result, the individuals stop at nothing in their craze for wealth, power and consequent social status.

Since the Civil War, average Americans had watched, half dazed, half entranced, while finance and enterprise flourished on an unprecedented scale. For the first time, industrial-era corporations and utility companies were shaped in the modern pattern, marked by common characteristics: massiveness, concentrated
wealth, octopus like tenacity and reach, untold power seized through piratical methods or legislative corruption, and a fundamental contempt for public opinion.

As the implications of this unbridled power struggle in “the land of the free” slowly dawned upon the citizenry, and particularly upon the writers, “the shadow of the muckrake” fell over the land. It became permissible for “captains of industry” to be unmasked as “robber barons.” Condemnations of big-business monopoly cropped up in the press; magazines and newspapers found exposes so profitable that few areas of public life were left undisturbed. One by one, the largest areas of industrial-era problems – the oil monopoly, slums, factory conditions, child labour, insurance, wheat and beef production, railroads, city government – were subjected to microscopic examination.

In Dreiser’s novels, the hands-off policy had been dramatised in the abject failure of George Hurstwood, for which society accepted no responsibility and offered no help, as well as the triumph of Frank Cowperwood, who through amoral self-interest amassed millions. Dreiser saw the Capitalistic system itself as the great enemy. He attacked the very basis of the American way, for through its endorsement of monopolistic practices it made possible, even encouraged, the piling up of untold wealth and power in the hands of the strong. On the other hand, large sections of the population knew unprecedented deprivation as a result of these same practices.

In A Book about Myself Dreiser wrote much about his observations of American economic practices during the 1880s and 1890s. In retrospect, he could see clearly that “America was just entering upon the most lurid phases of
that vast, splendid, most lawless and most savage period in which the great financiers were plotting and conniving at the enslavement of the people” (Dreiser, *A Book* 386). In his indictment, he named John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, William H. Vanderbilt, Jay Gould and others in a list that could well have included Charles T. Yerkes, whose buccaneering career he had fictionalised in the *Trilogy of Desire*.

Dreiser’s chief concern was with the individual’s relationship to society. He both respected and feared the omnipotence of society. Dreiser dreamed of powerful, magnetic, dominant individuals untrammelled by codes or caste. In some ways they seemed to represent an ideal, even a pernicious one. Dreiser himself was far from being such a man, and most of his fellow citizens, he was fairly certain, were even more intimidated and inhibited than himself. Dreiser was fond of conjuring up the image of men with strength enough to rise boldly to their full stature and to choose their own battlefields on which they challenge the society’s massive power and win.

Dreiser’s men and women are victims of crass materialism. He shows them as scapegoats of the modern economic system and the double dealing of the city. His novels study the failure of American youth. The American youth, according to Dreiser, is fated to strive for the objects of their personal desire. The chief characters in the novels of Dreiser suffer because of their personal desire and self interest. His characters are often the victims of ambitions to have all the worldly luxuries within their reach. The outward glow of fashionable American society appeals to them very powerfully.
In Dreiser’s novels, the hero or the heroine goes madly after material affluence and social status because they belong to a society in which the rich alone enjoy all comforts and luxuries and the poor are totally neglected or exploited. Money is the most important social yardstick, and if the individual is to raise he must, somehow, gain possession of enough of it to secure him a place in the class he desires to enter. A good number of Dreiser’s characters begin with nothing; hence, their first problem is to acquire the means to satisfy their social ambitions. Society lures its men and women with the possibilities of achieving power by accumulating money or having control over the public utilities by fair or foul means and to bask in the resultant glory.

The second chapter **Power and the Glory** studies Dreiser’s treatment of man’s obsession with attaining power by amassing wealth or influencing the society by controlling public utilities. Ignoring the genteel tradition of his day, Dreiser wrote novels which shocked the readers by their simple but brutal honesty. It was his conviction that he should write only of what he knew to be true. His novels are social documents that portray American youth who enter into a ruthless struggle with society. Dreiser’s heroes are motivated either by animal appetites and instincts or by a desire for position in society or by both.

Industrial Revolution brought American people a value crisis. Serial changes made people feel they were conquering the world and obtaining their treasures. The surprising development made people feel too close to wealth and happiness. There appeared small number of industrial giants and a large number of poor people. American value became materialistic to the core. Living in such
a society with such a value system, the human individual is obsessed with a never
ending, yet meaningless search for satisfaction of his desire. Dreiser deals with
the desire of wealth, social status, material things which are represented by
money. The influence, prestige, power, everything is commanded by moneyed
people.

On every side, during his travels in the 1890s, Dreiser had become witness
to the vast gap that divides the rich from the poor in America. He heard constant
talk about the equality of opportunity that was supposed to characterise American
life, but he saw little evidence that it was being taken seriously. Men preached
one thing and practiced another. Self-interest appeared to be the only guiding
interest of men, and the practical results of this for Dreiser were disheartening in
the extreme. Everywhere he went, from Chicago to Saint Louis, to Pittsburgh, to
New York City, he seemed to sense either a terrifying desire for lust or pleasure
or wealth, accompanied by a heartlessness which was freezing to the soul, or a
dogged resignation to deprivation and misery.

Dreiser presents a world where the material environment – above all, the
goods for sale and their mode of sale – is a culture that dictates desire. In a
consumer society, goods provoke an insatiate desire while at the same time
creating the feeling that the desired object is necessary to one’s well-being, one’s
sense of self, and one’s place in the world. Dreiser rendered honestly desires of
men and women: Carrie Meeber’s for clothes, money and social position; Jennie
Gerhardt’s for warmth, security, and respectability for herself and her illegitimate
daughter; the financier Frank Cowperwood wants money for the cosmic “Force”
it will bring him: the artist Eugene Witla wants “Life” – which at first means gritty urban experience, later accumulation and display; and the status-striving Clyde’s feelings expressed feverish yearning for sex, for status, for possessions, for power, rather than fulfillment.

The hope of attaining American dream of success draws Dreiser’s characters to the city. In their pursuit of power and social status the distinguishing human qualities are ignored or suppressed. The pursuit of glamorous life reduces man to mere animal existence. Complicating and even complementing the situations in which they find themselves is another strong factor – sexual activity. In the massive struggle for survival, human beings stumble and fall.

The third chapter titled **Sex and the City** deals with Dreiser’s presentation of the promiscuity of city life. In Chicago, Dreiser became a daily witness to scenes of human degradation. The cruelty of the city was a vital primer in the doctrine which he was later to know by name as the survival of the fittest. Through his exposure to Huxley, Tyndall, and Spencer, Dreiser formulated his declared beliefs that life is without purpose or plan, that man has no soul, that free will and original sin are myths, that human morality and motivation are based on physiological and sociological fate.

Dreiser’s first vision of the great city of Chicago was one of wonder and beauty. Living in the city and acquiring first-hand knowledge of the different echelons of the society, Dreiser soon realised that the city is a modern jungle where men enter into savage competition. Failure in this competition results in
poverty and total misery. On the other hand, success in the struggle intoxicates man and corrupts him. The achievement of the dream of material possession results in the loss of inner spiritual integrity. It is this human condition that Dreiser depicts in his novels.

David Weimer finds in Dreiser’s works, an allegory in which, “the characters are drawn to the city, given a glimpse of the good life inside the ‘mansion’ and then cast back on the side walk disillusioned and destroyed” (72). In *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, the stories of Clyde Griffiths and George Hurstwood conform to this thematic scheme and have become touchstones in assessing Dreiser’s significance. Similarly, Carrie, Clyde, and Eugene Witla were drawn to the city thinking that the city supplies the key that would unlock the door of their future. Dreiser went to the core of American experiences – the flight to the big city in search of self, the loss of such self in the pursuit of success and pleasure.

Dreiser believed that among the natural forces within man that significantly determines much of his action is the sex drive. Dreiser’s autobiographies offer ample evidence that he was afflicted to an unusual degree with romantic desire that could never be satisfied. The absence of fulfillment intensified his brooding melancholy. To put it precisely, Dreiser was a notorious womaniser whose affairs of the heart and exploits in the bedroom numbered in the hundreds and spanned his entire lifetime. In *Newspaper Days*, speaking of his own state of mind during his early days, Dreiser made a frank statement: “My body was blazing with this keen sex desire I have mentioned, as well as a desire
for material and social supremacy – to have wealth, to be in society et cetera – and yet I was too cowardly to make my way with women readily” (128). Dreiser points out time and again, through the portrayal of his male protagonists, that man is an eating, savage animal whose greatest appetite is sex.

Dreiser seems to be convinced that a natural concomitant of the craze for wealth is the craze for sexual indulgence. Dreiser presents each of his male characters with a difference in their attitude to sex and women. Drouet has been described by Dreiser as a moth of the lamp with regard to his relationship with women. Hurstwood is simply obsessed with the beauty of Carrie and nothing beyond. As for Cowperwood, it is the question of variety in women; he fancies each woman for a particular quality. Cowperwood combines his adventures in the world of finance with the seduction of women. Eugene Witla finds his aesthetic fulfillment in the beauty of girls in their teens. Clyde wants to get rid of Roberta and marry Sondra Finchley only to attain wealth and social status. In like manner, Dreiser’s female characters also make use of the victims or they themselves become victims of the sexual impulse of these men.

The craze of Dreiser’s characters for power and sex are realistic with reference to twentieth century American life. Man is more or less a slave of hypnotic, incomprehensible drives for sexual conquest, for esteem, fame, power and money. In Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, the men with their sexual immorality are responsible for the tragedy of the heroines. However, in both the novels it is really the men who suffer the ultimate tragedy. Drouet, Hurstwood, Senator Brander, Lester Kane, Clyde Griffiths, Cowperwood and Eugene Witla
are representatives of men in the male-dominated world. Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, Roberta Alden, and Angela Blue are representatives of women in the twentieth century America who were victims in the hands of male chauvinists.

Dreiser was fascinated by his observation of man’s disillusioned longing for ultimate fulfillment. As a consulting editor for the magazine Success, a monthly which highlighted the accomplishments of the nation’s prosperous and outstanding personalities by describing how they became so, Dreiser interviewed a number of rich and celebrated men and most of them piously professed that spiritual peace was far more important than material well being.

Dreiser had always been a dreamer of large dreams and intensely ambitious for financial security, material comforts, social acceptance, and the glamour of a writer’s career. He believed from his reading that existence is meaningless and he was concerned less with the pleasure in the pursuit of an object than with the disillusionment that attended its acquisition. With the dawning of the age of conspicuous consumption in America had come the realisation that material things do not bring fulfillment. The frenzied pursuit of an illusory happiness had already struck Dreiser as the most fascinating phase of American city life around the turn of the century.

Man is lost in the turmoil of material pleasures and ultimate fulfillment has always been seen as beyond man’s grasp in his earthly state. Dreiser’s characters were the victims of their vaulting aspirations. They aspire to goals that are transient and beyond their grasp. In fact, the protagonists of Dreiser fail in their pursuit of American Dream.
The fourth chapter entitled **Labour Lost** tells about the useless pursuit of wealth, sex and power. Dreiser’s novels are remarkable for their author’s profound preoccupation with frustrated desire. Randolph Bourne remarked in a review of *The “Genius”* that “the insistent theme of Mr. Dreiser’s works is desire, perennial, unquenchable” (5). Dreiser employs a variety of terms to describe and translate desire. At times he refers to inexplicable longing, unreasoning passion, or chemic compulsion, but always the reference is to the fact that his characters’ desires are unquenchable.

Dreiser’s novels portray the vaulting materialistic ambition of the American society. His protagonists are lost in the labyrinth of materialism and are unable to get out of the maze in spite of their wish to do so. Their adventures end as misadventures or in pyrrhic victories. Indeed, Dreiser’s novels vividly exemplify the struggle between the protagonists and the society and consequently his characters seem to wage an arduous struggle for status, money and position, the obvious parameters to assess an individual in a society.

*Sister Carrie* portrays the struggle of Carrie Meeber in the materialistic society, her raise and the despair and loneliness that follows her success. *Jennie Gerhardt* portrays Jennie as a selfless, magnanimous heroine who becomes a victim of her character and fate. Her nobility could not be recognised by the materialistic society. *An American Tragedy* is the story of Clyde Griffiths, a young American who kills his pregnant lady love to facilitate his marriage to a rich girl and pays the heavy price of ending his life in the electric chair. Dreiser’s *Trilogy of desire: The Financier, The Titan, and The Stoic* deals with the tragic
end of Cowperwood who is given to the false impression that force governs the world. The “Genius” portrays the story of Eugene Witla, an example of American tragic reality.

Dreiser’s fictions present the relentless and vain search of the individuals for fulfillment through the American Dream. Carrie’s aching need for material, social, and artistic success is answered with gowns, carriages, position, and career. When she attains the pinnacle of luxury, the illusory world hangs heavily on her. At the end of the novel, Carrie finds herself still hopeful of release from “longings” and “heartaches”.

Frank Cowperwood, the robber baron hero of the Trilogy of Desire, acquires a succession of mansions, priceless painting, and enchanting mistresses, but fulfillment eludes him. Dreiser insisted in his fiction that even the superhuman shall be the ultimate pawn of circumstance. Dreiser allows the winds of chance to blow through the Trilogy, rendering even great men insignificant against powerful forces. The Chicago fire smashes Cowperwood’s dreams of conquest in Philadelphia; the failure of the financial house of Jay Cooke re-establishes him as a power. His own death, coming at the worst possible time, demolishes his empire and scatters its ashes.

Eugene Witla, the artist hero of The “Genius”, is sustained neither by his art nor by the many liaisons that mark his frenzied pursuit of the “impossible she” (The “Genius” 105). His pursuit of beauty leads him to dejection and depravity when Suzanne Dale, the embodiment of ideal beauty and aesthetic perfection, considers her relationship with him as only a passing phase in her life. Clyde
Griffiths’ doomed dream of money, importance, and sexual power leads him inexorably to the electric chair. Dreiser exposes individuals as helpless pawns of economic and social forces beyond control and attacks the society for promoting false standards.

The researcher after embarking on this study came across many features that indicated the view that Dreiser’s novels could be great subjects for psychoanalytical criticism as well. As a matter of fact, his characters are suitable for psychoanalytical study. The researcher is of the view that future scholars who prefer to work on Dreiser may analyse Dreiser and his works from a psychoanalytical point of view as well.