Always "Poundin' a Kid": Abusive Realism in Stephen Crane's *Maggie*

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In Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Maggie and Jimmie Johnson grow up in a home resembling, in the Bowery dialect, a "reg'lar livin' hell" (11), amidst an environment of unrelenting abuse. While *Maggie* is recognized for its realistic portrayal of a nineteenth-century American slum, critical focus centers on the work's naturalistic elements, and critics allow that the events to which the characters are exposed are a result of the author's deterministic outlook without exploring the causes of that determinism. Critics have likewise evaluated the difference between Crane's representation of Maggie as a withdrawn, self-conscious, defenseless girl, seen by Laura Hapke as "mute and absent" (52), and his depiction of her brother Jimmie, who demonstrates an aggressive self-reliance Keith Gandal calls "a healthy belligerence" (760). They neglect, however, to discuss the factors which may have led to such dissimilarity.

Allowing for the misogyny of nineteenth-century morality, the differences between Maggie and Jimmie could be seen merely as a reflection of cultural bias. Indeed, June Howard claims that Crane is "utterly uninterested in causality" (99), which, if true, would explain why readers – feeling, perhaps, that they are given no cues as to the determinate factors shaping Maggie and Jimmie's development – may assume that gender distinctions are a result of authorial or cultural bias. Crane's portrayal, though, is only a misogynistic reflection of nineteenth-century morality if the difference between Maggie and Jimmie is unrealistic, or if, as Howard claims, the reader is given "little information about the specific determinants of Maggie's character and choices" (99). In the absence of those determinants, we might conclude that Maggie is constructed only by what Howard calls Crane's "plot of fatality" (99), so that "all that Maggie sees, and virtually all that the reader knows, is that she cannot survive in this brutal world" (99). Yet Crane develops throughout *Maggie* numerous factors that lead to both the naturalistic element of determinism for which the text is known and the behaviors exhibited by both Maggie and Jimmie, who respond to their environment in profoundly realistic ways given both the abuse they endure and the gender which shapes their experience of that abuse.

Certainly, Maggie and Jimmie are victims of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse, which we now understand involves not merely violence, but "isolation…induced guilt leading to victim self-blame…enforced loyalty; humiliation; and degradation" (Henderson 922). So, too, is that abuse lasting and constant, which is significant as researchers today "agree that persistence, pattern, and repetition, rather than single acts, are the hallmark of true psychological abuse" (Shull 1671). And recent studies indicate that children exposed to prolonged periods of violence and neglect

develop gender-specific coping mechanisms wherein females tend to internalize hardships, becoming depressed and silent, while males are more likely to externalize them, developing personality disorders that manifest in aggression and violence (Henderson 778).

Having applied these and other findings to Crane's work, I believe it to be accurate – not in spite of gender differences, but, in part, because of them – as Maggie, seen often by critics as two-dimensional and voiceless until her death, is in fact voiceless not because of Crane's fatalism or the influence of nineteenth-century misogyny over his work, but because of the pervasive abuse, abysmal poverty, and gender-specific coping mechanisms that shape her character. Likewise, Jimmie, who Gandal calls a "promising tough" (766), seems better equipped to handle the environment not because of an innate resilience – and not solely because of the culture that fails to judge him as harshly as it judges his sister – but because violence and aggression are the known mechanisms to which men who were abused as children often resort. It seems unlikely that the accuracy with which Crane depicts gender-differentiated coping mechanisms is coincidental, or that his seemingly misogynistic characterizations mirror psychological insight only by chance. Rather, it follows that though such mechanisms were not studied by psychologists or sociologists until the 1960s, Crane accurately anticipates throughout *Maggie* the circumstances that both lead to and result from child abuse. Moreover, he successfully applies the complexity of those circumstances to his characters' lives, accomplishing through literary means what social researchers would not do for more than half a century.

Richard Gelles, in "Family Violence," discusses the evolution of our understanding of child abuse, saying, "Social workers recognized but did not write about child abuse and child maltreatment in the nineteenth-century" (347). The few accounts of abuse written during the period, he furthers, "claimed that social factors were essentially irrelevant as a generative cause" (349). Though child abuse had been a recognized problem for some time, it was not until the mid-1960s – some seventy years after Crane gave us *Maggie* – that both the psychological and sociological communities began to examine it and to acknowledge the connection between certain societal conditions and the prevalence of abuse (Gelles 349). According to Gelles, "The private nature of family violence not only hides the problem from public and scientific view, it also makes the victims and offenders nearly inaccessible to many social researchers" (349). *Maggie*, though, does not hide the problem of abuse from its readers, and neither the abused nor the abusers are "inaccessible." Instead, Crane exposes not only the tragic reality of family abuse, but the factors that both lead to and result from that abuse.

Though sociologists allow that child abuse occurs at all socioeconomic levels, and until the mid-1970s focused on upholding the idea that abuse was free of economic influence, in the later part of that decade they began to acknowledge irrefutable connections between poverty and the occurrence of child maltreatment (Fryer 14-22). In *Child Abuse in the Social Environment*, a 1993 compilation of sociological research, George E. Fryer Jr. cites several studies, all of which indicate an incontestable correlation between a family's economic status and the likelihood of abuse. According to the

Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Sourcebook, "children from families with annual incomes below $15,000 per year were more than 25 times more likely than children from families with annual incomes above $30,000 to have been harmed or endangered by abuse or neglect" (Henderson 300). Though these figures are not applicable to the late nineteenth-century – and though we do not know the exact economic status of the tenants of Rum Alley – it seems likely, with respect at least to the Johnson family, that the average annual household income would have been significantly less than the late nineteenth-century equivalent of $15,000.

Poverty – certainly the most prevailing determinate in *Maggie* – is not the only correlate of abuse Crane accurately depicts. When researchers finally investigated, in the early 1980s, the high occurrence of non-natural child death, they found neglect and physical abuse – both usually perpetuated by a distressed and often extremely impoverished mother (Fryer 28) – were most often at fault. *Maggie* reflects the responsibility of both neglect and physical abuse in the death of the Johnson's youngest child, Tommie, who sadly never makes it past infancy. We first meet Tommie as the "red, bawling infant" (6) Maggie is dragging through their tenement building. Having been dragged back to their apartment, Tommie watches his mother beat Jimmie, and, as the violence escalates, we are told Tommie "crawled under the table and, turning, peered out cautiously" (8). In the middle of the fight, he "was knocked down. He protested with his usual vehemence, because they had bruised his tender shins against a table" (7). Soon after, Tommie dies. Of his death, we read simply: "He went away in a white, insignificant coffin, his small waxen hand clutching a

flower that the girl, Maggie, had stolen from an Italian" (13). Not only the abuse Tommie witnesses, but the "insignificant coffin" in which he is buried and the offhand and brief account of his death, give indication of the neglect he experienced.

Crane seems likewise aware of a connection between abuse and alcoholism, as Maggie and Jimmie's mother, Mary Johnson, is often depicted with a bottle in her hand. Overwhelmingly – though no scientific confirmation of this existed in the nineteenth-century – evidence indicates that alcohol plays a significant role in cases of abuse. In a 1999 study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, researchers determined that "children of substance-abusing parents were almost three times likelier to be abused and more than four times likelier to be neglected than children of parents who are not substance abusers" (Henderson 301). Early in the novel, Maggie sits eating, "with side glances of fear of interruption" (9), while her "mother sat blinking at them. She delivered reproaches, swallowed potatoes and drank from a yellow-brown bottle" (9). After drinking, "her mood changed and she wept" (9), which demonstrates the emotional influence of alcohol in her life. This is only one of many instances wherein Mary Johnson gets drunk. Passed out in the following scene, her face "inflamed and swollen from drinking" (12), we see clearly the excess of her alcohol consumption.

Keith Gandal, in "Stephen Crane's 'Maggie' and the Modern Soul," attributes to Crane the "rise of a modern psychology of self-esteem" (759) – thus acknowledging the significance of the psychological accuracy of *Maggie* – and he allows that Crane's version of the nineteenth-century American slum is more realistic than most

portrayals at the time, which depict the slum as "a hothouse of vice, brimming with temptations" (760). He says Crane, instead, reveals characters who "have either hardened against the hardship and humiliation of their circumstances, or…have sunk into self-loathing" (760). He furthers that Crane uses Maggie and Jimmie to demonstrate each of these tendencies respectively, as "Jimmie [develops] a healthy belligerence and Maggie [falls] into self-hatred" (760), a difference Gandal claims is a result of sexist nineteenth-century morality, wherein boys could recover from the impact of their environment, but girls – should they dare to transgress sexually – could only find redemption through "marriage or suicide" (763). Gandal concludes that unlike Maggie, whose lack of self-worth results in her demise, Jimmie, wearing "the armor…that protects self-esteem" (766), possesses the necessary resilience to survive. Though Gandal asserts that Crane accurately portrays Maggie's abysmal self-esteem, he blames on that self doubt her apparent inability to defend herself, saying, "Maggie… is not morally doomed because she becomes a prostitute, but because she does not have the toughness, the anger, or the habits of self-defense to triumph, psychologically, over her ostracism" (781).

Though he recognizes Maggie's fragility, then, Gandal does not allow that such fragility is caused by anything other than inferiority or weakness. Certainly, both Maggie and Jimmie lack self-confidence, and insecurity develops differently in each of them: we see Maggie as withdrawn, silent, and timid, while Jimmie is forceful and aggressive. When we first encounter Maggie, she is pleading with Jimmie not to fight anymore because when he does, they "all get a poundin'" (7). Shortly thereafter –

silenced by both her brother's and her mother's abuse – Maggie attempts quiet subservience, "[tottering] on her small legs beneath burdens of dishes" (9). Accidentally, though, Maggie breaks a plate, and Mary's "eyes glittered on her child with sudden hatred" (9). Later in the same night, "The small frame of the ragged girl was quivering. Her features were haggard from weeping, and her eyes gleamed from fear" (13). This day, we come to understand, is no different from most, and these occurrences condition Maggie into timidity, as virtually any action on her part may, at any moment, garner abuse.

Likewise, Crane establishes Jimmie's reaction to abuse in a number of moments. First, we are told Jimmie "never conceived a respect for the world, because he had begun with no idols that it had smashed" (13). From this we may assume that Jimmie – who never learns to feel respect – is likely never afforded any from the world around him. We also come to understand the degree to which Jimmie dissociates from his surroundings – "He became so sharp that he believed in nothing" (14) – and the way aggression becomes a normal pattern of behavior, as "he resolved never to move out of the way of anything, until formidable circumstances, or a much larger man than himself forced him to it" (15). Most profoundly, we witness his lack of empathy for others. Even regarding strangers encountered at corners, "He could not conceive their maniacal desires to cross the streets" (15).

Though Maggie and Jimmie's reactions are different, those differences are not without cause. According to the *Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Sourcebook*, "Aggression (in males) and depression (in females) may express the

same underlying distress, perhaps reflecting gender-specific strategies for maintaining self-esteem in the face of perceived rejection" (Henderson 778). Exposed to abuse, "boys were found to have more externalizing and girls to have more internalizing symptoms" (Henderson 778). Like the withdrawn Maggie and the aggressive Jimmie – "girls were more likely than boys to develop depressive disorders and less likely to develop conduct disorders" (Henderson 778). Maggie and Jimmie's actions, then, are not merely, as Gandal claims, reflective of a struggle for self-esteem, but are habitual and gender-specific reactions to ongoing abuse. And though Gandal correctly posits that Jimmie's defenses are apparently more suitable for survival, Jimmie's reactions, just like Maggie's, are defense mechanisms developed to help a child sustain the abuse of his supposed protector.

Crane also explores the complicated and controversial issue of prostitution, and this is the ground on which he is most criticized. Laura Hapke, in *Girls Who Went Wrong*, maintains that "*Maggie* is a traditional tale. Like [other writers], Crane sympathizes with but kills off the girl who goes wrong" (48). Hapke goes on to assert that the book's ending demonstrates Crane's desire to punish the streetwalker for her illicit activities (48). I would argue, though, that Crane's intent was only moral judgment if morality is the most likely cause for Maggie's fall. Rather, it is neither morality nor merely a desecrated sense of self-worth that ultimately results in Maggie's death. Dr. William Sanger, a medical doctor who conducted a study on the lives of New York City prostitutes in 1858, found overwhelmingly that though the women he studied claimed to have adopted prostitution voluntarily, abusive parents and a tortured home life were, in almost

all cases, the only alternative (Hapke 52). Recent studies confirm Dr. Sanger's findings, indicating that sexually abused girls are as much as 28 times more likely to be arrested for prostitution later in life (Henderson 301). While there is no evidence Maggie has been sexually abused, the effects of various types of abuse appear strikingly similar and the known link between abuse and prostitution seems sufficient to justify this development of Maggie's character.

Moreover, with specific regard to the book's conclusion, though the cause of Maggie's death is unclear – and certainly she could have been murdered – it seems probable that she killed herself, as this, too, would be likely given both her circumstances and her gender. According to recent studies, while both abused males and abused females are more likely to attempt suicide than non-abused control groups (wherein there is very little gender differentiation), the likelihood roughly doubles for abused males, while for abused females a suicide attempt is up to three times as likely (Henderson 786). Though no formal statistics existed in the nineteenth-century linking suicide to abuse, there were no shortage of cultural references indicating a connection between suicide and prostitution. Critics have observed that both the Reverend Thomas de Witt Talmage's *Night Sides of City Life* and Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes of New York* presented suicide as a resort to which prostitutes frequently turned, and each of these texts was published, and received a wide readership, in the decades preceding the publication of *Maggie* (Halliburton 68). While it is possible – given this cultural connection – that Crane's intention was to punish Maggie for her sexual indiscretions, this seems an overly simplistic

conclusion given the accurate portrayal throughout *Maggie* of the impact of abuse and the now known correlation between abused girls and suicide. Though she does not kill herself until Pete has left, her mother has denounced her, and she has turned rather unsuccessfully to prostitution, to conclude that her suicide was solely in response to those events, and not, at least indirectly, to the sustained abuse she endured, seems shortsighted.

If Maggie were the only female in the novel, it would be more difficult to demonstrate that her withdrawn and virtually voiceless character is not merely Crane's depiction of a Bowery girl, but is instead a deliberate representation of the combined effects of poverty and abuse. Crane, though, also gives us Nellie – the "woman of brilliance and audacity" (45) – who has developed even greater resilience and self-sufficiency than we see in either Jimmie or Pete. Nell, in fact, is so utterly commanding that her presence brings "an air of submission about [Maggie's] leonine Pete" (47). Though we never learn of Nell's background, she demonstrates none of the symptoms of abuse we see in either Maggie or Jimmie, and her influence over, and ultimate destruction of, Pete indicates the degree to which she has developed the mechanisms to thrive in their shared environment. Though her manner is similar to Jimmie's – in that survival for both Nell and Jimmie requires that others be hurt – Nell's ability to hold herself apart from that damage, to remain "brilliantly and audaciously" unharmed, seems a testament to a more sophisticated ability to adapt. Jimmie is capable of defending himself and his family's honor – first against the boys of Devil's Row and later against Pete – using his fists, but he never seems to do so without being hurt himself. Nell, on the

other hand, plays each situation to her advantage, and we ultimately see her "taking up [Pete's] bills and stuffing them into a deep, irregularly-shaped pocket" (59), before laughing and calling him "a damn fool" (59). Though I do not mean to suggest that Nell's actions are fully functional, she does respond to their shared condition of poverty in fairly effective ways, thus exhibiting a better ability to cope than either of the Johnson children. The "woman of brilliance and audacity," then, represents the way a woman, presumably without the early influence of abuse, can actually thrive amidst poverty and oppression, and can possess the voice and the strength of character absent in Maggie.

The Johnson father's demand for his wife to "Let up, d'yeh hear? Don't be allus poundin' a kid" (8) is an indication of the unrelenting nature of abuse in that household. Moreover, the presence of abuse seems largely responsible for the deterministic nature of the work: for the degree to which neither Jimmie nor Maggie possess agency. Not because of the misogyny of nineteenth-century morality, but because of gender-differentiated coping mechanisms, Maggie and Jimmie develop in ways we now know to be common for children exposed to similar circumstances. By interweaving the realities not only of abuse, but of poverty, prostitution, alcoholism, and suicide, Crane accomplishes what psychologists and sociologists would not do until decades after his death. In spite of strict nineteenth-century beliefs regarding the importance of familial privacy – which kept sociological exploration of abuse at bay until the middle of the twentieth-century – *Maggie* exposes child abuse in a public way,

unflinchingly revealing the "gruesome doorways" (Crane 6) beyond which a family's right to privacy is disregarded and the destructive influence of abuse is thoroughly exposed. Maggie's silence and Jimmie's aggression – as well as the causes and results of those characteristics – are not only depicted accurately, they demonstrate an understanding of the intricacies of the impact of abuse that is both subtle and profound.

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