

Artistic Representation Of Womanhood And Morality In The Novel “Jennie Gerhardt” By Theodore Dreiser

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Abstract

This article explores the artistic representation of womanhood and morality in Theodore Dreiser’s novel *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911). Through the lens of literary realism and naturalism, Dreiser portrays the female protagonist not merely as a victim of social circumstances but as a complex individual shaped by socio-economic limitations, moral dilemmas, and emotional resilience. The article examines how Dreiser’s narrative choices, character construction, and thematic elements reflect his critique of societal norms and gender expectations. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of early 20th-century American literature’s engagement with issues of female identity, morality, and artistic form.

Keywords: female protagonist, gender expectations, oppression, moral judgment.

Introduction. Theodore Dreiser, a key figure in American literary naturalism, is renowned for his unflinching portrayal of social inequality, moral ambiguity, and human vulnerability. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser centers his narrative on a working-class woman whose life is shaped by poverty, gender-based oppression, and moral judgment. The novel’s artistic approach to womanhood and morality reflects Dreiser’s engagement with the deterministic principles of naturalism and his challenge to traditional Victorian moral codes.

This article investigates how Dreiser artistically constructs the character of Jennie Gerhardt as a symbol of both feminine suffering and silent resilience. By combining detailed psychological realism with socially grounded themes, Dreiser offers a literary critique of the restrictive moral standards imposed on women in early 20th-century American society.

Methodology. The analysis draws upon close reading of the novel, with attention to:

- Narrative perspective and stylistic features
- Characterization of Jennie and key figures
- Thematic patterns (morality, gender, sacrifice)
- Intertextual references and historical context

Secondary sources include literary criticism on Dreiser’s naturalist technique and feminist interpretations of the novel. The study also employs elements of gender theory and socio-literary analysis to interpret the artistic representation of female morality.

Results. The analysis yielded several key findings:

- **Narrative Sympathies:** Dreiser’s third-person omniscient narration reveals deep sympathy toward Jennie, despite her moral transgressions, encouraging the reader to question conventional judgments.
- **Moral Ambiguity:** Jennie’s moral decisions, such as her relationships with men outside of marriage, are portrayed not as sinful but as survival strategies conditioned by poverty and social expectation.
- **Gender Constraints:** The artistic portrayal of Jennie reflects a broader critique of patriarchal norms that deny women economic agency and moral autonomy.
- **Artistic Realism:** Dreiser uses realism not only to depict material conditions but also to present the inner conflict of a woman caught between societal condemnation and personal virtue.

Discussion. *Jennie Gerhardt as a Moral Subject*

Jennie Gerhardt stands as a morally complex character whose actions defy the binary codes of virtue and vice. Dreiser crafts Jennie’s morality as one rooted in care, empathy, and familial duty, rather than

religious doctrine or social approval. Her willingness to sacrifice her own future for her family's well-being—first through her relationship with Senator Brander, then with Lester Kane—demonstrates a moral code that prioritizes love and responsibility over reputation.

Jennie's internal world is marked by silence and endurance. Dreiser deliberately avoids romanticizing her choices; instead, he underscores the coercive force of economic and gender constraints. Her lack of agency in determining her fate does not equate to moral weakness but rather speaks to the structural oppression women face.

Gender and Artistic Realism. Dreiser's portrayal of Jennie is artistically grounded in realism. She is not idealized or demonized but rendered with psychological nuance. The novel's realist aesthetics enable Dreiser to expose the contradictions in the cultural expectations of women, especially the double standards applied to sexual morality. While Jennie is judged for her relationships, male characters like Lester and Brander escape similar scrutiny.

Dreiser's attention to social detail—the Gerhardt family's poverty, the fragility of employment for women, and the lack of institutional support—situates Jennie's choices within a naturalist framework. Her story is not driven by personal failure but by a deterministic social environment that limits female mobility and moral autonomy.

Artistic Depiction of Society's Moral Hypocrisy. The novel also acts as a scathing critique of bourgeois morality. Jennie's compassionate and selfless nature is contrasted with the cold judgment of those who claim moral superiority. Society's condemnation of her relationships, despite their emotional sincerity, reveals a system that equates a woman's worth with her sexual purity.

Dreiser's use of sympathetic narration, recurring imagery of domestic hardship, and the symbolic isolation of Jennie in the final chapters reinforce his artistic condemnation of moral hypocrisy. The novel becomes a vehicle for social commentary, exposing the punitive moral logic applied to women's lives.

Symbolism and Social Determinism. Dreiser also incorporates subtle symbolic elements to enrich the moral and gender themes. The motif of confinement—manifested through Jennie's limited choices, her physical movement, and her social isolation—highlights her entrapment. The home, often symbolizing comfort and stability in literature, becomes a site of burden for Jennie, representing duty, sacrifice, and ultimately loss.

Moreover, the recurring image of letters—such as Lester's written communications—serves as a symbol of transience and emotional disconnect. While words flow easily on paper, actions often fail to follow. These artistic choices contribute to Dreiser's larger naturalist agenda: to depict individuals as products of forces beyond their control—social, economic, and emotional.

Comparative Notes. Comparing *Jennie Gerhardt* to Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, one observes that both protagonists navigate a male-dominated world where morality is defined by social reputation rather than personal integrity. However, while Carrie ascends socially despite moral ambiguity, Jennie remains an emblem of silent sacrifice. This artistic divergence reflects Dreiser's evolving understanding of womanhood—from ambition and self-actualization (Carrie) to quiet resilience and self-denial (Jennie).

Conclusion. Theodore Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt* offers a powerful artistic representation of womanhood and morality that challenges early 20th-century social norms. By creating a protagonist who embodies both moral integrity and societal transgression, Dreiser dismantles rigid moral binaries and elevates female experience to a subject of serious literary inquiry. Through his realist style and thematic depth, Dreiser not only portrays the plight of women like Jennie but also critiques the social systems that constrain them. The novel remains a significant contribution to American literature's evolving discourse on gender, morality, and artistic expression.

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