

## *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and Naturalism*

Nurhayati Purba, SS, MA  
Methodist University of Indonesia

Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) is a story of a young girl's fall and death in the New York slums. This novel was considered so inappropriate for the public during Crane's lifetime that it was rejected by any publishers. However, later on, this novel undoubtedly often serves as a naturalistic fiction in America. From the very first sentence of the novel, audiences are introduced to a naturalistic element in a fiction that is the slum setting. Crane introduces "Rum Alley" as the setting where Maggie (the main character) and her family live. Exploring the story shows the influence of environment on the characters in general and on the main character in particular. Each character in the novel is bounded by social values, which are formed unconsciously by the working class society. This essay focuses on three key naturalistic elements in the novel: the "human beasts" (a term borrowed from Emile Zola) or animal qualities of human beings; the effect of the environment on human lives; and the doom of the main character.

### 1. The "Human Beasts" or "Animal Qualities" of Human Beings

Maggie (the main character) in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* was raised in the "animal qualities" family and society. As the term naturalism describes a type of literature that emphasizes the study of human beings, it is important to discuss the human beings (family and society) in "Maggie". The first three chapters of Maggie clearly present the brutality of human beings, which is valued as "human beast". The qualities of animal – cruel, coarse, filthy, and out of control – are attached to the society where Maggie lives. People in Rum Alley beat each other. Men are drinking; women are displacing their unsatisfactory lives to the children. Furthermore, children are forming gangs and fighting on the streets, where the winners enjoy their enemies' loss, as exemplified by Jimmie and the children of Devil's Row at the beginning of the novel. The children of Devil's Row celebrated their happiness by singing and dancing when Jimmie was bloody. Ironically, these children have been showing their animal qualities since the young ages. Unfortunately, the society (parents) has no proper ways out to this condition, but apply the same ways: beating their children. This unhealthy environment can be found in most of the families in Rum Alley, Bowery.

At Maggie's house, Mrs. Johnson beats Jimmie for fighting; Maggie mistreats Tommie; Jim strikes Maggie; Mr. and Mrs. Johnson quarrel; Mr. Johnson beats Mrs. Johnson; and Mrs. Johnson beats Maggie for breaking a plate. Home is not a safe place for the children as it should be. In this condition, the children are confused on how to behave because they do not have any reliable example to follow. To make matter worse, each crisis in the Johnsons is viewed by neighbors who comprise an audience, which encourages the Johnsons to adopt moral values.

Maggie's family, especially after the death of her father centralizes the characteristic of the Bowery as the core of animality. Donald Pizer in his essay "Stephen Crane's Maggie and American Naturalism," states, "Mrs. John. Johnson is drunken rages symbolize the animal fury of a slum home, and her quickness to judge, condemn, and cast out Maggie symbolizes the self-righteousness of the Bowery morality" (Gullason 190). Mrs. Johnson's but anger scares not only Maggie and Jimmie but also babe Tommie. The "animal quality" of Mrs. Johnson drives her into an out of control-condition. She remains in the same temperament when she loses her family one by one, starts from the death of babe Tommie and then the death of Mr. Johnson.

Through this brutal environment, Crane emphasizes how working class society in New York slums worships the raw ethic. Maggie and Jimmie cannot escape from their mother's temperament. They are raised without loving, affection, and tenderness. Mrs. Johnson exemplifies parents in Rum Alley in raising their children. After beating the children, Mrs. Johnson feeds the children food to survive. This is more animality than humanity. "The babe sat with his feet dangling high from a precarious infant's chair and gorged his small stomach. Jimmie forced, with feverish rapidity, the grease – enveloped pieces between his wounded lips. Maggie, with side glances of fear of interruption, ate like a small pursued tigress" (Crane 9).

Maggie is also suffering from Jimmie's ego. Jimmie first tries to protect Maggie but ends up at his mother influence. When Maggie did not come home one night, Mrs. Johnson and Jimmie scolded her as a bad girl, or as Lois Tyson terms a "slut" (90). "She had a bad heart, dad girl did, Jimmie. She was wicked t' d' heart an' we never knowed it." Jimmie nodded, admitting the fact" (55). When neighbors discuss about Maggie's absence, Mrs. Johnson curses her. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Johnson, Jimmie, and society have pushed Maggie to the edge of life.

Young Maggie experiences these animal qualities for the rest of her life. She grows up into a beautiful girl, even the most beautiful girl in the area. "The girl, Maggie, blossomed in a mud puddle. She grew to be a most rare and wonderful production of a tenement district, pretty girl. None of the dirt of Rum Alley seemed to be in her veins"

(20). However, Maggie's beauty is more animality than humanity. By disguising himself into an honor man, Pete attracts Maggie into his pleasure. Pete sees Maggie as a property, and take Maggie's unhappiness at home as a grant to possess her. Maggie is totally ignored as a human quality. She is seen and valued in animal quality of human beings.

## 2. The Effect of Environment of Human Lives

Crane creates the atmosphere of slum environment as a metaphor of emotional, temperamental society. The slum environment, together with the drunken man society impacted not only individual but also society at large. The working-class families experience poverty and misery that prevent them from educating their children well. Drunken men indirectly drive their children to become wild and go to the streets, form gangs and fight. At home, frustrated parents lose their temper and beat the children. Furthermore, the children become frustrated and lose their beliefs to their parents. This circle rotates almost regularly and keeps the people in it in the same confusion.

The apartment buildings in New York metaphorically reflect the lack of communication and understanding within families in general and the Johnson family in particular. People in the slums fail to know each other because of the hard lives they face. They are emotionally influenced by their economic condition, which is mostly underprivileged. Parents focus on thinking about earning money, and do not understand their children's problem. When parents cannot solve their problems, they compensate their frustration by drinking and quarreling. Meanwhile children go to streets and fight. However, there is social value bounded to every family of the working class that is the "virtue" of the family. Breaking the virtue of the family means breaking the social values, therefore the subject must be cast out from society.

The Johnsons (Maggie's family) reflects a frustrating environment. Physically, the two rooms where they live are far from comfortable. Both parents were confirmed drunkards. They fought each other regularly and beat their children, Maggie, Jimmie, and Tommie. Furthermore, Crane uses language as a dramatic vehicle to describe how far Maggie suffering from her environment. "Eh, child what is it dis time? Is it yer fader beatin' your mudder, or your mother beatin' yer father?" (10) This familiar sound penetrates the building of the apartment together with the sound of broken dishes. How ironic that the same building which prevents the understanding of the people in the area, also transparently transfers the conflict in a family to other families. This proves how weak and sensitive the society who lives in the slum area.

Crane depicts the main character (Maggie) by overpowering the environment's control on her. As the house is not a sanctuary for Maggie, she tries to find it out of her house. She meets Pete who introduces her temporary sanctuaries such as saloon, bar, theatre, and the beer hall. Maggie enjoys her new sanctuaries for a while. This new environment influences Maggie very much, until she sees herself as the heroine in the theatre, and Pete as her rescue. However, when finally Pete ignores Maggie, she loses all the sanctuaries. Maggie is, then ignored by her mother and society. She sinks further into the dark side of society and becomes a prostitute. Nobody welcomes or merely greets Maggie, nor the figure of man of God. She is no longer anybody, then she commits suicide. Environment has forced Mrs. Johnson to ignore her own daughter; environment has forced society to reject Maggie; and environment itself has forced Maggie to ignore herself.

## 3. The Doom of the Main Character

Maggie meets all the qualities of naturalistic character. She is from the lower class, ill educated, forced by environment, and finally destroyed.

To meet all the naturalistic characters above, Crane creates Maggie as a beautiful lady but is absent from conscious thought. As a matter of fact, most of the characters in "Maggie" are absent from conscious of thought. Even though Maggie takes initiative to relieve herself from her environment (her family, Pete, and society), she is not strong enough to run out, thus she unconsciously lets herself be destroyed. Meanwhile Mrs. Johnson, Pete, and society unconsciously drive her to the world of prostitution and

Maggie's beauty cannot help her to gain a better life. Her environment (Mrs. Johnson, Pete, and society) does not value her beauty as a great asset for her to get a better life, but as an asset to satisfy men's ego. The only one who positively sees Maggie's beauty is Jimmie. Being the first one who notices Maggie's beauty, Jimmie suggests she apply for a job in the factory. He is sure that Maggie's beauty will help her to gain better positions in the factory. Ironically, Pete values Maggie's beauty in a lower way. By disguising himself with "love" and "honor", Pete drives Maggie into a temporary joy. As a matter of fact, Pete never respects Maggie as an individual, as he said, "Say, Mag, I am stuck on yer shape" (24). Pete's reaction to Maggie reflects society's response on human sources where lower society values human beings in the lower way, too.

lly by middle or higher-class society. Lower class presented in the novel unconsciously lets the society control them economically by respecting them too much, even praising them in big uses to call Pete; the elegant bartender. Maggie from the lower class gives up her job and higher class.

e presented in the novel is that woman dependent on man. Rather than seriously look for a job she looks for someone to rescue her. She relies on Pete who is dominant. "Maggie perceived all man. Her dim thoughts were often searching for far away lands where the little hill sings. Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover" (23). Maggie rests her head on Pete's shoulder, rather than on her own hand. Crane from beginning has presented the main personality that is easily broken someday.

away from her mother's brutality to Pete's sanctuary ends tragically. After satisfying her ego, Mrs. Johnson, the only possible woman to protect and save her, casts her out, too. The moral Johnsons are drawn from a middle class ethic that home is the center of virtue. Ironically, Mrs. Johnson for breaking the virtue of family, while as a mother she does not give good education to Maggie. "I could t'ink such a bad girl could grow up in our fambly, Jimmie, me son. Many d' hour I've had an' tol' her if she ever went on d' streets I' see her damned. An' after all her bringin' up, an' I with her, she goes the d' bad, like a duck the water." (43). Mrs. Johnson considers herself as an ideal mother who has given enough education to Maggie. By valuing social ethic, she pretends holding good moral values but does not act.

Mrs. Johnson) who drives Maggie into the world of prostitution and abuse. "It is appropriate, Mrs. Johnson) who literally drives Maggie into prostitution and eventually death. Secure in her moral values, she allows Maggie to return home after her seduction by Pete, driving her into remaining with Pete" (Gullason 190-191). Mrs. Johnson is absent as a good mother that she should prepare a home for her children. In other side, Maggie should be cast out from society, because being seduced means a loss of moral (ethic).

her mother, Pete also drives Maggie into prostitution and death. Maggie's difficult situation in her life is not as a grant by Pete to satisfy his ego. Pete absolutely uses "honor" and love as weapons on Maggie. Poorly, Maggie takes Pete's attention seriously and considers it as the way out of her life. "Ah, what d' hell Mag? Come ahn and we'll have a outasight time" (40). However, there is no hope for Maggie. When Pete wants to be free from Maggie, he breaks Maggie's heart by ignoring her pleas. "I asks in a low voice, 'But where kin I go?' The question exasperated Pete beyond the powers of speech. He made a direct attempt to give him some responsibility in a matter that did not concern him. In his haste, he steered information. 'Oh, go t' hell!' cried he" (71). Maggie has no way out from the other side.

unconsciously takes a part in driving Maggie into prostitution. His rude manner and selfishness are evident. Jimmie wants to protect Maggie, but he does not respect other ladies. He has no power to help her from Pete's ego for he himself owes a rescue from Pete when he fights the children of the street. He has no power, either when he wants to protect Maggie's from their mother's brutes. Jimmie is not helpful in Maggie's problem, but again, Maggie is alone without solution.

Maggie is left alone in her dilemma. From beginning, she has nobody to trust in her confusion. Her mother is not the place to trust on her problem. The cruelties of City and the social ethic applied by the characters depict her from her struggle against the difficulties given by her environment. Even when she is with Pete, she has nobody to talk to. "Maggie was anxious for a friend to whom she could talk about her life. She liked to discuss his admirable mannerisms with a reliable mutual friend. At home, she found no one to confide in and always raving. It seemed that the world had treated this woman very badly...." (33). If she had anybody to confide in, perhaps she can come to a solution of her problem.

Maggie is doomed. She is doomed by the "human's beast" or the animal qualities of human beings in her environment. She is victimized by her environment, society and family, which values the social ethic – the virtue of the individual destroyed by other character's brutalities and egos. All these elements make Stephen Crane's *Maggie* a strong naturalistic fiction. To end this analysis, I stress again on the naturalism in the novel by identifying three naturalistic elements in the novel: the human beasts or the animal qualities of the individual, the effect of environment, and the doom of the main character as the naturalistic qualities in the

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