

Stephen crane's style in maggie: a girl of the streets and the red badge of coura...

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Stephen Crane, a realist author in the 1860's, wrote many popular short stories in an emerging literary disruption from transcendentalism to naturalism. As one of many pioneers of this new literary technique, Stephen Crane diverged from the typical and familiar prose of romanticism and transcendentalism through unique characteristics that made him a distinctive naturalist author. By into the history and writing style Stephen Crane adopted and literary devices he used, what can be seen as Stephen Crane's individuality depicted in his poetry throughout this literary period?

To analyse an author's works, one must look at the period before his writing style to see the difference between focuses, and the reason behind it.

Romanticism's focal points were emotion, freedom, and imagination that engendered a sense of individualism. Romanticism, in part, was a rejection of the bleak reality and reasoning of the time. It divulged the concept of non-religious reverence and feelings of emotion that were gleaned from senses as opposed to the inner guidance of right and wrong that emerged from the transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalism exposed the idea of personal relationships with God through experiences in nature, and the belief in a universal, moral right and wrong. This literary movement lasted until around 1860, when realism and naturalism – an extreme form of realism – began to emerge. The transition from transcendentalism to naturalism occurred, and the theme of nature shifted from godly attributes and heavenly divination found in aspect of the physical world to determinism- that forces outside of man's scope is shaping human-kind into roles in life that they cannot escape. In naturalism, nature is a force to withstand, endure, and only the fittest survive, those being the ones that did not overstep their

bounds set in place by nature. Realists, in naturalism and realism, wrote using slang and language of commonfolk, deviating from the traditional writing style with the use of informal words that portrayed the grim reality it helped describe. Stephen Crane was one such naturalist writer who used this technique in his short story “Maggie: a Girl of the Streets”. Alluding to the main characters distancing themselves from responsibilities and duties in their lives, Stephen Crane suggests that trials, unlike the positive, encouraging trait in romanticism and transcendentalism where people’s backs bend but are then made stronger, people’s backs break in real life, and sometimes they can’t overcome their challenges. Through his word choice in “Maggie: a Girl of the Streets”, Stephen Crane portrayed Mr. Johnson as disillusioned, when he said in a drunken outburst, “My home, reg’lar livin’ hell! Damndes’ place! Reg’lar hell!” Here, Stephen Crane is unique from the rest of naturalist writers in that he is not implying that Mr. Johnson drinks every night because he is tempted by the alcohol – which was a major part of naturalism at the time- but that it numbed the injured pride and dissatisfaction of his life. It was a way for him to forget the poverty he could not escape. He was not living a good life, but simply suffering through, which as a theme of naturalism Stephen Crane employed to show the inevitability and struggle of life. This fatalistic view portrays the mental degradation that accompanies the physical degradation of poverty (Donald Pizer).

Stephen Crane delves deeper into the symbolism and naturalistic point of view in his short novel “Maggie: a Girl of the Streets”, where a young girl

living in the slums is introduced to the viles of her situation, driven into seduction after falling for a “ Bowery” and ultimately prostitution, where she later jumps off a bridge, taking her own life. Stephen Crane chose the slums as his setting to highlight is as a breeding ground of immorality and violence (Donald Pizer). His interest and opinion of slum life can be contributed to his time spent working as a New York City reporter where his exposure to the poverty-stricken areas of the city would provide inspiration for his later works. This setting for “ Maggie” was designed to imply the culture of alcoholic consumption, premarital sex, and low self esteem which was common in the slums of that day. Stephen Crane’s “ Maggie” was different than the typical slum stories of his times because throughout his work he is highlighting the fact the slums aren’t about immorality. The reason people live in the slums is because they succumb to their temptations, but people are content with the situation because their injured pride and low self esteem resign them to their fate (Donald Pizer). Stephen Crane’s early work is heavily laden with themes of naturalism where he invokes the concept of natural forces that neither help or enlighten man. In the very beginning of “ Maggie: a Girl of the Streets”, there is a street fight between gangs of little boys, named “ Rum Alley” and “ Devil’s Row”. Crane uses descriptive yet succinct words to describe the scene, condensing this short story into only about 20, 000 words. The violence exhibited by the young children manifests the horrid social corruption, but also the animalistic struggle of the slums beginning from an early age – survival of the fittest is the evident theme. Crane again dramatizes the concept of a group of people reduced to their animalistic instincts, now caught and serving time in prison when he writes, “

Over on the Island, a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a grey ominous building and crawled slowly along the river's bank." The author sets up the plot using naturalist methods and styles to get the point across that man is in a constant struggle with human nature and the forces of nature as an adversary and foe. Stephen Crane does this through his elaborate description of the setting of the slums and paints a vivid picture of the depravity in which this novel takes place, but does this with brevity which leaves a sense of rigid structure the characters can never escape. By narrating the desensitization of man to violence, Stephen Crane, in a "curiously asocial perspective", demonstrates those living in poverty have grown accustomed to the trevails in life (Jean Cazemajou). They have given up being better, striving, or achieving more, like Jimmie, in "Maggie: a Street Girl", whose "eyes were hardened at an early age. He became a young man of leather. He studied human nature in the gutter, and found it no worse than he thought he had reason to believe it. He never conceived a respect for the world, because he had begun with no idols that it had smashed." (Jean Cazemajou). By providing readers with an understanding of Jimmie's mindset, Stephen Crane pushes the concept of determinism, a branch of naturalism, that says people should expect the worst so they are never let down, they should not be expectant of better things to develop, and be accepting of their fate. He further pushes this concept when Pete was yielding to his destiny "When he said, 'Ah, what deh hell,' his voice was burdened with disdain for the inevitable and contempt for anything that fate might compel him to endure." Stephen Crane ties together the theme that everyone has a place in nature's web, and only those who shake the web in

order to try to better themselves fail. Throughout the whole of “Maggie”, Stephen Crane slowly transitions from naturalism towards realism, as the main character gradually transforms into a carnal creature forced to become a prostitute due to her circumstances. The realist view is that fate is a foregone conclusion, and Stephen Crane showcases this as the inaction of those around Maggie, resigned to their fate long ago and unwilling to fight for Maggie’s future which, in their mind, is already set in stone. Further illuminating this resignation, Stephen Crane weaves the lie in her brother Jimmie’s heart, that “he himself occupied a down-trodden position which had a private but distinct element of grandeur in its isolation.” (Robert Myers). Stephen Crane paints a picture of Maggie, who is determined to do something better with her life and get out of the dregs of poverty, a place where nature has put her. Though as Crane delves deeper into the story he reveals her fiery determination diminishes to resignation. Through his writing style, Crane paints a picture of his short story to show that the situation of the main character is drawn away from the outward perspective looking inward, to encouraging the reader to step into the story through the use of common folk words and colloquialisms. As noted above, this writing style is gradually lost as it changes imperceptibly to focus on realism.

In another one of Stephen Crane’s short stories, “The Red Badge of Courage”, the author in his characteristic brevity, makes the chapters of the story short to elicit a sense of snapshots being taken throughout the main character’s journey. The brief yet vivid description of war scenes and soldier’s responses to battle is characteristic of real experiences in war that

soldiers identified with, though Stephen Crane never saw real battle before writing this work. The main character, named Henry Fleming, is a young farm boy with a fanastical view of the war and battles, but Stephen Crane throughout this short story doesn't develop the main character just like he didn't with the main character in "Maggie". In "The Red Badge of Courage" he formulates in the minds of his readers that man is not so different from beast: "A man...who up to this time had been working feverishly at his rifle suddenly stopped and ran with howls...there was no shame in his face. He ran like a rabbit" (John McDermott). In Stephen Crane's writings a common thread like this is characteristic of naturalist workings, as his main characters and essentially man, revert back to their animal instincts and desires falling into their basic or carnal temptations. Crane demonstrates his characters not only stop developing, but many times regress as human beings. Stephen Crane delves into the mindset of Henry who "felt triumphant...There was the law, he said. Nature had given him a sign. The squirrel, immediately upon recognizing danger, had taken to his legs without ado. He did not stand stolidly baring his fully belly to the middle, and die with an upward glance at the sympathetic heavens. On the contrary, he had fled as fast as his legs could carry him; he was but an ordinary squirrel, too-".

The character makes amends and excuses for his cowardice and instinct to run through his comparison to beast-like creatures. He, like them, followed his baser instincts that screamed survival of the fittest. By telling himself that simple creatures do the same and they are smart for it, Henry Fleming becomes a thread of nature's tapestry by regressing from civilized,

thoughtful human to an instinctual, mindless creature. Nature is put in opposition to man in description to juxtapose the serene yet violently powerful role that nature takes in determining the lives of Henry Fleming and Maggie, and it's unassuming strength when the main characters are naive. When Henry has experienced battle and 'become a man'(John Casey), Stephen Crane develops the characters just enough for Henry to compare himself to other creatures of nature whose destinies are determined by mother nature. Henry, at least as a subconscious level, knows his fate is out of his hands just like "the squirrel", further cementing the concept of naturalism that Stephen Crane develops throughout 'The Red Badge of Courage'. Henry Fleming continues on in his journey and returns to camp, where he is greeted with joyous return as his comrades did not know he had fled the battle. Having received a wound from friendly fire, but making the assumption he got it in a victorious fight, Fleming hides his cowardice. In the next battle, though, he remains at the scene of the battle and fights back against his enemies with beast-like savagery and strength, which he is commended on by his commanding officer. Here, where his character doesn't flee but fights, Stephen Crane seems to question the "survival of the fittest" theme bursting through the pages as the other side of this motto is explored and exposed for the readers to ponder: which action, fleeing or fighting, is the best option for survival?

The thoughts of both Maggie and Henry are shown throughout their experiences, but never change or develop as they live through their trials to become better – both Henry and Maggie end up becoming accustomed to

the violence of their situations, and are content with just surviving where they are at. In addition to an unorthodox plot, Stephen Crane employs detailed description of the natural landscape in contrast to man's predicament:

“ The shells, which had ceased to trouble the regiment for a time, came swirling again, and exploded in the grass or among the leaves of the trees.”

He does this with a naturalist view point that develops the concept man is in a struggle with a constant and violent nature, in contrast to it's beautiful, unassuming features. Stephen Crane, in using comparisons of the natural world to man's creations, creates a sense of destruction, where “ shells... looked to be strange war flowers bursting into fierce bloom”, and produced destruction in its wake, like the way nature destroys itself. The difference between the two, though, is that nature is reborn through destruction. Man does not have that luxury and thus nature is a superior force because man is forever destined to struggle and eventually lose. As the dawn breaks over the sky on Henry's final day of battle, he is impervious to the beauty and simple pleasure from his surroundings, as his ability to appreciate the morning rays shows his numbed emotion, like the poor people in “ Maggie” who are used to or numbed to the violence and disgusting situations they live in.

In both “ Maggie: a Girl of the Streets” and “ The Red Badge of Courage”, there are instances where supposedly enlightened people regress back to their animalistic urges, which is counterproductive to the development of

society or the main characters. Stephen Crane uses these concepts to demonstrate the main theme and concept of his whole writing style that man is part of nature and are creatures that succumb to ungodly traits because of the imperfectuality of man's nature. Stephen Crane uses these devices, some unique- in "Maggie: a Girl of the Streets" targeting the question about the underworkings of the slums to be temptation or injured pride and self pity – and some characteristic of the realist writing style of the time to create unique pieces of work.