

REPRESENTATION OF THE WOMAN CHARACTER IN THEODORE DREISER'S NOVEL "JENNIE GERHARDT"

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Abstract

This article explores the representation of the central female character, Jennie Gerhardt, in Theodore Dreiser's 1911 novel. The analysis focuses on how Dreiser constructs Jennie as a symbol of female virtue, suffering, and social constraint within the moral and economic structures of early 20th-century America. The study situates Jennie's character within the broader context of American naturalism and examines the intersections of gender, class, morality, and determinism. Through a close reading of Dreiser's narrative strategies and characterisation, the paper argues that Jennie Gerhardt embodies both the victimisation and quiet resistance of women in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Naturalism and social realism, poverty, fate, gender expectations, social status, moral dilemmas.

Introduction

Theodore Dreiser's novel "Jennie Gerhardt" is often examined through the lens of naturalism and social realism, focusing on poverty, fate, and moral dilemmas. However, the centrality of Jennie's character offers a nuanced portrayal of femininity under pressure. As a woman caught between societal expectations and personal desires, Jennie is both emblematic of her time and timeless in her representation of female endurance and quiet defiance. This article aims to examine how Dreiser crafts Jennie's character in response to cultural constructs of womanhood, morality, and socio-economic determinism. From the perspective of literary gender studies, female characters in 19th- and early 20th-century fiction often embody cultural ideals or cautionary figures. According to Elaine

Showalter (1977), the Victorian "Angel in the House" archetype placed women in morally elevated but socially restricted roles. Dreiser, writing at the dawn of modernism, pushes against and simultaneously reinforces some of these tropes. Using the tools of feminist literary criticism, this article draws on the work of Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Simone de Beauvoir to unpack the semiotics of Jennie's womanhood in a deterministic society.

Methodology. Theodore Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* exemplifies many of the key traits of American literary naturalism, particularly in its depiction of an individual's life being shaped by external forces—poverty, gender expectations, social status, and determinism. Jennie, the novel's protagonist, is not a figure of traditional heroism or active rebellion; instead, she embodies the **quiet resilience and moral integrity** that mark her as a classic naturalist heroine. Naturalism as a literary movement, influenced by the works of Émile Zola and grounded in Darwinian and deterministic thinking, often presents characters as products of their heredity and environment. Dreiser, a leading figure of American naturalism, paints Jennie as someone whose **choices are severely constrained** by her socio-economic conditions. From her first appearance, Jennie is the daughter of impoverished German immigrants in Ohio, raised in a family that values religion, labour, and feminine obedience. Her physical beauty becomes both a blessing and a burden—it draws the attention of powerful men, but also exposes her to moral scrutiny and exploitation.

Results. Jennie's **relationship with Senator Brander**—a wealthy, older man who seduces her and then dies before he can marry her—becomes the first of several turning points that illustrate her vulnerability within a patriarchal society. Importantly, Dreiser does not frame Jennie's actions as sinful or manipulative; rather, he constructs her emotional and ethical motivations with **sympathy and depth**. She is portrayed as deeply loyal, affectionate, and incapable of exploiting others for personal gain. Her fall from societal grace is **not the result of vice**, but of structural power imbalances between men and women, rich and poor.

Moreover, Jennie's interactions with **Lester Kane**, a wealthy industrialist who falls in love with her, reinforce the deterministic themes of the novel. Despite their genuine affection, Jennie ultimately recognises that their social differences are insurmountable. Kane's inability to publicly acknowledge her without

jeopardising his social and economic position forces her to sacrifice personal happiness for his future stability. Here, **Dreiser exposes the cruelty of societal norms** that punish women for nonconformity and forgive men for similar moral transgressions.

Discussion

What makes Jennie a compelling naturalist heroine is not rebellion, but her **emotional and moral constancy** in the face of immense suffering. She does not resist fate in grand gestures, but endures it with grace and quiet fortitude. Her ability to **preserve dignity without privilege**, and to forgive those who abandon or judge her, sets her apart as a figure of **deep psychological complexity and ethical strength**.

Unlike some naturalist protagonists who descend into despair or destruction (such as Frank Norris's McTeague or Dreiser's own Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*), Jennie **survives with her humanity intact**. Her endurance—her emotional, moral, and even physical survival—can be seen as an alternative form of resistance within the deterministic framework of naturalism. In this way, Dreiser does not merely portray Jennie as a victim of circumstance, but as a **symbol of compassionate survival**, offering a subtle but powerful critique of societal injustice.

Dreiser, a leading figure in American literary naturalism, often depicted characters whose lives were controlled by heredity, environment, and socio-economic conditions. Jennie Gerhardt is no exception. From the opening chapters, she is presented as a self-sacrificing daughter in a working-class German-American family. Her early seduction by Senator Brander is portrayed with sensitivity, not as moral failure but as an act born out of love and desperation. This characterisation challenges the dominant cultural narrative that linked female virtue to chastity alone.

Jennie's passivity and endurance place her within the tradition of naturalist heroines, whose strength is located not in agency but in survival. However, her ability to love deeply, forgive others, and remain emotionally intact suggests a subversive kind of strength. Jennie is surrounded by institutions—family, church, and society—that define a woman's value through rigid moral codes. After her relationship with Brander results in pregnancy, Jennie is ostracised despite her intentions and emotions being sincere. Dreiser critiques this double standard by

showing how male characters (Brander, Lester Kane) face few consequences for similar transgressions.

Jennie's inner world is consistently marked by empathy, moral conflict, and sacrifice, contrasting with the utilitarian logic of the men who attempt to define her life. Her refusal to marry Lester Kane when it would harm his social standing reveals both her submission to societal norms and her agency in protecting others, even at her own cost. While some critics argue Jennie is too passive, her silence and endurance can be interpreted as a form of resistance. She does not confront society with rebellion but maintains her integrity by refusing to act against her conscience. In this way, Jennie becomes a precursor to the modern female protagonist—complex, morally independent, and emotionally resilient.

Dreiser does not give Jennie a traditionally triumphant ending. Instead, he presents her in a state of quiet endurance, still caring for others, embodying a kind of stoic humanism. This open-ended conclusion invites readers to reconsider definitions of strength and success in female narratives.

Conclusion

The character of Jennie Gerhardt challenges simplistic interpretations of female virtue and victimhood. Dreiser's portrayal blends naturalist determinism with emotional depth, offering a woman character who is neither saint nor sinner, but a nuanced individual shaped by love, poverty, and social expectation. Through Jennie, Dreiser critiques the moral hypocrisy of his time and provides a humanistic vision of femininity marked by endurance, empathy, and quiet strength.

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