Emotional Attachments, a Lack Thereof, and Potential Suicide

Victims of abuse always suffer from some sort of emotional attachment issues. They may have developed the issue because of the abuse, or they may have had the issue before and it escalated during abuse. It gets to the point where that kind of life is comforting in a sick and twisted way. In Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Maggie finds a sort of comfort in staying with her abusive family and not changing who she was; it is easier for her to deal with the abuse than to get away from them and lose what little support they could offer. She tries to stand up for herself and for her little brothers, but in the end is not successful.

On page four, after Jimmie comes home from his street fight, Maggie “upbraided him” for always fighting. She says, “‘yeh knows it puts mudder out when yehs come home half dead, an’ it’s like we’ll all get a poundin’.’” It sounds like she’s trying to keep her brother out of trouble and remind him that their mom doesn’t like it when he fights; at the same time, she’s just trying to save herself and her brothers from another beating. She can’t seem to separate discipline from protection. She’s afraid of both but not strong enough to deal with either of them. Even if she did have the strength to deal with it she wouldn’t know how to.

Maggie had nowhere from which to draw strength to deal with it. Abby Stein, a writer for The Journal of Psychohistory, presents an interesting correlation between abuse and the loss of attachment in her article “From Their Cradle to Your Grave: How Child Abuse and Dissociation Drive Violent Crime”. Stein puts children into their own class. Within that class they are
dependent on their parents, or guardians, emotionally and economically. Therefore, children who suffer from abuse are put in a difficult situation where they have to decide what is best for them. Maggie didn’t really have much of a choice. Her family neither had money nor expression of love and emotion. The victims of child abuse “are utterly alone, left to process their tenor and pain [in] complete isolation” (Stein). Maggie didn’t have to suffer completely alone because she had her siblings, yet they suffered just as much as she did. Each child is forced to choose between merging “with the abusing parent or [losing] the only [attachment] you have ever had” (Stein). Maggie’s family would have wanted her to “merge” with her mother and live with the abuse, but she struggled with the choice to emotionally detach herself completely from them or to stay. Maggie does not have the strength to protect herself emotionally.

Just as Maggie wasn’t strong enough to separate discipline from protection, she wasn’t strong enough to not get walked all over. Maggie was even too weak to protect herself from an abusive relationship with Pete. When Pete saw Nellie at the bar and began talking with her, Maggie didn’t try to introduce herself or insist that Pete introduce her. She just sat there and let the two of them talk about her as if she wasn’t even there. “Maggie sat still, unable to formulate an intelligent sentence upon the conversation and painfully aware of it” (Crane 40). Maggie knows that she should say or do something, but she’s too weak to stand up for herself and expect to be treated like she deserves.

Rather than kicking Pete to the curb, her weaknesses again take over and she succumbs to his charm. Maggie decides to leave with Pete and not come back home. It seems like she’s realized how horrible it is at home and wants to change her life for the better. Just before she goes Pete tells her that they’ll have a great time together. Her mother tells her that she’s “‘gone
After Pete has “ruined” Maggie, he is at a bar where he runs into Nell. As Pete is thinking about the previous events with Maggie and her family, Nellie refers to him as her “cloud-compelling Pete” (Crane 45). George T. Novotny, author of “Crane’s Maggie, a Girl of the Streets”, compares Pete’s character with that of Jove, or Zeus, in *The Iliad*. Novotny states that the use of the term “cloud-compelling” is referencing “Jovian attributes of ‘mover-and-shaker’ that he clearly does not possess” (226). This is exactly why Maggie was drawn to Pete in the first place. He appears to be quite powerful and able to help her leave her family behind. Novotny suggests that “by figuratively casting Pete in the role of Jove, Crane may well be drawing on a background in the classics to hint to the reader that Maggie’s fate is somewhat dependant on the actions of the ‘cloud-compellers’” (227). Again, Maggie’s fate of whether she leaves her family or not, appears to be completely dependent on Pete’s “cloud-compelling” attributes.

As evidence of Pete’s abusive behavior to Maggie, Joseph X. Brennan, author of “Ironic and Symbolic Structure in Crane’s *Maggie*”, explains Pete’s switch from a feeling of apprehension to relief by looking at the irony within the word *respectability*. The word *respectability* is used six times throughout chapter sixteen. Brennan states that each time the word is used it is done with “broadening implications and heightened ironic effect” (305). As Maggie enters the bar, Pete “beckoned to her hurriedly” and quickly tried to return to his “position behind the bar and to the atmosphere of respectability upon which the proprietor insisted” (Crane 46). This act of quickly trying to hide the fact that Maggie was in the bar shows the little respect Pete has for her. Pete doesn’t actually care about the bar’s respectability; he cares only about his own (Brennan 305). At the end of the chapter, Maggie is leaving because of
Pete’s reaction to her. “He slammed the door furiously and returned, with an air of relief, to his respectability” (Crane 47). Again Pete is only concerned about his “respectability” and therefore exemplifies the misuse of Crane’s term (Brennan 305). Brennan suggests that “Crane reduces respectability to a hypocritical sham, a convenient justification for cruelty, irresponsibility, and indifference” (305). Pete’s true character is shown in this chapter and proves that he abused Maggie emotionally thereby leaving her on the street with nowhere to turn but back to her family.

Maggie returns home soon after things don’t work out with Pete and isn’t greeted very warmly. Her mother seems to be rejoicing the fact that her daughter has returned while mocking her at the same time. “‘Ha, ha, ha,’ bellowed the mother. ‘Ain’ she purty? Lookut her . . .’ ‘Oh, she’s jes’ dessame as she ever was, ain’ she? She’s her mudder’s purty darlin’ yit, ain’ she?’” (Crane 44). Her mother gets upset when Jimmie doesn’t want to see her, yet she seems quite thrilled that Maggie has come home to suffer some more. She even calls Maggie her “purty darlin””. She makes Maggie feel like she’s worth something and then continues to abuse her.

At the end of the seventeenth chapter Maggie is nearing the end of her rope. She meets “a ragged being with shifting, bloodshot eyes and grimey hands” (Crane 49). Readers often “infer” that Maggie commits suicide shortly after meeting this being (Salemi 58). It is thought that she commits suicide because she is “despondent over her blighted hopes and her degradation” (Salemi 58). Maggie’s suicide is speculative, yet the second to last paragraph of the chapter leads many to believe the suspected suicide. The paragraph in Crane’s story reads:

When almost to the river the girl saw a great figure. On going forward she perceived it to be a huge fat man in torn and greasy garments. His grey hair straggled down over his forehead. His small, bleared eyes, sparkling from amidst great rolls of red fat, swept
eagerly over the girl’s upturned face. He laughed, his brown, disordered teeth gleaming under a grey, grizzled moustache from which beer-drops dripped. His whole body gently quivered and shook like that of a dead jelly fish. Chuckling and leering, he followed the girl of the crimson legions. (49-50)

Joseph S. Salemi, a writer for *ANQ*, writes in his article, “Down a Steep Place into the Sea: Suicide in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*”:

Extra-textual factors have reinforced this assumption. It was a commonplace of reformist literature that prostitutes came to their end by committing suicide in the river. Even if he did not wish to specify the exact mode of Maggie’s death, Crane was well aware of the stereotypical resonances that the scene of a street girl at the river’s edge would evoke in his readers. (58)

Salemi continues to say that there are signs of her suicide, by drowning, in the paragraph. He says, while using R.W. Stallman’s idea, that the image of the “dead jelly fish” representing the large man “prepares the reader for Maggie’s death” (Salemi 59). Yet, Salemi states that Maggie’s suicide, and Crane’s placement of this paragraph, have to do with the “evil character” of the man. Maggie’s loss of self-respect, as a result of abuse, shows here because no signs are given that she attempted to get away from the man or to protect herself.

The words “crimson legions” is also evidence of this man’s evil nature. In Salemi’s article he analyzes the use and meaning of this phrase:

This phrase gives us the key to unlock the meaning of the whole paragraph[.] Most obviously, the words refer to Maggie’s being a prostitute among the countless “legions” of others who plied their trade in the Bowery. In that “[s]ense, they are no more than the variant of ‘painted cohorts[’]” which Crane mentions earlier in the chapter[.] (60)
Salemi discusses the relation between the “crimson legions” and that of the legions from the writings of the Apostle Mark in the Bible. Looking at the “fat man” as the image of the pig, he compares and contrasts the similarities and difference between the two stories. Instead of the legions moving from the possessed man into the swine as in the biblical story, the “demons go from the swine . . . into the ‘crimson legions’” (Salemi 61). As a result of abuse from Maggie’s family and from Pete, she has nowhere else to turn, she thinks, to prostitution and therefore becoming a “legion”.

Maggie remains the victim of her abusive family no matter how hard she tries to get away. Her emotional attachment to her family is what led her to her fate because she never had the guts, or the ability, to move out of her mother’s home for good and make a better life for herself. She struggled with her family’s influence when she ran away from home the first time. In Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, emotional abuse and the lack of an attachment to family and friends result in Maggie’s death and presumed suicide. People who are victims of abuse try to overcome their past and make the necessary steps to improve their life instead of running away from it. It follows them until they decide to make it stop. Maggie didn’t have that kind of strength, or will power, and thought that running away from her family would make things better. Ultimately, life and death became more difficult for Maggie.
Works Cited


