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MAGGIE: INGENUE ON THE URBAN STAGE

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A number of historical currents have converged in our time to produce not merely in artists but in ordinary men and women an escalating cycle of self-consciousness—a sense of the self as a performer under the constant scrutiny of friends and strangers.

Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism¹

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets is a small novel with a slight heroine. Maggie Johnson is socially insignificant, culturally anonymous, and so inarticulate that her few words seem as ludicrous as they are pathetic. Yet Maggie is representative, and thus significant, in her thwarted longings, in her dreams. These very dreams, subsumed and distorted by an emerging mass culture, destroy her, and Maggie’s destruction makes her emblematic of a new pattern of American life.

Through Maggie’s development and subsequent fall, Crane tells a story of a new kind of education, of a heroine-in-training, preparing to take her place on the urban stage. Maggie, a novel of initiation, focuses on a young girl’s entry into a new, emerging culture—the culture of the marketplace—where consumption is the only good. As Maggie, her lover and her family perform in the Bowery theatre, we observe twentieth-century mass culture in its crudest form, and we see its effects. Crane brings us into a world exploding with change and accurately envisions the consequences of such upheaval.

Viewed within this framework, the blatant and infuriating hypocrisies of the characters, the juxtaposition of ironic, inflated narrative and Bowery dialogue, even the cliched plot, all become essential parts of a coherent, original tale. For in this world, truth is not only devalued, it is irrelevant; and seduction or prostitution are merely standard marketing strategies.

Frank Bergon notes that Crane’s talent “was to go over the wall to that side of experience where the spirit is quick to panic, where standards and values by which we think we live are no longer stable or even appropriate,” and he adds that, from the first chapter of Maggie, we are drawn into “a realm of experience where normal frames of reference are immediately shaken.”² The reader’s panic reflects the disorientation of the characters, for the Bowery is a fearful, unstable milieu. For the foreigner or the country dweller, recently arrived, the city was a threatening place. The newly arrived who remained in the city found
their fears supplemented by despair, as the bleakness of sweated work or of other menial labor provided no satisfaction beyond subsistence. The industrial city was cold and large, and, most frightening of all, it was filled with strangers. One did not see the familiar faces of a small town each day; instead, one was estranged and alone, confronted by the threatening and unfamiliar. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen describe the industrial city of the late nineteenth century:

The concentration of people in streets, in manufacturing districts, in dance halls and other urban entertainments, confronted people with an unrelenting parade of strangers. These were, and still are, the terms of mass life. Within it, one was continually forced to make silent, often unconscious decisions, based on outward appearances. Appearance became the only guide to survival, one’s only basis for judgment.

If strangers were thus to be judged by their surfaces, each observer himself was so judged. Inner bleakness, unremitting despair could be concealed, even from oneself, if one presented the appropriate facade. The characteristic genius of the new urban culture was its provision of endless channels of escape—in the very environment that was so threatening. The newly evolving industrial city was, as the Ewens describe it, an “urban stage,” “a jungle of display, an unrelenting spectacle, a circus of facade”; it was not only a place of terror but a platform of opportunity. The dispossessed worker could devise a new appearance. Appearance became the key to acceptance, to belonging; the right “look” could disguise one’s defeat and deflect the contempt of others. “The urban stage,” explain the Ewens, “generated continual opportunities for people to see themselves as part of the cityscape. As the metropolis took on its modern dimensions, it became a collection of glass and mirrored surfaces, unavoidable occasions for seeing oneself as a sight.” As actors in the city’s ever-shifting and spurious drama, workers could live their fantasies, could, for a moment, realize their dreams of status and respectability.

Essential to a successful performance in the new setting was costume. Fashion became paramount, consumption became obsessive when identity could be bought. Blanche Gelfant explains that in the insecure world of the city, “External fineries, extrinsic possessions become a compensation for a deeply rooted inner sense of helplessness. For people who live among each other as strangers, fashion comes to symbolize status and achievement.” Seduced by the promise of
fashion, one bought an appearance so he could sell a new self in the marketplace—the street.

The irony of such escape is, of course, its transitory and ultimately unsatisfying nature. Such momentary release denies the actor any chance for permanent amelioration of his misery, for it diverts him from the true sources of his discontent. But such diversion was tempting and widely sanctioned; Lasch notes that in 1907, both the Saturday Evening Post and Success magazine began departments of instruction in the “art of conversation, fashion, and culture.” The popular magazine no longer lauded the captain of industry; young men were now exhorted to become “masters of impressions....told that they had to sell themselves in order to succeed.” While Bowery teamsters did not read the magazines, they absorbed the message, for it permeated every form of mass culture: in the beer halls, in the theatres, one was told that dreams could come true if one learned the stance, the posture, of success. Thus emerging mass culture channeled the anger and pain of the underclass into the safest avenue of all—into an obsession with surfaces, into a fantasy world that money could buy.

Maggie’s tragedy is, as William Dean Howells notes, the “distorted perspective”8 she, like her peers, develops on the urban stage. Initially, Maggie is no actress; she possesses too many human qualities to succeed. She lacks the competitiveness, predatoriness, impersonality and indifference Gelfant cites as necessary for achievement.9 Maggie blossoms in a mud puddle precisely because she is humane in the inhuman world; in early chapters she comforts Jimmie, nurses Tommie, serves as mother to her family, weeps for them, and even steals a flower for the baby’s coffin. But soon, because she observes and learns the lessons of appearances, she is ready to take her place on the stage.

For the better part of each day, Maggie works at manufacturing symbols of respectability, collars and cuffs. Caught in a cycle of sweated labor and appalling family life, Maggie dreams modest dreams of love and protection. When the elegant bartender, Pete, enters her life, Maggie’s lessons in appearance begin in earnest.

Maggie is drawn to Pete by his mannerisms and his “extensive” wardrobe, and Pete soon initiates Maggie into the world of the streets, where she joins the crowd of the Bowery beer hall in an orgy of wish-fulfillment. Here she and the rest of the audience can indulge in a sentimental wallow listening to the song of “a mother’s love, and a sweetheart who waited and a young man who was lost at sea.”10 The audience of laborers can feel superior when a singer’s negro melody “necessitated some grotesque waddlings supposed to be an imitation of a plantation darky.” They can luxuriate in a mindless patriotism with
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songs of "Ireland bursting her bonds" followed by the national anthem (32). Such facile feeling is a glorious release for Maggie, who "drew deep breaths of pleasure. No thoughts of the atmosphere of the collar and curf factory came to her" (32).

As observer of this new world, Maggie learns the lessons of clothes. Like Dreiser's protagonists, Maggie soon perceives that clothes are the essential emblems of success. Her hope of capturing Pete's love is thwarted, in her mind, by her lack of appropriate apparel. "As thoughts of Pete came to Maggie's mind, she began to have an intense dislike for all of her dresses....She craved those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women" (34).

In terms of the universal values of the street, Maggie is right to worship clothes. Jane Addams noted that the working girl spent a disproportionate amount of her wages on clothes, but she, too, understood why:

if social advancement is her [the working girl's] aim, it is the most sensible thing she can do. Her house furnishing...her scanty supply of books...are never seen by the people whose social opinions she most values. Her clothes are her background, and from them she is largely judged.11

More than the lambrequin bought to impress Pete and soon ripped apart by Maggie's mother, Maggie's own appearance must attract and impress. She must compete on the city stage with the fashionable prostitute, Nell; she must package her longing in the wrappings of confident enticement.

When appearance is paramount, it is a short step from perceiving one's garments as crucial to perceiving one's self as a marketable item. Dreaming of attracting her lover, Maggie "began to see the bloom upon her cheeks as something of value" (34), something she will eventually trade for an illusory security.

The seduction of Maggie continues with further exposure to the urban masquerade. At a Bowery melodrama, Maggie, like the rest of the audience, cannot distinguish between the false and the true. Fascinated by the hackneyed, artificial plot, she identifies with the cardboard hero in the paper blizzard, as he rises through noble sentiments to moral and, more importantly, financial triumph. "To Maggie and the rest of the audience, this was transcendental realism. Joy always within, and they, like the actor, inevitably without" (36). This grotesque imitation of the misery and isolation of poverty provides the audience with a sympathetic enactment of their common pain, and,
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more destructively, with the false hope of rescue and economic success. It is the Horatio Alger story, the manipulative American myth, told and retold. With both insight and foresight, Crane depicts the use of mass culture as a form of social control, as both diversion and as channel for the pain of the underclass. The scene anticipates the widening impact of the mass media in the century to come, for it shows the power of manufactured illusion to create dreams, and to propose spurious ways to fulfill them. The images of the Bowery theatre are the forerunners of the images of the screen, and the lessons of such mass entertainment are lessons not merely in what to dream of, but in how dreams come true.

The implicit meaning of Crane’s theatre scene anticipates, by nearly a hundred years, the impact Jill Robinson, daughter of MGM producer Dore Schary, attributed to the Golden Age of American movies: “I think the reason we’re so crazy sexually in America is that all of our responses are acting. We don’t know how to feel. We know how it looked in the movies.” To Robinson, who grew up in the Hollywood fantasy world, not only dreams of love are formed by the screen; so, too, are attitudes that are ultimately self-defeating. “We know that in the movies its inconceivable that the bad guy will win. Therefore we don’t get terribly involved in any cause. The good guy’s gonna win anyway. It’s a marvelous political weapon.” In both Bowery theatre and movie palace, the audience is at once tantalized by fantasy and distracted from genuine, effective response to reality.

Like its successor, the movie, the Bowery melodrama teaches acting, and Maggie is again a quick study. Quite logically she concludes that, to merit her own rescuer, Pete, she must not only dress well but learn to develop the manners of a stage heroine. Buoyed by the false hopes of the theatre, Maggie dreams another empty dream.

Maggie always departed with raised spirits from these melodramas. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually overcame the wealthy and wicked. The theatre made her think. She wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps, grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory.

Fulfillment of her dreams, to Maggie, necessitates her transformation into a marketable product. Her lover will only “buy” her if she can act like the standard consumer item. Her longing fed by the tawdry fantasies of urban culture, Maggie tries to negotiate a deal in the mass market. Ironically, she is doubly a victim: she blindly accepts the
consumerist values of her society, but she cannot hold out for the best bargain. Instead of selling her only asset, she gives it away.

Only when she is forced to sell herself, when she is reduced to prostitution, does Maggie truly become a “legitimate” actress. Marston LaFrance says that nothing prepares us for the scene when Maggie appears briefly as “an entirely reconciled and successful prostitute”\textsuperscript{13} in elegant clothes, but this moment is the culmination of Maggie’s education. She now looks the part she has trained for, and she is now capable of acting that role. Milne Holton notes the shift in the novel from Maggie as an observer to Maggie as an object to be observed,\textsuperscript{14} and now we see her perform upon the city stage, throwing “changing glances at men who passed her, giving smiling invitations to those of rural or untaught pattern and usually seeming sedately unconscious of the men with a metropolitan seal upon their faces” (68).

But the new Maggie, tailored to look like the standard, saleable product, becomes, in her standardization, no one, nothing at all. Once the blossom that flourished in a mud puddle, Maggie drowns in the blackness of the enormous river, anonymous, unknown. Her final walk to her destruction is symbolic of her “progress” through the culture, for she begins as the person she so desperately wanted to be: she appears well-dressed, sophisticated, an accepted accessory to the bright lights of the theatre district. But, as Crane indicates, Maggie is no one. She is no longer even identified by name; she is a “girl of the painted cohorts” (68), and her walk soon takes her away from the reflecting mirrors of shop windows and restaurants’ glass facades to a place of darkness where the “shutters of the tall buildings were closed like grim lips” and the structures “seemed to have eyes that looked over them, beyond them, at other things,” not at Maggie. Here there are no windows in which to check one’s image, no bright surfaces or admirers to reflect and confirm one’s status. The lights are far away, a seemingly “impossible distance” away (70). Having forsaken any inner life to become truly “a girl of the streets,” Maggie has traveled to her logical end: oblivion. Seeking a false but marketable self, Maggie has only obliterated what little identity she may once have possessed.

There are other actors on the Bowery stage and all of them, like Maggie, understand the importance of appearances. Jimmie, unlike his sister, begins his career early: “Jimmie’s occupation for a long time was to stand on street corners and watch the world go by.” There he can dream and he can also present the facade of defiance and contempt so important to his sense of self. “He menaced mankind at the intersections of streets” for, at the corners “he was in life and of life. The world was going on and he was there to perceive it” (21). Again in contrast to Maggie, Jimmie has developed the aggression and competitiveness that characterize successful actors; to him the world is
made up of “despicable creatures who were all trying to take advantage of him and with whom, in defense, he was obliged to quarrel on all possible occasions” (22). While all men are potential enemies, Jimmie’s greatest hatred is for the well-dressed “swell,” his superior in appearance. His greatest joy comes when he can buy things: with “a dollar in his pocket his satisfaction with existence was the greatest thing in the world” (21).

Like Jimmie, Pete is obsessed with image. In the first chapter of the novel, Crane defines Pete in terms of objects and stance; at sixteen, Pete has “the chronic sneer of an ideal manhood” on his lips, a cigar “tilted at an angle of defiance” between them. The hat he wears is “tipped over his eye with an air of challenge” and the exaggerated swing of his shoulder “appalled the timid” (8). Beloved by Maggie because of his attitude and his clothes, Pete, like Maggie, is fooled by appearances. His inability to distinguish between Maggie’s genuine affection and the false love of the better-dressed Nell leads him to reject Maggie and to forfeit the very status he lives for. Respecting only that which he must pay for, Pete trades Maggie’s adoration for the commercial attentions of Nell; attempting to buy approval, he is cheated in the deal. In the whores he pays to reassure him he is a “goo’ f’ler” (73) Pete seeks a sympathetic audience. But neither this clique nor alcohol can erase the image of the fool derided by his own emptiness.

Donald Pizer has extensively analyzed the Johnsons’ flair for family theatre, and rightly notes that “The key to the morality of the Bowery is...its self-deceiving theatricality.” In the casting out of Maggie from both home and from Pete’s bar, in the “parody of Bowery melodrama” of the novel’s final scene, Pizer finds evidence of the power of a middle-class morality applied in largely inappropriate circumstances. To these “victims of amoral, uncontrollable forces of man and society,” Pizer states, such moral values are merely false and destructive.15 Pizer accurately pinpoints one deep need in the Bowery actors: the need to appear respectable, to win audience approval. But, in the Bowery world of mass culture, respect is earned not only by playing the roles of the middle-class, “decent” character, but in roles that challenge many traditional middle-class values. The new roles, of predator, of savvy salesman ready to drive a hard bargain in the marketplace, of contemptuous and cynical man or woman of the world, can as easily and frequently be played.

Thus the same Pete who shrewdly calculates his losses when an evening’s entertainment nets no kiss from Maggie can become the virtuous bartender who won’t sully his establishment with her presence. And the brother who publicly damns the ruined girl congratulates himself on his evasion of his own ruined mistress. The hypocrisy of such juxtaposed scenes is infuriating precisely because the actors
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perceive no hypocrisy; one set of values, one role, is as good as another. True, the Bowery stage and the Bowery streets present lessons in middle-class virtue rewarded, but they also present exemplar of the value of manipulation and violence. All such lessons are equally noted. What is valued is what will “play” before the audience of the moment, whether the role conforms to the vestiges of middle-class morality or to the new image of predator in the urban jungle. The city streets offer a department-store variety of ways to be; one can shop for the identity of the day. And if none of these identities is grounded in reality, if one is not only deceiving but self-deceived, that, too, is inevitable. What Lasch perceives of our own time is incipient in Maggie’s world: “Overexposure to manufactured illusions soon destroys their representational power. The illusion of reality dissolves, not in a heightened sense of reality...but in a remarkable indifference to reality.”

What is real hardly matters at all, and thus, in Maggie, imitation and simulation abound. Even objects lie. Pete’s elegant bar is imitation leather and mahogany veneer; clean, detachable collars and cuffs can conceal the grimy shirt beneath the clerk’s jacket. A beer-hall dancer takes her bows in “grotesque attitudes which were at the time popular among the dancers in the theatres up-town”; a maudlin song is greeted by “the kind of applause that rings as sincere” (32). At the melodrama, evil men in the audience cheer for the virtuous hero. There is no center of reality, no way to determine truth. By the last half of the novel, even the contrasts of vision are blurred; as Holton says, the final ten chapters have “a quality of distortion...Characters are often drunk, or confused by rumor. Scene after scene takes place in bar, beer hall, or theatre. The air is continually smoky, and images are blurred by glare, or sudden movement, or rain, or darkness.”

Even Crane’s alternating styles—the inflated, mock-heroic language of narrative and the rude Bowery dialogue—work to show the bizarre nature of this distorted world. Maggie’s beau is at once a simian figure of ridicule and, as Maggie sees him, a knight. Images shift rapidly, appropriately for a novel about mass culture. Sergio Perosa compares Crane’s technique to the cinema, citing the use of “a kind of rapid and essential montage, which is more evocative and suggestive than descriptive...desultory and a bit disconnected, as in the case of silent films.”

Crane uses a modern technique for his vision of a world in transition, one where people define themselves and others from the outside. Life in the Bowery is lived on the streets, where one must learn to play out his dreams on the urban stage. It was Crane’s particular genius to note that such a life of spectacle leads, ultimately,
to the dark river of despair. For no matter how many selves one can buy, no matter how many roles one plays, New York theatre audiences are notoriously fickle. Like Maggie, every actor must leave the stage, with its audiences, its costumes, its mirrors, and enter that midnight region where he is alone with his empty self.

NOTES


2Stephen Crane’s Artistry (New York, 1975), p. x.


4Ibid., p. 199.

5Ibid., p. 191.


7Lasch, p. 58.


11Ewen and Ewen, p. 214.


16Lasch, p. 87.
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17 Holton, p. 47.