Vanity and Violence in Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets

Chuan-Hui Hung
Department of Applied English
Chihlee Institute of Technology

Abstract

Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets has been criticized for its “episodic” style, “weakness for words,” or “inadequacy” since its publication in 1893. However, Crane’s portrayal of the late 19th century Bowery slum life has kept attracting critics’ attention for its ironic touch on human vanity and violence. For example, characters, like Jimmie, Pete, and Mrs. Johnson, are all used to picking up vanity and violence as means of self-justification. Besides, Crane is very good at handling colors and images for the specific intention of his narration. The following reading is an attempt to analyze Crane’s techniques of narration, to see how he displays his artistic craftsmanship to portray vanity and violence as underlying themes throughout Maggie.

Keywords: Stephen Crane, Maggie, Vanity, Violence, American Literary Naturalism
史蒂芬·葛倫所著《瑪姬：阻街女郎》小說中的虛榮與暴力

洪全揮
致理技術學院應用英語系

摘要

史蒂芬·葛倫所著《瑪姬：阻街女郎》自一八九三年出版以來，常被指敘事情節不連貫、詞不達意，或因文風弱點而飽受批評。然而，持續引起文評家關注的是在這本描述美國十九世紀末紐約貧民窟生活中，葛倫卻以他反諷式的手法，生動地刻畫人們生活中所顯露出的虛榮與暴力。其中的角色，諸如吉米、皮特、強生太太等，都以此作為自我正當化的藉口與手段。除此之外，葛倫也善於運用色彩與意象，來刻意地呈現他所要表達的敘事目的。本篇研究即針對葛倫在書中所展現的寫作技巧，探討他是如何成功地鋪陳人性的虛榮與暴力，並使其成為貫穿全篇小說的重要主題。

關鍵字：史蒂芬·葛倫、《瑪姬：阻街女郎》、虛榮、暴力、美國自然主義文學
Acclaimed as “the first dark flower of American Naturalism” by Maurice Bassan (3), Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets has been criticized for its “episodic” style, “weakness for words,” or “inadequacy” since its publication in 1893. John Berryman, for example, believes that the art of Maggie is “an effect of intense pressure and nearly perfect detachment,” but he also points out that Crane has to “rely on loose, episodic structure” (163). As to Crane’s weakness for words, Arno Karlen comments that Crane “used whatever was handy, especially superlatives,” when he “didn’t have something inspired” (219). In Karlen’s opinion, Crane is desperate to convince his reader, so that he produces “an atmosphere of grotesquerie in which everything was bigger than life, like a violent shadow play” (213). Donald B. Gibson’s criticism on Maggie is harsh, too. He criticizes that the tale, “on the ideological level,” is “entirely inadequate” (212). Owing to Crane’s “inadequacy of the basic conception of the tale,” Gibson asserts that “the reader is likely to find it difficult to involve his sympathies with anyone in the story” (213). Indeed, Crane’s scenes for his portrayal of the late 19th century Bowery slum life are, to some degree, episodic in form or style. Lars Åhnebrink, for example, uses several scenes in Maggie to further exemplify his assertion that “a few of Zola’s novels seem to have been a source of inspiration and a literary model for some of Crane’s own stories” (250).

However, despite his episodic style for story narration, Crane maintains a consistent as well as ironic touch on human vanity and violence. For example, characters, like Jimmie, Pete, and Mrs. Johnson, are all used to picking up vanity and violence as means of self-justification. As Joseph X. Brennan points out, Crane’s use of irony is brilliant and “most remarkable” (304). Or, to put it in Janet Overmyer’s words, there is “a decided controlling structure that combines with the theme to form a pleasing whole” (184). Besides, Maggie is Crane’s first novel, but this doesn’t mean that he writes it in an immature or heavy-handed way as Karlen alleges. On the contrary, Crane is very good at handling colors and images for the specific intention of his narration. In his study of Crane, Milne Holton asserts, too, that Crane’s manipulation of metaphors and images is “intrinsic” to his “method as well as to his theme”
(40). Thus, in the following reading, I shall try to analyze Crane’s techniques for narration, to see how he displays his artistic craftsmanship to portray vanity and violence as underlying themes throughout Maggie. In his letter to John Northern Hilliard, Crane explains his code for literary creation. Crane writes:

I endeavored to express myself in the simplest and most concise way. If I failed, the fault is not mine. I have been very careful not to let any theories or pet ideas of my own creep into my work. Preaching is fatal to art in literature. I try to give to readers a slice out of life; and if there is any moral or lesson in it, I do not try to point it out. I let the reader find it for himself. . . .1

Indeed, Crane never preaches because he just wants to give to readers “a slice out of life,” to see how people err and suffer. This objectivity, in my opinion, is not the author’s inadequacy or “lack of sympathetic involvement with his people” as Gibson declares (216). On the contrary, Crane gives the novel its power by his artistic detachment, or to put it in Van Wyck Brooks’ words, by his “omissions” and “the things he did not say” (6).

In the opening scene of Maggie, Crane describes a children’s fight, in which he suggests his understanding of violence and vanity as parts of human nature. Crane writes:

A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil’s Row who were circling madly about the heap and pelting at him. His infantile countenance was livid with fury. His small body was writhing in the delivery of great, crimson oath. (3)

As the little boy is defending the honor of Rum Alley, so are those from Devil’s Row defending their own. The boy and his foes are performing a class-war, in which they all want to prove themselves superior.2 Nevertheless, Crane holds a tone of mockery toward the children’s conflict. In their fight, we observe that the children’s hatred to each other is strong and intense. Thus, in his fighting, the little boy, Jimmie, looks like “a tiny, insane demon” (3). And his enemies from Devil’s Row are “hurling stones and swearing in barbaric trebles” (3). It is obvious that the chil-
en's barbaric swearing and intense hatred make them look more like wild animals than civilized human beings. In this sense, their animal-like behavior and howling shape a sharp contrast to the assumed honor of their race. To put it in Donald Pizer's words, Crane, in the scene, suggests that "the idea of honor is inappropriate to the reality, that it serves to disguise from the participants in the fight that they are engaged in a vicious and petty scuffle" (187). Indeed, we are likely to think that children are the most innocent and ignorant because they have little understanding of what the real world or the grown-up world is like. However, Crane thwarts our belief, at the very beginning of the novel, by depicting two groups of pugnacious boys who have been engaged frantically, or, even ridiculously in their fight with each other. According to Jay Martin, the scene of the children's fight is Crane's purposeful satire on the conventional "angelic-child figure" (58). In my opinion, the fight is, in fact, one for the kids' primeval sense of vanity,--the strong desire to show themselves better, stronger, or even superior by defeating others through the use of violence.

To cast more light on the vain side of Jimmie's "honor," Crane juxtaposes, effectively, a portrayal of some onlookers' cold responses to the children's war. Crane describes:

From a window of an apartment house that upreared its form from amid squat, ignorant stables, there leaned a curious woman. Some laborers, unloading a scow at a dock at the river, paused for a moment and regarded the fight. The engineer of a passive tugboat hung lazily to a railing and watched. Over on the island, a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a grey ominous building and crawled slowly along the river's bank. (3-4)

In contrast to the children's noisy and heated battle, this juxtaposed portrayal, however, conveys to us a strong sense of indifference. As quoted, the woman is "curious" but only leans at the window and watches. As to the laborers and the engineer, they simply pause "for a moment," watch, or regard the boys "lazily." None of them is likely to get involved or prevent the children from fighting. In a sense, Crane seems to imply that people care more about themselves than others. The onlookers' concerns...
for these boys are never more than curiosity. However, as far as curiosity is concerned, we can hardly keep ourselves from further asking: what may come to the boys who like to use violence without being stopped or corrected when they are just kids? For this, Crane seems to offer his answer with the description of the “grey ominous building,” foreshadowing the blustering boys’ possible future. That is, if the children continue their life of violence, they may some day be like the “yellow convicts,” who have been punished and imprisoned in the grey building.

In Jimmie’s example, we see that vanity and violence accompany each other. Paralleled with Jimmie’s assumed honor is some running boys’ cowardice. Before Pete appears to save Jimmie from his besieging enemies, the other boys who are on Jimmie’s side have just run away and disappeared. But when the fight comes to an end, these boys appear again to brag about their heroic deeds and begin to “give, each to each, distorted versions of the fight” (5). Out of anger and indignation for his friends’ cowardice, Jimmie fights with one of the boys from Rum Alley. With the fight “in the modes of four thousand years ago” (5), Jimmie is again defending his vanity through violence, as is he “throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil’s Row.” It is clear that Jimmie’s friends run away during the fight, but none of them admits that he does or does it for cowardice’s sake. Like Jimmie, they turn back to fight or argue with him certainly not for unspoken cowardice or vanity but for their brave deeds and honor, too. As far as this is concerned, Jimmie and his friends are paralleled and don’t really have much difference in their purpose of winning “vainglorious” acclamation from others (4). Jimmie is tough, but before he can fully fulfill his justice by violence, his father intervenes. As Crane describes, this is “degradation” for Jimmie, for one who has “aimed to be some vague soldier, or a man of blood with a sort of sublime license, to be taken home by a father” (5). Feeling hurt, Jimmie discharges his vehemence by beating his own sister, Maggie. From Crane’s description, we see that Jimmie is a boy characterized by quick-temper, violence, and soaring sense of vanity, a boy who is quite used to using violence as a means to justify himself and his hurt feeling. Jimmie’s tendency toward violence can find its root in his family background. Seeing Jimmie taken back by his father, Mrs. Johnson behaves like a monster rather than a motherly figure. For this, Crane again
overthrows our conception of a mother’s role by describing how Mrs. Johnson washes her son in a brutal way. Crane gives us an amazing as well as vivid description:

Grasping the urchin by the neck and shoulder she shook him until he rattled. She dragged him to an unholy sink, and, soaking a rag in water, began to scrub his lacerated face with it. Jimmie screamed in pain and tried to twist his shoulders out of the clasp of the huge arms. . . .

The woman’s operations on the urchin instantly increased in violence. At last she tossed him to a corner where he limply lay cursing and weeping. (8)

In Alice Hall Petry’s opinion, Mrs. Johnson is “a major factor in the breakdown of the family unit.” Alcohol is, in fact, the very catalyst that provokes the mother’s child-abusing violence. Indeed, owing to the mother’s brutal way of bathing the son, there begins a family dispute between the husband and the wife. The husband believes that his wife’s anger and ferocity are triggered more by alcohol than by Jimmie’s naughtiness. Unable to handle his domestic affairs, the father walks out and is “determined upon a vengeful drunk” (9). Indeed, it is Mrs. Johnson’s abuse of violence that causes the family to break down, and that teaches her children as an example to show dissatisfaction with life by means of violence. Ironically, instead of feeling ashamed of her brutality, she, on the contrary, only rocks to and fro upon a chair, shedding tears and crooning miserably to the two children about their “poor mother” and “yer fader, damn ‘is soul” (9).

Crane’s representation in the early part of the novel is not only ironical but also episodic and impressionistic. In structure, the early scenes are like episodes in sequence, but they are, however, closely connected to Crane’s underlying themes of vanity and violence and their correlated effects concerning social indifference and human cowardice. In techniques, Crane shows as well his proclivity for manipulating colors and images to reinforce his impressionistic writing. As Katherine G. Simoneaux points out, Crane’s “color imagery contributes forcefully to his ideology and the themes in his work” (91). Jimmie, for example, is described as delivering “crimson oaths” when fighting, and his rivals
seem to “leer gloating at the blood” upon his head (4), with a background presented as grey and yellow to add to the indifferent and ominous implications. Besides, the atmosphere built up in the first scene of the boys’ fight is intense and urgent, but that of the juxtaposed portrayal, is stagnant and inert on account of the audience’s nonchalant or, at most, curious attitudes. Crane’s application of colors to his description helps us envision that the world is red and hot with fights, with violence executed in the name of honor. But in the mean time, the world is also yellow and cold with social indifference and human cowardice. These early scenes all combine to present to us a violent world which seems to promise nothing but ominous and grey future for the young, who grow and live fearfully in it.

The Johnsons’ family feud is another example which displays Crane’s impressionistic use of language and images. For example, in his description of the Johnson family in chaos, Crane relies much on his employment of the building and furniture images. As the father and the son enter the tenement house, we see it a “careening building” with a dozen gruesome doorways” (6). When the parents fight with each other again late at night, there is “a crash against the door and something broke into clattering fragments” (11). In addition, in Crane’s portrayal of the children’s comprehension and fear of family violence, Maggie is described as eating like “a small pursued tigress” (9). According to Thomas A. Gullason, the animal imagery reinforces “Crane’s view of slum life as a jungle” (9). In my opinion, the animal image also refers to the children’s fear of their mother, who may beat them brutally when she loses her temper with the “rough yellow of her face and neck” flaring “suddenly crimson” (8). It is because of this unrestrained violence from their mother that Maggie totters “on her small legs beneath burdens of dishes” and that Jimmie keeps watchful and “breathless,” casting “furtive glances at his mother” (9). Especially, when Maggie breaks a plate, the mother howls again, and the innocent baby, Tommie, runs to the halls, “shrieking like a monk” in an earthquake (9). Crane’s images and specific way of expressions cluster to give us an impression that every thing about the Johnsons is related to violence and the breaking down of the family. To be sure, as the tenement house quivers and creaks “from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels” (6),
so does the brutal mother keep weighing on her children like a fearful threat which they can hardly remove from their hearts.

Jimmie and Maggie survive in the Bowery slum, but their understanding and conception of life are quite different. For Jimmie, as we have seen, he is characterized by a strong sense of vanity. His tendency for violence is obvious as well. What he has learned from his mother is the way of showing his vanity and malcontent through violence. This characteristic inclination becomes even stronger as he grows up. Besides, Jimmie conceives that most people are hypocrites, who only care about their own interests. For example, in the church, Jimmie sees that many “of the sinners” are “impatient over the pictured depths of their degradation” (13). Listening to the priest preaching, they are “waiting for soup-tickets,” and ask “Where’s our soup!” (13) In appearance, these people seem to be pious for their attendance to the church. But, what they have kept in hearts is not God’s salvation but the food they will get at the end of the preaching. Through Jimmie’s observation, Crane actually implies that the conventional role of the church has changed or has been reduced to the minimum of food donation. The church is no more the center of life or a place that promises salvation for the slum people, but only a food-donating spot which gives people gifts to go on living, not spiritually but physically.

Owing to his perception of most people as hypocrites, Jimmie never bears “a respect for the world” (13). For the “well-dressed” men, he maintains “a belligerent attitude” because of their hypocrisy and weakness at heart (14). On Jimmie’s part, he never feels safe, and he needs to be tough and careful in a world, which he believes, is hostile to him. The writer writes:

He became so sharp that he believed in nothing. To him the police were always actuated by malignant impulses and the rest of the world was composed, for the most part, of despicable creatures who were all trying to take advantages of him and with whom, in defense, he was obliged to quarrel on all possible occasions. He himself occupied a down-trodden position that had a private but distinct element of grandeur in its isolation. (14-15)
Jimmie’s malevolent attitude toward others reflects, too, his dissatisfaction with life of poverty. On the one hand, he knows that only money can help him live better. When he has “a dollar in his pocket,” his satisfaction with existence is “the greatest thing in the world” (14). On the other hand, being aware of his poor situation, Jimmie, instead of admitting his own inferiority, tries to maintain his vanity in face of those who look better or richer. Thus, in order to justify his vanity and to prove himself “superior” (15), Jimmie, as a truck driver, likes to intrude upon the passengers in the streets unless “formidable circumstances, or a much larger man than himself” can stop him (15).

From above, we see even more clearly that Jimmie’s way of survival is to defend himself through violence. He behaves like the little Jimmie who is fighting for the “honor of Rum Alley” in the opening scene. The only difference is that he is now tougher and more violent than he is a kid. Interestingly, Jimmie’s belief in violence corresponds to his fear of the fire engine. He recognizes the fact that his horse truck is simply a breakable toy in face of the huge and formidable machine. Thus, a fire engine is “enshrined in his heart as an appalling thing” which he loves “with a distant dog-like devotion” (16). Jimmie’s understanding of life, though somewhat caricatured, is quite practical. He believes that the poor and the weak are not to inherit the world. Only the fittest and the stronger can survive. Therefore, it is acceptable to say that the fire engine, for Jimmie, is the very embodiment of force and power which can help him exhibit utmost violence to satiate his sense of vanity as a worthier man in the conflicting world.

As to Maggie, she is passive and never thinks of revolting until Pete appears. In Pizer’s words, she functions as an “almost expressionistic symbol of inner purity uncorrupted by external foulness” (187). None of the “dirt of Rum Alley” seems to be in her veins (16), and she only reacts submissively to everything happening to her. She does nothing but “burst into tears” when her brother beats her; in face of her brutal mother, her “small frame” can not help “quivering” (13). In answer to Jimmie’s insulting suggestion to “go teh hell or go teh work” (16), Maggie finds a job in the factory of collars and cuffs, sitting among “twenty girls of various shades of yellow discontent” (17). However, when Pete appears, Maggie’s desire for a better life awakes at once. In
Holton’s words, if Jimmie is “saved” by Pete in his early fight for the honor of Rum Alley, it is the same Pete to whom “Maggie will turn in her search for a way out” (46). To Maggie, Pete is the kind of man who represents another way of life: hopeful, joyful, and more ebullient than hers.

Interestingly, George Kelcey, who admires Maggie greatly in George’s Mother, also feels defeated when he meets this dandy and imposing young Pete. Crane describes:

He met a young man in the halls on evening who said to him: “Say, me frien’, where d’ Johnson birds live in heh? I can’t fin’ me feet in dis bloomin’ joint. I been battin’ around heh for a half-hour.”

“Two flights up,” said Kelcey stonily. He had felt a sudden quiver of his heart. The grandeur of the clothes, the fine worldly air, the experience, the self-reliance, the courage that shone in the countenance of this other young man made him suddenly sink to the depths of woe. . . . (118)

Kelcey’s observation of Pete further explains the bartender’s masculine physique and his possible attraction to young women. No wonder, Maggie, when seeing Pete’s energetic way of talking with Jimmie, is deeply attracted. Pete’s “mannerisms,” to Maggie, has “stamped him” as a man who has “a sense of his personal superiority” (17). With Pete’s appearance, Maggie now sees more clearly the “broken furniture, grimy walls, and general disorder and dirt of her home” (18-19). She imagines that Pete is “the knight” who can save her from her life “composed of hardships and insults” (20). The “purchase of flowered cretonne for a lambrequin” represents Maggie’s hopeful expectation, which, however, is not likely to come true as is the lambrequin hung upon “the slightly careening mantel” (20).

In addition to the building, the furniture, and the lambrequin images, Crane attempts to use the images of clothes and a “play within a play” to portray Maggie’s eagerness for love. Maggie has an “intense dislike for all of her dresses” whenever thoughts of Pete come to her (25). Reflecting upon Pete’s “condescension” (23), Maggie feels hurt for her own inferiority. The “well-dressed” women walking on the
streets are those she envies. Crane puts it in this way:

She began to note, with more interest, the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. She craved those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women. (25)

It is because of her awareness of inferiority that Maggie, when watching the melodrama, rejoices “at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually surmounted the wealthy and wicked” (28). Maggie identifies herself with the suffering heroine in the play, while Pete, to her, looms like “a golden sun” (26), warming her heart and helping remove all the gloominess of her life.

For Pete, Maggie, however, is only his sex target. Pete, “stuck on” Maggie’s beauty, tries to attract her attention with “descriptions of various happenings in his career” (19). He exaggerates how “invincible” he is whenever in fights (19). Coming to the tenement house to have a date with Maggie, he cares only about “flourishing his clothes” rather than paying attention to her lambrequin (21). In the theater, he does not “pay much attention to the progress of events upon the stage,” but is “drinking beer and watching Maggie” (24). As a bartender, Pete doesn’t care much about art. What he is interested in are wine and sex. Thus, when Maggie is being expelled by her mother, He gets the chance to seduce Maggie by saying “Come ahh out wid me! We’ll have a hell of a time” (31).

As to Jimmie, he is, like Pete, very interested in sex and sensual pleasure. Crane gives us a record of his irresponsible taste for women:

Two women in different parts of the city, and entirely unknown to each other, caused him considerable annoyance by breaking forth, simultaneously, at fateful intervals, into wailings about marriage and support and infants. (16)

In a sense, Jimmie and Pete are like brothers, who are both characterized by egoistic sense of vanity, believing in violence as means of self-justification, and highly interested in seducing women for sexual purpose. Jimmie holds off easily the girls he has seduced but fails to expect that his good pal is planning to seduce his sister as a sexual prey. Impressively, Crane, in one of his poems, touches upon this kind of sin-
ful brotherhood between Pete and Jimmie. Crane writes:

I stood upon a high place,
And saw, below, many devils
Running, leaping,
And carousing in sin.
One looked up, grinning,
And said: “Comrade! Brother!”

In “A Spiritual Autopsy of Stephen Crane,” Keith Gandal also asserts that Crane’s poems offer us “a direct road into his psyche” (507). Indeed, Crane’s poems, as seen in the quoted one above, do cast light on Crane’s literary intention for the theme of sinful brotherhood in this novel. In this sense, the striking parallels between Pete and Jimmie also signify the unavoidable misfortune of Maggie’s coming fall. Jimmie has deserted his used women, and Pete, who is characterized by the same characteristic tendencies, will forsake Maggie.

Seeing Maggie’s possible downfall, Mrs. Johnson does nothing to prevent but drink. In fact, it is Mrs. Johnson that first notices Maggie’s change of manner and behavior after Pete’s visit. When Maggie seems to be greatly intoxicated by her knight, the mother finds it strange that her daughter should be so fastidious about her clothes. “What deh hell ails yeh? What makes yeh be alius fixing’ and fussing’? Good Gawd,” the mother asked (25). But, far from doing anything to save her daughter from Pete’s seduction, Mrs. Johnson becomes more addicted to alcohol. Having no money to spend, she begins to carry “the lighter articles of household use, one by one” to the pawn shops for some money to buy her drinks (26). This addiction to alcohol reflects not only Mrs. Johnson’s degradation but also her inability to be a rightful parent, to teach her children the right things. Or, to put it in Åhnebrink’s words, alcohol, is like a “curse,” which is detrimental “not only for the individual but for the society at large” (251). It is when Maggie finds her mother “often drunk and always raving” that Maggie’s desire for leaving the house becomes more intense (26). As a consequence, it is fair to say that Mrs. Johnson is responsible, to some degree, for Maggie’s downfall. Reinforcing Maggie dissatisfaction with life, Mrs. Johnson makes it further to curse and gives “her daughter a bad name” (21).
Above all, it is Mrs. Johnson that gives Pete a good opportunity to seduce Maggie by expelling her out of home. Pete is the seducer, but Mrs. Johnson is the one that helps make the seduction happen.

Ironically, the mother never reflects upon her own ignominious indulgence in alcohol, but deems Maggie’s fall a disgrace upon her family. For example, when Jimmie tells the mother about the neighbors’ talks of Maggie, Mrs. Johnson is not only “astounded” (32) but also eager to convince her son how she has taught her daughter not to do immoral things. Crane describes:

She’s deh devil’s own chil’, Jimmie. Ah, who would t’ink such a bad girl could grow up in our fambly, Jimmie, me son. Many deh hour I’ve spent in talk wid dat girl an’ tol’ her if she ever went on deh streets I’d see her damned. An’ after all her bringin’ up an’ what I tol’ her and talked wid her, she goes teh deh bad, like a duck teh water. (32)

In front of her son, Mrs. Johnson appears as a responsible mother, who has been watchful of Maggie’s conduct. But when Jimmie suggests that they should find Maggie back and keep “dis t’ing dark” (40), Mrs. Johnson rejects this idea with a “vindictive smile” on her face (41). Far from keeping Maggie’s fall in the dark, she wastes no time to make it public. As she tells Jimmie not to take her “for a damn fool” (41), Mrs. Johnson knows well that by making her daughter’s misdeeds public, she, on the one hand, can cut all connection with her daughter; on the other hand, she can retain her sense of pride in the neighborhood. Thus, to the attentive ears of the neighbors, the mother moans “the whole length and breadth of her woes” (41). Moreover, she even uses Maggie’s misdeeds as the excuse for her dishonorable addiction to alcohol when “arrested for drunkenness” (41). Maggie is Mrs. Johnson’s daughter; she is also the mother’s sacrifice of washing her bad name as a drunkard.

Jimmie, too, cares more about himself. Jimmie believes that all girls, excepting his sister, can “advisedly be ruined” (33). He fights with Pete after knowing the fact that Maggie has been seduced by the bartender, but in fact, he only wants to defend the assumed vanity of his family just as he fights for the “honor” of Rum Alley with the boys from Devil’s Row. Thus, when his mother threatens him the possibility of bringing shame upon himself by finding Maggie back, Jimmie shrinks
at once, abandons his suggestion, and remains submissive to the mother’s persistence in keeping Maggie out of the house. For an instant, it occurs to Jimmie to “vaguely wonder” if some of “the women of his acquaintance” have brothers (32). Seeing Pete’s seduction of Maggie, Jimmie knows that he himself has been harassed by his women and may get into trouble for what he has done to them. When one of the forsaken women comes to him, Jimmie feels greatly threatened and quickens “his pace,” with “the savageness of a man whose life is pestered” (47). Clearly, protecting his own clean name, rather than defending Maggie, is his major concern. It flickers in his mind to give Maggie a hand, but he soon finds that he can’t “hold such a view” and throws it “hastily aside” (42). Jimmie concedes to himself that “his sister would have been more firmly good had she better known why” (42). Indeed, Maggie fails to know that her own brother is like a spineless coward as are others. Jimmie has conceived that most people are hypocrites; nevertheless, he is one of them.

For Maggie, she doesn’t think that she is “a bad woman” as her mother and brother have believed (39), but this doesn’t help with her situation. Firstly, Maggie thinks that things will be fine as long as she has “Pete’s strong protecting fists” (39). But the fact is that Pete deserts her as soon as he meets Nellie, a “woman of brilliance and audacity” (43). Inwardly, Maggie experiences an aching reversal of her expectation for true love. Seeing Pete’s eyes “sparkle” as he gazes upon “the handsome stranger” (43), Maggie dimly perceives that “something stupendous” has happened (45). She can’t help feeling “astounded” when she further sees Pete leave with Nellie, deserting her, not even saying a word, alone in the drinking hall (45). Secondly, Maggie’s misfortune only gives her mother and brother a chance to clean their own names when she attempts to return home. Mrs. Johnson, especially, rings out loud, when seeing Maggie, “like a warning trumpet” (48), to make her daughter the target of public derision. By public derision and expulsion of her daughter, Mrs. Johnson can show to her neighbors how rightful she is as a mother. Being a drunkard, Mrs. Johnson never has had a good name in the neighborhood. However, by tramping the name of her daughter, she can, to a certain extent, clean hers, or even pardon herself at once, abandons his suggestion, and remains submissive to the mother’s persistence in keeping Maggie out of the house. For an instant, it occurs to Jimmie to “vaguely wonder” if some of “the women of his acquaintance” have brothers (32). Seeing Pete’s seduction of Maggie, Jimmie knows that he himself has been harassed by his women and may get into trouble for what he has done to them. When one of the forsaken women comes to him, Jimmie feels greatly threatened and quickens “his pace,” with “the savageness of a man whose life is pestered” (47). Clearly, protecting his own clean name, rather than defending Maggie, is his major concern. It flickers in his mind to give Maggie a hand, but he soon finds that he can’t “hold such a view” and throws it “hastily aside” (42). Jimmie concedes to himself that “his sister would have been more firmly good had she better known why” (42). Indeed, Maggie fails to know that her own brother is like a spineless coward as are others. Jimmie has conceived that most people are hypocrites; nevertheless, he is one of them.

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because she is a morally responsible mother. Ironically, Mrs. Johnson is as hypocritical as is her son, who, instead of helping Maggie, further hurts her by saying “Well, now, yer a hell of a t’ing, ain’ ye?” (48)

Crane’s portrayal of Mrs. Johnson’s hypocrisy and Jimmie’s “horror of contamination” (48) is ironic when contrasted with the audience’s reaction to the falling down of a baby. Crane gives us a vivid depiction:

The crowd at the door fell back precipitately. A baby falling down in front of the door, wrenched a scream like a wounded animal from its mother. Another woman sprang forward and picked it up, with a chivalrous air, as if rescuing a human being from an on-coming express train. (48)

On the one hand, the scene tells us the audience’s ignorance and their innate fear of being like Maggie, who has been expelled from home and publicly humiliated for her misbehavior. On the other hand, in the woman who picks up the baby on the floor, we see the kindness of motherly love and the goodness of human helping hand. In this light, the baby’s fall contrasts sharply with that of Maggie. In them, we witness the exhibition of human kindness in the former and the meanness of human hypocrisy in the latter. Besides, in contrast to the baby’s scream, the wound felt at Maggie’s heart seems just muffled, because the writer drops not even a word to describe Maggie’s painful feelings. This is an example of Crane’s “omissions,” as we have pointed out in the beginning of this study, which sounds more clearly and significantly to us in its silence and stillness. In contrast to the baby, who is instantly rescued, Maggie has no one, not even her mother or brother to turn to, to speak to. In this sense, Crane’s ironical touch upon humanity and human hypocrisy is remarkable.

As to Pete, it never occurs to him that he has “ruined Maggie” (49). Pete assumes that it is Mrs. Johnson and the brother who have always tried to cause him trouble. Pete sees “no necessity for anyone’s losing their equilibrium merely because their sister or their daughter” has stayed out from home (49). Women, for him, are only “temporary or indifferent ones” (49). And for Maggie, Pete further asserts that he has never been “very much interested in the girl” (49). Despite his rationalization and ostensible calmness, Pete can’t help feeling horrified for the
possible ruin of his vanity. Crane describes:

Pete stood behind the bar. He was immaculate in white jacket and apron and his hair was plastered over his brow with infinite correctness. No customers were in the place. Pete was twisting his napkined fist slowly in a beer glass, softly whistling to himself. . . .

With lingering thoughts of the woman of brilliance and audacity, the bartender raised his head and stared through the varying cracks between the swaying bamboo doors. Suddenly the whistling pucker faded from his lips. He saw Maggie walking slowly past. He gave a great start, fearing for the previously-mentioned eminent respectability of the place. (49-50)

Pete, in Maggie's conception, is the “knight,” who knows things, one who can protect her with his “strong fists.” As Gandal points out in “Crane's 'Maggie' and the Modern Soul,” Pete is “awed” by Maggie, because he knows that he is “a moral exemplar” in her ethics (760). However, it proves that Pete is by no means a knight. He is but a scoundrel, who deserts his women after having sensual excitements with them. In appearance, Pete is as immaculate as are his clothes. However, Maggie is now the very stain at his heart. He knows well that if Maggie keeps hanging about in his place, she may ruin his career, good name, and the “respectability” of his place. This is what really awes Pete for the most part. As pointed out, Pete and Jimmie are alike in their sense of vanity. They are hypocrites who only appear to be strong and respectable but spineless and weak at heart for their irresponsible deeds towards their deserted women.

Crane's ironical touch upon human vanity becomes even more significant when it is applied to a clergyman who, likewise, declines to give Maggie a helping hand. Crane writes:

Suddenly she came upon a stout gentleman in a silk hat and a chaste black coat, whose decorous row of buttons reached from his chin to his knees. The girl had heard of the Grace of God and she decided to approach this 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 side-step. He did not risk to save a soul. For how was he to know that there was a soul before him that needed saving? (51)

Ironically, even the clergyman discriminates and tends to be vain and snobbish in his choice of the souls that need God's salvation. Like what we have seen in the church's food donating scene, Crane again seems to imply that the church is unable to solve the secular problem of social morality, and that Maggie's world is not only a world of deprivation but also one of depravity, so deprived that even the spiritual salvation for the weak and the defenseless like Maggie is hard to attain. As Marcus Cunliffe points out, since Maggie is described as an "experienced prostitute," wearing a "handsome cloak and well-shod feet, why, then, "does she commit suicide?" (37) In my opinion, Maggie commits suicide just because she is disillusioned with this prejudiced discrimination, which deprives her of her final hope for life. Consequently, Maggie's death can also be seen as homicide.6 Committing suicide is her only possible protest against the society which leaves her no way out, not even a possible relief in "the Grace of God" and His mercy. The clergyman probably does not know that he is the one that actually gives Maggie a final blow, which causes her to die determinedly after meeting a "huge fat man in torn and greasy garments" in "the blackness of the final block" (53).

Concerning this, Crane is obviously using color images again to reinforce his portrayal in the ending part of the novel. As quoted above, Pete, after deserting Maggie, assumes himself to be as clean and "immaculate" as the "white jacket and apron" on him. The "blackness of the final block," too, adds to the gloomy atmosphere of Maggie's coming suicide, which virtually results from a predatory society, leaving her no choice but to end her miserable life of degradation with a hopelessly broken heart.

The last two scenes about Pete and Mrs. Johnson show Crane's bitter mockery on the two characters' hypocrisy. Knowing Maggie's death, Pete, in a saloon, is trying to prove to his girl friends that he has always been a righteous man. When drunk, he still tries to defend his
vanity or integrity by laying “stress upon the purity of his motives in all dealings with men in the world” (54). As a man of honor, Pete claims that he would die if he “could be convicted of a contemptible action” (55). Pete’s allegation doesn’t convince anyone but incur the waiter’s “disgusted look” (54) and the women’s scream “in disgust” (56). As far as this is concerned, Crane, in *George’s Mother*, seems to hint that Pete’s swear eventually comes true. Near the “side-door of a corner saloon,” one of the “well-dressed” men named Pete Brady is “stabbed” to death by a pedlar (142). Crane never verifies that Pete Brady is the same Pete in *Maggie*, but he, by this technical ambiguity, casts light on a moral lesson in his abbreviation. That is, a person like Pete, who is fond of having sex with women, drinking wine in saloons, and using violence in disputes with others, may easily invite a sudden death on account of his bad temper and reckless nature.

As to Mrs. Johnson, the neighbors’ response to her lament upon the death of her daughter is cynical rather than sympathetic. When the mother is lamenting for the death of Maggie, the neighbors gather in the hall, “staring at the weeping woman as if watching the contortions of a dying dog” (57). In her lament, Mrs. Johnson is again cursing her daughter, claiming that Maggie has gone “where her sin will be judged” (58). In a sense, Mrs. Johnson is as stubborn and self-centered as is her addiction to alcohol. She claims that she will “forgive” Maggie, the “bad, bad” child (58). However, the fact is that her woeful words can not convince anyone and that she acts more like a clown, crying mournfully in the form of a “dying dog.”

Through our reading of this novel, we see that Maggie is a victim of the vain and brutal society. With his tone of mockery and artistic techniques of representation, Crane successfully lays open man’s vanity and violence, which result in a decayed world of cowardice and hypocrisy. In this kind of society, people only care about self-interest. In order to survive, they tend to be indifferent to others’ sufferings, or, they may choose to defend themselves at the sacrifice of others. The society belongs to those who can maintain their selfish interests and to those who have their own sins but are able to conceal them effectively well. However, for the former, the more they care about themselves and their own

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interests, the more they show themselves selfish and cowardly in a moral sense. For the latter, the more they emphasize their vanity or "respectability," the more they disclose themselves as hypocrites. On account of vanity, people have established a society which stresses honor but is, in fact, hypocritical and violent in essence. Because of the common belief in honor, people discriminate and set up social codes which deprive the weak of the right to live if they trespass against any of the established codes of "morality." And Maggie, being submissive and weak by nature, fails to defend herself and falls to be an example of the social outcast. These codes, established in the name of honor or respectability, are in fact rude and brutal because they can't fairly judge who is truly wrong or right. The expected social justice is non-existent. For the weak like Maggie, there is no salvation but victimization. In this sense, Crane's portrayal of Maggie's final disillusion with life by means of her silent death-protest is tragic as well as pathetic. Maggie dies in a silent way, and it is in the silence and stillness of Maggie's death that Crane tries to offer us a clear and profound look at the reality of human vanity and its brutality.
Notes


2 Thomas A. Gullason, “A Minister, a Social Reformer, and Maggie,” in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, ed. Thomas A. Gullason (New York: Norton, 1979) 106, asserts that the complete disregard of the plight of the poor by the rich could lead to class war.


4 Holton believes that Crane’s major concern is to vitalize “his character’s apprehension of the scene.” Thus, for Crane’s description of the violent family feud, Holton labels Crane’s technique as “dramatic impressionism.” See Holton’s Cylinder of Vision: The Fiction and Journalistic Writing of Stephen Crane 41-45.


6 Also see Keith Gandal’s annotation on the death of Maggie in his “Crane’s ‘Maggie’ and the Modern Soul” in ELH 60.3 (1993): 782.
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