



## Article

# The Dynamics of Character Development in “Jennie Gerhardt”

Orzigul Otamurodova Musayevna<sup>1</sup>

1. Uzbekistan, Kashkadarya, Karshi State University, teacher of Linguistics Department

\* Correspondence: [otamurodovaorzigul@gmail.com](mailto:otamurodovaorzigul@gmail.com)

**Annotation.** This article examines the dynamics of character development in Theodore Dreiser’s novel Jennie Gerhardt. The study focuses on the psychological, moral, and social transformation of the protagonist within the framework of American naturalism. It analyzes how Jennie’s personality is shaped not by individual freedom or personal ambition, but by poverty, social inequality, and gender constraints. The research demonstrates that Jennie’s character development is closely connected to emotional endurance and gradual psychological decline under external social pressures. The findings suggest that Dreiser presents Jennie as a symbol of human vulnerability and silent resilience in an unjust society.

**Keywords:** naturalism, character development, social determinism, moral decline, gender inequality, patriarchal society, emotional vulnerability, triumph.

**Citation:** The Dynamics Of Character Development In “Jennie Gerhardt” Literature 2026, 5(3), 346-348  
 Received: 10<sup>th</sup> Maret 2026  
 Revised: 21<sup>th</sup> April 2026  
 Accepted: 10<sup>th</sup> May 2026  
 Published: 10<sup>th</sup> June 2026



**Copyright:** © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

## Introduction

Theodore Dreiser’s Jennie Gerhardt is one of the most significant examples of American naturalist fiction, in which human life is presented as being controlled by social and environmental forces. The novel tells the story of a young woman who grows up in poverty and experiences a life shaped by hardship, sacrifice, and moral complexity. Unlike traditional literary heroines who follow a path of clear moral or social success, Jennie is portrayed as a realistic character whose life is determined by conditions beyond her control [1, 2].

From the beginning of the novel, Dreiser emphasizes the harsh reality of social life and the vulnerability of individuals who lack economic stability. He writes that “life was very hard for those who had no money or protection” (Dreiser, 1994, p. 37). This idea establishes the foundation of Jennie’s world, where survival depends not on personal strength alone but on external support and social circumstances. Therefore, Jennie’s character development should be understood as a process influenced by naturalistic determinism rather than individual choice [3, 4].

**Methodology of research.** This research is based on qualitative literary analysis and close reading of Jennie Gerhardt. The study applies the principles of American literary naturalism and social determinism to interpret the development of the protagonist’s character. The analysis focuses on textual evidence from the novel, examining key episodes that reveal Jennie’s emotional, psychological, and moral transformation. The study also considers feminist literary perspectives in order to understand the role of gender and social expectations in shaping Jennie’s identity. Through this approach, the article aims to demonstrate how Dreiser constructs character development as a response to environmental forces rather than individual autonomy.

**Results and discussion.** The early stage of Jennie Gerhardt’s character is defined by innocence, obedience, and emotional dependence. Growing up in a poor family, she learns responsibility at a very young age and becomes sensitive to the needs of others. Her personality is shaped by economic hardship, which forces her to suppress personal

desires in favor of family survival. At this stage, Jennie does not possess strong individual agency; instead, she reacts to circumstances imposed on her by society. Dreiser presents her as emotionally gentle and morally unformed, but this innocence is already under pressure from poverty and instability [5, 6].

The first significant transformation in Jennie's life occurs through her relationship with Senator Brander. This relationship marks the beginning of her emotional vulnerability and introduces the theme of dependency. Jennie does not engage in this relationship out of moral failure but rather as a result of social and emotional insecurity [7]. Dreiser subtly suggests that her actions are influenced by lack of protection and guidance, highlighting the naturalistic idea that human behavior is shaped by environment rather than moral intention. This stage demonstrates the beginning of Jennie's psychological exposure to a world where survival often depends on emotional compromise [8, 9].

As Jennie becomes involved with Lester Kane, her life becomes even more complex and socially problematic. This relationship places her in direct conflict with societal norms and moral judgment. Although Jennie experiences deep emotional attachment, society interprets her situation as morally unacceptable. Dreiser, however, challenges this interpretation by presenting Jennie as a victim of circumstances rather than a morally corrupt figure. Her emotional conflict reflects the tension between personal feelings and social expectations. At this point, Jennie begins to experience internal psychological strain, as she is forced to navigate between love, survival, and social rejection [10, 11].

One of the most important aspects of Jennie's character development is her capacity for sacrifice. Throughout her relationship with Lester Kane, she consistently prioritizes his well-being over her own emotional needs. Her willingness to remain by his side during his illness demonstrates compassion and loyalty, yet it also reflects emotional exhaustion and self-neglect. Dreiser describes her endurance as something almost instinctive, suggesting that her actions are driven more by emotional conditioning than conscious moral decision-making (Dreiser, 1994, p. 219). This stage of her development reveals a paradox in her character: outward strength combined with internal emotional depletion [12, 13].

Jennie's character also represents a broader social critique of gender inequality in early twentieth-century America. As a woman with limited economic independence, she is particularly vulnerable to social judgment and dependency. Her life illustrates how women in her position are often forced into roles defined by male authority and economic necessity. Dreiser uses Jennie's experiences to expose the limitations placed on women within patriarchal society, where moral standards are often applied unevenly depending on gender and social class [14].

In the final stage of the novel, Jennie appears to achieve a form of emotional stability, but this stability is not the result of triumph or success. Instead, it reflects a gradual adaptation to suffering and loss. Her acceptance of life is characterized by emotional restraint rather than happiness. Dreiser suggests that in a harsh social environment, survival often requires emotional suppression rather than fulfillment. Therefore, Jennie's final state can be interpreted as a form of psychological withdrawal rather than true resolution. Her character development concludes not with transformation into a heroic figure, but with quiet endurance shaped by long-term emotional struggle [15].

**Conclusion.** The analysis of Jennie Gerhardt demonstrates that the protagonist's character development is a complex process shaped by social determinism, gender inequality, and emotional sacrifice. Jennie's life does not follow a traditional pattern of growth or success; instead, it reflects a gradual movement from innocence to emotional vulnerability and finally to psychological endurance. Dreiser presents her not as a conventional heroine, but as a realistic representation of human survival under oppressive social conditions. Her character embodies the naturalistic idea that individuals are shaped and often limited by forces beyond their control. Ultimately, Jennie Gerhardt stands as a symbol of silent resilience and emotional complexity within

## USED REFERENCES

- [1] Theodore Dreiser, *Jennie Gerhardt*. London, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1994, 448 pp., ISBN: 9780140187106.
- [2] Robert H. Elias, *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature*. New York, NY, USA: Knopf, 1965.
- [3] James Lundquist, *Theodore Dreiser*. New York, NY, USA: Ungar Publishing, 1981.
- [4] Donald Pizer, *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- [5] Charles Child Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1956.
- [6] Richard Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Madison, WI, USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.
- [7] Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation*. New York, NY, USA: Viking Press, 1991.
- [8] I. Ismoilov, "Iskandar oynasi," *Oltin Bitiglar–Golden Scripts*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2019.
- [9] I. Ismoilov, "The image of 'The Mirror of Iskandar' in the poetry of Alisher Navai and its comparative analysis," unpublished article.
- [10] I. Ismoilov, "About the Talismans of Iskandar (Alexander) by Alisher Navoi," *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 139–145, May 2021, doi: 10.21744/ijllc.v7n3.1488.
- [11] I. Ismoilov, "'Boburnoma' as a Literary Source," *American Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Research*, vol. 5, no. 11, pp. 128–130, 2025, doi: 10.37547/ajsshr/Volume05Issue11-32.
- [12] Q. S. Makhmudov, "Forms of Quick Management of Manufacturing in the Conditions of Market Relations," 2023.
- [13] K. Makhmudov, "Key Concepts Regarding the Quality of Services and Its Management," 2023.
- [14] K. Makhmudov, "The Need to Introduce Quality Systems in the Field of Services," *European Journal of Business Startups and Open Society*, vol. 2, no. 7, pp. 11–14.
- [15] I. Ismoilov, "Tafsirlarda Iskandar mavzusiga oid talqinlar," *Oltin Bitiglar–Golden Scripts*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2021.