

The laws of naturalism



Stephen Crane's interpretations of life are spawned from his own opinions of the world. These opinions correspond with naturalistic train of thought. He makes use of an observation technique to show the natural law of the universe: One can either accept the laws determining social order or become their victim. In the Novella, Maggie is used as a medium to paint the picture of the devastating consequences that befall one who attempts to violate this unspoken law, breaching the social and economic boundaries set upon them at birth. Crane's views of the poor allow him to create his characters as shells absent of conscious thought, leaving them susceptible to the ills of their environment. Crane's writings depict what he believes are the norms of the world. He molds himself after the dying form of realism but finds himself often giving naturalistic qualities to his work. Such is evident in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Though this example of Crane's work is realistic, offering an accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of life, it is written within a frame that can only be deemed as naturalistic. These shifts in writing form leave the reader wondering from which perspective did Crane approached the story, that of realist or naturalist; evidence supports that of the latter more than that of the prior. Naturalism is synonymous with characters being pitted against forces that are beyond their control. The naturalists of Crane's day "naturalized historical process", making it inevitable. They believed that social circumstances were natural and hence unavoidable. These naturalists created effect without necessarily elaborating on the cause. Though Maggie is not the only person that is born into the poor conditions, she is the only one who takes the initiative to attempt to relieve herself of them. Crane insinuates that Maggie is special but does not elaborate as to why she is the only one chosen to try to crack the shell of pauperism that had for years held

her at bay. Crane supports these factors of naturalism, when he bestows upon Maggie the initiative to venture beyond what she was born into without giving the reason as to why she alone is chosen. The naturalistic universe falls under one single explanatory theory of all events. “ In such a universe one can either internalize the laws determining natural and social focus or be their victim”(P. 18). Crane falls into this grouping of writers and supports this view in the novella, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Maggie is given two options upon arrival at the mental crossroads in her life. She can either submit to the social norms ascribed of her class or venture forth and fight them. Each choice comes with a consequence. By submitting to the assumed cultural standards of his class and making no attempts to distance himself from the life in which he was born, Maggie’s brother, Jimmie, manages to survive. Jimmie gains this life at the price of individualism. He became a pawn of the environment he lived in, conforming to it’s will and not his own. Conversely, Maggie, who attempts to distance herself from her own social circumstances and follow her own will, loses her life, but, in the process, gains a sense of individualism. She make herself one of the few that dares to be different, not follow the implied guidelines set before her at birth. She proverbially colors outside the lines. Naturalistic form can not allow one such as her to succeed and consequently Maggie is consumed by the new life she now leads. Maggie’s fate was determined more by her experiences in the world than by their subjective acts of assimilating those experiences. Maggie’s environment offered no places where a girl of the tenements could get educated, leaving her options of ways to attain wealth scarce. The jobs a person of her skills and class could procure were usually limited to labor. Maggie became a prostitute not to lead a life of indecency but because

Crane had endowed her with two unique qualities: initiative and beauty, and had put her in a place where the combination of the two came at a loss of integrity. Maggie “grows up under conditions which repress all good impulse, stunt the moral growth, and render it inevitable that she should become what she eventually did, a creature of the streets” (Urban Life and Reform, 145). Maggie’s fate was determined more by the environment that Stephen Crane created for her than by her actions as a response to the environment, classifying the novella as naturalistic. In Crane’s short stories he depicts the reality of life for the poor. With vivid imagery he conveys all that he sees to the reader. He does so from the perspective of someone looking down and seeing rather than that of someone immersed in the environment. Crane sees the poor as sub human and gives them no voice in his pieces. They are absent of inner lives. Crane, in his absence of a real knowledge of how the poor felt, is unable to put their thoughts into words. The lives of the poor in the 1880-1890 were riddled with hardships. This made them the perfect specimen for Crane’s writings. In their state, of urban ills, destitution, and alcoholism, they were easily manipulated and could be used, as Crane deemed necessary in his work. To bequeath people these inner thoughts would have made them tangible and not as easily controlled. No longer would they fit Crane’s mold and fall helplessly before the obstacles confronting them. By giving them voices, they were no longer tools to be used; now their opinions and feelings had to be put into accommodation. Fortunately for Crane, such an occurrence did not have to be guarded against for he never fully grasped the concept that the poor actually thought for themselves. Consequently, he threw them into his pieces to fend for themselves, lacking any defense from the inevitable forces that be. Stephen

Crane began writing *Maggie* with “ little relatively knowledge about the characters as individuals but had a clear notion of the plot and of his heroine’s inevitable downward slide”(P. 147). He sought to tell the story of a girl of promise who succumbs to the brutal circumstances of her life in the slums of lower Manhattan. Stephen Crane wrote with a purpose and accomplished the goal of the novella: illustrating what happens when one, such as Maggie, defies the conformists ways of her social class and rebels. Stephen Crane, edited by Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin. *The Red Badge of Courage, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and other selected writings*. New Riverside Editions/ Paul Lauter, Series Edition