Maggie: A Girl Of The Streets Essay, Research Paper

Maggie and Jimmie are two siblings being raised within the slums of New York City in the Stephen Crane novel; Maggie: A Girl of the Streets. The parents of these two are constantly fighting as broken furniture and fistfights are an everyday occurance in the decrepid family apartment. The mother and father fight while their children hide frightened as “There was a clash against the door and something broke into clattering fragments …. (Jimmie) heard howls and curses, groans and shrieks, confusingly in chorus as if a battle were raging” (11). Crane exxagerates the furniture destruction as every night when the two parents battle, seemingly all the furniture in the apartment is destroyed. Obviously, this poor family couldn’t afford to fix and/or buy new furniture everyday. This then is the environment that Maggie and Jimmie struggle with throughout the novel, but both respond to in opposite ways. Maggie dreams of a better life than of her roots while Jimmie excepts his roots and becomes nihilistic. However, the hope of Maggie sadly goes unfulfilled.

Maggie is introduced into the storyline quite subtle and quickly becomes the main focus of attention by the other three main characters. From the beginning, Maggie is a harsh contrast to the slum environment she has to endure. She “blossomed in a mud puddle … a most rare and wonderful production of a tenement district, a pretty girl” (16) that not only had the physical beauty that her family seemed to lack, but also the hope that she could be better than what was around in her environment. Therefore, the slum environment that surrounds her contrasts her character greatly. “None of the dirt of Rum Alley was in her veins” (16) as she became the talk of numerous males in the neighborhood.

Pete; an acquaintance of Jimmie, became Maggie’s infatuation. They meet when Pete is called to the Johnson apartment by Jimmie after Pete promised to attend a boxing match with him. Although only a bartender, Maggie finds Pete as a man of “personal superiority” (17) that is capable of providing her with any dream she desires. She views the contrast between Pete and her environment when:

The broken furniture, grimy walls, and general disorder and dirt of her home all of a sudden appeared before her and began to take a potential aspect. Pete’s aristocratic person looked as if it might soil. She looked keenly at him, occasionally, wondering if he was feeling contempt …. Maggie perceived that here was the beau ideal of a man. (19)

Therefore, Pete is the infatuation of Maggie because she has never known anything or anyone better than of her environment. Pete; although somewhat sly and charming, isn’t the best that Maggie could do. However, a rather normal hustler such as Pete is practically god-like compared to her rotten state of life. In the above quote, Crane hints in Maggie’s lack of self-confidence. Although Maggie does have hope to exit the slums, she is embarrased by the condition in which she lives as she fears that Pete is looking at her with contempt.

Once Pete notices Maggie he doesn’t waste anytime in taking her out on the town. An average night for them is watching “an entertainment of many hues and many melodies” (21) and other various performance acts. Maggie grows more feelings for him after wining and dining around all the local dinner halls and concerts. Pete continues to impress upon Maggie at these outings as she begins to conger visions of Pete having “some half dozen women in love with him …. he must live in a blare of pleasure. He had friends and people who were afraid of him” (21). Her hopes of an extravagant life grow rapidly while with Pete. This relationship builds to the point where Maggie decides to move out of her family apartment and in with Pete. Not that Maggie can be blamed for wishing this as even after the death of the father, Jimmie and the mother still bicker and break furniture as Jimmie had grown “large enough to take the vague position of head of the family” (17). Jimmie virtually replaces his father at this point in the novel as “he stumbled up-stairs late at night, as his father had done before him. He reeled about the room, swearing at his relations, or went to sleep on the floor” (17). The mother chastises Maggie for leaving yelling “‘Yeh’ve gone teh deh devil … Yer a disgrace teh yer people’” (30) yet, the devil is what she is really leaving. Her mother can never realize that she is the bad in the situation and that Maggie simply hopes instead of accepts her position in life.

Unfortunately, Maggie’s hopes and dreams wither away as Pete leaves her without notice to chase after “a woman of briallance and audacity” (43). “Pete did not consider that he had ruined Maggie” (49) and simply brushed her off as just another fling. Maggie never recovered from Pete’s dumping of her and instead of heading home to the sure temper tantrums and scornful attitude of her mother, Maggie turned to the streets.

Jimmie provides the first scene in the novel as “the little champion of Rum Alley” (3). At an elementary school age, Jimmie already is an experienced fighter and has been hardened to thug life. Crane hints at Jimmie’s innocence a couple of times, but the reader can easily perceive that Jimmie will grow up to what he naturally becomes. He finds a job as a driver and begins his descent into nihilism as:

During that time his sneer became chronic. He studied human nature in the gutter, and found it no worse than he thought he had reason to believe it. He never conceived a respect for the world …. After a time his sneer grew so that it turned its glare upon all things. He became so sharp that he believed in nothing. To him the police were always actuated by malignant impulses and the rest of the world was composed … of despicable creatures who were all trying to take advantage of himand with whom, in defense, he was obliged to quarrel on all possible occasions. He himself occupied a down-trodden position that had a private but distinct element of grandeur in its isolation. (13 – 14)

As mentioned earlier, Jimmie is accepted as male head of the family after his father dies. Although Jimmie seemingly hated his father, he instantly takes over his spot as the mother’s antagonist. Jimmie and the mother begin to parallel the father and the mother in their numerous battles, fortunately there are no more children in the apartment to scare.

Jimmie sinks into the world his father knew all to well; that being a typical day of working at a job that promotes his rotten argumentative attitude, drinking, coming home just to fight with the mother, and never realzing there is any better in the world than this.

In the end, Maggie commits suicide after realizing that she cannot escape her environment. Jimmie brings the news to the mother who begins to weep and while mourners gather in the apartment. The final lines in the novel provide an ironic insight into the character of the mother as:

1The mourner essayed to speak but her voice gave way. She shook her great shoulders frantically, in an agony of grief. Hot tears seemed to scald her quivering face. Finally her voice came and arose like a scream of pain. “Oh, yes, I’ll fergive her! I’ll fergive her!” (58)

The mother; while sobbing over the death of her daughter, still doesn’t understand the situation. She never perceives that she is the bad and that Maggie is the blossoming flower from the mud puddle. Therefore, the mother should be apologizing to Maggie. Another ironic twist added by Crane in the bipolar world of Maggie’s hopes and Jimmie’s nihilism.