



Maggie, A Girl of the Streets: a Prototype of Naturalistic Aesthetics

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Résumé – *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* se révèle être un roman d'esthétique naturaliste par excellence en ce sens qu'il est le résultat d'une démarche scientifique, expérimentale et doctrinale fondée essentiellement sur une observation rigoureuse et fidèle des faits, mais aussi sur des déductions logiques. L'auteur y met en scène des gens ordinaires pris au piège par des forces extérieures irrésistibles telles qu'un environnement hostile, des circonstances défavorables, indépendantes de leur volonté, et l'hérédité, ce qui explique la pauvreté extrême, le manque d'éducation, la violence, l'aliénation, la résignation et la perversion morale auxquels ils sont condamnés, sans omettre la fin tragique inéluctable du personnage central. Aussi l'œuvre est-elle un condensé des caractéristiques du roman naturaliste comprenant des personnages sans relief, une séquence linéaire d'événements malheureux, une structure simple et un langage ordurier qui, conjugués aux thèmes, rendent compte avec beaucoup de clarté et de pertinence des problématiques existentielles comme le déterminisme social et la prédestination.

Mots-clés : naturalisme/naturaliste, environnement, hérédité, déterminisme, violence.

1. Introduction

Never in recorded American literature has a trend been more pessimistic and experimental than naturalism. Thought to be dark, deepened, and radicalized realism, naturalism particularly addresses on scientific and doctrinal bases the irresistible influence of outside forces like environment, circumstances, and heredity on man's psychology, thought, personality, behavior, actions, and social conditions¹. Also defined as "literature with scientific pretensions" (Guthrie and Diller 1942, p. 338), naturalism appears as an intellectual approach used for a logical analysis of the dynamic interactions between people and their various surroundings. The essential role of naturalists, as Émile Zola, the tutelary figure of French naturalism and author of *The Experimental Novel* (1880) emphasizes it, is to closely examine things, phenomena, and people with a magnifying glass, and collect as much documentation as possible on them so as to carry out an insightful study that gives enough room to rigorous deductions (Bafaro, 2000, p. 97).

Naturalistic writers are believed to draw the ferments of their thoughts from such doctrines as "scientism"², "positivism"³, and absolute determinism.⁴ They equally rely on Claude Bernard's theory of heredity (Alikavazovic, 2003, p. 31). Such an alchemy allows them to penetrate into human beings' hearts, discover their hidden sides, and understand the reasons behind their feelings, behaviors, motivations, actions, reactions, and moral characteristics.

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A case in point is *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*⁵ (1893) which Stephen Crane (1871-1900) has fashioned out of a microscopic observation and evaluation of city squalor and the lives of working classes and their families caught up in the suburbs of New York City, like Balzac, who has used his knowledge of the “tourangeau” milieu to produce *Eugénie Grandet* (1833). Crane draws a poignant portrait of a young urban girl, Maggie, who falls into homelessness and sexual perversion as a result of extreme poverty, family violence, and ostracism to evidence the “persistent illusions of people and the disparity between their buoyant expectations and their doom” (McMichael *et al.*, 2004, p. 611). Set against the historical background of the Industrial Revolution that radically changed the American economy from an agriculture-based one to an industry-driven one, the novella highlights the serious social problems brought about by that technological improvement – massive migration, uncontrolled urbanization and high birthrate, unemployment, low wages, unhealthy living conditions, etc. – which demonstrates Crane’s purpose, as a proponent of naturalism, “to achieve personal honesty, to deflate romantic idealism, and portray men battered and alone in a hostile world”, and to show that “human beings are wholly controlled by their environment and their heredity” (McMichael *et al.*, 2004, p. 611).

The most salient themes of naturalism, especially that of man and beast struggling in vain against irresistible forces of nature, or between the savage heart and civilization, are in full motion in a wide range of works, including Jack London in *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906); Theodore Dreiser, who, as a Marxist writing from a naturalistic perspective, is concerned with the overwhelming effects of industrialization on urban life, which causes him to express his “sympathy for people haunted by poverty”, filled with “gallant dreams,” but “helpless in the clutch of relentless fate” (McMichael *et al.*, 2004, p. 756) in such books as *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhart* (1911), and *An American Tragedy* (1925). Similarly, Eugene O’Neill, in *Anna Christie* (1921), voices his “psychological probing of alienation and his depiction of the suffering of ordinary mortals” (McMichael *et al.*, 2004, p. 1077), while Sinclair Lewis, in *The Jungle* (1906), denounces the exploitation of migrants by the cynical capitalists, the misery of hopeless working classes, and the absence of any political protection and social support.

This article intends to demonstrate that Crane’s short story is an experimentation of naturalistic aesthetics in the sense that it presents human society as a jungle where only the strong survive. To illustrate his opinion, the author shapes ordinary people devoid of free will, and condemned to poverty, ignorance, violence, and moral downfall by a hostile environment, a combination of difficult circumstances, a history of social and economic



heredity, along with such animalistic drives as sex and hunger over which they have no control.

2. Endemic Poverty: A Contagious and Incurable Disease

In *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, the omniscient author-narrator dramatizes the execrable life in the suburbs by setting in chapter II the action in a New Yorkian environment, riddled with acute poverty, lack of education, idleness, sordidness, insecurity, and immorality. In doing so, he suggests that where people live, what they eat, how they dress, speak, and behave define who they are. These concrete indicators serve for introductory character-drawing since they help reveal slum-dwellers from inside and outside. In the same vein, these markers stand as theoretical and ideological discourses because, as Roland Barthes knowingly argues when talking about food, they are “system[s] of communication, bod[ies] of images, protocol[s] of usage, situations, and behaviour” (Chang, 2008, p. 118). As such, these discourses capture any individual’s inward life, soul, sensibility, psyche, thought, personality, class, status, culture, and identity. In this respect, the following scene is illuminating: “Eventually they entered into a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter.... Long steamers of garments fluttered from fire-escapes. In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags and bottles....The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels” (MGS: 4-5).

Place as a narrative element and as a character, symbolizing destiny, most notably ill-fate, can be perceived through “New York’s Bowery” (McMichael, 2004, p. 611) which connotes an unfriendly domestic space, where lower classes bow, submit to poverty and its repercussions. The milieu “epitomizes the ghetto in America today, just as back alleys, crowded tenements, and lack of play areas defined the slum of the late nineteenth century” (Laguardia and Guth, 1996, p. 18). Place as a sign of bad destiny is also noticeable through Maggie’s inadequate living place, the description of which unveils, in all respects, her complex of inferiority, uneasy feeling, and lack of self-esteem, and proves as well that location, accommodation, and clothing produce far-reaching effects on the body, the mind, and the heart (Bafaro, 2000, p. 98). The use by the “auctorial”⁶ narrator of negative words to describe the despicable state of her dwelling shows that Maggie’s past, present, and future are filled with gloom, especially because they are determined in advance, hence the pre-eminently naturalistic dimension of the novelette: “Maggie contemplated the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home. A clock, in a splintered and battered oblong box of vanished wood, she suddenly regarded



as an abomination. The almost vanished flowers in the carpet-pattern, she conceived to be newly hideous" (MGS: 15-16).

In Maggie's ramshackle house and in her family, poverty, unemployment, despondency, child-labor, inequality, and institutionalized abandonment are on the surface. Not only does her so-called house, which is unfit for habitation, make her sick and disclose her fragility but it also reveals her yearning for a real and comfortable one she will never find. Actually, it is no wonder that Maggie has the feeling that she does not live in a home because, as John Steinbeck (1970, pp. 61-62) maintains, "the word 'home' meant, at first, safety, then gradually comfort.... A home was a place where women and children could be reasonably safe, a place to which a man could return with joy and slough off his weariness and his fears". In his *The Pearl* (1947), for instance, Steinbeck shows through insurmountable determinism that Kino's poverty has been a family affair for generations through their thatched hut that can take fire or be blown away anytime as well as the canoe he has inherited as his only means of support.

There are stigmata in every chapter which prove that low-income people live badly, as can be noticed through the shabby garments of their urchins, and the poor food they can hardly afford as well: "[Mary] extracted a frying-pan full of potatoes that hisses..." (MGS: 6) The theme of unbalanced diet as a symptom of poverty is also present in Steinbeck's *The Pearl* (8) where the family eats the same meal every morning: "[A hot corncake] was the only breakfast he had ever known". The human misery that Crane's characters are confronted with is accentuated by the musty air, the sound pollution, and the nauseating smell of cooking: "A thousand odors of cooking food came forth to the street" (MGS:5). Other unpleasant occurrences, too, make the block of flats unfit for habitation.

On account of its various implications, poverty – especially in underprivileged areas – quickly gains ground, intensifies, and becomes hard to eradicate. For instance, considering that destitution, hunger, and idleness stimulate sexual desire, men and women crowd together, and find solace in sex, which turns them into child-producing machines that only fabricate failures, street children, hoodlums, and *enfants terribles*. As a consequence of overpopulation, "the building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowls"(MGS: 5); streets are transformed into overflow pipes, effluents, or discharges of human waste; they also become a no man's land, where griny children feel comfortable, get out of their confinement, build tight relationships, acquire or reinforce bad habits, break law and order, and develop the culture of violence and permissiveness. And since poverty may be a cause and/or a consequence of a lack of infrastructures, streets are equally transformed into playgrounds, kindergartens, and schools, widening the gaps between the privileged and the underprivileged. Crane's young and old characters' lives being indissociable with streets and life outdoors, it is not



surprising, therefore, that they all rush headlong to disaster, as is literally and figuratively foreshadowed by the carefully chosen eponymous title: *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*.

Examined from every angle, poverty may well be associated with what Durkheim has termed *habitus* and Aristotle *hexis*, both concepts designating the dispositions acquired by the body, the mind, and the soul (Dubar, 1996, p. 65). In Crane's book, poverty is, undeniably, habit-forming; it represents the social condition, culture, ways of thinking, feeling, and acting of underprivileged communities. That is why, being born of poor parents, children can neither escape poverty nor the objective situations which have generated it, or its impacts.

One of the reasons why poverty is intractable is that, as a contingent and hereditary phenomenon like race, it is not only transmitted from one generation to the next but it also excludes any possibility of change, especially for the better. In other words, because each individual is corporeally, spiritually, morally, economically, socially, and politically conditioned, he/she cannot possibly go through positive transfiguration or metamorphosis. This fact explains the deliberate use by Crane of a simple structure, an Aristotelian⁷ directed-plot, and flat or one-dimensional characters, not round ones, who are doomed to fail. As misfortune that is bound to happen, poverty can be compared to an inborn and incurable disease, to an evil that annihilates man's free will, and dismisses good luck. To put it differently, poverty operates like a *fatum*, the latter term is understood from a Zolian viewpoint as irrevocable fate. Quite the opposite of the Sartrean existentialist perspective according to which though he may be the prisoner of external forces, man is, as a thinking creature, still fully responsible for his destiny, therefore he is free to rise above his circumstances and to overcome the impediments on his way.

Maggie is the perfect embodiment of the impact of poverty, as illustrated through her devastating relationship with Pete, a bartender. Figuratively, the young man is portrayed as a viper or a poisonous snake, capable of destroying a human being's life. His Machiavellian attitude towards the innocent and envious girl suggests that he is sugary, but has no scruples in gaining what he wants. Putting expediency above morality, and using deceit and machination in his way of life, he has pitilessly exploited Maggie's vulnerability to seduce and entice her away from the palling suburban life into the exciting and luring, but deceptive town centre, with its night haunts, museums, etc.

What is invariable is that in a social-class system, children hold their status by virtue of inheritance, environment, and circumstances. If their families are indigent, there is no escaping it. This is all the more natural since their parents feel powerless as a result of their being conditioned by the soulless capitalistic system to believe that poverty and its undesirable repercussions cannot be



triumphed over. Such a defeatist state of mind shows that poverty is not only alienating but it also kills the genius, and damps pride, courage, self-confidence, self-reliance, etc. Which is contemptible in a Puritan and capitalistic country like America, where poverty, no matter what its form may be, symbolizes failure, dependence, idleness, laziness, regression, and damnation.

The core of the issue is that Maggie's parents' lives have been so consumed by the exploitation of man by man and by unsubstantial means of existence that they cannot think of reversing their situation. While Maggie and Jimmie are striving from an early age to bring them a helping hand, they believe that improving their situation is a-next-to-impossible task. Their hopelessness, aimlessness, and inaction are all the more understandable since extreme destitution has denied them the sought-after knowledge, know-know, and awareness necessary for a qualitative and quantitative leap in an industrialized country. As a subterfuge to have a reason for living, they are, like their neighbors, lost in escapist activities like drinking alcohol, taking drugs, having sex, quarelling, and fighting, which corroborates the wise saying according to which "it is no use reasoning with a hungry man".

That old adage particularly applies to Maggie, for abject poverty represents the exciting force that has driven her to hastily and rashly throw herself in the arms of a young man, who epitomizes corrupt urban civilization, hoping that he is infatuated with her, and is going to make her enjoy life. But much to her surprise, she soon realizes that "better the devil you know than the devil you don't know", for Pete is nothing but a Don Juan, an arrogant seducer, who only pursues girls for casual sexual intercourse. Like Emma, in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), who turns to hateful adultery after her aborted love affairs, Maggie's misadventure with Pete and her street life are revealingly more disappointing than her difficult life in her family.

However, Maggie's mishap was predictable because, like most of Crane's human and anthropomorphic characters – Bowery, Rum Alley, Devil's Row –, her name, Marguerite, affectionately called Maggie, is symbolically and semantically loaded with meaning. Being as beautiful as the ox-eye daisy and as innocent as a newborn babe, she is constantly an object of attraction, especially for malicious men. Perhaps even more significant, the shortening of her name prefigures that of her life.

One can well argue that in the American collective mind, money, the useful but corrupting metal, is a primeval need, the lack of which is a great handicap, in that it causes vulnerability, precariousness, dependence, homelessness, vagrancy, etc. Unfortunately, with regard to poverty, the whole difficulty and complexity lies in the fact that it breeds multi-faceted problems among which violence.



3. Violence as an Outlet and a Lifestyle

Linked by cause-and-effect relationships, poverty and violence are closely interwoven organic and structural issues which cannot be analyzed or solved separately since they nurture each other, and form a vicious circle. So, to break the cycle of violence, one must, first, break the cycle of poverty, and vice versa.

The imponderable effects of desperate poverty on individuals are easy to substantiate since this evil leads them to deviation, subversion, revolt, and brutality. Indeed, decreptitude fuels aggressiveness, for causing its victims to feel frustrated, helpless, powerless, and worthless; it instinctively pushes them to resort to verbal, physical, psychological, moral, and sexual violences to give their existence a meaning. As an inappropriate response to their degrading living conditions, violence represents for destitute people a lifestyle; it becomes for them an outlet for releasing their frustrations, an urgent need for recognition, a means of resistance, expression, and individual redemption. In sum, it is a survival strategy, according to Frantz Fanon: "Violence is a cleaning force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (in Hughes, 1970, p. 193).

Naturalistic writers have a predilection for the themes of poverty and violence since both raise the central issue of the absurdity of the human condition. Poverty, for instance, often drives the poor to wonder about the meaning and arbitrariness of life, that is, to ask themselves why they should be penalized for a situation they have not created. Because their question remains unanswered, they become subversive, rebellious. Further, poverty represents a spiritual sickness that may cause its victims to have their faith undermined, shaken for being in a quandary about the existence of God, His fairness, benevolence, etc. This skepticism may be surprising coming from Crane, the omniscient author-narrator, who was raised in a family, where both parents adhered to "a characteristic nineteenth-century faith in the benevolence of God, in the existence of free will, and the significance of man in the universe" (McMichael, 2004, p. 611).

In Crane's short fiction, wretched existence has bred physical violence outdoors, turning streets into a wild place, where only the fittest can get out of difficulties, reminiscent of Charles Darwin's deterministic theory about the transformative impacts of environment on creatures: "To survive, people must adapt to irresistible natural forces and to the 'stress and strain of life, its fevers and sweats and wild indulgences'" (McMichael, 2004, p. 724). The ruthless fight between Jimmie, a member of Rum Alley, and a group of Devil's Row illuminates how violence is part and parcel of the lives of worse-off parents' children. The point is that in their lawless milieu, urchins must be tough



enough to get along, defend their honor, and assert themselves, as shown through this imagery: "The little champion of Rum Alley stumbled precipitately down on the other side. His coat had been torn to shreds in a scuffle, and his hat was gone. He had bruises on twenty parts of his body, and blood was dripping from a cut in his head (MGS: 1). The child of Rum Alley's violent nature, martial frame of mind, and fearless nihilism reflect his name because, literally interpreted, Jimmie or Jemmy designates a crow-bar, especially used by burglars for forcing open doors, windows, and drawers. Additionally, the blood which is running down his body is a metaphor for pride, courage, stoicism, heroism, etc.

Secondly, the Johnsons experience daily violence, domestic disputes, and drunken brawls that have even culminated in the tragic death of their son, Tommie. Mary, Maggie's mother, is depicted as a virago, for she behaves like a bear with a sore head, spending her time showering her children with verbal, physical, and moral violence, and shouting at her errant husband: "When I come nights I can't get no rest' cause yer allus pounding a kid (MGS:12-13). Quiet life *en famille* being impossible, partly because the couple is usually under the influence of alcohol so as to forget their plight and partly because Mrs. Johnson is not a dotting wife and a protective mother; Mr. Johnson spends most of his time in the bars: "My home reg' lar living hell!..... Why do I come an' drin' whisk' here thish way? 'Cause home reg' lar living hell!" (MGS: 17). As may well be imagined, he is alcoholic, aggressive, ragged, and rude simply because he has genes of violence in his blood, heart, mind, history, culture, and civilization, hence the relevance of this questioning: "Is it not time to take a long look at ourselves, at the way we live and the way we think, and to face the fact that the violence in our streets is the violence in our hearts, that with all our accomplishments, our spires, and mines, and clean, glistening packages, our charities and gods, we are what we were – a people of violence" (Bertrand, 1991, p. 273).

Though marital violence pervades all societies, and transcends racial, cultural, economic, and religious barriers, there is no denying that it is a hateful wrong-doing that is more frequent in the city and, more particularly, in the suburbs than in the countryside, where people are less stressed out because they have fewer social and financial constraints to meet. Doomed to live in hateful conditions, the deprived instinctively resort to physical, moral, and psychological violences as a mode of conflict resolution as well as a way of life that has devastating effects on them and on society at large.

On the one hand, violence in poverty-stricken families may find its roots in the exasperating fact that they hardly make both ends meet. Needless to emphasize that one cannot be stable, serene, and happy when one does not have enough to eat, when one cannot bring home the bacon. Obviously, in a



country like America, where money is the measure of social status, success, reputation, and respectability, it is not surprising that people who are unprovided for should be anxious, bad-tempered, and aggressive. On the other hand, violence in low-income families may be read from a traditional point of view as a passionate strategy to break children's resistance and impose discipline. But no matter what its motives may be, the use of violence can be equated with the confession of one's powerlessness, the incapacity to achieve in another way what one is longing for (Colette, 1941, p. 169). Sartre (1983, p. 579) expresses the same opinion when he states that violence is not a means among others but the deliberate choice to reach the end anyhow.

Maggie's oppressive mother who turns her domestic worries into acts of violence on her scapegoats has a distorted view of the situation. She does not know that violence, as Elizabethan dramatist Ben Johnson has it in *Everyman in His Humour* (1601), can have effects on servile people, but not on frustrated and rebellious ones like Jimmie and Maggie. She cannot possibly realize that the children, who sweep off her feet, are nothing but the by-products of the destitute location, the execrable social and economic conditions, but also the polluted family atmosphere in which they live. The climax of the story occurs when Mary throws her innocent daughter out of the house, pushing her in the hands of a bartender she does not appreciate. In doing so, she commits the most disastrous blunder in her life since she exposes her to the perils of being alone, homeless, insecure, aimless, and restless. Her instinctive act is all the heavier with consequences as she drives her daughter to lose her moral integrity. On this point, a parallel can be drawn between Maggie's tormented life and that of the protagonist in Ron Rash's *Incandescences* (2015): in an attempt to escape their miserable everyday life and fulfill the American Dream, both girls end up falling into the abyss.

Tell me who you are, I tell you who your children are. As a matter of fact, the narratee soon realizes that in the Johnsons, the children take most of their indecorum after their parents whom poverty has reduced to passivity, irresponsibility, even nothingness. There is every reason to believe that had the latter been able to live with dignity, despite their precariousness, or shown their offspring that poverty can be overcome through hard work and unremitting patience, they would not have been failures. More significantly, Maggie's parents should not have a grudge against their artefacts either, but against the political, economic, and social systems, which have alienated them, that is, as Frantz Fanon defines the term alienation in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), driven them into poverty but also made them interiorize it. In fact, for Fanon, alienation designates whatever prevents the individual from becoming independent, whatever separates him/her from his/her humanity. As a result, poor parents should be conscious that they share a common destiny with their



children since they are all, without any exception, the prisoners of overwhelming forces that deny them any possibility of self-accomplishment.

Being associated with violence, dark streets are the open spaces where the rabble and dregs of society take to pitched battles and gangsterism, and display their carelessness and ill-breeding. Onomastically interpreted, the names of the streets, "Rum Alley" and "Devil's Row", are telling. "Rum Alley", for instance, designates a street, where you can find any kind of "rum", or alcoholic liquor; a place, where people are sodden with drink or illegally import alcohol. As for "Devil's Row", it is an association of "devil", meaning the spirit of evil, or a cruel, mischievous, wretched, and unfortunate person, and "row", which signifies uproar, noisy disturbance, violent argument, or quarrel: "In the streets, infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles" (MGS: 4).

Children's rough manners uphold that people in destitute communities are entrapped by the culture of violence, as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. aptly states it: "[Americans] are a violent people with a violent history, and the instinct for violence has seeped into the bloodstream of [their] national life" (in Hughes, 1970, p. 188). In other words, the underprivileged cannot possibly shape their own existence: they lack free will and are not accountable for their doom. And what makes them more powerless is the fact that they can neither influence their past, nor their present, nor their future. Clearly, as a staunch determinist, Crane ceaselessly refutes the Sartrean existentialist perception according to which man "dwells in an absurd universe and defines himself through his choices....[and] realizes that only he can provide his own escape from the enveloping nothingness around him" (in Hughes, 1970, p. 191).

Grosso modo, in worse-off communities, violence represents a subculture, which denotes marginality, on the one hand, and centrality, on the other. Yet, the crux of the matter is that poverty and violence are difficult to uproot since they are serious diseases which result from a third one: poor education.

4. Lack of Education: A Handicap to Human Development

A close reading of *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* reveals that the dialectical interplay between poverty and violence is the same as that between poverty and poor education; it is also the same as that between violence and poor education. Rarely is it emphasized enough but poverty and violence can engender lack of education insofar as these evils often create disrupted families as well as an insecure surrounding that cannot be conducive to intellectual, moral, economic, and material growth. Such is the reason why poverty and violence are incompatible with freedom, independence, dignity, peace,



enlightenment, and happiness; that is equally why if poverty and violence are extreme, ignorance becomes extreme.

In the ordinary meaning of the word, education refers to the action exerted upon an individual to increase his/her possibilities, especially his/her body, his/her intelligence, and his/her character. More concretely, and as is stated in article 2 of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (in Grawitz, 1999, pp. 142-143), education designates a set of means a society uses to socialize its members, that is, to make them share its culture, values, and good manners as well as to transmit them the knowledge and know-how they need to fulfill themselves.

Likewise, Émile Durkheim (1969, p. 38) defines education as the shaping of an inner self which guides the individual all along his/her life. He views education as a catalyst for social integration and quick adjustment in a rapidly-changing and merciless world, an efficient instrument for filling gaps and compensating for inequalities. The noble missions assigned to education require that children be well disciplined, instructed, and trained. Especially and with reference to the American collective mind, not to receive good family and school education is not to be an *Homo Americanus*, that is, what Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur calls a "New Man". Regrettably, since their inborn social conditions deny them intellectual, professional, and moral development, which is the *sine qua non* prerequisite for self-realization, lower class people are doomed to reproduce their undesirable status.

The plain truth is that no society can afford to neglect education because, after food, it is the first compelling need of human beings and the driving force of progress, welfare, and citizenship. Metaphorically put, systematic instruction and training, especially of the young in school, is to man what blood, fertile soil, and gloss are respectively to the organism, the seeds, and the wood because only well-read people can aspire to the development of individual qualities as well as to the social, economic, scientific, and material improvements which, according to Alexis Carrel in *Man, The Unknown* (1935) are the ultimate goals of civilization. Conversely, to be uneducated is to have no prospects, to be poor intellectually, spiritually, and economically, as exemplified by the Johnsons and their neighborhood. Jimmie's and Maggie's reckless attitudes inform that they have not been prepared to properly behave and challenge the complexities of life.

Remaining true to his deterministic option, Crane proves that like culture, race, and sex, language fixes the social status of an individual; it serves as an index of his/her ideas, feelings, desires, mentalities, manners, customs, beliefs, lifestyle, qualities, failings, and level of education. He shows that habits of speech, accent, tone, vocabulary, and syntax can help identify, locate, categorize, and label people insofar as they represent the first tangible



differentiation factors. In any community, the poor and the rich are easily distinguishable from their languages because, as Elsa Nettels (1988, p. 5) caps it to the point, “language has divisive effects in the sense that it reinforces the barriers that divide the social classes, the races, and the sexes”. Naturally, slum-dwellers speak underworld, coarse, offensive, vulgar language, which subsequently gives weight to Victor Hugo’s statement in *Les Misérables* (1862) according to which slang is the language of poverty-stricken and ignorant people.

It is simple logic: in *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, characters perfectly demonstrate that the language of the Americans is not uniform at all because their conditions of existence are not equal. That is the reason why literary English and a polished style are vanities which poor classes cannot afford to speak, their concern being to have enough to eat. Molière expresses this truth in his comedy *Les Femmes savantes* (1672), maintaining that one can live on delicious soup but not on refined language. Besides, it would be ironical if poor people tried to speak correct English since such an attempt would mean signifying. To be sure, their efforts would have been vain, for they are socially marked. The adequacy between language and social status accounts for the sharp contrast between the filthy language of the Johnsons and that of upper and middle-class people. No confusion is possible between “*Dey’ll get yehs*” (MGS: 1), “*dese micks can’t make me run*” (MGS: 1). “*Go the hell*” (MGS: 41) and “*Hi, there, Mary, I beg your pardon! Brace up, old girl*” (MGS: 71). Altogether, lack of education, violence, and poverty are Gordian knots which influence one another, and result all from the creation of structures that allow a dominant class to be better off and a lower one to be worse-off.

5. Conclusion

All things considered, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* fits the definition, characteristics, and pattern of the naturalistic novel through its conception, aesthetics, and *mise en scène*. Thematically, it is an experimental and empirical novella based on an accurate documentation on the diseases that plague the American society, which gives it plausibility and reader-interest but also serves as a vehicle for the manifestaion of the whole truth. Crane’s fine rendering of the poverty, dirt, violence, poor education, paradoxes, injustices, and moral degradation prevailing in suburban New York City is a deft pretext for him to demonstrate through scientific and natural laws how people can be trapped and pre-determined, especially in a capitalist economy, by such irresistible forces as a hostile urban surrounding, bad circumstances, and direct or indirect heredity.



As far as the form is concerned, the novella is emblematic of naturalism in the sense that the spatial and temporal setting, and the characters as well work together to reveal the interconnections between direct or implied themes. Firstly, the people, who belong to the bottom of society, are life-like, and snugly fit in with their austere spatial and temporal environments. Their physical appearances, thoughts, behaviors, habits, qualities, one-dimensionality, and foul language are panoptic illustrations of their material, intellectual, and moral poverty, abruptness, hopelessness, and aimlessness. Equally worth stressing, the strict linearity, unity, and meticulously woven structure and plot point to the disenchantment and inevitable ruin of the anti-heroine.

On the moral plane, Crane's work is, doubtless, a naturalistic one, for his poetic intention is to prove that the mission of a writer is to unmask life as it is exactly in order to heighten public awareness and to moralize. His *verismo*⁸ or daring painting of serious problems in a so-called Puritan, democratic, industrialized, and urbanized country should be read as an invitation to redeem the wretched lot of common people.

NOTES

1. From the naturalistic perspective, the human being is conceived of as a mere artefact of a dynamic interaction between the environment or "milieu", where he/she has grown up, the concrete circumstances in which he/she finds himself at a given time (moment), and heredity, which produces innate character traits.
2. "Scientism" is the conviction that only science is the source of true knowledge.
3. "Positivism" rejects metaphysics and prioritizes factual, physical observation.
4. Determinism refers to the interpretation of reality through the only principle of cause-and-effect, hence the negation of free-will.
5. Stephen Crane. 1984. *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*. New York: The Library of America. References to this novel will appear in the text as MGS, followed by page numbers.
6. An auctorial narrator is one who entirely dominates the narrative, and is in a position to explain, comment, or evaluate any element. The term auctorial is used as a synonym of Genette's terms: not focalized, zero focalization, omniscient, or "vision par derrière". Cf. Hendrik van Gorp *et al.* 2005. *Dictionnaire des termes littéraires*. Paris : Honoré Champion, p. 376.
7. Aristotle sees plot as a complete and whole action with a beginning, a middle, and an end, the latter being a logical outcome or culmination of the events in the beginning and middle. Cf. Robie Macauley and George Lanning. 1987. *Technique in Fiction*. New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 203.



8. VÉRISME, (latin *verus*, meaning *vrai*; italian *verismo*) is the documentary and photographic reproduction of reality with a view to satirizing; it is naturalism pushed to the extreme. Cf. Hendrik van Gorp *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

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