

A STUDY OF JENNIE GERHARDT

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I CHIEF CHARACTERS

Jennie Gerhardt, “a product of the fancy, the feeling, the innate affection of the untutored but poetic mind of her mother combined with the gravity and poise which were characteristic of her father”¹ had a “well-rounded, graceful form, full of youth, health, and that hopeful expectancy . . .” (p. 7) at eighteen when she first appears before the reader. She was brought up in a poor family and was not trained to any special work. She was one of those poor girls who dreamt far dreams and wondered how beautiful life must be for the rich. The privilege of being generous appealed to her. Yet she was never meanly envious. This fresh, young soul had too much innocence and buoyancy to consider for a moment the world’s point of view. She was an unsophisticated creature, emotional, totally inexperienced in the matter of the affections, and yet mature enough mentally to enjoy the attentions of Senator Brander, fifty year old bachelor, whose room in a hotel she visited for laundry.

Jennie was “of a naturally long-suffering and uncomplaining disposition,” and after her first real trial: pregnancy and her secret lover’s sudden death, she was sorry—more for his sake than for her own—that his end had been so untimely.² She was

¹ T. Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt* (Cleveland and New York, 1956), p. 1.

Quotations from this work will be shown hereinafter by the page number in parentheses attached immediately after the quotation.

² Dreiser further describes Jennie at this critical moment as follows: Strangely enough, she felt no useless remorse, no vain regrets. Her heart was pure, and she was conscious that it was filled with peace. Sorrow there was, it is true, but only a mellow phase of it, a vague uncertainty and wonder, which would sometimes cause her eyes to fill with tears. (p. 99)

“of that naturally sunny disposition, which, in spite of toil and privation, kept her always cheerful.” (p. 109) To her way of thinking, people were not intentionally cruel. Vague thoughts of sympathy and divine goodness permeated her soul. She felt that life at worst or best was beautiful—had always been so. The ordeal aroused in her a clearer conception of the responsibilities of life. Yet she was to attract another man with “the peculiar softness of her disposition and her pre-eminent femininity.” (p. 128)³ On her part, too, when she met Lester Kane, she felt “for the first time in her life, an interest in a man of his own account. He was so big, so handsome, so forceful At the same time she felt a little dread of him.” (p. 127) “A flash that was hypnotic, significant, insistent passed between them” (p. 129) and she was “swept by some force beyond her control.” (p. 140) She felt that she must not yield and tried her best to control herself, but it was in vain. And just at that time, it so happened that her family needed money owing to her father’s accident, and when she realized that if she gave up herself to Lester who offered help her family could meet the emergency, she concluded that the only way out was to sacrifice herself. She believed that her life was fated. She asked herself if it really made any difference, and if her life had not already been a failure.

Jennie wanted “to make herself right with the world, to live honorably, to be decent.” She went about numb and still, but the ache of defeat and disgrace was under it all. She knew she was bad, for she had yielded on two occasions to the force of circumstances which might have been fought out differently.

³Dreiser’s explanation is as follows: It is a curious characteristic of the non-defensive disposition that it is like a honey-jar to flies. Nothing is brought to it and much is taken away. Around a soft, yielding, unselfish disposition men swarm naturally. They sense this generosity, this non-protective attitude from afar. A girl like Jennie is like a comfortable fire to the average masculine mind; they gravitate to it, seek its sympathy, yearn to possess it. Hence she was annoyed by many unwelcome attentions. (p. 126)

She wished she had had more courage and that she did not always have that haunting sense of fear. But when publicity was given to her affair with Lester, she wanted not to be hounded that way, but be let alone. She was trying to do right then. She wondered why the world couldn't help her, instead of seeking to push her down. She wanted to keep Lester, to whom she was grateful for all that he had done and was doing for her.

Jennie's view of life broadened as she travelled abroad with Lester. She gained a clear idea of how vast the world was, and as she saw decayed Greece, fallen Rome, and forgotten Egypt, she realized how pointless were our minor difficulties and beliefs. Her father's Lutheranism did not seem so significant any more. She also came to know that "love was not enough in this world" and that "one needed education, wealth, training, the ability to fight and scheme." But she did not want to or could not live in this way.

When finally, although after repeated suggestions to leave on her part, Jennie had to give up Lester, she felt hurt through and through, and yet she realized that it was foolish to be angry. Life was always doing that sort of a thing to her. It would go on doing so. She was sure of it. Here she was walled in this little place, leading an obscure existence, and there was Lester out in the great world enjoying life in its fullest and freest sense. It was too bad. But why cry? Why?

Jennie, who did not have an incisive reasoning capacity, only felt, as she thought about the world and her experiences, "that the world moved in some strange, unstable way. Apparently no one knew clearly what it was all about. People were born and died. . . . Was it all blind chance, or was there some guiding intelligence—a God? 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! 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." (p. 405)

She felt that she was never a master of her fate. "Was not her life a patchwork of conditions made and affected by these things which she saw—wealth and force—which had found her unfit? She had evidently been born to yield, not seek. This panoply of power had been paraded before her since childhood. What could she do now but stare vaguely after it as it marched triumphantly by? Lester had been of it." (p. 430) "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—?" (p. 431)

Jennie was "natural, sympathetic, emotional, with no schooling in the ways of polite society, but with a feeling for the beauty of life and the lovely things in human relationship which made her beyond any question an exceptional woman." (p. 381) She was obedient and ready to sacrifice herself for her family and Lester. Criticizing the "yielding sweetness of her character," Lester said that she was "sweet all right, but needed courage and defiance." (p. 198)

Jennie felt instinctively that, on the large human side, Lester preferred her to Letty Pace, who was his natural mate, so far as birth, breeding, and position went. Lester called her "a noble and charming woman" and on his death bed he confessed that she was the only woman he had ever loved truly. "You're a good woman" was the tribute to her from her father, who once sent her out of home for her shameful act, as well as from Lester.

Lester Kane was born of a very clannish family.⁴ He was not interested in formal education and went into business at eighteen. He was not by any means the financier that his brother Robert was, but he had a larger vision of the subtleties that underlie life. He was softer, more human, more good-natured about everything. And, strangely enough, his father admired and trusted him. "Mental force and courage" were always predominant in Lester; "business is business" was a favorite axiom with him.

There were molten forces in him, flames which burst forth now and then in spite of the fact that he was sure he had them under control. They were taste for liquor and sensual nature. He "flattered himself that he had a grasp upon a right method of living, a method which was nothing more than a quiet acceptance of social conditions as they were, tempered by a little personal judgment as to the right and wrong of individual conduct. Not to fuss and fume, not to cry out about anything, not to be mawkishly sentimental; to be vigorous and sustain your personality intact—such was his theory of life, and he was satisfied that it was a good one." (p. 135)

Up to the time he met Jennie at thirty-six he was full of the assurance of the man who has never known defeat.⁵ Yet he became "confused by the multiplicity of things, the vastness of the panorama of life, the glitter of its details, the unsubstantial nature of its forms, the uncertainty of their justification. Born

⁴ His position in the family was as follows: His mother loved him, but her attitude toward him had not so much to do with real love as with ambition. His father—well, his father was a man, like himself. All of his sisters were distinctly wrapped up in their own affairs; Robert and he were temperamentally ungenial. (p. 216)

⁵ Lester's appearance is described as follows: above the medium in height, clear-eyed, firm-jawed, athletic, direct, and vigorous. He had a deep resonant voice that carried clearly everywhere; people somehow used to stop and listen whether they knew him or not. He was simple and abrupt in his speech. (p. 127)

a Catholic, he was no longer a believer in the divine inspiration of Catholicism; raised a member of the social elect, he had ceased to accept the fetish that birth and station presuppose any innate superiority; brought up as the heir to a comfortable fortune and expected to marry in his own sphere, he was by no means sure that he wanted marriage on any terms. . . . In short, the whole body of things material social, and spiritual had come under the knife of his mental surgery and been left but half dissected. Life was not proved to him. Not a single idea of his, unless it were the need of being honest, was finally settled. In all other things he wavered, questioned, procrastinated, leaving to time and the powers back of the universe the solution of the problems that vexed him." (pp. 132-33) He was the natural product of a combination of elements—religious, commercial, social—modified by that pervading atmosphere of liberty in the American life which is productive of almost uncounted freedom of thought and action.

He had begun to feel that there were achievements in life which he had failed to realize in his own career. "The trouble with Lester was that, while blessed with a fine imagination and considerable insight, he lacked the ruthless, narrow-minded insistence on his individual superiority which is a necessary element in almost every great business success. . . . Lester did not possess that indispensable quality of enthusiasm. Life had already shown him the greater part of its so-called joys. He saw through the illusions that are so often and so noisily labeled pleasure." (pp. 303-4)

Lester's view of love and marriage was far from normal. He thought if he chose to have irregular relations with women, he was capable of deciding where the danger point lay. His belief was that if man were only guided by a sense of the brevity inherent in all such relationships there would not be so many troublesome consequences growing out of them. He did not want to marry any woman. He was like those who preferred temporary companionship to conventional marriage. "He wanted the comfort

of feminine companionship, but he was more disinclined to give up his personal liberty in order to obtain it. He would not wear the social shackles if it were possible to satisfy the needs of his heart and nature and still remain free and unfettered." (p. 136)⁶ And in Jennie he believed that he had discovered the right woman.⁷ His connection with Jennie was irregular in the eyes of the church and of society, but it brought him peace and comfort and he was perfectly satisfied with it. When he met objections on the part of his family, his reaction was a reflection that the chief difficulty was perhaps "the bad luck in being found out," for Jennie was too sweet to let go. Yet pressures became stronger. He could care enough to seize her and take her to himself as he had, but he could not care enough to keep her if something more important—his family and business—happened. However, when he was separated from Jennie, it was not without that painful sense of unfairness which comes to one who knows

⁶ Dreiser's idea concerning this sort of union is explained as follows: "Must it be?" they ask themselves, in speculating concerning the possibility of taking a maiden to wife, "that I shall be compelled to swallow the whole social code, make a covenant with society, sign a pledge of abstinence, and give to another a life interest in all my affairs, when I know too well that I am but taking to my arms a variable creature like myself, whose wishes are apt to become insistent and burdensome in proportion to the decrease of her beauty and interest?" These are the men, who, unwilling to risk the manifold contingencies of an authorized connection, are led to consider the advantages of a less-binding union, a temporary companionship. They seek to seize the happiness of life without paying the cost of their indulgence. Later on, they think, the more definite and conventional relationship may be established without reproach or the necessity of radical readjustment. (pp. 135-36)

⁷ Concerning his relation to Jennie, Lester explained to Letty as follows: I said to myself that I could just take Jennie, and then, after a while when things had quieted down some, we could separate. She would be well provided for. I wouldn't care very much. She wouldn't care. You understand. (p. 337)

Lester's ideal was that a woman should reveal herself completely to the one man she is in love; and the fact that Jennie had not done so was a grief to him. His love was self-centered.

that he is making a sacrifice of the virtues—kindness, loyalty, affection—to policy. Even when he had been away from Jennie so long that the first severe wave of self-reproach had passed, he was still doubtful, but he preferred to stifle his misgivings.

Could it be done *to his own satisfaction*? Would it pay mentally and spiritually? Would it bring him peace of mind? He was thinking, all the while he was readjusting his life to the old—or, rather new—conditions, and he was not feeling any happier. As a matter of fact he was feeling worse—grim, revengeful. If he married Letty he thought at times it would be to use her fortune as a club to knock other enemies over the head, and he hated to think he was marrying her for that. He took up his abode at the Auditorium, visited Cincinnati in a distant and aggressive spirit, sat in council with the board of directors, wishing that he was more at peace with himself, more interested in life. But he did not change his policy in regard to Jennie.

Lester's feeling about his marriage with Letty is shown in the following words of his addressed to her: "I'm too cynical. Too indifferent. It won't be worth anything in the long run." (p. 380) He married her because she was insistent but his original feeling of doubt and dissatisfaction with himself had never wholly quieted. It did not ease him any to know that he had left Jennie comfortably fixed, for it was always so plain to him that money was not the point at issue with her. Affection was what she craved. She needed him, and he was ashamed to think that his charity had not outweighed his sense of self-preservation and his desire for material advantage. He knew now that no act of his could make things right. He had been to blame from the very beginning, first for taking her, then for failing to stick by a bad bargain.

From one point of view it seemed to him best to have married Letty, but he was not so much happier as when he lived with Jennie. And his conclusion was that it wasn't himself that

was important in that transaction apparently; the individual didn't count much in the situation. He said, "all of us are more or less pawns. We're moved about like chessmen by circumstances over which we have no control.... After all, life is more or less of a farce,.... It's a silly show. The best we can do is to hold our personality intact. It doesn't appear that integrity has much to do with it." p. -01)

Lester, in addition to becoming a little phlegmatic, was becoming decidedly critical in his outlook on life. He could not make out what it was all about. "If death was coming, let it come. He was ready at any time. No complaint or resistance would issue from him. Life, in most of its aspects, was a silly show anyhow." (p. 413) His views of living were still decidedly material, grounded in creature comforts, and he had always insisted upon having the best of everything. He gambled a little; took more and more to drinking, not in the sense that a drunkard takes to it, but as a high liver, socially, and with all his friends. When he drank he could drink a great deal, and he ate in proportion. Nothing must be served but the best—only a high-priced chef was worth while.

Lester is not an average man because of his rich family background but in his relation to his family, non-conformity attitude toward the society, and in the matter of sex, he is one of the many. In fact, Lester's dilemma was also Dreiser's own. At least he suffered from the same kind of troubles.

Letty Gerald Pace was a talented woman, beautiful, graceful, artistic, a writer of verse, an omnivorous reader, a student of art, and a sincere and ardent admirer of Lester Kane. Now a wealthy widow, she said to Lester Kane that she looked upon her life as a kind of failure and that sometimes she got so tired, doing nothing but travelling, talking, and shooing away silly fortune-hunters.

She wanted Lester, and she was not ashamed to let him see

that she wanted him. As she stood before him, she was attractive as a woman of her age could be, wise, considerate, full of friendship and affection. Yet, when Lester breathed his last, it was not she but Jennie who stayed with him and comforted him. She was on her way back from Europe.

In William Gerhardt's father's cottage the influence of the Lutheran minister had been all-powerful; he had inherited the feeling that the Lutheran Church was a perfect institution, and that its teachings were of all-importance when it came to the issue of the future life. His Lutheran proclivities had been strengthened by years of church-going and the religious observances of home life. Gerhardt was convinced that everything spoken from the pulpit of his church was literally true. Death and the future life were realities to him.

Now that the years were slipping away and the problem of the world was becoming more and more inexplicable, he clung with pathetic anxiety to the doctrines which contained a solution. Oh, if he could only be so honest and upright that the Lord might have no excuse for ruling him out. He said, "I don't know how it is, . . . I try, I try! Every night I pray that the Lord will let me do right, but it is no use. I might work and work." Yet he continued poor and his daughter was left pregnant.

Later when the family moved into a more comfortable house through the help of Lester Kane, and Gerhardt finally concluded that there was something wrong, he realized that he had let himself into this situation, and was not in much of a position now to raise an argument. Ever since his wife's death and the departure of the other children he had been subject to moods of profound gloom, from which he was not easily aroused. Life, it seemed, was drawing to a close for him, although he was only sixty-five years of age. The earthly ambitions he had once cherished were gone forever.

The nature of the old German's reflections at this time were

of a peculiarly subtle and somber character. What was this thing—life? What did it all come to after the struggle, and the worry, and the grieving? Where does it all go to? People die; you hear nothing more from them. His wife, now she had gone. Where had her spirit taken its flight?

Yet he continued to hold some strongly dogmatic convictions. He believed there was a hell, and that people who sinned would go there. He believed that the just would be rewarded in heaven. But who were the just? He shook his head. Mystery of mysteries. Life was truly strange, and dark, and uncertain. Still he did not want to go and live with any of his children. Actually they were not worthy of him—none but Jennie, and she was not good. So he grieved.

So far as his own meager store of money was concerned, he gave the most of it to his beloved church, where he was considered to be a model of propriety, honesty, faith—in fact, the embodiment of all the virtues.

Gerhardt had appealed to Jennie not only as her father, but as a friend and counselor. She saw him now in his true perspective, a hard-working, honest, sincere old German, who had done his best to raise a troublesome family and lead an honest life.

Mrs. Gerhardt was of a helpless, fleshy build, with a frank, open countenance and an innocent, diffident manner. Her eyes were large and patient, and in them dwelt such a shadow of distress as only those who have looked sympathetically into the countenances of the distraught and helpless poor know anything about. Every day Mrs. Gerhardt, who worked like a servant and who received absolutely no compensation either in clothes, amusements, or anything else, arose in the morning while the others slept, and built the fire.

She agreed with her husband timidly. She was not the type to think through or with a strict conscience. If she had only

gone a little bit further she might have learned more but she was only too glad, for her own peace of mind, to hush the matter up. When she was consulted about the affair with Lester and was asked to help, she acquiesced from sheer force of circumstances. She was sorry, but somehow it seemed to be for the best.

When, through the financial help of Lester Kane, a new house was procured for the family to move in, Mrs. Gerhardt was simple enough to be fairly beside herself with joy, thinking that it was the realization of her dreams, when Jennie had tears in her eyes.

II ETHICAL IDEAS, LOVE, RELIGION

Dreiser believed fate's intervention as in the case of Gerhardt's coming home being seriously injured in an accident, just when Jennie was courted by Lester. He also believed that there were inspirations, saying thus:

Flashes of inspiration come to guide the soul. In nature there is no outside. When we are cast from a group or a condition we have still the companionship of all that is. Nature is not ungenerous. Its winds and stars are fellows with you. Let the soul be but gentle and receptive, and this vast truth will come home—not in set phrases, perhaps, but as a feeling, a comfort, which, after all, is the last essence of knowledge. In the universe peace is wisdom. (pp. 93-94)

Dreiser may be characterized as amoral. He said:

No process is vile, no condition is unnatural. 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 seem to predicate so inevitably. (p. 98)

The differences in standards of morals were, according to Lester, due sometimes to climate, sometimes to religious beliefs, and sometimes to the rise of peculiar personalities like Mohammed.

And concerning their relations, Lester's belief was that admitting that Jennie "had been bad—locally it was important, perhaps, but in the sum of civilization, in the sum of big forces, what did it all amount to? They would be dead after a little while, she and Lester and all these people. Did anything matter except goodness—goodness of heart? What else was there that was real?" (p. 306)

He called the endeavor to adjust moral and ethical entanglements as an effort "to put the ocean into a tea-cup, or to tie up the shifting universe in a mess of strings called law." (p. 402)

Dreiser's definition of virtue is as follows:

Virtue is that quality of generosity which offers itself willingly for another's service, and, being this, it is held by society to be nearly worthless. Sell yourself cheaply and you shall be used lightly and trampled under foot. Hold yourself dearly, however unworthily, and you will be respected. Society, in the mass, lacks woefully in the matter of discrimination. Its one criterion is the opinion of others. Its one test that of self-preservation. Has he preserved his fortune? Has she preserved her purity? Only in rare instances and with rare individuals does there seem to be any guiding light from within. (p. 93)

About sex, he called the tendency to close the eyes and turn away the head as if there were something unclean in nature ridiculous, for, according to him, "the whole earth, not we alone, is moved by passions hymeneal, and everything terrestrial has come into being by the one common road,..." (p. 98)

Dreiser believed that there was "a fate in love." (p. 131) That was the reason why Lester Kane, a "strong, intellectual bear of a man, son of a wealthy manufacturer, stationed, so far as material conditions were concerned, in a world immensely superior to that in which Jennie moved, was, nevertheless, instinctively, magnetically, and chemically drawn to this poor serving-maid." (p. 131) By the same token, a man in love with one woman may be attracted by another at some moments. Jennie, who ex-

perienced this with Lester, was of opinion that "a man and a woman ought to want to live together, or they ought not to.... It doesn't make so much difference if a man goes off for a little while—just so long as he doesn't stay—if he wants to come back at all." (p. 311) Jennie had hoped once that Lester might want her only. But she could not think that since he did not, his affection was worth nothing.

"Fate" in love seems to mean more than attraction one feels in the opposite sex for a short time, but this is Dreiser's philosophy of love. In this he seems to be trying to defend his own behaviors in relation to his wives, Sallie and Helen.

There is described a pastor named Wundt, who is intolerant because of his bigotry and hard and fast orthodoxy, and who admonishes people to walk the straight and narrow way so that they may escape eternal punishment. But it is done rather casually and in this novel there is not much satire on Christian faith or church except that Gerhardt, who is stern and called the pillar of his church, is finally comforted by Jennie, whom a minister like Wundt would say hopeless of salvation.

Except Gerhardt, the main characters in this novel have very little of Christian faith that can sustain them. Mrs. Gerhardt was only nominally of the Mennonite faith and she quite willingly accepted her husband's creed.

Religion had no striking hold upon Jennie in her youth; when she accepted the doctrines of her family's church, it was little more than nominal. Later in life she had no particular objection to the church, but she did not depend upon its teachings as a guide in the affairs of life.

Lester Kane was an agnostic but he was conventional enough to think he might as well be married in the church, because he had been reared in it. When he died his church raised no objection in his being buried in the regular Christian way, because his family were distinguished.

III CONCLUSION

"Mirage" which is, though later given up by Dreiser in preference to *An American Tragedy*, quite suggestive of the theme of his chief work, applies to Jennie Gerhardt and as well as to Clyde and Roberta. One theme of his novels is a struggle of a handicapped yet lovable woman. Jennie's handicap was poverty and her illegitimate child, Vesta.

The affair with Senator Brander is somewhat like a prologue to the main part of this novel. Jennie was a victim of fate in the person of Brander, who seduced her when he was off his reason and passed away suddenly while still planning to redress his error. So, at the outset of the story, we find the heroine exclaiming "Dead?" in blank amazement, "the mirage of a distant country and wondrous scenes" that loomed up in her mind being shattered to pieces. And like many others who saw a mirage, she was to say "perhaps, perhaps" and "rich men had married poor girls before this."

There are no bad characters in this novel; most characters have shortcomings but they are treated with some sympathy. Reconciliation among William Gerhardt, Jennie and Lester Kane gives a kind of warm atmosphere to this novel. On this point, it is different from *An American Tragedy*.

The style has a little more lyrical tone than other works, especially when the author deals with Jennie and Letty. This would appeal to women readers. Letty Pace makes the novel a little romantic and breaks the tone of sheer realistic storytelling.

Account of Jennie gives a warm feeling; in fact, the authors humane attitude in dealing with characters is felt more than in other works, but all in all, this tells of Dreiser's cold philosophy of life.