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A Prostitute Angel: Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt*

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It has often been agreed among the critics that Theodore Dreiser, after the severe reception of *Sister Carrie*, reduced his daring tone in describing women, and created more of a conservative, "good" heroine in his next novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*. By the standard of Dreiser's contemporaries and their followers several decades later, both Carrie and Jennie are categorized as fallen women without moral sense. But when it comes to assessing Jennie, somehow, they have chosen to defend her, rather than offend her (as was the case with Carrie), attributing Jennie's fall largely to the outward circumstances. Among Dreiser's early critics, Charles Walcutt argued that "Jennie's goodness is valued more highly than the society which destroys her chance for happiness" (115). Emphasizing Jennie's "selfless and idealistic" features (85), Richard Lehan compared Carrie and Jennie as follows:

Carrie and Jennie taken together embody the indwelling values of American culture. Jennie sacrifices herself for those she loves – for something beyond her – in a way that would seem foolish to Carrie. (Lehan 87)

If Jennie's characteristics are marked by her "goodness" and "sacrifice" as these critics stated, it must be noted that the text they depended on then was based on the first edition published in 1911 by Harpers, the edition which had gone through large-scale deletions and alterations during editing, so as to suit the demands of the literary market at that time. Recently, the Pennsylvania edition of *Jennie Gerhardt* was published, and since then critics have recognized another Jennie, who is closer to the figure that

Dreiser first intended, suppressed under Harpers' censorship for a long time. In the preface of the new edition, James West III, the editor, argued that in the new version Jennie's "power as a woman is clearer, and we are less likely to see her as a weak sentimental heroine" (*Jennie Gerhardt* x). Not surprisingly, after the publication of the Pennsylvania edition, critics – especially women critics – have begun to read *Jennie Gerhardt* from gender perspectives, and their interpretations based on the new edition certainly have revealed that there is still room left to discuss Jennie's uniqueness, not simply as a tragic female figure resembling Hardy's Tess or Hawthorne's Hester, but as a woman of many roles, such as mother, daughter, wife, and most importantly, a sexually active, wage-earning woman of the working class. Among these recent critics, Nancy Barrineau, for instance, compares Jennie's situation to the actual condition of the women of the lower class in the nineteenth century in America, stating as follows:

Jennie Gerhardt is, in fact, a much more radical and realistic novel than its predecessor, especially in its treatment of the means by which working-class women survived at the century's end" (Barrineau 127).

In the other essay, she also points out that this novel is radical in its treatment of the heroine's sexuality, for Dreiser describes "the natural consequence of [the heroine's] first youthful experience with sex...the territory barely glimpsed in *Sister Carrie*" (Barrineau 57).

Reviewing both the old-fashioned study and the recent gender criticism on *Jennie Gerhardt*, we notice that their discussions are diverged in two opposite directions. On the one hand, the traditional readings emphasize Jennie's conservative characteristics, whereby placing her among the nineteenth century's simple and loving "angels in the house." On the other hand, the recent critics, such as Barrineau, find the radical and daring features in Jennie's social participation and sexual aggressiveness, the image that would make a great contrast with the former assessment of Jennie as a spiritually innocent and

"good" woman. To some extent, we can attribute such polarized interpretations to the two editions' difference. However, as long as the plot itself is concerned, it is clear that the old edition also deals with Jennie's sexual experiences that would look bold and deviant just the same. In other words, Jennie's radical features potentially existed in the first edition also, though the publication of the Pennsylvania edition certainly contributed to crystallizing it. Given these two diverged interpretations of Jennie, what is at stake here is not to take sides with either one of them in denial of the other; but rather, to assume that the polarized characteristics co-exist in Jennie, and, to examine further how this could be made possible. In this paper, I will attempt to read Jennie's peculiarity in her shifting roles between a simple, loving woman of domesticity on the one hand, and as a shrewd, strong woman of the public on the other. In my opinion, Jennie's uniqueness can be found in the fact that she is a woman placed on the boundary, between the angel and the prostitute, the private and the public.

Before I begin my discussion, I must explain briefly the gap that lies between the stance of certain feminist criticism and that of my own. When *Jennie Gerhardt* is read in terms of the heroine's sexuality, the argument tends to put emphasis on Jennie's disadvantage as a woman whose sexualized body is exploited by the men surrounding her. For example, Kathy Frederickson states that "Female desire...is...in *Jennie*, neutralized in favor of a white male-dominated capitalist economy" (17). Another example can be found in Margaret Vasey's argument, in which she asserts "it is precisely Jennie's passivity, and the unresolved ambiguity about her future, that suggest the fact of her powerlessness as a woman" (29). However, such arguments sound univocal and fruitless, for, to place Jennie among the weak and the passive and to fault the man-centered society may end in underestimating her strength and shrewdness that can be most noticeable in the hardest time of her life. Whether sexually exploited or not, dominated or governed, Jennie at least tries to make the most of what she is

given, and this future-oriented attitude she reveals, I believe, deserves an affirmative assessment.

Rather than seeing Jennie as a victimized figure whose sexuality merely causes negative effects on her, this paper tries to see Jennie's life as a positive one, emphasizing her ability and flexibility as a woman assigned with many roles, the fact which has been relatively neglected in the past. The first section will argue that for Jennie, sex and family are not only inseparable but also function interdependently, one in perpetual need of the other. The second section, then, will focus on Jennie's ability to cross the boundary between the private and the public, in which she manages to play several different roles according to the people's needs. Finally, the third section will discuss that her flexibility as a woman on the boundary indeed enables her to form a family of her own, manipulating others to take parts in role-playing in the pseudo-family she has created. Examining Jennie's strength and shrewdness occasionally found in the various stages in her life, I will regard the novel as a *bildungsroman* of Jennie, whose growth into an adult is the main theme that Dreiser emphasized through the story's development.

Sex and Family Integrated

Although Carrie and Jennie are essentially the same in that both women tend to make use of their sexuality in order to live, one of the major differences that lie between Jennie and Carrie is the former's spiritual attachment to the family that lasts throughout the novel. Carrie gets sexually active as she leaves her home in the country, riding a train bound for Chicago on which Drouet, her first lover, comes to seduce her. Carrie's travel from the country to the city is a symbolic farewell to her innocent girlhood protected within her family, the tie with which gets "irretrievably broken" (*Sister Carrie* 1) as soon as the story begins. In Jennie's case, however, her mentality is inseparable with the Gerhardts. And because of this strong linkage to the family, she

is, naturally, assigned to play three different roles among the family members: to her parents she is an affectionate daughter; to the siblings, a kind and reliable sister; and finally, to Vesta, her only daughter, a loving mother. If she must always keep playing these roles as a woman within a family, it is not difficult to associate her with a domestic figure rather than a public individual represented by Carrie.

Consider Jennie's first sexual relationship with Senator Brander. Her involvement with this old politician is motivated solely by the "gratefulness"(73) she feels toward him for doing so much for the family's sake, including paying ten dollars to get her brother out of jail. Brander's proposal sounds to Jennie nothing but an opportunity to save the Gerhardts' poverty: "Her mother came into her mind. Maybe she could help the family" (49). If to marry Brander means to marry well, the thought to "help the family" explicitly reveals her use of sexuality. However, so long as this is enacted under the legitimate reason of saving her family, the degree of immorality found in her whorish attitude inevitably lessens. In Brander's eye too, "[p]overty and beauty certainly made up an affecting combination," and thus, his taking her is justified (23). Significantly, Brander calls Jennie "You angel! You sister of mercy!" just before he "[pulls] her to him close" in order to possess her physically (73). Even at the moment of her fall, Jennie is defined as an "angel" in the house, a "sister of mercy," distinguishing herself from a Carrie-like fallen woman of self-interest.

Jennie's affectionate feelings for the kin is occasionally emphasized in the text so as to justify her being a virtual prostitute. How she falls in the hands of Lester Kane, her second lover, is again explained in the context of her desperate financial necessity, and the motivation behind it has little to do with her own convenience; it has much to do with her family's circumstances. This time, the Gerhardts are confronting another crisis: Mr. Gerhardt's severe injury on both his hands, which means the loss

of the main labor force in the family. With the crying mother before her, Jennie quickly speculates the best way to get out of the present predicament:

What about this man's[Lester's] offer of money now? What about his declaration of love? Somehow it came back to her – his affection, his personality, his desire to help her, his enthusiasm, much as Brander's had done when Bass was in jail. (149)

The man's "offer of money" and "declaration of love" equivalent in Jennie's mind, Jennie of course accepts his proposal to help the family. Soon the Gerhardts begin to live in "a house of nine rooms," and "Jennie [is] happy to know that her family [can] be comfortable in it" (175-6).

Significantly, the Gerhardts' do not refuse, if not appreciate, to accept Jennie's capital value as a woman. Indeed, the father Gerhardt, as the patriarch in the family, once condemns Jennie for the untimely pregnancy she endures after Brander's death. Yet the strict father's condemnation has little effect in reality, when it is the Senator's money that has bought "bread and meat" for the family (24), his connections that have brought the jobless father's workplace as a night watchman (39). To borrow Frederickson's use of metaphor, "Gerhardt has a penis while Brander possesses the Phallus" (14).

Behind the father's helpless existence, Mrs. Gerhardt's power is notable. On the face of it, she is obedient and reticent before her husband; she does not oppose to his decision to drive their daughter away when her pregnancy is discovered. Yet as soon as Mr. Gerhardt goes to work the next day, Mrs. Gerhardt sends for Jennie hidden in an apartment, and has several important things discussed during the father's absence. After Jennie gives birth to Vesta, it is the mother who looks after the child in order that Jennie can go out for work. Certainly, if the female sexuality is the source of their living, the young daughter must be more valuable than the old mother. Leaving the family and the newly-born child behind, Jennie goes to Cleveland to look for work. At

her departure, the mother, "through her own tears," says: "I'm glad she[Jennie] looked so nice, anyhow" (102). The mother approves of the daughter's "looks" because, she knows that Jennie's beauty would soon turn into money to save the family. To respond to the mother's expectation, soon Jennie's beauty catches the heart of Lester Kane, who happens to see her on one of his frequent visits to the Bracebridges, where she works as a maid. To Mrs. Gerhardt, Lester is another Brander, who counts as long as he brings fortune to the Gerhardts. When Jennie "[opens] her dress at the neck and [takes] out the two hundred and fifty dollars" given to her by Lester, the money automatically transforms into specific items of necessities in the mother's mind:

Here was the solvent of all her woes, apparently — food, clothes, rent, coal, all the ills that poverty is heir to and all done up in one small package of green yellow bills. (162)

If the very act of taking out the money from her dress and giving it all to the mother makes Jennie a prostitute figure, her mother's reaction, too, reminds us of an image of a brothel's owner. Her inquiry to Jennie — "Do you think he might ever want to marry you?" — therefore, has dual meanings (162). It can be interpreted that the mother is simply anxious about the daughter's future. At the same time, it can also mean that she, by asking the possibility of their legal bond, is measuring just how reliable Lester can be as a patron for the entire family. With Jennie at the center, the Gerhardts are in fact conspiring to turn into a family brothel. Naturally, when Lester decides to keep her, it is again the mother who helps arrange things, persuading the stubborn father to let their daughter do what she wants: "her mother at once began to plan a campaign to have her husband keep silence" (168). Jennie's capitalizing her sexuality is not only the outcome of her tendency to give and devote herself to the family, but is accomplished with the help of her family members' self-awareness and understanding that they must depend on Jennie's sexuality in order to survive.

Jennie as a "Transgressor"

If Jennie is placed on the boundary between the public and the private, playing both an "angel" for the family and a wage-earning prostitute in the outer world; her choice of occupations underscores such polarized characteristics. As a working-girl, Jennie naturally steps in the public sphere; but her career either as a scrubwoman (also as a laundress for Brander) or a lady's maid, makes her social position rather ambiguous. After all, Jennie's status is at most a paid *domestic*, bearing resemblance to that of a housewife within a family; while Carrie's can be counted as a part of work force in the nation's industry. To cite Laura Hapke's acute remark:

Jennie's work scrubbing steps at a downtown Columbus hotel and doing the washing of a prominent guest there is, if anything, evidence of the compliant spirit associated with traditional womanliness rather than of a Carrie-like determination to better her prospects. (81)

If Jennie's domesticity is emphasized in her choice of work as a scrubwoman and a maid in the house, we must also note that the place where she has chosen to work is, literally, on the border line that divides the public and the private. A hotel or a rich house is, in a way, a walled, domestic space where the residents' privacy is protected. However, for Jennie, it is, just the same, a public work-place where she earns money, and meets new people as well.

Stepping inside someone's house or room, Jennie partly manages to go beyond the realm of *her* domestic territory. In the Columbus Hotel, or in the Bracebridges, she is no more a daughter/sister/mother within the family, but is given a status as a *paid* domestic, distinguished from the residents inside. And this ambivalent social role in fact provides her, if temporarily, with an opportunity to encounter those who belong to a social class different from her own. She meets Brander and Lester when she is working; and both of their seductions take place, again, when she is on her duty. Since seduction requires certain form of

privacy, it must be called the domestic workers' "advantage" (or "disadvantage") that they work in the private sphere. In order to deliver Brander's garments, Jennie must enter his private room, where she inevitably becomes a sexually available "girl" for her employer. At the Bracebridges, Lester too, is "constantly looking for opportunities to speak to Jennie, to waylay her in the halls or on the stairs" (119).

The novel's initial title, "The Transgressor," is meaningful in this respect. Most likely, when Dreiser chose the word as the title, he meant "transgressor" to be "a law-breaker" or "a sinner" (OED). Surely, by the ethical standard of the nineteenth century, Jennie's sexual conduct of sex and its consequence must have been labeled as law-breaking and sinful. However, when we recall that to "transgress" also means "to go or pass beyond (any limit or bounds)" (OED), it does not necessarily convey negative meanings any more. For, Jennie, as a paid domestic, most easily "transgresses" lines that divide the public and the private, the poor and the rich, and male and female.

It must be noted here, though, that the privilege to transgress the border line is limited only to Jennie, and nobody else is granted this speciality. True, that the Gerhardts' prosperity depends on Jennie's sexuality. However, this does not mean that they too manage to climb up the social ladder, crossing beyond the class stratification. The Gerhardts seem to be well aware of this, when the narrator comments: "[Jennie] had come to be looked upon in the family as something rather out of the ordinary...she was constantly doing something out of the ordinary" (173). What is "ordinary" for the Gerhardts is no longer "ordinary" for Jennie; and it is precisely this gap that indicates Jennie's ability to go beyond the line dividing her own class and the upper class. The same thing can also be said from the opposite point of view, represented by Lester. When introduced to Jennie's parents, Lester shakes hands with them; but to his eye, "they [are] such people as his foremen hired" (173). Although it is with his money that

the Gerhardts are able to live in a large house, Lester stays in his own room whenever he visits them, and Jennie "[serves] his meals to him in what might have been called the living room of the suite (182). Sharing the same residential area, Lester and the Gerhardts lead their lives separately, with the invisible but indelible border line between them.

That Lester believes Jennie to be childless for the first few years of their courtship is understandable in this respect. In the circumstances in which Jennie intermediates between the public and the private, the rich and the poor, Vesta must be kept "in the background" and "thoroughly concealed" within the Gerhardts, to whom Lester has no direct access but for Jennie as an intermediary (181-2). Jennie already foresees this necessity when she declares before her mother, "I don't want [Vesta] brought into" the newly established relationship with Lester (161). In her mind, the public and the private are separated from the beginning: the public sphere is where Lester expects her to "serve" him; the private sphere is where her family lives on the reward earned for her "service." Not surprisingly, at the discovery of the child's existence Lester exclaims, "Could this be the Jennie he had known? Was this the woman he had lived with for four years and never suspected of duplicity?" (204). His utterance clearly illustrates Jennie's flexibility, as well as her "duplicity". Close and attached to Lester as she appears before him, Jennie, in fact, has led a double-dealing life divided in the two entirely different worlds, occasionally shifting her roles whenever desired.

Family Formation and Its Dissolution

In the early part of *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser spares a whole chapter to describe "the spirit of Jennie," which, he asserts, is filled with love for nature. One of the episodes introduced there is a trivial conversation exchanged between Jennie and her younger siblings, in which the former tells the latter, that every creature has a home to go back:

"Does everything have a home?" asked Martha.

"Nearly everything," [Jennie] answered.

"Do the birds go home?" questioned George.

"Yes," she said, deeply feeling the poetry of it herself, "the birds go home." (18)

Surely, Dreiser inserts this sentimental episode to emphasize Jennie's preference of family togetherness, as a woman of domesticity. Yet after we have seen some evidence that implies her shrewd conduct in life – namely, her subjectivity – the above conversation may read differently. For, if Jennie truly believes that "nearly everything [has] a home," this utterance illustrates not so much her conservative and domestic features as her daring ambition to form a family of her own, despite that both she and her child have no proper place in society.

In reference to Jennie's devotion and affection for the family, the critics so far have tended to conclude that her life was, after all, a tragic failure because she never achieved to marry Lester legally in order to raise a family of her own. Yet just because she fails to marry Lester does not necessarily mean that she fails to form a family of her own. In fact, Jennie's power as a transgressor is most noticeable in that she actually manipulates her surrounding people to form a family, in which she is the core figure.

Let us reexamine her intimate relationship with Brander. It looks not so much a love affair of grown-up adults as a little flirtation between a father and a daughter, which went wrong just once. In fact, Mr. Gerhardt denounces Jennie, for her having herself ruined "by a man thirty years older than she is, a man old enough to be her father" (86). This utterance coming out of the very father conveys importance. After all, Mr. Gerhardt's anger derives from the fact that his daughter has deprived him of his paternity, by choosing Brander as her surrogate father, who is socially as well as financially above him.

The private sphere in the hotel room immediately becomes a makeshift living-room, in which the father Brander and the

daughter Jennie enjoy spending their intimate time together: "One evening he put his arm around her and strained her to his breast. Another time he drew her to his knee, and told her of the life at Washington" (40). To Brander's fatherly treatment, the daughter Jennie answers, "'You're so good to me'...with the loving tone of a daughter" (49). Mr. Gerhardt and Senator Brander are distinguished only by the fact that the latter sleeps with Jennie, who finds herself pregnant with Vesta after Brander is gone for good.

On the face of it, Jennie's conception of Vesta is equivalent to reproducing her double, for, Vesta is born fatherless, as Jennie has lost her surrogate father Brander. However, luckily for Vesta, the loss of a father is made up temporarily by her grandfather, Mr. Gerhardt, who "[shows] his finest traits of fatherhood toward the little outcast" (183). As a father substitute, the old Gerhardt even wishes that Vesta should be educated in "a German-Lutheran parochial school," the idea immediately declined by the child's newly emergent father, Lester (269). Jennie's conduct to form a family of her own must be called tactful, for, she manages to quiet down the initial anger of both Lester and Mr. Gerhardt so as to make them into the father substitutes for the child, whose existence was originally the very source of their indignation. Although he was stunned to discover Jennie's duplicity at first, "Lester liked to take the little seven-year-old school-girl between his knees and tease her," the scene resembling what is enacted between Brander and Jennie in the hotel room before (270). In their pseudo-family intimacy, Jennie even tells Vesta, "Run to your papa and show him how you look" (271). Common-law wife as she is, Jennie successfully installs herself and Vesta within Lester's apartment, and forms a family of her own, with herself at the center of it.

Jennie's life with those whom she has loved turns out to be rather short. During these years she must confront many deaths

affecting her life one way or another, and thus, the family once formed inevitably dissolves. The members of the Gerhardts family begin to disperse as the mother dies, and completely dissolves as the father dies. The pseudo-family that Jennie forms with Lester, too, must fall apart at Vesta's death, which is followed by Lester's own. Indeed, in *Jennie Gerhardt*, "virtually every significant character except Jennie herself" dies (Hutchisson 208), and these too many deaths inserted in the heroine's various stages of life may contribute to adding the novel's gloomy tone in the ending. When Lehan says, "Jennie is left alone, counting empty days and waiting for the release that only death can bring" (81), this pessimistic view sounds convincing to some extent. However, while the majority of the critics read *Jennie Gerhardt* as a tragedy because of the heroine's lonely state in the ending, we must also keep in mind that in Dreiser's original script Jennie was to marry Lester and live happily ever after, which he later decided to change so as to provoke the readers' sympathy. Dreiser's intentional plot shifting at the end of the story, if anything, is a reminder that *Jennie Gerhardt* is also a product of his time, which could not escape from the influence of the surrounding environment.

Rather than affected by the gloomy ending with too many deaths prevailing, perhaps we should try to read the novel as a whole and assess how its heroine is described in its process. For, it is obvious that through to the end, Jennie gradually grows into a female adult, with various events she experiences. In this respect, *Jennie Gerhardt* is not a tragedy any more. It can be a *bildungsroman* of a woman of the lower class, whose future is yet uncertain: "She was not so old yet. There were these two orphan children to raise.... Days and days, an endless reiteration of days, and then - ? The End" (418). As was the case with *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser again completed *Jennie Gerhardt* with an open ending, as if to suspend his own assessment of Jennie, suggesting that the evaluation of her character's should vary, according to the time and place in which the text would be read.

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