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Humanities

May 2017

Stephen Crane Essay

Stephen Crane was a prolific writer who helped establish realism as a literary force during the late 1800s. His writing brought the dark underbelly of American culture to the forefront and forced a radical realist perspective upon his readers. More specifically, Crane explored contemporary issues like poverty and alcoholism throughout his writing and his ideas reflected his experiences frequenting and documenting the slums of New York. A particularly pertinent issue to Crane was religion. Living in a religious family exposed Crane to religion at an early age and became aware of how religion affected and influenced the people around him. Crane routinely elicits religious notions during *The Dark Brown Dog*, a story about a child and his dog, and **Maggie: A Girl of the Streets**, a story about a young girl who is shaped by her surroundings. Throughout these two writings, Crane effectively illustrates the hypocrisy of the Christian dogma through the language of his characters, group mentalities, symbolism, and imagery.

The language of Crane's characters often reveals a false sense of piety and a disregard for the principles of proper Christian behavior. The word "hell" is spoken repeatedly throughout **Maggie** and excluding Maggie herself, almost all the characters use it. The affinity with which the characters use the word indicates a sentiment that emphasizes a hellish world and an embrace of chaos. Such sentiments run contrary to classic Christian beliefs, which teach an embrace of love and tolerance. However, despite the Church's wishes, it is much easier for the characters to accept their hell. Not only do the average street dwellers emphasize hell over more peaceful thoughts, but also the preacher in the church Jimmie goes to remarks upon "damnation" and hellfire rather than the benefits awaiting the saved in heaven.

Furthermore, many characters throughout **Maggie**, such as Mary, have a wavering attachment to Christianity but blatantly use God's name in vain, casually remarking "For God's sake." Crane uses this casual disrespect to subtly reveal the characters' contempt for the chicanery of religion. Ultimately, the characters in Crane's novella use language that exposes the deceitful nature of Christianity and the disconnect between true Christian behavior and reality.

Group mentality is shown throughout **Maggie** specifically as a stand-in for Christian associations to illuminate their self-righteous and exclusive nature. The "us vs them" nature of the Devil's Row children, who yelled "...notes of joy like songs of triumphant savagery" harkens to the celebration of antipathy and discrimination displayed by Christian culture throughout history. Likewise, Crane leads the reader to draw the conclusion between Christian exclusionism and class warfare through the thoughts of Jimmie, Maggie's brother. Jimmie hates the upper class, believing that "...his order [of plebeians are] kings", but "above all things he despised obvious Christians." Herein Crane equates the dynamics of class warfare to the separatism and elitism of Christians, an obvious contrast with the supposedly humble creeds of Christianity that command humility and loving thy neighbor. Overall, the cliques and groups of **Maggie** insinuate an exclusive and sanctimonious behavior that parallels the same behavior ingrained in Christian associations.

Crane uses symbols to excoriate Christianity as a false means of salvation and as a hypocritical doctrine. For example, the dog in Crane's *A Dark Brown Dog* is a means of escape for the young child that befriends the dog. This dog epitomizes religious escapism, not only being "...ever sympathetic", but also having "perfect faith." Furthermore, the dog constantly offers "...small prayer[s] to the child." However, despite this firm loyalty, the dog is unable to protect the child and ends up dying, not as a martyr, but as a symbol of the failure of Christianity to protect its most vital, like the young child and the poor in **Maggie**. Equivalently, Maggie encounters a man who typifies God and Christianity and decides to accost him for help, but does not receive any help or protection. Despite his apparent kindness, the

man "...saved his respectability by a vigorous side-step. He did not risk it to save a soul." This man symbolizes how Christians value their own dignity over the most important virtues of their own religion, ergo turning a blind eye to those they are most obliged to aid. Through these symbols, Crane indicts Christianity and brings to light the failure of its adherents to live up to its idyllic doctrines.

Images of religion are omnipresent throughout **Maggie** and serve to point out the hypocrisy of Christianity. The devil and red, images representative of hell, are unmistakably evident in emotional and violent scenes. Jimmie experiences a hellish vision when being hailed with "...great, crimson oaths" by the children of Devil's Row, an obvious image of devilry. This image argues that the world is dominated not the beauty of God's creation, but instead by the inherent evil in man and the turmoil inscribed within the human experience. Another example of imagery with religious undertones is the fight between Pete and Jimmie, wherein "blows left crimson blotches upon pale skin... [Jimmie fought] with the face of a sacrificial priest." Crane uses the image of a sacrificial priest to relate violence to religion. On a metaphorical level, this analogy reveals how Christianity feeds off the lower classes, using the poor as fodder for larger goals. This idea establishes Christianity as a pretense for immoral and selfish gain, the antithesis of Christian principles. Hence, Crane's imagery presents a compelling case for realizing the insincere pretenses of Christianity.

Crane forcefully epitomizes Christianity as a hypocritical and fraudulent system of beliefs through the language of his characters, group mentalities, symbolism, and imagery. Using these techniques, Crane has managed to create disturbingly relevant ideas throughout his writing of *A Dark Brown Dog* and **Maggie** that relate religion to several societal and cultural issues. Christianity, in Crane's view, is a biased system that is meant to represent a unified humanity but instead promotes selfish security, a hill upon which to look down upon the poor and destitute. In contemporary US society, this bias is seen in the government, where a startlingly majority of representatives are white and Christian. Additionally, many of these representatives do not support welfare or social programs, a puzzling

incongruity with the Christian values they often espouse. This incongruity therefore outlines Christianity as a factor behind class warfare and second-class citizenship. The ascension of Donald Trump has further exacerbated the disparity between Christianity and other religions, particularly Islam. Similarly, many theocratic or partially theocratic governments, especially those in the Middle East, use religion as a means of control and are apt to interpret their religion in a way favorable to the elites of society. In sum, religion has as much potential for deceit and misuse as it does for good.