

28 CRITICS DISCUSS

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893)

Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

“It is inevitable that you be greatly shocked by this book but continue, please, with all possible courage to the end. For it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless. If one proves that theory, one makes room in Heaven for all sorts of souls (notably an occasional street girl) who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people. It is probable that the reader of this small thing may consider the Author to be a bad man, but, obviously, this is of small consequence to -- The Author.”

Stephen Crane

Inscription on gift copy to Hamlin Garland (1893)

“The pathos of her sad story will be felt by all susceptible persons who read the book. The slum life of New York city is treated with the frank fidelity of the realist, and while the...ultra pious may be shocked by the freedom of his descriptions and the language in which the dialogues are carried on, sensible people will read the book in the spirit in which it was written and will derive therefrom the moral lesson which it is the author's aim to inculcate. The literary merits of the work are considerable. The author, although scarcely yet out of his teens, is the master of a vigorous style and uses the English language with precision, force and fluency. He has humor, originality and a wonderful power of depicting life as he sees it. He has a positive genius for description and great skill in the analysis of human character and motive. The dialogue of the New York slums, which is reproduced in this volume with absolute accuracy, is, we take it, something new in literature. It is certainly as legitimate a subject of literary and artistic treatment as the dialect of the Georgia negro or Tennessee mountaineer.”

Anonymous

New York *Port Jervis Union*
(13 March 1893) 3

“It is a work of astonishingly good style.... The young author, Stephen Crane, is a native of the city, and has grown up in the very scenes he describes. His book is the most truthful and unhackneyed study of the slums I have yet read, fragment though it is. It is pictorial, graphic, terrible in its directness. It has no conventional phrases. It gives the dialect of the slums as I have never before seen it written--crisp, direct, terse.... It creates the atmosphere of the jungles, where vice festers and crime passes gloomily by, where outlawed human nature rebels against God and man. The story fails of rounded completeness. It is only a fragment. It is typical only of the worst elements of the alley. The author should delineate the families living on the next street, who live lives of heroic purity and hopeless hardship.... Some of the words illuminate like flashes of light. Mr. Crane is only twenty-two years of age, and yet he has met and grappled with the actualities of the street in almost unequalled grace and strength.”

Hamlin Garland
The Arena VIII
(June 1893) xi-xii

“There is unquestionably truth in it; the kind of truth that no American has ever had the courage (or is it bravado?) to put between book covers before. It is a question if such brutalities are wholly acceptable in literature. Perhaps, as Mr. Howells says, they will be before long. Perhaps there will always be certain phases of life which we will not want to have woven with entire realism into our reading matter. This writer, however, deserves praise for one thing, surely. He has not failed to touch vice in his book where he has found it in real life; but he has not gilded it. He has painted it as it is; he has not made it clandestinely attractive.” [Crane was working for this periodical at the time.]

Anonymous
New York Press

(15 April 1894) 11, 2

“Stephen Crane is not yet twenty-four years old, but competent critics aver that his command of the English language is such as to raise the highest hopes for his future career. The impression he makes on his literary co-workers is that he is a young man of almost unlimited resource. The realism of *Maggie*--a story that might have taken a greater hold on the public than even *Chimmie Fadden*, had the publishers been less timid--is of that daring and terrible directness which in its iconoclasm is the very characteristic of rugged undisciplined strength in a youth of genius.”

Harry Thurston Peck, Editor
The Bookman New York
(1 May 1895) 229

“But probably the strongest piece of slum writing we have is *Maggie*, by Mr. Stephen Crane, which was published some years ago with a pen-name for the writer and no name at all for the publishers. But merit will out, and the unclaimed foundling attracted no little attention, though by no means as much as it deserves. The keenness of the wit, the minuteness of the observation, and the bitterness of the cynicism... The foredoomed fall of a well-meaning girl reared in an environment of drunkenness and grime is told with great humanity and fearless art, and there is a fine use of contrast in the conclusion of the work, where the brutal mother in drunken sentimentality is persuaded with difficulty to ‘forgive’ the dead girl whom she compelled to a harsh fate by the barren cruelty of home-life.”

Rupert Hughes
Godey's Magazine CXXXI
(October 1895) 431-32

“Mr. Crane entirely lacks the ability which has enabled some other men to deal with sordid, disgusting and vicious themes in a way that made them at least entertaining. He has no charm of style, no touch of humor, no hint of imagination. His story is one of unrelieved dullness in which the characters interest neither by their words nor acts, are depraved without being either thrilling or amusing, are dirty without being picturesque. There is nothing enticing in their lives nor uplifting in the contemplation of their sorrows. There is nothing alluring in the evils they exhibit. They are not even piquantly wicked, and their talk is as dreary as their lives are empty. Mr. Crane has attempted the accurate reproduction of the tenement dialect, but has succeeded in presenting only its brutal side.... To read its pages is like standing before a loafer to be sworn at and have one's face slapped twice a minute for half an hour.... Now it is reissued to take advantage of the talk concerning his later work. It has been rendered somewhat less disgusting than formerly by the evident aid of some friendly editor.... The same hand might well have suppressed the whole book.” [This periodical had fired Crane for sardonic reporting and after that it attacked him repeatedly.]

Anonymous
New York Tribune
(31 May 1896) 26

“We should classify Mr. Crane as a rather promising writer of the animalistic school. His types are mainly human beings of the order which makes us regret the power of literature to portray them. Not merely are they low, but there is little that is interesting in them. We resent the sense that we must at certain points resemble them. Even the old mother is not made pathetic in a human way; her son disgusts us so that we have small power of sympathy with her left. *Maggie* it is impossible to weep over. We can feel only that it is a pity that the gutter is so dirty, and turn in another direction. In short, Mr. Crane's art is to us very depressing.”

Anonymous
The Nation LXII
(2 July 1896) 15

“In *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*, Stephen Crane has written a story something on the plan of the episode of Nana in *L'Assommoir*, the dialect and local color being that of the Bowery.... I think the charm of his style lies chiefly in his habit and aptitude for making phrases--short, terse epigrams struck off in the heat of composition, sparks merely, that cast a momentary gleam of light upon whole phases of life. There are

hundreds of them throughout this tale of *Maggie*. Indeed, it is the way Mr. Crane tells his story. The picture he makes is not a single carefully composed painting, serious, finished, scrupulously studied, but rather scores and scores of tiny flashlight photographs, instantaneous, caught, as it were, on the run. Of a necessity, then, the movement of his tale must be rapid, brief, very hurried, hardly more than a glimpse....

Good though the story is and told in Mr. Crane's catching style, the impression left with the reader is one of hurry, the downfall of *Maggie*, the motif of the tale, strikes one as handled in a manner almost too flippant for the seriousness of the subject. But though these stories make interesting reading, the reader is apt to feel that the author is writing, as it were, from the outside. There is a certain lack of sympathy apparent. Mr. Crane does not seem to know his people. You are tempted to wonder if he has ever studied them as closely as he might have done. He does not seem to me to have gotten down into their life and to have written from what he saw around him. His people are types, not characters; his scenes and incidents are not particularized. It is as if Mr. Crane had merely used the 'machinery' and 'business' of slum life to develop certain traits or to portray certain emotions and passions that might happen anywhere. With him it is the broader, vaguer, *human* interest that is the main thing, not the smaller details of a particular phase of life."

Frank Norris
"Stephen Crane's Stories of Life in the Slums:
Maggie and George's Mother"
The Wave XV, San Francisco
(4 July 1896) 13

"I have found it extremely difficult to reconcile my undisguised admiration for Mr. Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* with my dissatisfaction with *Maggie*. The difference between these two books is so great that, were I to neglect chronology, I should have to confess that Mr. Crane's talents are in a process of degeneration.... Now, it is because, knowing somewhat of the slums of New York and having arrived at certain definite conclusions from my experience, I have for several years contended that Richard Harding Davis's sentimental slum sketches are as false to the actual conditions as I am now reluctantly forced to own is Mr. Crane's presentation of the life of the same locality. There is little to choose between hollow sentimentality and lurid melodrama....

Yes! Mr. Crane has used his note-book to good effect; his story bears unmistakable evidences of being observed, and observed on the spot. I will go so far as even to admit that there are a few scenes and passages of dialogue in Mr. Crane's story of masterly vigor and convincing reality. I make no objection to the details--or to most of them. My quarrel with the author begins and ends with his general conception of the life of the slums. To change the form of expression, he might be likened to an artist who knows how to draw but cannot paint. He has 'laid in' an admirable sketch, which raises one's hopes high for the success of the finished picture. But the moment he begins to lay on his colors it is evident that he is a caricaturist, not an artist; and, to make matters worse, he is a caricaturist without humor."

Edward Bright
The Illustrated American XX
(11 July 1896) 94

"I think that what strikes me the most in the story of *Maggie* is that quality of fatal necessity which dominates Greek tragedy.... Another effect is that of an ideal of artistic beauty which is as present in the working out of this poor girl's squalid romance as in any classic fable. This will be foolishness, I know, to the foolish people who cannot discriminate between the material and the treatment in art, and who think that beauty is inseparable from daintiness and prettiness, but I do not speak to them. I appeal rather to such as feel themselves akin with every kind of human creature, and find neither high nor low when it is a question of inevitable suffering, or of a soul struggling vainly with an inexorable fate....the girl herself, with her bewildered wish to be right and good; with her distorted perspective; her clinging and generous affections; her hopeless environments; the horrible old drunken mother, a cyclone of violence and volcano of vulgarity; the mean and selfish lover, a dandy tough, with his gross ideals and ambitions; her brother, an Ishmaelite from the cradle...with his warlike instincts beaten back into cunning."

William Dean Howells
New York World

(July 26, 1896) 18

“*The Red Badge of Courage* showed his refusal to sentimentalize. Sentimentality is so far away from the story of *Maggie* that one expects every moment to come on some exaggeration of sordidness, some morbid reveling in the ugly and the brutal; yet nothing of the kind happens. His mind is as unusually restrained as it is watchful. Romance is not wanting. It is shining bright when Pete, the elegant bar-tender, condescends to visit Maggie’s brother... ‘As Jimmie and his friend exchanged tales descriptive of their prowess, Maggie leaned back in the shadow’....

There is running through the miserable story the fair light of a trustful, grateful nature, a ‘blossom in a mud-puddle,’ gentle even when cruelty and treachery have done their worst. And as such, Maggie is as real as the redoubtable savage Jimmie, or the terrible mother, nearly as real as the magnificent Pete. There Mr. Crane surpasses nearly all his models of the sternly realistic school, who fail so often in their finer, their more beautiful portraits. New York life--nearly at its lowest, surely--is the material of the book, and the material is used by a daring and a relentless hand. But Mr. Crane has reticence and sympathy, and these, as much as his astonishing cleverness, have given him the high rank he holds already in America and England.”

Anonymous
The Bookman XI, London
(October 1896) 19-20

“This little story will make a powerful impression on those who are not repelled by the strange oaths in which the story is for the most part told. Maggie, a factory hand, the child of a drunken woman and sister of a rough in an American town, is seduced by a barman (the patron of her brother), and dies. The telling of the tale is so strong that it produces on the reader an impression of absolute truthfulness, and yet, we are not convinced, it is not true to life. Such a case as is described may, indeed, be met with; but far more usual would be either the moral destruction of the girl by her mother’s influence at an earlier age, or, on the other hand, the development of a harder type, helped along by the extreme kindness to one another of the very poor. To this kindness there is only one allusion in the book, yet it is the most striking feature of low life in the United Kingdom, and is probably not lacking in the low life of the United States.”

Anonymous
The Athenaeum 3600
(24 October 1896) 562

“Every chapter cocks its tail with a point to it.... One gets an impression from the *Red Badge* that at the end Mr. Crane could scarcely have had a gasp left in him--that he must have been mentally hoarse for weeks after it. But here he works chiefly for pretty effects, for gleams of sunlight on the stagnant puddles he paints. He gets them, a little consciously perhaps, but, to the present reviewer’s sense, far more effectively than he gets anger and fear. And he has done his work, one feels, to please himself. His book is a work of art, even if it is not a very great or successful work of art--it ranks above the novel of commerce, if only on that account.”

H. G. Wells
The Saturday Review LXXXII, London
(19 December 1896) 655

“Mr. Crane is too young to have written a good novel... *Maggie* does not seem to us to justify its existence. Given a drunken father, a drunken mother, and their children, a pretty girl and a boy, stunted but as brave as a weasel; this is very likely how the lives will shape themselves. Tragic pathos there certainly is in the girl’s devotion to her swaggering lover, a fighting bartender, who deserts her without the shadow of compunction. But it seems as if one needed more than this to repay one for wading through such a mass of revolting details--street fights of little boys, fights of grown men in bars, scenes in dirty beer saloons, and everywhere the dialect of the Bowery, which, as Mr. Crane writes it, is the most hideous representation of human speech that we have ever met with. One may read a book like this as a tract, to keep one alive to the misery existent somewhere in the world; but we can conceive no other motive for reading it. As a work of art we disbelieve in it....

In Mr. Crane's book *Maggie's* passion for Pete is the one trace of human coherence; there is no other tie between any two of the characters. It is an impression of sheer brutality. The admiration for work of this sort savours of the latest modern cant, which preaches that to see things artistically you must see them disagreeably. Mr. Crane has seen a piece of life in a hard superficial way, and rendered it in the spirit of a caricaturist. That is the true formula for producing what, in the cant of the day, is called uncompromising realism."

Anonymous
The Edinburgh Review CLXXXVII
(April 1898) 413-14

"*Maggie* is not a story about people; it is primitive human nature itself set down with perfect spontaneity and grace of handling. For pure aesthetic beauty and truth no Russian, not Tchekhov himself, could have bettered this study which, as Howells remarks, has the quality of Greek tragedy."

Edward Garnett
Friday Nights
(Knopf 1922) 214-15

"It is short, a novelette. Yet it suggests more life than any American contemporary of Crane could have depicted in a thousand pages. In its every crowded phrase and metaphor it is reality. The little book breaks all traditions in fiction. Crane has no model for it--except possibly the page or two he had read from Zola. But it is not Zolaesque. Critics like to call it the first specimen of genuine Realism produced by an American. Perhaps it is that. But it should be judged as a thing unique--just a faithful and vivid projection of the grim degradation and sordid beauty of the Bowery."

Vernon Loggins
I Hear America
(Crowell 1937) 25

"In a slum district of New York City called Rum Alley, Maggie Johnson and her brother Jimmie are the maltreated and neglected children of a brutal workingman and his dipsomaniac wife. Maggie, attractive though ignorant and ill cared for, somehow preserves an inner core of innocence in her miserable, filthy environment. She finds work as a collar maker in a sweatshop, while Jimmie becomes a truck driver, typically hard-boiled and fight-loving. Their mother, now widowed, is constantly drunk and has acquired a lengthy police record. Maggie falls in love with Jimmie's tough friend Pete, a bartender, who easily seduces her. For a brief time she lives with Pete, having been melodramatically disowned by her mother. Jimmie offers only the questionable assistance of administering a beating to his former friend. Pete abandons Maggie, who becomes a prostitute for a few months. Then, heartbroken and unable to succeed in this uneasy, exacting occupation, she commits suicide. Her mother makes a great display of grief, sends Jimmie to fetch home the body, and allows herself to be persuaded by her drinking companions to 'forgive' her 'bad, bad child'."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"In *Maggie* the mind is not entered; the crisis is presented only by swift and ironic reconstruction of environment and surrounding characters. By sheer sincerity the story rises to a conviction in which Howells could detect the 'fatal necessity which dominates Greek tragedy' and the simplicity of effect or true art. Naive and overwritten, it flung Crane's challenge to his times by its unprecedented candor of theme, its sense of fate, and its directness in dealing with sordid material. Its lack of sensuality makes it seem almost pale today, but the fire in its unsold paper-backed copies smoldered until the acclaim accorded to his next work made a new edition possible. With that republication (1896), modern American fiction was born."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1022

“No American work of its length had driven the reader so hard; in none had the author remained so persistently invisible behind his creation. The incongruity of these qualities forces our attention to the strangeness--the daring and ambition--of Crane's attempt.... The banal story...had to be given heroic and pathetic stature and yet not be falsified. At the same time, its melodramatic character called for disguise under an air of flatness and casualness. Furthermore, Crane had to rely on loose, episodic structure--except once or twice he would never use any other. And no passion such as revenge or love or greed could dominate the fable. If in these unpropitious circumstances he achieved in *Maggie* a sense of inevitability, one may well wonder how he did it. The word Howells was to use for this triumph of Crane was a good one, namely, 'Greek.'

Not Maggie's fate alone but the fates of the others are inevitable, given their misconceptions of each other, themselves, and their world. These misconceptions register as astonishment and rage. Pete and then another man are astonished when Maggie repulses them; her mother is astonished when she succumbs. Jimmie is astonished to learn that his own sister, like others', can be seduced. She is astonished by leonine Pete's sudden submissiveness (to Nell), then by his desertion. Everything is exactly what we expect but not at all what they expect.... Self-indulgent, brutal, self-pitying, none of these people can help each other....

One note of sentimentality or reproof, by the author, would destroy the work, but Crane never falters or insists. 'It seemed that the world had treated this woman very badly.... She broke furniture as if she were at last getting her rights.' The characters are left to their illusion that they are working out their own fates, and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions. In the brilliant analysis of Jimmie's progress toward nihilism, all Crane says is: 'He became so sharp that he believed in nothing.' If the mother's self-pity apes affection, crooning drunkenly to her children about 'yer poor mudder' just before she beats them up again, Crane does not explain that it does. At most, over certain moments of their aspiration, irony permits the tone to lift. The young man wanders hilariously into a mission and comments freely, but confuses the speaker with Christ: 'Momentarily, Jimmie was sullen with thoughts of a hopeless altitude where grew fruit.' And for all his police record, his seductions and desertions, 'he had, on a certain star-lit evening, said wonderingly and quite reverently, "Deh moon looks like hell, don't it?"'

His heroine's misconceptions are spared as little as anyone else's by Crane in this confident and stern little work. Only her good faith distinguishes her from the others, who deceive themselves with their simulations of good faith.... Crudity in stylistic detail *Maggie* sometimes shows, but in originality of conception, energy, instinct for inclusion and for the tacit, consistency of ironic execution, it as little solicits allowance on the score of the author's youth as the *Disparates* [etchings] of Goya do on the score of his deafness and age."

John Berryman
Stephen Crane
(William Sloane 1950) 58-61

"In telling this story, Crane fuses elements of poverty, ignorance, and intolerance in a context of violence and cruelty to create a nightmarish world wavering between hallucination and hysteria. The language establishes this tone through violent verbs, distorted scenes, and sensory transfer.... The device of sensory transfer appears in 'lurid altercations,' 'red years,' 'dreaming blood-red dreams,' and 'various shades of yellow discontent.' When Maggie's brother comes in bloody from fighting, 'The mother's massive shoulders heaved with anger.... The rather fantastic but obviously intentional exaggeration of these passages renders Crane's sense that this world is so warped as to be mad. His tone unites despair and moral outrage with the self-protection of a sort of wild humor. A dominant idea that grows from this landscape of hysteria is that these people are victimized by their ideas of moral propriety which are so utterly inapplicable to their lives that they constitute a social insanity....

The impressions that these people are not free agents, and that their freedom is limited as much by their conventional beliefs as by their poverty, are Naturalistic concepts completely absorbed into the form of the story. One might object upon sociological grounds that Crane's ideas of the family are unsound, but his literary technique here is a triumph. It creates a coherent if terrible world, and there are no loose ends--no effect of tension or contradiction between abstract theory and human event. Crane's hallucinatory inferno is a gift of his style. What he says and what he renders are one. Indeed, he does not comment because the

whole work is one grand roar of mockery and outrage. The hysterical distortions symbolize, image, and even dramatize the confusion of values which puts these social waifs in a moral madhouse. The discrepancy between the Victorian pieties and the jungle reality of the slums is conscientiously explored....

Elsewhere the tone is complicated, beyond the needs of his thesis, into further impressionisms which demonstrate virtuosity of auctorial impression (and style) rather than exploration of the subject.... However stark the horror, no reader can feel that Crane is scientifically disinterested or unconcerned. Where his method does, through its fascinated concern with detail, achieve a ghastly fixation, it is the quality of Goya rather than the cold form of Velasquez. The story shows that nothing can be done for Maggie and her family, for they are lost; but it presents the exact reality with an intensity that defies indifference.”

Charles Child Walcott
“Stephen Crane: Naturalist and Impressionist”
American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream
(U Minnesota 1955) 67-72

“The rigid Naturalistic interpretations of *Maggie*, so popular in some critical circles today, obscure the universal implications of Crane's dramatic re-creation of Bowery existence.... Actually his creative imagination is deeply stirred by religious aspects of the setting. This is seen in a recurrent pattern of symbolic moral situations which is inspired by the New Testament. Here, of course, Crane's background is the point at issue. Reared in a confining religious atmosphere (his father was a Methodist minister and his mother a newspaper reporter of church activities), he unconsciously was trained to think in the ideological framework of Christianity. Even in rebellion against its expression in institutional religion, he could not completely subdue its incontrovertible ethical affirmations. We can see, for example, his patent detestation of mission evangelism in *Maggie*, and we can understand his impatience with its blatant self-righteousness. But, on the other hand, he introduces certain scenes and incidents which, though they do not beg attention, are nevertheless manifestations of an intuitive loyalty to the redemptive love of the Gospels....

His scenic logic argues that human nature is depraved; but he counterpoints this attitude with an argument to the contrary which promises a deliverance from this amoral state.... The name Maggie is deliberately equated with the practice of prostitution, but it is also, in context at least, suggestively proposed as a diminutive of Magdalene. This etymology, of course, is not correct, but here the association is almost instinctive for anyone acquainted with the parables.... The heroine, in other words, is entitled to forgiveness like her counterpart in the New Testament. Crane has in mind, I think, Maggie's quite pardonable sin of assuming that love will redeem all, and at this juncture she metamorphoses into Magdalene.... This interpretation may seem to run counter to the opinions about Christ expressed by Crane in his poetry; yet his quick sympathy with prostitutes is an impulse of his moral conditioning--a much sounder gauge of his spiritual values, it seems to me, than the sophomoric heresies which dialectically shape some of his poems. Then, too, the novel was written before he began to connect his aggressive moral impatience with the scientific Naturalism which enveloped the literary world of his day....

The unvoiced inspiration of the novel is Crane's distressed insight into the abandonment of Christian love by his culture. This perception is forcefully embodied in another important segment of the action. It involves Maggie's quest for salvation after her rejection by Pete, and is an adaptation of another New Testament motif. The minister's lack of mercy in this case parallels the response of the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan.... Ordinarily one would, I think, tend to limit this parody to Crane's contempt for the clergy and their fastidiously cultivated piety. But the satirical probe strikes deeper. It penetrates to the real cause of the degeneration of love in human affairs--the betrayal of Christ by his ministry....

Contrary to the critics who argue that Maggie is a victim of her environment, he dramatizes key scenes of her pathetic fate against the background of man's defection from the redemptive love of Christianity as it is crystallized in John's record of the Savior's conversation after his betrayal by Judas... Maggie, in short, is crucified by the same forces of hate in human nature that destroyed Christ.... It may not be farfetched to ascribe a similar meaning to the names of Pete and Jimmie. Simon Peter and James were the two disciples who accompanied Christ on the road to Calvary.... Immersion in the destructive element of personal experience perhaps explains why in his later fiction religious images, for the most part, serve as simple

correlatives of irony. Crane seems to lose even his provisional faith in the symbolic machinery of Christian salvation. When Maggie's innocent dream of love died, something may be said to have died in his soul."

William Bysshe Stein
"New Testament Inversions in Crane's *Maggie*"
Modern Language Notes LXXIII (April 1958) 268-72

"Appearing six years before Frank Norris' *McTeague*, *Maggie* was the first piece of American fiction to truthfully render urban slum life. Rupert Hughes, writing in *Godey's Magazine*, called it 'probably the strongest piece of slum writing we have.' Crane describes the foredoomed fall of a well-meaning girl reared in an environment of drunkenness and grime. But, unlike much writing of the Naturalistic school it influenced, Crane's *Maggie* is artistic, a tone-painting rather than a realistic photograph. Crane once defined a novel as 'a succession of sharply outlined pictures, which pass before the reader like a panorama, leaving each its definite impression.' *Maggie*--divided into nineteen chapters or episodes--is a panorama of Impressionistic vignettes, disconnected scenes reeled off with much the same jerky, nervous effect that early motion-pictures convey. Not logic but mood defines the relationship of image to image, episode to episode. Bathos and the contrast of contradictory moods form the novel's pattern. Crane's *Maggie* is thus a Bowery version of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

The first edition was published under the pseudonym of Johnston Smith in paper covers early in 1893. The text of the 1893 edition is far more picturesque and melodramatic, and more blasphemous in phrasing, than that of the 1896 revision. It contains a passage that Crane expunged from Chapter 17 in later editions, in which after Pete's rejection of Maggie, she encounters nine persons indifferent to her plight. *Maggie* and *George's Mother* comprised *Bowery Tales*, published posthumously in England in 1900."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"One of its most noticeable virtues is the relation of structure to theme.... It is my contention that the novelette has a decided controlling structure than combines with the themes to form a pleasing whole.... The structure, which serves as an encircling frame for the plot, is that of the familiar 'play within a play'.... To emphasize...theatrical unreality still further, three scenes are set in a beer hall that presents stage shows, where Pete takes Maggie on their dates. On their first date (Section 7) Maggie has a fine time; she sees a wonderful world hitherto completely unknown to her. The second beer hall scene (Section 12) takes place after Maggie has left home to be with Pete, and is becoming used to such evenings. The stage show is therefore described in less detail than previously, and Maggie, while enjoying herself, has a less pleasant time. On the way out she prophetically sees two street walkers. The third such scene (Section 14) gives very little description of the entertainment and is saddened for Maggie by Pete's desertion of her. Maggie's downward slide is set against the make-believe backdrop to further emphasize the story's theme.

The theme may be stated as being that an unreal view of life precipitates tragedy, or at least unhappiness. None of the four main characters sees life clearly and honestly. Pete correctly views his affair with Maggie as a pleasant interlude for him and nothing more, but he hopes mightily for a satisfactory relationship with Nell, who sees him as a fool. Jimmie is at a loss to understand his sister's fall and, incapable of seeing any relation between his own seduction of various women and Pete's seduction of his sister, damns his sister mercilessly for thus disgracing the family. Once he 'almost came to a conclusion that his sister would have been more firmly good had she better known how,' but he discards this idea. Neither he nor his mother can understand Maggie's desire for a better life nor see how her environment helped to propel her into Pete's arms.

But it is Maggie's view of reality that proves, finally, the most saddening. She sees life as she wishes it to be; to her, Pete is 'the ideal man,' and the plays she sees represent 'transcendental realism.' It is quite proper to her that in the theater the villain is punished and the hero is rewarded; she fails to realize that this is not necessarily the way of the world. She believes her love affair with Pete will last forever, when it does not, she is utterly lost. The play within a play structure thus reinforces the idea that life must be

viewed realistically, even if painfully. It is far more painful to fool oneself. Crane begins and ends his story with the emphasis on unreality, and includes several overt references at intervals throughout. It can thus be seen that structure and theme are firmly and complementarily wedded to give the story unity....

There is also a careful alternation of places and people throughout; scenes in the beer hall alternate with scenes of home as scenes of Maggie and Pete alternate with scenes of Jimmie and his mother. All of which shows that while the structure of *Maggie* may be episodic, it is not loose, but tightly controlled; for all his faults, Crane, even at an early age, knew how to structure a story."

Janet Overmyer
"The Structure of Crane's *Maggie*"
The University of Kansas City Review XXIX
(Autumn 1962) 71-72

"His first great triumph, the novel which brought him the friendship of Howells and Garland: *Maggie--A Girl of the Streets* (1893). In many ways, the inspiration for this book--one which John Berryman says 'initiated modern American writing'--came from Howells, who was deeply concerned with the problems of urbanization.... The story of the first publication of *Maggie*, at Crane's expense, is well known. It appeared in 1893 without a publisher's imprint under the pseudonym of 'Johnston Smith' ('Johnson'--similar to 'Johnston'--and 'Smith' were the two names most listed in the city directory).... Crane masked his narration and directed it, as it were, through this composite, anonymous mass man--the Johnsons and the Smiths who observe and indifferently record her career. Originally, indeed, Crane had refused to give his characters names at all, thus further emphasizing their essential anonymity and the ironical inconsequence of such real suffering as he depicts....

Men in the present are no less savage than in the past: they are rather worse than better. Like Twain, Crane relied on the recapitulation theory of human development for his irony. Apparently confirmed in the '90s by embryological experiments, this theory suggested that the human embryo, from the fertilization of the cell through to birth, recapitulated all the stages of human development. Generalizing this sequence, psychologists saw childhood as the savage stage of the race. Thus, in the beginning of *Maggie*, Crane presents his young savages engaged in a mock-Homeric battle--one, however, totally devoid of the Homeric virtues. Like the heroes before Troy, Jimmie throws stones in defense of his gravel heap. He too delivers great war-cries--but they are only curses. He too fights for honor--but only for that of Rum Alley against the equally grotesque Devil's Alley. His opponents are 'barbaric,' 'true assassins'--yet they are only the children of the slum.... Crane superimposes a vague memory of the heroic past upon a savage present. The heroic world has given way to the slums....

But at the same time, his satire, like most forceful satire, criticizes the romance and chivalry of his heroic world as well. His vision is contrary--set against itself. He is comfortable with neither the ideal nor the real, but alienated from both. The conventional ideal that he uses to illustrate the decline of modern man he must, therefore, expose as hopelessly idealistic. In *Maggie*, then, he parallels his mock-heroic satire against the slum world with three other ironically treated themes: (1) the mock-chivalric satire on the courtly lover; (2) the mock-sentimental satire on the happy American family; and (3) the mock-genteel satire on the angelic-child figure. Pete, of course, with his elaborately 'oiled bang,' his checkered pants, his 'red puff tie,' and his patent leather shoes, is a grotesque mockery of the courtier.... Crane develops his other mock-conventional themes in a similar fashion. The theme of the happy American family had been popularized by several well known writers, among them Louisa May Alcott, in *Little Women* (1868) and *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). In this convention, the family usually is threatened with not only a series of minor disappointments, but also with dissolution. At the end, however, the family is joyfully unified."

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 57-59

"*Maggie*, *George's Mother*, and the Tommie stories are concerned with life on New York's East Side, with the population of the permanent lower class composed mainly of the 'New Immigration' poor Irish. The stories are linked by the Johnson family, who represent those assimilated into defeat, and by the

tenement building in which they live. There is also a group of stories about Swift Doyer and his associates, the shady element of the slums who resist defeat by breaking the law. And there are two further groups of stories that represent the viewpoint of those who are only temporarily slum dwellers, either transients who need cheap accommodations while they struggle toward successful artistic careers, or slum crawlers who wish merely to experience the quality of life at the depths....

In Maggie's world...life is not controlled by the bio-mechanistic forces that Emile Zola saw determining human actions. Although the characters in the novel frequently are compared to lower forms of life--Pete to a caged monkey and Maggie to a flower--the 'quality of fatal necessity' Howells detected in *Maggie* does not exclude choice: it allows those with sufficient strength to force their will, no matter how perverse their desires, while it crushes the weak. Maggie is doomed not by the gods, but by her blossom-like fragility....

He projected a world in which the 'respectable' classes press the disreputables into a ghetto where they expend themselves preying on one another. In a kind of transcendental daisy chain, Nellie does Pete as Pete did Maggie as Jimmie did Hattie. Only Maggie and Hattie lack the force either to harness brutality or to withstand it. The singular torment of all these people is the complete inability to communicate save on the most brutal level: Pete woos Maggie with the same 'What deh hell?' with which he chastises a waiter and assaults a trespasser, and Jimmie expresses his perception of natural beauty with, 'Deh moon looks like hell, don't it?' And the brutal epithets cumulatively reinforce the demonic character of the mock-heroic slum battles to suggest the appeals of the damned. In the words of Maggie's father crying into his glass of whiskey, these people are in a 'reg'lar livin' hell.' They are caught in an environment that shapes their lives regardless of the reputed good intentions of 'Gawd,' an environment that ruins the girl who 'blossomed in a mud puddle' and then mourns her in a burlesque of pagan tragedy. In this world hell is, as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, other people....

Crane's letter to Catherine Harris [1896] suggests a vision of inevitability: 'In a story of mine called "An Experiment in Misery" I tried to make plain that the root of Bowery life is a sort of cowardice. Perhaps I mean a lack of ambition or to willingly be knocked flat and accept the licking.' Certainly Tommie--Maggie's young brother, the 'baby' in several sketches--is given an education in defeat. For him as for his older brother Jimmie, the horse-drawn fire engine is a symbol of power and authority. It is worth the taking."

Joseph Katz, ed.
The Portable Stephen Crane
(Viking 1969) x, xi-xiii

"Crane produced an atmosphere of grotesquerie in which everything was bigger than life, like a violent shadow play. No one speaks in the opening pages of *Maggie*; everyone shouts, bellows, roars. Yet amid all this...lie sentences that are little masterpieces of the most subtle and difficult prose effects--rhythm, assonance, alliteration--and full of premeditated irony or menacing beauty.... Crane's writing always suffered from occasional lapses into wooden clumsiness or rigidity, and often the cause was pompous diction. The Naturalists inherited more from their Romantic forebears than they could admit. The intrigue with local color, dialect, and street language was an extension of Romantic exoticism; the taste for the strange, the brutal, the frankly sexual, moved from Gypsy camps and South Sea islands to the industrial slums....

The works of many great Naturalists, including Crane's, abound with sentimentality and vague, passionate effusions. Their very unconcern about techniques was Romantic, an assumption that powerful feelings and deep truths could be conveyed by the brute force of their being, almost despite craft. After all, it was a Romantic who said, long before Zola or Howells, that truth is beauty, beauty truth.... *Maggie* leaves a memory of brilliant effects and glaring failures jumbled together, of heavy-handed irony, telegraphed punches, exquisite humor, melodrama, and verbal audacity. Crane begins fortissimo and then keeps straining for a crescendo, confusing volume with the power of harmony."

Arno Karlen
"The Craft of Stephen Crane"
The Georgia Review XXVIII (Fall 1974) 473-77

“The colors used, usually strong and pure, heighten the emotions that surround the characters, their environment, and their problems. The predominant color used in *Maggie* is red, followed by black, yellow, and blue.... Crane suggests color in such expressions as ‘many-hued,’ ‘happy-hued,’ and ‘painted’... Color images surround each character in *Maggie*. It is significant that Crane uses red sparingly in the images surrounding Maggie although the color is traditionally associated with prostitutes....realistic use of white, because Maggie is fearful, has symbolic overtones signifying her innocence....That she sees herself ‘mouse-coloured,’ gray, indicates her inability to survive.... Pete ‘swaggering...loomed like a golden sun to Maggie.’ Like the sun, he is Maggie’s life-giving force. But he is only ‘golden’ in Maggie’s illusions; in reality he is false gold, a gilded god who abandons rather than saves her. ‘Fittingly the concluding chapter of the novel is characterized by the repetition of the word black in contrast with the violent colors of life in the earlier chapters’ [William Bysshe Stein, “New Testament Inversions”]....

In contrast to Maggie, the colors most often associated with her mother are red and yellow. Both have unpleasant connotations. Although used mostly for descriptive purposes, these colors also have symbolic suggestions. Red describes her skin as well as her emotional state. Her red skin connotes not only the harshness of her physical being and personality, but of her world.... The color most often associated with [Jimmie] is red, suggesting anger, violence, and sex.... A variation of red, flame-color, is prominent in a mythical image surrounding Jimmie... Pete dressed in his best clothes is reminiscent of the attire of a courtier or of a knight dressed for pageantry. Blue and red, in heraldry, signify sincerity and bravery respectively. Both are used ironically: Pete behaves neither bravely nor sincerely....

Color, then, is not only a vital part of Crane’s work but an aspect of it which is of primary importance, indispensable to an understanding of his art. To convey emotional or sense impressions, Crane depends on color-words which, though perhaps not always realistically accurate, cause the reader to appreciate and remember characters and events. Thus Crane associates black primarily with Maggie; red with her mother and her brother; red, blue, black, and white with Pete; and yellow with the environment. Black in *Maggie* is related to death; red to anger and violence... Crane’s philosophy found little use for delicate colors such as green, pink, or blue except when these colors are used for irony or for contrast with the harsh world that the strong, plain colors portray. The frequent use of color creates a poetic texture in Crane’s prose and contributes to the power of his Impressionistic writing.”

Katherine G. Simoneaux
“Color Imagery in Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*”
CLA Journal XVII (September 1974) 91-100

“Stephen Crane’s first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York)*, written under the pseudonym Johnston Smith, was published at his own expense in early 1893 because no commercial publisher would touch it. Even his hired and still-unknown publisher, a firm specializing in religious and medical texts, presumably refused to have its imprint on such a shocking and ‘cruel’ book. Of the eleven hundred copies printed, Crane gave away a hundred and sold only a handful. *Maggie* was stillborn. But it won Crane two powerful champions whom he called his ‘literary fathers,’ Hamlin Garland and William Dean Howells. His second novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), was a phenomenal bestseller and acclaimed--then and now--as a great American novel. Only because of this was *Maggie* officially published in 1896, by D. Appleton and Company, though Crane had to make some concessions and revisions.

Neither the 1893 *Maggie*...nor the 1896 *Maggie* is a great American novel. Yet it remains an important novel for many reasons. More starkly than *The Red Badge*, it presents the essence of Crane’s art and vision, where he flourishes a radically new lifestyle in writing and seeing and feeling. Its avant-garde techniques of Impressionism, symbolism, and irony, and its perception of reality signal the spirit of modern American literature found in Crane’s disciples of the 1920s--Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway. It is the first major Naturalistic novel in America. (Unfortunately, the Naturalistic novel has never had a fair hearing; moreover, *Maggie* is no mere handbook of Naturalism, but a highly individualized and highly stylized work of art.) It made the city, with its slum dwellers and social problems, a fit subject for serious literary study, when the novel of the 1890s was still generally regarded as escapist fare, as mere entertainment. It helped to liberate the American novel, for in its satiric portraits of sacred institutions (like the Church), its profanity, crude slang, violence, prostitution, and degradation, *Maggie* was battling the

genteel realism and Romance of the day, along with the tight censorship imposed by publishers and public alike. It prepared the way for Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), which also suffered at the hands of censorship; and for the muckraking movement that began in the early 1900s.

In other ways, Stephen Crane's *Maggie* has assumed a special status in American culture. It epitomizes the young man's first novel, the 'genius of youth' (Crane began writing *Maggie* at nineteen as a student at Syracuse University). It is the 'new' novel, the 'anti-novel' of its day. It is the work of an 'angry young man,' the 'rebel' challenging conventions and traditions. It is the 'experimental novel,' for basically as in his other major works--*The Red Badge*, 'The Open Boat' (1897), 'The Monster' (1898), 'The Blue Hotel' (1898)--Crane in *Maggie* was working in a relatively new genre, Henry James's 'blest nouvelle,' the short novel, which still defies definition. The importance of *Maggie*, then, lies in what it promised and accomplished in both intrinsic and extrinsic terms. It is the great 'seminal' novel....

Beneath his bohemian veneer, Stephen Crane had the crusading instincts of his parents and many of their values. While he did say that 'preaching is fatal to art in literature,' he drew large lessons: the terror and waste of slum life in *Maggie*; *the stupidity and meaninglessness of war and violence* [Italics added: This is a liberal stock response, as Crane affirms the Union and the war necessary to preserve it.] in *The Red Badge*. His parents would have been proud of these humanistic ends but shocked by the 'profane' and 'vulgar' means he used. The touching and pathetic discord between Stephen Crane and his mother is partially revealed in his third novel, *George's Mother* (1896).... Stephen Crane remains the 'genius' of his generation and the 'wonder boy' of American literature."

Thomas A. Gullason, ed.
Maggie: A Girl of the Streets by Stephen Crane
(Norton Critical Edition 1979) xi-xiii

Michael Hollister (2015)