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## SENTIMENTALISM IN DREISER'S HEROINES CARRIE AND JENNIE

By DARYL C. DANCE

Theodore Dreiser is usually hailed as a pioneer of American realism who freed American literature from Victorian restraints, from nineteenth century idealism and optimism, and from the ever-present moralizing of domestic sentimentalism. It is interesting to note, however, that this shockingly modern trail-blazer not only stands at the dawn of a new era in literature, but also at the twilight of the old, for in Dreiser is a mixture of both the new realism and naturalism and the old sentimentalism that had dominated American literature from its inception.

During his formative years, before he read Zola and Balzac, Dreiser was exposed to the popular literature of his day, which consisted of tales in which virtue triumphed, truth prevailed, evil was punished, and good was ultimately rewarded. As a boy in Warsaw and Chicago, he delighted in melodramatic plays where love was "exalted, enduring, reforming, refining."<sup>1</sup> Among the "most fascinating of earthly delights" for him were the dramas' "ruthless villain [and] the disheveled maiden tortured by love or deprivation in any form." Even as a dramatic editor for the St. Louis *Globe* he was, he said, "captivated" by the romantic and sentimental dramas which he saw.<sup>3</sup> Later, having recognized the mediocrity of most of those plays, he commented:

The saccharine strength of the sentiment and mush which we could gulp down at that time, and still can do to this day, is to me beyond belief. And I was one of those who did the gulping; indeed I was one of the worst.<sup>4</sup>

Then too Dreiser's reaction to poverty and suffering was essentially sentimental. From the time the young child Dreiser,

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (New York, 1965), p. 331.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *A Book about Myself* (New York, 1965), pp. 149-52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

with tears flowing from his eyes, sympathetically and affectionately examined his mother's torn shoes, he felt sympathy and tenderness for the poor and unfortunate.<sup>5</sup> In *A Book about Myself* he writes:

I was filled with an intense sympathy for the woes of others, life in all its helpless degradation and poverty, the unsatisfied dreams of people, their sweaty labors, the things they were compelled to endure.<sup>6</sup>

This pity for the poor, coupled with his disappointments in his own state in life as a reporter on the *Globe*, gave his writing at that time, according to Dreiser, "a mushy and melancholy turn," which caused him "to paint the ideal as not only entirely probable but necessary before life would be what it should."<sup>7</sup>

Even as late as 1909 when editor of the *Delineator* and the *Bohemian*, Dreiser was resigned, if not truly dedicated, to giving the readers the sentimental, idealistic, optimistic, moralistic fiction they wanted. On August 8, 1909, he explained the policy of the *Bohemian* to his friend H. L. Mencken. He wrote:

I want to make it the broadest, most genial little publication in the field . . . I don't want any tainted fiction or cheap sex-struck articles but I do want . . . an apt realistic perception of things as they are.

Later in the same letter he explained, "Above all I want knowledge of life *as it is* [—] broad, simple, good natured."<sup>8</sup> On August 16, 1909, he explained the policy of the *Delineator* in a letter to Charles G. Ross. He wrote:

We like sentiment, we like humor, we like realism, but it must be tinged with sufficient idealism to make it all of a truly uplifting character. Our field in this respect is limited by the same limitations which govern the well regulated home. We cannot admit stories which deal with false or immoral relations, or which point a false moral, or which deal with things degrading, such as drunkenness. I am personally opposed in this magazine to stories which have an element of horror in them, or which are disgusting in their realism

<sup>5</sup> Dreiser, *Dawn*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Dreiser, *A Book about Myself*, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, ed. Robert H. Elias, Vol. I (Philadelphia, 1959), pp. 93-4.

and fidelity to life. The finer side of things—the idealistic—is the answer for us.<sup>9</sup>

It seems a bit of an exaggeration to assert, as Leslie Fiedler has done, that these letters show that “Dreiser is bound . . . to the values of the sentimental lower middle class,”<sup>10</sup> especially since during this period, as Robert H. Elias has noted, Dreiser continued to produce serious work which called attention to the impersonality of the cities, the working conditions of laborers and other shortcomings of society.<sup>11</sup> But whether one agrees with Fiedler or contends that Dreiser was merely acquiescing to the demands of the time, already accepting the belief, as he told Mencken over a year later, that his “desire is for expression that is entirely too frank for this time,”<sup>12</sup> it is still obvious that Dreiser's exposure and his attraction, at least as a youth, to sentimentalized fiction as well as his own sympathies and tendencies towards romance and beauty (“I was a half-baked poet, romancer, dreamer.”<sup>13</sup>) are reflected in his work, particularly in his most successful heroines, Carrie and Jennie, each of whom comes close to being one more in a long line of Clarissas—another seduced heroine in the sentimental tradition. A brief examination of the sentimental novel will serve as a basis for substantiating this assertion.

Sentimental fiction in America was patterned for the most part after Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, the first novel printed in America, and *Clarissa*. American writers, using Richardson's works as models, proceeded to create sentimental tales which made use of an almost standardized plot and stock characters. The heroine of these novels, like Clarissa, is a virgin of flawless beauty. She is also a paragon of sensibility, as evidenced by her constant tears and swoons. Her parents are mercenary; generally there is a harsh and stubborn father patterned after Mr. Harlowe. This model of virtue, beauty, and sensibility is abducted by a cruel villain, who is generally, like Richardson's

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, revised edition (New York, 1966), p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> Robert H. Elias, *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (New York, 1949), p. 148.

<sup>12</sup> *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Dreiser, *A Book about Myself*, p. 14.

Lovelace, of a higher class than the heroine. The wily libertine customarily whisks the heroine off by night in a carriage. The American Lovelace, like his predecessor, then uses one of several of a set of timeworn tricks to beguile his innocent victim, among them a fake wedding ceremony and drugs—or a feigned illness designed to lure her back if she escapes. The heroine, who is always an angel of mercy, will of course return to a suffering villain, for her place is in the sickchamber (Sentimental novels show a morbid preoccupation with suffering and death.), and her duty is to reclaim erring man. To accomplish the latter duty, this sympathetic and meek creature is willing to accept the basest of injuries and to make any sacrifice.

If the long-suffering heroine can reclaim her erring Lovelace through her soft influence, her uncomplaining suffering, and her unexampled self-sacrifice, her reward may be marriage, the only salvation for the seduced heroine—or the persecuted innocent who throughout all these ordeals retains her virginity. If she is not rewarded by marriage, or if, as in *Clarissa's* case, her persecution has been so vile that she no longer wishes marriage, then her only reward is death—and if she does not commit suicide, she faces, in the manner set up by *Clarissa*, a lingering “decline” without a complaint. The “decline” is a fashionable attribute of these delicate sentimental heroines who constantly regard mourning and death and who believe that the good die young. Vitality and good health are considered unbecoming in a sentimental heroine, and there are few examples of healthy, vital sentimental females.

It was generally affirmed that the purpose of the sentimental novelist was to teach, to inculcate morality by precept. Many novelists contend that their works teach the same lesson that William Hill Brown claims for his *The Power of Sympathy*. In his Preface he writes, “The dangerous consequences of SEDUCTION are exposed, and the Advantages of FEMALE EDUCATION set forth and recommended.”<sup>14</sup> All the sentimental novelists, like Richardson, stress the triumph of good over evil. Thus, after a series of harrowing experiences and emotional

<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Perez Morton [The true author was later established to be William Hill Brown], *The Power of Sympathy or the Triumph of Nature* (Boston, 1894), Preface.

crises, the sentimental heroes and heroines are given a punishment or reward commensurate with their crime or virtue.<sup>15</sup>

*Sister Carrie*, like the early sentimental novels which it resembles in several respects, has its inception in an actual incident: one of Dreiser's sisters left an architect who had been supporting her to elope with the manager of a restaurant, whom she later discovered to be married and with whom she lived in New York.<sup>16</sup>

In *Sister Carrie* Dreiser uses the framework of the usual sentimental novel, but the surface resemblance only serves to magnify the differences in the significance of the actions, motivations, and aspirations of the characters. Dreiser's obviously intentional use of the conventional plot, theme and characters of the sentimental novel, treated, in such a way as to blaspheme the purpose and meaning of those old melodramas, makes it highly likely that Dreiser was intentionally parodying them.

*Sister Carrie* appears at first to be the traditional story of the seduction of the innocent girl of the lower classes. When we first see the youthful Carrie arriving in Chicago from the provinces, we are attracted to her beauty—not a sexual beauty, for Dreiser gives few details of the female form, but rather the beauty of her innocence and purity. Like the sentimental novelist, Dreiser begins with a sermon on virtue, cautioning against the pitfalls likely to befall the young girl, but oddly enough, the seducer which Dreiser warns against is not a scheming male so much as the “cunning wiles” of the city. He cautions, not against the deceitful lies that the designing libertine may whisper in the ears of the helpless female, but rather against “the falsehoods . . . these things [superhuman forces of the city] breathe into the unguarded ear.” It is the beauty of cosmopolitan society, not the magnetism of the cunning male, which, Dreiser warns, “relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simpler human perceptions.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite the already obvious fact that a portion of the role of

<sup>15</sup> This discussion of the general characteristics of the sentimental novel is based largely on Herbert R. Brown's *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860* (New York, 1959); see also Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, pp. 62-125.

<sup>16</sup> See Dreiser, *A Book about Myself*, pp. 364-5.

<sup>17</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York, 1960), pp. 23-4. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text of the paper.

the villain will be usurped by social forces in *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser nonetheless furnishes a human seducer in Drouet, though he is an almost laughable parallel to Lovelace. Like the traditional villain, he has a "magnetism" (25) which causes Carrie to forgo conventions and respond to this masher, whose striped shirt, gold plate cuff buttons, gold watch chain, numerous rings, and gray fedora hat make her conscious of the fact that he is of a higher class. Carrie is led to her fall, however, not by being abducted by Drouet, not by any of his beguiling tricks, but rather by her helplessness in a cruel world.

In Chicago Carrie is forced to work long hours under the most grueling of conditions and then required to hand over \$4.00 of her \$4.50 salary to her brother-in-law Hanson for room and board. Hanson, who replaces the hateful, mercenary father in the sentimental novel, is concerned with his own private profit from Carrie's labors and does not expect her to spend any money on recreation. With the fifty cents left to her Carrie cannot afford car fare or a much needed winter jacket, hat, and shoes. As a result of walking to her sister's house in the rain on a cold afternoon without a jacket, she catches a cold and loses her position. Unable to find another job, without fall clothes, and aware of the fact that Hanson will send her home if she is not self-supporting, Carrie accidentally meets Drouet and finds in him a means of escape from the cruel deprivations of a harsh and ruthless society.

As in conventional sentimental novels our attention is focused on the aftermath—the consequences of the seduction—rather than on the seduction itself. Dreiser is positively Victorian in his handling of the seduction scene.<sup>18</sup> With no evidence of any physical contact beyond Drouet's holding Carrie's arm or her hand (no passionate embrace, no kiss), Dreiser leaves the two on the steps of her flat and shifts the scene to Carrie's sister, who is dreaming that Carrie is falling down a coal pit, then sinking in encroaching water, and finally falling off a rock. Indeed this manner of indicating that Carrie has "fallen" is genteel enough and yet emphatic enough for any sentimentalist.

<sup>18</sup> Dreiser's Victorianism is treated at length by Sheldon N. Grebstein. See his "Dreiser's Victorian Vamp," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, IV (Spring, 1963), 3-11.

And yet it soon becomes clear that in Dreiser the significance of the fall, of sin, and of villainy will not satisfy the sentimentalists, for in Dreiser (and therefore in this paper) *fall, sin, villain*, and similar sentimental clichés are used only as functional terms, since, as it will later be shown, there is no real fall, no actual sin, nor no true villain in *Sister Carrie* or *Jennie Gerhardt*.

Like all proper sentimental heroines, Carrie falls without any show of passion on her part. But unlike all proper sentimental heroines Carrie falls without any notable show of regret. Unlike her predecessor who fought until the end to protect her virtue, who might even commit suicide rather than submit, and who would certainly swoon if faced with the inevitable loss of her chastity, Carrie, having been clothed and fed, as she faces what even so naive and innocent a creature as she must have recognized as imminent, merely "glanced about, warmly musing." (96) Dreiser explains that Carrie is not more distressed because she "had no excellent home principles fixed upon her." (95) After the fall, Carrie's reaction to her seduction is unlike that of the proper sentimental heroine; she does not react like Jenny in *The Fille de Chambre*: Jenny

became so violent, that she was unable to proceed . . . For several days she was unable to give us any account of what had befallen her. She was feverish, sometimes delirious, and when any lucid intervals appeared, too weak and languid to be capable of speaking more than two or three words at a time.<sup>19</sup>

She does not react like Amelia in *Amelia: or the Faithless Briton*: Amelia "fell senseless to the ground. For a while convulsive motion shook her frame, but gradually subsiding, the flame of life seemed to be extinct, and all her terrors at an end."<sup>20</sup> She does not react like Clarissa; Clarissa, after recovering from a state of delirium and madness, writes letter after letter in which she minutely analyzes her heart and reveals the state of her disordered and wildly suffering mind. But Carrie, unlike Clarissa, has "only an average little conscience," (107) and she has no Anna Howe in whom to confide every minute detail in lengthy letters, even if her mind were capable of such

<sup>19</sup> Susanna Rowson, *The Fille de Chambre* (Dublin, 1798), p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> [Anonymous], *Amelia; or, The Faithless Briton* (Boston, 1798), p. 126.



analysis. No, unlike the usual delirious, lost heroine, Carrie merely muses, "Ah, what is it I have lost." (105) Carrie, like any proper heroine, wishes marriage. Failing to attain this earthly salvation, she does not forthwith commit suicide or, like Clarissa, go into the customary and proper decline. If on occasion she, considering her behavior, "looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse [image of herself]," it is also true that when "she looked into her glass [she] saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen before." (107) Carrie is hardly the Clarissa type of fallen woman described by Goldsmith in *The Vicar of Wakefield*,

When lovely woman stoops to folly,  
And finds too late that men betray,  
What charm can soothe her melancholy?  
What art can wash her tears away?  
The only art her guilt to cover,  
To hide her shame from ev'ry eye,  
To give repentance to her lover,  
And wring his bosom is—to die.<sup>21</sup>

No, as Carrie represses thoughts of her fall by turning her attention to her beauty and her new clothes, she is rather more faithfully described in T. S. Eliot's parody,

When lovely woman stoops to folly and  
Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand  
And puts a record on the gramophone.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed the thought of death never occurs to Carrie, nor does she decline, but rather this hardy lass grows, becoming more beautiful and graceful, while retaining her childlike innocence; and she later proceeds to have herself seduced by another villain, this one of a higher class than Drouet.

Carrie is originally moved in this second affair by a desire that motivates many a sentimental heroine—that of reclaiming a villain. When Hurstwood pleads with Carrie to love him and help him to rehabilitate his life, she pities him; Dreiser writes,

<sup>21</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield: a Tale* (London, 1928), p. 162; these lines and the following lines by T. S. Eliot are cited by Fiedler in his discussion of the seduction theme. See Fiedler, *Love and Death*, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York, 1952), p. 44.

“Carrie looked at him with the tenderness which virtue ever feels in its hope of reclaiming vice.” (140)

In this affair Carrie insists like the proper sentimental heroine that she will not yield to Hurstwood without marriage, and she refuses to see him again when she discovers he is already married. But Hurstwood, determined to win her, turns to the usual guiles of the villain, and with that old lie about illness (Hurstwood tells her Drouet is injured.), he lures her from her apartment, and, like so many Lovelaces before him, he whisks her off in the middle of the night in a carriage—and later (modernity!) in a train. Her resistance when she discovers the villain's true purpose seems a parody of Clarissa's violent repulsion of Lovelace. Carrie attempts to free herself from Hurstwood and then cries, but neither of these expected actions is performed with enough vehemence to attract the attention of the few dozing passengers in the same car; nor does Carrie appeal to the conductor for help. By the time the train makes its first stop, Carrie is too excited about the prospects of seeing Montreal and New York to consider making her escape. Once in Montreal Hurstwood uses the familiar old ruse of the false ceremony to seduce the innocent young maiden, who thinks she has resisted until her virtue has been rewarded with marriage.

Carrie lacks the sensibility of the sentimental heroine which was usually evidenced in the latter's sympathy for others, her willingness to sacrifice herself, and her frequent weeping. Carrie cries on a few occasions, but the few tears she sheds are hardly enough to qualify her as a true daughter of feeling. Dreiser at times notes that Carrie is of a sympathetic nature. He writes on one occasion, “She was rich in feeling, . . . Sorrow in her was aroused by many a spectacle—an uncritical upwelling of grief for the weak and helpless.” (154) She feels sympathy for Drouet when she thinks he is injured; she feels sympathy for Hurstwood when she leaves him, when she finds out he has stolen money, and when, as a helpless tramp, he begs her for help; but in each case Carrie, unlike the true creature of feeling, offers only a *brief* expression of sympathy, feels only a *momentary* pang, or extends a merely *perfunctory* hand of relief, and then promptly *forgets*, as in the following incident which Dreiser relates:

The plea [for money] was that of a gaunt-faced man of about thirty, who looked the picture of privation and wretchedness. Drouet was the first to see. He handed over a dime with an upwelling feeling of pity in his heart. Hurstwood scarcely noticed the incident. Carrie quickly forgot. (148)

Unlike the typical sentimental heroine who is always willing to sacrifice herself, Carrie's main motivation is self-interest. This fact is aptly attested in her leaving the destitute Hurstwood when he is no longer able to contribute to the maintenance of their apartment. Before this Dreiser has informed the reader that "Self-interest with her was high . . . It was . . . her guiding characteristic." (24)

In *Jennie Gerhardt* Dreiser comes closer to creating a purely sentimental heroine than he does in *Sister Carrie*. This novel, like the usual sentimental novel, is also based on an actual incident; in *Dawn* Dreiser writes of one of his sisters who had, like Jennie, accepted money from a prominent man, with her mother's consent, and who was also seduced by him. This was the man who got Paul out of jail, just as Senator Brander secured the release of Jennie's brother Bass.<sup>23</sup>

Here again we have the stock figures of the sentimental novels: the young innocent virgin who is seduced, the cruel father who will not allow her to marry her chosen and puts her out of her home after she has fallen, and the seducer.

Jennie, a pure young virgin with slight intellectual endowments, is led to her fall by a series of unfortunate circumstances rather than by any cunning wiles of the kind and sympathetic Senator Brander. The Gerhardt family is without money for clothes, food, or the mortgage when Jennie's brother Sebastian is jailed for stealing coal. Thus Jennie turns to the generous Senator for aid—and is seduced.

Despite Jennie's "chemic" attraction to Lester, her second fall is precipitated by a similar set of circumstances. Her father is injured, thus cutting off his contributions to the family resources and adding daily doctor's bills to the family's other expenses. Money is needed for clothing, rent, food, and other necessities. Jennie is again driven to sacrifice herself by circumstances and by her natural sympathies for the suffering of her family.

<sup>23</sup> Dreiser, *Dawn*, pp. 14-15.

Unlike Carrie, who is motivated by instinct and selfish desire, Jennie is sincerely stimulated by feeling. She is a true creature of sensibility. As Dreiser writes, "goodness and mercy had molded her every impulse."<sup>24</sup> Her sympathies are always with others, and she is quite willing to sacrifice herself for them. She is the one who always comforts her sisters and brothers and makes sacrifices of her goods and energy that they may be happy. This she does joyfully, never complaining. Her sympathy for the plight of her jailed brother moves Senator Brander to exclaim, "You angel! You sister of mercy! To think you should have to add tears to your other sacrifices." (76) Jennie gladly contributes all of her salary towards the maintenance of her family. When she willingly sacrifices herself on a second occasion to provide essentials for her family, she is motivated by the thought of providing a comfortable home for her mother rather than by the desire for beautiful clothes and comfort for herself, as in Carrie's case. Upon discovering that Lester will inherit his full share of his father's estate only if he leaves her, she makes the supreme sacrifice of the sentimental heroine; she uncomplainingly sacrifices her lover to her less worthy (but socially prominent) rival, Mrs. Gerald.

Like her predecessors in the sentimental tradition, Jennie's place is at the deathbed—her mother's, her father's, Vesta's, and finally, Lester's. Dreiser shows almost as much preoccupation with death and suffering here as does the sentimental novelist striving to keep his reader shedding constant tears for the suffering victim. Dreiser subjects Jennie to one harrowing experience after another—the death of her lover while she is pregnant, the inevitable eviction from the family home by the cruel father; financial crises, the death of her father, abandonment by Lester, the death of Vesta, and finally the death of her beloved Lester. This long series of emotional crises was deliberately contrived by Dreiser to add poignancy to the novel, which originally ended with Lester's marriage to Jennie and did not include the death of Vesta.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt* (New York, 1911), p. 16. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text of the paper.

<sup>25</sup> In a letter to Fremont Rider, dated January 24, 1911, Dreiser writes, "I am convinced that one of the reasons of lack of poignancy is the fact that Lester marries Jennie." *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, p. 110.

Dreiser's treatment of Vesta is in direct accord with another popular sentimental device which Herbert R. Brown calls "the cult of the child." Brown notes:

The children were used by the sentimentalists to rescue families from divorce, to cheer the poor and to nurse the sick, to soften flinty hearts, . . . More often than not, their sole reward was an early, if not a painful death, for a cherished article in the sentimental creed is that the good die young.<sup>26</sup>

Thus it is Vesta who softens Gerhardt's cold heart and is the chief solace and comfort of his last days; it is Vesta who, by winning Lester's heart, helps to keep Lester and Jennie together after he determines to end their relationship upon discovering that Jennie had "deceived" him about the child. It is Vesta who unites them as a family, for the desire to give Vesta a yard motivates Lester to give up his apartment, which is more convenient to his work, and to move the family to a suburban home. Dreiser's only reward for his angelic little creation is an early death.

Although both *Jennie Gerhardt* and *Sister Carrie* maintain many of the conventions of the sentimental novel, they are most notable for their differences. The American sentimentalists were for the most part dreamers, moralists, and sensationalists, and they failed to reflect life as it actually was. They were unable to portray the real nature of the industrialized American society with its unemployment, poverty, and general unrest. They insisted on the belief in the perfectibility of man. Lust and vice were acceptable only if severe punishment were meted out in the end. Even the more realistic works such as those by Howells and Norris continued to cling to this last divine dictum. It is on these points that Dreiser most notably differs from the sentimentalists. He had had constantly revealed to him in his profession as a newspaper reporter that "this idea of a perfect world which contained neither sin nor shame for any save vile outcasts, criminals and vagrants, was the trashiest lie that was ever foisted upon an all too human world"; and he was incensed that "You couldn't write about life as it was; you had to write about it as somebody else thought it was, the ministers and farmers and dullards of the home."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America*, p. 300.

<sup>27</sup> Dreiser, *A Book about Myself*, pp. 113-14.

As Dreiser saw the American society in which he set his stories, it was not a society in which the conventional code of ethics was enforceable; thus neither his villains nor his heroines are sinful because they have defied those codes. No character in either of the novels is really a villain; the seducers Drouet, Hurstwood, Brander, and Kane, while not perfect, are for the most part good-natured, kind, generous, and sympathetic. Their shortcomings are that they (with the possible exception of Brander) are weak rather than that they are evil and that they are victims of chemic drives. Further, Hurstwood's and Kane's suffering and death are not, like Lovelace's, a punishment for sin, which the reader is led to believe a just retribution, but rather the result of their weakness, which the reader is led to pity, and of blind chance. Hurstwood's gradual decline is a consequence, first of all, of his inability to cope with his new surroundings: Dreiser notes that in New York, "The sea was already full of whales. A common fish must needs disappear wholly from view—remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was nothing." (*Carrie*, 285). The second cause of Hurstwood's decline is simply bad luck, such as the loss of his investment in a bar when the land on which the bar is located is sold. Lester lacks the business acumen and the ruthlessness to be the success in the business world that his brother is, and he is so weak that he sacrifices the woman he loves for the sake of policy. Dreiser notes,

Lester . . . was suffering . . . that painful sense of unfairness which comes to one who knows that he is making a sacrifice of the virtues—kindness, loyalty, affection—to policy. (*Jennie*, 369)

Too weak to fight the "policy" of society, he acquiesces and is killed by his new life. Dreiser writes:

Drifting in this fashion, wining, dining, drinking the waters of this curative spring and that, traveling in luxurious ease and taking no physical exercise, finally altered his body from a vigorous, quick-moving, well-balanced organism into one where plethora of substance was clogging every essential function. His liver, kidneys, spleen, pancreas—every organ, in fact—had been overtaxed for some time . . . he was allowing himself to drift into a physical state in which even a slight malady might prove dangerous. The result was inevitable, and it came. (*Jennie*, 417)

Thus, in their final suffering and deaths, Lester and Hurstwood are to be viewed as pitiful victims themselves of the true villains, society, chance, and chemic drives, not rakes who are receiving their just punishment in the sentimental tradition of the heroine triumphing over the villain. There is no true triumph here of the persecuted heroines either, for both Jennie and Carrie are thwarted in their quest for happiness though they are well off materially in the end. Carrie will never be content nor realize her dream. In spite of her chance rise to material success, as the novel closes Dreiser apostrophizes the lonely girl:

Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel. (*Carrie*, 476)

*Jennie Gerhardt* closes on a similar note. Dreiser writes of Jennie, watching the train with Lester's body disappear in a maze of smoke:

Before her was stretching a vista of lonely years down which she was steadily gazing. Now what? She was not so old yet. There were those two orphan children to raise. They would marry and leave after a while, and then what? Days and days in endless reiteration, and then—? (*Jennie*, 431)

The disappointments and disillusionments of these heroines are not any sentimentalized punishment for their loss of virtue, however, for their loss of virtue is no sin. They too are victims of the true villain—impersonalized society, chance, and chemic drives. Thus they are not personally responsible for having violated society's impersonal codes. Considering the arbitrary and conventional codes of society and the matter of morality, Dreiser notes, after Carrie's fall, "It [morality] is yet deeper than conformity to things of earth alone. It is more involved than we as yet perceive. Answer first why the heart thrills . . ." (*Carrie*, 105) To Jennie and Carrie, Dreiser has applied this same comment that he makes of his sisters who inspired these two characters:

Now I know how futile are all earthly doctrines as to morals and virtues and how incapable the most well-meaning and puritanic

of virtue-seekers of establishing the thing of which they dream. Who filled these girls with this eager fire which made them seek relief at any cost? Who caused their eyes to blazon their hunger for love? Who made their eager feet to run, their hearts to pant with desire? There is in this world too little grasp of the nature-made chemisms and impulses that evoke and condition our deeds.<sup>28</sup>

Dreiser continually denies that his heroines are sinful, and he rejects the societal standards that tempt them to their fall and then accuse them. Of Carrie and her ilk, those enticed by the beautiful temptations of the world, he says, "Not evil, but longing for that which is better, more often direct [their] steps." (*Carrie*, 474) In *Jennie* he insists:

The accidental variation from a given social practice does not necessarily entail sin. No poor little earthling caught in the enormous grip of chance, and so swerved from the established customs of men, could possibly be guilty of that depth of vileness which the attitude of the world would seem to predicate so inevitably. (*Jennie*, 98-9)

Jennie's lack of guilt is reaffirmed by the stern, moralistic Mr. Gerhardt, who, when governed by his conventional understanding of morality, condemned Jennie, declaring that she had "set herself right to hell." (*Jennie*, 89). Later, realizing his error with the wisdom of age, Mr. Gerhardt begs Jennie's forgiveness and asserts, "We get wiser as we get older." His last words, addressed to Jennie, are, "You're a good woman." (*Jennie*, 346)

Thus, in Jennie's case Dreiser goes even further than denying that she is sinful; he reaffirms her virtue, a virtue that cannot survive in a society which has as its one criterion the opinions of others and which asks merely, "Has she preserved her purity?" (*Jennie*, 93) True virtue, Dreiser proclaims, "is the wishing well and the doing well unto others. Virtue is that quality of generosity which offers itself willingly for another's service." (*Jennie*, 93) When Dreiser so simply, yet forcefully, writes in his moralizing epilogue, "Jennie loved, and loving, gave. Is there a superior wisdom?" he echoes that new code for virtue that Hester Prynne daringly anticipated when she asserted, "What we did had a consecration of its own."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Dreiser, *Dawn*, p. 138.

<sup>29</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York, 1966), p. 188.



The great tragedy here is not only that Jennie cannot find happiness in her society, but even worse, that her world cannot embrace and reward the Jennies, who are more generous and thereby more virtuous than those who condemn them. In the society pictured by Dreiser the reward goes not to the virtuous as opposed to the sinful, but rather to the strong as opposed to the weak.<sup>30</sup> In this epilogue Dreiser writes of Jennie's "short-comings" which cause her failure:

Not to be possessed of the power to strike and destroy; Not to choose, because of an absence of lust and hunger, to run as a troubled current; not to be able to fall upon a fellow-being, tearing that which is momentarily desirable from his grasp, only to drop it and run wildly toward that which for another brief moment seems more worthy of pursuit. Not to be bitter, angry, brutal, feverish—What a loss! (*Jennie*, 432)

Thus what we have in Jennie and Carrie are two heroines whom Dreiser obviously consciously places within a sentimental framework, but who are essentially modern, realistic, American heroines, whose fall is the inevitable result of the society in which they live. The paradox is that they never seem to realize that they have fallen and thus proceed to grow and "rise" in the society's material sense of the word. The blasphemy to the sentimental tradition is that their submission is not debasing and deserves no reprimand and that their seducers are to be pitied rather than condemned. The ultimate tragedy is that true virtue such as that exemplified particularly by Jennie—virtue which has nothing whatsoever to do with chastity or the lack of chastity—can never be rewarded in the society in which they live.

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<sup>30</sup> In *Dawn* Dreiser writes, "Surely the battle was to the swift, the race to the strong," (p. 155) and again more precisely, "The race was surely to the swift, the battle to the strong." (253) This is an important theme in *The Financier* and *An American Tragedy* as well.