

**POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN STEPHEN CRANE'S *MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS*: A NEW-HISTORICISM STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper will analyze poverty and unemployment in America that is portrayed in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and the parallels connection between the story and the era in the US at that time. The researchers apply the Neo-Historicism approach to analyze the issue since it helps the researcher answer the research problem by analyzing the historical event, social problem, time and place that become key components. The researcher also employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the primary data, that is the novel by Stephen Crane entitled *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, while the supporting data were taken from books, articles, journals, online sources, and other sources. The outcome demonstrates the existence of societal problems like unemployment and poverty, which Stephen Crane makes the novel's primary problem. Researchers discovered a resemblance between Maggie's poverty and unemployment and the historical period in the USA at the time. What Crane shows in his novel is that not all Americans, especially those in New York during the industrial revolution, have happy lives. Moreover, a large number of people experience unemployment and poor condition, which is made worse by the industrial revolution and the American Panic of 1893. These issues resemble the societal issues that are presented in the book.

**Keywords:** *Maggie; Neo-Historicism; Poverty; Stephen Crane; Unemployment*

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## INTRODUCTION

When we talk about literature, it can also be regarded as the chief of art that is transmitted through spoken or written words. Literature contains the record of the values of people with their thoughts, problems and conflicts, in short, their whole life. It is also an imitation of the variation of experiences of people. Literary studies provide a window into a region’s culture and conditions. Although the author of a novel creates a story through fictional characters to pique the reader's interest, the characters in the novel also represent a depiction of a real issue that exists in human daily life. Wellek stated “literature represents life; and life is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation” (1956, p.94).

Based on the statement above, literary studies become one of the windows into understanding and interpreting the culture and situation of society. For example, American society at a given time, particularly minority issues. That is why in American Studies, literature, such as novels, short stories and poems. can be used as mental evidence to analyze the society in America. Literature can be used to understand the issues in society, especially in the US, such as poverty, civil war, Native Americans, abolished slavery, the women’s movement, and others.

The story in literature, such as novels, is affected by many things, for example, the era in which they are created and published by the author, such as Naturalism. Emile Zola, a French novelist, proposed and formulated Naturalism, which was introduced to the US

by American novelist Frank Norris. It is a harsher, new realism. Naturalism became a literary movement that used detailed realism in social conditions, heredity, and environment that inescapable force in shaping human character. In naturalism, characters can be studied through their relationships with their surroundings. Naturalists in American literature questioned the validity of comforting moral truths. They attempted to achieve extreme objectivity and frankness by portraying characters from lower social and economic classes who were influenced by their environment and heredity. Naturalism's pessimism and deterministic ideas pervaded the works of writers, such as Stephen Crane (Zhang, 2010 p. 195).

Crane was one of the most famous writers in American history. On November 1, 1871, Crane was born in Mulberry Place, Newark, New Jersey. His father died in 1880, and the family relocated to several locations in New Jersey. The Cranes eventually relocated to Asbury Park, New Jersey, where Stephen matured into his adolescence. Crane, the ninth child of Methodist parents, began writing at the age of 4 and had numerous essays published before the age of sixteen. Crane was a reporter for his brother's news agency in Asbury Park during the summer of 1891. In his leisure time, he also created drawings and stories. Crane lived in New York after his mother died and temporarily worked in a commercial enterprise and did some freelance writing (Britannica, 2022).

One of Crane’s novels that belong to the naturalism era is his debut *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. In fact, it belongs to a modern novel presenting naturalism. After his mother died, Crane spent his fortune on the publication of the novel in 1893. The novelist

is often regarded by critics as the pioneering work of American literary Naturalism.

The novel is an observation of real life and the story's characters, which are depicted from their childhoods to their adult lives to better present the elaborating incidents of real life. The characters in the stories become victims of circumstance, struggling to overcome the social and economic problems that they were born with. Maggie's life turns tragic when she runs into problems in her bad environment, and she eventually commits suicide. Because of that researcher was interested in the issue of social problems, such as poverty and unemployment in the US during that era, and the parallels connection between the story and the era in the US at that time. Researchers will use the New-Historicism approach to analyze the problem.

## DISCUSSION

Literature is a social expression. Many researchers believe that literature reflects or expresses life. A writer frequently reflects on his or her own life experience and perspective. Literature such as novels can be a representative of age and society, this concept can be analyzed by using the Neo-Historicism approach.

New historicism is a literary theory that emphasizes the idea that all works of literature should be studied and understood in light of their context, such as the author, politics, economy, or history. Stephen Greenblatt, a critic and English professor at the University of California, Berkeley, invented the term "new historicism". Greenblatt created the term when he assembled a collection of articles and, in a desperate attempt to write the introduction, stated that the writings demonstrated

phenomena he referred to as the new historicism. New historicism rejects the idea of someone being able to know and draw a picture of an entire age; rather, new historicism believes that age is created by many cultural contexts and frequently leaves untold stories from the powerless (Mambrol, 2016).

New Historicism recognizes that a work of literature is influenced not only by its author, times and circumstances, but that any literary works also has time, place, and thus a historical event as key components, and that the key elements can be deciphered from the literary text following careful analysis of the text, even if these elements are not depicted by a writer in his or her work. In short, the new historicism also acknowledges that literature is "affected" by culture and environment. Tyson (2016 pp. 291-292) stated that,

For new historicism, the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (the literary work) and context (the historical conditions that produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts.

She (2016, p. 295) also further explains that, For new historical literary critics, then, the literary text, through its representation of human experience at a given time and place, is an interpretation of history...That is, the literary text shaped and was shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced. Likewise, our interpretations of literature shape and are shaped by the culture in which we live.

Based on the explanation above, a New Historicism examines literature from a broader

historical perspective, looking at both how the writer's times influenced the work and how the work represents the writer's periods, but also acknowledging that contemporary cultural settings distort the critic's judgment. New Historicism utilizes the poststructuralist theory that reality is created and multifaceted, as well as the Foucauldian understanding of power's involvement in knowledge creation (Harpham, 1991, p. 370). So, a parallel reading of a text with its sociocultural and historical conditions is very important in understanding literature from a Neo-historicism perspective. Because literature, for neo-historicist, has its own relationship to the larger culture, in analyzing literature we need to understand what “things” shaped the literature, such as history, culture, politics, economy, etc. The approach will be used by the researcher to find social issues, like poverty and unemployment, inside the novel that becomes the main problem in the story. This approach also will be used to analyze the economic and political condition of the US during that era.

### **Poverty**

The first problem that appears in the novel is poverty. To examine the issue, the novel is set between 1880 and 1900 when the US population increased because of immigrants. The increased demand for municipal services, housing, jobs, and educational facilities overwhelmed the local government. Tensions between various groups erupted into violence, which local police were unable to contain. The definition of Poverty refers to having too little income to buy the necessities of food, shelter, clothing, or health care (Britannica, 2020).

The novel centers on Maggie, a young woman, who struggles to survive the harsh environment of the Bowery, a nineteenth-century New York City slum. Her father and mother are both alcoholics, and both are unemployed. She and her two brothers, Jimmie and Tommie, lived in poverty and were raised in an abusive household. Just like the following quotations.

The girl, Maggie, blossomed in a mud puddle. She grew to be a rare and wonderful production of a tenement district, a pretty girl. None of the dirt of Rum Alley seemed to be in her veins. The philosophers, upstairs, downstairs, and on the same floor, puzzled over it. When a child, playing and fighting with gamins in the streets, dirt disgusted her. Attired in tatters and grime, she went unseen.” (Crane, 1893, p. 21)

Maggie’s family life is difficult (poor) because her parents are unemployed, based on the quotation above. Moreover, her parents do not have enough money to buy food, shelter, and clothing and are unable to obtain a good job because they are uneducated. Her parents have no experience or skills to work in a factory because, as we know, this story takes place at the end of the nineteenth century in New York City, during the era of industrialization. This era has an impact on the lives of people in the society at the time. Her parents are unable to support their children’s lives due to a lack of funds. That is why their children have a negative attitude. Parents cannot be idols to their children. The poverty can be seen in the quotations below.

A glow from the fire threw red hues over the bare floor, the cracked and soiled plastering, and the overturned and broken furniture. In the middle of the floor lay his mother asleep. In one

corner of the room his father's limp body hung across the seat of a chair." (Crane, 1893, p. 13)

It is also illustrated in the following excerpt, Maggie broke a plate. The mother started to her feet as if propelled. "Good Gawd!" she howled. Her glittering eyes fastened on her child with sudden hatred. The fervent red of her face turned almost to purple. The little boy runs to the halls, shrieking like a monk in an earthquake. He floundered about darkness until he found the stairs. He stumbled, panic-stricken, to the next floor. (Crane, 1893, p. 10)

Those quotations above show that Maggie comes from a poor family. Her home has been shattered, with shattered door panels, cracked and filthy plastering, and overturned and damaged furniture. This narrative may have a poverty issue.

Above all, one could argue that Crane brings alcohol into play as an emphasis on the explication related to a cycle of poverty, since Brennan (1962) measures that the symbolic meaning behind the use of alcohol is to put into light that one's destiny, as well as the condition of the characters' lives, cannot be changed. As mentioned earlier, it is evident that Crane portrays Maggie's mother, Mary Johnson, as a tangible demonstrator of the destructive power of alcohol. When Mrs. Johnson is in her drunken rage, she is described as a violent person who has the heart to abuse everyone including her own children – let alone things, as she is breaking everything around her.

In fact, a plate is more valuable to her than her daughter to her mother because her mother knows she doesn't have enough money to buy a new one. That is why when Maggie broke one of the plates, she was very

afraid. Because her parents are very alike, they do not have a proper job and are constantly fighting. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* shows the poverty problem in American society at that time. The reason why Maggie's parents and other Americans during that time were stuck in poverty was Maggie's parents' unemployment. Other reasons are they lack skills because they are uneducated, they are extremely lazy. As a result, all they can do is drink alcohol, get angry, and fight. The fact that Maggie's parents are alcoholics makes them too lazy to help their families. Moreover, when they are in their cups, Mary Johnson is recklessly condemning Maggie in front of the public's eye and thus isolates her daughter from the community. One could agree that Mary Johnson's drunken rage is what causes Maggie to live on the street because she feels alienated.

### **Unemployment**

Another problem that we can find in the novel is unemployment. Unemployment happens because of the labor surplus and lack of job field, in the end, many labor rejected because of age, competition of younger workers, technical changes in the industry, merging of computations, business depressions and illness. It is very clear to see the unemployment problem as a social problem revealed in this novel. The following quotation will make it clear.

In the street infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles. Formidable women, with uncombed hair and disordered dress, gossiped while leaning on railings, or screamed in frantic quarrels. Withered persons, in curious postures of submission to something, sat smoking pipes in obscure corners. A thousand

odors of cooked food came forth to the street. The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels. (Crane, 1893, p. 5)

Maggie's parents are uneducated. They lack work experience. It renders them jobless and prevents them from doing everything. Aside from that, they live in the tenements of the Bowery, a slum area of New York City, making it difficult for them to find work. As good parents, they must do everything possible to provide for their children's daily needs. But the truth is that they are too lazy to look for work. They give up on their real life, and as a result, they have no responsibility as a good parent. They tried to find work, but they were unsuccessful because they lacked quality, and their living situation shows the general economic problem in that era. They are depressed and unable to think correctly. They give up on their normal lives, it makes them careless. They turn to alcohol and waste their time by drinking alcohol until they are drunk.

Even more, in accordance with the discussion related to one's being uneducated, the characters in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* are all stuck in the prejudice of their fate with no way out because of the inability to think further in a more critical way to see the other perspective in a solutive manner besides their own. Critic Don Dingleline (2006) points out how the behavior and actions of the characters in the novel are all closely related to their condition of being in poverty. Maggie specifically, is one of the subjects of this environment as it has already molded the outgrowth of her life despite her best effort to improve her lie of the land by marrying Pete. Don Dingleline examines this issue which shows that there is a socially-

constructed behavior as the reason why they are impoverished.

During the evening he had been standing against a bar drinking whiskies, and declaring to all comers confidentially, "My home reg'lar livin'hell! Why do I come an'drin' whisk' here this way? Cause home reg'lar livin' hell"! (Crane, 1893, p. 12)

Actually, not only Maggie's parents are unemployed in that slum, but so are many others. The novel reveals that the old woman in Maggie's parents' neighborhood is also unemployed. Every day, she takes a seat on Fifth Avenue's stones. She is a beggar there, and she receives a small sum in pennies every day from people who walk in front of her. She will go to any length to obtain money. The difficulties in her life lead her to believe that everything is fair. She will try a variety of methods to obtain food, clothing, and shelter, and then she will survive. Just like being stated by the quotation below.

The old woman was a gnarled and leathery personage who could not at will an expression of great virtue. She possessed a small music box capable of one tune, and a collection of "God bless ye's" pitched in assorted keys of fervency. Each day she took a position upon the stones of Fifth Avenue, where she crooked her legs under her and crouched, immovable and hideous, like an idol. She received a small sum in pennies daily. It was contributed, for the most part, by persons who did not make their homes in that vicinity." (Crane, 1893, p. 11)

Unemployment is widely regarded as a significant global social and economic issue. The majority of people who become unemployed remain unemployed for only a short time. However, there is a hard core of unemployed people who have been out of

work for extended periods. Maggie's family lives in a rough, poor, and filthy neighborhood. Families in that area are unemployed and impoverished. Their daily suffering causes them to be unconcerned about themselves and their surroundings. They do not have enough money to buy clothes, repair their damaged home, or further their education.

Maggie's parents and the elderly woman are willing to go to any length to obtain what they require for themselves. For example, the old woman will do anything to get money although what she did to the young lady belongs to criminal action. She doesn't think that what she does will risk her own safety because all she needs is money. At her age, where most women will avoid doing things that belong to criminal action, but she does the other way. Because the suffering of life makes everyone do bad things although it can bring them to jail. Just like described by the quotation below.

Once, when a lady had dropped her purse on the sidewalk, the gnarled woman had grabbed it and smuggled it with great stealth beneath her cloak. When she was arrested she had cursed the lady into a partial swoon, and with her aged limbs, twisted from rheumatism, had kicked the breath out of huge policeman whose conduct upon that occasion she referred to when she said, "The police, damn 'em!" "Eh, Jimmie, it's a shame," she said. "Go now, like a dear, an' buy me a can, an' if yer mudder raises 'ell all night, yehs can sleep here." (Crane, 1893, p. p.11).

The unemployment problem in America during that era is depicted in the story, As a result of their lack of education, the majority of people living in the Bowery tenements are unable to obtain employment. The majority

of them do not attend school due to financial constraints. Maggie's parents spend all of their time smoking pipes and drinking alcohol until they forget everything. The elderly woman then becomes a beggar to earn some money and purchase alcohol to drink. Because of that, everyone who lives in the Bowery must do everything to survive, even though it means they must be criminals or fall into prostitution. Through their performances of class problems, poverty, unemployment and prostitutes, Maggie exposes urban savagery in the New York slum area at that time, the place that is known as a hard place to live (von Cannon, 2015, p. 43).

### **Parallel Connection between the Story and the Era**

When using the Neo-Historicism approach, researchers need to analyze external aspects, such as history, politics and economy. Because in Neo-historicism, this aspect has a vital role and parallel connection in shaping the story of the novel. It is in accordance with Tyson (2016, p. 291-292),

For new historicism, the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (the literary work) and context (the historical conditions that produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts.

The parallel connection between the novel and the era can be seen from the time settings of the story. It represents the industrialization era in America, especially in New York and the Panic of 1893. Crane reacted to this romanticized and homogenized view of American life, in his

novel *Maggie*, by showing New York that he had seen himself. It was a New York of the poor, the drunken, and the desperate, people blinded by hypocrisy or driven by necessity, profane and corrupted. Crane saw this portrait of New York as necessary honesty; most of his contemporaries thought it was improper, even scandalous. The story of *Maggie* is also influenced by the story of his life, Stephen Crane is not a lucky and rich kid; he lives during the revolution industry and the panic of 1893. Yet, his father passed away when he was still a child and he lives with his single-parent mother, just like *Maggie*. As we know, *Maggie* in the story is very unlucky, born into a poor family, her father and brother die so she needs to live with her drunken mother.

With that being said, as the US gained ground as an industrialized nation, “an unprecedented influx of immigrants contributed to a boom in population,” (Holton, 1972, p. 54). The influx directly affected the number of populations, meaning that more people have to compete even rigorously to get what they need to survive. These alterations are closely related to the core cause of poverty; illustrating that the majority of the US population was skeptical about the dependency on the fluctuation of the global economy.

Crane did not have an easy childhood. The family moved often, and his father died, of what seems to have been a heart attack, in 1880. In 1886, the local paper reported that his mother was “suffering from a temporary aberration of the mind... He explored New York in for two years, while living with his brothers upstate (Crain, 2014).

The parallel condition of social problems in the novel and the era can be seen at the

beginning of the industrial revolution, industrial workers have been critical to the survival of the American economy. The lives of American industrial workers have always been difficult, but between 1865 and 1900, their lives were made both easier and more difficult by the impact of technological changes, immigration, and labor unions. Between 1865 and 1900, technological advancements had an impact on American industrial workers. Technology made certain jobs easier and faster to complete, allowing more to be produced in less time. Because of the invention of electricity and lamps, work could be done at any time. However, as a result of these technological advances, workers had much less job security, and their wages became lower than the standard of living at the time. Skilled artisans, who were once high valued tasks, were now replaced by machines. And these things became the reason for the increasing poverty and unemployment in America during that time.

Skilled workers proved remarkably successful at maintaining their position through the 1880s, but they had to fight to do so. The relatively high wages for skilled workers led employers to seek ways to replace skilled with unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Mechanization provided the best tactic for deskilling work and lowering wages. Many of the bitterest strikes of the period were attempts to control working rules and to maintain rather than raise wages (Hine, 2011).

The problem is not just for those who find it hard to make money because they need to compete with machines and technologies. But, also for those who are still working, the workers were underpaid.

In 1890, 11 million of the nation's 12 million families earned less than \$1200



per year; of this group, the average annual income was \$380, well below the poverty line. Rural Americans and new immigrants crowded into urban areas. Tenements spread across city landscapes, teeming with crime and filth. Americans had sewing machines, phonographs, skyscrapers, and even electric lights, yet most people labored in the shadow of poverty. (pbs.org)

The statement shows that during 1890, many American workers were underpaid, even though most of them were classified below the poverty line. During that time the average income of Americans was \$380. That is way too less to fulfill their daily life. it becoming worse with the wave of immigrants that come to the US for the American Dream, to get a better life. During that time the US as a nation almost had everything, including technologies, machines, skyscrapers, and resources, but their workers are stuck in poverty. Some of them also conducted criminal action because of their life in the shadow of poverty.

Another parallel between the story in the novel and the political and economic problems in that age is the Panic of 1893. It was one of the worst in American history, with unemployment exceeding. The Panic of 1893 was a national economic crisis precipitated by the failure of two of the country's largest employers, the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and the National Cordage Company. The failure of these two companies triggered a stock market panic. Stevens (1894, p. 121) states,

Leading railway securities traded in at the New York Stock Exchange declined sharply, the months of November and December in 1890 presenting marked panic symptoms in Wall Street.

Moreover, he also explains that

The stock market showed extreme nervousness. Gold was going abroad freely, and banks were finding it important to be more conservative in making discounts as well as collateral or stock market loans. Meanwhile the cloud which hung over the trade situation darkens (Stevens, 1894, p. 124).

Many companies go bankrupt because they cannot afford to pay their laborers. So this problem then created poverty and unemployment in America during that time became worse. In the story, Maggie's parents are unemployed, they do not have work to do because of their lack of skills they have. During that time when workers compete with machines, skills are very important to help people to get jobs and better lives. However, Maggie's parents failed to do so; they lived in poverty and failed to raise their children properly.

Stephen Crane created this story to show us that not all Americans, especially during the industrialization in New York, can get a good life. Many of them then become unemployed and live in (poverty), it also becomes worse, with the Panic of 1893 that happened in America. This economic problem then created many companies bankrupt and their workers became jobless and increasing the poverty in America at that time, just like what happened to Maggie's parents and the people who lived in his area.

## CONCLUSION

In *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Crane employs sarcastic approaches that come under naturalism to convey topics of societal issues. The connections between the novel and the period can be seen by employing a new historicism perspective. Maggie's main focus is on social issues like unemployment

and poverty. Problems with class, gender, and identity then intersect in the New York slum region at that time. Maggie and her family can survive in the Bowery, which is described as an 'amoral' environment where the struggle for identity and validity begins at a young age, despite their struggles from the start of their lives to the end. Crane argues through realistic language that Maggie's family lives in a world of dread, rage, and evil where morality has no place. The socioeconomic issues of poverty and unemployment that Maggie's narrative highlights are also prevalent in that period in American history, which coincides with the industrial revolution and the Panic of 1893. Crane shows via Maggie that not all Americans, especially those in New York during the industrial revolution, lead happy lives. After then, a large number of people experience unemployment and ill health, which is made worse by the industrial revolution and the American Panic of 1893. These issues are comparable to societal issues that Maggie's parents and residents in her neighborhood dealt with. In the narrative, Maggie, her parents, and her neighbor are mostly jobless and without employment, which keeps them in poverty, mirroring the situation of the majority of Americans at the time.

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