

The preservation of tenement dialect in stephen crane's 'maggie'



**ASSIGN
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The dialogue in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is an attempt by Stephen Crane to preserve the language of tenement dwellers in lower Manhattan in the late 1800s. During this time, many citizens were poor. Children were left to fend for themselves. Families lived in conditions of squalor and filth.

Tenements were jam packed with residents, many of whom had to share beds and quarters. Many pictures from this time show residents who slept back to back on the floor, to fill every last inch of the apartment. These places were a horrible place to grow up, and bad for the keeping up of a happy family. This is shown very clearly in *Maggie: A girl of the streets*. In addition, not many people were well educated, and upward mobility was reserved for upper social class people. While their dialect is intricate and allows the novel its naturalist leaning, Crane's use of it reflects his own biases, as well as those of his readers.

Purposefully, the dialect lets upper class readers feel elevated and separate from the tenement dwellers. Readers have to make a conscious effort to spend time with the characters, because of the phonetic and often broken language. This allows readers to feel intelligent for understanding, but also charitable and compassionate for listening to their stories of tragedy.

Because the dialect Crane uses in the novel accurately matches some of that the lower class at the time, it creates a palpable distance between upper class readers and the lower class subjects of the novel. For example, in the beginning of Chapter III, an old woman asks Jimmie to buy her a growler of beer. This request could have been expressed rather simply; instead Crane uses more phonetic spellings and apostrophes to shorten syllables and create a rougher sound. "' Eh, Jimmie, it's a cursed shame,' she said. ' Go,

now, like a dear an' buy me a can, an' if yer mudder raises ' ell all night yehs can sleep here," (43). The woman as a result does not feel grandmotherly or fragile. Instead, she takes on the archetype of a hardened old lady. She is tough, but her kindness towards Jimmie is transactional. The sound of her words are jagged, and contributes to the survivalist characterization of the archetypes in the novel. Although this sentiment did help to alert the wealthy of the inequity in the city, it also makes the poor seem like failures in the realm of social darwinism.

At the end of Chapter IV, Jimmie contrasts the composition of the scene with his dialect. He looks up at the sky, in a moment that Crane uses to cast him in a softer light to the upper class audience, who might be unhappy with his record of delinquency. Jimmie says "' Deh moon looks like hell, don't it?'" (49) in admiration of the moon and the sky. Jimmie also uses the term " hell" here as a word of wonder, while other people likely would use a different word choice because of its negative connotation. The use of dialect here is meant to remind the upper class readers that although Jimmie is as human as they are, he has attributes that differentiate them. This is somewhat problematic, but it does succeed at nudging readers to notice the issues with the tenement system, and asks them to forgive the shortcomings of its dwellers. However, it also saturates the story with humanity, and its display alerted the upper class of the serious problems within tenement life. Even Pete, who is seen by Maggie to be much more educated, is written with this dialect. During a fight that is described by Crane to be animalistic, Pete says, "... ' Youse fellers er lookin' fer a scrap an' it's damn likely yeh'll fin one if yeh keeps shootin' off yer mout's.'" (70). At this point in the novel, readers

have agreed to read dialogue like this. However, it is still very difficult to understand quickly and could require multiple readings to fully grasp.

The sheer amount of work that it might take readers to comprehend the dialect rewards them for their patience, and affirms that the readers are unlike the characters of Crane's novel. Indeed, the choppiness of its dialogue and its consistent roughness is meant highlight disparities between the upper and lower classes. Such narrative techniques are designed to make readers feel educated and responsible to help change the system of tenements, and the lives of those within them.