

Motherly love



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A child can feel lost and alone without motherly love. Marian Anderson's "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* by Stephen Crane each detail isolation in light of separation from a mother. Anderson's timbre, tone, loudness, tempo, and the song's lack of grand instrumentation help the listener understand the speaker's isolation. However, instead of being literal, the lyrics only compare the narrator's emotional state to that of a motherless child. On the other hand, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* involves the reader in Maggie's actual motherlessness through point of view, imagery, and the unloving setting she finds herself in. Crane's story is more tragic than the song because he forces the audience to suffer through Maggie's genuine isolation from her mother instead of listening to a merely figurative account of that emotion.

The song begins with a strong, prominent piano that quiets down as Anderson's vocals make a commanding entrance. At the instant she begins to sing, the listener is made aware that the speaker is mature due to Anderson's deep and husky tone, just as a child must be mature and strong while navigating the world without a mother. Anderson cries, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." Putting "motherless" in front of "child" indicates how speaker prioritizes their feelings; being a child is secondary to the isolation brought by the lack of a mother. This syntactical choice makes the listener first hear "motherlessness" instead of "child" which sets the tracks isolated tone. Furthermore, instead of being featured as a main part of the song, the piano slowly tinkers around Anderson's loud vocals, adding to the lonely mood by isolating her voice with minimal instrumentation. Approximately one minute in, the piano is deafening as Anderson screams, "

True believer, a long ways from home!” These lyrics portray the narrator as a believer in God who is punished with isolation despite their faith. The situation contributes to the speaker’s isolation because it shows that even in a time of need, when they feel they have done everything right, God is not on their side. They feel both motherless and neglected by God—two figures who are supposed to be unconditionally present and caring. Simultaneously, the noisiness of the piano and vocals reify the narrator’s despair while Anderson’s vibrating timbre makes her sound like she is on the brink of crying due to her loneliness. About one minute and thirty seconds in, the tempo quickens along with her delivery. The speed of this section creates a desperate mood. Just as a child becomes frightened and confused in a grocery store when they lose their mother, the speaker feels increasingly endangered and lonely due to their solitude. Afterwards, Anderson sings, “Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone.” The transition from feeling like a “motherless child” to “almost gone” shows that instead of simply feeling like a kid with no mother, the speaker feels like they have been almost completely disconnected from the parent, nearing total seclusion.

Motherlessness and isolation are especially present in Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. By page 35, Maggie has arrived home with her lover, Pete, when Mary suddenly begins to scold her. It is unclear why she is upset, but she continues to curse Maggie and banishes her from the home. Maggie stands defenseless against the attack, unaware of what she has done wrong, but her mother continues to unravel: “Teh hell wid him and you,” she said, glowering at her daughter in the gloom. Her eyes seemed to burn balefully. “Yeh’ve gone teh deh devil, Mag Johnson, yehs knows yehs have gone teh

deh devil. Yer a disgrace teh yer people, damn yeh. An' now, git out an' go ahn wid dat doe-faced jude of yours. Go teh hell wid him, damn yeh, an' a good riddance. Go teh hell an' see how yeh likes it." Maggie gazed long at her mother." Go teh hell now, an' see how yeh likes it. Git out. I won't have sech as yehs in me house! Get out, d'yeh hear! Damn yeh, git out!" The girl began to tremble. At this instant Pete came forward. " Oh, what deh hell, Mag, see," whispered he softly in her ear. " Dis all blows over. See? Deh ol' woman ' ill be all right in deh mornin'. Come ahn out wid me! We'll have a hell of a time." The woman on the floor cursed. Jimmie was intent upon his bruised fore-arms. The girl cast a glance about the room filled with a chaotic mass of debris, and at the red, writhing body of her mother." Go teh hell an' good riddance." She went." The passage begins, "' Teh hell wid him and you,'" (35). Throughout this page, Maggie's mother repeats five times that her daughter should go to hell and four times that she should get out. The reader feels Maggie's pain each time as she is kicked to the curb for no apparent reason. The girl is utterly alone because Jimmie and Peter are not supportive. Crane forces his audience to cram into the defenseless child's shoes to make them feel afraid, uncomfortable, and lonely in the face of Mary's tirade. Furthermore, " Glowering at her daughter in the gloom" conveys two images. Since Crane does not specify who is " in the gloom," the reader pictures either Mary or Maggie. If they think of Mary, they see an unhinged alcoholic losing herself in a poorly lit corner of a tenement home, which is exactly what Maggie sees. The reader is forced to watch from the girl's eyes with fright as her mother's sanity disintegrates. If they think of Maggie, they feel sympathetic for a defenseless girl who is scolded for unknown reasons. No matter what the reader imagines, they see Maggie

terrified as she either watches her mother unravel or receives unrelenting abuse.

Her loneliness is further underscored when Mary says, “ Yehs knows yehs have gone teh deh devil. Yer a disgrace teh yer people, damn yeh. An’ now, git out an go ahn wid dat doe-faced jude of yours” (35). Throughout this monologue, though she is not explicitly described, the audience senses Maggie isolated “ in the gloom,” trapped due to her inability to defend herself. Maggie says nothing in this passage, indicating her defenselessness. The reader finally gets a glimpse of the girl’s feelings when the narrator says, “ Maggie gazed long at her mother” (35). Up until this point, the reader had no idea of Maggie’s expressions as she was baselessly bombarded with harshness. “ The girl began to tremble” (35). In these two quotes, Crane interrupts Mary’s incoherent rambling with Maggie’s thoughts, but he does not have to use her own words; through free indirect discourse, the reader knows that Maggie is isolated in a corner, attacked by the one person who is supposed to love her unconditionally. The narrator says, “ The woman on the floor cursed. Jimmie was intent upon his bruised fore-arms. The girl cast a glance about the room filled with a chaotic mass of debris, and at the red, writing body of her mother.” The point of view shifts to Maggie’s and the audience sees complete mayhem. Her isolation is palpable as her own brother watches intently as if her anguish is a gripping film. “ ‘ Go teh hell an’ good riddance.’ She went.” At this point, Maggie is finally an impoverished girl of the streets. “ Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” is like a soundtrack to Maggie’s life. Unlike the song’s speaker, Maggie does have a mother, but the relationship results only in isolation, which is a shared theme

between the texts. Anderson's quaking timbre throughout the track relates to Maggie's trembling during her mother's first onslaught on page 35. Both the narrator of the song and Maggie feel like lost, lonely, scared children who lack the guidance of a strong parent. Moreover, the rawness of the song is comparable to the unromantic story.

"Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" is put together with only a pianist and a vocalist, but that simple combination creates a heartbreaking account of isolation through lyrics and sound. The lyrics are comparable to Maggie's predicament when Anderson sings, "True believer, a long ways from home." Throughout the story, Maggie is also found far away from home, whether home is her house or the comfort of a loved one's acceptance. She is constantly in a liminal state as she transitions between living spaces, often far from achieving the acceptance of others. Isolation is a common feeling, and the narrators of each text share it, but their lack of a mother makes it even more heartbreaking. However, their differences are stronger than their similarities. Contrasting elements between the texts show the harsh reality of Maggie's situation. Firstly, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" offers a heart-wrenching account of the loneliness the narrator feels, but the use of "sometimes" and "like" make it clear that the narrator is not actually without a mother. The speaker is using the feeling of being a motherless child as a simile for their isolation. Furthermore, the song's idea of home is not literal. The speaker means that they feel lost and far away from the symbolic, reassuring embrace of a mother. They are not literally far from home, but instead isolated and far from comfort.

In *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, however, the reader observes the life of a child truly without motherly love, and often literally homeless. Crane's use of focalization when describing Maggie's expressions isolates the reader from the girl who is berated by her mother. The audience only gets to see that Maggie is gazing and trembling in a gloomy corner of the house. The disconnect between the reader and the main character makes the former focus upon Mary's monologue, making them feel as if they are there with Maggie as she is attacked. In addition to the passage, Maggie rarely speaks throughout the entire story. She is the titular character, and her movements are the focus, but her actions are usually described by the narrator from an outside perspective, making her seem like a less significant character. The narration styles separates the audience from the main character. Instead of giving his audience a clear understanding of what Maggie is thinking, Crane displays her mood by showing her exterior actions through free indirect discourse.

Conversely, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" is told from the standpoint of the lonely narrator. The song allows the speaker to express their isolation not only through the lyrics, but through Anderson's choked up, expressive voice which is the focal point of the track. The lack of instrumentation makes Anderson's voice feel alone, but in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, the girl is accompanied by a brother who is supposed to support her. The presence of a family member should make Maggie feel supported, but her company is dormant in the face of Mary's tirade. Mary is doing everything except loving her daughter while Jimmie is seen "intent upon his bruised fore-arms," watching the attack in awe instead of supporting his

sister. His presence only heightens her loneliness. He just stands there, letting her know that he does not care enough about her to intervene. Ironically, while the song has a lonely tone due its lack of any accompanying vocalists or layered instrumentation, Maggie's isolation is emphasized by her complacent company. After she understands that she is banished, the narrator declares, " She went," which is said of Maggie four times throughout the story. The reader feels the girl's situation growing more dire with each banishment. The first time Maggie is rejected by a loved one is on page 35. The next is on page 54 when Pete leaves Maggie for Nell. Thirdly, when Maggie comes back to her family, she is turned away yet again. Finally, Maggie returns to Pete for solace, but he tells her to " Go teh hell" (59). The reader feels increased anxiety each time she is rejected by a loved one because after each instance, it becomes increasingly clear that she will fulfill the destiny of the title by having to live in the streets. She seeks refuge with loved ones four times, but each time they make it clear that she is not loved. While the song's narrator is " sometimes" isolated, Maggie is constantly transitioning between homes without any love or support, making her isolation more tragic than the song's.

Anderson's " Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets tell intensely emotional stories about solitude due to a lack of motherly love. However, the song is simply drawing a comparison between isolation and motherlessness, while the short story offers a view from within the depths of an impoverished household headed by an alcoholic parent. Crane uses a third-person point of view to separate the reader from Maggie, employs imagery to make the audience feel her isolation, and

details her surroundings to convey the heartbreaking extent of her solitude.

The differences between each text contribute to Crane's novel offering a more tragic account of loneliness when compared to Anderson's song.