CHAPTER-SIX
THE DOUBLE VISION:
JENNIE GERHARDT
Chapter VI

The Double Vision

*Jennie Gerhardt*

For Dreiser, the depiction of man as a victim of environment and heredity was inadequate as a vision of life. The dream in a business society of rapacious materialism is like a boat against the current. The romance that is fostered by money is ultimately destroyed by it. The rhetoric of romance subverts the very romance it dramatizes; whereas the traditional romance aims at reaffirmation, the modern romance is distopic leading a tragic individuation of the protagonist and a final alienation. The romantic aspirations of the Dreiserian characters were not in conflict with society which is strained by the physical or the Spencerian conditioned impluses but they were as a result of an awareness of the limit of illusions. What is difficult to understand is the significance of the dream born out of the transcendental ideals.

Dreiser’s greatness consists in the fact that he highlights “the unreality of reality”—the fundamental ambiguity of money its potentality and also its powerlessness. It is the triumph and tragedy of Sister Carrie. In *Jennie Gerhardt* also we find Dreiser dealing with the same theme. The novel is another milestone in the evolution of a fresh imaginative fictional form to present a
double vision. Dreiser’s efforts to invite the readers into the
discourse have become successful. Ignoring the gigantic shadow
of the deterministic novel Dreiser rooted his art in the anti-
romantic mode with a view to subverting the romance tradition.

Ford Madox Ford in his essay “Portrait of Dreiser” mentioned
that Jennie Gerhardt was one of Dreiser’s most favourite books:

At any rate” “it is the only one of his books which I ever heard
Mr. Dreiser mention—several times and as if with regretful
affection.....

Jennie depressed Ford Madox Ford. But the book was praised
by Dreiser’s new friend H. L. Mencken as

the best American novel ever written with the single exception of
Huckleberry Finn

The story of Jennie Gerhardt was the story of another
transgressor of society, and its rules of conduct. For Jennie Gerhardt
as for aspects of Sister Carrie, Dreiser used memories of his sisters’
lives for material. Charles Shapiro rightly called the novel

probably the most autobiographical of Dreiser’s fictional works,

and points out that

while the Gerhardts are not carbon copies of Dreiser’s unhappy
family, they do represent in spirit the author’s impression of his
troubled childhood much in the way that David Copperfield or
Little Dorrit convey Dickens’ painful evaluation of his early days.

But Philips Gerber tried to point out the differences between
Carrie and Jennie:

If Carrie is a weed equipped to thrust its way sunward against the hostility of environment, Jennie is the fragile blossom that deprived of care and protection will be trampled underfoot. Whereas Carrie is all ambition, Jennie is all love and affection.

*Jennie Gerhardt* was more explicitly based on the Dreiser family than any other of his novels and the destitution he experienced as a boy was utilized for full impact. Even in this story the heroine is more than a victim, an instrument for victimization of Senator Brander and later of Lester Kane. Brander was fascinated by the girl’s beauty and made Jennie pregnant. His unexpected death was only a blow of fate. Lester Kane was also a man of higher status. It was rather surprising that Lester Kane was “magnetically and chemically drawn” by Jennie, an unmarried mother. Dreiser’s account of Lester Kane’s love for Jennie was fraught with ironical undertones:

*There is a flower on my table which reminds me of you very much — white, delicate, beautiful. Your personality, lingering with me is just that. You are the essence of everything beautiful to me. It is in your power to strew flowers in my path if you will* (JG 585)

He writes to her:

*He released her with a short laugh. We won’t do any more of this here, but remember, you belong to me.* (JG 568)

He trusts his own irresistibility:

*He had only to say ‘come’ and she must obey, it was her destiny.* (JG 573)
Fatalism was one of the important themes in *Jennie Gerhardt*. Dreiser read Hardy and he was deeply affected by his tragic vision. In Jennie’s case the force of dark blind fate is stronger. In Hardy’s novels happiness was but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain. But while Carrie was not certain of her happiness and satisfaction, Jennie in her own way was happy. Poverty could not make her yield. She was determined and her love for the millionaire’s son Lester Kane did not alter even in the face of all adversities. Money was not her concern. The people of Lester’s world did not accept her. She did not crave for dollars either. While Lester desired only her in his death bed Jennie regarded it as the unmistakable token of his affection. Her will power won over all obstacles. Her sacrifice was rewarded. The end of the novel *Jennie Gerhardt* was not depressing like that of a naturalistic novel. Human being was after all not wretched. Dreiser explained the crisis of Jennie’s life and the real predicament of her nature:

> Caged in the world of the material, however, such a nature is almost invariably an anomaly. That other world of flesh into which has been woven pride and greed looks askance at the idealist, the dreamer. (JG 471)

Jennie was the daughter of poverty. But life for Jennie was a dream "a true wonderland, a thing of infinite beauty which could they but wander into it wonderingly would be heaven enough." (JG 471)

Dreiser individualises Jennie’s character and invests her with a rare kind of charm and nobility:

> As to Jennie, his original object in approaching her had been purely
selfish. But now that he had asserted his masculine prerogatives, and she had yielded, at least in part he began to realize that she was no common girl, no toy of the passing hour. (JG 572)

Philip Gerber tried to guess the implications of Dreiser's novel:

Dreiser's dilemma seems clear. On the one hand, he sees Jennie as being eminently worthy of the best that life can bestow, on the other, he is committed to his stark view of life in which the worthy, justly or unjustly, are thwarted by circumstance.6

That Jennie remained worthy amid all the adversities of her life was a wonderful achievement. Philip Gerber rightly praised Jennie by saying:

It is to Jennie's everlasting credit and well being that she manages consistently to resist the impact of these forces.7

Charles Shapiro also failed to realize this aspect of her character when he remarks that

Jennie is all suffering, almost too fudgy in her passivity.8

But Jennie's seeming passivity was in reality her strength her forte. Her father rightly felt.

Mystery of mysteries. Life was truly strange and dark and uncertain (JG 245)

Even in this dark unchartered sea Jennie was not a ship without rudder. In some way she was more determined than Hester
Prym of Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*: Vesta was the living symbol of Jennie’s sin as Pearl was the symbol of Hester’s sin. Jennie was more optimistic and while in the beginning she was rather passive, she had to tolerate the hard blows of life. Hawthorne says of Hester, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint like because of the result of martyrdom. (SL 75)

In spite of her lonely and empty end of life, Jennie too was ennobled. The earlier version of the novel before the revision revealed that Dreiser did not prefer the happy ending with Jennie and Lester serenely married. In that case Jennie’s struggle might not have been clearly shown or the ending might have been more mechanical and less spontaneous.

Dreiser revised the happy ending. Lester married Letty Gerald, Vesta died of typhoid and Lester too died. Dreiser beautifully evoked the tragic scene:

Jennie who had been strongly wrought up by watching and worrying was beside herself with grief. He had been a part of her thought and feeling so long that it seemed now as though a part of herself died. (JG 816)

Jennie was lonely. But she was satisfied. Lester regretted in his death bed:

I’ve always wanted to say to you Jennie that I haven’t been satisfied with the way we parted. It wasn’t the right thing after all.
I haven't been any happier. I'm sorry. I wish now, for my own peace of mind, that I hadn't done it. (JG 814)

Dreiser himself commented throughout his authorial intrusion:

This was such a testimony to their real union — their real spiritual compatibility. (JG 814)

Even Jennie's comment is significant:

It's all right. It doesn't make any difference. You've been very good to me. I wouldn't have been satisfied to have you lose your fortune. It couldn't be that way. I've been a lot better satisfied as it is (JG 814)

Jennie may be called serene, rather than passive. Her seduction by Brander might have taken the shape of marriage had there been no accidental death of Brander. But in her relationship to Lester Kane, Jennie appeared to have attained a maturity greater than that of Carrie. If the blows of misfortune and pangs of poverty made Carrie restless, they made Jennie serene. Charles Shapiro felt that Jennie's struggle had a unique nobility:

But there has been a struggle and in this struggle lies both the wonder and truth of humanity which Dreiser portrays.9

Richard Lehan also referred to the "romantic dilemma" of Dreiser:

Dreiser's inability to reconcile his romantic aspirations with his belief in a world of physical limits led in his fiction to the displaced
hero — the man whose desire for essential self-fulfilment is in conflict with his environment.10

Dreiser did not look on Free Will as an inherent attribute of man; rather he believed that Free Will was an achievement of man gained individually and collectively through knowledge and the acquisition of the control both over nature and over self. Naturalism breaks completely with the past notions of spiritualism and romanticism. It believes in the concept of impersonality; it studies the growth of man’s personality in relation to heredity and environment. It rejects the idealistic or divine contemplation of human mind. It dispenses with the concept of soul in man. But in Dreiser’s novel the study of the mind is no less important. Robert Penn Warren comments:

Over and over again in his fiction, Dreiser develops such moments of psychological depth.11

Like characters in a stream of consciousness novel Dreiser’s characters too live more through psychic recreation and analysis of memories than through real action.

Memory plays an important part in the functioning of their minds. Memory as psychologists opine can either be voluntary or involuntary— the former being more in the nature of habitual awareness or recollection of routine than the latter which is an unconscious and spontaneous reaction to an associated fact. Details of the external world served as stimuli to the silken skeins of memory within Dreiser’s novels and Dreiser was often quick to
see their usefulness to the structure of the novels. In Chapter XXV
Dreiser describes Lester's kindness and Mrs. Gerhardt's elation. All
through the long years of her life she had been waiting and she
had got them—a new house, new furniture, plenty of room—things
finer than she had ever even imagined. But the moment she
expressed her excitement, Jennie tried to conceal her emotion.
Dreiser analyses Jennie's state of mind:

Jennie smiled and tried to pretend satisfaction without emotion,
but there were tears in her eyes. She was so glad for her mother's
sake. She could have kissed Lester's feet for his goodness to her
family (JG 612)

Here we feel how memory plays so important a role in
revealing the consciousness of Jennie. Little Vesta reminded her
of Senator Brander all the time, and "found his life hard indeed to
bear." (JG 619) Even before the birth of Vesta, Jennie pondered time and
again. Dreiser gave detailed account of Jennie's musing:

The days which followed were ones of dreamy uncertainty to
Jennie. She went over in her mind these dramatic events time
and time and time and again. (JG 525)

Later the stress is on the "emotions recollected in tranquillity."

Brander was gone, and Jennie's fate was really in the balance.
But her mind still retained all of the heart—innocence, and
unsophistication of her youth; a certain gentle wistfulness was the
only outward change in her demeanor. (JG 525)
After Lester Kane's death Jennie was overcome with grief. Dreiser described:

He had been a part of her thought and feeling so long that it seemed now as though a part of herself had died. She had loved him as she had fancied she could never love any one, and he had always shown that he cared for her — at least to some degree. (JG 816).

Jennie's own existence was quiet and uneventful. After Vesta's death she was in a state of contemplation trying to reconcile her present to her past:

This inconsiderate fortune was quite enough to throw Jennie back into that state of hyper-melancholia from which she had been drawn with difficulty during the few years of comfort and affection which she had enjoyed with Lester in Hyde park ... Jennie had no tears to shed; only a deep insistent pain to feel. (JG 793).

The psychological analysis of Jennie's character adds to the meaning:

As one in a dream. She was dazed almost to the point of insensibility. (JG 794)

The references to God abound in the novel and offer a positive view towards life:

"There dear come now" soothed the voice of Mrs. Davis. "Can't you leave it all in God's hands? Can't you believe that everything is for the best?" (JG 792)
Jennie’s mind is analysed by Dreiser. Her mind had never grasped the nature and character of specialized knowledge:

History, physics, chemistry, botany biology, and sociology were not fixed departments in her brain as they were in Lester’s and Letty’s…people were born and they died. Some believed that the world had been made six thousand years before; some that it was million of years old. Was it all blind chance, or was there some guiding intelligence — a God? (JG 801)

But Jennie gained a new awareness:

Jennie felt that there is a higher power: Almost in spite of herself she felt there must be something a higher power which produced all the beautiful things — the flowers, the stars, the trees, the grass. Nature was so beautiful! (JG 801)

For Jennie life seemed cruel but she was never blind to the beauty that persisted. This thought gave her consolation and solace in her hours of secret loneliness. Jennie in his opinion underestimates moral environment which is limited by the social situation. Richard Lehan speaks of one important theme in Dreiser’s fiction and it was “the inevitability of limits”12 But even Lehan also could not ignore the point of “Dreiser’s attraction to Thoreau.”13 The drive for money and luxuries in Carrie’s life resembles the desire for heightened life of man like Charles Yerkes.

Like Carrie who in Lehan’s opinion embodies the spirit of aspirations, Jennie is also aspiring but as her romantic aspirations were not in conflict with a society that is bound by the physical or the Spencerian “conditioned impulses”, but by an awareness of the limit
of illusions. The significance of the dream of Jennie was due to the transcendental ideals. In a letter to Grace Norton written on July 28, 1883, Henry James says that "consciousness is an illimitable power". The uniqueness about Dreiser's romance lies in this consciousness of his heroes and heroines. The consciousness of Jennie survives the illusions crumbling down in the harsh reality of a materialistic world. Dreiser saw clearly the underlying contradictions of his age—the metaphors which sustained the romance were ultimately responsible for its defeat and negation.

The idealistic relations between men and women are brutally damaging in a money-centered society. There is no room for tenderness and selfless love in any of the fictions. The severance of the idyllic relations in the Mammon-worshipping society had already occurred. Exchange values have replaced the humanitarian considerations. Marriage is not a union of true minds and the body mystic no longer exists. It is a lost myth. In Jennie Gerhardt Dreiser directly deals with the theme of romantic impossibility. Jennie had dreamt of marriage so that she could attain a colossal dream. But even when that dream is not translated into reality, she feels a contentment when she tells Lester:

You've been very good to me. I wouldn't have been satisfied to have you lose your fortune. It wouldn't be that way. I've been a lot better satisfied as it is. It's been hard but dear, everything is hard at times. (JG 814).

This faith and sense of satisfaction cannot be possible without a faith in something higher which produces all the beautiful things.
Nature is really beautiful to Jennie and in spite of all her delusions she is romantic and preserves her idealism. but Dreiser uses the romance pattern for showing the frustration of the dream and illusion in the final alienation of the protagonist. This is the difference from a traditional romance Dreiser offers a distopic vision through the modern romance which he attempts to write in Jennie Gerhardt.