CHAPTER VIII
Conclusion
It has been stressed in the preceding chapters that heredity and social environment play a vital role in shaping the destiny of Dreiser's characters as was in the case of Dreiser himself. Born of extremely pietistic parents, Dreiser himself was the victim of the forces of heredity and social environment. The crucial events of his stories occur as a consequence of innumerable prior experiences. Dreiser's themes of slow growth, of gradual personal disintegration and of life's inevitable reversals, therefore, required a different approach. In each novel he is telling us something about his personal life, his ambitions and frustrations.

In dramatizing man's ultimate helplessness against the forces which prod him, we have the feeling that Dreiser was looking at himself through his characters. All his major novels describe the stories of individuals crippled by unfavourable circumstances. About determinism and human helplessness, Dreiser said that he was helpless personally. The efforts he made for getting material success and acquiring social recognition, were not of his own volition. He had to make them
because the forces that moved him required him to. Like
Elia, Dreiser believed that there was no free will. We
are all governed by the forces of heredity and social envi-
ronment.

Dreiser has often been called the first naturalist
because he created for his characters natural and recognizable
motivations and circumstances rather than an idealized and
exceptional world. We do not have worked-out 'situation' in
his novels but have case after case - Carrie, Hurstwood,
Eugene Witta, Clyde Griffiths, Roberta Alden. In his novels,
we have a large gallery of individuals who are victims of a
ruthless social process. But at the same time, they evade
its claim to full domination over them because of their strong
heredity.

Dreiser's repeated references in his early works to
the chemical compound which is youth, 'the chemical force' within
the mind, 'the chemical formula which works to reproduce the
species' show that he believed in mechanistic psychology. The
notion that mental activity is a chemical reaction is, in fact,
not a full explanation of that activity. Dreiser still recog-
nised some wonderful mystery, some all important force which
give life its 'wonder and terror and meaning.' In A Book About Myself (1922) he broods over the impermanence of life:

"When one was dead, one was dead for all time. Hence the reason for the heart-break over the failure here and now, the awful tragedy of a love lost, a youth never properly enjoyed. Think of living yet not living in so thrashing a world as this, the best of one's hours passing unused or not properly used. Think of seeing this tinkling phantasmagoria of pain and pleasure beauty and all its sweetness go by, and yet being compelled to be a bystander, a mere onlooker, enhungered but not satisfied."

This yearning is present in all of his novels. As a materialist, then, he recognised, in the The Genius (1923) that man is not in control of his destiny. He is a helpless individual destroyed by social or hereditary forces over which he has hardly any control. Dreiser observed:

"Most of these youngmen (reporters) looked upon life as fierce, grim struggle in which no quarter was either given

or taken, and in which all men laid traps, lied, squandered, erred through illusion, a conclusion with which I now most heartily agree."²

What distinguishes Dreiser from his predecessors Henry James and Stephane Crane is his deep concern to identify the social forces, to grasp them and then to co-relate them with human destiny. The main motif in the works of Henry James and Stephane Crane is awareness or self-discovery. The works of Dreiser, on the other hand deal with social Darwinism. According to James T. Farrell "Dreiser can be described as the American novelist who reflect social Darwinism in his work."³

Dreiser tried to grasp the working and operation of social laws as they affect human destiny. Consequently, the movement of his novel does not depend upon acts of will by the central figures (barring of course, the Cowperwood Trilogy viz. The Financier, The Titan and The Stoic which deal with the Superman Cowperwood). It is the general flux of life. It is the quality of lives represented that moves the reader, not the excitement

² idem.
of what the characters do. Dreiser in this respect reminds us of the impressionism of Stephane Crane and anticipates Sherwood Anderson.

Dreiser feels keenly the plight of each individual soul at the mercy of chance and of forces beyond his control. Man is a mechanism. His pitiful existence is determined by factors of biology and social environment. The vulnerability of the characters of Dreiser depends upon the degree of cohesion between the forces of heredity and those of social environment. The fragility or strength of his characters viz. Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, Clyde Griffiths, Eugene Witla and Cowperwood depends upon their hereditary background. The pitiful cry of the sex criminal of The Hand And th Potter. "I ain't made right" "Can you blame a man when he ain't right" reflected upon his weak heredity. But, besides the forces of heredity, the forces of social environment were equally responsible for his downfall.

The protagonists of Dreiser fall an easy prey to the doctrine that wealth is all. One of the most familiar themes of the short stories and the novels of Dreiser is man's helplessness before social and economic forces, Dreiser has
described two scales of society in his novels - the one representing wealth and social position called the Havees, the other representing poverty and starvation called the Have-nots. The tragedy in his novels is the tragedy of social structures.

The greatest blot on American character is its avidity to get as much money as possible. The individual is replacing the family. The family is getting reduced and fragmented. In a materialistic social environment human relationships are based on the consideration of money. Money is the sole driving force in a materialistic society as it brings social recognition and respectability. Love and beauty are treated as commodities.

The material affluence of Cowperwood gave him enormous power to enjoy the love of countless women. From the world of art to the world of women, everything was at his command. Drouet and Hurstwood took advantage of the poverty of Carrie and senator Brander was successful in establishing sexual liaison with Jennie Gerhardt because of his superior social and economic status. Women, on the other hand, use men for acquiring money and social recognition. They use
their love-objects as spring-boards for getting success and social respectability. Carrie moved from one lover to another because they offered her fresh prospects of gay life, Jennie allowed herself to be prostituted by senator Brander and Lester Kane because of the need of money, Roberta Alden yielded to Clyde Griffiths because of his better economic status. Sex, therefore, has been treated as a means for getting money and social recognition besides biological urge, in the novels of Dreiser.

The lure for money and the lure for sex go simultaneously in a materialistic society which is bereft of moral values, woman is treated as a sexual object only. The society turns her into "a product which is then confiscated for use in a consumer society."^4

Sex is less a matter of morality than a question of convenience or the acquisition of a lovely status-symbol. There is complete absence of love in the man-woman relationship in the novels of Dreiser. Dreiser has connected sex with money and social ambition. There is no description of marital love in his novels. Man and women live together as meaningful associates only. They do not believe in one-love one-life.

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theory. They go on co-habiting with one another in search of the impossible. She or He. Sexual promiscuity is the main integer of a materialistic society. Dreiser himself had noticed the sex vagaries of the people which were not uncommon in his times. He was of the opinion that people should not be given too sharp a punishment if strict justice was to be done at all. He too was sick of the exaggerations of sex in the works of modern novelists but in his view it was foolish to ignore it. He wrote in The New York Times:

"I too am sick of the exaggeration of sex in the novels of today. But the person who ignores sex is as much a fool as the person who over-emphasizes it. You can't write a novel of realism and let sex out of the picture even as you can't write a novel full of sex and call it realism." 5

Dreiser, therefore, should not be branded as a reveller in sex. Dreiser was conscious of the natural attraction of the opposite sexes. Drouet and Hurstwood were drawn towards Carrie, Clyde was bewitched by the beauty of Roberta and tempted by Sondra Finchley, Senator Brander and Lester Kane were caught up by the beauty of scrub-woman Jennie Gerhardt.

Eugene Witle and Cowperwood were unable to control themselves after seeing the delicate curves of the body of a woman. Dreiser knew the importance of sexual urge in life. He believed that no authentic picture of life was possible without it. In a materialistic social environment people fall an easy prey to the drives for sex and money. Carrie moved from one lover to another because they promised her fresh prospects of gilded life. In Jennie Gerhardt, the meek submission of Jennie first to senator Brander and then to Lester Kane was a sad commentary upon the values prevailing in the American materialistic society. The murder of a poor and innocent girl like Roberta Alden in An American Tragedy was the murder of human values in the prevailing materialistic social environment according to Dreiser. Heredity and social environment, therefore, determine the attitude of Dreiser's character towards love and sex. The characters which have weak heredity yield easily before the forces of social environment. Conversely, those who have strong hereditary background are able to thwart the influence of the forces of social environment.

There is increasing self-alienation in a materialistic social environment because of the erosion of moral
values and complete absence of spiritual belief from the lives of the people. The emergence of industrial culture evolves new concepts and motifs. The city becomes the centre of attraction. The focus shifts from the prairie to the city as the city offers a world of hope and opportunities. To Dreiser, the city was not just a painted canvas or stage-setting "It was a vital terrifying, convulsive presence in his life and consequently, in the lives of his characters." The city was the glittering yet terrifying jungle in which the struggle for survival was fierce and motifs of self interest dominated. Chicago, New York and San Francisco were the places which were filled with hope as well as despair. They were the battlegrounds of existence. Carrie had to leave the green environment of the village and her parents for Chicago in order to get a job. Clyde Griffiths also had to leave his parents and serve as a bell-boy in a hotel in Kansas City and then work in the Collar manufacturing firm of his uncle Samuel Griffiths at Lycurgus. The seductive appearance of the city captivates the hearts of Dreiser's characters and causes emotional as

well as economic alienation in their lives. The passion for acquisitiveness alienates the characters of Dreiser from their family and ultimately from the society. They realize the futility of material prosperity in the end as it fails to give them true happiness. Carrie who could dazzle the big-wigs of the society remained within herself a solitary and bewildered child trying to understand the mystery of this world. "In your rocking chair, by your window shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel." Lester Kane, Eugene Witta, Clyde Griffiths and Cowperwood all were disillusioned in the end as money and free-sex could not give them real happiness. They all writhed in solitude. It is this essential solitariness of Drei ser's that lingers in our imagination. The profound sense of loneliness and alienation that the characters of Dreiser feel exposes the values prevailing in a materialistic social environment. Kazin has rightly called Dreiser's work as a 'series of indelible episodes in the moral history of twentieth century man.'


But Dreiser was not anti-man or minus-man. Despite the fact that Dreiser saw the collapse of moral values in the materialistic social environment, he had faith in man’s ultimate triumph and his enormous capacity to bear everything. We notice in his characters a strong personal desire to survive, to fight to win and an intense desire to understand the mysteries of life even though they are pitted against hostile forces of social environment. In the person of Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser has described a victim of contemporary American dream of achieving success, through money. The tragedy of Clyde’s life was the tragedy of an average American.

Dreiser understood the selfish urgencies of the people which lead to unsocial behaviour. He does not regard his characters as sinners. On the other hand, they are more sinned against than sinning. The world of Dreiser was more like the jungle in which none of the social things was established than of Edith Wharton. This world was peopled with men and women starting poor, vulgar, ignorant, emotionally starved but determined to win for themselves wealth, luxury, social recognition and the gratification of love. In this struggle most were doomed to mediocrity and many heedless
ones were doomed to be caught by the clutches of law like Clyde in *An American Tragedy* or to ignominious defeat and death like Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*.

Dreiser shared a personal affinity with his characters. These characters were very much the sort he took himself to be, with the same problems ambitions, cravings and discouragements. He was sympathetic towards them because of this affinity. In the world which Dreiser saw as a seething maclstorm whether his character were winners or losers in their struggle, it was immaterial, Dreiser saw the working of a social process in determining the destiny of his characters.

To conclude, we may say that heredity and social environment play a conspicuous role in shaping the destiny of Dreiser's characters. They are all influenced by the forces of heredity and social environment. The characters of Dreiser experience happiness in life when the forces of heredity are in harmony with the forces of social environment and they face misery and troubles in life when the forces of heredity are antagonistic to the forces of social environment. The potentialities of heredity are realized within a proper and favourable social environment. The rise or fall of the characters of Dreiser takes place according to their capacity to adjust themselves to the prevailing social environment.