

Aaron D. Sommers

From *Coastline Journal*

Crane's *An Experiment in Misery*: **Living in Urban Decay**

The short story *An Experiment in Misery* is not more than ten pages long, yet the author, Stephen Crane, manages to successfully concentrate the thoughts, feelings and physical environment of an impoverished existence he felt many were doomed to live through. The harrowing tale, published in 1893, is a story that mirrors much of Crane's other works, taking place in a nondescript date. While *An Experiment in Misery* is one of his less known works, it is a prototypical tale of literary realism and a testament to his talent as an American writer.

While many authors take great pains in detailing the particular setting of the story (diaries, letters, landmarks) Crane has the narrator in *Experiment* instead create an atmosphere of darkness and congestions, suggesting that a general mood is more important in his story than specific details. The environment in Crane's *Experiment* and *Maggie: Girl of the Streets* becomes more significant to the story than the characters themselves.

The introduction of *Experiment* has a young man plodding through the soaked and indifferent streets of a city square. Walking alone, he makes his way through the hazy fog of a rainy evening. Feeling lonely and forlorn the anonymous man, "looked about him for an outcast of the highest degree...the two might share companies." Yet all he sees are "deserted benches" and all he hears is the taunts of "bum" and "hobo" from others. His circumstance becomes more apparent when he spots "squads of well-dressed people" who, unlike a wandering homeless person like himself, appear full of purpose, "as upon

important missions.” They are the upper crust of society; he a negligible footnote. If the young man feels any relief during the night, it is when he observes a “sudden descent in style of the dress of the crowd.” Here Crane reinforces the deterministic world created by a modern industrialized society that is made up of the have and have-nots. It seems inevitable that the character feels more comfortable when among other like him, found in the midst of an unkempt crowd. The life a person living in the slums is cold, competitive and overcrowded in *Experiment*. Allowing no exceptions to the rule of Social Darwinism, the nature of life dictates the future of one’s life, regardless of their virtue or aspirations.

In *Maggie: Girl of the Streets*, an ambitious and honest girl is characterized as “a flower that blossomed in a mud puddle.” Though she has promise, her strong will becomes a paltry force, even a detrimental one, when stacked against the countless pitfalls awaiting her within the “mean streets” of the city.

The seduction that initiates Maggie’s moral and physical downfall is a device used by Crane to emphasize the danger that exists among the predators that lurk in the concrete jungle he writes about. Her suitor Pete is a conformist, one who has assimilated into a world of corruption and decay, and has little use for questioning the drastic differences among the class structure in society. Moreover, her integrity and beauty, along with being an adolescent, make her more vulnerable as a “creature of the streets” that will eventually be swallowed up by the ravenous beasts awaiting her.

What makes *Maggie* such a poignant tale is the fact that, judging from her appearance and demeanor, she has never belonged in her family or the decrepit city in the first place. Although Crane’s title makes it clear that she is a prostitute, the profession does not seem akin to her personality. Her mother is a hopeless drunk, and it is incredible

that Maggie has escaped this addiction, while at the same time becoming the matriarch of the troubled family. However, Crane makes it clear that she grew up in dire straits and that it is where she will always be, trapped by destitution, though she'll die with dignity nonetheless.

Like many a gifted writer, Crane is able to detail the sights, sounds and smells his characters experience during their journey through hardships. For example, the young man in *Experiment* enters a boarding house and immediately smells “the fumes from a thousand bygone debauches; the expression of a thousand miseries.” Later, the narrator describes seeing “tawny hues of naked flesh...statuesque, carven, dead...there was a strange effect of a graveyard, where bodies are merely flung.” This account could serve as details of a Nazi concentration camp during WWII, rather than a 19th century boarding house in the Bowery.

Perhaps this is an example of why specifics dates and locations are neglected by Crane in his stories. He regards the theme and atmosphere of urban life as a universal application, one that can be used in any place in time where impoverished and diseased groups of people are ostracized. Considered a naturalist by modern literary critics, he writes about the pivotal role of the environment and heredity on human life, and both stories mentioned are prime examples of what happens when a person accepts or struggles against the overwhelming tide of nature.

A striking detail in *Experiment* is the role of light in the story. Beginning with a dark, stormy and dismal opening, the downtrodden area where the young man seeks shelter is devoid of bright light, and subsequently, of hope. From the “gloom-shrouded corridor” of its entrance, to the “grey haze” and “subdued luster” of the interior, the

language suggests the appearance of a dark, subterranean and evil land. Crane's words make the building into a vile, diseased behemoth. Within the hovels that invite the people of such wretched conditions, it is as though light is not welcome. This is because illuminating the environment would highlight the inadequacies, the many "deformities" of the people, and they likely want to forget these depressing facts. And yet, oddly, the homeless men, once stripped of their clothes, appear grand and statuesque. It's their ragged, mismatched clothing that makes them deformed and misshapen.

Crane writes that the "golden rays of the morning sun came in bravely and strong" through a musty window. Under the miserable circumstances the young man finds himself and others in, even sunlight needs strength to pierce the heavy darkness of the slums. Thus, as found in both *Maggie* and *Experiment*, people living in a crowded and stratified urban environment must learn to become accustomed to their conditions. Crane's perception—a premonition—can only be paralleled by a modern American author such as J.D. Salinger. Salinger anchored the bulk of his canon in New York City, and illustrated the different worlds inherent in the class structure inevitable in the city. Though the wealthy couple on the street in *Experiment in Misery* may suggest another world, one that is clean and comfortable, their exclusive social positions remain, for the anonymous young man as well as Maggie and countless others in Gotham city "unconquerable kingdoms."

Work Cited

- Crane, Stephen. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. London: Kesinger Publishing, 2004.
- Crane, Stephen. *The Portable Stephen Crane*. New York: Penguin, 1997.

