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THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE IDENTITY AND SOCIAL OPPRESSION IN THEODORE DREISER'S NOVELS

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Abstract: This article examines the representation of female identity and social oppression in Theodore Dreiser's novels, focusing on the complex relationship between women, social expectations, and economic constraints in American society. Dreiser's fiction provides a critical perspective on the challenges women face in their pursuit of personal freedom, social recognition, and individual autonomy. Through the portrayal of female characters in Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, the study explores how gender inequality, economic dependence, and conventional moral standards influence women's identities and life choices. The article also investigates the ways in which Dreiser's female protagonists negotiate social restrictions and attempt to establish their own identities within a male-dominated social structure. By employing feminist literary criticism and textual analysis, this research demonstrates that female identity in Dreiser's fiction is shaped by the continuous tension between individual aspirations and oppressive social structures. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of Dreiser's representation of women and highlights the social and cultural mechanisms that limit female autonomy in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American society.

Keywords: Theodore Dreiser, female identity, social oppression, gender inequality, feminist literary criticism, economic dependence, female autonomy, American literature.

Introduction: The representation of female identity and social oppression has been a significant theme in American literature, particularly in the works of writers who critically examine the relationship between individuals and society. Among these writers, Theodore Dreiser occupies an important position due to his realistic portrayal of social inequality, economic struggle, and the limitations imposed on individuals by prevailing social structures. His novels offer valuable insights into the experiences of women who attempt to define their identities and pursue personal independence within a society characterized by gender inequality and patriarchal expectations. Through his female characters, Dreiser explores the complex relationship between individual aspirations and the social, economic, and moral forces that shape women's lives. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American society was marked by significant economic transformations, changing social values, and persistent gender-based inequalities. Although industrialization and urbanization created new opportunities for social mobility, women's access to economic independence and social recognition remained restricted by traditional gender roles and moral expectations. Women were frequently judged according to prevailing standards of respectability, marriage, and social status, while their opportunities for independent decision-making were often influenced by their economic circumstances. The female aspect of the American Dream in the turn of the twentieth century, through the analysis of the dreams of the main character of Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie. The analysis deals with the dream that drives this female character from countryside to city, and her experience of the American Dream in the urban environment (Aziz, 2022).

In Sister Carrie (1900), Dreiser examines the experiences of Carrie Meeber, a young woman who leaves her rural home in search of a better life in the city. Her experiences reveal the relationship between female ambition, economic necessity, consumer culture, and social mobility. Carrie attempts to improve her circumstances and establish an independent identity in a society where financial resources and social recognition strongly influence individual opportunities. Her development illustrates the contradictions of a social system that offers women certain possibilities for advancement while continuing to subject them to restrictive gender expectations. Similarly, Jennie Gerhardt (1911) presents the life of a woman whose personal experiences are shaped by poverty, social prejudice, emotional attachment, and economic dependence. Through Jennie's character, Dreiser explores the unequal moral standards applied to women and men, particularly in relation to relationships, sexuality, and social respectability. Jennie's experiences demonstrate how women's personal choices can become sources of social judgment and how economic vulnerability may limit their ability to control their own lives. By portraying these difficulties, Dreiser draws attention to the structural inequalities that influence female identity and individual freedom.

The significance of examining female identity in Dreiser's fiction lies in the interaction between personal agency and social oppression. His female characters are not merely passive figures who experience the consequences of social inequality; they also make decisions, pursue opportunities, and respond to the limitations imposed upon them. Their experiences reveal the complex ways in which gender, social class, and economic circumstances influence women's possibilities for self-determination. Therefore, analyzing these characters requires attention not only to the oppressive structures surrounding them but also to their individual responses to those structures. This study employs feminist literary criticism and textual analysis to investigate the representation of female identity and social oppression in Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt. It focuses on the influence of gender expectations, economic dependence, and social morality on the development of the central female characters. By comparing Carrie Meeber and Jennie Gerhardt, the study examines both the similarities and differences in their experiences of social constraint and their attempts to establish meaningful identities. The primary objective of this research is to demonstrate how Dreiser represents female identity as a complex process shaped by the interaction between individual aspirations and broader social structures. The study addresses the following research questions: How do gender inequality and economic dependence influence the identities of Dreiser's female protagonists? In what ways do social expectations restrict their personal freedom and life choices? To what extent do Carrie Meeber and Jennie Gerhardt demonstrate agency in responding to the social conditions that shape their lives? By addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between gender, social oppression, and individual autonomy in Theodore Dreiser's fiction. It argues that his portrayal of female experience reveals the contradictions of a society that offers the possibility of individual advancement while maintaining social and economic structures that constrain women's freedom. Through the examination of his female protagonists, this study highlights the continuing literary significance of Dreiser's exploration of gender inequality, social expectations, and the struggle for personal identity.

Methodology. The analysis draws upon close reading of the novel, with attention to:

• Narrative perspective and stylistic features • Characterization of Jennie and key figures • Thematic patterns (morality, gender, sacrifice) • Intertextual references and historical context Secondary sources include literary criticism on Dreiser’s naturalist technique and feminist interpretations of the novel. The study also employs elements of gender theory and socio-literary analysis to interpret the artistic representation of female morality (Ikromova, 2025, p.38).

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the representation of female identity and social oppression in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900) and Jennie Gerhardt (1911). These novels were selected because they explore women's experiences of gender inequality, economic dependence, and social expectations in American society. The research uses feminist literary criticism, close reading, and comparative textual analysis. Feminist literary criticism provides a theoretical framework for investigating gender relations, patriarchal norms, and the limitations imposed on female autonomy. Close reading is used to analyze characterization, social relationships, and the challenges faced by the female protagonists. Comparative analysis identifies similarities and differences between Carrie Meeber and Jennie Gerhardt in their responses to social oppression. The analysis focuses on three major themes: female identity, economic dependence, and individual agency. Relevant passages from both novels are examined to understand how social and economic conditions influence women's personal choices and opportunities for independence. Secondary scholarly sources are also considered to establish the theoretical and historical context of the study. This methodological approach provides a basis for understanding how Dreiser represents the relationship between female identity, social inequality, and the struggle for personal freedom in his fiction.

At a time when most Americans were moving to the big cities to realize their "American dream," Carrie was moving to her sister's family too, but she noticed a great change in her sister Minnie Hanson after marriage: "She was only twenty-seven years old, and though still strong, she was a thin woman, whose view of life, of happiness and duty, had been narrowed by her husband's influence". Her family constituted the whole of her life and identity. Besides, her thoughts were rigid, following the rules of the environment, and being emotionally attached to her husband (Chen, 2023).

As a male writer, Theodore Dreiser did not face the same problem of social inequality as women did, but he was affected by the social constraints that his sisters faced. Besides John Dreiser's rigid gender expectations at home, the broader social milieu was still in the clutches of the Victorian code and failed to permit the same social freedom to women that is provided to men. Throughout the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, women's struggle for equality was surging across the nation. Examples of social inequality for women are frequently found in Sister Carrie. The stage is set with Carrie's arrival in Chicago, when Hanson, her brother-in-law, indirectly opposes her intention to walk alone: "I am going up the street for a walk," she said after supper. "Not alone, are you?" asked Hanson. "Yes," returned Carrie. . . . "What is the matter with her?" asked Hanson when she went into the room to get her hat. (Dreiser, 1970, p. 42) The social constraints of a Victorian woman are further exposed when she feels bound to Hurstwood: "She began to look upon Hurstwood wholly as a man, and not as a lover or husband. She felt thoroughly bound to him as a wife and that her lot was cast with this, whatever it might be" (Dreiser, 1970, p. 243). In the end, she grows allergic even to the name of marriage: "Carrie was ashamed to say that she was married" (Dreiser, 1970, p. 289).

Results: The analysis of Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt reveals that female identity is strongly influenced by social expectations, economic circumstances, and gender inequality. Both novels demonstrate how patriarchal norms and conventional moral standards restrict women's freedom and shape their life choices. In Sister Carrie, Carrie Meeber's experiences illustrate the relationship between economic independence, social mobility, and the development of female identity. Her pursuit of a better life demonstrates women's efforts to overcome social and financial limitations. In contrast, Jennie Gerhardt highlights the consequences of poverty, economic dependence, and unequal moral judgments on women's personal freedom and social position. The comparative analysis identifies both similarities and differences between the protagonists. Although both women experience social constraints, their responses

to these challenges differ according to their individual circumstances. The findings suggest that Dreiser portrays women not only as victims of social oppression but also as individuals who attempt to negotiate restrictions and establish their own identities. The results indicate that female identity in Dreiser's fiction develops through the interaction between personal aspirations and oppressive social structures. His novels reveal the complex relationship between gender, economic dependence, and women's pursuit of autonomy in American society.

Comparative Analysis of Female Identity and Social Oppression in Theodore Dreiser's Novels

Carrie Meeber (Sister Carrie)	**Jennie Gerhardt (Jennie Gerhardt)**
Personal ambitions- desire for independence	Family responsibilities – self-sacrifice
Financial difficulties – pursuit of success	Poverty- economic dependence
Traditional gender roles – challenge to social conventions	Traditional moral standards- social judgment
Limited opportunities – search for autonomy	Social obligations – restricted personal choices
Ambition – social mobility	Personal decisions – attempts to overcome difficulties
Individual desires – societal expectations	Personal desires – social and moral expectations

The analysis of Carrie Meeber in Sister Carrie demonstrates the relationship between female ambition, economic independence, and social mobility. Carrie attempts to improve her circumstances and pursue a more independent life, challenging conventional expectations of women. Her experiences illustrate the tension between individual aspirations and societal norms. In contrast, the analysis of Jennie Gerhardt reveals how poverty, family responsibilities, and social judgment influence female identity. Jennie's experiences emphasize the difficulties women face when personal decisions conflict with traditional moral standards. Her character illustrates the limitations placed on women's freedom by economic dependence and social expectations. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Dreiser presents female identity through two different experiences. While Carrie's story emphasizes ambition and the pursuit of independence, Jennie's story highlights sacrifice and the influence of social constraints. Both characters reveal the complex relationship between women's personal aspirations and the social structures that shape their lives.

Conclusion : This study has examined the representation of female identity and social oppression in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900) and Jennie Gerhardt (1911). The analysis demonstrates that both novels portray the challenges women face in a society shaped by gender inequality, economic dependence, and traditional moral expectations. The comparison of Carrie Meeber and Jennie Gerhardt reveals two different responses to social constraints. Carrie's experiences emphasize personal ambition, the pursuit of economic independence, and the desire for social advancement. In contrast, Jennie's experiences highlight self-sacrifice, financial vulnerability, and the consequences of social judgment. Despite their differences, both characters illustrate the difficulties women encounter when their personal aspirations conflict with established social conventions. The findings suggest that Dreiser presents female characters not merely as passive victims of social oppression but as individuals whose identities develop through their interactions with restrictive social structures. His portrayal of women reveals the complex relationship between personal freedom, economic circumstances, and societal expectations in early twentieth-century American society. In conclusion, Dreiser's novels offer valuable insights into the representation of women's experiences and the social inequalities that shape their lives. By presenting different perspectives on female identity, Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt demonstrate the importance of examining gender, social status, and individual agency in literary studies. These works remain significant for understanding the literary representation of women's struggle for autonomy and recognition.

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