

## **Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*: A Socio-Philosophical Examination into Individual and Cultural Responsibility**

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### **Abstract**

American middle-class, bourgeois ideology posits a doctrine of self-reliance, meritocracy, and a belief in upward socio-economic advancement. Ethical relativism, on the other hand, views morality and ethics as culturally specific and subject to environmental variances. Stephen Crane, in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, his 1893 novella, incorporates these seemingly opposed notions into his view of the individual's relationship to his or her environment. Examining the unique ethical framework of the underclass, my research addresses the dialectical relationship between one's social class and the limits of human agency. Critics have tended to read naturalist works as entirely relativistic, depicting characters' fates as strictly determined by their socio-economic environment. Crane, unlike his fellow naturalist writers, defies such a simplistic worldview, positing a complex philosophy where human agency and social determinism coincide. I will demonstrate Crane's distinctive philosophical outlook by contrasting the characters of Maggie and Jimmie in their respective reactions to their oppressive environmental conditions. Specifically, I will explore how Maggie and Jimmie possess different levels of human agency, dictated by their personalities and dissimilar positions in the social hierarchy of the underclass. Jimmie recognizes the ceiling of his socio-economic advancement and strives to achieve maximum success in this prescribed social framework. Maggie, on the other hand, possesses a more idealistic view of her life circumstances, allowing herself to imagine the world beyond the slums. Due to her heightened sentimentality and romanticism, along with the social constraints of poverty and patriarchy, she falls prey to nihilism and despair whereas Jimmie existentially wills himself to survive the harsh environment. This research's aim is to reveal Crane's idiosyncratic philosophy, which calls for a reevaluation of American ethics and the roles of individual and cultural responsibility.

**Keywords: ethics, determinism, naturalism**

### **1. Introduction**

Conventional American middle-class bourgeois ideology posits a doctrine of self-reliance, meritocracy, and a belief in upward socio-economic advancement. Critics have tended to read Stephen Crane's 1893 novella, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, as a socially deterministic text depicting characters' fates as fixed strictly by their socio-economic environments. However, during the scientific and philosophical ascendance of Darwinism, Crane, unlike many of his fellow naturalist writers, defied simplistic determinism in favor of a complex philosophical dialectic where human agency and social determinism are not mutually exclusive, but, rather coincide. While not refuting the Darwinian conception of the universe, Crane complicates the ethical role of humanity in such a materialistic world.

Naturalism as a literary-philosophical movement is often misinterpreted as fatalistic, morally defeatist, and, when taken to its intellectual extremes, even nihilistic. Donald Pizer, a celebrated literary critic of naturalism, summarizes the movement as depicting a "struggle to survive materially rather than to prevail morally" (*The Norton Anthology*

1746). Placed in a post-Darwinian world, naturalism affirms an ontologically monistic, material universe where environmental factors, not human will, determine life outcomes. However, despite the starkness of this philosophy, naturalist writers engage in multifarious ways to derive human meaning in an indifferent “natural” universe. Darwinism ushered in a complete philosophical realignment regarding man’s “spiritual” self, leaving humanity lost in a moral dilemma where ethics exist relativistically, not absolutely. Naturalism offers two diametrically opposed responses, determinism and agency, to this epistemically ambiguous world where man’s actions seem to possess no intrinsic meaning. Crane, unlike many other naturalistic writers, embodies facets of both responses. Because of his varied position, Crane is able to interweave definitive ethics, despite their relativistic nature, into humanity’s existence in the post-Darwinian, ethically enigmatic universe.

The first conventional response of naturalism, causal, or unequivocal determinism, views man as simply a material phenomenon of the natural world devoid of melioristic agency. This response posits that free will and moral freedom are illusory; man is a slave to his somatic situation. This view directly argues against teleological notions of humanity’s existence, or notions of design and a coherent rationality of natural phenomena. Furthermore, this position is often criticized as nihilistic and for intensifying the ethical uncertainty associated with naturalism. The second response shifts the focus away from man’s dismal environmental condition toward individual human consciousness, a self-generating force of morality in a morally void wasteland. The first response characterizes the philosophical position of many naturalistic writers, perhaps most notably French novelist, Emile Zola. Crane’s philosophy, however, though sharing many fundamental philosophical aspects with the first response, is more concerned with the second. For Crane, the issue of whether the universe is deterministic or not is inapposite; he is concerned with constructing moral-ethical meaning in what he takes, in accordance with the philosophical-scientific community of the day, to be an indifferent universe. In other words, Crane’s philosophy is not concerned with the abstract, but rather with the practical and with human existence rather than metaphysical speculation. His philosophy is distinctly pragmatic in an American philosophical sense. He rejects the flat pessimism traditionally associated with naturalism and attempts to find, or, at the least, construct meaning in a meaningless world. According to Crane, humanity must create its own moral-ethical frameworks through actions. In this sense, his philosophy is predicated on a belief in humanity’s ability to metaethically construct ethics through its self-determination. Crane amalgamates two dialectically distinct philosophical doctrines, forging a melioristic materialism where human agency, whatever its limits, possesses moral-ethical agency. The question of how to create such meaning is a central concern Crane explores in *Maggie*.

Crane critics such as David Fiteslon in 1964 and Howard Horwitz in 1998 have claimed that Crane reduces the actions of the characters of *Maggie* to merely animalistic or ritualistic behavior, marking him a strict Darwinian determinist who “offers no suggestions or alternatives to the struggle for existence” (Fiteslon 194). This reductionistic reading ignores the rich moral-ethical meaning derivable from the text. In fact, and contrary to critical consensus, Crane offers a vigorous humanism where human actions possess melioristic, effectual meaning. To Crane, human actions, or at least, moral and ethical actions, matter because they are *chosen*. Crane does not discard human agency, or “personal honesty,” as he calls it, in favor of social determinism because of the powerful influence of socio-environmental influences and inhibitors. As Max Westbrook has pointed out, the most pressing question to Crane is that of man’s responsibility in an “environment [which] frequently shapes lives”? (587). We can trace Crane’s response to this question by contrasting the fates of the novella’s two main characters: Maggie and Jimmie.

## 2. Crane’s Characters

*Maggie* is a story of a young girl from the slums of New York City’s Bowery. She and her brother, Jimmie, react in starkly different ways to their brutal, poverty-stricken existence; their divergently reactions inextricably engender the different outcomes of their lives. Maggie, described as a flower “who blossomed in a mud puddle,” embodies sentimentalized romanticism and the yearning for personal transcendence over her environment (*Maggie* 9). Jimmie, on the other hand, early on recognizes his station in life, resigning himself to his socially prescribed existence within his socio-economic framework. He possesses no delusions of aristocratic grandeur, no yearnings for social transcendence like his sister. He is the figure of deterministic defeat. Jimmie is not much concerned with varying social frameworks and hierarchal American society; he “never conceived a respect for the world, because he had begun with no idols that it had smashed” (*Maggie* 7). Maggie is discontented with her life circumstances, while Jimmie, certainly not to be viewed as contented, is certainly *resigned* to his lot. This discrepancy of personal contentedness leads the characters to act in fundamentally different ways which alter their life outcomes. Jimmie reacts to his oppressive environment by hardening himself, becoming “a young man of leather,” and, as he grows up, his contemptuous “sneer became chronic” (*Maggie* 7). Maggie, by contrast, had “none of the dirt of Rum Alley in her

veins" (*Maggie* 9). Maggie is depicted as notably dissimilar from the rest of her social environment, and while Crane describes her dissimilarity primarily in physical, non-psychological terms, Maggie's sentimentalism renders her unique from the other characters of her world. And uniqueness, viewed from a Darwinian evolutionary perspective, is not a trait typically conducive to natural survival. Maggie's romanticized yearning for socio-economic transcendence is found most ostensibly in her infatuation with Pete, Jimmie's friend. As Jimmie and Pete tell tales of their masculine, physical prowess, Maggie "leaned back in a shadow," reflecting in wonder on the "aristocratic person" of Pete (*Maggie* 10). Already, Maggie imagines Pete, her soon to be lover, as "aristocratic," or as something other and beyond the cultural normalcy of her social environment. She places her faith in Pete's pseudo-aristocratism as a vehicle for her escape from a mundane existence. Her longing for the bourgeois and the aristocratic in her impoverished circumstances is a recurring, self-effacing factor which eventually leads to her despair. Obsessively romanticizing Pete eventually leads Maggie to adopt a sense of her own personal and economic inferiority, a stance inimical to surviving the harsh world of the Bowery.

Maggie becomes hyper self-aware of her own existence the more time she spends with Pete. Crane writes, "As thoughts of Pete came to Maggie's mind, she began to have an intense dislike for all of her dresses," and she began to self-consciously notice the "well-dressed women she met on the avenues," whom she envies for their "elegance of soft palms" (*Maggie* 14). The "soft palms" of the well-dressed women are starkly opposed to the impenetrable "leather," the "armor" which Jimmie dons. As Maggie regards her fellow seamstresses, "grizzled women," "mere mechanical contrivances... with heads bent over their work," she has a realization of her own aging self, leading her to speculate on "how long her youth would endure" (*Maggie* 14). Maggie demonstrates an ability to reflect in self-detached fashion; she constructs her sense of self by relating and comparing herself to others, whereas Jimmie constructs his sense of self by internalized self-reinforcement. Crane writes, after Maggie's exposure to the theater with Pete, that the "theater made her think" (*Maggie* 13). Maggie's "thinking," this ruminating quality in a world of physical immediacy, is what distances her psychologically from the other characters of the text. Her "thinking," as opposed to the "acting" of Jimmie, is a chief delineation of Maggie's dissimilarity from her environment.

More specifically, it is self-awareness that distinguishes Maggie from Jimmie. Jimmie engages in no noticeable reflection or self-questioning; he impulsively lives in the moment and does not cogitate on the abstract world beyond his immediate socio-economic locale. In contrast to Maggie's contemplative, future-focused mindset, Crane describes Jimmie in immediate environmental terms: "on the corners he was in life and of life... The world was going on and he was there to perceive it" (*Maggie* 7). Jimmie "perceives" life rather than considering it. Further marking his difference from Maggie, Jimmie disdains the well-dressed, viewing "fine raiment as allied to weakness" (*Maggie* 7). Maggie finds chimerical wonder in the garb of the aristocratic; Jimmie repulses it. Jimmie embraces his lower socio-economic existence and Maggie does not. When Jimmie does reflect for a moment on the heavens on a "star-lit evening," he pessimistically says, "Deh moon looks like hell, don't it?" (*Maggie* 9). Jimmie and Maggie are both pointedly aware of their inferior socio-economic position in society, but Jimmie's cynical worldview allows him the hardened psychological and emotional armor to survive the Bowery. Conversely, Maggie's idealistic sentimentalism leads to feelings of inferiority and despair, feelings unsuitable to surviving in her severe social environment. In Darwinistic terms, Jimmie adapts to his social environment and Maggie does not. Maggie's disposition is not *determined* to survive.

Maggie's lover, Pete, is shown to be oblivious, even callously indifferent of Maggie's heightened sentimentalism: "Pete did not consider that he had ruined Maggie. If he had thought that her soul could never smile again, he would have believed the mother and brother, who were pyrotechnic over the affair, to be responsible for it. Besides, in his world, souls did not insist upon being able to smile" (*Maggie* 30). Maggie, unlike her brother and Pete, is incapable of such emotional apathy. She is a creature of affective sensitivity who, when meeting the indifference of others, cannot, or refuses to, self-harden herself by repressing her emotionality. Upon Pete's rejection of her, Maggie is rendered speechless. She is incapable of defensive action, or reaction, and is induced numb by her lover's insouciance: "She was apparently bewildered and could not find speech. Finally, she asked in a low voice: 'But where kin I go?' The question exasperated Pete beyond the powers of endurance. It was a direct attempt to give him some responsibility in a matter that did not concern him" (*Maggie* 31). As this passage demonstrates, Pete embodies the normative virtues of the Bowery: self-reliance and emotional indifference to others. Maggie is void of such affective self-reliance; she requires *others* to help her survive her environment. Her codependence is an unfortunate trait which prevents her from adopting the normative behaviors of her environment.

But such an explanation, while certainly congruent with the naturalistic philosophy of the day, neglects the ethical questions engendered by Maggie's blight. Crane vividly depicts her demise, but he also offers an ethical interpretation to augment his bleak portrayal of the protagonist. Naturalistically, Maggie's inability to conform to the normative behaviors of her environment demarcates Crane's deterministic philosophical beliefs; however, the humanistic question is still left unresolved. If Maggie is inadequate to survive her environment due to her *determined* disposition,

who or what is ethically responsible for saving her from her weakness? Is anyone or anything responsible or is Crane resigning to social determinism?

### 3. Conclusion

Maggie's death, while a natural, undoubtedly expected culmination given her vulnerable predisposition, should not be viewed as Crane simply reinforcing a deterministic doctrine. Such a narrowed reading neglects the ethical imperatives Crane postulates by his characterization and the ontological realities of the text. Humanistic philosophy, integral to not only naturalism, but to Crane's own philosophical stance, leaves her death accessible to ethical interpretation. Critics have fallen prey to interpreting Maggie's demise as a byproduct of her harsh environmental constraints; the focus is nearly always placed on Maggie the individual as inept to survive her world. The critical focus should not be on Maggie and the Darwinistic maxim of "survival of the fittest." The focus must be sociologically placed beyond Maggie the individual and onto society. Individually, Maggie is inferior in her social environment, though if her fantasies of an aristocratic life were manifested, her sentimental nature would likely flourish in a bourgeois social environment. In this regard, Maggie is simply an individual born with traits uncondusive to her environment, though possibly amenable in another social context. When read humanistically, Maggie's death is not her fault, but rather society's. The social world of *Maggie* directly reflects the natural world; the characters of the text are incomprehensibly indifferent to Maggie's tender nature. Maggie's socioeconomic class, coupled with her unfitting predisposition of sentimentality, contribute to her ruin. Maggie herself is innocent, undeserving of such a sordid fate in the Bowery, yet she has no advocates to save her. Her own individual inferiority, found in her inability to adopt her environment's normative behaviors, doesn't allow her to survive, but it is society's faulty ethical standard which ultimately allows her to perish. If the world is deterministic, as Crane certainly believes, what is society's ethical responsibility for those, like Maggie, who cannot survive their *determined* environment?

Crane's aphorism of "personal honesty" charges man to use his predisposed qualities to their highest degree. He does not exempt ethics from this charge; in fact, ethics is his primary concern here. It is not simply Pete's desertion of Maggie which brings about Maggie's end. All the characters of the story play an implicit role in killing her. Such a sweeping ethical assertion is not out of line with Crane's own ethical philosophy. Crane was certainly a realist; he understood the relativistic nature of ethics, but he refused to absolve the individual from acting ethically due to ethical relativity. Crane rejects the moral-ethical resignation produced by determinism, understanding Maggie as not only an individual doomed by her own nature, but also as an individual doomed by an ethically anomic society. Maggie's death, whether viewed as murder by her prostitution patron, or as her own suicide, is *not* an archetypal illustration of Naturalism. Her death, when viewed through a melioristic, altruistic lens, is an ethical charge which emphasizes the need for a reevaluation of cultural responsibility for those, like Maggie, who cannot survive their environment. Ethics, despite being relativistic, are to be *self-determined* by society. Humanity must self-determinedly create its own ethics in a deterministic universe. Crane grants man the volition to choose ethics over relativistic indifference. Had her fellow characters and society chosen ethics over indifference, Maggie could have likely been saved from nihilistic resignation. Crane's emphasis on ethical choice as freely chosen in the face of environmentally normative pressures shows that Crane was uninterested, unlike many of the naturalistic writers, in capitulating to ethical relativism or social determinism in place of moral-ethical human agency. On the contrary, Crane posited humanistic ethics in a time of ethical doubt. *Maggie* demonstrates the idiosyncratic philosophy of Crane and the rich ethical meaning derivable from the text regarding the complicated social dialectical relationship between the individual and society.

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