

# Life in the iron mill and maggie: a girl of the streets essay



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Rebecca Davis and Stephen Crane portray the darker side of humanity by making the reader feel they are observing the social environments of animals. In *Life in the Iron Mill and Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, the animals are penniless products of the America's Industrial Revolution. Through realistic and naturalistic lenses, Davis and Crane are connected through their abilities to create a unique spectator-to-subject relationship between the audience and characters. To speak to a broader issue of course, the authors used what is possibly the most effective method to arouse a necessary disturbance in the hearts of their readers.

In *Life in the Iron Mill and Maggie: Girl of the Streets*, the tragic lives of the lowest of the low are put so plainly in order to achieve a truthful representation of society's most oppressive force: class. For Maggie Johnson and Hugh Wolfe, social class determines the courses of their lives. The authors show a sad truth about America's impermeable social boundaries through the environments the characters were brought into, their relationship to the rest of the world, and ultimately, the prices they have to pay in order to escape class confines.

At birth, Maggie and Hugh were automatically put on a slippery slope. Hugh Wolfe, a Welsh puddler, was born in Kirby and John's Iron Mill and remains there for the rest of his life. Harding describes his family background and the culture of his people. "They are a trifle more filthy; their muscles are not so brawny; they stoop more" (Davis 1708). Years of brutal labor turned the Welsh puddlers into a group that can be distinguished from the way they "neither yell nor shout, nor stagger, but skulk along like beaten hounds" (Davis, 1708).

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The bleak description of Wolfe's social stimulations from birth, makes it hard to fathom any sense of hope for him. Maggie, who is also born straight into poverty, is bogged down by her environment. While the description of the "dark region," "gruesome doorways," and women with "uncombed hair and disordered dress" in Devil's Row seems deadly, the Johnson's haphazard home life further legitimizes Maggie's behavior (Crane 949). During the first scene at the home, Maggie is struck by her brother, witnesses a gruesome quarrel between her parents, and is driven to fear of her entire family. Her mother breaks into a wild frenzy, "the woman screamed and shook her fists before her husband's eyes. The rough yellow of her face and neck flared suddenly crimson. She began to howl" (Crane 950). Maggie is shrouded by the deep pit of violence she is forced to call home. Thus, her longing for Pete is understood, which is the first sense of protection she has experienced in her entire life.

Through Crane and Davis' bleak descriptions of the main characters' living conditions, they show their vulnerability at birth will remain stagnant for the rest of their lives. Maggie and Wolfe's situations get worse over time. They eat, sleep and breathe poverty. In both stories, the upper class is blinded. They are oblivious to what is happening outside of their privileged lives, while the poor live surrounded by the billowing smoke, grimy streets, and violence that defines the working class lifestyle.

The disconnect between the rich and poor is elucidated during the encounter with Mitchell and Kirby. As an aspiring artist, Wolfe is dehumanized to the point where he is nothing more than one of Kirby's "hands." Kirby says, "If

I had the making of men, these men who do the lowest part of the world's  
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work should be machines, nothing more, hands" (Davis 1717). While the high class folk saunter about the mill, feeling the most superficial sense of pity for the workers, the peasants are robbed of their dignity with the weight of the huge divide between the rich and poor on their backs.

Much like Wolfe, Maggie is constantly reminded of her peasantry, despite her attempts to conceal it. Shortly after meeting Pete, who is wallowing in foreign elegance, Maggie suddenly becomes self-conscious of the pathetic squalor she lives in. "Maggie contemplated the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home," "she suddenly regarded it as an abomination" (Crane 959). Entirely embarrassed on her behalf, Maggie is forced to confront her social situation as a hindrance to any chance of escaping the slums of New York.

The interactions between the main characters and the upper class haunt Maggie and Hugh with the sad American truth that being born poor, they will remain poor. Davis and Crane both present tragedy as the only way to escape the societally imposed class boundaries of the day. The permanence of poverty is shown when Hugh and Maggie are punished for their rebellion with death. Davis portrays Hugh's experience in jail after stealing the money with a realistic implication, thus evoking a great sense of pity as he slowly and painfully falls into his demise.

Crane develops Maggie's downfall in a much more naturalistic, and powerful way. Rather than to seek compassion for her unfortunate fate, Crane seeks to enhance the price Maggie must pay for denying who she really is when she is ostracized by her family and community, a lacking factor in *Life in the Iron*

Mill. Rather than to evoke the same type of sympathy blatantly present in Wolfe's situation, Crane's more pessimistic view on the human condition is achieved through his ability to take the next step into a more extreme version of realism.

Wolfe is a vulnerable and submissive character from the beginning, putting the majority of the blame for his death on his environment, rather than himself. In *Maggie: a girl of the Streets*, the reader has to contemplate whether Maggie's fate was a result of her social situation, or a poor choice on her behalf. Crane ultimately achieved the goal of naturalism by presenting not only the darker side of class structures in America, but the darker side of humanity as well.

Crane and Davis sought to inspire a better society by embarking on a graphic, experimental journey to prove the impermeability of social class. They outline the bleak lives of those born into poverty, forced to endure poverty, and ultimately, ruined by poverty. In *Life in the Iron Mill*, the reader is forced to observe a man trapped in a cage of hardship and destroyed by his surroundings. In *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, a similar situation is presented, except it is she who destroys herself.