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High Moral Values of The Heroine in Theodore Dreiser's Novel "Jennie Gerhardt"

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Abstract: This piece explores the moral integrity and spiritual resilience of Jennie Gerhardt, the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser's novel Jennie Gerhardt. The study approaches Jennie's empathy, self-sacrifice, maternal devotion and moral endurance through the lenses of realism, naturalism and feminist literary criticism. Despite the social condemnation and economic hardship they suffer, Jennie manages to be both ethically strong-willed and emotionally sincere. According to this article, Dreiser secures a morally ascendant image of Jennie as the inwardly noble heroine who reveals the hypocrisy of early twentieth-century American society.

Keywords: Theodore Dreiser, American realism, naturalism, moral values, female character, social criticism, feminist reading.

1. Introduction

The turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth marked a turning point in American literature. Idealism romanticized love and nature; realism and naturalism replaced it with a focus on social conditions, economic struggle and determinism. Theodore Dreiser is one of the major leaders of this movement. Set in 1911, Jennie Gerhardt follows the life of a young woman from a poor immigrant family whose destiny is determined by financial deprivation and social inequity. Although often read in deterministic terms, the novel's Jennie reveals tragic moral agency that cuts through naturalistic fatalism [1], [2].

This article maintains that Jennie, in the embodiment of high moral values and expressed through compassion, loyalty, forgiveness, and emotional endurance. Instead of representing her as a morally fallen woman, Dreiser glorifies her as an icon of ethical purity in a morally depraved society [3], [4].

2. Materials and Methods

The analysis combines three approaches:

1. *Naturalism* – examining environmental and economic determinism.
2. *Moral philosophy in literature* – focusing on virtue and ethical action.
3. *Feminist literary criticism* – analyzing gender expectations and social double standards.

FILE — Through this interdisciplinary framework, Jennie is not simply a passive figure but rather morally awake in the shadow of structural limitations. Jennie's defining quality is compassion. She shows compassion and gratitude toward her family from childhood. She acts not out of ambition but out of duty. Whereas the other characters are

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often motivated by rank and riches, Jennie is all about emotional connection. Even when being pushed away or criticized, she chooses kindness over bitterness. This moral consistency places her above society's cliché respectability.

Over and over again, Jennie sacrifices her own happiness for other people. Her relationships with Senator Brander and Lester Kane are not based on calculation, but appreciation. But while her choices breach social norms, they are not immoral of intent. Dreiser describes her choices as reactions to vulnerability and survival, not manipulation. Her openness to suffering without rancor suggests moral maturity.

3. Results

Motherhood deepens Jennie's moral character. The supreme expression of altruism is unconditional love for her child. She continues nurturing and protecting even in poverty. In the novel, maternal devotion is a sign of spiritual transcendence. Authentic morality, Dreiser implies, has nothing to do with social conformity but rather is rooted in emotional generosity [5].

The novel reveals strict moral codes that are placed on women. Jennie is socially ostracized, while her male peers maintain status in the face of identical behavior. In this contrast, Dreiser criticizes patriarchal morality. Unlike Yi, who is condemned for cruelty and deceit, Jennie is dogged through her life by a horror of transgression against expectations of female purity. Ironically, many of those held up as socially respectable are coldly immoral and opportunistically disposed. In this way, Dreiser subverts the traditional moral world order. While Jennie's life is determined by naturalistic forces, she has moral agency [6], [7]. Her responses to pain embody deliberate moral decisions.

She chooses forgiveness over revenge.

She chooses loyalty over self-interest.

She chooses dignity over resentment.

This implies that naturalism in Dreiser opens space for moral transcendence.

Jennie Gerhardt is a paradox: socially inferior but morally superior. She is a silent heroine whose strength resides in endurance rather than rebellion, Dreiser builds [8].

Her virtues: Compassion, Forgiveness, Emotional sincerity, Loyalty, Maternal devotion, Moral resilience. Through Jennie, Dreiser forces readers to question normative indices of virtue [9].

Jennie Gerhardt is one of the most morally severe pieces of American naturalistic fiction ever written, and its protagonist, a poor woman caught up in both love and sacrifice, has proven to be one of the most ethically complex female figures that early twentieth century literature produced. In Jennie's life story, Theodore Dreiser builds a potent critique of social morality, class prejudice and gender inequality. And though these modes are shaped and often circumscribed by poverty, patriarchal demands, or rigid social hierarchies, Jennie maintains an inner dignity and emotional integrity throughout [10].

Throughout the novel, external forces shape Jennie not as an individual but as a social category — a poor working-class woman whose value is assessed in accordance with codes of respectability set by society. Shifting her relationship from Senator Brander to Lester Kane, Jennie becomes susceptible to the moral judgment of society and isolation. And yet, Dreiser does not depict her as morally fallen. Far from it: he expertly disambiguates social "sin" from actual moral failing. Rather than through selfish ambition or manipulation, Jennie's actions arise from compassion, loyalty and a deep sense of responsibility to her family [11], [12].

Dreiser's naturalism is grounded in determinism — the proposition that human beings are formed by environment, heredity and social condition. However, Jennie complicates strict determinism. Though she cannot break free from the strictures of economics and gender, she has a persistent moral sensibility that transcends them. Her compassion for others and refusal to become bitter and capacity to forgive reveal her form of moral agency within social limitation, rather than outside it. In this way, Dreiser

indirectly helps us push against simplistic readings of naturalism as strictly pessimistic or mechanistic [13].

Jennie's stoical endurance amounts to a kind of moral heroism. In a narrative tradition in which heroines constantly assert themselves by rebellion or dramatic transformation, Jennie is strong by patience, empathizing with those around her and putting the needs of others above her own. Her heroism is unheroic, undramatic. She doesn't win socially — she doesn't attain marriage or wealth or public acclaim — but she has an unwavering ethical center. This inward steadiness is the novel's central moral axis [14].

Furthermore, Dreiser makes an attack on the hypocrisy of American society at the turn of the twentieth century. Characters who outwardly comply to social norms tend to be morally shallow, while Jennie, condemned by society, is the most deeply human. This is an inversion: Dreiser's true morality cannot be contingent upon his popular approval nor respectability of current institutions. Rather, it is characterized by compassion, emotional honesty, personal integrity [15].

4. Conclusion

More broadly in the context of literature, Jennie signaled a change in American fiction's treatment of women. She is neither a soft-minded figure nor a trade mark cliché; she's drawn with psychological realism and moral complexity. Dreiser's subtle treatment previews later modernist explorations of female subjectivity while grounded in the social preoccupations of naturalism. Ultimately, Jennie Gerhardt raises the question if we should rethink sources of our moral judgment. The novel argues that ethical worth lies not in adherence to draconian public codes, but in the ability to love and sacrifice and experience empathy under extreme conditions. Jennie's life seems relentlessly tragic, but her moral integrity elevates suffering to quiet nobility. So Jennie Gerhardt survives not only as a victim of circumstance but also as a testament to moral fortitude. Through her, Dreiser insists that dignity can survive impoverishment, social ostracization and individual tragedy and that actual heroism is often a muted experience.

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