

# Experimenting with Poverty & Performing Benevolence: Morality and Social Reform in Stephen Crane's New York City Sketches and *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*

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## Abstract:

This article analyzes the belief system of the Bowery people in Stephen Crane's city sketches and *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* and considers how the values imposed on them by the performance of morality in both the theatre and the mission church clash with their lived experiences and actively shape their lives. Through scenes which present a performance of grief and a spectacle of insincere emotions, Crane effectively criticizes the false morality of certain characters, like Maggie's mother Mary Johnson, while at the same time causing his readers to contemplate the plight of the poor. Mary seems to be mimicking the rhetoric and the ideology of benevolence of many female moral reformers. Middle-class morality significantly influences the values of these characters and seeps into Bowery culture through the religion of the mission church and through the entertainments found in the theatres and music halls that the characters visit. Middle-class culture sought to counter the disorder and crowd behavior of the lower class and the reform movement specifically targeted urban areas, subscribing to the belief that private virtue led to public virtue. Crane is critical of how both the mission church and the theatre promote moral poses without really seeking to do anything to help people. I argue that Crane emphasizes the effects of the performance of morality over the harsh physical environment as a determining force in the lives of the poor in America's emerging cities during the nineteenth century.

**Keywords:** nineteenth-century American literature, benevolence, morality, class, Stephen Crane, New York City

In the nineteenth century, America experienced rapid changes, including a shift of its population from rural to urban spaces. The effect of these changes on the daily lives of many Americans was reflected in the literature produced during this era, which often focused on urban life. Along with the population explosion in cities came an increased concern over morality, driven by organized groups of reformers. Because this was also the golden age of journalism, newspapers,

reporters, and editors dominated civic space by the late nineteenth century as readership and circulation skyrocketed. Writers like the reporter-novelist Stephen Crane examined both the harsh urban environment of America's emerging city landscape and the sentimental morality of the middle-class, which was heavily influenced by the reform movement. Technological and economic innovations were a factor in the transformation of journalism from a craft into an industry as a mass audience began to read newspapers during this time and, according to Howard Good, reporters took on a "wider and more controversial role in the life of the nation" (Good 1986, 13). This shift of power resulted in an era of violent strikes and class conflict; the economic suffering and social unrest felt by many was captured in both the journalism and fiction produced during this period.

Journalistic influences on creative writing occur in both stylistic techniques and the use of reporters as characters, and in a larger sense, newspaper journalism helped to shape the production and politics of American fiction. In particular, Stephen Crane's newspaper work significantly influenced his literary career as a reporter-novelist. Many nineteenth century writers believed, at least initially, in the idea of starting their writing career as a reporter and then transitioning into a literary career. However, several of these writers later came to disparage their journalism backgrounds as a waste of or distraction from their literary talents. Michael Robertson contends that starting in the 1880's, William Dean Howells and Henry James portrayed newspapers in conflict with the novel, and James even established the "myth of the artist destroyed by journalism," which later competed with the notion of the "artist nurtured by journalism," seen most clearly in the career of Stephen Crane and other reporter-novelists; these examples demonstrate "journalism's powerful role in the making of modern American literature" (Robertson 1997, 210).

Shelley Fisher Fishkin explores the continuities and discontinuities between American writers' journalism and fiction, concluding that for many writers, their journalism experience helped form the core of their greatest imaginative works by forcing them to be precise observers, teaching them to respect fact, and influencing their style (Fishkin 1985, 3-4). Fishkin explains that during the 1830's there were technological and demographic developments that created a new, cheap, and different kind of newspaper, in addition to a new concentration in these penny papers on reporting facts (Fishkin 1985, 13). In the 1850's through the 1870's there was a dual desire for greater accuracy in reporting and entertainment which led to the manufactured story and newspaper stunts that was common in yellow journalism. By the 1890's mass-circulation journals were overshadowing more traditional papers, and journalism helped authors create new styles of writing and new characters and subjects that had never been seen before in American literature.

Many of the practitioners of Howells's realism (Crane and Dreiser, among others) were reporters and editors who saw pivotal changes in America during this time period, including the rise of factories, the growth of the slums, an intensification of labor strikes, and the deepening gap between the wealthy and the poor. Fishkin contends that the success of many of these writers occurred when they returned to material they had first come to know as reporters. Furthermore, the influence of journalism on writers of fiction has produced, as Fishkin describes, "a distinctively

American pattern of literary creation” in which the press played a special role in “exposing the gaps between rhetoric and reality, between illusion and fact” and these writers could often more effectively question in their fiction the views they challenged in their journalism (Fishkin, 1985, 216-217). Even though Howells and James were apprehensive about the intersections between journalism and fiction, the younger generation of writers, including Crane, considered their newspaper work as a resource and preparation for their creative literature. Robertson argues that “none illustrates more clearly than Stephen Crane the shift from an antagonistic to a symbiotic relationship between journalistic and literary careers” (Robertson 1997, 4). Crane’s early journalism at the beginning of the 1890’s allowed him to, as Robertson describes, “experiment with narrative conventions, to explore his preoccupations with human character and the natural world, and to craft a distinctive ironic voice” (Robertson 1997, 73). He continued to develop those elements as he explored new literary outlets in New York City.

In a book on the intersections between journalism and realism, Thomas Connery argues that “Crane’s writing for newspapers and magazines became part of a rich collection of written and visual depictions, stories, and sketches that documented life in the 1890’s and early twentieth century, and included striking first-person participatory journalism” (Connery 2011, 164). This social reform aspect was also prevalent in the fiction of American authors between 1880 and 1920, and it was especially evident in works of literary realism. That genre in particular allowed authors to probe into the social, economic, and cultural issues of their day and presented a type of literature to readers that pushed them towards critical examination and action rather than escapism, which had dominated earlier American fiction. By pushing readers, especially women and those in the growing middle class, beyond the usual melodramatic and sentimental literature, realist authors sought to expose the grittiness of modern American life, most notably in the rapidly growing urban areas. The larger impact of this shift reveals an alteration in the objectives of American literature; by directly confronting the issues of poverty, racial and ethnic prejudice, economic disparity, and class conflicts, these writers were able to use their fiction to urge social action and reform.

Specifically, the literature of realism served as a link to and vehicle for social change. It represents the idealized values of personal autonomy in tandem with the collective duty to participate in civic affairs. By presenting realistic depictions of American life, writers aimed to enlighten readers about the ills of their society and spur them on towards social change. This period also saw a shift in the way many people perceived reform, towards a model that recognized the need for society to change the circumstances (including environmental and social forces) in which people live in order to change behavior. Reform-minded writers increasingly portrayed this progressive stance in their fiction. Many of the novels produced during this time were more than mere fiction, but instead in a larger sense were part of a movement for social change. Crane is often seen as the leading author of this type of realist and progressive literature, but the writing done by minority groups, including immigrants and women, was also instrumental in pushing the movement forward.

Among the younger journalists like Crane who wrote fact and fiction at the turn of the century, many focused on exposing the misery of the city, with a particular emphasis on the poor living and working conditions of the city's most unfortunate citizens. Muckraking, stunt reporting, and investigative reporting set the foundation for works like Jacob Riis's cutting-edge photographs and writing in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). These new styles of literature helped open the eyes of many in regards to how awful the slums were and how deplorable the working conditions of the factories were for these exploited people.

The increased significance of journalism between 1880 and 1920 had a profound effect on the content and form of American literature during the period, and there were blurred boundaries between the genres of poetry, fiction, essay, and news, all of which often appeared alongside one another in periodicals. The genres of realism and naturalism were greatly influenced by journalism's emphasis on careful observation, and the scientific approaches of many reporters contributed to the shaping of these two literary genres. Robertson describes Crane as a writer "unconcerned, both professionally and artistically, with the distinctions between literature and journalism, artist and reporter, high culture and low that were so significant to Howells and James" (Robertson 1997, 56). Realism, as a reaction against sentimentalism, focused on the experiences of ordinary life, realistic details, and objectivity. As a subset of realism, naturalism also chronicled the everyday realities of life at the turn of the century, but there was a notable deterministic element associated with this fiction that portrayed the biological and social forces beyond the characters' control. Donald Pizer calls *Maggie* "a novel primarily about the falsity and destructiveness of certain moral codes" and sees Crane as a naturalistic writer "in the sense that he believes that environment molds lives. But he is much more than this, for his primary concern is not a dispassionate, pessimistic tracing of inevitable forces but a satiric assault on weaknesses in social morality" (Pizer 1984, 120). Crane, Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Jack London were all influenced by their earlier journalistic careers and produced fiction that fits into the naturalistic and realistic genres. Crane is also sometimes referred to as a "literary journalist" due to his journalistic research style and approach. Additionally, Crane is one of the best known stunt-reporters of the late-nineteenth century, producing sketches such as "Experiments in Misery" and "Experiments in Luxury" in 1894. This type of experimental piece is described by Robertson as a common newspaper device during the 1890's in which a journalist would report on some uncommon experience and were generally aimed at reforming social ills. One of the most famous of these reporters was Nellie Bly whose 1887 stint in New York's public asylum led to a series of articles later published as *Ten Days in a Madhouse*.

In a biographical sketch, Bernard Weinstein suggests that the "missionary zeal" and "devotion to social causes" displayed by his parents impacted Crane's thoughts about "poverty, social inequity, and moral responsibility," causing both a "rebellion against their bourgeois values and an affirmation of their ethics" (Weinstein 1972, 13). Crane's father was a minister and his mother was a temperance-speaker. For a while Crane left his middle-class roots and lived in a bohemian community in New York to observe the poor living around him. Keith Gandall describes Crane's time spent in the

Bowery as an escape from the “dull and oppressive” culture he grew up in (Gandal 1997, 11). His assessment of middle-class sentimental morality and the reform movement was likely influenced by Crane’s own family background and upbringing. The Crane family, Robertson contends, would have been familiar with the works of Christian reformers like Charles Loring Brace and the Reverend Thomas DeWitt Talmage, which contained commentary on the issues of the New York slums in the 1870’s and 1880’s (Robertson 1997, 78).

In both his journalism and his fiction, Crane explored the ruptures in the middle-class system of morals, using sharp irony in his critiques. *Maggie* was written before Crane’s New York City sketches, so a linear connection between his journalism and his fiction cannot be simply constructed but there are important commonalities between his fiction and his journalism. Crane is one of the few writers who did not “abandon journalism once he had published a successful novel . . . He continued to write for newspapers throughout his career [including] feature articles on New York City, travel journalism, war correspondence, even sports reporting” (Robertson 1997, 4). Although *Maggie* was initially published in 1893, it didn’t gain critical attention until its second, revised edition was published in 1896 after the success of *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1895. In reviews critics set the stage for the notion that Crane’s writing developed through a process of observation in the New York slums, reports in the newspapers, and finally fiction based on that material. The relationship between his journalism and fiction is much more complicated than that. Nevertheless, it is notable that both his fiction and his reporting lack what Robertson refers to as “overt moralistic commentary” (Robertson 1997, 78). Unlike standard slum literature, Crane does not condemn drinking, violence, and sexual misconduct. On the contrary, he negatively portrays characters who are self-righteously moral. Crane’s disjointed and disorienting style was common in journalism of his era, but he carried this unconventional approach over into his fiction, avoiding moralizing and sentimentality in favor of a “morally neutral visual perspective” of city life (Robertson 1997, 85).

Although Crane’s fiction cannot be seen as a direct progression from observation to journalism to fiction, the complex relation between the two is still useful for understanding Crane’s writing. *Maggie*, along with other works like Jacob Riis’s pictorial documentary *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), had, as Gandal describes, a “mixed agenda of spectacle with charity and surveillance” (Gandal 1997, 17). However, unlike Riis, Crane uses few racial and ethnic stereotypes, instead focusing on the determining forces of morality.

In the 1890’s the socioeconomic gap in New York City was huge, and Crane explores these tensions in his writing of this period. As Robertson asserts, Crane’s city sketches “bridge distances that were geographically insignificant but socially and cognitively vast” (Robertson 1997, 81). Within a historical context, 1894 is considered the most brutal year of the depression after the stock market crash of 1893, and this worsening plight of the poor is examined in Crane’s “experiment” sketches. A comprehensive biography of Crane by Paul Sorrentino contains a description of how direct, personal experience “became the basis for not only journalism but fiction as well” for young

writers like Crane even while more traditional, older writers found the approach to be extreme (Sorrentino 2014, 125). Crane's experience of joining a line of bums and unemployed to wait for a cheap meal and bed makes its way into his sketch "The Men in the Storm" which ran in the *Arena* in October 1894. Even though "The Men in the Storm" was published in October 1894, which was six months after the "Experiment" sketches, there is evidence that Crane experienced the blizzard which blanketed the Bowery with nearly eighteen inches of snow for over thirty hours starting on February 26, 1894 (Sorrentino 2014, 123). For these three stories, Crane left behind the comfortable middle-class existence of his family and briefly immersed himself in the poverty of the New York City slums in order to better understand their situation in a more personal way.

Crane uses repeated imagery in "The Men in the Storm" to capture their plight. "The Men in the Storm" there is a shift in narrative perspective early on which discards the complacent observer from the middle-class and plunges the reader into the crowd's interior. In this way, Crane discards the notion of a stable narrative point of view. Although it can be seen as a work of social protest due to its inherent challenging of the divisions created by the American economic system, the sketch rejects the tone of moralistic condemnation that was commonly seen in other texts in journals like the *Arena*, published by the Christian socialist Benjamin O. Flower.

The snowstorm is described in detail with the blizzard that "began to swirl great clouds of snow along the streets .... Until the faces of pedestrians tingled and burned as from a thousand needle-prickings" and the people "huddled" and "stoop[ed] like a race of aged people" and no one is spared from the "dreariness of the pitiless beat and weep of the storm." However, Crane then divides people into those who were hurrying off to their cozy homes and "hot dinners" and those who had to stand cold and hungry in the storm for food & shelter – showing the contrast between the affluent and the poor. Crane's repetition of imagery in the description of the group of homeless men exposes their isolation and vulnerability to the reader. The men in the story are often reduced to animals through Crane's language, but Robertson argues that the determinist perspective is presented as only a temporary point of view. The storm turns the men into nothing but "a heap of snow-covered merchandise" and they are often described in terms of their clothes or body parts in the examples "a heap of old clothes" and a "collection of heads." Connery highlights this experience as one that is dehumanizing for the men described and this is reflected in Crane's use of the phrases "mass," "collection of men," "a compressed group of men," "bodies of men," "a collection of heads," "a mob," a "thick stream," and "sheep" – all of which deemphasize them as individuals (Connery 2011, 182). They become less human and less civilized as they wait, as depicted in the following lines: they are "grim," telling "uncouth" jokes and laughing "ferociously like ogres." As a mass of brute force, they push against the building, "panting and groaning in fierce exertion" but upon entering the building, Connery notes, they become complacent and human again; Crane's journalistic training helps him capture this scene of the plight of the unemployed but he goes beyond the fact when he turns it into a cultural interpretation of the loss of their individuality due to their situation.

Similarly, Crane explores the facts of poverty and homelessness in his two “experiment” sketches but they are distinguished from other newspaper accounts on the subject due to “intense, striking metaphors and imagery” and what Connery calls the “interplay between perception and reality and its role in society’s creation of identity” (Connery 2011, 183). In this context, Crane explores the fluidity of a person’s identity as influenced by environment in “An Experiment in Misery” and “An Experiment in Luxury,” which appeared in consecutive Sunday editions of the *New York Press* in April 1894. Together they reveal how, as Connery contends, “a person’s *behavior* and *thinking* are shaped by the environment,” as evidenced by the young man conducting the experiments who begins to think like a tramp or a millionaire (Connery 2011, 184). Crane questions whether it is possible to “feel” what a homeless person feels and his character ultimately concludes that at the very least his point of view has “undergone a considerable alteration.” The strength of Crane’s experiment pieces was the contrast between the perspectives that he gained by dressing like a homeless person in the first situation and then attending a formal dinner at the home of a Fifth Avenue millionaire in the second. What’s unique is his lack of moralizing and sentimentality. As Robertson describes, Crane “uses a conventional newspaper form to conduct experiments in perception and identity” (Robertson 1997, 96). Because these pieces came out during the frenzy caused by the march of Coxe’s Army of unemployed men on Washington D.C., they have additional cultural significance. Unlike other newspapers who disparaged Coxe’s group, Crane did not portray the notion of the tramp as a threat to morality, but instead sought to convey to his audience the experiences and feelings of the tramp.

Although Crane was familiar with the reform efforts of the 1890’s, his writing does not contain direct commentary on the sources of poverty or propose ideas for reform. Instead, Crane is interested in experimenting with point of view in his sketches. His writing differs from other texts that examined the poor which primarily took on the ideological approach of Christian moralism, which Robertson defines as “the belief that poverty resulted from the moral failings of individuals, predominantly intemperance and idleness” (Robertson 1997, 91). Chauncey M. DePew and T. DeWitt Talmage represent the time period’s attention to both individual effort and religious redemption, and nineteenth-century urban reformers “shared a belief in the need for moral regeneration” with reform programs that included ideas about how to “cure” the “disease” of urban poverty, the most notable being Charles Loring Brace’s strategy to remove poor children from the slums to send them to live on western farms (Robertson 1997, 91).

In the frame to the story in “Experiment in Misery,” the conversation between the young man and his friend sets the stage for the experiment. The friend says that the youth can tell nothing of the tramp’s condition unless he experiences it himself, noting that “it is idle to speculate about it from this distance.” After dressing the part, the young man quickly experiences negative reactions from those he passes on the street and this causes him to lose his confidence and become dejected. Robertson suggests that the youth becomes controlled by his surroundings and the passive verbs used to describe him at that point in the story emphasize his “passivity and the corresponding power

of his surroundings” (Robertson 1997, 99). When he connects with another man from the “other half” and spends a sleepless night in the Bowery, his perception begins to transform, revealing new ideas about social inequality.

The subsequent experiment also causes a revelation about identity and perception. In “An Experiment in Luxury,” the youth’s perceptions fluctuate from superiority and complacency to an expanded point of view that questions class divisions. At the beginning, the mansion and visible signs of wealth make him “feel that he was a better man than many – entitled to a great pride.” Later this point of view shifts as he idly chats with his friend “with no more apparent responsibility than rabbits, when certainly there were men, equally fine perhaps, who were being blackened and mashed in the churning life of the lower places.” The youth wants to understand the “eternal mystery of social condition” and ultimately Crane’s sketch suggests that these divisions are created by ideology and rigid moralistic beliefs that impede social progress.

Crane also probes the effects of these moral codes in *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893), in which the title character grows up in the slums of New York City. Through scenes which present a spectacle of grief and insincere emotions, Crane criticizes the false morality of characters like Maggie’s abusive mother Mary Johnson, while at the same time causing his readers to contemplate the plight of a poor girl like Maggie. Rather than presenting Maggie as a character who is merely a pawn of her environment, the main tragedy of *Maggie* centers on what Gandal refers to as a “clash between traditional and Bowery ethics . . . [as] Crane explicitly challenges the universality of Protestant morality” (Gandal 1997, 22). Notions of purity and moral integrity are not part of the ethics of Maggie’s generation in the Bowery. Crane doesn’t judge his characters according to middle-class morality but rather is interested in exploring the ethical codes of the Bowery in which his younger characters operate. Gandal splits the main characters into three groups, including “uninformed violators” like Maggie, “superstitious believers” like Mrs. Johnson, and “hypocritical advocates” like Jimmie (Gandal 1997, 53). Within this context, I argue that Crane emphasizes morality over environment as a determining force and uses this to critique the performance of sentimental morality during the nineteenth century.

According to historian Paul Boyer’s study of the stages of America’s moral response to the city, the common ideology of all reformers centered on the idea that the city should replicate the moral order of the village, in which citizens are knit together in cohesive communities by shared moral and social values. At mid-century, the middle class became more and more concerned about the danger the slums posed to society through the revolutionary violence displayed in riots and gangs (Boyer 1978, 89). As Boyer asserts, the middle class looked down on the poor as having “defects of character” and saw the slums as the site of the “plague” that would “infect” the rest of society (90). Reformers during this time saw a clear connection between environment and morality – a person’s failings might initially drag them down to the slums but the physical conditions deepen his moral degradation and might be passed on to his children (93). The zeal of moral reform and “civic-uplift” hit a new high in the late nineteenth century and urban middle-class America became even more

caught up in the movement, spurred on by groups like the National Union for Practical Progress, which included Frances Willard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union on its advisory board (163). Crane criticizes this zeal for moral reform and the pressing of middle class ideals upon the urban masses, but tempers it with a sense of concern for Maggie's predicament.

Fundamentally, Crane is not concerned so much with the physical environment of the slums as he is with the moral belief system of the people who live in the Bowery and how, as Pizer describes, their values both clash with their experience and actively shape their lives (Pizer 1984, 145). Although Maggie's mother Mary is a violent drunk, she envisions herself as a good parent and pious Christian. Mary is clearly hypocritical to the reader, but she doesn't see it herself. Due to this mindset, she is able to ignore the fact that she regularly beat her children, while accusing Maggie of abusing and treating her mother poorly, and with no irony wonders "When a girl is bringed up deh way I bringed up Maggie, how kin she go teh deh devil?"

Mary subscribes to a sentimental morality drawn from middle-class values that emphasize the home, virtue, and respectability. The morality of the Bowery is deeply tied to the approval of others, but for Maggie, morality revolves around an internal belief system, putting her at odds with those around her. She does not feel like she is going against morality by becoming involved with Pete and in fact, Maggie sees him as a "knight," indicating that both hold values different from those of the middle class, which the older generation in their community attempt to enforce. This division between opposing moralities causes tension between parents and children. Gandal asserts that Crane portrays this "extreme separation so that Maggie can fall through the cracks . . . [since] she does not know how to be conventionally virtuous because she was never told; she is drawn to the values of her generation, but she does not seem to possess the spirit to embody them herself" (Gandal 1997, 57).

In his overview of the ironic structure of the story, Joseph Brennan asserts that Mary is "brutal yet hopelessly maudlin, irresistibly aggressive and invulnerably self-righteous . . . [embodying] all the evil forces of this society that work Maggie's and eventually its own destruction . . . [H]er outrageous physical strength [symbolizes] the devastating moral and psychological might by which she smashes the minds and souls of her children" (Brennan 1979, 181). Furthermore, as Marston LaFrance argues, Mary is a "moral monster" who delights in brutality, destruction, and sentimental self-pity (LaFrance 1972, 38). The story forcefully dramatizes the central thematic irony of the self-righteous condemnation of a good woman by the very society responsible for her downfall (Brennan 1979, 184).

Through characters like Mary Johnson, Crane is attacking the middle-class morality that she mimics. Crane's critique is that Mary's performance is a sham, and he is critical of the romantic way that morality was often "performed." By portraying Mary as a contradictory figure whose life experiences do not match the moral positions she espouses, Crane draws attention to the sentimentalism of the reform movements led primarily by middle-class women who became involved in benevolent and moral reform societies that sought to suppress vice in urban areas. Reform organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) dedicated much of their time to regulating the morals of American society.

This idea of community standards of morality is portrayed in the scenes in *Maggie* where Mary plays the role of moral judge in front of the audience of neighbors. She fits into Gandal's description of Crane's dichotomy between characters who are performers or spectators, and this is particularly evident when she implements "conspicuously theatrical measures" during her confrontation with Maggie (Gandal 1997, 111). Mary dramatically points her finger and jeers at Maggie when she comes home after Pete abandons her. Maggie's brother Jimmie recoils from her, "express[ing] horror of contamination" (56). The neighbors gather to witness the scene as if it is entertainment and children "ogled her [Maggie], as if they formed the front row at a theatre" (56). The women whispered in the doorway as Mary addressed them like a "glib showman" (56). Crane effectively expresses his criticism through his theatrical language of Mary's performance of morality.

Crane's use of the mother-figure as an instrument of criticism is especially significant given that the ideology beneath much of women's social activism in the late nineteenth century revolves around the conflation of femininity and morality. According to Lori Ginzberg, many female reformers used the "ideology of benevolence" to fight for their causes, and the depiction of piety and moral virtue as inherently female qualities was widely accepted in the nineteenth century. In her book on democracy and public life in the city, Mary Ryan challenges the positive association between femininity and morality, arguing that the role many women played as public female icons ("living female allegories") actually turned them into spectacles, rather than positive symbols (Ryan 1997, 246). Women of the middle and upper classes performed a ritual of charity – Ryan calls them "impersonators of benevolence" – and this ritual "spelled out an elaborate social and political theory: They honored free enterprise, self-help, class harmony, and female altruism all at once" (Ryan 1997, 249). This "ceremonial performance of gender," according to Ryan, did not further women's rights or feminism; it wasn't until much later that women would escape the representation of females as some "transcendent other" or projection of ideals and begin to fight against gender division (Ryan 1997, 251).

Mary's performances of morality seem to fall within this category, as she plays the role of the virtuous female in the scenes she performs for her audience of neighbors. Notably, her audience is also made up primarily of other women who react with the same smug self-righteousness towards Maggie. One mother snatches her child away from Maggie "casting a terrible look of indignation at the girl" (56). Another mother picks up a child in Maggie's path "as if rescuing a human being from an on-coming express train" (56). In his essay on tragedy and melodrama in *Maggie*, Thomas Gullason describes the tenement neighbors in theatrical terms, referring to their function as a sort of chorus like those in classic Greek tragedies. In their role as chorus, the audience of neighbors is meant to interpret the action, take sides, criticize, and moralize, but Crane's chorus is notably hypocritical in their damnation and lack of pity (Gullason 1979, 250). These women epitomize Crane's critical portrayal of female reformers myopically concerned with morality, while ignoring justice and fairness in their treatment of girls like Maggie.

At the end of the story, Crane illustrates sentimental morality to its fullest in the scene where Mary weeps over the baby booties of the dead Maggie:

The mourner sat with bowed head, rocking her body heavily to and fro, and crying out in a high, strained voice that sounded like a dirge on some forlorn pipe. 'I kin remember when she weared worsted boots an' her two feets was no bigger dan yer thumb...' (67)

This exaggerated sentimental picture of a mother grieving over the loss of her child is followed by the scene of "forgiveness." As if she was acting in a play, Mary reacts to the other women's cries to forgive her daughter by shaking "in an agony of grief" while "hot tears seemed to scald her quivering face" and finally in a voice "like a scream of pain" she agrees, "'Oh, yes, I'll fergive her! I'll fergive her!'" (69).

The contradictory nature of Mary provides Crane with a means to analyze the sentimental morality of the middle-class. Karen Halttunen links the expression of sentimental culture to the "cult of mourning." Mary and her audience of tenement dwellers publicly enact a scene of Christian piety and social benevolence. Middle-class sentimentalists feared that the ritualization of mourning could be deceptively performed by those that were not really sincere, and this is exactly what Mary is doing in her scene of grief. A common feature of sentimental mourning was the veneration of mementos or reminders of the deceased, such as Maggie's baby booties. These items were supposed to be cherished and wept over in privacy but Mary uses them as a prop in her performance. Halttunen explains that the sentimental view emphasized the "power of domestic love" over death (Halttunen 1982, 130). Crane parodies this by portraying discontinuity between Mary's previous cruel behavior towards Maggie and her sentimental response to her daughter's death. She appropriates this expression of morality when it is useful to her.

The emphasis on powerful rhetorical strategies also applies to Mary's performances. In her book on nineteenth-century temperance rhetoric, Carol Mattingly examines the effectiveness of the arguments of women reformers, which was so successful because of its carefully composed ethical appeal. Crane applies this rhetoric to Mary through her persuasive performances in front of the judges at court and the neighbors at the tenement. During her regular visits to court, she "besieged the bench with voluble excuses, explanations, apologies and prayers" (19). She employed ethical appeals in her arguments to escape punishment; her familiar act of "flaming face and rolling eyes" effectively won her influence in the court as she "gradually [rose] to that degree of fame that she could bandy words with her acquaintances among the police-justices" (19). Mary also effectively uses rhetoric in her performances of grief and gains the sympathy of all of the neighbors. Throughout the story, Crane manipulates language in his ironic use of words and concepts like "respectability" and by doing so he reduces them to what Joseph Brennan calls a "hypocritical sham, a convenient justification for cruelty, irresponsibility, and indifference" (Brennan 1979, 175). Crane comments on the power of rhetoric most vividly in his depictions of Mary.

Just as Mary's rhetoric wins her power within her circle of neighbors, the reform movements of the nineteenth century, can also be linked to an increase in female power and influence. Catherine Gilbert Murdock argues that the temperance campaign helped define the simultaneous battle for women's suffrage (Murdock 1998, 4). The debate motivated women's political participation because women realized that it would be impossible to pass prohibition laws without political involvement. The concept of femininity was complicated by this issue as temperance women promoted the image of woman as "pious, pure, domestic, and submissive: the 'true woman' who obeyed her father or husband while quietly swaying him with her inherently moral nature" (Murdock 1998, 17). However, women became increasingly aware that their piety alone would not get legislation to pass. The founding of the WCTU gave the movement a more organized front and got many women involved in politics. Mattingly concludes that a major component of the success of temperance was the effectiveness of their rhetorical appeals (Mattingly 1998, 163).

Within this context, Crane's deliberate characterization of Mary as both a drunk *and* the central moral judge in the story is striking. The distinctly unfeminine Mary, who abuses her family during her drunken rages, is clearly not the description of a woman who has an "inherently moral nature." Mary's rhetoric and performance are instead influenced by the middle-class culture she observes and mimics.

A politicizing of urban morality occurred in the nineteenth century, and as a result, the reform movement took on a more explicit class and ethnic coloration, strengthening the desire to impose middle-class ideals upon the urban masses (Boyer 1978, 172). Historian Paul Gilje argues that middle-class morality was closely tied to the rise of the market economy, which valued private property and aggressive entrepreneurs (Gilje 1987, 205). There was a sharp contrast between middle-class culture and what Gilje calls the plebeian moral economy, which emphasized the unity of the individual and the community. These differences led to an inevitable clash that often involved violence and taking grievances to the streets; the rapidly growing market economy, combined with the influx of immigrants during the nineteenth century, caused greater distance between levels of society (Gilje 1987, 206). The reform movement specifically targeted urban areas, subscribing to the belief that private virtue led to public virtue.

The Bowery people came into contact with middle-class culture through urban entertainment found in the theatre, music halls, and museums. Even Maggie is temporarily influenced when Pete takes her to see a show and she is enthralled: "Her cheeks were blushing with excitement and her eyes were glistening...No thoughts of the atmosphere of the collar and cuff factory came to her" (27). At the theatre, Maggie and the rest of the audience "hissed vice and applauded virtue" (31). Ironically, she believes that the theatre "made her think," even though the melodramas she watches are not relevant to the reality of Bowery life. Robert Dowling asserts that "the fiction of the stage begins to distort the very reality it loosely represents" (Dowling 2003, 53) and Pizer affirms this notion with his idea that there is a difference between the values *imposed* on the Bowery and reality (Pizer 1984, 144). The theatrical performances that Maggie and Pete attend are moral-reform dramas

that contain the typical aspects of popular melodramas (the hero rises from poverty in the first act to wealth and triumph in the end). Middle-class values are acted out on the stage and absorbed by the audience.

Similarly, middle class culture penetrates the Bowery through the music hall in scenes juxtaposed against each other. One scene that Maggie and Pete see involves the singing of the star-spangled banner, which rouses a cheer from the audience while “eyes gleamed with sudden fire, and calloused hands waved frantically in the air” (27); another scene includes a dancer in a costume of “some half dozen skirts” whose performance is described as “[giving] to the Bowery public the phantasies of the aristocratic theatre-going public, at reduced rates” (26). Dowling argues that in performances like these, middle-class morality is introduced to the audience of lower-class people, and this interweaving of Bowery behavior and Victorian culture influences their value system.

The sentimental morality of the Bowery is also very closely connected with the sanctimoniousness of Bowery religion, and Crane is critical of both. The mission church, like the theatre, promotes moral poses without really seeking to do anything for the people it is supposed to help. Mid-nineteenth century reformers focused on evangelical “revivals” and the primary outreach in the slums continued to center around the city missions; by 1865 there were 76 missions in New York City alone, but they were considered largely impersonal (Boyer 1978, 80). It is through these venues of entertainment and religion that the Bowery receives their notions of morality. In one scene, Jimmie enters a mission church where a minister is preaching to a Bowery audience. As he sermonizes about sin, the minister addresses the audience directly using “you” rather than including himself by using “we”; the minister is saved but the Bowery audience is damned because they are not a part of the acceptable Christian culture (Dowling 2003, 56-57). The minister’s audience grows “impatient over the pictured depths of their degradation” (15) as they tolerate the minister’s sermon while they wait for the soup-tickets that are so necessary to their survival.

A scene near the end of the novel again shows the moral ambiguity of some of the church’s representatives when Maggie meets a clergyman on the street and he avoids assisting her:

The girl had heard of the Grace of God and she decided to approach the man. His beaming, chubby face was a picture of benevolence and kind-heartedness. His eyes shone good-will. But as the girl timidly accosted him, he gave a convulsive movement and saved his respectability by a vigorous sidestep. He did not risk it to save his soul. For how was he to know that there was a soul before him that needed saving? (60)

Dowling calls these influences of morality the “grotesque imposition of middle class mores onto the slum’s inhabitants” (Dowling 2003, 58). Within this context, it seems that Crane’s criticism is not of slum life, but rather the harm done by an artificial morality imposed on that life. Clearly Mary embodies the influence of the middle-class morality that is impressed upon the Bowery by the missions and the melodramas, which teach her to judge and detach herself from any responsibility to others. Maggie, on the other hand, is influenced more by her own internal beliefs, which seem more aligned with a truly Christian spirit of generosity and kindness. In this sense,

she clearly does not perform morality in the way her mother does. When she thinks about her relationship with Pete, she says “she [does] not feel like a bad woman. To her knowledge she had never seen any better” (45). It is the artificial sense of morality practiced by Mary and others in the Bowery that drives Maggie to her downfall. Since Maggie is not consciously going against traditional morality, it becomes evident that Crane is more interested in her loss of confidence rather than a battle with temptation. Gandal contends that “self-doubt replaces temptation self-hatred replaces sin [and] a struggle to be virtuous has been replaced in *Maggie* with a battle for self-respect” (Gandal 1997, 102). When Maggie takes action and leaves with Pete, she is scorned by her family and community. This lack of support in the name of moral codes that Maggie does not understand ultimately leads to her demise.

In both his journalism and his fiction, Crane explored the ruptures in the middle-class system of morals, using sharp irony in his critiques. Crane’s description of Maggie as a girl who “blossomed in a mud puddle” tests the link many reformers saw between morality and environment. The “positive environmentalist approach,” as Boyer defines it, was a more subtle approach to reform that aimed to remold the city’s physical environment in order to elevate its moral tone; it coexisted alongside other more coercive crusades of reform that treated the city as a “menace” to be subdued (Boyer 1978, 175). Tenement reform and the conscious planning of urban environments with parks, municipal art, and playgrounds were sponsored by more progressive reformers who studied the social needs met by saloons and brothels, offering the working class viable alternatives (Boyer 1978, 221). The city beautiful movement grew out of this impulse, promoting a more livable and attractive environment that would inspire a surge of civic loyalty and reverse the decay of social and moral cohesiveness (Boyer 1978, 264). As Boyer asserts, this group of reformers was focused on using the “benevolent manipulation” of the physical and social environment as a technique of urban moral control.

For Maggie, the effects of the physical environment play a less significant role than the middle-class morality that influences the Bowery through the theatre and the mission church. Crane draws upon melodrama to evoke compassion and to express his criticism of the sentimentalism of the moral reform movement. Mary practices this sentimental morality in her judgment of her daughter, even though her own life experiences are at odds with this ideology. Her performance is an act of superficial sentimentality that allows her to judge but distance herself. Crane is critical of this performance of morality because of its empty meaning and he complicates and redefines the concept of morality through his novel. In doing so, Crane stretches the boundaries of literary naturalism by exploring the theme of morality as a determining force, and thereby leaves his own distinct mark on the literature of his era.

The characters in Crane’s socially engaged sketches and stories are continuously shifting and revealing new perspectives to the reader, probing beneath the surface and confronting the fluidity of identity and perception. In his sketches especially, Crane presents a strong sense of social injustice yet he wrote with irony that created an unsentimental distance. His sketches in 1894 display

an astute awareness of the effects of environment on people and reveal Crane's social conscience that was developed out of his direct experiences. Crane's critique of hypocritical middle-class moral codes in *Maggie* took the form of a prose style that Sorrentino aptly describes as "replete with jarring diction and sensory impressions [that render] character, theme, and setting" (Sorrentino 2014, 109). The sentimentalizing and moralizing that was so common in other works of his era was missing from Crane's work, portraying an innovative, starkly realistic portrayal of slum life that remains among the most captivating examples from American literary history.

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