

Naturalism and Crane's Maggie: Metaphor and Paradox

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Introduction:

Heroines in literary naturalism are different from the popular concepts of ideal heroines because the former lack certain qualities we expect from the latter who are powerful. Naturalistic heroines are the conquered ones because they are construed as victims of their environment. Identified with someone low and ignoble bereft of the will to alter her fate, the naturalistic heroine suggests that she has issues about herself as a product of heredity and social conditions. Because she has been moulded by her environment and heredity, she acquires certain traits that have direct bearing to her instincts and physical desires and which Zola in his doctrines of naturalism refers to as the "beast within" depicting an animal inheritance. Since the naturalistic heroine's actions are based on her instincts and desires, the inevitable consequences that challenge her are premature and violent deaths such as suicide. The naturalistic heroine thus suggests that she is worth the focus in literary studies because as distinctive literary character she is "the salt of literature" that gives discriminatory flavour because "without it, the page is savorless" (Burroughs 4). Zola wants to portray representations of human beings that have the greatest percentage among the population, and he specifically refers to the lower and middle classes in society. His theory of naturalism relied on the belief that this group of people comprise the greater reality that can also be appropriate as content of literature instead of the typical small portion of people who belong to the upper class usually represented in the literature that precedes naturalism.

Naturalism overall has been fraught with criticisms from earlier and present critics such as sensationalism (Cowley 427), atheism (Jelavich 348), and bestialism (Loomis 189), and low status (Pizer in Brennan). Other issues related to naturalism specify the promotion of hedonism, extreme pessimism, unhappy endings, depressing environments, absence of free will, men as laboratory specimens controlled like puppets through the forces of environment and heredity (Loomis 181-191 and Cowley 427-429). There may be consensus among literary aficionados that naturalism shocks the finer sensibilities of man particularly those that have preference for Christian ideology that accentuates values over vices. However, there are also hints apropos creating a different breed of literary heroines in order to manifest unique archetypes of human experiences exclusive only to naturalistic fiction, and the idea that the naturalists as serious narrative writers want deeper reader awareness that the role of literary heroines is not only confined to someone with influence, but also to someone suicidal and a victim of her environment which implies that naturalistic literature challenges the standard idea of literary heroism. The irony of naturalism therefore is that despite its reaction against romanticism, naturalism's heroines inherit certain traits identified with romanticism.

It was Pizer, a literary scholar, who spends most of his huge critical work opposing the "reductionist treatment of naturalism" (Brennan 12) and clarifies that naturalism's major impact is on the emphasis of the "humanity of the novels' protagonists" (13). Brennan adds that "Pizer's oppositional strategy is not a negation of what others believe but has always meant as an affirmation of human connection we feel with characters in naturalistic fiction when we come to them without preconception" (19). This implies that Pizer values the human element in literary expression. He interprets "naturalism as but another version of the relatively bleak view of humankind" held even by past well-respected prominent figures such as John Calvin, Thomas Hobbes, and St. Augustine (13). On how others undervalued literary naturalism, Brennan clarifies that Pizer does not deny that it "has a low status in the literary

field so that you have to struggle against the lack of interest and lack of concern of publishers and editors” (Brennan 16). However, Brennan notes that there are naturalistic books “issued from major university presses in recent years” that have generated “much critical acclaim” (17).

The founder of French naturalism, Zola, laments the annihilation of naturalism (296) and “massacre of the naturalistic novelists” (297) by literary critics. He argues that unconstructive criticisms are simply misinterpretations of the doctrines of naturalism. Thus, he advises critics that for any queries on naturalism and to avoid misconceptions, they “seriously study the question in the original documents” (296). Zola applies his scientific interest to the method of crafting literature through a study of the “environment” and detailed analysis of the characters’ physical and psychological traits, according to Brown (Conti and Conti 866). He contends further that “if the experimental approach leads to knowledge of the physical life, then it must also allow to understand the emotional and intellectual life” (866). Fascinated by the scientific changes that occurred during his time (868), and through his encounter with the medical practitioner’s scientific writings, Zola requires fiction writers the application of the scientific method in literature. Such method, he claims, can be done through observation in order to establish the “facts or phenomena” and specifies for instance, that the traits of the “physiological man” be investigated substantially. He reinforces naturalism’s concept that underscores determinism to “dominate everything” (18) and identifies both heredity and surroundings to have a “great influence on the intellectual and passionate manifestations of man” (19). Zola clarifies further that the function of a novelist is similar to a medical practitioner involved in experimentation and observation for accurate depiction of natural phenomena. He notes that “novelists are the examining magistrates of men and their passions” (10) and like a doctor, the novelist “should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings, and as the physiologist operates on human beings” (18).

Aside from Zola's assertion that experimental method be incorporated in the writer's craft, he also mentions in passing his awareness of Darwin's theories which makes his ideas on naturalism with its focus on determinism less original although naturalism's application is on literature. Zola's naturalism with its lens on the scientific method to literature has influenced novelists not only in France but also in the United States spearheaded by Crane, Dreiser, London, and Norris who were the first generation American naturalistic practitioners in the early nineteenth century.

Naturalistic literature therefore with its focus on determinism depicts conclusions fraught with extreme pessimism, a narrative style alien to romantic fiction where the heroines' desires and ideals are achieved and positive values are accentuated. Such literature proliferated during the early part of nineteenth century when American writers pursue the naturalistic trend of writing, an offshoot of the influence of French Naturalism. Although naturalistic authors hesitate to be labelled "naturalists" as in the case of Ellen Glasgow and James Farrell, for instance, naturalism as an active literary movement then prevailed highlighting social realities to embody the realism of the populace, determinism as philosophy, and objectivity as fictional method for accurate reality depiction and verisimilitude of character, plot, and setting. From the first generation American naturalistic practitioners to the present novelists, the naturalistic narrative mode is still being applied. In fact, Ratner acknowledges that literary scholars and critics have seen naturalism as a "continuing influence on modernist and postmodernist fiction".

Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Street*:

One naturalistic fiction is Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Street* that portrays the Bowery life in New York. It regales readers with slum residents who flounder in abject poverty where dysfunctional families, alcohol addictions, verbal and physical altercations,

lack of education, and prostitution are a normal reality. The novel's heroine, a representation of the lowest class in society, is young, naive, naturally romantic, and unschooled with the typical western given name, Maggie Johnson. Her being juvenile makes her susceptible to her harsh environment. She yearns for the good life e.g. popular entertainment made available to her by the dapper bartender who catches her attention and curiosity. She observes with interest "the well-dressed women she met on the avenues", envies "the elegance and soft palms" and craves "those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women" (Crane 21). She feels life's bleak prospects and imagines herself "in an exasperating future, as a scrawny woman with an eternal grievance" (21) unless she gets herself a man who can provide for her. The destructive Bowery environment is Crane's depiction of life as a valley of sweat and tears and therefore without meaning for the young and powerless Maggie because the world is a race only for the strong. It is a world that is decaying with all the social concerns that beset mankind making it less possible for man to live a meaningful existence. Heaver asserts: "The question is one of decomposition with dignity in a decomposing universe" (Bloom 14).

Maggie's emotions and thoughts are less emphasized in Crane's narrative. She is known essentially through her interaction with the other slum characters. Her situation is survival from corporeal desolation. As a result of her Bowery orientation, she does not know right from wrong. Her alcoholic mother often snarls at her and her siblings. Her father, equally negligent of his familial tasks, creates brutal scenes consistently with Maggie's mother in the tenement resulting to the children's clumping in one corner extremely scared from their parents' outbursts and violence. Without a good role model that can influence her, Maggie engages in pre-marital sex with the Pete because she is left with no other option after her mother drives her out of the house. Her naiveté and impetuosity make her succumb outright to any available relief in the slums for survival due to the absence of parental support

system, a potent force a girl needs in order to develop into someone mature and responsible and live meaningfully despite being trapped in a chaotic world. Crane's novel tries to show that Maggie does not have any control over her life because external forces are stronger than individual freedom as confirmed by Henry George when he declares:

... that man mentally and physically is the result of slow modifications, perpetuated by heredity, irresistibly suggests the idea that it is the race life, not the individual life, which is the object of human existence (qtd. in Bloom 8).

Maggie's image as heroine is ironical because she is a victim of societal force. One of the weakest human species in Darwin's world, she has no place in the human race because in such world only the strongest and fittest survive. She just has to die because she is trapped by her natural circumstance, and her world is meant for the tough and violent. Bloom cites Beaver who explains:

But what Mendel and Ricardo and Marx and Darwin and Freud and Malthus had seemingly taught was that man was trapped: that he was the unsuspecting victim of genetic and economic and political and evolutionary and psychological forces, including an ever-spiralling population growth (7).

Maggie's conclusion is controversial. Critics present opposing views reflected in Dowling and Pizer's "*A Cold Case File Reopened: Was Crane's Maggie Murdered or a Suicide*" where both argue about Maggie's ending. Dowling claims that Maggie is murdered because the "huge fat man" who follows her "stands with her at the water's edge" and he adds by quoting Crane's words: "varied sounds of life...died away in silence" (53). Dowling strengthens his arguments by citing Bowers who explains that "the possibility of murder is as present as that of suicide, given the degeneracy of the man in Crane's description" (52).

Dowling sees Maggie's "prostitution as a naturalistic representation of the Darwinian struggle to survive that actual prostitutes no matter the time period, face as a matter of course" (44). He notes the change of the pronoun "her" (1893 edition) to "them" in "The structures seemed to have eyes that looked over them, beyond them, at other things." (Crane 47) and concludes that maybe "Stephen Crane insinuated the fat man back into his story after all" (48) implying that the latter is responsible for Maggie's death, a homicide case.

Pizer, on the other hand, insists that the ending is an act of suicide. To prove his point, he presents historical papers published in 1872, 1878, 1890, and 1894 about real life prostitutes who usually commit suicide "in the East River" (39). He also confirms the theme of suicide as the trend of the period and suggests that Crane's novel shows that the environment is responsible for Maggie's destruction (40). Pizer argues too about the meaning of the appearance of the fat man who "represents a stage in her decline...the stage of her absolute degradation" and adds that the fat man is "a harbinger, not the agent, of Maggie's death" (Dowling and Pizer 42). In the recent edition of *Maggie: A Girl of the Street*, the "huge fat man" is already changed to "a ragged being with shifting, bloodshot eyes and grimy hands" (Crane 47). Crane must have written the ending hanging and ambiguous so that his work remains a point for discussion by scholars and researchers, and makes them consider seriously the novel's social implications even after countless decades have already elapsed.

Metaphor and Paradox:

Crane has successfully portrayed the character of Maggie different from our standard idea of heroine because she lacks certain qualities of the heroine that precedes the naturalistic literature. Maggie has romantic delusions and is powerless over her sexuality which may be Crane's admonition for women with sentimental preference over practical realism. Having

inherited her family's economic deprivation, she could have toughened her acts for her survival in the Bowery. She could have worked in the factory with perseverance even if she loathes its dehumanizing condition:

The air in the collar and cuff establishment strangled her. She knew she was gradually and surely shrivelling in the hot, stuffy room. The begrimed windows rattled incessantly from the passing of elevated trains. The place was filled with a whirl of noises and odors (Crane 21).

Hopelessly romantic, Maggie knows that the factory is not for her.

Maggie is aware that her impoverished family cannot be relied upon for her own well-being. So she elopes too early with Pete whom she has romantic liaison with. However, after three weeks of being together with him, Pete dumps her for a slum girl he refers to as a "woman of brilliance and audacity". Eventually, Maggie opts to selling her body to whoever fancies her on the dumped and dim street in the city appearing dolled-up every night. Without any education, skill, and support from her immediate family, young Maggie can only be a defenceless whore. Crane tries to point out that in such society, a young woman like Maggie has no future.

Encarta Dictionary defines whore as "an offensive term for somebody who is regarded as willing to set aside principles or personal integrity in order to obtain something, usually for selfish motives". However, it is dubious if young Maggie knows anything about "principles or personal integrity". And why would she care about such idealism when her stomach is grumbling forever? Her experience in the Bowery offers her no one to emulate as role model of "principles or personal integrity". The Bowery is a jungle where savagery is common among the inhabitants just so they live on or continue to exist amidst stiff competition. And Maggie is hungry and homeless, and the only way to survive in her vicious world is to let men ravage her pure body and corrupt her soul and have total control over her

sexuality. She can only satisfy her hunger for food after she peddles herself to strangers of diverse backgrounds. This makes Maggie anti-heroine, an antithesis to our concept of heroine who commands power over her sexuality.

Life in the Bowery implies a dystopian society. The physical misery the heroine undergoes is continual, making suicide the only possible end. In chapter XVII, paragraph four, readers are shown a girl who is a member of the flesh trade because “she threw changing glances at men who passed her, giving smiling invitations...” (Crane 46). However, paragraph five of the same chapter depicts her as someone determined to reaching a specific place because she just walks on and on: “She hurried forward through the crowd as if intent upon reaching a distant home, bending forward in her handsome cloak, daintily lifting her skirts and picking of her well-shod feet dryer spots upon the pavements” (46). Crane seems already foreshadowing the imminent death of Maggie in the preceding sentence. This “distant home” is a hint of her impending suicide because she just walks on and on, block after block passing by several men until she reaches the “gloomy districts near the river” and “went into the blackness of the final block” (47). From her actions, she must have already decided to plunge into the river and prepared for it because she is clad handsomely while hastening her steps, and does not even stop to talk back when men disrespect her through their mockery. She just bears their disdain. A young man with moustache and evening attire is even taken aback by Maggie because she just passes by him “as if he was not in existence” (46). Having the river as target, she hastens her steps although she glances at a passing young man and manages to smile at a boy. It is therefore intriguing if her aim that important wet night is still to prey on men for them to shelve some extra bucks for her. She dresses well on a wet night because it is her last night to freedom apart from the obvious that she is accustomed to wearing presentable outfits being in the flesh trade. And she prefers the “darker blocks” to the “glittering avenues and the crowd” in order to get near the dark river fast and carry out

her plan. Crane writes: “She passed more glittering avenues and went into darker blocks than those where the crowd travelled” (46). The inclusion of “river” on the last paragraph of chapter VXII “... the deathly black hue of the river” (47) is associated with suicide as Pizer has already indicated in the news headlines of the time (Dowling and Pizer 39).

Crane, as naturalistic fiction writer, reports from his observations the reality of the era and shows how things are in the slums of New York. His novel hints at that having suicidal prostitutes is one of the era’s social realities. Metaphorically, he portrays Maggie’s Bowery as a jungle where life is a race for the strong and powerful. He shows, too, that her character as heroine is poles apart from our standard idea of heroine because Maggie’s qualities lack certain ingredients basing on standards that precede literary naturalism. She is initially an image of an underclass innocent girl who degenerates inevitably into a Mary Magdalene.

Maggie’s suicide is therefore deliberate. Uninformed of the concepts of morality, she belongs to no religious affiliation that can instil in her that self-violence is prohibited. She is a pariah in her society. No one cares for her, not even her own family who abandons her. She just endures a meaningless existence on the street. Her prolonged silence in the society means that she is incapable to speak for herself. She does not have a voice and is defenceless and powerless over her rights as a woman in a milieu where social ostracism prevails. Friendless in the flesh trade, she cannot prolong her desolation because death is still her sure-fire end eventually. Crane’s naturalistic novel suggests that only suicide can fill the void in her life. And this is where the paradox lies because people, in general, think of suicide as a form of cowardice. However, in Maggie’s case, suicide is liberation from being trapped in the decadent Bowery. It is a liberating act for Maggie because it is her voice, her final act of power. She could have chosen to have slowly declined further and survived from her physical situation, but she chooses the suicide over a bleak life as a whore. Her suicide means female power over further degeneration, the only clear-cut future for humankind as the

novel suggests, and a show of defiance from the norms of her harsh world. Her suicide is therefore a noise, a statement of pragmatism and common sense because the end is still the same for all: death of whatever form.

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