

A Picture of Nativism: Maggie's New York

BY HELEN MCGUIRE-DRIVER

The rise of immigrant Catholics during nineteenth century America resulted in their being “viewed as the pawns of Rome and a moral stain on the sanctified fabric of republican culture.”¹ This concern became heated from 1870 until 1890 when New York City’s Irish population exploded with over 859,000 new Irish immigrants.² The resulting demographic shift engendered a radical reshuffling of the electorate; almost half of the voters during the 1890 elections in New York City were immigrants.³ Lines were soon drawn in the struggle to retain power. For instance, many Protestant men began to call themselves “Native Americans” and asserted that everyone else (blacks, women, and immigrants) was not American. Demeaning caricatures of Irish immigrants became commonplace in popular culture, while the nation’s printing presses churned out visions of an Irish-America that promised to threaten the foundations of the American republican government.

This scene of change, fear, competition, and struggle served as a backdrop for many important late nineteenth century literary works. Perhaps the most important of these was Stephen Crane’s 1893 work *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Long viewed as an honest portrayal of New York City slum life (it was subtitled “A New York Story”), according to Crane it was meant “to show people to people as they seem to [him].”⁴ This quote is often used as evidence that *Maggie*, much like a still photograph, offers a true to life snapshot of

immigrant slum life in nineteenth century New York City. However, this snapshot can only be understood through its alignment with the rapidly changing power configurations of the time. More than a snapshot, *Maggie* is one piece of the dominant group’s cultural discourse focused on developing intersubjective agreement on what was perceived to be the burgeoning Irish threat.⁵ As such, *Maggie* is a contribution to the construction of meaning: the meaning of being Irish in nineteenth century America. In the end, it says more about its author and the dominant group that gave him rise than the immigrant experience that was the subject of the novel.

“The starting point of critical elaboration,” observed Antonio Gramsci, “is the consciousness of what one really is, and is knowing thyself as a part of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an

inventory [;] therefore [;] it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.”⁶ Such an account is crucial to understanding Crane’s *Maggie*. Crane’s purported effort to write a photographic novel through researching the Bowery is only partially accurate. Without ever having seen the Bowery, Crane came up with the plot and wrote his first draft during his one semester at the Methodist Syracuse University. In fact, it was only after Crane began his final revisions on *Maggie* that he decided to test his literary vision “by observations and adventures in the Bowery.”⁷



Illustration:
Detail from photograph by Jacob Riis, whose pictures of life in New York City slums contributed to perceptions of dangers from Irish influence. His work influenced Crane. Riis's book, *How the Other Half Lives*, was first published in 1890 and contained many of his photographs.

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Illustration: View of an alleyway in lower Manhattan from Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*. One importance of the book was its influence on public understandings of immigrant life in the city's poor neighborhoods (it represented most Irish immigrants as infatuated with alcohol and politics). It preceded Crane's *Maggie* by three years.

If Crane, the realist, had never visited the Bowery when inventing his plot for *Maggie*, how did he conceptualize this picture of "people as they seem to [him]?" A number of secondary sources were, no doubt, available for this task. Crane was a frequent visitor to the red light district in Syracuse, New York;⁸ his mother was an active and committed member of the temperance movement;⁹ and he witnessed and reported on an illustrated lecture of Jacob Riis's book, *How the Other Half Lives*, the year before he started work on *Maggie*.¹⁰ Riis's book was an important contribution to the contemporary discourse on slum life, generally, and the Irish, more specifically. Consequently, he deserves some brief attention before continuing.

"DANGERS" OF IRISH INFLUENCE

Similar to the praise Crane received for his social commentary, *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890, was commended for being an important work of social justice. Indeed, it was often thought of by critics as a useful tool for understanding New York City immigrant slum life. However, it also sets forth a distinct concern for the dangers of Irish influence. Riis explained to America that in the nineteenth century tenements, the minority was the majority. According to Riis, out of "one hundred and forty families, one hundred [were] Irish."¹¹ This change in struc-

ture of the community naturally showed up in its politics. "The Irishman" notes Riis "dictate [d] the politics of the slums and [was...] the landlord, an autocrat of the slums."¹² Riis sees the nineteenth century Irishman as a kind of slum sovereign with power and control over all in his dark world. Riis also voices concerns with Irish morality in New York City's nineteenth century slums and claims that the "Celt," who made up the majority of the people living in the slums,¹³ fell "most readily victim to tenement influences."¹⁴ The most pervasive of those influences was alcohol, mixed with a dash of political interest. According to Riis, the life of the Irish, unlike other residents of the slums, ran "to public affair rather than domestic life; wherever he [was] mustered in force, the saloon [was] the gorgeous center of political activity."¹⁵ Riis also comments that when a "queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements, ever striving and working like whiskey and water in one glass [,]" unites, the end result will be a "final union and a prevailing taint of whiskey."¹⁶ In sum, Riis warns that the Irish infatuation with alcohol and politics will eventually affect born citizens of America.

Many believe that *Maggie*, like Riis's work, illustrates how "the environment in which people lived influenced their lives powerfully enough to render them helpless to resist external forces."¹⁷ These critics feel that Crane wanted to show how the environment could affect a person, more so than biological inheritance.¹⁸ There is no doubt that *Maggie* does depict the Bowery as poor and hellish.¹⁹ However, most of Crane's contemporaries did not see this sympathetic version of the story. They saw the novel as a validation of concerns and views they held about immigrant slum life. One such critic, Henry Edward Rood, in his May 30, 1896 review of the novel, writes that *Maggie's* immigrants are miserable, 'bestial,' and barbaric, which calls into question their humanity.²⁰ His review shows how *Maggie* actually invites renewed nativism. Another reviewer compares the residents of the slums in *Maggie* to beast-like creatures as well: "slimy things that crawl and blink when a long undisturbed stone is removed and the light is thrown upon them."²¹ Hamlin Garland's *Arena* review of *Maggie* is similar: he believes the novel "creates the atmosphere of the jungles, where vice festers and crime passes

gloomily by, where outlawed human nature rebels against God and man."²² These critics do not show a concern about the environment around *Maggie's* characters, but the characters themselves. For these critics, *Maggie* was another brick in the wall of Irish condemnation, another contribution to the social construction of meaning.

HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE IRISH

Some more indicting glimpses into Crane's cognitive inventory are offered by several of his other works. In his short story "The Duel That Was Not Fought," published in *The New York Press* in 1894, a year after *Maggie*, Crane focuses on the Irish as ready participants in violent and criminal behavior. The story centers on a drunk and violent Irishman in a bar attempting to engage in a sword fight with another character. Crane's ignorant, boastful Irishman, Patsy, is drunk in the saloon. The stereotypical "Patsy was not as wise as seven owls, but his courage could throw a shadow as long as the steeple of a cathedral."²³ This courage is more like a craving for violence as he becomes determined to engage in a sword fight with an experienced swordsman. Patsy does not care about his life or others. Patsy just wants to get drunk and fight.

Crane's understanding of what it meant to be Irish is also evident in a short play that he

published the same year as *Maggie*, "At Clancy's Wake." Crane recounts the story of a wake for an alcoholic immigrant Irish politician – Clancy. Despite being a power in the "warrud," Clancy abused his young children, attacked other Irish politicians with stove poker, and involved himself routinely in corruption.²⁴ The mother, another alcoholic, is stereotypical in her portrayal as a hysterical Irish woman who has lost her grip on reality: "Don't I remimber win he clipped little Patsey wid th' bottle, an' didn't he buy th' big rickin'-horse th' minit he got sober?"²⁵ "Clancy's wake" validates the American tendency to equate "Irishness" with alcoholism, violence, and criminal behavior. In the end, the reporter, who stops by to obtain information on the wake, is soon convinced to partake in drink and falls victim to the temptations of immoral behavior. After a few drinks, he slips into the family's drunken Irish vernacular: "I wanna fin' out, if poshble– zat is, if it's poshble shing, I wanna fin' out– shay, who the blazesh is dead here, anyhow?"²⁶ The message is clear; the young reporter's misfortune might soon be that of all Americans, not if they exist within Clancy's environment, but if they live among this Irish family and other families like it. The Protestant water has indeed been tainted with Irish whiskey.

Illustration:
(Below) Published in Harper's Weekly during the 1870s, drawings by Thomas Nast contributed to perceptions of corrupting influences imposed by immigrant Irish Catholics on political processes and church-state relations. (Next page) Nast also represented Irish immigrants as alcoholic and depraved, characterizations that Crane would later build upon.





CAST INTO THE IRISH HELL

Just like the unfortunate young reporter, *Maggie's* Johnson family, a non-Irish family, is cast into the distinctly Irish hell of the Bowery. The Irish certainly have a visible presence in the novel. For instance, many immigrants, especially the Irish, live in the Johnson's Bowery neighborhood. However, although "the nationalities of the people of the Bowery beam [...] from all directions,"²⁷ the Irish nature of the Bowery becomes apparent when, early in the novel, Jimmie has an altercation with a child with the Irish name "Riley."²⁸ Maggie and Pete go on to witness a ventriloquist who says "funny things about geography and Ireland" and plays upon the Irish audiences' dreams by singing "a vision of [...] Ireland bursting her bonds."²⁹ The same singer finishes his show, reminiscent of Crane's "Where De Gang Hears the Band Play," singing "The Star Spangled Banner," causing these Irish immigrants' callused hands to wave "frantically in the air."³⁰ Furthermore, one of the only two neighbors mentioned by name, Mary Murphy, is described by Maggie's mother Mary as an overgrown terrier, loud and beast-like.³¹

However, it is not merely the plot that shows how visible the Irish presence is within *Maggie*; the language itself uses ingrained views about Catholicism to help describe scenes within the story. For example, the Bowery boys who run away from Mary in fear are compared to Catholic Monks racing away from an earthquake. Both groups are shrieking and cowardly.³² Crane mingles two seemingly contradictory terms into one when he describes the wrathful Jimmie as "fighting with the face of a sacrificial priest."³³ At the end of the novel, monks again are mocked as Mary eats bread—the body of Christ—"like a fat monk in a pic-

ture."³⁴ Both Mary and Catholic monks become greedy, sweaty, and bloated in this image. Perhaps the most striking use of popular beliefs held about Irish Catholicism occurs when Pete, while drunk, tries to impress a group of women who appear to be streetwalkers by giving them money. This scene of money, drunkenness, and lust is compared to "an offering priest."³⁵ The scene ends by contrasting the air of the saloon to Catholic incense, with smoke and "the smell of oil [...] pervading the air."³⁶ Catholic transubstantiation is called to mind when Pete leaves with "wine [...] dripping softly down upon the blotches on his neck."³⁷ *Maggie* is rife with these kinds of Catholic references that correlate directly to contemporary Protestant fears.

In this Irish underworld, the Johnson family becomes quickly infected. The transition takes place early on in the novel when the "micks" who live in "Devil's Row" circle about Jimmie Johnson, a "Rum Alley" child. Just like the name of their street, "Devil's Row," the micks are tiny devils who invoke their wrath with inhuman persistence. The howling little micks are shown as "insane demons" who scream "great, crimson oaths" and engage in "blasphemous chatter."³⁸ They have murderous tendencies, have "the grins of true assassins," and "leer gloatingly on blood."³⁹ The hero, the "little champion," attempts vainly to run away. The demon Irish children "close in" and reign stones down onto little Jimmy Johnson. As they conquer Jimmie's body, they also appear to conquer his soul. The experience transforms Jimmie; his "infantile countenance" changes to the "look of a tiny, insane demon."⁴⁰ Jimmie's "roaring curses of the first part of the fight had changed to a blasphemous chatter."⁴¹ In short, this experience transforms Jimmie from a young Protestant child into an Irish demon. The Irish devils triumph in their conquest.

Just as it is symbolized with Jimmie at the start of *Maggie*, living among the Irish immigrants causes the Johnsons to become one of them. The attributes of the characters are depicted in stereotypical Irish fashion. The Johnsons drink heavily, eat potatoes regularly, and fight often. The most obvious in the novel occurs in a scene where the family matriarch, Mary, gets drunk on whiskey, cooks fried potatoes, and cries

...very of great, crimson oaths.
 "Run, Jimmie, run! Dey'll get yehs,"
 screamed a retreating Rum Alley child.
 "Naw," responded Jimmie with a valiant
 roar, "dese micks can't make me run."

over nothing – a few pages before she beats her children.⁴² She, like the Irish mother in "Clancy's Wake," becomes hysterical and sentimentalizes the dead daughter she never loved: "Hot tears seemed to scald her quivering face [...] Her voice [...] arose like a scream of pain. 'Oh, yes! I'll fergive her! I'll fergive her!'"⁴³ The father gets equal treatment. He is usually absent, always drunk, and spends most of the novel in the saloons. When he actually does communicate with his children, he is abusive. Like the stereotypical Irishman described by Riis and Crane in his stories "The Duel" and "Clancy's Wake," the father hangs out in the bar and complains about his life. "Why do I come an' drink' whik' here thish way?" His answer, a complaint, "'Cause home reg'lar livin' hell!"⁴⁴ Jimmie is also reminiscent of the Irish Patsy: he, too, looks for blood in a saloon.⁴⁵ These characters resemble Crane's Irish characters in almost every way, with the exception of their last name.

The Johnson's lack of respect for authority is another defining Irish characteristic. Jimmie begins his tough career by becoming arrested as a little boy; even then, he does not fear the "leader of society."⁴⁶ He believes he is the only human of worth "and the rest of the world was composed [...] of despicable creatures."⁴⁷ Jimmie is not the first in his family to become a felon; Jimmie's mother, who has been often arrested for drunkenness, also holds that title.⁴⁸ Jimmie's father may not have been arrested in the novel, but maybe he should have. He is a thief and abusive, even to his own son.⁴⁹ Even sweet Maggie has criminal tendencies; she steals a flower from an Italian⁵⁰ and eventually becomes a prostitute. These descriptions reiterate the native's concerns and beliefs about the Irish and how this group affects society. These criminal, 'native' characters, who

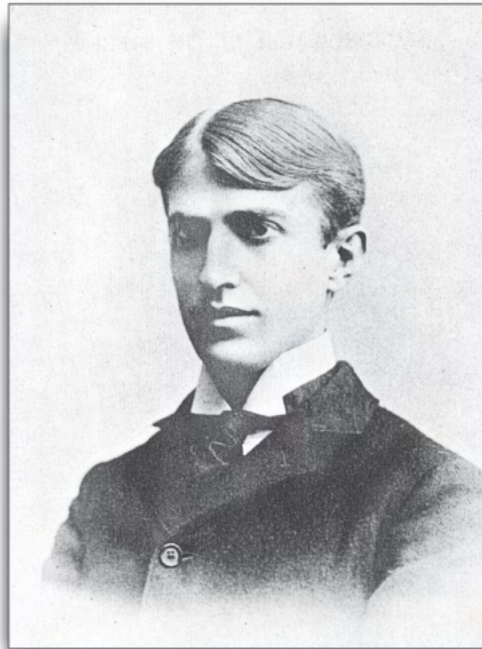
are surrounded by the Irish, have a complete disregard for authority and seem to have no moral capacity. Even an inherently good person like Maggie cannot help but be influenced by the criminal world that envelops her.

Like a Monty Python caricature, the Bowery explodes from human reproduction. The Irishness seen everywhere in the Bowery has devastating results to the environment. As with the "teeming" slums in "Where 'De Gang' Hears the Band Play," the characters in *Maggie* seem unable to control their sexual impulses and multiply with reckless abandon. The buildings are overflowing with people, and "loads of babies" scatter over the "street and the gutter."⁵¹ The Johnson family building quivers and creaks "from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels."⁵² No sense is immune from this onslaught of humanity as "a thousand odors of cooking food" permeates the nostrils.⁵³ Crane's descriptions in *Maggie* of the stuffy, dirty, disgusting, and ready-to-burst slums filled with people cry out for attention. It is not that the environment is too small, it is the environment that cannot contain this infestation of immigrants.

DAMNATION AND PERDITION

The hell *Maggie's* characters endure and, indeed, propagate is all too evident in Crane's penchant for references to damnation and perdition. Even characters who appear in the story for a short period manage to use the words "hell" and "damn" frequently. For instance, an elderly woman who emerges only briefly in the novel manages to damn a few people.⁵⁴ A preacher, who has one sentence in the story, succeeds in informing the tenements that they "are damned."⁵⁵ It starts with birth for the babies in the novel have no chance; they are doomed to an existence in

Illustration: Lines from the opening page of Stephen Crane's first edition of Maggie: A Girl of the Streets. In a later edition, "micks" was changed to "mugs"—but the novel's themes remained the same.



hell. These children are ignored and have to care for themselves. They learn quickly to be violent or be killed. Their choices were to fight "with other infants" in the street or to sit "stupidly in the way of vehicles."⁵⁶ With these descriptions, Crane succeeds in associating the growing immigrant population in America with Christianity's ultimate concern: eternal damnation.

Aside from brief diversions to mock Catholicism, *Maggie's* stereotypically Irish characters have no interest in religion. When introduced to religion, the characters ignore it, think that they are above it, or do not understand it. For instance, Jimmie despises "obvious Christians," is not "afraid [...] of the devil," and believes "in nothing."⁵⁷ Pete, like Jimmie, seems to disdain religion and waves "his hands like a man of the world, who dismisses religion and philosophy."⁵⁸ Jimmie's friend cannot even comprehend what the afterlife is. He asserts that "if he should ever meet God he would ask for a million dollars and a bottle of beer."⁵⁹ These types of assertions were exactly the problems feared most by Protestants about the residents of the slums. For the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant of late nineteenth century, the battle was for more than The Republic; it was for the very soul of America.

In an insightful commentary on the status of

powerless groups in society, Karl Marx noted "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."⁶⁰ Because they could not represent themselves, others represented the Irish. This is the picture America has inherited: a dominant group construction of caution and fear. Who were the Irish immigrants of late nineteenth century America? Did their labor build America, or did their infectious immortality destroy it? Were they victims of unrestrained capitalism or predators for all that was true and decent in the early Protestant republic? It is posited here that *Maggie* and the dominant cultural discourse of the period offers no good answer to these questions. Rather than a window into the immigrant experience in New York City, *Maggie* is a window out onto the power configuration present in nineteenth century white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America. *Maggie* and the many other works of its kind are lessons in the cultural and societal construction of meaning; meaning that is both supported by and supportive of existing power relationships. The historical and cultural baggage Crane brought to *Maggie* is deep; the picture he paints is clear, and the effects of his photograph helps color American understanding of what it is to be Irish to this day.

Notes

- 1 Robert Levine. *Conspiracy and Romance*. New York: Cambridge, 1989. 108.
- 2 Josiah Strong. *The Twentieth Century City*. 1898. The Rise of Urban America. New York: Arno Press, 1970. 30.
- 3 Ibid. 78.
- 4 Qtd. in Keith Gandal. *The Virtues of the Vicious*. New York: Oxford, 1997. 61–2.
- 5 Two groups that formed around this threat were the National League for the Protection of American Institutions (N.L.P.A.I.) and the American Protective Association (A.P.A.). For more information about these groups see Donald L. Kinzer's *An Episode in Anti-Catholicism*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1964.
- 6 Qtd. in Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1994. 25.

Illustration:
Image of Stephen
Crane from a
photograph taken
in 1896.
Courtesy of Lilly
Library, Indiana
University.

- 7 R.W. Stallman. *Stephen Crane: A Biography*. New York: George Braziller, 1968. 66.
- 8 Ibid. 32.
- 9 Ibid. 11,
- 10 Kevin J. Hayes ed. Introduction. *Maggie*. Boston: Bedford, 1999. 8.
- 11 Jacob A. Riis. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1904.18.
- 12 Ibid. 18.
- 13 Ibid. 18.
- 14 Ibid. 124.
- 15 Ibid. 25.
- 16 Ibid. 18.
- 17 Kevin J. Hayes ed. Introduction. *Maggie*. Boston: Bedford, 1999. 4.
- 18 Stephen Crane inscribed the following in the first edition copies of *Maggie*: *Maggie* "tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless" (Hayes 3). Kevin J. Hayes explains how this quote, and *Maggie* itself, "challenges the reader to think differently from the 'excellent people,'" whom he describes as "the bourgeois Christian readers who formed a large majority of the late-nineteenth-century readership" (4). Keith Gandal, who wrote a book that discusses *Maggie* at length, *Virtues of the Vicious*, explains that Crane and Riis offer something different than the typical slum novel; they are "crusaders for social justice and fearlessly honest writers" (Gandal 8). Gandal believes that *Maggie* defies stereotypical anti-immigrant novels by showing a "refusal to judge slum life" (39).
- 19 The tenements in which many of these immigrants live are referred to as a "reg'lar hell" (Crane 44). The Bowery looks like hell; it is "a dark region" (39) with "dark stairways" (40). Later, the novel describes the business districts as "gloomy [...]" where the tall black factories shut in the street and only occasional broad beams of light [fall] across the pavements from saloons" (88). The members of the tenement houses live on "Devil's Row" and "Rum Alley" (36), which symbolize the immigrant's existence in hell, with only one escape: alcohol. All of this serves to illustrate the city, the place where immigrants from all directions call their home, as a dark, uncivilized, hellish place.
- 20 Henry Edward Rood. "Review of Maggie." *New York City—The Mail and Express*. May 30, 1896: 18.
- 21 "Unsigned Review, New York Morning Advertiser." 1896. *Stephen Crane: A Critical Heritage*. Ed. Richard M. Weatherford. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973. 43.
- 22 Hamlin Garland. "Arena Review." 1893. *Stephen Crane: A Critical Heritage*. Ed. Richard M. Weatherford. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973. 38.
- 23 Stephen Crane. "The Duel That Was Not Fought." *The New York City Sketches of Stephen Crane and Related Pieces*. Ed. R.W. Stallman and E.R. Hagemann. New York: New York UP, 1966. 117.
- 24 Stephen Crane. "At Clancy's Wake." *The New York City Sketches of Stephen Crane and Related Pieces*. Ed. R.W. Stallman and E.R. Hagemann. New York: New York UP, 1966. 24.
- 25 Ibid. 23.
- 26 Ibid. 25.
- 27 Stephen Crane. *Maggie*. Ed. Kevin J. Hayes. Boston: Bedford, 1999. 56.
- 28 Ibid. 38.
- 29 Ibid. 57.
- 30 Ibid. 58.
- 31 Ibid. 63.
- 32 Ibid. 42.
- 33 Ibid. 71.
- 34 Ibid. 93.
- 35 Ibid. 92.
- 36 Ibid. 93.
- 37 Ibid. 93.
- 38 Ibid. 36–7.
- 39 Ibid. 36–7.
- 40 Ibid. 36.
- 41 Ibid. 37.
- 42 Ibid. 40.
- 43 Ibid. 94.
- 44 Ibid. 44.

- 45 Ibid. 72.
- 46 Ibid. 47.
- 47 Ibid. 47.
- 48 Ibid. 77.
- 49 Ibid. 44.
- 50 Ibid. 46.
- 51 Ibid. 39.
- 52 Ibid. 39.
- 53 Ibid. 39.
- 54 Ibid. 43.
- 55 Ibid. 46.
- 56 Ibid. 39.
- 57 Ibid. 47.
- 58 Ibid. 51.
- 59 Ibid. 47.
- 60 Qtd. in Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1994. 335.
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- . "The Duel That Was Not Fought." *The New York City Sketches of Stephen Crane and Related Pieces*. Ed. R.W. Stallman and E.R. Hagemann. New York: New York UP, 1966. 111–7.
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