



REALISM, NATURALISM, AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM IN THE NOVEL “JENNIE GERHARDT” BY THEODORE DREISER

Ikromova Shakhnoza Abdirasulovna
2nd Year Master’s Student of the
University of Economics and Pedagogy,
Karshi City, Republic of Uzbekistan

Abstract

This article examines the representation of realism, naturalism, and feminist perspectives in the novel “Jennie Gerhardt” by Theodore Dreiser. The study analyzes how Th.Dreiser’s narrative technique reflects the principles of literary realism and naturalism while simultaneously revealing the gendered limitations imposed on women in late nineteenth-century American society. Through literary analysis and feminist criticism, the research explores the protagonist Jennie Gerhardt as a character shaped by social forces, economic pressures, and patriarchal structures. The findings indicate that Th.Dreiser’s depiction of Jennie reflects the deterministic worldview typical of naturalist literature while also exposing the social injustice experienced by women. The article argues that the novel combines social realism with psychological depth, thereby creating a complex representation of gender, morality, and social inequality.

Keywords: Realism, naturalism, feminist criticism, social inequality, American literature, characterization, gender roles.

Introduction

The development of American literature at the turn of the twentieth century was strongly influenced by the literary movements of realism and naturalism. These movements sought to depict life as it was experienced by ordinary people, emphasizing the role of social conditions, economic realities, and environmental



forces in shaping human behavior. Among the prominent writers associated with these traditions is Theodore Dreiser, whose works explore the struggles of individuals confronting the complexities of modern society. One of Th. Dreiser's most significant novels, *Jennie Gerhardt*, published in 1911, presents the life story of a young woman whose fate is determined by poverty, social prejudice, and gender inequality. Through the character of Jennie, Dreiser portrays the moral and emotional challenges faced by women in a society dominated by patriarchal values and rigid social norms. While the novel has traditionally been studied within the framework of American naturalism, modern literary criticism has increasingly examined the text from feminist perspectives. Feminist literary criticism focuses on the representation of women, the power structures embedded in literary narratives, and the ways in which literature reflects or challenges gender inequality [Tyson, 2015].

The purpose of this article is to analyze how realism, naturalism, and feminist literary criticism intersect in *Jennie Gerhardt*, and to demonstrate how Dreiser's narrative reflects both social determinism and gender-based oppression.

Literature Review

Scholars have long recognized Theodore Dreiser as a central figure in the development of American naturalist fiction. According to Pizer (1993), Dreiser's works illustrate the influence of environmental and economic forces on individual destiny, which is a defining characteristic of naturalism. Donald Pizer also emphasizes that Dreiser's novels often depict individuals struggling against social structures that limit personal freedom [Pizer, 1993]. In this regard, *Jennie Gerhardt* represents a powerful example of how social conditions determine human fate. From the perspective of realism, Dreiser's works portray everyday life with remarkable attention to social detail. As noted by Campbell (2000), realism in American literature aimed to present a truthful representation of society without idealization or romantic exaggeration.

In recent decades, feminist scholars have reevaluated Dreiser's female characters. Tyson (2015) argues that feminist literary criticism seeks to uncover how literary texts reflect patriarchal ideologies and how female characters navigate oppressive social systems. *Jennie Gerhardt*, as a literary character, has often been interpreted as a victim of social and economic circumstances. However, some scholars



suggest that her moral resilience and compassion reveal a subtle critique of the social structures that exploit women [Lingeman, 2005]. Thus, previous research demonstrates that Dreiser's novel can be interpreted simultaneously within the frameworks of realism, naturalism, and feminist criticism.

Methodology

This research employs several methodological approaches commonly used in literary studies. The literary-analytical method is used to interpret the narrative structure and thematic elements of the novel. The historical-contextual method allows the analysis of social conditions reflected in the text, particularly those related to gender roles and economic inequality in late nineteenth-century America. The feminist critical approach is applied to examine the representation of women and the patriarchal social structures that shape Jennie's life. Finally, elements of comparative literary analysis are used to evaluate how Dreiser combines the principles of realism and naturalism with the depiction of female experience.

Materials and Discussion

Realism in Jennie Gerhardt is evident in the detailed portrayal of everyday social realities. Dreiser carefully describes the economic hardships faced by Jennie's family and the limited opportunities available to individuals from lower social classes. The author's attention to social detail reflects the realist tradition, which emphasizes the accurate representation of ordinary life. By presenting the struggles of working-class families, Dreiser exposes the inequalities embedded within American society.

Naturalism extends the principles of realism by emphasizing the deterministic forces that influence human life. In Dreiser's novel, Jennie's fate is largely shaped by circumstances beyond her control, including poverty, social expectations, and gender discrimination. Naturalist writers often depict individuals as products of their environment, suggesting that personal choices are constrained by external conditions [Pizer, 1993]. Jennie's experiences illustrate this concept, as her life trajectory is repeatedly influenced by economic necessity and societal judgment. From a feminist perspective, Jennie Gerhardt represents the vulnerability of women within a patriarchal society. Throughout the novel, Jennie's relationships



with male characters reveal the imbalance of power between men and women. Despite her kindness and moral sincerity, Jennie is often judged according to social standards that privilege male authority and female obedience. Her experiences highlight the limited agency available to women in the social environment depicted by Dreiser. However, Jennie's character also demonstrates emotional strength and resilience. Her compassion and capacity for forgiveness suggest an alternative moral perspective that challenges the harsh judgments of society.

Results

The analysis reveals several important conclusions regarding the novel's literary significance. First, Dreiser's narrative combines realist social observation with naturalist determinism, creating a powerful depiction of social inequality. Second, the novel exposes the gender-based limitations imposed on women, making it relevant to feminist literary criticism. Third, Jennie's character illustrates how individual morality can persist despite oppressive social conditions. Finally, the novel reflects the broader transformation of American literature during the early twentieth century, when writers increasingly addressed issues of social justice and human suffering.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that Jennie Gerhardt represents an important example of the interaction between realism, naturalism, and feminist themes in American literature. Through the life story of Jennie, Theodore Dreiser portrays a society in which economic inequality and patriarchal values significantly shape human destinies.

Th. Dreiser's realist approach enables the author to depict the social environment with remarkable authenticity, while his naturalist perspective emphasizes the deterministic forces that influence the characters' lives. At the same time, feminist interpretation reveals how the novel exposes the vulnerability of women within a system dominated by male authority and social prejudice. Jennie Gerhardt emerges as a complex literary figure whose experiences reflect both the limitations imposed by society and the enduring strength of human compassion. The novel therefore serves not only as a critique of social injustice but also as a



profound exploration of moral resilience and emotional depth. Consequently, the study of Jennie Gerhardt contributes to a deeper understanding of American naturalist literature and highlights the continuing relevance of Dreiser's work in discussions of gender, social inequality, and literary realism.

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