

TO EDIT OR NOT TO EDIT

by

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To Edit or Not To Edit

A Consideration of the Revised Edition of Theodore Dreiser's
Jennie Gerhardt, as published in 1992 by the
University of Pennsylvania Press.

Theodore Dreiser started to work on his second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*, on January 6, 1901, his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, having been published November 9, 1900 by Doubleday-Page. *Jennie Gerhardt* was not finished, however, until 1912 when it was published by Harpers. The long gap between the appearance of these two Dreiser novels constitutes a significant episode in American literary history—it was during this time that romanticism was fading and the turn to realism taking place, a change that resulted in part from Dreiser's work.

The contribution of Dreiser's novels to this development in American letters is doubtless the reason for the scholarly attention they are now being given. *Sister Carrie* was recently republished by W. W. Norton in an edition which includes, besides 373 pages of the text of the novel, 216 pages of "Background and Sources," together with essays by a number of distinguished critics. Now the University of Pennsylvania has published a new edition of *Jennie Gerhardt* which is described in the preface as "... one of a projected series of volumes that will provide scholarly texts of Dreiser's novels." It was edited by James L. W. West III, a professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, with the supervision of an

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editorial board of which Thomas P. Riggio is general editor. One purpose of this work is to present the story as Dreiser intended it, the text having been collated with the aid of a computer from a carbon copy of the 1911 typescript of the author's original manuscript. This comparison revealed the many editorial changes made in Dreiser's work, with more than 16,000 words cut, and whole sentences and paragraphs rewritten. In addition, this edition has been supplied with scholarly apparatus no less impressive than that of the Norton *Sister Carrie*: the 580 pages including not only the text of the novel itself but notes and comments, a sixty-page "Historical Commentary" and some 70 pages of "Textual Tables," which track down and provide specific information on the alterations that were made in Dreiser's original manuscript.

This treatment of *Jennie Gerhardt* has given us a well-designed, carefully printed scholarly book which will doubtless be of great interest to anyone concerned with the career and literary achievement of Theodore Dreiser. This Pennsylvania edition also, it should be mentioned, contains a number of illustrations which include a leaf of the original manuscript, the front of the dust jacket, several pages from the first *Jennie Gerhardt*, and photographs of the editor, Ripley Hitchcock, and the critics, Hamilton Wright Mabie and H. L. Mencken, but none of Theodore Dreiser. Dreiser was not, it must be admitted, particularly handsome, but he did write the book.

To the controversy that seemed always to attend Dreiser's work, this new edition has aroused additional cause for disagreement, first concerning the extent to which editing altered the author's original intention, and second, in posing the rather critical question whether present day standards (and prejudices) can appropriately be brought to bear on what is after all, a treatment of another time and another place, now fading into the past.

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Dreiser's life was difficult from the first. His father, a German immigrant and strict Catholic, married a Mennonite girl whose prosperous parents disowned her for marrying outside their faith.

The Dreiser family, raising ten children, was plagued by ill fortune, unrelieved debt and continuing poverty, although an older brother Paul changed his name to Dresser and became successful in show business, writing a number of popular songs, and able to help the family from time to time. At sixteen, Theodore left Warsaw, Indiana and took the afternoon train to Chicago seeking fame and fortune. The big city did not treat him well—he ended up washing dishes for \$5 a week in a Halsted Street eatery. He was rescued by a former high school teacher who had recognized his talent and underwrote a year at Indiana University.

Somewhat older and wiser, Dreiser had a second try at Chicago, more fortunate this time, landing a job as a reporter on the *Chicago Globe*. This launched his career in newspaper and magazine work. Moving on, he worked at two St. Louis papers, fell madly in love with a local girl, and six years later reluctantly married her. Falling madly in love proved to be a continuing problem as two ex-wives and uncounted ex-girlfriends seem to suggest. Still moving on, Dreiser struggled in New York to make a living as a freelance writer for newspapers and magazines. Unable to find a regular job, Dreiser finally induced a publisher of popular songs, Howly Haveland, with whom his brother Paul was associated, to accept his idea for a new magazine, *Ev'ry Month*, with himself as editor. This lasted for only two years, but gave Dreiser invaluable experience as a magazine editor. It was during this time that a friend urged him to try his hand at writing a novel.

The result was *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser borrowed the plot from the misadventures of one of his own family. The novel's sister Carrie, like his own sister Emma, came to Chicago a young and innocent girl, could not find a regular job, and took up with a travelling salesman. She left her first lover to elope with her second, and, after becoming a successful actress, abandoned him. It was not this rather overwrought plot that recommends *Sister Carrie* to the reader but what Dreiser made of the story. While his writing style could be clumsy, his characters are real and some scenes are unforgettable—Carrie's first love, the ruined George Hurstwood, now a derelict, hungry and cold, huddling near a Broadway backstage exit, hoping to catch a glimpse of Carrie. When last we hear of

him, "A slow, black boat setting out from the pier at Twenty-seventh Street upon its weekly errand, bore with many others, his nameless body to Potter's Field."

What happened to Dreiser's initial effort reflected the problems that seemed to remain with him. He offered the manuscript first to Harpers, where he had successfully placed several articles. It was promptly rejected—"a superior piece of reportorial realism, but it will not sell"; besides, they pointed out, it was immoral. Dreiser then took it to Doubleday, Page & Co. where the novelist Frank Norris was a reader-editor. He wrote Dreiser that it was "the best novel I have read in MS. since I had been reading for the firm." This was followed by a letter from Walter Hines Page, leading to an agreement to publish the book. Dreiser was overjoyed but when Frank Doubleday returned from a trip to Europe he strongly objected on the grounds that the book was immoral and would not sell. When Dreiser insisted that the agreement be honored, the reluctant publisher brought out an edition of 1,000 copies, offering no support other than the 127 review copies that Norris sent out. There were a few reviews but the book was condemned for its "philosophy of despair" and its "immorality." Within the first year of publication *Sister Carrie* sold only 465 copies, from which Dreiser earned \$68.40 in royalties. All this left Dreiser completely beaten. He began work on his second novel, entitled *The Transgressor*, but was unable to continue. On the verge of despair, living in a room in Brooklyn at \$1.25 a week, he ran into his brother Paul, the successful song writer, who gave him the \$75 he had in his pocket and arranged for him to go to a "repair shop for over-indulged millionaires" run by a friend where Dreiser seems to have regained his self-confidence and health.

He started his comeback by working as an editor on a succession of magazines, his earlier experience on *Ev'ry Month* and his successful magazine articles proving most helpful. He finally became editor of *The Delineator*, then the largest and most influential women's magazine of the day. It was while editor of *The Delineator* that he met and became a friend of H. L. Mencken. He also fell madly in love again, this time it involved the teenage daughter of one of his editors. This relationship led to another disaster, a scandal

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that forced Dreiser out of his job and confronted him with a crisis—what ought he to do next? Having saved some money from his successful years and having divorced his wife, Dreiser now felt free to finish the manuscript he had started. His decision to give the writing of books one more chance was a significant turning point in American literature.

* * *

During his prosperous years as an editor, Dreiser had accumulated enough money to buy the plates for *Carrie* and arrange for the book to be properly reissued by a new firm, B. W. Dodge & Co., not only providing the plates for the new edition but by investing in the house itself. He had the satisfaction of seeing the book better received by the critics, the *New York World* praising its "uncommon quality" while the *San Francisco Call* described it as "a work of genius." The first four months' sales totaled a respectable 4,617 copies. It was then with a sense of vindication and increased confidence that Dreiser took up the manuscript he had abandoned ten years earlier. He retitled it *Jennie Gerhardt* after its central character, her life, as in his first novel, at least partly derived from the experiences of another of his sisters.

The story opens at the front desk of the leading hotel in Columbus, Ohio, in the fall of 1880. A middle-aged woman is asking the clerk if there might be any work in the hotel for her daughter, who is standing in the background, timid and shame-faced at being the object of attention. Dreiser's description of the mother with his deeply felt understanding for her situation sets the tone of the whole book. The mother, he wrote, "... was 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 countenance of the distraught and hopeless poor know anything about."

The girl, who, of course, is the center of the novel, is the oldest of six children of a family that is having a hard time. The father, a glass blower by trade, has been ill and out of work. The mother,

we are told, is "no weakling." Besides dressing the children, cooking, mending, taking care of her sick husband, she takes in washing when she can get it, and now, in desperation, has gone to the hotel to find work for her daughter. On the way home she is able to get bread and bacon, on credit, for supper. It is finally arranged for Jennie to work in the hotel three afternoons a week and also to do any laundry for the hotel's most distinguished guest, Senator Brander. The Senator, who is unmarried, is much taken by Jennie's comely, open face and ingratiating manner, becomes interested in her, and comes to visit the family, much to the annoyance of the father, a German and strict Lutheran. The Senator tries to be helpful to the family and when Jennie's brother is arrested for stealing coal from a railroad car, Jennie goes to the Senator for help. The stress of the situation is too much for her and Jennie learns that she is carrying the Senator's child. The Senator promises to marry her, as he doubtless intended to do, but having lost an election, goes first to Washington to wind up his affairs and while there suffers a fatal heart attack.

With the arrival of the baby, Jennie is rejected by her father. But the mother takes care of the child, the family is eventually reconciled and they move on, searching for work, to Cleveland. Here Jennie gets a job as a lady's maid in a wealthy household. There she catches the eye of a friend of the family, Lester Kane, rich, unmarried, in his thirties, a vigorous, handsome man. Overwhelmed by the attention of the worldly, self-confident Kane and his promise of help to her struggling mother, Jennie succumbs and agrees to live with him. He tells her that he loves her and seems to believe that he does, but not enough to face the disapproval of his family and the social opprobrium that marriage to a servant girl would bring. Kane's business interests—his family are successful manufacturers of wagons and carriages—take him to Chicago where he eventually buys a large house in a fashionable neighborhood. He and Jennie live quietly, their unmarried state excluding them from the social life that would otherwise have been appropriate to Kane's wealth and position. Vesta, the child of Jennie's relationship with Senator Brander, joins them, and after the death of her mother, her father is also brought into the house-

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hold. Jennie, by nature, is what before the days of feminism was approvingly called a homemaker, and does everything in her power to make Kane comfortable and contented, but suffers from her exclusion from marriage and a normal family life. Her child dies of a sudden illness; her father, of old age. All of these vicissitudes she accepts, however, as a consequence of what she calls "her badness."

Jennie, however inferior her social status may be, as a person is far superior to Lester Kane. Lester may think he loves Jennie, treats her kindly, takes her to Europe with him, but in the end is unwilling to risk the disfavor of his family, and especially the loss of his inheritance, to marry her. Jennie, on the other hand, when Kane's old flame reappears, the rich, beautiful Letty Pace, urges him to marry her, great as the blow to her would be, because she thinks it would make a more satisfying life for him. Her love for him includes the willingness to make such a sacrifice for his happiness. But when Lester is on his deathbed, it is Jennie he asks for. Reflecting on her own life, after all that has happened to her, she says to herself—"Did anything matter except goodness—goodness of heart? What else was there that was real?" Jennie was, Dreiser once said, based on his own mother, all-giving, all-sacrificing. He portrays her finally, in another of his poignant, unforgettable moments, standing quietly to one side of the Chicago railway station waiting for a glimpse of Lester Kane's coffin as it is loaded on the baggage car for burial in Cleveland.

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After many revisions, the manuscript was completed, but Dreiser, still mindful of the reception given to *Sister Carrie*, circulated *Jennie Gerhardt* among a number of friends. Dreiser was especially encouraged by Mencken's opinion, the novel "comes upon me with great force. It touches my own experience of life in a hundred places; it preaches (or perhaps I had better say exhibits) a philosophy of life that seems to me sound; altogether I get a powerful effect of reality, stark and unashamed." In another letter, Mencken added, "... it is at once an accurate picture of life and a search-

ing criticism of life and that is my definition of a good novel." Reassured, Dreiser was ready to submit his story to a publisher.

Offered first to Macmillans, *Jennie Gerhardt* was rejected as too "broad," meaning too explicit. Dreiser then suggested to his agent that the manuscript be submitted to Ripley Hitchcock, who had recently become an editor at Harpers. Hitchcock had admired *Sister Carrie* and had expressed interest in Dreiser's work. He was a skillful, successful bookman, combining sound commercial with literary instincts. He had been responsible for the publication of *David Harum*, which he had completely revised and made into the best-selling novel of the day. He had also edited Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and *The Red Badge of Courage*, dealing adroitly with the problems those books originally presented. But he was as well an active churchman and a moralist and there was this further problem: Harpers at that time was heavily in debt and could ill afford to sponsor a book that might not only sully its reputation but add to its financial difficulties.

The situation was ripe for confrontation: the author already subject to criticism for his "immoral" first book but stubborn in his convictions, the editor, adept in dealing with difficult manuscripts (and difficult authors) but steadfast to his standards, while the publishing house was in no mood to take risks. The outcome was a contract offered in April 1911 that protected all parties concerned: Harpers had the right to condense and revise the manuscript under Hitchcock's hand; Dreiser retained the option, in case of any radical disagreement, to take his book elsewhere without penalty. Under these circumstances, not surprisingly, a considerable tension arose. The publisher, even with Hitchcock dealing with the manuscript, felt its survival was at stake. The author, given his first book's failure and admittedly unsure about his future as a novelist, knew his literary career was in jeopardy.

Hitchcock, while respecting Dreiser and the quality of his manuscript, was determined to get on with the job—to publish the book as quickly and as profitably as possible—and proceeded on his own. Dreiser, left out of the process and fearful of being confronted with a complete revision, take it or leave it, demanded to see what the editor was doing. When Hitchcock produced the emended

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manuscript, Dreiser was appalled to find some 25,000 words had been eliminated. He objected strongly and succeeded in having about 9,000 words restored. Despite the disagreements over the extent and character of the changes, the matter was soon settled between them and Hitchcock could write to Dreiser's agent, "He seems to have accepted my final work on the manuscript without any changes of consequence." *Jennie Gerhardt* was published in September 1911 and while not a best seller, it did sell 14,000 copies by the end of December, which made it a qualified success—a great improvement, needless to say, over the fate of *Sister Carrie*.

The critical response to the novel, while not entirely favorable, was far warmer than that accorded to Dreiser's first book. The supportive Mencken, who became almost a sales agent for the book, declared in his review in *Smart Set* that *Jennie Gerhardt* was "one of the great American novels." Franklin P. Adams, in a letter to Dreiser, told him "*Jennie Gerhardt* is a great book and I salute you and congratulate you earnestly and reverently." Floyd Dell in the *Chicago Post*, a much respected and influential newspaper in those days, in a full-page review agreed: "I may say, without saying it in vain, this is a great book." There were, of course, dissenting opinions: the Lexington, Kentucky, *Herald* called the book "utterly base," and the *Chicago Herald* compared its style to that of a "proficient stenographer."

Harpers sent a review copy to Hamilton Wright Mabie, who had considerable influence on what, at the time, was judged proper and acceptable in literature. Mabie read the book and approved it without a murmur, which must have given great satisfaction to the editor and made him feel that his efforts had not been in vain. Meanwhile Dreiser had sent Mencken an autographed copy of *Jennie* with the note, "Will you do me the favor to read it again and see whether in your judgement you think it has been hurt or helped by the editing?" Mencken replied, "On first going through *Jennie* in the printed form, the cuts irritated me a good deal, particularly in the first half, but now I incline to the opinion that not much damage has been done. As the story stands, it is superb." But, out of all the tension, crises, confrontations and clashing opinions, the fact remains that Hitchcock prevailed with his

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usual skill, *Jennie* was published with a measure of success, Harpers was able to continue in business, and Dreiser's literary career survived as he started on his next novel.

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Now this Pennsylvania reissue of *Jennie Gerhardt* containing the original text raises again the controversy over the changes that were made, why they were undertaken, and what, if any, effect they had on the novel's meaning and message. Most of what the revisionists have to say appears in a chapter entitled, "The Composition and Publication of *Jennie Gerhardt*," an essay that comes to some 50 pages. In editing the manuscript, Ripley Hitchcock was faced with the problem of its length and the danger of arousing the antagonism of the groups that were influential and sought to preserve literary standards. He did not want to publish a book that might be banned in Boston or New York, but, on the other hand, as the essay points out, "Hitchcock knew that the novels that dealt in an acceptable fashion with 'off color' material can sell quite well. *Sister Carrie* came close to running into problems of this nature, none of which Hitchcock had any desire to repeat." When the Harper editors had finished their work, as the Pennsylvania edition puts it, "The pages of Dreiser's typescript must literally have been covered with alterations and cuts. What emerged was a considerably different work of art—changed in style, characterization and in theme. Speaking generally, one can say that *Jennie Gerhardt* was transformed from a blunt, carefully documented piece of social analysis to a love story merely set against a social background." Even more, this essay goes on to say, "The most important cuts have to do with Lester's and Jennie's personalities and with why they are drawn so powerfully to each other despite the fact that they are opposites in almost every way. These cuts are most telling on Jennie's character for they could be said to put the novel out of balance and tip it in favor of Lester . . . as a consequence, Lester and his point of view tend to dominate the novel. Jennie is still present, but except for a few passages, she seems not to have a point of view. Dreiser evidently did not intend this to be the case

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when he composed *Jennie Gerhardt*. He wanted Jennie's way of approaching life to have equal time with Lester's, equal explanation to the reader." The conclusion is bluntly put: "After the Harpers editors were finished, Lester had come to dominate the philosophical argument of the book, Jennie's point of view had been all but silenced. Dreiser's own prose was blunt and unadorned; the Harper editors conventionalized and domesticated it. The book he had submitted to Hitchcock in the spring of 1911 was, in its own distinctive way, a powerful novel of manners. What emerged after the editing was a touching love story isolated from much of its social context."

It is interesting to compare these opinions with those of Richard Lingeman, the author of the biography *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey*, who has written a lengthy review of the new edition of *Jennie Gerhardt*. He begins by noting that "The great bulk of the editing had to do with tone and style rather than censorship," adding, "Hitchcock and his subeditors recast the novel in language that was closer to the popular fiction of the day than was Dreiser's plain style." He even points out that the changes were not always improvements, citing the emotional crisis in the story when Jennie, in responding to Lester's advances, tells him of her decision. Dreiser's description of her reaction is exactly right: "(She) wrote him the briefest note. She would meet him as requested. Please not to come to the house. This she mailed and then waited, with a sort of soul dread, the arrival of the day." This the Harper editors revised and reads: "She mailed the letter, and then waited with mingled feelings of trepidation and thrilling expectancy, the arrival of the fateful day." As the reviewer rightly states, "Dreiser's phrase 'soul dread' cuts to the heart of Jennie's fears. The Harper revision is clichéd, marred by that false note of 'thrilling expectancy'." Lingeman then declares, "Not that Hitchcock's editing radically altered Dreiser's intentions. The basic story remains; the most moving passages are retained; the pessimism and determinism still come through."

How Dreiser would have been astounded at the diligence of the professors and the persistence of the critics in resurrecting the original text and in raising again the issues that plagued his nov-

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el writing, even struggling to put *Jennie Gerhardt* right in view of today's obsession with political correctness. How he would have been amused by this paragraph from the preface to the Pennsylvania volume: "This edition will undoubtedly lead readers to reexamine historical problems such as Dreiser's relation to the naturalistic and sentimental forms of his day. In addition, it provides an occasion to consider the novel in terms that are critically relevant to our times. *Jennie Gerhardt* is challenging—perhaps more so than any other Dreiser novel—as a text that encourages inquiries relevant to recent debates about the literary canon. In particular, the novel opens up the question of how a canonical author like Dreiser may be viewed in relation to issues of gender and emerging literary minorities." One can imagine Dreiser regarding with some skepticism those who are quite possibly taking his book more seriously than he, as the original author, had taken it. After all, Dreiser was a professional and most successful editor in his own right, accustomed to dealing with difficult problems as they arose in the writing and editing for magazines. In the republication of *Sister Carrie*, which he underwrote and supervised, great care was taken in positioning and promoting the novel, as has been pointed out, "... in an effort to attract lowbrows interested in sex without offending highbrows demanding literature," which suggests that Dreiser was perhaps more worldly and sophisticated in these matters than the professors and pedants so busily engaged in re-examining him and his writings today.

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In answer to my original question, "To edit or not to edit," which serves as the title to this paper, it can be said, I think, that the editing done by Ripley Hitchcock and his staff was most skillfully done, was doubtless necessary to get the book published at all, and that the reworking did not seriously affect the literary quality of the book. The successful publication of *Jennie Gerhardt*, one feels justified in saying, made a positive contribution to American literature, because if this novel had failed, Dreiser planned to go back to magazine work and give up any further writing of novels. One

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might go even farther and say Hitchcock played a critical constructive role in the career of a great American author.

What is one to say, on the other hand, about the University of Pennsylvania Press edition of *Jennie Gerhardt*? As I have already stated, the book is masterfully produced, in every way a superior piece of bookmaking, and a contribution to what seems to be called these days "The Dreiser Canon," whatever that may mean. But whether this new edition justified the enormous amount of painstaking, careful work that clearly went into it, I have no way of deciding, but useful as the corrected edition is, it in no way detracts from the contribution to American literature by the original publisher.

What can be said with certainty, whatever else is claimed, is that the Hitchcock editing was likely necessary for the simple reason that the novel would not have been published at all. The proof of the importance of this success to Dreiser can be seen in the fact that it launched him into the most prolific stage of his long career. Between 1912 and 1916 he finished three major novels, two volumes of the trilogy on the transit tycoon he called Cowperwood (*The Financier* and *The Titan*, which Mencken claimed was his finest work) and *The Genius*, also short stories, poems, and one-act plays, and his nostalgic return to the scenes of his boyhood, *A Hoosier Holiday*. Not that he continued to write without controversy—Harpers would not publish *The Titan* and his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Genius*, was banned. After completing the Cowperwood trilogy there followed another long span of frustration, nearly nine years, before Dreiser capped his career in 1925 with the publication of *An American Tragedy*, based closely on a sensational murder and trial that intrigued him, achieving that rare feat of creating both a best seller and a literary classic.

As can be seen from all of this, Theodore Dreiser is still as he seems to me, a great writer in spite of himself, his stature assured by his difficult but compelling novels. All of those interested in his literary career will be grateful to those who have given us the text of *Jennie Gerhardt* as Dreiser first conceived it.

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