

Maggie Johnson and The Absence of Choice in a Fight

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In the heartbreaking story of “Maggie, A Girl of the Streets,” Stephen Crane presents a well-crafted look into the hopeless plight of the dispossessed in society. The story is about a young girl in the Bowry of late nineteenth-century New York City. However, it could be about any family, and any young woman, deprived of options by poverty, alcoholism, and restraining moral codes. Crane shows how people born into a constant fight for a better life can only react to the situations they find themselves in and never have the luxury of an option. Her ultimate death was not a result of her decisions or choices as much as the inevitable outcome of economic and societal forces.

Crane begins his story with a fight, establishing in the reader’s mind that the living situation of the characters in his story puts them into constant confrontation. We learn that Jimmie is very young and is defending his part of the neighborhood. When his fellow urchins abandon him, Jimmie has no choice but to stay and fight, “‘Naw,’ responded Jimmie with a valiant roar, ‘dese mugs can't make me run’” (1). The reader never learns what the small boys are fighting over beyond defending their proto-gang. The lack of concern from adults watching the confrontation shows that the society these boys belong to sees nothing wrong with the struggle. The description of one observer describes it best, “The engineer of a passive tugboat hung lazily over a railing and watched” (2-3).

At the start of the book, Crane establishes the acceptance by the entire community that there is nothing you can do to stop a fight and that you must let it play out. And as we see when the story unfolds, they do not try to stop Maggie's fight against hardship.

When we learn more about the character Maggie, Jimmie's sister, Crane presents her as not being controlled by her surroundings, "None of the dirt of Rum Alley seemed to be in her veins. The philosophers, upstairs, downstairs, and on the same floor, puzzled over it" (38). Readers might start with some hope around Maggie — that she might not get pulled into the struggle her brother and mother are consumed by. However, we soon learn that her beauty dooms her. Jimmie warns her that she only has two choices and says, "Mag, I'll tell yeh dis! See? Yeh 've edder got t' go on d' toif er go t' work!" (38). Going on the turf means walking the streets. Education is not on the table, and marriage is not yet an option because she is so young.

Maggie and Jimmie's mother Mary is presented throughout the book as one possible outcome for Maggie. She is a widow, an alcoholic, and unable to hold down a job. She frequently runs afoul of the law, and in one of the shortest but most telling passages about how hopeless any change is for these characters, Crane recounts how the courts accept her as a fixture. He shares how "Court officials called her by her first name" (39). The same passage further reinforces her infamy and fixed position in the community, "Her flaming face and rolling eyes were a familiar sight on the island. She measured time by means of sprees, and was eternally swollen and dishevelled" (40).

Hemmed in by an alcoholic mother, a brother who constantly fights, and a dirty

tenement packed full of nosy and judgemental neighbors, Maggie decides to get a job in a shirt factory. She initially likes the position, and readers may see her job as a way to hold her over until she is old enough to find a husband. Then, one day, Pete stops by Jimmie's apartment to take Jimmie to a boxing match. The author uses a single three-word sentence to establish the turning point in the story and Maggie's life, "Maggie observed Pete" (40).

After watching Pete while he talked to her brother, "Maggie perceived that here was the ideal man. Her dim thoughts were often searching for far away lands where the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover" (44). Maggie sees Pete as her escape from her embarrassing surroundings. She does not see a way for her to effect an escape. Once he notices her, commenting on her figure and therefore signaling his sexual intentions, she is pulled onto a path with him. After he leaves with Jimmie, she compares him to her apartment and her job and finds both wanting.

However, most importantly, she sees him as someone who defies the harsh reality that repressed her. She contemplates, "To her the earth was composed of hardships and insults. She felt instant admiration for a man who openly defied it" (48). Not only was he secure financially, she perceived him as someone that didn't let life pull him as it wished. Instead, he fought back. Instead of fighting back herself, she wanted to be closer to him in the vain hope that it might help her situation.

As their relationship grows, society's views of women and that they are either

chaste or depraved starts to pull on her. Soon, society and her family viewed her as a fallen girl. After a drunk and fight with Jimmie, Mary attacks Maggie by saying, “Yeh’ve gone t’ d’ devil, Mag Johnson, yehs knows yehs have gone t’ d’ devil. Yer a disgrace to’ yer people.” (77). She then tells Maggie to go and be with Pete and tries to throw her out of the apartment. Angry and embarrassed by her own situation, the mother attacks the daughter and pushes her further down the path toward her downfall.

Signaling another critical milestone on that path, Crane uses another short sentence after Mary says, ““Git th’ devil outa here”” (78). The author finishes the chapter with two words, “Maggie went” (78). If a cheesy Hollywood soundtrack were added to the story, they would have added the sound of a nail going into a coffin at that point.

The push of alcoholism, poverty, and moral hypocrisy only stop when they push Maggie to prostitution and death. Shunned by family, community, and her lover, Maggie was only given one path — become the harlot they viewed her as. Crane symbolizes Maggie’s entire journey in Chapter XVII as a walk through neighborhoods.

Crane has her take a walk from “an atmosphere of pleasure and prosperity” (140) to “into the blackness of the final block” (144). Maggie does not choose her path on this final trek. She moves through the city, seeking a client, pulled deeper and deeper into lesser parts of the city just as her fight for a better life pulled her deeper into the lesser parts of society.

In the next chapter, we learn that Maggie has died. Even in death, her family and neighbors condemn her. As they lament her passing, they do not bring up any choice or

decision that anyone made that put her on her path. They take no blame and assign none to her. One mourner sums it up when beseeching Mary, "Her life was a curse an' her days were black an' yeh'll fergive yer bad girl?" (157-158). In essence, she could not help being a prostitute and dying because she had no choice, she was destined to end that way and therefore, her mother should forgive Maggie.

The entire story looks at how economic inequality pushes impoverished people into a fight for their survival. Ironically, in the symbolic children's fight at the start of the book, it is Pete who saves Jimmy. But for Maggie, it is Pete who pulls her to destruction. In the few words of this novella, Crane has shown how people in the fight for survival in life can only address the momentary battles and hope someone comes to their rescue. And, since no one will come to the rescue, anger, a dissipated life, alcoholism, or death are all that await.

Works Cited.

Crane, Stephen. *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*. United States, D. Appleton, 1896.

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