

ANALYSIS BY 8 CRITICS

Jennie Gerhardt (1911)

Theodore Dreiser

(1871-1945)

“The publication of *Jennie Gerhardt* in 1911 brought H. L. Mencken into the field as a resounding champion who made Dreiser almost a cause and passionately identified him with the new spirit in American literature...Novels which celebrate [Frank Cowperwood] call to mind *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, annals of women who yield as readily as Cowperwood’s many mistresses to the conquering male. Dreiser, who refused to condemn the lawless financier, did not condemn the lawless lover. He wrote about love with a biologist’s freedom from moralism. Love in these novels is a flowing, expanding energy, working restlessly through all human tissue...To a cosmic philosopher it does not greatly matter whether this or that human male mates with this or that human female, or whether the mating endures for a lifetime. A position so disinterested outraged or upset American readers before the war.”

Carl Van Doren

The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 248, 252

“As a poor girl in Columbus, Ohio, Jennie Gerhardt has an affair with Senator Brander, who dies before he can marry her. With their child Vesta she moves to Cleveland and there, attracted by the kindness and domineering personality of Lester Kane, son of a rich manufacturer, becomes his mistress, although she insists he leave her when she learns that the elder Kane’s will provides that Lester receive only a small legacy as long as he remains with Jennie. Lester does leave Jennie to marry Letty Gerald, a woman of his own social class and interests, but installs Jennie in a modest home where she lives with two adopted children after Vesta dies. When Lester falls ill during his wife’s absence, he summons Jennie and confesses that she has been his only true love, and she nurses him until he dies.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“*Jennie Gerhardt* celebrates another woman, gives us still another portrait of the weakness of the male and again deals with illicit love and other unconventional matters. Jennie, like Carrie, is victimized by poverty. She suffers further misfortune when the distinguished father of her illegitimate child inconsiderately dies before his promise of marriage can be fulfilled. Jennie has the strength of the uneducated but faithful Dreiser woman. Social stratification prevents her from marrying Lester Kane, son of a wealthy manufacturer. In time, Kane uncomfortably realizes Jennie’s limitations, and he marries a woman of his own class. But Jennie triumphs in the end; Kane gives her his deathbed assurance that she has always been the only ‘true love.’ The social implications of the novel are similar to those of *Sister Carrie*, though here Dreiser makes his first attempt to provide some clarity of outline.

His purpose here is a variant of that in *An American Tragedy* (1925). Human desires and social conventions are incompatible. A natural and therefore suitable satisfaction of those desires should certainly have been achieved in the marriage of Jennie and Kane. But this cannot happen because of class differences. Jennie, however, has the strength that the hero of *An American Tragedy* lacks. She accepts, is solaced by her feeling of self-sacrifice and by her spiritual resources. Her victory over circumstances (which nominally defeat her) is a triumph of the strongly passive soul. She has none of the discomfort that bothers Carrie Meeber when she hears ‘the call of the ideal’; nor is she disturbed by the conflict of renunciation with desire which leads to Clyde Griffiths’ death. There is little enough of the ‘brooding inference’ in this novel. Like Jennie, we accept the circumstantial defeat, and we are satisfied that there is a power that endures beyond it. With a heavy hand but a tender concern, Dreiser has produced a heroine quietly equal to the stresses and strains of her environment.”

Frederick J. Hoffman

“The heroine of *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911)—whose original was another sister of Dreiser’s—is again a ‘kept’ woman, but this time of a different sort. For Jennie, despite the irregularities of her life, *is* virtuous—at least if we accept Dreiser’s definition of virtue: ‘Virtue is that quality of generosity which offers itself willingly for another’s service....’—and Lester is attracted to her because ‘Something about her—a warm womanhood, a guileless expression of countenance—intimated a sympathy toward sex relationship which had nothing to do with hard, brutal immorality.’ Once more it is economic considerations that lead to irregularity, but Jennie is Lester’s wife in everything except the name; there is not unfaithfulness in her. In one aspect, Dreiser is like life itself: we can find in his novels the morals we bring to him. The orthodox reader may find in *Jennie Gerhardt* an impressive picture of the miseries incident to irregular unions, a powerful denunciation of the wrongs which women must suffer under such arrangements. Another type of reader will discover the moral issue in the question of love versus property; according to this view, Lester’s sin would not be his union with Jennie but his later sacrifice of her to position and wealth. That Jennie herself was vastly worth loving, and worth marrying, I think no reader has ever been able to doubt.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 287

“Jennie’s harsh German father forces her to leave home when he discovers that she is pregnant; an Ohio senator had promised to marry her but died before he could carry out his intention. She becomes the mistress of the scion of a wealthy family, who marries in his own ‘class,’ becomes ill, and is nursed by Jennie. When he dies she steals in to his funeral, afraid to speak to his family. Oscar Cargill sees the influence of George Moore’s *Esther Waters* (1894) on the novel, but compares the two books to Dreiser’s disadvantage. He also remarks: ‘It’s a pretty story, wherein the heroine exhibits all those Christian virtues in which Dreiser can see so little merit.’ On the other hand, George F. Whicher says the book is in some respects Dreiser’s best.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“*Jennie Gerhardt* is one of Dreiser’s good books, but it is certainly not among his best; it does not communicate, as both *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* do, the terror implicit in purely commercial relationships. But the question of relative importance aside, and judged only as a reading experience, *Jennie Gerhardt* is beautiful and affecting, and the basic reason that it is so is Dreiser’s own admiration for his heroine....It may be objected that Dreiser in his turn created women characters who are too submissive, tender, that Jennie Gerhardt is a mythical mother rather than a lover. Yet her effect on the men who love her is very different from the kind we have learned to associate with the standard bitches in contemporary novels....

The language of this can make us squirm. Dreiser was never a man to avoid a cliché. But as a novelist, as a dramatist of personality, he was awkward rather than superficial in representing what people feel. And the fact is that Dreiser himself *did* see Jennie Gerhardt as ‘a significant type emotionally.’...Jennie is so exceptional, indeed, that the men who are attracted to her are given distinction by their feeling for her. It is Jennie alone who brings out what is unusual in them. Senator Brander, who soon loses his Senate seat, is a reflective figure among politicians; his ‘weakness’ for Jennie marks the better nature that explains his political downfall. Lester Kane in his turn is portrayed as a businessman who doesn’t respect business. That Brander is sensitive enough, though a lordly United States Senator, to fall for a lowly little laundress, is in Dreiser’s eyes an example of his positive feeling, his virtue—in the classic sense of individual excellence rather than in our sense of conventional morality.

But above all it is Jennie’s submission to love, her patience and fortitude and tenderness in sustaining so much love for Lester, in winning his loyalty against so much opposition from his class and his family, that explain Lester Kane’s one heroic and distinguished act—his solicitude for Jennie. Lester Kane, so detached

from the mores of his class, so indifferent to the demands of moneymaking and his family's demand that he make a 'good' marriage, has been revealed as 'exceptional' by the fact of loving Jennie....

Lack of struggle between the characters is a decided weakness in *Jennie Gerhardt*. This weakness is in the novelist's own morality, as a point to be made about life, and it is even a greater weakness in the technical organization of the novel. Dreiser's essential theme—in this book at least—is the necessary resignation to forces in society that are as impersonal as those of nature. He seems to be saying that man can no more defeat society than he can defeat death. But this theme of necessary resignation means that ultimately there is no difference between those whom we have been asked to think of as 'exceptional' and the others. It means that 'life,' in the too generalized and vaguely sentimental sense of 'force,' is simply too powerful for everyone under the pressures of modern society. It reduces them to the same condition. As Dreiser puts it in Chapter XVII, when he comments on Lester Kane's arrogance in commanding Jennie to be his mistress—"We live in an age in which the impact of materialized forces is well-nigh irresistible; the spiritual nature is overwhelmed by the shock...."

This emphasis on 'fatigue,' or the inability of the human being under modern conditions of stress to understand the necessary terms of his existence, much less to be able to stand up to them, explains why *Jennie Gerhardt* tends to run out, as it were, unimpeded by any real clash of wills. In *Sister Carrie* people are forced to do what they do not want to do; in *An American Tragedy* they are shown struggling for success—uselessly from one point of view, tragically from another—but struggling. Life seems terrible. In *Jennie Gerhardt* it seems largely sad. As there is nothing to interrupt the downward flow, the still sad march of diminution and resignation, so there is not enough struggle, not enough tension, to make us feel that people are paying a price for something they have done. It does not seem to matter whether Jennie is 'good' or not, whether Lester leaves her or not. Even Jennie's fine speech, after Robert's lawyer has told her what Lester will lose if he stays with her, is not backed up by any great struggle in Lester himself....If Lester Kane had really been torn by these conditions, there would have been some dramatic tension indeed, instead of the slow drift out to death that we get at the end of *Jennie Gerhardt*....

Yet though *Jennie Gerhardt* is not one of Dreiser's strong books, it is as moving as if it were saturated in Jennie's own quality of feeling. It is a book that will live. We may quarrel with Dreiser's point of view; we may complain that his philosophy gets in the way of what we have come to expect in a novel; we may complain that this point of view is too harsh, or too unyielding, and that just as 'philosophy' it is excessive in a work of fiction. Yet if we think of some recent American novels, the thing that strikes us most about them is the fact that the authors have no very compelling point of view about anything. These writers don't commit the kind of gaucheries that Dreiser did, but they seem as helpless on the face of the earth to understand the terms of our existence as anybody could ever be....Dreiser has the one great quality that so many writers lack today. He makes you care about these people."

Alfred Kazin

Introduction

Jennie Gerhardt by Theodore Dreiser

(Dell 1963) 6-12

"Like Carrie, Jennie was modeled after one of his sisters, and the novel was a kind of biography not only of her but of his family life. Dreiser now softened the bitterness he had earlier felt toward his father, and with patient care he put some of his best writing into *Jennie*. This woman's story was briefly told and was familiar to any student or product of the rural America of Dreiser's youth. In the course of supporting her family by working in an Ohio hotel, Jennie had an affair with that state's leading citizen, Senator Brander. Over her father's strong objections, she continued to see her illicit lover, and became pregnant; the Senator's untimely death robbed her child of a name. After his death and after she left her family, Jennie fell in love with Lester Kane while working in his father's home. The Kane family, manufacturers of world-famous wagons and other implements, represented the newly rich America, whose sudden wealth and social stature fascinated Dreiser.

Jennie became Kane's mistress and filled his life as he gradually drifted away from the company business. Disowned by his father, Kane entered abortive business ventures that finally ruined him. Though he recognized Jennie's goodness, he could not resist other sexually attractive women, and his career as a

lover began a long series of similar conflicts in Dreiser's work. His business ventures hinted at the 'trilogy of desire' in which Dreiser soon detailed the career of a tycoon [Frank Cowperwood]. Kane died, leaving Jennie to raise another man's child of whom he had become fond....Like Carrie, Jennie was not wicked. He did not condemn her lapse from the era's moral standards, and though society labeled her 'fallen,' he was more interested in the process of her fall than in judging her. Like Carrie, but with greater clarity and more certain development, Jennie grew under the impact of experience. Her isolation from much of society bewildered her, as did the artificial barriers that threatened to mark her child. She did not feel unclean or immoral. Throughout the book her innate goodness, expressed in thoughtful attention to others' needs and deep love for her father, Kane, and her child, offset any question of her morality. She was a victim, never a strumpet. 'She was not a cheap, ambitious, climbing creature. She was a big woman and a good one.'

Jennie Gerhardt was a long indictment of society's false values. Jennie's tragedy was not that society condemned her but that the world did not recognize her goodness. She was in but not of a world that trammled her own limited but nonetheless meaningful method of self-expression. For one mistake, and that committed innocently to better herself in the world's own terms, society ostracized her. Dreiser argued that the loss was not hers, but society's....He spelled out with greater force and clarity the rather fuzzy determinism of his first book. *Jennie Gerhardt* discussed love and human understanding, a theme often buried under the sheer weight of details in Dreiser's books. Jennie's travels abroad with Kane showed her the transience of even the greatest civilizations....

Dreiser wrote *Jennie Gerhardt* with a care and attention to nuance that he seldom lavished on his books, illustrating the depth of his feeling for this favorite sister. The book was well rounded, carefully constructed, and logical. It lacked the scope and color of *Sister Carrie* and the settled purpose of his later work, but it had a warm personal tone and clear characterization....Though *Jennie* was marred by the Dreiserian tendency to preach—a tendency that outlined the limits of his determinism—the book marked a significant stage in that determinism's development. In *Sister Carrie*, the pointless struggle and the play of blind chance in men's lives seemed overwhelming. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser turned to the broader belief that if the struggle was ultimately pointless, it was still fascinating to watch. *Jennie* marked a widening if not a deepening of Dreiser's view....

Jennie and Old Gerhardt saw that love, harmony with other people and nature, was the essence of life.... Jennie saw that the total outline of life mattered more than individuals. This did not prevent pain and suffering. But it offered her and Dreiser an explanation and a reassurance... 'If at times life seemed cruel, yet this beauty still persisted. The thought comforted her; she fed upon it in her hours of secret loneliness'."

H. Wayne Morgan
American Writers in Rebellion: From Mark Twain to Dreiser
(Hill & Wang 1965) 163-66

"Dreiser first sketched out the plot of *Jennie Gerhardt* in 1901, under the title 'The Transgressor.'...A fledgling reporter wrote *Sister Carrie*; *Jennie Gerhardt* was the work of a seasoned editor. The difference between the two books is the difference to be expected from two such varying backgrounds. As an editor, Dreiser knew the importance of coming to terms with accepted taste....

Those who protested Carrie's prosperity probably sympathized with Jennie for her misfortunes. Like Carrie Meeber, Jennie Gerhardt is a woman of feeling rather than of intellect. Yet where Carrie is self-seeking, Jennie is self-giving. Each has two lovers, yet acquires them under circumstances wholly unlike. Both Drouet and Hurstwood win Carrie with promises of a better life. Jennie gives herself to Senator Brander because he saved her brother from jail. She gives herself to Lester Kane to procure means to provide for her daughter and her parents. Both girls are victims of the society in which they live, but ambition betrays Carrie while Jennie is undone by her sense of duty. Thus while Carrie is a creature of the new age, Jennie (often depicted sighing to herself or 'clenching her fingers in an agony of poetic feeling'), resembles the traditional heroines of romantic literature...In her closeness to Nature, Jennie is superior to those who are guided by social thought. Yet their code excludes her....The iron grillwork interposed finally between Jennie and Lester merely gives visible form to a condition that has persisted throughout their relationship, with Jennie the victim of an uncompromising society."

John J. McAleer
Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation
(Holt 1968) 93, 96, 102

Michael Hollister (2015)