

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS
(A STORY OF NEW YORK)

by Johnston Smith (1893)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

“A Remarkable Book.”
Port Jervis Union, March
 3, 1893, p. 3

The *Union* has been favored with a copy of a recently published novel entitled, “Maggie, a Girl of the Streets,” by Stephen Crane of New York city. The writer is a son of the late Rev. J. T. Crane and a brother of Judge Wm. H. Crane, which facts, apart from the merits of the publication, will invest it with a certain degree of local interest.

The plot is laid in the slums and dives of the great metropolis and the characters depicted are all, without exception, creatures of the slums. The evident object of the writer is to show the tremendous influence of environment on the human character and destiny. Maggie, the heroine, or central figure of the tale, grows up under surroundings which repress all good impulses, stunt the moral growth and render it inevitable that she should become what she eventually did, a creature of the streets. The pathos of her sad story will be deeply felt by all susceptible persons who read the book.

The slum life of New York city is treated with the frank fidelity of the realist, and while the unco guid [*sic*] and ultra pious may be shocked by the freedom of his descriptions and the language in which the dialogues are carried on, sensible people will read the book in the spirit in which it was written and will derive therefrom the moral lesson which it is the author’s aim to inculcate.

The literary merits of the work are considerable.

The author, although scarcely yet out of his teens, is the master of a vigorous style and uses the English language

with precision, force and fluency. He has humor, originality and a wonderful power of depicting life as he sees it. He has a positive genius for description and great skill in the analysis of human character and motive.

The dialect of the New York slums, which is reproduced in this volume with absolute accuracy, is, we take it, something new in literature. It is certainly as legitimate a subject of literary and artistic treatment as the dialect of the Georgia negro or Tennessee mountaineer and even more interesting to the average New Yorker.

The volume before us is a very clever and most creditable achievement for so young a man and we congratulate the author most heartily on the success of his first attempt at book making.

John D. Barry. Letter to
 Stephen Crane. March
 22, 1893

Thank you very much for sending me your book. It reached me on my return after an absence of several days from the city. Otherwise, I should have acknowledged it sooner. I have read it with the deepest interest. It is pitilessly real and it produced its effect upon me—the effect, I presume, that you wished to produce, a kind of horror. To be frank with you, I doubt if such literature is good: it closely approaches the morbid and the morbid is always dangerous. Such a theme as yours, in my judgment, ought not to be treated so brutally—pardon the word—as you have treated it: you have painted too black a picture, with no light whatever to your shade. I know one might say that the truth was black and that you tried to describe it just as it was;

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

but, one ought always to bear in mind that literature is an art, that effect, the effect upon the reader, must always be kept in view by the artist and as soon as that effect approaches the morbid, the unhealthful, the art becomes diseased. It is the taint in the peach. I really believe that the lesson of your story is good, but I believe, too, that you have driven that lesson too hard. There must be moderation even in well-doing; excess of enthusiasm in reform is apt to be dangerous. The mere brooding upon evil conditions, especially those concerned with the relation of the sexes, is the most dangerous and the most sentimental of all brooding, and I don't think that it often moves to action, to actual reform work. This, it seems to me, is just the kind of brooding your book inspires. I presume you want to make people think about the horrible things you describe. But of what avail is their thought unless it leads them to work? It would be better for them not to think about these things at all—if thinking ends as it began, for in itself it is unpleasant and in its tendency unhealthful.

Hamlin Garland. "An Ambitious French Novel and a Modest American Story." *Arena* 8 (June 1893), pp. xi–xii

This is of more interest to me, both because it is the work of a young man, and also because it is a work of astonishingly good style. It deals with poverty and vice and crime also, but it does so, not out of curiosity, not out of salaciousness, but because of a distinct art impulse,

the desire to utter in truthful phrase a certain rebellious cry. It is the voice of the slums. It is not written by a dilettante; it is written by one who has lived the life. The young author, Stephen Crane, is a native of the city, and has grown up in the very scenes he describes. His book is the most truthful and unhackneyed study of the slums I have yet read, fragment though it is. It is pictorial, graphic, terrible in its directness. It has no conventional phrases. It gives the dialect of the slums as I have never before seen it written—crisp, direct, terse. It is another locality finding voice.

It is important because it voices the blind rebellion of Rum Alley and Devil's Row. It creates the atmosphere of the jungles, where vice festers and crime passes gloomily by, where outlawed human nature rebels against God and man.

The story fails of rounded completeness. It is only a fragment. It is typical only of the worst elements of the alley. The author should delineate the families living on the next street, who live lives of heroic purity and hopeless hardship.

The dictum is amazingly simple and fine for so young a writer. Some of the words illuminate like flashes of light. Mr. Crane is only twenty-one years of age, and yet he has met and grappled with the actualities of the street in almost unequalled grace and strength. With such a *technique* already at command, with life mainly *before him*, Stephen Crane is to be henceforth reckoned with. "Maggie" should be put beside "Van Bibber"; to see the extremes of New York as stated by two young men. Mr. Crane need not fear comparisons so far as *technique* goes, and Mr. Davis will need to step forward right briskly or he may be overtaken by a man who impresses the reader with a sense of almost unlimited resource.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Edward Marshall. "A
Great American Writer."
Philadelphia Press, April
15, 1894, p. 27

[Quotes William Dean Howells:]

There is another whom I have great hopes of. His name is Stephen Crane, and he is very young, but he promises splendid things. He has written one novel so far—*Maggie*. I think that as a study of East Side life in New York *Maggie* is a wonderful book. There is so much realism of a certain kind in it that we might not like to have it lying on our parlor tables, but I hope that the time will come when any book can safely tell the truth as completely as *Maggie* does.

Stephen Crane, the young writer whom Mr. Howells praises in such an unusual manner, is still in the very early twenties and wrote *Maggie* several years ago. The little book, which is sold by the Arena Company of Boston, is the story of the life and death of a girl of the tenements. It aims at exact truth in painting an unpleasant side of life, and approaches nearer to realizing it than any other book written by an American ever has.

"Stephen Crane's
'Maggie.'" *New York
Press*, April 15, 1894,
part 3, p. 2

"Maggie, a Girl of the Streets," Stephen Crane's book, to which Mr. W. D. How-

ells pays such an astonishing tribute in the interview published in another part of this paper, is a study of tenement house life in this city. It tells two stories—those of a brother and sister. It begins in this way

[Quotes from "A very little boy stood on a heap of gravel" to "the fight had changed to a blasphemous chatter."]

After this the boy's father comes and takes him home. They meet Maggie, then 10 years old, on the way. The home life of this tenement house family is painted in this way:

[Quotes "Finally the procession plunged into one of the grewsome doorways" to "Eh, Gawd, child, what is it dis time? Is yer fader beatin' yer mudder, or yer mudder beatin' yer fader?"]

Such is the environment which Mr. Crane gives the brother and Maggie. It is from it that she goes out to become "a girl of the streets." He tells his story—or, rather, makes his study—with merciless accuracy. There is unquestionably truth in it, the kind of truth that no American has ever had the courage (or is it bravado?) to put between book covers before. It is a question if such brutalities are wholly acceptable in literature. Perhaps, as Mr. Howells says they will be before long. Perhaps there will always be certain phases of our life which we will not want to have woven with entire realism into our reading matter.

This writer, however, deserves praise for one thing, surely. He has not failed to touch vice in his book where he has found it in real life; but he has not gilded it. He has painted it as it is; he has not made it clandestinely attractive. In this he rises far above such other Americans—Edgar Fawcett and Edgar Saltus, notably—as have endeavoured to gain recognition in somewhat similar fields.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Throughout the book the quaint and graphic descriptive powers of the young author are shown as strongly as in the portions quoted. Whether or not we can be entertained by the book, it certainly must command our respect. "Maggie" is published by the Arena Company of Boston.

It is interesting to note that in next Sunday's Press Mr. Crane will describe the experience of a student of human nature among the tramps in Bowery lodging houses, under the heading of "An Experiment in Misery." This will be followed the next week by the same student's observations among people of the other social extreme—"An Experiment in Luxury."

"Holland" [Elisha J. Edwards]. "Realism and a Realist." *Philadelphia Press*, April 22, 1894, p. 5

In the interesting interview with Mr. William D. Howells, published in "The Press" last Sunday, there appeared a word of unusual commendation from Mr. Howells for the work of an author whom he called Stephen Crane. It is unusual because Mr. Howells, since his commendation of Mr. Howe and his story, "A Story of a Country Town," has been careful of his favoring criticism. Of course, the praise of Mr. Howells for Mr. Crane caused quick interest to be awakened in the personality of that author. Howells praised him for his realism, approaching, as he told a friend, even that of Tolstoi. He had found it in a little book descriptive of a certain

phase of miserable life in New York city, a book certainly that no one except its publisher and perhaps a score of others had ever seen.

The realism of Mr. Crane as it is done in that book is certainly cold, awful, brutal realism, and it reveals a power which when the author has learned of experience and has disciplined his artistic sense may give us something that may be compared to Tolstoi with respect to art as well as realism. But it is possible to tell a story of realism quite as suggestive and not so shocking as that one told in Mr. Crane's book, and it is a realism in which he had an unconscious part.

Stephen Crane was not long ago in a certain office in New York where the tools are those of literature and journalism. The cases upon the walls contain dusty and dog-eared manuscripts. The desks were littered in charming confusion with proof slips, sheets of copy daubed here and there with the carelessly thrown, unwiped pen. Cigarette stubs were on the floor and a dismal bell over an editor's desk jingled with the peremptory resonance of a call from the composing room beyond.

Stephen Crane stood in the middle of that room as odd and plaintive appearing a specimen of eager humanity as has ever been there. He seemed to have withered so that all the vitality of his body was concentrated in his head. He was a slender, sad-eyed slip of a youth, looking around the room with yearning glances of his eyes as though he would like to find a place where he could deposit the manuscript. He looked like one who had been fed for months on crackers and milk, as very likely was the fact since he had starved himself in order to get together money enough to publish at his own expense, every publisher having rejected it, the very book which Mr. Howells has praised.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

At last turning to a man of authority who sat before a desk and who did not even look up when Crane spoke to him, the youth said in a voice in which there was the note of despair: "Well, I am going to chuck the whole thing," and he pulled a listless hand out of his pocket and let it deliver an impulsive gesture, as though he was casting something away from him.

"What do you mean by that?" said the busy man.

"Oh, I have worked two years, living with tramps in the tenements on the East Side so that I could get to know those people as they are, and what is the use? In all that time I have received only \$25 for my work. I can't starve even to carry on this work, and I'm going home to my brother in New Jersey and perhaps learn the boot and shoe trade."

"I am sorry," said the busy man, and then Crane wheeled about and walked away with the set of a man in whose blood there was not a particle of the vitality which comes from good beef or mutton. He went out and strolled down Broadway, far more miserable than any of the sorry creatures whom he has been studying because he was conscious of his misery. He had failed in an ambition, whereas they had no ambition.

A friendly hand was laid upon his shoulder and he started as though it was the clutch of a policeman. Then he saw that there was greeting in the touch and the smile.

"Crane," said his friend, "what do you think? William D. Howells has read your book, and he says it's great."

"Eh?" said the youth, and it seemed to the friend as though a sort of blur came over his eyes.

"I say that Howells has read your book, and he compares you with Tolstoi, and he is going to say so in print." It came upon that half-starved youth with such sudden force that he received it like a blow. If

he had been told that Howells had condemned the book he might have heaved a sigh. He seemed dazed. He looked around like a man who did not know where he was. He gulped something down his throat, grinned like a woman in hysterics, and then went off to take up his vocation again.

The story must have impressed Howells only because of the brutal force of the blunt description which the author revealed. It is faithful; no newspaper man in New York, no one who is familiar with the life of the tenements, can deny the accuracy of the picture, but it is awful, just as life there is awful. And the wonder is that having gone so far in his realism Crane did not dare to go—as Tolstoi did and as Victor Hugo once did in his "Les Misérables"—clear over the line. Quite as realistic pictures, however, have been occasionally painted by some of the reporters for the newspapers, but they have done it without any sense of art or vocation—but simply as an incident in the reporting of some great tragedy or other important happening in those parts of the city.

Crane, however, had another triumph recently. There was a gathering at a resort of high culture at which were several authors who had promised to read from their unpublished manuscripts. Mrs. Burnett was one; Gilbert Parker was another, and perhaps there were six or seven more. One of those readers, turning from his own "uncut leaves," took up another manuscript. It contained several poems which were not poems by the laws of prosody, having no metrical arrangement, but being of exquisite rhythmic quality, something perhaps of the character and construction which distinguished the poems of Walt Whitman. The reading of these poems by Mr. John T. Barry created something of excitement and interest.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

“Chelifer” [Rupert Hughes]. “The Justification of Slum Stories.” *Godey’s Magazine* 132 (October 1895), pp. 431–432

But probably the strongest piece of slum writing we have is “Maggie,” by Mr. Stephen Crane, which was published some years ago with a pen-name for the writer and no name at all for the publishers. But merit will out, and the unclaimed foundling attracted no little attention, though by no means as much as it deserves. The keenness of the wit, the minuteness of the observation, and the bitterness of the cynicism resemble Morrison’s work. The foredoomed fall of a well-meaning girl reared in an environment of drunkenness and grime is told with great humanity and

fearless art, and there is a fine use of contrast in the conclusion of the work, where the brutal mother in drunken sentimentality is persuaded with difficulty to “forgive” the dead girl whom she compelled to a harsh fate by the barren cruelty of home-life.

Checklist of Additional Reviews

New York Recorder. 1894? Scrapbooks, Stephen Crane Collection, Columbia University.

E. J. Edwards. “Uncut Leaves,” American Press Association Release. May 1, 1894.

William Dean Howells. “Life and Letters.” *Harper’s Weekly* 39 (June 8, 1895), p. 533.

“Stephen Crane’s ‘Maggie.’” *New York Commercial Advertiser*, April 11, 1896, p. 17.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE BLACK RIDERS AND OTHER LINES

Boston: Copeland & Day 1895

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

“Writers and Books.”
New York Recorder,
 March 25, 1894, p. 6

Mr. Stephen Crane, whose first novel, “Maggie,” won high praise from prominent authors last year, and whose second story was mentioned in *The Recorder* a few weeks ago, has written a volume of poems which will probably create considerable discussion when it is published. The poems are uncompromisingly realistic, and in their composition the author has ignored the laws of form. He is only 22 years of age and intensely devoted to realism.

Harry Thurston Peck.
 “Some Recent Volumes
 of Verse.” *Bookman* 1
 (May 1895), p. 254

Mr. Stephen Crane is the Aubrey Beardsley of poetry. When one first takes up his little book of verse and notes the quite too Beardsleyesque splash of black upon its staring white boards, and then on opening it discovers that the “lines” are printed wholly in capitals, and that they are unrhymed and destitute of what most poets regard as rhythm, the general impression is of a writer who is bidding for renown wholly on the basis of his eccentricity. But just as Mr. Beardsley with all his absurdities is none the less a master of black and white, so Mr. Crane is a true poet whose verse, long after the eccentricity of its form has worn off, fascinates us

and forbids us to lay the volume down until the last line has been read. Even in the most fantastic of his conceits there are readily to be found a thought and a meaning. In fact, if Walt Whitman had been caught young and subjected to æsthetic influences, it is likely that he would have mellowed his barbaric yawp to some such note as that which sounds in the poems that are now before us. A few examples of Mr. Crane’s manner may serve at once as an illustration and as a diversion to those who have not yet made his acquaintance. Mr. Crane will perhaps pardon us if we neglect to display his lines in the capital letters that he appears to love.

The following is a fair specimen of Mr. Crane’s treatment of things religious—or as one might more truly say, of things dogmatic:

Two or three angels
 Came near to the earth.
 They saw a fat church.
 Little black streams of people
 Came and went in continually.
 And the angels were puzzled
 To know why the people went thus,
 And why they stayed so long within.

Here is a good instance of his allegorical way of giving new expression to philosophical truths or truisms:

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
 Round and round they sped.
 I was disturbed at this;
 I accosted the man.
 “It is futile,” I said,
 “You can never—”
 “You lie,” he cried,
 And ran on.

Very few of his poems sound the note of love; and when they do, there is always something gloomy or unhappy either in the main thought or in the accompanying suggestions. This short poem is sufficiently typical of the rest:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-38265-6 - Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by George Monteiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Should the wide world roll away,
 Leaving black terror,
 Limitless night,
 Nor God, nor man, nor place to stand
 Would be to me essential,
 If thou and thy white arms were there,
 And the fall to doom a long way.

Here is an example of his weirdness:

Many red devils ran from my heart,
 And out upon the page.
 They were so tiny
 The pen could mash them,
 And many struggled in the ink.
 It was strange to write in this red muck
 Of things from my heart.

On the whole, Mr. Crane's work has traces of *Entartung*, but he is by no means a decadent, but rather a bold—sometimes too bold—original, and powerful writer of eccentric verse, skeptical, pessimistic, often cynical; and one who stimulates thought because he himself thinks. It is no exaggeration to say that the small volume that bears his name is the most notable contribution to literature to which the present year has given birth.

“An American Symbolist.” *New York Recorder*, May 5, 1895, p. 39

Mr. Stephen Crane is an extremely young man who writes beautiful prose, when he is content to do so, and who has written and published, through Copeland & Day of Boston, a strange book, which is neither prose nor verse, but a series of Maeterlinckian convulsions of symbolism, printed all in capital letters and mercifully

condensed within limits of commendable brevity. The following extract will give some idea both of Mr. Crane's literary method and of the appearance upon the printed page of the selections printed in “The Black Riders, and Other Lines”:

MANY RED DEVILS RAN FROM
 MY HEART
 AND OUT UPON THE PAGE,
 THEY WERE SO TINY
 THE PEN COULD MASH THEM.
 AND MANY STRUGGLED IN THE
 INK.
 IT WAS STRANGE
 TO WRITE IN THIS RED MUCK
 OF THINGS FROM MY HEART.

Symbolism, and mainly the symbolic utterance of gloomy, cynical, pessimistic imaginings, is Mr. Crane's literary incubus. He says:

“If I should cast off this tattered coat and go free into the mighty sky; if I should find nothing there but a vast blue echoless, ignorant—what then?”

Printed thus as a paragraph of ordinary prose, this is a rather unprepossessing statement of agnostic doubts. The author can be far more ridiculous when he tries. As thus:

“IT WAS WRONG TO DO THIS,”
 SAID THE ANGEL.
 “YOU SHOULD LIVE LIKE A
 FLOWER,
 HOLDING MALICE LIKE A PUPPY
 WAGING WAR LIKE A LAMBKIN.”
 “NOT SO,” QUOTH THE MAN
 WHO HAD NO FEAR OF SPIRITS:
 “IT IS ONLY WRONG FOR
 ANGELS
 WHO CAN LIVE LIKE THE
 FLOWERS,
 HOLDING MALICE LIKE THE
 PUPPIES,
 WAGING WAR LIKE THE
 LAMBKINS.”