

***Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893) by Stephen Crane, 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, circonstances, hérédité, déterminisme, pauvreté matérielle et intellectuelle, violence, perversion, langage ordurier, fin tragique.

Introduction

Never in recorded American literature has a trend been more optimistic and rhetorical than romanticism and more pessimistic and experimental than naturalism. In fact, rooted in the idealism, sentimentality, and subjectivity of the nineteenth century, romanticism glorifies the individual, values emotions, and idealizes nature. As for naturalism, it is seen as the highest outgrowth of realism, the latter movement being defined by Howells, Balzac or Stendhal as a faithful representation of material. 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, behaviour, actions, and social conditions¹.

One dividing line between naturalism and romanticism is most evident on the fact that, contrary to the latter, the former breaks free from the hopeful vision of life as an Eden on earth, exempt of evils, and where things always work out for the best. Another major difference is that naturalism is analytical whereas realism is synthetic. Defined as “literature with scientific pretensions” (Guthrie *and al.* 1942: 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: 97). Naturalistic writers are believed to draw the ferments of their thoughts from such doctrines as “scientism”², “positivism”³, and determinism⁴, but also the theories of Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893) and Claude Bernard (1813-1878) about heredity (Alikavazovic 2003: 31). Such an alchemy allows them to penetrate into human beings’ hearts, discover their hidden sides, and understand the reasons behind their feelings, behaviours, motivations, actions, reactions, and moral characteristics.

A case in point is *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (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, 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 testify the “persistent illusions of people and the disparity between their buoyant expectations and their doom” (McMichael *and al.* 2004: 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, namely 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 *and al.* 2004: 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” (Michael *and al.* 2004: 756) in such books as *Sister Carrie* (1900), *An American Tragedy* (1925), and *Jennie Gerhart* (1911). Similarly, Eugene O’Neill, in *Anna Christie* (1921), voices his “psychological probing of alienation and his depiction of the suffering of ordinary mortals” (McMichael *and al.* 2004: 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. As for Frank Norris, his *The Octopus* (1901), a book about the power of railroad monopolies over individuals, ranks him among the adepts of naturalism, along with Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, to name but a few.

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, through 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 animalistic drives as sex and hunger which they cannot control.

I. 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, as early as the opening pages –chapter II–, the action in a New Yorkian environment, riddled with acute poverty, lack of education, idleness, sordidness, insecurity, and immorality while deducing that where people live, what they eat, how they dress, speak, and behave define who they are. These concrete indicators serve for capsule or 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: 118) that capture any individual's inward life, soul, sensibility, psyche, thought, personality, class, status, culture, and identity, as can be seen through this scene:

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, especially ill-fate, can be perceived through "Bowery", the name of 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: 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: 98). The use, by the "auctorial"⁵ narrator, of negative words, descriptive of 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-labour, 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 that she yearns 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 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" (Steinbeck

1970: 61-62). 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 John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, where the family eats the same meal every morning: “[A hot corncake] was the only breakfast he had ever known” (*The Pearl*: 8). 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 accounts of its various implications, poverty, especially in underprivileged areas quickly gains ground, intensifies, and becomes, thus, hard to eradicate. For instance, considering that destitution, hunger, and idleness stimulate sexual desire, men and women crowd together, and find solace and an activity in excessive sexuality, 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 equally stand instead of playgrounds, kindergartens, and schools, which keeps 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 : 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 cannot escape poverty, nor the objective situations which have generated it, nor 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, which explains the deliberate use by Crane of a simple structure, an Aristotelian⁶ 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 comparable 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 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 impedimenta 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 testifies 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 all the more natural since their parents feel powerless as a result of 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 neighbours, 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 multifaceted problems among which violence.

II. Violence as an Outlet and a Lifestyle

Linked by cause-and-effect relationships, poverty, violence, and ignorance are closely interwoven organic and structural issues which cannot be analyzed or solved separately since they nurture one another, and form a vicious circle. That is why to break the cycle of violence, one must, e. g., break the cycle of poverty, and vice versa. Rarely is it emphasized enough but violence and lack of education can also engender poverty insofar as these questions 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 is incompatible with freedom, independence, dignity, peace, enlightenment, and happiness; that is equally why if poverty is extreme, violence and ignorance become extreme.

The imponderable effects of desperate poverty on individuals are easy to substantiate since this evil leads them to deviation, subversion, revolt, and brutality. Indeed, decrepitude 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 violence 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, to be brief, a survival strategy, because as Frantz Fanon says it suitably: “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” (Hughes 1970: 193).

Naturalistic writers have a predilection for the themes of poverty and violence since both problematics raise the central issue of the absurdity of the human condition. Poverty, for instance, often drives those who suffer from it 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” (Michael 2004: 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, to recall again British biologist, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), in his deterministic theory about the transformative impacts of environment on creatures, or Jack London (1876-1916) who, in *To Build a Fire* (1908), has borrowed from social Darwinism “the idea that to survive, people must adapt to irresistible natural forces and to the ‘stress and strain of life, its fevers and sweats and wild indulgences’” (Michael 2004: 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 honour, 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). It all fits! 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 squabble and drunken brawl 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, Jimmy is alcoholic, aggressive,

ragged, and rude simply because he has genes of violence in his blood, heart, mind, history, culture, and civilisation, hence the relevance of Claude-Jean Bertrand's 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: 273).

Though conjugal violence pervades all societies, and transcends the barriers of racial, cultural, economic, and religious groups, 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 violence 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: 169). Sartre expresses the same opinion when he states that violence is not a means among others, but the deliberate choice to reach the end anyhow, to cut it short, "the end justifies the means" (Sartre 1983: 579).

What Maggie's oppressive mother, who turns her domestic worries into acts of violence on her scapegoats, that is, her children and her husband, has a distorted view of the situation. She does not know that violence, as Elizabethan dramatist Ben Johnson has written 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 turning point or climax of the story occurs when Mary throws her innocent daughter out of the house on the street for her sleeping with 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 and thoughtless act is all the heavier with consequences as, mistaking kindly discipline, obedience, and correction for irresponsibility, 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), for, in an attempt to escape their miserable everyday life and fulfil 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' family, 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. 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.

Violence breeding 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. In connection with that, 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).

One gathers from children's rough manners that in destitute communities, people are so entrapped by external factors in the culture of violence that they have internalized its impulses, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. 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*" (Hughes 1970: 188). In other words, the underprivileged cannot possibly shape their own existence, for, lacking free will, they 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. Which means that 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" (Hughes 1970: 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 root out since they are serious diseases, which may cause or result from a third one : poor education.

III. Lack of Education: A Handicap to Human Development

The dialectical interplay between poverty and violence is the same as that between poverty or violence and poor education. Though different apparently, the three problems are the same in essence, for poverty is the compost of lack of education and violence, and the other way round. In the ordinary meaning of the word, education refers to the action exerted upon an individual to increase his possibilities, especially his body, his intelligence, and his character. More concretely, 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 fulfil themselves, as stated in 1948, in article 2 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Grawitz 1999: 142-143).

As for Émile Durkheim, he defines education as the shaping of an inner self, which guides the individual all along his life (Durkheim 1969: 38). He postulates that education is of paramount importance since it is a catalyst for social integration and quick adjustment in a rapidly-changing and merciless world but also an efficient instrument for filling gaps and compensating for inequalities. The noble missions assigned to education require, thus, that

children be well disciplined, instructed, and trained. To crown it all, 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 improvement which, according to Alexis Carrel in *Man, The Unknown* (1935) are thought to be the ultimate goal of civilisation. Conversely, to be uneducated is to have no prospects, to be poor intellectually, spiritually, and economically, as exemplified by the Johnsons’ family and their neighbourhood. Jimmie’s and Maggie’s reckless attitudes testifies that they have not been prepared, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocates it in his treatise *Émile ou De l’éducation* (1762), to properly behave and face 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 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 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” (Nettels 1988: 5). 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 very badly off 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 as such an attempt would be 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' family 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.

Conclusion

All things considered, *Maggie a Girl of a Streets* fits the definition, characteristics, and pattern of the naturalistic novel through its conception, aesthetics, and *mise en scène*. Thematically, it is 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 Surburban New York 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 naturalistim 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, behaviours, habits, qualities, one-dimensionality, and foul language are panoptic illustrations of their material, intellectional, 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*⁷ 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. 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 *and al.*, *Dictionnaire des termes littéraires*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2005, p. 376.
6. 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 focus on the meaning. Cf. Robie Macauley and George Lanning, *Technique in Fiction*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1987, p. 203.

7. 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 and al., *op. cit.* p. 498.

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