Ethnicity in Theodore Dreiser’s *Jennie Gerhardt*

Dissertation to achieve the degree of
Master in English and Dutch Language and Literature
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Promotor: Dr. M. Boyden
Theodore Dreiser led a very turbulent, albeit interesting, life and to be able to study an aspect of his writing – the ethnicity that is or is not to be found in his work – has truly been a pleasure. This dissertation would not be what it is today without the help of Dr. M. Boyden, my promoter, who provided me with ideas, sources and the necessary advice to complete this work.
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1. Introduction

1.1. General introduction

Theodore Dreiser’s work was virtually never studied, analyzed or read in the light of its ethnicity. This seems strange not only when reading his books, his name already appears to suggest an ethnic background. His German ancestry, however, was addressed solely as an aside. Stuart Sherman famously wrote about Dreiser’s ‘barbaric naturalism’ and mentioned Dreiser as an ‘ethnic element’ (87). Other critics mentioned his ancestry primarily in the context of World War I, when virtually every German American was treated with suspicion. An extensive analysis of Dreiser’s novels dealing with ethnicity is nowhere to be found. It lasted until 1951, six years after Dreiser’s death, that his ethnicity was pointed out to the public. F.O. Matthiesen, in that year, recognized that Dreiser, while being one of the great American authors, was not of English or Scotch-Irish descent. In 1971, in his homage to Dreiser, R.P. Warren alluded to Dreiser’s background as a second generation immigrant. He seems to downplay its importance but still claims it had an influence on his work. (Riggio, “Hidden Ethnic” 53). Recent articles that point out this side of Dreiser are Riggio’s Theodore Dreiser: Hidden Ethnic and Casciato’s How German is Jennie Gerhardt? This last author however, as the title already suggests, primarily deals with Dreiser’s German-ness, not his ethnicity as such.

After this general introduction, the reader who is not familiar with Dreiser can find a section that briefly introduces Dreiser with special mention of three points that are often addressed in different publications on this writer; his preoccupation with the modern and urban United States, his excessive use of detail and finally his tendency to write about women. After this first introductory chapter a short reception history is included. The aim of this second chapter is to answer to a question that undoubtedly arises with Dreiser’s later readers: if Dreiser, during his lifetime, was not studied in an ethnic context, how was he studied? In other words, a part of this dissertation will consist of a reception history concerning the criticism on Dreiser’s work. Often, critics were too preoccupied with criticizing his conception of the realist/naturalist movement in literature to notice he was actually a second generation immigrant.

The second part of the dissertation, the third chapter, takes one of Dreiser’s novels, namely Jennie Gerhardt, and analyzes it. With the analysis I would like to make clear that it is
remarkable that Dreiser’s contemporaries did not acknowledge his ethnicity. There is an ethnic side to his work, and the analysis will try to prove this.

*Jennie Gerhardt* (1910) was Dreiser’s second novel. After Dreiser’s autobiography *Dawn* (1931), this book was arguably the novel with the most clear ethnic subject matter: a poor second generation German immigrant girl gets involved with a rich second generation Irish immigrant. Some events of the novel are loosely based on the life of some of Dreiser’s family members, as will become clear later on. The novel was not often mentioned in an ethnic context; it was primarily seen as the story of female domestic labourers in the form of Mrs. Gerhardt and later on Jennie Gerhardt¹. Barrineau argues that *Jennie Gerhardt* should be viewed in the context of a debate that was going on about domestic labor in Dreiser’s day (128). This debate is of course too lengthy and complex to discuss in this context². Novels about female domestic laborers were part of a separate genre that existed then. These novels often involved a story about a girl who worked hard for wages that were next to none, in very bad conditions. The girl was then rewarded through an unexpected twist in the plot (West, “Introduction” viii). This might be one of the reasons why the ethnic side of the novel was largely forgotten, next to, as mentioned above, the preoccupation of critics with Dreiser’s idea of naturalism.

The previous can already be interpreted as reasons to state Dreiser was an ethnic author; he was a second generation German immigrant and he wrote about it. An early and quite premature statement that could thus be made is that ‘*Dreiser writes like an immigrant because he is one.*’ (Casciato 167). He did this not solely in the aforementioned *Dawn* and *Jennie Gerhardt*; his debut *Sister Carrie* (1901) featured a protagonist ‘two generations removed from the emigrant’ (Riggio, “Hidden Ethnic” 59) and other ethnic characters (the French-American Drouet and the Swedish-American Sven Hanson for example). Also in *Jennie Gerhardt*, the reader can easily find overtly ethnic passages and references. One can find a reference to ‘*Kriss Kringle*’ (26) and German ancestors are mentioned (24); Germans are said to like to make a great display at Christmas (25) and the reader learns that Germans have ‘*the tendency to talk loud*’ (55). A more profound reading suggests that the Gerhardts probably live in a so-called ‘immigrant neighborhood’, for for one thing, all of their neighbours have German names (Dr. Ellwanger, Pastor Wundt, Otto Weaver and Bauman the grocer). However, a lot of questions can still be asked about immigrant neighborhoods. Old theories

¹ In what other way she takes over the role of her mother will be discussed below, see section ‘3.4. Ethnicity in *Jennie Gerhardt*’.
² In short, in the U.S. Census of 1900 unpaid female workers who stayed at home were classified as dependents, much to the rage of feminists and others.
about the relationship between residence and assimilation seem in need of a revision, but we
do know that, with the urban modernization at the end of the 19th century (Jennie Gerhardt
starts in 1880), certain ethnic concentrations were possible (Conzen, “Immigrant
Neighbourhoods” 605).

Going back however, I would like to prove that Dreiser’s ethnicity goes further than just this
surface subject matter and occasional references. By analyzing different aspects of Jennie
Gerhardt I would like to show that the ethnicity of Dreiser is very much rooted in this novel;
that it thus goes far beyond this surface evidence. Dreiser’s ethnicity is sometimes mentioned
when dealing with his style of writing³. I however want to study this matter primarily in how
the characters function in the world of the novel, how they act and react.

The third chapter is structured in two main parts, each about one of the two families that play
an important role in the novel. The first part will deal with the Gerhardts and how language is
used to show how the second generation distances itself (consciously or unconsciously) from
the so-called Old World and how the first generation may desperately cling to this Old World.

Another aspect that will be discussed is religion. Here also it will be made clear that religion
causes a breach between the Old World and the New World. A third aspect is one that is
related to language, but important enough for a separate section, namely name-giving. In that
section I will try to show that in the process of removing themselves from the Old World, the
second generation immigrants in Jennie Gerhardt got involved in a process of altering their
names to come across as ‘more’ American or assimilated. Another, and final, element that
deserves some attention in the context of the ethnicity in Jennie Gerhardt is newspapers.

The second part of the third chapter deals with the Kane family. In a first part I will discuss
how this family is ethnically described. This is less apparent than with the Gerhardts, but it is
certainly present. In the second part I will discuss the opposition (and some similarities)
between the two families Dreiser inserted in the novel. It is, for example, often stressed that
the father of the German family (Gerhardt) is a devout Lutheran, as opposed to the father of
the Irish family (Kane), who is a Catholic. I then ask the question if Dreiser made this ethnic
distinction on purpose, and consequently strengthened this opposition through religion.

³ See also section ‘2.3. Criticism after Dreiser’s death’.
A last part of this dissertation is the fourth chapter, the conclusion. I will try to compile all the points that were made and discuss what they imply in light of ethnicity in the work of Theodore Dreiser.

1.2. Dreiser and American Realism/Naturalism

Dreiser is presently recognized as a very important writer in American fiction. During his career however, he first endured adversity in becoming a novelist, and when he was finally recognized as one, he was subject to a lot of criticism. After his death for example, New Criticism primarily denounced his work4.

Dreiser has always been described as a realist or naturalist. However, there is no real consensus as to what the terms ‘American’ realism and naturalism actually comprise. These terms involve several problems (Pizer, “Introduction” 1), one of which is that they have counterparts with the same name in the field of philosophy. They also ‘bear social and moral valences’ (Pizer, “Introduction” 3), which make that texts are immediately ‘condemned’ as being realistic or naturalistic. The terms are thus often wrongfully interpreted as ‘bad’ or immoral.

The biggest problem however lies in the fact that the terms have a different meaning in Europe and the United States; even the period differs. European naturalism and realism lasted from 1850 until 1880 (Pizer, “Introduction” 4), while in the United States the period lasted from the Civil War (1860-1865) until World War I (Pizer, “Introduction” 4). Some critics deem it unacceptable that the same terms are used for movements with different characteristics, in a different time. The fact that the terms ‘realism’ and ‘naturalism’ are used interchangeably in Europe, but for different periods in the United States5, is reason enough for some to proclaim the uselessness of the terms (Pizer, “Introduction” 5).

However, it is now a widely held view that, instead of dismissing the terms, one simply needs to accept that European and American naturalism do not imply the same characteristics. Realism and naturalism as terms related to literature in the United States are now accepted as appellations, as mentioned before, for a period in which a certain kind of literature was created or, in other words, [...] that whatever was being produced in fiction during the 1870s

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4 See below: ‘2) Dreiser: a concise reception history’.
5 Realism from 1870 until 1880 and naturalism in the 1890’s.
and 1880s that was new, interesting, and roughly similar in a number of ways can be designated as realism, and that an equally new, interesting, and roughly similar body of writing produced at the turn of the century can be designated as naturalism.’ (Pizer, “Introduction” 5). Pizer, quite predictably, points out that this is not the most accurate of definitions (Pizer, “Introduction” 5). Budd is more profound in his definition. In his view, naturalism means recognition of industrialism and urbanism and their consequences. Naturalism pushes further to determinism (43). Furthermore, objectivity became a key term and, as far as subject matter is concerned, taboos were broken (42-43). Another critic I would like to mention in this context is Lehan. He argues that naturalism believes in empiricism and attempts to be scientific in the belief that history can be known and can be written (65-66).

With these definitions in mind it can thus be stated that Dreiser is primarily viewed as a naturalist. He broke taboos, wrote about the city and industrialism and did this with a keen eye for detail and objectivity.

Naturalism at the turn of the century was often ignored or condemned (Pizer, “Introduction” 8). But when naturalists did receive some attention, they were often regarded as pioneers because of their subject matter (see below, modernity, women…) that was often daring and of a sexual nature. Moreover, in later years it was adopted that naturalism, such as that of Dreiser, was ‘often crude and formless and [...] appeared to be confined to the depiction of man as victim’ but it was also to some extent accepted that it ‘was an apt expression of late-nineteenth century American social reality’ (Pizer, “Introduction” 10). This is of course not a dissertation on American naturalism, so in what follows I will limit this section to three aspects that are often mentioned in publications⁶ on Dreiser; namely his preoccupation with modernization, his excessive use of detail and his tendency to write about women.

### 1.2.1. Dreiser and the modern United States

Dreiser is often depicted as a very forward-looking novelist (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 1). His work deals with the modernization of the United States that went on in his day. Lears argues that Dreiser ‘wrote (repeatedly) the history of the urbanizing United States between the Civil War and World War I’ (63). His depiction of life in the twentieth century is lively and true. One can ask the question what is comprised in the term ‘modernization’ in this context.

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Dreiser ‘came of age as a novelist in a time in an industrializing country which was growing and producing material goods in quantities, varieties and speeds never before seen.’ (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 2). From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, modernization could no longer be stopped. Products were made on a large scale with the help of new machines, methods of fabrication and new and larger locations. This new mode of production ensured profit, while fabricating the goods cost less. The population of the country increased dramatically, also due to the large influx of immigrants from Europe, making the country more heterogeneous on all levels (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 3). With respect to Jennie Gerhardt, three immigrant groups can be discussed: the Germans, the Irish and to a lesser extent the Swedes. This is however not the place to provide an extensive overview of the very complex matter of emigration to the United States in the 19th century. Nonetheless, it should be noted that between 1815 and the start of the Civil War in 1861 some five million immigrants made their way to the United States. Between the end of the Civil War and 1890 ten million more followed. Another fifteen million then arrived between 1890 and the beginning of World War I (Johnson 27).

Furthermore, legendary names like Rockefeller and Carnegie created large corporations, ‘widening the gap between rich and poor and creating a new bureaucratic hierarchy which gave business its recognizably modern form’. (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 3). While industrial activity grew, agriculture became less important. As a consequence, cities grew larger and it should be noted that more women went to work. Dreiser was not blind to the latter and often wrote about sex and gender in a ‘contradictory but often visionary’ (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 4) way. Sister Carrie, Dreiser’s debut, certainly needs to be mentioned in this context, but in Jennie Gerhardt, the female protagonist also goes out to find work at some point (103).

Adding to this, several innovations (railroads, telephone, film…) made sure that by 1920, the United States of America was an economic and industrial power indeed (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 3).

Dreiser’s writing then ‘meditates deeply on consumerism, gender divisions and the workings of class and power [...]’. (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 1-2). As can be derived from what is written above, these topics of course blend in with the age of change Dreiser lived in. However, this upsurge of industrial activity and its consequences did not mean prosperity for the entire American population. Dreiser did not lose track of this, for his writing famously

7 See also section ‘1.3.3. Dreiser and female characters’. 
explores the desperation of the poor’ (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 6); Jennie Gerhardt is but one example of this preoccupation.

Cassuto and Eby admit Dreiser was not the first to do this, but he probably did it in the deepest, most profound way. He was thus very much ahead of his time and ‘was performing his own cultural studies long before the practice had a name.’ (4).

But Lears on the other hand argues that to see Dreiser ‘as merely a prophet of progress – or a poet of consumer desire – distorts his narration of American history.’ (64). Lears further argues that Dreiser was never a master of bringing the bigger picture to life and further claims he focussed more on the story of the lives of certain people (64). This view can be deemed valid, but the importance and prominence of the modernization of society in the work of Dreiser can certainly not be ignored.

In Jennie Gerhardt, one can find several examples of Dreiser’s preoccupation with the modernization of the country. Very conspicuous is the account of the immense growth of the Kane Company under the ruthless leadership of Robert Kane. There is mention of a real-estate boom in Chicago, where streets are paved, street car lines are expanded and train stations are built (329), and the city of Cleveland is presented as ‘a new world’ (98) where ‘all was business, all activity’ (98).

1.2.2. Dreiser and detail

Theodore Dreiser is most famously known for the excessive use of detail in his writing, creating ‘a unique sort of narrative momentum that is authorative, yet often disconcerting.’ (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 3). An example of a passage full of detail is the following scene at the beginning of Jennie Gerhardt:

The hotel into which they were thus summarily introduced, was a rather remarkable specimen of the time and place. Columbus, being the state capital, and having a population of fifty thousand, and a fair passenger traffic, was a good field for the hotel business, and the opportunity had been improved; so at least the Columbus people proudly thought. The structure, five stories in height, and of imposing proportions, stood at one corner of the central public square, where were the capitol building and principal stores, and, naturally the crowd and hurry of life, which, to those who had never seen anything better, seemed wondrously gay and inspiring. Large plate-glass windows looked out upon both the main and side streets, through which could be seen many comfortable chairs scattered for those who cared to occupy them. The lobby was large, and had been recently redecorated. Both floor and wainscot were of white marble, kept shiny by frequent polishing. There was an imposing staircase with handrails of walnut and toe strips of brass. An inviting corner was devoted to a news and cigar stand. Where the staircase curved upward the clerk’s desk and offices had been located, all done in hardwood and ornamented by novel gas fixtures. One could see through a door at one end of the lobby to the barber-
shop, with its chairs and array of shaving mugs. Outside were usually to be seen two or three buses, arriving or departing in accordance with the movement of the trains. (6-7).

The reader is provided with far more information than is needed to follow the story. Cassuto and Eby, in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Theodore Dreiser*, argue that ‘the enormous accumulation of physical detail makes Dreiser’s work into a kind of verbal kaleidoscope, reflecting and refracting the changing world around him as he seeks to capture it in words.’ (2).

He researched ‘much of his longer fiction with the fervor of a professional biographer.’ (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 42). He investigated crimes and murder histories for ‘An American Tragedy’ and for the Cowperwood trilogy he ‘drew heavily on the outsized cultural images of the post-Civil War robber barons.’ (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 43). In other words, his writing looked at the reality of his life and that of others ‘with a diagnostic scalpel sharper than any used by his harshest critics.’ (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 30). He even compared himself to a painter; he wanted to show the reader the color and pictures of his age. In his very own words, ‘to tell the truth is the sum and substance of literary as well as social morality.’ (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 35). Literature could duplicate reality to the point of scientific exactness in his view. He wanted to be and was ‘an observer and recorder of the common and uncommon lives of his era’ (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 45).

This specific style was criticized by some as tiresome to read, but it cannot be denied that Dreiser’s style, however overwrought with detail, holds a certain agency in its ‘enormous accumulation of physical detail.’ (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 2).

1.2.3. Dreiser and female characters

One of Dreiser’s favourite topics was women. A plain, but not unimportant example of this is the fact that two of his novels (*Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*) carry the names of their female protagonists, while none of his novels has a male name as title (Eby 142).

Much can be said about Dreiser’s view on and portrayal of women. Traditionally, there were two views on this matter (Eby 142). Some saw ‘his non-judgmental description of fallen women as proof of his moral and literary inaptitude’ while others ‘laud his open treatment of sexuality and evident sympathy for women as an important aspect of his crusade against restrictive American Puritanism.’ (Eby 142). These two opinions coincide not that
accidentally with the people who either disliked or liked his writing. From the sixties of the former century onwards, another opinion came to the surface, not in the least because feminism surfaced then too. The concern then lay more with Dreiser’s use of gender stereotypes, a concern derived from the fact that Dreiser’s stories often rely on popular culture (Eby 142)

In short, many conclude that Dreiser is negative towards women, others argue he is not. Clare Eby asks the question why Dreiser and his look on women can be interpreted in so many opposing manners. She answers the question by referring to the fact that his own personal biography and his writings are closely related. He worked for women’s magazines, he relied on women to edit his work, he adored his mother and was known to be rather promiscuous (143).

Next to the twofold opposition found in the criticism and analyses of Dreiser’s portrayal of women, one can also distinguish a duality in the way Dreiser describes his main female characters. Dreiser discerns a traditional power or ‘a capacity to compel male sexual desire’ (Eby 143) and a power which lies in emotional or psychological authority (Eby 143). One can thus argue that Dreiser both subscribes to and reinforces, but at the same time also transcends the stereotypical views on woman prominent in other late 19th century fiction in the United States.

This duality can also be found in Jennie Gerhardt. Jennie is often described as a woman who is attractive to men. One can read for instance that ‘men were naturally attracted to her’ (119). Dreiser also describes it in his characteristic style:

> It is a curious characteristic of the non-defensive disposition that it is like a honey-pot to flies. Nothing is brought to it, and much is taken away. Around a soft, yielding disposition, where beauty is and sweetness, men swarm (120).

It even goes as far as Jennie finding this annoying and wishing she was not so attractive to the opposite sex. She seems to know this and ‘gives’ herself to both senator Brander and Lester Kane, for the benefit of her family.

This is where the duality starts to take form. Jennie gives up her virginity and plunges into a relationship with Brander (and later Lester) in order to help her family financially. She is thoroughly selfless throughout the novel; it is often said she is a deeply emotional woman with a vigorous inner strength. Her role in the story is thus not solely sexual in nature; Dreiser
makes Jennie into a deeply moral and constantly contemplating character. She always has the best interest for her family in mind and acts accordingly.

More on the role of Jennie as a woman, more precisely as a mother (a role associated with the stereotypical image of women, which is also present in Dreiser’s work) can be found in section ‘3.4.1.1. Language’.

Theodore Dreiser was a writer who was ahead of his time in writing about modern, urban society. Added to this are his exceptional views on women and his excessive use of detail to make him an extraordinary artist among the authors of his day. It is impossible to delineate the work of Dreiser in terms of the former three aspects of his work, but it does shed some light on the novel discussed in this dissertation. It brings these three elements together in the following way: *Jennie Gerhardt* is the story of the struggle of a poor, selfless girl who works in the house and has a strong emotional bond with nature and the senses, in modern society, told to the reader in a very detailed style. That the novel is of course far more complex than this, also on an ethnic level, will be made clear in the rest of the dissertation.
2. Dreiser: a concise reception history

2.1. Dreiser’s career

The fiction of Dreiser took form in the newspaper business. In the beginning of the 1890’s he worked for several newspapers in Chicago, Cleveland and New York, all three cities of importance in *Jennie Gerhardt*. He wrote human interest stories based on conversations he had had with important personalities. He had the reputation of being a good listener and this is where he obtained his keen eye for observation, something which he used later to write his novels (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 31). Often, however, he made these stories up. This newspaper work was Dreiser’s ‘first training in the invention of compellingly life-like characters, which would typically remain a mixture of biography, autobiography, and wild imaginings.’ (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 31).

In 1894 however, he was out of work and out of money. With the help of his brother he was able to become editor of the magazine *Ev’ry Month*. He stayed with the magazine for two years and learned valuable things not only about editing, but about writing also. After these two years he worked as a freelance journalist from 1897 until 1900. He worked for several national magazines (*Success*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ainslee’s…*) (West “Profession of Authorship” 17), and it is said that he had ‘good instincts about what the public might want to know.’ (West “Profession of Authorship” 17). *Success* for example, was a monthly self-help magazine that highlighted simple virtues of people, not their complexities. The magazine stated everyone could grow from rags to riches. Dreiser again worked with interviews for his articles. He thus wrote for a magazine that promotes financial gain while soon Dreiser himself will start writing ‘against’ big business^8^ (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 32). In those years Dreiser also took his first steps in writing fiction. In 1899, obviously convinced of his talent, he started writing *Sister Carrie*, and published it in 1900. In his first novel, Dreiser is very much influenced by the new kind of realism written by naturalists from France, Russia and England (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 35). Dreiser’s work stood in opposition to the more popular genres of his day, the historical romance and the sentimental novel. While he was writing *Sister Carrie* he had the novels of Hardy and Balzac in mind; he wrote with sympathy for his female protagonist (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 35). This sympathy was instigated by

^8^ The people he wrote about then came back in his later work, especially in ‘The Financier’. In ‘Twelve Men’ and ‘A Gallery of Women’ to show that what *Success* stood for was not holy.
the fact that he had heard similar stories at home. These stories however were not enough for him to write a novel of this length. Dreiser had most difficulty writing the part of the novel after the discovery that the low class Carrie and the high class Hurstwood are attracted to each other. In those days, in a society based on classes, a love story like this one was impossible. He wrote that part of the novel with the life story of his sister, and another woman he knew, in mind (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 36).

Unfortunately, Dreiser made a lot of debts and got into a depression in the period that followed the publication of his debut. He started work on Jennie Gerhardt but this depression, presumably caused by the ‘commercial failure’ of Sister Carrie (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 7) and a writer’s block stopped him from finishing the novel. In 1904 his depression seemed over and he became an editor again, waiting until 1910 to pick up on his writing career. He published Jennie Gerhardt and thirteen other books in the next fifteen years. Dreiser remained a controversial writer during his whole career and sales were almost never more than average, except for An American Tragedy, the sole bestseller in Dreiser’s oeuvre. West argues that Dreiser had a difficult relationship with his different publishers, ‘he did not trust them and did not want to cede authority to them in any of the decisions.’ (West “Profession of Authorship” 24). These difficult relationships made sure that the publishers did not advertize Dreiser’s work in the way that was customary, resulting in the disappointing sales mentioned above.

According to Riggio the questions that Dreiser asked in his writing kept on coming back throughout his career: ‘Why do some rise in their fields, while others succumb to the forces of nature and society? What ethical values promote well-being? What personal qualities lead to a good life?’ (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 34). Furthermore, Dreiser, in asking these questions, was a pioneer in the sense that he transcended ‘philosophical certainties and practical guidelines’ of an earlier period. (Riggio “Uses of Biography” 34).

Furthermore, Dreiser also wrote some drama, particularly after the suppression of his sixth novel The Genius (1915), for being sexually immoral to some. His play The Hand of the Potter (1916) was the most ambitious work of drama Dreiser wrote (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” xvi). In that period Dreiser thus turned to drama, but also some

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9 See also section ‘3.3 The genesis of Jennie Gerhardt’
autobiographical writing (e.g. *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916) and *Book about Myself* (1922) (later reworked to *Newspaper Days*) (Cassuto, Eby, “Introduction” 8).

### 2.2. Criticism during his life

It has already been mentioned above that Dreiser was never really studied as an ethnic author. The question then remains how he was studied and read.

Dreiser published his debut *Sister Carrie* in 1900. At that time it was a widely held view that the purpose of literature was ‘to appeal to man's "higher nature," to inspire him through the depiction of man's capacity to achieve the ethical life to seek such a life for himself.’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”). It was virtually unimaginable to write about the ordinary people and the circumstances of their lives.

*Sister Carrie* was primarily seen as a novel about a girl having two illegitimate relationships without being ‘punished’ for it. Comments included (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”):

> Neither a pleasant nor an edifying book

> The name of God is not mentioned from cover to cover, a significant omission

This meant an immediate critical rejection of the novel, also because a lot was said about faults against the English language. They were referred to as ‘blunders in English’ (Giles 48) and Dreiser was heavily criticized for his way of writing words. He was seen as a writer of ‘minute detail’ and ‘unsparing realism.’ (Giles 48)

Dreiser’s next novel, *Jennie Gerhardt* received a rather ambivalent reception. Although Jennie’s behaviour was deemed appropriate, some critics did acknowledge her good nature.

After *Jennie Gerhardt* Dreiser completed three works in rapid succession, *The Financier* in 1912 and *The Titan* and *The Genius* in 1914 and 1915. In the first two of these novels the main character Frank Cowperwood defies ‘all conventions of acceptable sexual behaviour’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”), just like Eugene Witla in ‘The Genius’. By some critics Dreiser was lauded, by most however he was again rejected. It was said he caused ‘a riot of eroticism’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”) and it was argued that he presented the human species as animals. This claim of Dreiser’s ‘barbaric naturalism’ became famous due to Stuart Sherman’s essay *The Barbaric Naturalism of Theodore Dreiser* (Sherman 85-101).
Dreiser’s supporters primarily applauded his works for what they meant in opening up new grounds for other authors. One of those supporters was Sherwood Anderson (paraphrased by Donald Pizer):

The feet of Dreiser,” Anderson wrote, are “making a path for us.” If Dreiser's feet were "heavy" and "brutal," as Anderson went on to note, it was because he had mountains of resistance to scale. If his work appeared to lack beauty, it was because the concept of beauty had degenerated into a belief in mere surface grace and polish. And if his ideas were often tedious or obscure, it was because he was fumbling honestly for truths which others had so long refused to acknowledge (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”).

The most criticism Dreiser had to endure during the teens and twenties came from the movement of ‘New Humanism’, of which Stuart Sherman was spokesperson\textsuperscript{11}.

Dreiser’s last major novel was An American Tragedy, written in 1925. This novel was well received by the readers. In the years before this publication Dreiser’s reputation, in spite of his difficult themes, had grown for the better, but An American Tragedy really made the public accept Dreiser. An example is the fact that even Stuart Sherman wrote a review praising the novel. Dreiser was finally recognized and even a Nobel Prize seemed probable (Pizer, “Critical Reputation).

In the thirties however, Dreiser was again criticized, this time in an essay by Lionel Trilling. This essay was the first of many to criticize Dreiser after World War II. Trilling challenged Dreiser’s idea of realism and ‘indirectly expresses a widely shared revulsion by formerly radical critics of the 1930s (Philip Rahv and Malcolm Cowley are other significant examples) toward writers whose work and thought had close ties to the Communist Party and its policies during the decade.’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”) He bluntly called his work badly written and stupid (Giles 47).

Trilling, with his essay on Dreiser, was the first to mention Dreiser’s tendencies towards communism, but he was certainly not the last. From Trilling’s famous article onwards, Dreiser was often criticized for his belief in communism. He not only supported the communist cause in his writings during the thirties and forties, he also became a member of the Communist Party in the last year of his life (Pizer, “Critical Reputation). It is not hard to believe that these inclinations, in those years, made Dreiser an easy target for additional criticism on his work. It was believed that, due to his sympathies for the left, Dreiser was not a great intellectual and ‘what better way to demonstrate his intellectual vacuity than to point out the inadequacies of his ideas in his fiction?’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”). So in this period Dreiser was primarily criticized as a thinker.

\textsuperscript{11} See also section ‘2.4. Xenophobia or nativism as reason to reject ethnic writing’.
Other sources of information concerning the question how Dreiser was seen in his day are of course the different historical works on American literature that were written. An example is *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. In this work Dreiser is only mentioned once, as a playwright, not a novelist. His *Plays of the Natural and Supernatural* is mentioned in the context of one-act plays (Trent et al. “Literary History” 298). Nowhere in this overview is Dreiser addressed as a novelist, let alone as an ethnic novelist. It is also revealing in this context that in the shortened version of the aforementioned historical overview, Dreiser is completely left out. There is not even mention of him as a playwright (Trent et al. “Concise Literary History”).

Another work that can be of interest is *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*. This publication, printed in 1988 and thus after Dreiser’s death, has chapters on minority writers from different immigrant groups, but Dreiser does not feature in them.

### 2.3. Criticism after Dreiser’s death (1945)

After Dreiser’s death, two novels were published, *The Bulwark* (1946) and *The Stoic* (1947). These novels were written, for the first time in any of Dreiser’s works, with a certain mystic element inscribed in them (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”) and this was another reason critics could use to strengthen their dismissal of his work.

Furthermore, during the last years of Dreiser’s life, New Criticism came to the fore and remained dominant until the sixties. New Criticism as a critical movement in literature was fathered by T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards (Raleigh 23). Raleigh further claims that New Criticism is a marriage between art and science ‘or, more precisely, aestheticism and scientific method’ (23). The New Criticists were preoccupied with the form and structures in texts and relied on close reading (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”). These critics proclaimed Dreiser the centre of everything bad in literature in the twentieth century and found that Dreiser’s ‘awkwardness and massiveness’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”) could not be classified as artistic.

Furthermore however, Donald Pizer claims that since the fifties ‘the academic writing about Dreiser [...] has shifted from the use of him as a cultural symbol to a close examination of his career and work.’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”). Several critics and researchers thus published about Dreiser, his work and the genesis of it all. With this shift in interest from
dismissing to simply researching some years went by, but during the sixties it became clear that some old discussions surrounding Dreiser and his work were still prominent. One of these discussions involved the definition of American naturalism and Dreiser’s place in that tradition. This discussion is long and complex and suffice it to say, in the context of this dissertation, that critics ‘now incline toward an acceptance of the complexities and ambivalences of both the movement and Dreiser.’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”).

Also, Dreiser’s peculiar way of writing still remained an issue among several critics. It has already been mentioned above that Dreiser’s ‘blunders of English’ (Giles 48) were a great cause of criticism. Giles argues that Dreiser’s use of ‘objectional’ for ‘objectionable’ and ‘fatuitously’ for ‘fatuously’ was heavily criticized by both scholars and newspaper reviewers (48). Even now scholars write on Dreiser’s knowledge of English. Delbanco claims that the work of Dreiser shows ‘some discomfort with customary English word order.’ (Giles 55) and likewise argues that there is a certain distance between how Dreiser writes and the ‘Anglo-Saxon syntactical norms’ (Giles 55).

It must be added however, that some critics, during the sixties slowly began to realize that Dreiser was more than a self-proclaimed realist with a poor knowledge of the English language. There was mention of ‘finesse’ and strong symbolic constructs in his writing (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”).

Since the eighties there has been another shift in publications about Dreiser. Since then, the preoccupation in research and criticism on Dreiser primarily lies on how his work can be related to ‘large-scale social and cultural issues arising out of our condition as an urban society and consumerist economy.’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”). Scholars and critics alike took interest in how Dreiser’s work dealt with the ‘major cultural realities of his day’ (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”). In the line of what is written in section ‘1.3.1. Dreiser and the modern United States’, it can be argued that critics took an interest in how Dreiser depicted the modernization of the United States (how the city functions as an urban reality for example). It has, for several years, been widely accepted that Dreiser functioned as a naturalist who wrote about modern life with a line of approach against the old values that often still governed his time. Some critics however now challenge this view and claim that, quite on the contrary, Dreiser wrote in order to maintain these old values (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”).
2.4. Dreiser’s rejection of ethnic writing?

It is striking that virtually nowhere Dreiser is studied as being a German-American, or ethnic author. Dreiser’s view on his own ethnicity (born in the United States, of German parents) has always been ambivalent and rather unclear. H.L. Mencken, a journalist, critic, but also Dreiser’s friend and ‘literary champion’ (Eby 142), however, insisted upon Dreiser’s American nature (Casciato 168). Riggio argues that the movement of realism and naturalism Dreiser belonged harboured a tendency towards nationalism. Dreiser had a leading role in that movement, and as a result, he referred to himself as ‘radically American’ (Riggio, “Hidden Ethnic” 56). It can thus be stated that, due to Dreiser’s role as pioneer in American realism and naturalism, he was virtually ‘forced’ to turn away from his ethnic roots. Furthermore, it can be argued that there are other reasons why Dreiser could have been turned away from writing in an overtly ethnic manner. Riggio distinguishes four reasons as to why critics now and then did and sometimes do not recognize the ethnic dimension in his writings. One of them is the possibility that Dreiser was turned away from writing in an ethnic manner due to the xenophobia or ‘nativism’ that ruled the United States at the turn of the century. Anbinder argues that due to the recent ‘birth’ of the term ‘nativism’ there is no real consensus as to its precise meaning (177). Its use as a term for those who wanted to restrict the vast flow of immigrants during the 19th century is all but comprehensively describing the phenomenon. Indeed, this definition merely captures a certain policy, while nativism can also be described as an ideology. In this section I will thus use ‘nativist’ in the same meaning as does Anbinder, as ‘someone who fears and resents immigrants and their impact on the United States, and who wants to take some action against them […]’ (177).

The onset of this xenophobia thus lies in the 1840’s, with the beginning of mass immigration. The latter led to the fear of the contemporary ‘real’ Americans, from then on referred to as ‘nativists’ that the protestant character of America, combined with its so-called Anglo-conformity ‘would be endangered by the uncontrolled mass influx of poor, uneducated, and for the most part Catholic immigrants who were presumed to be incapable of democratic principles.’ (Ripley, Reichman, “Nativism”).

The occurrence, in 1844, of the Philadelphia Riots is but one example of the problems that arose. These riots were instigated by nativist anti-Catholics against Irish immigrants; as a result, two Catholic churches were torched (Wilson, Coval 1).
One of the early acmes of anti-immigrant feeling was unmistakably the forming of the American Party, popularly referred to as the ‘Know-Nothing Party’ or the ‘Know-Nothings’. This political party arose out of secret anti-immigrant societies, with leaders who wanted to remain unknown and members instructed to answer ‘I know nothing’ to possible questions about their xenophobic and pro-slavery activities. For a while, this party had many followers, some also found them detestable, Abraham Lincoln being the most prominent opponent. They pleaded to restrict the voting rights of immigrants and they wanted to make the time to become an American citizen three times as long. (Mauk, Oakland 57). The party knew an immense growth in the early fifties, especially in 1852 ‘when it triumphed in local and state elections from New Hampshire to Texas.’ (Johnson 529). By 1860 however the party lost all influence. The party ceased to exist primarily due to a conflict about slavery. Anti-foreign agitation thus reached it first peak in the 1850’s and this nativism ‘focused on popular versions of ideas made famous by Alexis de Tocqueville’s American Democracy, which claimed that the basic social and political character of the USA was transplanted to New England from the mother country.’ (Mauk, Oakland 57). The Know-Nothing Party was nonexistent in Dreiser’s time, but its existence must be mentioned when dealing with 19th century xenophobia in the United States.

Following the decline of the American Party, the growing North-South controversy and the imminent Civil War (1861-1865) somewhat overshadowed the anti-immigration agitation (Rippley, Reichman, “Nativism”).

After 1877, the year in which the South was once again part of the United States of America, nationalism grew very strong. Consequently, in the following years, the United States, convinced of its often racial superiority, mingled in ‘the great power rivalry for colonial possessions.’ (Rippley, Reichman, “Nativism”).

Some incidents made sure that anti-immigrant feelings were quite widespread. Following the Exclusion Act of 1882, involving the denying of entry for ‘the insane, criminals papers and (for ten years) Chinese contract laborers’ (Johnson 427), the Haymarket Affair in Chicago in 1886 further fueled xenophobic feelings. During a strike for better working conditions, an eight-hour working day to be precise, the anarchist Sam Fielden was on the pulpit when a platoon of policemen marched into the crowd of about thirteen hundred people. At that same moment a bomb was thrown, killing one policeman and several bystanders. The newspapers wanted blood and the people wanted vengeance (Everett 271). Eight anarchists were arrested and tried, but there was no evidence that they knew the person who threw the bomb. Of these eight there were five German immigrants and three Americans, two with European roots.
Although it was never proved whether these men had anything to do with the bomb ‘the duty of almost every American seemed clear. Our (the American, note added) way of life was endangered by foreign criminals [...]’ (Everett 271).

The murder on a New Orleans police officer in 1891 also caused U.S. citizens to oppose immigration. Nineteen Italian-Americans were tried for this murder, but none was found guilty. Before they were released however, eleven of them were lynched by an angry mob. Italians worldwide were outraged, but American newspapers again seemed to approve (“Italian Immigration”).

These incidents however should not be seen as truly representative of the nativist feeling (O’Connor, “Nativism”). A lot of patriotic societies were founded out of an Anglo-Saxon feeling of superiority, and this can be seen as characteristic of nativist activity. An example is the Immigrant Restriction League, founded in 1894. The League claimed there were major flaws to the immigration system and wanted to acquire support of both the people and the government to reform that system (“Immigration Restriction League”).

The Immigrant Restriction League was active for 20 years. People saw large groups of immigrants get together in public activities; this upsurge of European nationalism in the United States led to an equal upsurge in American nationalism ‘with the result that in 1916 a massive Anglo-Americanization campaign was launched.’ (Ripley, Reichman, “Nativism”).

In relation to Dreiser, the following can be stated: ‘nativism was characteristic of a significant portion of the population and helps to explain some of the obstacles which confronted the immigrant population during this important decade in American history.’ (O’Connor, “Nativism”). In this light it is indeed obvious and understandable why Dreiser could have been not all that eager to write in a clearly ethnic context. All of Dreiser’s major, most famous works were written between 1900 and 1925, a period in which xenophobic feelings were at a high. In the bibliography of Theodore Dreiser by Donald Pizer one can read:

To Stuart Sherman in 1915 and later to such New Humanists as Paul Elmer More (1928) and Robert Shafer (1930), Dreiser was not the pure voice of truth but rather the howl of atavistic animalism. Men often may be selfish and bestial, they agreed, but they also argued that civilization was man's effort to control these remnants of his animal past through reason and will, and that literature should represent the possibility and desirability of this effort. (It is of interest to note that this attack on Dreiser's "barbarism" reached its shrillest level during World War I, when critics such as Sherman frequently alluded to Dreiser's German ancestry.) (Pizer, Dowell, Rusch 208).

In his writings on Dreiser, Sherman makes sure the reader knows that Dreiser is of German ancestry. He claims that Dreiser’s five first novels are ‘a representative of a new note in American literature, coming from the ‘ethnic’ element of our mixed population.’ (Sherman
Furthermore, Sherman delineates Dreiser as a naïve writer with a simple naturalistic philosophy. He claims that Dreiser shows the reader a simplified picture of American society; a simplification even ‘beyond recognition’ (Sherman 95). Sherman concludes that ‘Mr. Dreiser’s field seems curiously outside American society’ (Sherman 95).

It is the movement of New Criticism especially which criticized Dreiser and rejected him as a voice of American fiction12 (Pizer, “Critical Reputation”).

This type of publications made it hard for Dreiser to become an established writer; it gave him a bad reputation. In addition to that, World War I made people suspicious of German-Americans. An interesting case to look at in this context is the situation in some American universities during the Great War. When America entered the war, some patriots demanded clear demonstrations of loyalty and zeal for the American cause. Universities for example became a favourite target for extreme patriots (Wilcox 59). The University of Michigan discharged six professors linked to the German department, in no more than five months. This was the fault of ‘extremist professors who acted in concert with a coalition of powerful alumni to force the Regents and administration to discharge professors they deemed insufficiently patriotic or of suspect loyalty.’ (Wilcox 61) In the context of this dissertation I will discuss only one of the six professors who were discharged, namely Dr. Carl E. Eggert. This man lost his job due to the actions of some alumni who claimed to have proof he made pro-German remarks in his classes. Eggert was never given any opportunity to defend himself, while ‘no actual proof was produced to substantiate the affidavits.’ (Wilcox 63).

Here also, as already mentioned above, the newspapers played their role. The Detroit News for example never mentioned the true reason for the dismissal of the six professors; they claimed declining enrolments caused the men to be discharged. The Christian Science Monitor, however, did recognize the true reason, but this was contradicted by an article in the Michigan Daily elucidating ‘that an official investigation by the university had found the disloyalty charges “groundless.”’ (Wilcox 67)

This incident is just one example of the agitation World War I caused against immigrants and other people in the United States. Other examples include vigilantes painting windows of German homes yellow or covering them with notices to ensure that fellow-men knew Germans lived there (Carnevale 479). Wittke summarizes this period as follows:

Misunderstanding, suspicion, conflict of emotions, bewildered readjustment, and tragedy marked the years from 1914 to 1918 when everything of German antecedents in the United States was suddenly labeled as part of a vast Pan-German plot to Prussianize America. (90)

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12 See section ‘2.3. Criticism after Dreiser’s death’.
Of course, a reaction of German-Americans was to be expected. From 1914 to 1917 it is said that German-Americans closed their ranks. This led to a modest upsurge in the field of German newspapers and German societies. *The German Day Association* for example, wanted to ‘reawaken and strengthen the German’s rightful and just pride in his German nationality’ (Dobbert 679).

As a consequence, when America entered the war, Germans in America were stuck in a terrible dilemma: support the government in its war effort or remain loyal to the Old Country and be accused of lack of patriotism? (Dobbert 680).

Obviously, in this time it was hard to be a German-American author, so it is very understandable that Dreiser was not inclined to write novels with a clear ethnic influence.
3. **Dreiser as an ethnic author** *(case study: Jennie Gerhardt)*

### 3.1. Introduction

This third part of the dissertation makes out the main part. First of all, for the readers of this dissertation who have not read the novel, a short synopsis and a brief description of the genesis of *Jennie Gerhardt* are included. In what follows, I would like to substantiate why I think ethnicity was an important factor in Dreiser’s work. The previous chapter described how Dreiser was seen and reviewed in his time as well as in the time after his death. When reading and researching this, it soon becomes clear that the ethnic element in Dreiser’s work was often neglected and never truly studied before Riggio’s discussion of Dreiser as a hidden ethnic. By looking at several aspects which are prominent in the story I will attempt to prove that Dreiser did write with an ethnic line of approach in mind. In doing this I will furthermore try to make clear that it is astonishing that Dreiser’s early commentators especially, very often completely neglected this side of his work. The chapter thus consists of a synopsis of the story, followed by a section on how the novel came into being. In section 3.4 a distinction is made between the Gerhardt and the Kane family. With regard to the Kane family I will discuss several aspects in which I could discover an ethnic line of approach by the author. These aspects include language, with a short introduction as to the role of German in the United States and two separate sections on the use of German within the Gerhardt family (Mr. Gerhardt and Mrs. Gerhardt). The analysis will discuss how this ensures a transition from the second generation, in which the mother is the link between Old and New. Another aspect that will be discussed below is religion. With regard to this aspect of life also, I will discuss how it causes a breach between the Old World and the New World. A third aspect that will be handled is related to language. In section 3.4.3 the use of different names and how this relates with cutting loose from the Old World will be analyzed.

A final part of the first section addresses how Dreiser approached a business in which he once functioned; that of newspapers. I will discuss how German and more traditional ‘American’ newspapers are described in quite different terms.

Following the section on the Gerhardt family, I will shift attention to the Kane family. The ethnicity in this family is less apparent, but it is nonetheless very present. Finally,

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the third chapter closes off with a comparison between the two main families (3.4.2.2.), and a conclusion (3.4.5) as to what all of this implies.

3.2. Synopsis

Jennie Gerhardt is a low class second generation immigrant, German-American girl who is eighteen years of age at the beginning of the story. She has five brothers and sisters (Sebastian or ‘Bass’, Martha, William, George and Veronica), a hard working, honest but devout Lutheran and very stern father (also called William, from here on referred to as William Senior) and a mother, whose name is never mentioned, with a nervous disposition. When Jennie’s father falls ill and has to stop working, she and her mother go to a local hotel to clean for money. Some time later, they start doing the laundry of one of the more wealthy regular guests of the hotel, the United States senator George Brander. This man is immediately interested in Jennie and asks her to marry him. This is the chance for Jennie and her family to relieve them of poverty. However, Brander dies before the marriage and what is worse, Jennie is pregnant. Furthermore, William Sr. is furious and bans Jennie from his house. When William Sr. is healed, he leaves to go to work in Youngstown. Consequently, Jennie moves back home and the child, named Vesta, is born. She moves to Cleveland with Bass and starts work as a maid for Mrs. Bracebridge. Some time later, the whole Gerhardt family (except for William Sr., who still lives in Youngstown) moves to Cleveland. In the house of Mrs. Bracebridge, Jennie meets Lester Kane, son of a very wealthy Irish carriage builder from Cincinnati. He is enchanted by Jennie and repeatedly claims she is his. Jennie eventually moves in with him, without telling him about her baby, Vesta, who is taken care of by her mother. Again, like with Brander, Jennie initially goes to Lester because the family needs money, primarily because William Sr. has been in an accident at work in Youngstown, after which he moves back in with his family and reconciles with Jennie. The latter and Lester eventually go and live together in Chicago; they tell William Senior they are married. Three years later the situation is still the same. Then Mrs. Gerhardt dies, causing the family to disperse and forcing Jennie to find a solution for Vesta. Jennie finds a Swedish woman in Chicago to take care of Vesta, but soon Lester finds out about her, virtually causing the end of

14 See section ‘3.4.1.3. Names’.
their relationship. Lester, however, gradually learns to accept Vesta and eventually treats her like his daughter.

In the meantime, Lester’s family (father, mother and his siblings Robert, Imogene and Louise) discovers that he is living out of wedlock with a working class girl. They are not willing to accept this; they want him to leave Jennie and marry a girl of his own class, preferably Letty Pace, a recently widowed and very rich woman, with whom Lester was close some time ago. Lester’s father, Archibald, goes as far as to change his will, so that Lester is not left with his part of the family business. This would leave Lester’s brother, Robert, with a very large share of the company. After Archibald’s death, Lester, as stated in his father’s will, has three years to choose between Jennie and his share of the company. Maddened by this ultimatum, he leaves his position in the company and attempts to make a living by investing what he has saved, for example in real-estate. These enterprises fail and gradually, Lester loses his position in his beloved social world. Lester finds it difficult to decide whether he should leave Jennie or not, and his decision is further postponed by the fact that William Senior, who came to live with Jennie, Vesta and Lester in Chicago, falls ill and dies.

Just before the deadline Lester is almost maddened by the ultimatum and in dialogue with Jennie, who is a very selfless woman, decides to leave. He pays for a house for Jennie in a quiet town outside of Chicago and he marries Letty Pace. He becomes one of the most powerful men in the United States; but he never really stops thinking about his old life with Jennie. The latter, in the meantime, lives a quiet and quite satisfying life with Vesta, although the pain of Lester’s departure keeps haunting her. Furthermore, Vesta dies after an illness and as a consequence, Jennie adopts two children. At the end of the novel, Lester is dying and he wants Jennie with him (his wife is overseas and will not make it in time for his death). Jennie stays with him for the last days of his life. At the very end of the novel, the reader is left with a picture of Jennie, with her children, waiting what the future will bring.

3.3. The genesis of Jennie Gerhardt

Before moving on to the actual analysis of some aspects of the narrative, it might be useful to see just how this novel came into existence. Sister Carrie, Dreiser’s debut, was published in
1900 and although there were some problems with his publishing house\textsuperscript{15}, he almost immediately started work on his next instalment, which was \textit{Jennie Gerhardt}, in 1901. Dreiser found a new publishing house in the same year; a deal was struck, after which Dreiser retracted himself from public life to make some progress on the novel. However, he experienced severe hardship due to his naturally nervous disposition and nerve sickness. This caused him to cease work on his novel in 1902; he even told his new publisher that he would never finish the story (West “Introduction” ix).

From 1902 until 1910, Dreiser had several jobs and he got married and divorced. In the latter year he decided to start up work on \textit{Jennie Gerhardt} again and remarkably enough, he made progress. In the beginning of 1911 the first version of the novel was a fact. To some degree this first version was different from the narrative that is discussed in this dissertation. In this first narrative for example, Jennie and Lester do get married. Unfortunately we do not know how this story evolved; there are no remnants of Dreiser’s initial work because he destroyed it upon completion of the alternative – now official – ending. Dreiser did this because some of his ‘test-readers’ advised him not to let Jennie and Lester marry. Dreiser then turned the novel in what it is today (West, “Introduction” xi). By 1911 the story was finished and the hunt for a publisher could begin. After one refusal, Dreiser found a house that was willing to get the novel published, but under some conditions. Dreiser was to accept that the manuscript would be changed for example. The novel was clear-cut about some taboos of that time and a book ban could be easily obtained. Dreiser had to accept the conditions due to financial difficulties and some time later the revised edition was finished. It was reworked to the extent that ‘\textit{some 25000 words had been cut, and the prose rewritten extensively. Profanity had been removed; slang spoken by characters had been corrected; virtually all mention of sex had been muted or cut.}’ (West “Introduction” xiv). Much of these changes were meant to make the story more fluent; for as we have already seen, Dreiser wrote in a very detailed, descriptive style that can often be tiresome to read\textsuperscript{16}.

Dreiser did not react enthusiastically to this new version and demanded that the text should be changed back; something that happened only to a limited extent.

\textsuperscript{15} “Doubleday” publishing house condemned his work as ‘immoral’ and was reluctant to publish the novel (West, “Introduction” vii).
\textsuperscript{16} See also section ‘\textbf{1.3.2. Dreiser and detail}’.
When the book was finally published, it received quite some favourable criticism and the sales were not at all disappointing (West, “Introduction xvi), although Dreiser never sold many books\textsuperscript{17}.

\section*{3.4. Ethnicity in Jennie Gerhardt}

\subsection*{3.4.1. The Gerhardt family}

\subsubsection*{3.4.1.1. Language}

\subsubsection*{3.4.1.1.1. German in the United States}

Language, as defined by Nancy Carnevale, ‘\textit{is the means through which we perceive and understand the world as well as the medium through which we present ourselves in a social context.}’ (471). This makes the fact that William Sr., his wife and his children all use language in a different way, a very important one.

The United States of America does not have an official language. To this day some still claim that German was very near to becoming the official language of the United States. This claim, often called ‘The Mühlenberg Legend’, named after the man who would have cast the decisive vote against German as official language, has been passed on by authors and teachers of American and German descent alike (Rippley, Reichman, “German or English”). However, a vote like this never took place; Frederick Mühlenberg, the first Speaker of the House of Representatives, simply spoke against the translation of a set of regulations originally handed out in English (Tappert 293).

In reality the situation was quite the opposite, for it is astonishing ‘\textit{how swiftly German immigrants and their children were ready and willing to surrender their mother tongue for the sake of the advantages English offered in the social and economic arena}’ (Rippley, Reichman, “German or English”). It was primarily this quest for economic prosperity that caused German to disappear as everyday language; World War I later on only accelerated this process. Anti-German feelings in that period ensured that many stepped away from their native language\textsuperscript{18}.

\textsuperscript{17} Only \textit{An American Tragedy} (1925) was a bestseller. Dreiser even sold the stage rights and movie rights for this novel (West “Profession of Authorship” 20).

\textsuperscript{18} See further below and also section \textit{2.4. Dreiser’s rejection of ethnic writing?}. 
The decades before World War I knew a large base of speakers of German. As a consequence, a lot of German newspapers and other publications arose (Ripplrey, Reichman, “German or English”). In Jennie Gerhardt too, it is often stressed William reads a German newspaper\textsuperscript{19}. States such as Pennsylvania and Ohio, primarily in rural areas and often on parental demand, allowed German as an alternative to English in schools (Ripplrey, Reichman, “German or English”). This is not at all surprising, knowing that already in 1745, some 45 000 German immigrants lived in the colonies (Carnevale 477). Only in larger cities such as Cleveland, Cincinnati and Baltimore\textsuperscript{20} bilingual education on a larger scale was feasible. By 1900 however, German was no longer of enough importance to warrant bilingual education; it became a popular foreign language elective (Ripplrey, Reichman, “German or English”).

Since the 1880s there was an increase in the opposition to German as a co-language for instruction. Laws were voted to limit German language use; Lutherans and Catholics united to stop these new regulations with only limited and temporary success. Efforts were made to make Germans honor their native language but World War I rendered these exertions futile (Ripplrey, Reichman, “German or English”). Views on immigrant languages, other than English, in general were very negative in that period. Some scientists believed, though not proved, that language was related to race. They claimed ‘Anglo-Saxon superiority was associated with the English language itself, considered by some to be the highest form of speech.’(Carnevale 478). Tests were done and the results were staggering, though false of course: it was claimed that immigrants ‘had low intelligence due to hereditary inferiority that included foreign language usage.’ (Carnevale 478). Imputations like this were long from all what Germans had to endure preceding and during World War I (see also: ‘2.4. Dreiser’s rejection of ethnic writing?’ where it is explained that Dreiser’s German ancestry might of held him from writing overtly ethnic novels).

The former is of course only a limited overview of the status and use of German in the United States of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. To sum up, one could argue that German played an important role in the United States, but it never got to the point where it could claim the role as main language of the country; World War I especially ended this permanently, because, ‘with American entry into the war, the public use of German in any context was strongly discouraged by official actions as well as an overzealous public.’ (Carnevale 478). German-Americans often suffered from anti-immigrant behaviour in that period. Consequently, street

\textsuperscript{19} The fact that Dreiser stresses this as often as he does justifies a separate section on this subject (3.4.1.4. Newspapers).

\textsuperscript{20} The first two are important cities in Jennie Gerhardt.
and town names that contained German were altered and ‘organizations with German names were pressured into changing them, and German words that had entered American English were substituted with English equivalents, such as ‘liberty cabbage’ for sauerkraut’ (Carnevale 479). Furthermore, German language newspapers declined in number at a fast rate, German language schools disappeared, German as a language was dropped from curricula and books were burned. German thus virtually disappeared as a language in the United States. This was strengthened by local laws against the use of German, but, due to the ‘era of pervasive and vociferous hostility’ at least some of the loss of knowledge of German in the United States can be associated with an unwillingness of the people to speak German. (Carnevale 479).

3.4.1.2. German in Jennie Gerhardt

3.4.1.2.1. William Gerhardt Senior

The German language plays an important role in Jennie Gerhardt. On no less than ten different pages in the novel (37, 38, 55, 56, 57, 64, 82, 86, 118, 148) it is made very clear that German is being used. A briefly-worded overview:

- p. 37: “Mother,” he called in German, and then not seeing her, came to the door of the front room and looked in. (William Sr.)

- p. 38: “Oh yes,” he said with a considerable German accent. (William Sr.)

- p. 55:
  1) “What is this about Senator Brander coming out to call on Jennie?” he asked in German. (William Sr.)
  2) “Why nothing,” answered Mrs. Gerhardt, in the same language. (Mrs Gerhardt)

- p. 56: “There is nothing the matter,” she declared suddenly, using an effective German idiom. (Mrs. Gerhardt)

- p. 57: “What difference?” cried Gerhardt, still talking in German, although Jennie answered in English. (William Sr.)

- p. 64: “Oh my!” said Gerhardt, “Ach Gott” He actually wrung his hands in distress. (William Sr.)

- p. 82: “What is it you say?” he inquired in German, his voice straining to a hard note. (William Sr.)
- p. 86: “I shall tell you what for,” said Gerhardt, still speaking in German. (William Sr.)

- p. 118: “She must be heavy”, he said in his characteristic German. “Let me take her.” (William Sr.)

- p. 148: It was time for the regular weekly remittance, but this time, instead of the regular fatherly communication, written in German and telling of his condition and enclosing five dollars […]. (William Sr.)

These are the eleven instances (on ten pages) in which the narrator explicitly states that German is being used as main language, except for p. 38, which only states that William Sr. spoke with a considerable accent. What immediately strikes one when looking at these short extracts is that in eight of the ten examples it is William Gerhardt Senior who is talking in German. This corresponds with what Riggio writes in his essay on Theodore Dreiser as a hidden ethnic. He argues that the character of the father in multi-ethnic literature loses parental authority and ‘sadly fails to understand his children’s American ways […]’ (Riggio, “Hidden Ethnic” 54). One component of the fact that William Sr. is not in touch with the American ways of his children could be found in him not speaking German all the time. If we look at the seven (leaving out p. 38) instances in which the use of German by William Gerhardt is mentioned, one can see that in five of these William Sr. is, to say the least, irritated, if not mad. Accordingly, one could state that for William Sr., German has become a language that he almost always only uses when he is vexed or cross. But, the other instances could be used to prove that this is not always the case. On p. 37 one can find no clues to claim William is angry. What the text does say, however, is that William ‘was given to speculation these days’ (37). So, one might add that William also uses German when he is feeling somewhat gloomy and worried.

One also learns that William writes his family in German. There are some possibilities here. Either William Sr. cannot write English sufficiently to use it in letters or him writing in German can be seen as a sign of him talking German almost all the time to his family and not only when he is cross, irritated or worried. There is no solid reason however to suggest that William Sr. speaks German to his family all the time. One could say that the fact that narrator stresses the fact that German is being used on these occasions is a sign that these are the only occasions he speaks German. The book, however, gives no clear answers to this question.

Another angle of incidence can be found with Giles. He argues that by looking at Dreiser’s style of writing, one can conclude that the whole novel is actually translated from the German

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21 Or writing on p. 148.
spoken in the Dreiser home (56). Dreiser’s tendency toward compound words, as Giles puts it, ‘gives the reader the curious impression that the whole of Jennie Gerhardt, and not just Gerhardt’s own speeches, might almost have been translated from the German’ (56). Casciato also addresses this problem. He argues that all of William Senior’s words are spoken in German (173). Giles thus says every member of the family may talk German, while Casciato claims all of Gerhardt Senior’s words are translated from German. In my view this is impossible to prove without knowledge of the author’s intentions; I find no evidence that Gerhardt would speak German throughout the entire novel.

Furthermore, although the narrator almost never mentions whether William speaks German rather than English, it is stressed several times that William speaks English. At one point in the novel, it says: “No,” Gerhardt would sigh immediately, “my stomach don’t do right […]” (343). Here, the narrator, in emphasising the estranging use of English of William Sr., stresses the fact that he is speaking English. This happens in two other instances of the novel. The first one reads: ‘He (Lester) answered the old man’s querulous inquiry as to what was wrong “with them shoes” by saying they weren’t comfortable anymore.’ (265). And some pages before that: “What has she done!” exclaimed Gerhardt, his excitement growing under the strain he was enduring, and speaking almost unaccented English in consequence.’ (59).

Furthermore, Gerhardt teaches his granddaughter prayers, and he does this in English. This is made very clear by the text itself:

“Say ‘Our Father,’” he used to demand of the toddling infant when he had her alone with him.
“Ow Fowvah,” was her vowel-like interpretation of his sounds.
“Who art in heaven.”
“Ooh ah in av’en,” repeated the child.
(183)

So, one could argue that Gerhardt does not want his granddaughter to be able to speak German, or he would have taught her these prayers in his native language. He knows that she will get more opportunities in life with a thorough knowledge of English.

Carnevale, in her article on immigration and language, mentions how the immigrant can be stuck in between private and public life (475). For William Sr. then, German would be the language of the home, of safety and English the language of the outside world, the language also he wants his granddaughter to master. But again, there is no reason to assume William almost exclusively speaks German, or English for that matter, he seems to speak the two at the same time.
After reading the novel carefully, something else, which is also mentioned by Carnevale thus seems to be more plausible for the case of William Gerhardt Senior. Carnevale claims that ‘*many first generation immigrants were not able to make a complete transition from one language to another.*’ (474). She adds that immigrants would rely on their own mixture of their native language and the language of their new country. This could go as far as the development of a creole. The latter is probably not the case for William Gerhardt, but one can undoubtedly argue in a plausible way that he did not undergo a complete transition from German to English. In my view, the narrator seems eager to make clear to the reader that William Gerhardt Senior is not completely assimilated to life in the United States. From what follows, one will be able to conclude that Gerhardt’s wife is more assimilated, also in language. This, among other things, ensured that their children, being second generation immigrants show a higher degree of assimilation because, for one thing, ‘*psychoanalysts have drawn the connection between language and the mother*’ (Carnevale 473). If the mother speaks English to her children, these are prone to establish a connection with their mother in English.

### 3.4.1.2.2. Mrs. Gerhardt

Mrs. Gerhardt thus also uses German. There are two instances in the book where it is said this woman speaks German and in both cases, she is talking to her husband. This could suggest that she only speaks German to her husband, not her children. This claim also fits in with the text by Riggio. He writes about the mother in multi-ethnic narratives as an ‘*isolated, beleaguered mother who attempts to mediate between old-world customs and the emotional needs of her children*’ (Riggio, “Hidden Ethnic” 54). Seen in this light, Mrs. Gerhardt mediates between her husband (the Old World) and her children (United States of America or the New World) through language. Conzen argues that ‘*language change, often bitterly fought […] was a key indicator of the transition, as was a pronounced focus upon American concerns rather than old world issues.*’ (Conzen, “Invention of Ethnicity” 12). The novel seems to suggest that the Gerhardt-children do not speak German, but understand it. Again, there is little proof of this in the narrative itself, but one can read: ‘*What difference?*’ cried Gerhardt, still talking in German, although Jennie answered in English.’ (57). This passage

22 She also does this in the field of religion, see section ‘*3.4.1.3. Religion*’
suggests that Jennie (and with her probably also her siblings) understands German, but does not speak it, or at least chooses not to speak it. Language change can thus be seen as characteristic of the second generation; typical of assimilation to the New World (Conzen, “Invention of Ethnicity” 12).

3.4.1.2 Religion

Leaving the matter of language behind, one can now ask the question whether there are other ways in which it is made clear that William Sr. still clings to the Old World, while his offspring is gradually Americanized. Not only language change is characteristic of the second generation; another characteristic of life that can change from one generation onto another is religion. As is already mentioned above, William Gerhardt Senior is a convinced and very pious German Lutheran. Already in his childhood the Lutheran teachings were very important and ‘the influence of the Lutheran minister had been all-powerful.’ (51); he wholeheartedly believes that the Lutheran church is perfect. There was a period in his youth in which he neglected this church; this period is described as ‘ruddy’ and later on it is said that William Sr. believed ‘that he had been rather wild and irreligious in his youth’ (Dreiser (2006): 52). After that he became a confirmed Lutheran who even convinced his wife, who would otherwise have been aligned with another religion, to be a Lutheran. William Sr. thinks everything that is said in the church is literally true. In the novel, this anxiety to cling to the tenets of Lutheranism is seen as rather pathetic; but William Sr. believes one can find answers in the doctrine. For William Sr., ‘God was a person, a dominant reality.’ (117). Furthermore, religion was not a thing of words or interesting ideas to be listened to on Sunday, but a strong, vital expression of the Divine Will’ (117). He also feels responsible for his wife and children, albeit with a selfish motivation, for ‘would he not some day be held responsible for them?’ (53). In other words, he does not want to give his Lord a reason to rule him out.

This is without any doubt the most momentous characteristic of William Gerhardt Senior. The situation with his daughter Jennie is different for she is not so much interested in religion, although she recognizes that it exists:

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23 It is quite ironic then, that William Sr. is described as having ‘a Calvin type of face.’ (82).
24 ‘The Mennonite or perhaps the Dunkard religion.’ (51).
Religion had, as yet, no striking hold upon her. In fact, she felt its claims most lightly. It was a pleasant thing to know that there was a heaven, a fearsome one to realize that there was hell. Young girls and boys ought to be good, and be genial toward their parents, when they had to work so hard. Otherwise, the whole religious problem was badly jumbled in her mind, and she did not know what to make of it (52).

And further on:

The Lutheran church she had no objection to, though religious forms did not exactly explain life to her now (192).

And also:

Her father’s Lutheranism now – it did not seem so significant any more; and the social arrangement of Columbus, Ohio – rather pointless, perhaps (307).

Jennie is thus not captivated by religion; certainly not as captivated, or better, obsessed with religion as is her father. A symbol for the breach between Jennie and her father with regard to religion can be found in Jennie’s daughter Vesta. William Sr. wants his granddaughter to go to a Lutheran school (192); after all, she had been baptized in a Lutheran church (115-118). He also wants Vesta to join him when he goes to church and ‘he was scandalized to see that Jennie did not go.’ (254). Jennie, however, does not want Vesta to go to a Lutheran school; she thinks public schools are the best choice. Later on, Lester also mixes in the debate whether or not to let Vesta go to a Lutheran school; he makes his point abundantly clear by saying “we’ll not have any thick-headed German training in this. [...] The public schools are good enough for any child. You tell him to let her alone” (270). The fact that Vesta will probably not experience the Lutheran upbringing William Sr. would want her to enjoy undoubtedly makes clear to William Sr. that his children (2nd generation) and certainly his grandchildren (3rd generation) are constantly removing themselves further and further from the Old World.

To go back to the second generation, Jennie’s eldest brother, Sebastian\(^{25}\) goes much further than his sister in denouncing the church:

Though only a car-builder’s apprentice, without any education, except such a pertained to Lutheran doctrine, to which he objected very much, he was imbued with American color and energy (11).

And some pages further on:

\(^{25}\) Or ‘Bass’, see section ‘3.4.1.3. Names’.
Sebastian could not be made to go to church. He was vigorous and self-willed, and his father, from whipping him, unavailingly, and occasionally threatening to turn him out of doors, had come, out of sympathy for the lad’s mother, merely to complain tempestuously about him every Sunday morning (52).

It is said that the younger Gerhardt-children at that point are too young to be occupied with religion (52). It is however safe to guess that Martha, Veronica, Genevieve and William will follow their older brother and sister, although there are no real clues to be found in the novel to verify if this is the case, or not the case for that matter.

Here, as in language, one must again acknowledge that Riggio’s claim is attested. Also in the field of religion, William Senior’s children seem to be moving away from the Old World custom of devout belief in Lutheran values. And again, Mrs. Gerhardt participates in all of this as a link between the Old World of William Sr. and the modern, American ways of the children. This becomes clear in the last few words of the last extract mentioned above; Mrs. Gerhardt’s ‘malleable and sympathetic personality’ (Riggio, “Hidden Ethnic” 40) enables the ‘outmoded’ thoughts of William Sr. to be connected with the ‘modern’ values of Jennie and Sebastian in a way that does not stand in the way of them living together in the same house.

Another passage in the novel can further support this claim:

As it was, she came heartily over to the Lutheran denomination, was resoundingly instructed by a preacher of that faith in Beaver Falls, and thereafter came modestly to believe in it [...] (51).

Mrs. Gerhardt is thus not such an ardent Lutheran as is her husband. The latter knows this; one can read that Gerhardt’s faith in his wife’s religious devotion is not any too overpowering (113). At some point in the novel it is even said that Mrs. Gerhardt finds William Senior’s religious idiosyncrasies quite amusing (183).

If one thus places the religious feelings of the Gerhardt family on a continuum, one would see that William Sr. is on top with his pious Lutheran behavior. Mrs. Gerhardt, with her modest beliefs, is in the middle, acting as a moderator between William Sr. and his children; the latter being at the bottom of the continuum.

Mrs. Gerhardt thus, is in the middle and acts as a link. The clearest indication that Mrs. Gerhardt is the moderating link between William Sr. and his children can be found around the middle of the novel, for then it is made clear ‘how much the average home depends upon the mother’ (180). Mrs. Gerhardt dies after an illness and this immediately causes the family to separate. At first two of the six children stay at home with William Sr., but eventually they
also move, leaving ‘the old German’ behind. Mrs. Gerhardt is gone and therefore the link between the Old World and the United States has disappeared too. Furthermore, it can be argued that Jennie slowly and gradually takes on the role her mother once had. Before Mrs. Gerhardt’s death, a reference is made to Jennie being the ‘ideal mother’ (97); it is said that ‘she of all women had the perfect mother instinct inborn.’ (108). Adding to that, Jennie is also the only one of the Gerhardt children who enjoyed such a good, sympathizing bond with her mother; it is made clear that there is an enduring affection between the two:

What this beneficent presence meant to Jennie, only those possessed of a heart as great as hers may hope to understand. She of all the children fully understood her mother. She alone of all them grieved for her, and strove with the fullness of a perfect affection to ease her burden (108).

It is made clear that Jennie is gradually preparing to take over her mother’s role, for example in consoling her brother:

She was so glad to see him (Bass, added) back that she stroked his hair […]. She was already years older in thought and act. She felt as though she must help her mother now, somehow, as well as herself (76).

In my view, Jennie, after her mother’s death, takes over the role as the establisher of a link between the Old and New World. At first this process is somewhat vague, as Jennie is still growing in this new part. However, some time after her mother’s death, when William Sr. is living alone, she writes her father asking to move in with her, Lester and Vesta. In order for him to move in, Jennie has to lie about being married to Lester. If her devout Lutheran father would have known that she was not married, he would have never moved in. The fact that Jennie lied is another link with her (by now deceased) mother. After all, Mrs. Gerhardt also often lies to William Sr., or at least does not mention certain things in order for him to be more pleasant to live with. Throughout the beginning of the novel for example, she does not tell William Sr. about the time Jennie spends with Senator Brander or about the nature of their relationship, which, by degrees, seems to go further than friendship at that point. Another indication is that William Sr., once he lives with Jennie, Vesta and Lester, only dares to complain to Jennie. If he experiences difficulties with things Vesta or Lester have done, Jennie is the one he talks to. This is another clear sign that Jennie takes upon her the role of her mother and personifies the link between Old and New.
In getting her father to live with her, the Old World, in the form of William Sr. re-enters Jennie’s life; the New World is now represented in the character of Vesta (who is already a third generation immigrant\(^26\)) and also Lester\(^27\), while Jennie has taken on the role of link between the two worlds. Jennie thus very much resembles her mother, just as the relationship between Jennie and Vesta resembles the one between Jennie and her mother:

Jennie had been an ideal mother – there was an indissoluble bond of affection between them, just as there had been between Jennie and her own mother […]. (378).

In this light it is interesting to see how Vesta, while growing up and certainly after Lester leaves Jennie, gradually takes on the role Jennie once took up with her own mother. One can read for example:

She felt terribly sorry for her mother, though she pretended not to and concealed always what she thought. (378).

But most conspicuously linked to the situation of Jennie and her mother is the following extract:

The child had come so close to her during the last few years. There had sprung up between them a strong bond of intelligent sympathy. Vesta understood her mother. (385).

In this extract there is a strong resemblance of wording with an extract mentioned above on p. 108 of the novel, in which it was said that only Jennie, of all the Gerhardt children fully understood her mother.

In emphasizing that the bond between Vesta and her mother is as strong as the one between Jennie and her mother, the narrator makes clear that the world works in a circular movement and that certain things reoccur throughout the generations. The mother thus, as mentioned above, plays an important role in the family and certainly from an ethnic point of view, for she, again, personifies a link between the Old and New World.

\(^26\) Furthermore, her father is Senator Brander, a man of ‘decidedly Anglo-Saxon extraction’ (Casciato 173).

\(^27\) See section ‘3.4.2.1. Old and New World’
3.4.1.3. Names

Another point that can be addressed with relation to the second generation and the loss of touch with the Old World, though not related to religion or language as such, is how Jennie, Sebastian and the other children use and transform their names. I suggest that they use another name than the one that they were given by their parents to show that the Old World no longer has a strong hold upon them; that they are no longer attached to it.

In the beginning of the novel, when the Gerhardt family is introduced to the reader, one can read the next four extracts (5, 5, 6, 7 respectively):

- Genevieve, the oldest of the girls, was past eighteen, but had as yet been taught any special work.

- Martha complained that she had nothing to wear, and Genevieve was glad that she was out of it all

- Mrs. Gerhardt thought of all the places to which she might apply, and despairingly upon the hotel. Her son had often spoken of its beauty, and she was a resourceful woman. Genevieve helped her at home, why not here.

- “Isn’t it fine?” said Genevieve nervously, more to be dulling the sound of her own conscience than anything else.

These are the only four instances in the novel in which Jennie is referred to by what is undoubtedly her birth name ‘Genevieve’. But what is more, after these four instances, Jennie is never again referred to as ‘Genevieve’. This is probably not a simple slovenliness on the part of the author. My suggestion is that this blending into the use of ‘Jennie’ is a sign that she becomes more and more an American woman and less and less a second generation immigrant. This process of Americanization of her name reaches its acme when Sebastian refers to Jennie as ‘Jen’ (28)\(^{28}\). However, for the remainder of the novel she is mainly referred to as ‘Jennie’. This, in turn, can again be interpreted as Jennie gradually taking on the role as mediator between the two worlds; she is not wholly affiliated with the Old World, nor wholly assimilated to the New World.

With Sebastian, this process is less subtle and far clearer in one direction, for the narrator tells the reader literally that it is in process. This is what is said about him:

> Though only a car-builder’s apprentice, without any education, except such a pertained to Lutheran doctrine, to which he objected very much, he was imbued with American color and energy. His transformed name of Bass suited him exactly. Tall, athletic and well-featured for his age, he had already received those favors and glances from the younger girls that tend to

\(^{28}\) Casciato also mentions this (175)
make the bright boy a dandy. [...] He knew all about ball-games and athletics, had heard that the state capital contained the high and mighty of the land, loved the theatre, with its suggestion of travel and advertisement, and was not unaware that to succeed one must do something – associate, or at least, seem to, with those who were foremost in the world of appearances (11).

It is safe to say that Sebastian no longer resembles a typical second generation immigrant, or at least he does not want to. He feels American, and his name change is certainly part of that. I also suggest that Sebastian is the only one of the Gerhardt children that has to endure criticism from the narrator, albeit mild. In this way it could be made plausible that the narrator subtly criticizes American society. This is what is said about Sebastian:

Sebastian now appeared in the distance, a mannish spring in his stride, and with every evidence that he took himself seriously (28).

And:

Bass was too much interested in his own affairs to pay much attention to anybody (Dreiser 2006:80).

These quotations could be seen as signs that America is here depicted as a self-involved society. According to his father, Sebastian is a ‘loafer’ (61). This blends in with what will be said about William Gerhardt and his views on Americans in section ‘3.4.1.4. Newspapers’. The examples of passages in which Sebastian is depicted in this way are numerous. These include for example:

He was of the kind whose personal balance could not be upset unless he himself were stricken. [...] His brain was not large enough to grasp the significance and weigh the result of things (148).

However, it has to be said that Sebastian does not think about himself at all times. At some point for example, Sebastian really wishes that his family could come to Cleveland to live with him and get a better life (98). These altruistic thoughts only cross his mind when he is alone or with his family however. In public, it seems as if Sebastian does not want to have anything to do with his family and consequently his poor and German heritage. One can read for example (in the context of Jennie and her mother working at the hotel in front of which Sebastian often meets his ‘dandy’ friends):

“Don’t you ever speak to me if you meet me around there”, he cautioned her a little later, privately. “Don’t let on that you know me.”
“Why?” she asked, innocently.
“Well, you know why,” he answered, having indicated before that they looked so poor he did not want to be disgraced by having to own them as relatives. “Just go on by. Do you hear?” (12).

At a certain point in the novel, Sebastian’s process of Americanization seems complete to the narrator also. From this point onwards Sebastian is virtually always referred to as ‘Bass’, a clear indication that he has left behind his German heritage. A last clue I would like to mention here can be found around p. 100 of the novel. Sebastian would like to make a clean start in a new city, and thinks Cleveland is the way to go for him. William Sr. on the other hand also wants a new job, but he leaves for Youngstown, a much smaller city. The fact that Sebastian chooses a large city 29 is undoubtedly linked with his need to be seen as an American. Gerhardt on the other hand stays true to his German, more rural ancestry.

Going back to the issue of names, there are few clues to be found in the novel as to how the younger Gerhardt children act in matter of name giving. George however also shortens or ‘Americanizes’ his siblings’ names. He refers to Martha as ‘Mart’ (28) and he calls Sebastian ‘Bass’ (100). This may well indicate that Martha is often called ‘Mart’.

Further on in the book, however, it is clear that they too are very much Americanized and have left behind their German roots. All of them leave William Sr. behind and get married with non-German-Americans 30 and one also learns that Martha is ashamed of her family (239).

The Gerhardt children, finally, have more contact with Sebastian than with Jennie. William Gerhardt Senior even goes as far to say that none of his children are worthy of him, except for Jennie (242).

In this context we can say that Vesta, like with the aspect of religion, again shows William Gerhardt Senior that his children and their offspring are further and further removed from their ethnic roots. When Jennie’s child is born, William Sr. mingles in the ‘debate’ as to how the child should be named. William Sr. suggests naming the child ‘Wilhelmina’, a name ‘left over from the halcyon period of his youth.’ (114). William Sr. thus wants his granddaughter to carry a name connected with the (or his) Old World. Jennie resists and wants to call her daughter Vesta. Again, like with the questions of language and religion, Mrs. Gerhardt here acts as mediator between the Old World and the new one, for she suggests giving the child both names, which also happens.

29 Cleveland at that time was a rapidly growing city, see also section ‘1.3.1. Dreiser and the modern United States’.
30 Except for William who does not get married.
Another, and final, point that can be made in accordance with naming certain characters, is how the fathers of the Gerhardt and Kane family are referred to. When analyzing this particular aspect of the novel, one can only conclude that the Kane family is portrayed as more American or Americanized that the Gerhardt family. The narrator refers to William Gerhardt Senior as ‘the German’ or ‘the old German’ in no less than nine instances in the novel (37, 38, 83, 173, 242, 265, 344, 346, 348). He is referred to as ‘old man’ only once (344). Archibald Kane however is constantly referred to as ‘old man’ or ‘old gentleman’ by the narrator as well as his children (273, 274, 275, 278, 279, 292, 293…). It is thus nowhere really emphasized that Archibald Kane is a first-generation Irish immigrant; he is never referred to as ‘the old Irishman’ or something of the sort. In emphasizing the German-ness of William Sr., together with everything written above, Dreiser is an ethnic writer. It seems as if ‘Irish’, in his view, is the same as ‘American’, whereas German clearly is not. When one analyzes the Kane family more closely, one must however conclude that they are indeed to a further extent Americanized than the Gerhardtts, but also that an ethnic aspect is certainly present.\footnote{See section ‘3.4.2. The Kane family’.}

### 3.4.1.4. Newspapers

The image of the (German) newspaper recurs throughout the novel. This already makes clear Dreiser was preoccupied with ethnicity, but it goes further, for the foreign language papers seem to be placed in an opposition with the American newspapers.

For this particular aspect of the novel Dreiser probably made use of his rather extensive experience as a journalist. From 1892 until 1894 he worked for newspapers in Chicago, Cleveland, Toledo and Pittsburgh. (West, “Profession of Authorship” 16). After this period, Dreiser made it to editor of a magazine called Ev’ry month. From 1897 until 1900, he worked as a freelance journalist for different national magazines. In this period, ‘some assignments were given to him by editors, but Dreiser had good instincts about what the reading public might want to know, and he thought up the topics for many of his articles himself.’ (West, “Profession of Authorship” 16).

As mentioned above, newspapers are recurrently mentioned in the novel. Next is a short overview (all citations: Dreiser, “Jennie Gerhardt”)
- p. 58: He sat down calmly, reading a German paper and keeping an eye upon his wife until, at last, the gate clicked, and the front door opened.

- p. 99-100: To this he would ascend, after sitting alone on the doorstep of the mill in this lonely, forsaken neighbourhood until nine o’clock of an evening; and here, amid the odor (sic) of machinery wafted up from the floor below, by the light of a single tallow candle, he would conclude his solitary day, reading his German paper, folding his hands and thinking, kneeling by an open window in the shadow of the night to say his prayer, and silently stretching himself to rest.

- p. 174: Gerhardt went back to his newspaper reading and brooding.

- p. 270: She learned rapidly, he discovered, and would sit at the big table in the library in the evening conning her books, while Jennie would sew and Gerhardt would read his interminable list of German-Lutheran papers.

- p. 342: He liked to lie in bed instead, read his Lutheran papers, read his Bible, and query Jennie as to how things were getting along.

One can thus distinguish five different instances in which it is stated that William Gerhardt Senior reads a paper. In two of these instances it is not explicitly mentioned whether it is a German rather than an English paper. In my view there is no reason to suggest that on p. 174 and p. 342, he is not reading a German paper. As I have already argued in the chapter on language (3.4.1.1.1), William Sr. is not a master of the English language. An expression such as “No,” Gerhardt would sigh immediately, “my stomach don’t do right […]” (343) indicates this is the case. Furthermore, it is mentioned once that William Sr. speaks with ‘a considerable German accent’ (37).

Added to that is the fact that William Sr. is not at all an enthusiastic advocate of America and its citizens; he still clings to the Old World. This impression is derived from some enunciations from the side of William Sr. One example is: ‘In Germany they knew how to do these things right, but these shiftless Americans knew nothing.’ (254), taken from a passage in which he is commenting upon the Americans’ ability to tend to trees. Another example is: ‘these Americans, they know nothing of economy. They ought to live in Germany awhile. Then they would know what a dollar can do.’ (265-266), where William Sr. scorns what he calls ‘American extravagance’32.

I suggest that it is safe to claim that William Sr. is reading a German paper at all times; his knowledge of the English language is not exhaustive and, more importantly, he does not like American attitudes towards life. Why would he read American papers?

32 See also section ‘3.4.2.1. Old and New World’.
Some harboured mistrust against these foreign-language papers. The main concern was that immigrant newspapers would be used for propaganda purposes. These concerns were especially grounded in the period preceding World War II (Zubrzycki 80). However, this does not mean that prejudice against newspapers in a foreign language was non-existent before World War II. Proof of this claim is a citation by German-born statesman Carl Schurz around the turn of the century:

It is said that the foreign-language press prevents immigrants from learning the language of the country; that it fosters the cultivation of un-American principles, notions and habits, and that it thus stands in the way of the development of a sound American patriotism in those coming from foreign lands to make their home among us and to take part in the working of our free institutions (Zubrzycki 78).

But he goes on to disprove these imputations:

I think I may say without undue assumption that from personal contact and large opportunities of observation I have as much personal experience of the German-born population of the United States, its character, its aspirations and its American patriotism, as any person now living; and this experience enables me to affirm the prejudice against the German-American press is groundless. On the contrary that press does the country a necessary and very important service. In the first place it fill a real and very urgent want. That want will exist as long as there is a large number of German-born citizens in this Republic. There will also be among them, especially persons of mature years, who arrived on American soil without any knowledge of the English language, who may be able to acquire enough of it to serve them in their daily work, but not enough to enable them to understand newspaper articles on political or similar subjects. […] The suppression of the German-American press would, therefore, be equivalent to the cultivation of political ignorance among a large and highly estimable class of citizens. (Zubrzycki 78).

The last point Schurz makes here can be linked to what I have already mentioned above, namely that William Sr. probably reads German papers in part because he has not mastered the English language perfectly.

Which German-American papers William Sr. would have been reading is difficult, if not impossible to determine. By 1900, some 750 periodicals appeared in the German language, the first one (Der Hochdeutsch-pennsylvanische Geschicht Schreiber, oder Sammlung wichtiger Nachrichten aus dem Natur-und Kirchen-Reich, later called the Germantown Zeitung) dating back to 1739 (Zubrzycki 74, 76).

Traditional papers in the native language of immigrants had five areas of interest, namely ‘news of the country of settlement, world news, home-country news, group life and interests, editorial features (Zubrzycki 76). Olzak and West argue that the organizations responsible for the ethnic newspapers often became symbols of the ethnic community itself and ‘often serve
as central communications links in local and national ethnic networks’ (458). I suggest that when William Sr. reads these newspapers, it is clear he is still very much in touch with his country of birth. These papers are not only written in the language of the Old World, they are also, in part, preoccupied with news concerning the country from which he emigrated. However, what needs to be added here is that, according to Zubrzycki, the German papers that appeared in the United States were simply American papers printed in German, with a main function of preparing ‘migrants for good citizenship in the countries of settlement’ (77). Nevertheless, one can still claim that in emphasizing the existence of foreign-language newspapers, it can be argued that Dreiser wrote this book with an ethnic point of view in mind.

Dreiser, in Jennie Gerhardt, is also preoccupied with American newspapers, and it can be argued that he juxtaposes these to the German papers to some extent. When dealing with the American press, the narrator gives the reader the impression that editors, and the American public alike, like rumors and scandal. One can read for instance:

The American public likes gossip concerning the rich, or did at this time. It was inordinately interested in all that concerned the getting of money and the spending of it, for that was almost the sole and vital interest of the nation. A certain family had a million or two millions or ten millions of dollars. How were they going to spend it? Who were the daughters going to marry? How much cash were the children going to receive? With whom were they in love now? This was the business of the newspapers to chronicle, particularly in their Sunday issues, and this was the gossip of some smaller-fry society papers and magazines. (284).

At first, the story of Lester and Jennie, which is made to be a romantic history of a businessman and a working girl, is only recorded in some small, unimportant leaflets. Here already, the real story is altered, for the press ignores the fact that Lester and Jennie are not married as such. Soon after that the story is reported by more journalists of papers less on the margin of being called ‘society papers’, until finally it attracted the attention of what the narrator calls ‘a Sunday editor’ (285), or the editor of the Sunday issue of a paper. This man is first portrayed as a good journalist; he has ‘the facts carefully looked up.’ (285). But some lines further on one sees he is not the journalist he is first portrayed to be. The reader learns that he covered up all bitter aspects to the story. In other words ‘the Sunday editor’s idea was to have framed up a more or less Romeo and Juliet story in which Lester should appear as an ardent, self-sacrificing lover, and Jennie as a poor and lovely working-girl […]’ (286). The real story is disguised as a romantic love story, purportedly for the readers benefit.

33 One of these society papers is in fact mentioned; the South Side Budget.
Furthermore, Jennie even has her picture taken when she leaves the house; one could go as far as to look at this as an act of ‘paparazzi avant-la-lettre’. All of this leads Lester Kane to have the same opinion as the narrator: ‘It’s amazing – this damned country of ours! […] A man with a little money hasn’t any more privacy than a public monument.’ (288).

American newspapers are also mentioned in other parts of the novel. When Lester invests in a real-estate deal with Samuel Ross, the papers play a big part in the failure of this venture. Lester, together with Ross, buys a plot of land to build houses on. One year after the purchase Lester is very happy with the progress. But some time later, problems arise:

[…] it was rumored in the papers that the International Packing Company, one of the big constituent members of the meat-packing group at Halsted and 39th Streets, having become dissatisfied with the treatment accorded it, not only in the space for handling cattle but in building facilities, would desert the old group and lay out a new packing area for itself. The papers explained that the company intended to go farther south, probably below 55th Street and west of Ashland Avenue. This was the territory that was located due west of Lester’s property, and the mere suspicion that the packing company might invade the territory was sufficient to blight the prospects of any budding real-estate deal. Ross was beside himself with rage. He was angry to think that the newspapers would quote a rumor of this kind, which so seriously affected his property, without first actually verifying and being sure that such was the case (333).

Whether this rumour is in fact the truth or not, is beside the point here. The fact that the paper made it public long before anything would have happened near the site Lester invested in, made sure he was not able to sell the land before it would or would not have been too late. Again, Lester’s feelings about the matter are made clear; in fact ‘to say that Lester was greatly disheartened by this blow is to put it mildly.’ (334).

What the narrator in my view is telling the reader when dealing with American newspapers, is that these periodicals are filled with rumour and sentimentality. He talks about papers as if the people who work for them are half-bred journalists involved in some kind of gutter journalism.

There are still other instances in which American papers are mentioned. Robert for example learns about the marriage of his brother via the papers (397). Jennie keeps track of Lester’s new life with Letty Pace through the newspapers (380, 396). What this suggests, again, is that American newspapers are filled with news about society’s high and mighty. When one rereads the passages dealing with the German papers, there is no reason to assume the narrator thinks this way about these periodicals too. When the German papers are first mentioned, William Sr. ‘sat down calmly’ (58). In the second record William Sr. reads the paper after a solitary day, and this activity precedes prayer and contemplation (99-100). On p. 174, reading a paper is combined with the act of brooding, in other words, contemplation. On
p. 342 it is again (as on p. 99-100) made clear that William Sr. reads the paper in the evening, a preferred period of the day for thinking things over. In the last mention of a German paper (342), it is again combined with an aspect of religion (the Bible).

German papers are thus, in my opinion, presented to the reader as if they exist within a realm of contemplation, intellect, religion and tranquillity. This is opposed to stories found in American newspapers, filled with gossip and aimed at cheap success.

In presenting German papers as high-principled and more sophisticated than American papers, the narrator places the story in an ethnic context. William Gerhardt Senior is partially stuck in the Old World, very much like Dreiser’s father in real life. We know that he also read German-language papers (West (2006): viii).

3.4.2. The Kane-family

3.4.2.1. Old and New World

There is another major family, the Kane family, present in the novel and here one can distinguish some similar processes as with the Gerhardts. It is not so often emphasized that they are from (Irish) immigrant descent. Dreiser does not seem to write about them from an ethnic point of view; they seem very much ‘Americanized’\(^3\). But, a closer reading of the novel presents us with a more ethnic picture of the Kanes, and especially of Lester, than can be distinguished at first sight.

The Kane family is of Irish-Catholic descent, and as is already mentioned, little is said about this. But from what one can gather reading the text it can be stated that Archibald and Mrs. Kane\(^3\) are devout believers in the Catholic faith (177). Lester’s belief, as a member of the second generation, is far less devout, even non-existent:

Raised a Catholic, he was no longer a believer in the Divine inspiration of Catholicism; raised a member of the social elect, he was not altogether a believer in that innate superiority which is too often supposed to exist in those socially elect[…](126).

“You talk about your democracy,” he grunted one day. “You have as much democracy as I have religion, and that’s none at all.” (405).

\(^3\) As argued in section ‘3.4.1.3. Names’.

\(^3\) Interestingly, her name, like that of Mrs. Gerhardt, is never mentioned in the novel.
The resemblance with the situation in the Gerhardt family is clear, for there also, the second generation moves away from devout religious belief. In the case of the Kane family however, the mother does not seem to have the role of mediator between the two worlds. One could claim that there is no need for a mediator anymore because most of the Kane children (Robert, Imogene and Louise) have already completely lost touch with the Old World. The clearest example of this is Robert, Lester’s older brother. Just like Sebastian, Robert is often criticized in the novel as being a self-involved person, very much to a further extent than Sebastian. He is repeatedly referred to as a cold, logical businessman, wanting the Kane-company for himself. If he has to perform ‘a snaky thing’ (303), he will have no problem in doing so. I suggest thus that Robert is, according to the narrator, wholly Americanized. Sebastian then, is in the process of becoming a ‘real’ American like Robert36.

It is through the character of Lester primarily that one can recognize the ethnic style of writing Dreiser also uses in portraying the Gerhardt-family. Lester Kane is a complicated character and, in my view, this has to do with his ethnicity. This son of a wealthy Irish immigrant is often described as being an unstable person; two extracts can clarify this:

The trouble with Lester was that the complicated and incisive nature of his mind, coupled with his very robust physique, as well as the social and somewhat unintellectual nature of his duties, tended to produce a rather unbalanced condition (127).

And:

His was a naturally observing mind, Rabelaisian in its strength and tendencies, but confused by the multiplicity of evidences of things (125).

Lester is thus an unstable, confused person and one can argue that this has to do with his struggle between the Old and New World. At certain points in the novel Lester is described in terms that are also used by the narrator to describe the typical Irishman. One extract makes this abundantly clear:

Like the hundreds of thousands of Irishmen who, in his father’s day, had worked on the railroad tracks, dug in the mines, picked and shovelled in the ditches, carried up bricks and mortar on the endless structures of a new land, he was strong, hairy and witty (126).

36 See section ‘3.4.1.3. Names.’
This is the second time Lester’s ‘robust physique’ (127) is mentioned. Lester, while having lost his faith in Catholicism, does still have a connection to the Old World, and this is probably the reason why, as Casciato also argues (175), Lester has difficulty to combine his wealth, obtained in a New World characterized by consumerism, with his personality that still reminds the reader of the Old World. Here again, as with regard to the religious feelings within the Gerhardt-family, one can distinguish a continuum present in this family. Lester’s father, being a first generation immigrant, is still connected to the Old World to a considerable degree. Dreiser makes this clear by constantly describing Archibald Kane in terms of honesty. This honesty is placed into a sharp opposition with Lester’s brother Robert. As already mentioned above, Robert seems very much assimilated and thus stands in opposition with Lester. At one point one can read

He knew that his brother was not warm-hearted or generous – would in fact turn any trick which could be speciously, or at best necessitously, recommended to his conscience. How he reasoned Lester did not know – he could not follow the ramifications of a logic which could combine hard business tactics with social and moral rigidity, but his brother managed to do it (169).

From the viewpoint of Robert, one can read that temperamentally, they did not agree as to how life and its affairs should be conducted (170). The brothers are also opposite to each other, for instance, when it comes to the treatment of old employees:

Robert was for running the business on a hard and cold basis, dropping the aged, who had grown up with his father, and cleaning out the “dead wood” as he called it. Lester had stood in counsel for a more humane course (170).

Their views on business thus, are very different. Lester, like his father before him, wants to maintain friendly relationships with everyone he does business with. Robert on the other hand is a hard, ruthless and sometimes hypocrite businessman. As mentioned above, Robert does not hesitate to do a ‘snaky thing’ and says about his brother that ‘he was not crafty; not darkly cruel’ (402), while he believes that to succeed one must be.

Furthermore, their tasks within the company are also the opposite of each other:

All his work in recent years – in fact, from the beginning – had been with large propositions, the purchasing of great quantities of supplies, the placing of large orders, the discussion of things which were wholesale and which had very little to do with the minor details which make up the special interests of the smaller traders in the world. In the factory his brother Robert had

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37 Something he also does in describing William Gerhardt Senior, see also section ‘3.4.2.2. Kane versus Gerhardt, a well-considered (ethnic) opposition’
figured the pennies and nickels of labor-cost, had seen to it that all the little leaks were shut off. Lester had been left to deal with larger things, and he had consistently done so (332).

To sum up, the continuum one can devise for this family, thus stretches from Archibald Kane, who, with his honesty and friendly way of doing business, can be related to the Old World, over his favourite son Lester, who is stuck between his love for money and the high social life and his honest way of doing business, to Robert, the assimilated businessman and prototype of American consumerism. In this light it is interesting to mention how Lester at one point in the novel describes his brother. He says his brother has a ‘Scotch Presbyterian conscience mixed with an Asiatic perception of the main chance’ (169). While Lester is thus described with regard to his Irish ethnicity, Robert is not. However, when Lester, Jennie and William Gerhardt Senior live together, Lester drops a place in the newfound continuum in this house in Chicago. William Sr. obviously tops this continuum. When living with Jennie and Lester, William Sr. is linked to the Old World through several of his expressions, significantly, about Lester’s wastefulness. At one point William Sr. says: These Americans, they know nothing of economy. They ought to live in Germany awhile. Then they would know what a dollar can do (265). William Sr. complains when Lester buys new shoes or clothes and even denounces Lester’s use of matches. On the one hand thus, William Sr. is depicted as a miser, but on the other, Lester is described as a man who likes to spend money, a consumerist. In the middle of the continuum, one can find Jennie as the link between Old and New World; the latter being primarily characterized by consumerism.

3.4.2.2. Kane versus Gerhardt, a well-considered (ethnic) opposition

When Dreiser wrote about the Gerhardt family he undoubtedly had his own family in mind. James L. West argues that ‘almost all of the major and minor characters are versions Dreiser family members or people Dreiser had known.’ (West, “Introduction” viii). The life of the character of Jennie for example is (loosely) based upon the life of his sister: Mary Frances

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38 It can be seen as exemplary that Lester, being closer to the Old World, is his father’s favourite child. With William Sr. one can distinguish the same process. Once Jennie has taken on the role her mother once had, William Sr. repeatedly states Jennie is his favourite child e.g. p. 242.

39 As already mentioned in section ‘3.4.1.3. Religion’.
Dreiser. She was in a relationship with an older man and got pregnant. Although the child was stillborn, the resemblance with the story is striking. But there is more; Frances, later on, met a wealthy Irishman. She claimed to have married him, but no one is sure there was ever a marriage between them. Also, Frances was never accepted by the man’s family.

The other Gerhardt-children are also based upon Dreiser’s brothers and sisters. Furthermore, the cities that play important role in Jennie Gerhardt (Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Columbus) are cities Dreiser knew well. Jennie’s mother can also be seen as a replica of Dreiser’s real mother. We have little information on Dreiser’s mother. What we do know is that she was of Mennonite descent; in the novel one can read: ‘She would naturally have aligned herself with the Mennonite [...] religion.’ (51).

For the character of William Gerhardt Senior, Dreiser also undoubtedly found inspiration in his real father, John Paul Dreiser. Dreiser’s father had been furious at Frances at first, but later on he moved in with her and her alleged husband, very much like William Gerhardt Senior. We also know that John Paul Dreiser read German papers for example, something that is often stressed in the novel (West, “Introduction” viii)⁴₀.

However, there is one striking difference between William Gerhardt Senior and John Paul Dreiser. Whereas the character of Mrs. Gerhardt has the same religion as the mother of Dreiser in real life, Dreiser seemed to have altered his father’s religion from Catholicism to Lutheranism when writing about William Gerhardt Senior. The fact that William Sr. is a Lutheran is stressed throughout the novel⁴¹.

Although Dreiser probably did not set out to write an autobiography, I find it quite odd that he, while he based most of his characters on people he knew, changed the most strongly marked characteristic of one of his main characters, the religious belief of his father. This would not be an important finding if it was not so much emphasized in the novel that William Gerhardt Senior is a devout Lutheran; if one is asked to describe the figure of William Gerhardt Senior after reading the novel, most respondents will be inclined to point to him being a Lutheran. Why would Dreiser have done this?

I suggest Dreiser could have done this out of an ethnic motivation. In 1910⁴², one year before Dreiser published Jennie Gerhardt, the empire of Germany had some 35 percent Catholics

⁴₀ See section ‘3.4.1.4. Newspapers’.
⁴¹ See section ‘3.4.1.3. Religion’.
⁴² It should be noted that Jennie Gerhardt starts in the year 1880 and ends around 1907. It is clearly stated in the beginning of the novel that it is 1880; we also know that Jennie is 18 then. On p. 292 we learn that Jennie is 31 and Lester 46, so 13 years have passed (1893). At the end of the novel, Lester dies at the age of 60, so another 14 years have passed (1907). The numbers given here thus more or less coincide with the period in which the story takes place.
between its borders (and this number was decreasing) and only two states had a majority of Catholics (Lempp 99). When reading articles about the religious situation in the Germany of the first decade of the twentieth century, it becomes clear that the relationship between Catholics and Lutherans was far from friendly. Lempp goes as far to say that in 1910 ‘the situation is at present as far removed from peace as ever’ (Lempp 99). With this knowledge in mind it seems strange of Dreiser to have written about a Lutheran family, when he himself was raised in a Catholic family. One opinion could be that Dreiser wrote about a Lutheran German family rather than a Catholic one to make his characters seem ‘more’ German to the outside world. It is often claimed that the largest part of the German immigrants was of a protestant, especially Lutheran denomination, while only one third of the German immigrants were Catholics\(^\text{43}\) (Conzen, “Immigrant Religion” 69). Moreover, there were a great deal of problems with German Lutherans in America in the 19\(^{th}\) century. In their opinion, English was not to be used in the services, and they strongly opposed the liberalization of the church. This resulted in a schism. All of this happened before 1847, but these events could still be alive in the mind of the people. In this way, it is probable that Lutheranism was more closely linked to ‘being German’ than Catholicism. Moreover, Lempp claims that Luther was one of ‘the greatest of heroes in the eyes of the majority of Germans’ (Lempp 100), so it could be argued that the American public associated Lutheranism more than Catholicism with Germany and its inhabitants and immigrants. Historically speaking, generalizations like this are wrong, of course, but it can be argued that they lived and still live in the minds of the people. Doerries argues that it has been long ignored, even in the United States, that Catholics formed a large part of the immigrant group that came from Germany (10). Conzen also states that ‘too often [...] we have assumed that all Catholics were Irish, and all Germans were freethinking or Protestant. Religion used to be linked to ethnicity to a great extent, so that Catholicism is more often linked to the Irish, Italians or Polish (Hammond, Warner 59). The narrator himself also indulges in stereotyping of this kind when he describes Lester Kane in this extract that was also mentioned in section ‘3.4.2.1. Old and New World’:

Like the hundreds of thousands of Irishmen who, in his father’s day, had worked on the railroad tracks, dug in the mines, picked and shovelled in the ditches, carried up bricks and mortar on the endless structures of a new land, he was strong, hairy and witty (126).

\(^{43}\) However, it is hard to determine the actual number of Catholic immigrants. No authority (German or American) recorded the religion of the Germans who left or arrived. The estimate is derived from ‘weighting the decadal totals of immigrants from the various German states by the proportions of Catholics within their respective populations.’ (Conzen (2004): 77).
But of course, no one can be blamed for the fact that Catholicism, by the people, was probably more associated with the Irish than with the Germans, due to the much larger influx of Irish Catholics in the 19th century than German Catholics.

Another, and probably a more plausible, reason why Dreiser would have switched from the Catholicism of his father to the Lutheranism of William Gerhardt Senior, is the fact that the Kane family is Catholic. This is not mentioned very often, but the reader is made aware. On p. 177 for example, it is said that both the parents of the Kane family are good Catholics. Taking into account what written above, it is certainly not a coincidence that the Kane-family is of Irish descent.

With this Dreiser undoubtedly wanted to make a clear distinction and opposition between on the one side the Gerhardt family and on the other side the Kane family. These families are not only opposed in religious belief. Other oppositions can be distilled from the book. The descriptions of the houses of the respective families for example can certainly be seen in this light. About the house of the Kanes in Cincinnati, the following is said, in Dreiser’s famous, detailed style:

The Kane family mansion at Cincinnati to which Lester returned after leaving Jennie was an imposing establishment which contrasted strangely with the Gerhardt home. Here was a great, rambling two-story affair, done after the manner of the French chateaux, but in red brick and brownstone. It was set down among flowers and trees in an almost park-like inclosure, and its very stones spoke of a splendid dignity and a refined luxury. The interior atmosphere of this home was most charming. The furniture, the rugs, the hangings and the pictures were of course the best. [...] It was well-built and well-furnished, with a great old Nuremberg clock in the hall which chimed the hours mellifluously, with some charming landscapes by Corot and Troyon and Daubigny on the walls [...] It was a fine home, a really comfortable American mansion, and was so known to be by all who knew anything about social life in Cincinnati (136-139).

More is said about the beauty and splendor of the mansion, but what is rendered here is enough to understand that the Kane family lives in great wealth.

The Gerhardt house is often referred to as a ‘cottage’, which is usually defined as a one-story house with a rural feel to it. One also learns that it has five rooms. The most conspicuous proof that the Gerhardt do not live as comfortably as the Kanes is the repeated wish of Mrs. Gerhardts to live in a nice home:

44 These differences do not rule out the similarities that exist between the families, namely in the continuum that can be devised (section 3.4.2.1), and other similarities that are discussed further below.

45 The house at the beginning of the story that is. With the help of Lester they later move to a more comfortable house.
Mrs. Gerhardt always had had a keen desire for a really comfortable home. Solid furniture, upholstered and trimmed, a thick, soft carpet of some warm, pleasing color, plenty of chairs, settees, pictures, a lounge, and a piano had often come definitely into her mind, and as often they had been put sharply away by the rigor of her surroundings. Still she did not despair. Some day, maybe, before she died these things would be added to her, and she would be happy (106).

Close to the end of the novel finally the Gerhardt house of the beginning of the novel is referred to by Jennie (in her thoughts) as ‘the little shabby house they had been compelled to live in [...]’ (347). The opposition is once again made clear when the following is said about Lester’s attitude towards the Gerhardt home:

> When he did call, the whole shabby condition of the house, its confined nature, disgusted him in a way; but somehow Jennie seemed as sweet to him as ever (173).

However, as already mentioned above, there are similarities to be found between these two seemingly opposed families. Although the fathers of the respective families are referred to in a different way and live in quite opposite circumstances, they act in a similar manner. First of all, both men are ardent and pious believers in their faiths, Lutheranism (Gerhardt, referred to throughout the novel: 46, 50, 61, 83, 111, 113-117, 152, 182, 183, 185, 191, 192, 240, 254, 268, 307, 345, 396) and Catholicism (Kane, far less referred to, but made clear in a sufficient manner: Dreiser (2006): pp. 177 and 233). Also similar is that their children are not that enraptured by religion as they are, with Lester Kane and Sebastian Gerhardt as most clear examples.

Both men are also described as honest, about Archibald it is said he is ‘shrewd but honest’ (137). When Gerhardt dies, Jennie realizes that all he attempted to do was lead an honest life. Earlier in the novel, one learns that this honesty was given to from his father and grandfather before him (50).

The most conspicuous similarity the two fathers have in common is linked to their reaction to one of their children acting against social convention. When Jennie is pregnant by Senator Brander William Sr. is furious, for that is not what should be expected of an eighteen year old working girl. When Archibald Kane finds out about Lester’s child with a low-class girl he has not married, he too is not at all happy.

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46 See also section ‘3.4.1.3. Names’.
A similar comparison can be made between Lester and Jennie. Although they are radically different at most points (the importance they attach to money for example), at some points their lives and feelings overlap. A similarity between the two for example, can be found in their relation to their older brothers. Sebastian and Robert are portrayed, as argued above, as self-involved Americans who are not really in touch with the natural world of feelings. Lester, and to a larger extent Jennie belong more to the world of dreamers, are less rational. Furthermore, both Lester (at first) and Jennie are in a close relationship to their father and mother respectively.

In the novel, Lester and Jennie are also often described in similar terms. Letty sees Lester as a ‘charitable’ (309) man, and some pages later Lester finds Jennie a ‘charitable’ (311) woman.

There is one large simile to draw in the lives of Lester and Jennie that I would like to address here. Lester and Jennie both, in the course of the novel, leave their initial homes to live in other circumstances. Jennie leaves the cottage of her family to live with Lester, first in an apartment and then in quite a large house, for her standards at least. Lester from his side moves from an impressive mansion to the same apartment and house, which are less luxurious and spacious than he was used to.

Interestingly enough, both Jennie and Lester eventually return to an apparent duplicate of the home they once grew up in. This is something Jennie feels will happen some time before she actually makes the move:

Something would happen. She would go back to simple things, to a side street, a poor cottage, to old clothes. It could not be that this could endure (317).

Later on, Jennie even has a predicative vision about what is going to happen:

When she was really alone she put her doubled hands to her chin and stared at the floor, the queer design of the silken Turkish rug resolving itself into some curious pictures. She saw herself in a small cottage somewhere, alone with Vesta; she saw Lester off in another world, driving and beside him was Mrs. Gerald. She saw this house vacant, and then a long stretch of time, and then - (355).

There are thus similarities to be found between the two families. In my opinion, however, these do not compensate for the fact that the reader is left behind with a great sense of opposition between the two main families. This opposition is primarily ethnic in nature.
3.4.3. Conclusion

The third chapter attempted to show how Theodore Dreiser clearly wrote *Jennie Gerhardt* from an ethnic point of view.

A first indication can be found in the distinction Dreiser makes between one clearly ethnic family and one family that is seemingly less ethnic in behavior. This is a distinction that is represented in this dissertation also, namely in the structure of the third chapter (*3.4.1. The Gerhardt family; 3.4.2. The Kane family*). One will have noticed the significant difference in length of these two sections. This did by no means spring up out of favoritism of any kind; the Gerhardts are simply the more prominent of the two in the (ethnic) universe of the novel.

The main line of approach in dealing with Dreiser’s ethnic writing lay in distinguishing how he attempted to describe the gap that existed between the Old World and the New World within the two families. For each of the two families a continuum can be constructed with regard to present or absent affiliations with the Old World, or the other way around. Within the Gerhardt family, this continuum consisted of William Sr. at the top and his children at the bottom, which is logical, since they are second generation immigrants. In the middle however one finds, as Riggio pointed out, the mother, who acts as a link between the Old World and the New World. In the section on language (*3.4.1.1.*), I argued that Mrs. Gerhardt personified this link by speaking German to her husband and English to her children. Mrs. Gerhardt again takes upon her the role of mediator when it comes to religion (*3.4.1.2.*). She does not mind her husband’s feelings being very far-reaching when it comes to religion, while she herself is not all that interested in the matter. Her children, especially Sebastian, do not care for religion, but their mother makes sure William Sr. does not cause a riot on the subject.

A continuum could also be recognized in the situation of the Kane family (*3.4.2; 3.4.2.1* in particular). In this family, the mother does not take upon her the role of mediator; here, the continuum stretches from the father over his youngest son, to his eldest. The latter (Robert) is presented to the reader as a ‘real’ American. He is a greedy businessman and, in a way, the personification of consumerism, a concept that went hand in hand with the modernization that occurred in the United States at the end of the 19th century. Lester, who is in the middle, struggles between his love for great wealth and the social scene, and his inborn honesty and good nature, which are linked to the Old World and consequently also to his father, who is at the top of the continuum.
When we then get a mixture of the two families, when William Sr. Lester and Jennie are thus living in the same house, one can determine which family Dreiser deems more assimilated. This is clearly the Kane family, for Dreiser sets Lester one place back in this new continuum, and Jennie one place up. To sum up, this means that William Sr. stays on top, but that Lester falls from a position in the middle, to a position at the bottom, seeing that he is more of a consumerist than is Jennie. Consequently, Jennie goes one place up and acts as the link between Old and New in the forms of William Sr. and Lester. This event almost coincides with the death of Jennie’s mother, who was the archetype of the link between Old and New. Jennie thus takes this role upon her after her mother’s death; she enables William Sr. and Lester Kane to live together without conflict, aside from the occasional minor clash of Old and New. The story is thus ethnically charged in this way. A lot of the conflicts throughout the novel can be explained in this light. One example is the ongoing difference of opinion between Lester and Robert, but also William Senior’s thoughts about Jennie’s ‘liberal’ relationships with Senator Brander and later Lester can be seen in this light.

However, the novel is also preoccupied with other aspects that can be viewed in an ethnic light. The aspect of names (3.4.1.3) for example can also be revealing for the elements mentioned above. I argued that the children of the Gerhardt family alter their names in order to get away from their German heritage. This process can most clearly be distinguished in the character of Sebastian, otherwise know as ‘Bass’. Jennie is caught between ‘Genevieve’ and ‘Jen’. This can be seen as a first indication that Jennie gradually takes on the role her mother played in keeping the Old World and New World together. Jennie is not a link throughout the story; when her mother is still alive, Jennie for example opposes her father, representing the Old World, by being unwilling to name her child ‘Wilhelmina’. Later on she becomes the link when she lives together with Lester and her father.

Vesta plays an important role in the story. She can be seen as symbol for the breach between William Sr. and his children. He wants her to enjoy a Lutheran upbringing, but Jennie and Lester make sure this does not happen. Later on in the novel it is interesting to see that Vesta is taking up the role Jennie also had with her mother. Her name, the New World Vesta together with the Old World Wilhelmina, and the fact that she is the child of a second generation German-American and an American of Anglo-Saxon descent, shows she too can act as a link between old and new, just like her mother and grandmother.
For the last section on the Gerhardt family, the one about newspapers, I stepped down from looking how Dreiser wrote about the Old and New World\(^\text{47}\) and just studied how Dreiser presented foreign language newspapers as opposed to American newspapers. It seems as if foreign language newspapers are presented in a better light than their American counterparts.

\(^{47}\) Of course, the fact that William Sr. reads German papers can be an indication to state that he still clings to the Old World.
4. General conclusion

The primary objective of this dissertation has been to study the question of ethnicity in the work of Theodore Dreiser. However, one can never plunge into such a rich and complex subject without a thorough knowledge of the background of the matter. Therefore the introductory chapter included background information on the second generation German-American immigrant whose work was focussed upon here. First of all, however, the difficulty of defining naturalism was addressed. Although the meaning of the term differs from its counterpart in Europe, one can construct a definition, which unfortunately is necessarily incomplete, for naturalism was not “a coherent and self-sustained doctrine uniformly used by the same group of writers” (Lehan 65). But, naturalism everywhere breaks taboos of sex and gender, deals with industrialism and urbanism, comes close to determinism and is written in a detailed style. Three aspects that feature in this definition are also often mentioned in publications on Dreiser. As an introduction to this dissertation I selected these three aspects and discussed them. Dreiser wrote about modernization in the sense that he often sketched a gloomy picture of urbanism, work in factories but also in the sense of sex and gender. The latter brings us to his tendency towards female protagonists, another aspect of his writings. Dreiser both wrote about women in a stereotypical, sexual way, but also transcended this. In Sister Carrie, he made the female protagonist succeed where males fail and in Jennie Gerhardt he made the protagonist into a deep and moral human being. All of this is written in excessively detailed style.

The second chapter functioned as an introduction to the largest and most important third chapter. This second chapter attempted to answer the apparent question: how was Dreiser seen, if not as an ethnic author? The answer is of course very complex. A first, logical, step was to give a short overview of Dreiser’s career. West argues that Dreiser attempted to become a professional writer two times; the first time from 1892 until 1895, in the newspaper business and once from 1897 until 1900, a period in which he wrote his debut novel Sister Carrie (West (2004): 15). Furthermore, throughout his career, Dreiser had a difficult relationship with his different publishers. Dreiser’s reception has always been rather ambivalent; in different waves Dreiser went from dismissed to praised and back before he was finally accepted as a member of the American literary canon. During his life he received criticism from individuals as Stuart Sherman and Lionel Trilling, who called his work sex-obsessed, among other things. Furthermore, Dreiser was criticised for his peculiar way of
spelling English and his tendencies towards communism. However, he found supporters in the forms of Sherwood Anderson and his good friend H.L. Mencken.

After Dreiser’s death the criticism primarily came from one movement, that of New Criticism. The New Critics denounced Dreiser’s work as fundamentally un-artistic. Later, during the sixties, Dreiser’s power as a novelist was recognized, but until now, there is ambivalence regarding the reception of his work. However, one thing is clear, the ethnicity in Dreiser’s work was never mentioned, criticized or analysed.

A final section of the second chapter addressed one of the possible reasons why Dreiser could have turned away from writing overtly ethnic novels. He lived in a period of large-scale nativism throughout the United States. This could have made him downplay the ethnicity in his work.

The aim of the third chapter was clear. Through an analysis of several aspects of Dreiser’s second novel *Jennie Gerhardt*, I primarily attempted to answer the question if Dreiser is an ethnic author. My answer is a clear yes, Dreiser is an ethnic author. The conclusions I drew from the third chapter can be found listed more exhaustively in section 3.4.5. Dreiser, in writing about the Gerhardts and Kanes, was concerned with the ethnic side and how this concerned first generation immigrants as opposed to second or third generation immigrants. On the basis of aspects as language, religion and naming, I distinguished a continuum in the Gerhardt family, from clinging to the Old World to attempting to assimilate to the New World. A special role in this is reserved for the mother, who acts as a mediator or link between the two extremes.

For the Kane family, of Irish descent, a similar continuum can be devised, albeit less apparent than with the Gerhardts.

What is interesting in this context, is that when the two families are combined (when Jennie, Lester and William Sr. live together), there is also a continuum visible, but Lester drops a place and Jennie goes one place up, taking on the role her mother once had, while her own daughter (Vesta) is becoming like she used to be. This shows the reader that Dreiser deems the Kanes more assimilated.

The section on newspapers can be interpreted as an aside from this account. There is a striking difference in the way German of foreign-language newspapers are represented in opposition to American newspapers. It seems Dreiser wrote about the opposition integrity versus gossip.

Taking all of the above into account, I think it is safe to say Dreiser wrote *Jennie Gerhardt* with these ethnic issues in mind. A lot of the conflicts the protagonists have to deal with
fundamentally start from an ethnic consideration. The functioning of both families heavily relies on the continua that were discussed in the third chapter. If these continua were not present, if, in other words, all the members of both families were either completely assimilated or still completely stuck in the Old World, the story would have had a completely other outlook; the lives of the different characters would have been thoroughly different.

One can of course argue that it is premature to state that Theodere Dreiser is an ethnic author, merely on the basis of one of his books. But in any event, Dreiser, certainly in this story, showed himself to be an ethnic author and in this light, it seems astonishing that the contemporary critics and academics principally forgot to study Dreiser’s ethnic side.

48 Casciato, for example, claims that Jennie Gerhardt is the only ‘immigrant fiction’ Dreiser wrote in his career, but goes on to take the edge of that statement in the conclusion of his article by stating that there is nonetheless a double-ness present in his writings (181) Not to mention the ethnic characters in Sister Carrie and his autobiography Dawn. But also, as Riggio argues, the Jewish characters in The Hand of Potter (1916), the southern and eastern European immigrants in The Color of a Great City (1923), and other ethnic characters in Newspaper Days (1922) and A Hoosier Holiday (1916) (Riggio, “Hidden Ethnic” 56). These are, of course, mere examples of ethnic subject matter on the surface, I hope to have made clear that Dreiser, in Jennie Gerhardt, was also preoccupied with ethnicity on a deeper level.
5. Bibliography


