PREFACE

During the first half of the twentieth century, there are many literary stars, such as Jack London, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. Among these writers, Theodore Dreiser is one of the most outstanding novelists. Although he was not awarded with the Nobel Prize for literature, he is “deservedly regarded as a leading exponent of naturalism in American fiction” (Elliott 1571), and a powerful writer who described the twentieth century America vividly and realistically. With the publication of *Sister Carrie* in 1900, Dreiser became the first American author to step into the twentieth century, rejecting the old Victorian morality for what was considered to be a shocking new form of descriptive realism.

Before Theodore Dreiser was born, his father, a devout German immigrant, lost everything when his large wool mill burned down. During the mill’s rebuilding, a beam hit his head, which resulted in his dramatic mood swings; this brain damage caused him to become an evangelist. After that, Dreiser’s father became extremely religious and was easily cheated by his business partners.

Theodore Dreiser was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1871. By this time, his parents were poor, nomadic preachers. Their nomadic lifestyle meant that Dreiser did not have any companions outside his family. While travelling, his mother taught him to avoid degrading and destructive experiences. Certain that his parents were failures because of their strong moral codes and their constant
preaching, he rebelled. Dreiser had no friends, money, social status, or sex life, which he craved. For most Americans, these were collectively “The American Dream.” For Dreiser and his most famous character, Clyde Griffiths, living the American Dream – the evasive pinnacle of success – became an obsession. That obsession led Dreiser to Indiana University, which he flunked out of. Instead of preaching, he instantly abandoned his unsuccessful family for the promise of riches and women in industrial Chicago.

After living in abject poverty for years, he worked as a journalist for both Chicago Globe and St. Louis Globe-Democrat, which gave him a glimpse of high society. He married Sara White. The two ultimately got separated and Dreiser eventually became a nomad. While wandering, he studied the writings of Balzac, Darwin, Freud, Hawthorne, Huxley, Poe, and Spenser, from which he created two philosophical theories: social Darwinism governs society, and man’s greatest appetite is sexual. Dreiser followed his philosophy; he typically had several affairs at once.

The researcher, while doing her Post Graduate course in English Literature and American Studies in Annamalai University, was enamoured by one author – Theodore Dreiser. *Sister Carrie* was in the syllabus. Attracted by the novel the researcher began to read a few of his books. She found that Dreiser is relevant even in present day Indian context and so she decided to do her Ph.D., in Dreiser. When her research supervisor heard about it he encouraged her to work on the author.
The present thesis entitled **Social Tension and Personal Reaction: a Reading of the Select Novels of Theodore Dreiser** studies Dreiser’s presentation of society as a malefactor producing criminals and immoral women. The researcher has selected all the novels of Dreiser except *The Bulwark* for her study. *The Bulwark* is different in cast from the other novels in its theme. It was published posthumously in 1946. Dreiser’s main purpose in this novel was to trace the spiritual development of Solon Barnes. Though Dreiser holds modern society responsible for the loss of faith in traditional value in the novel he does not elaborate on this point rather he elaborates on Quaker faith and the spiritual development of Solon Barnes. It lacks the usual documentation found in other novels. The researcher shares F. O. Matthiessen’s view that the novel “reads more like a chronicle” (242) and “is far more a symbolical than a naturalistic novel, basically as bare as a parable” (243).

In Dreiser’s view society lures men and women with tinsels only to trap and destroy them. The seeming glory of rich possessions and offer of indisputable power is nothing but tricks to attract, capture, and destroy. Dreiser’s characters rush towards power and possessions as insects do towards a burning lamp at night. The second chapter of the thesis deals with the aura associated with material possessions and how Dreiser’s characters are carried away by it. All Dreiser’s central characters move to cities and find cities fecund enough to feed their passions. They also have weakness for sex. The male characters in the garb of search for beauty indulge in indiscriminate sexual affairs. Obviously, women exploit this weakness of men to gain comforts. This is studied in the third
chapter of the thesis. Dreiser in his novels stresses the futility of chasing materialistic dreams. All his major characters end up desolate. The futility of pursuing material benefits at the expense of ethics and morality is studied in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter sums up the thesis.

The researcher has followed the seventh edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* for research methodology.