Working Girls: The Commodific of Female Sexuality in Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and Truman Capote's Breakfast at Tiffany's

Rodger Moran

At first sight Stephen Crane's "Maggie" and Truman Capote's "Breakfast at Tiffany's" hardly seem comparable. Crane documents New York City tenement life at the turn of the 20th century, deterministically linking crowds, drink, and ignorance with the limited options of a pretty girl, who lets a spark of romance lure her to seduction, and ultimately to prostitution. Crane can be wistful about Maggie's thoughts, but he never allows any doubt as to her fate. Capote's heroine, by contrast, appears never to cede control of her situation, and the gritty facts of Holly Golightly's desperate childhood, including a marriage at fourteen, only gradually emerge from the glamorous mist that she generates about her. In some sense a surrogate for the ambitious writer himself, Capote's Holly eventually provokes us to question the cost of her success, and to doubt its substance.

- Dr. Bruce Greenfield

Stephen Crane and Truman Capote focus on very different elements of New York society. Crane's novella, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, centers on a young woman longing to escape the squalor of the Bowery tenement who is eventually forced into prostitution as a means of survival. Capote's protagonist, however, willingly enters the profession and uses it to her advantage. Maggie traverses the Bowery tenement while Holly frolics among the elite of New York City. Yet despite the obvious differences between the two novellas, they share a common theme: the commodification of female sexuality as a means social elevation. While their methods differ, both Maggie Johnson and Holly Golightly use their sexuality as a tool for social advancement. These two novellas ultimately come down to the ways Crane and Capote present their characters. Because Maggie rests her hopes for a better life on a man who eventually lets her down, the reader reacts to her and her situation with a certain sense of pathos. The same cannot be said of our response to Capote's protagonist: through Holly, the reader experiences a sense of empowerment because of her reliance on no one, and her ability to be the architect of her own environment. While both Maggie and Holly attempt to use their sexuality to advance their social standing, the opposing reactions inspired by their efforts highlight both the fundamental differences between the two women and the social climates in which their creators were writing.

Maggie Johnson longs to escape the confines of the Bowery tenement. Although she "blossomed in a mud puddle" (Crane 18), it is clear that Maggie desires a life beyond the borders of the Bowery. This desire is apparent throughout Crane's novella, particularly when Pete takes Maggie to "deh show". Crane's use of language allows the reader to experience the same sense of wonder that befalls Maggie:

> An orchestra of yellow silk women and bald-headed men on an elevated stage near the centre of a great green-hued hall, played a popular waltz…Little boys, in the costumes of French chefs, paraded up and down the irregular aisles vending fancy cakes [while] clouds of tobacco smoke rolled and wavered high in the air about the dull gilt of the chandeliers. (25)

Crane's description conjures images of an overwhelming sensory experience. The sights, sounds, and smells are an exciting and dramatic change from the squalor of the Bowery that Maggie is accustomed to. It is clear she longs to escape from her meagre existence once she is exposed to what exist beyond the boundaries of the Bowery.

After going to "deh show," (24) we see a change in Maggie. She becomes more concerned with presenting herself in a manner reminiscent of the New York that exists outside the Bowery. Crane notes, "as thoughts of Pete came to Maggie's mind, she began to have an intense dislike for all of her dresses [. . . and how] she began to note, with more interest, the well-dressed women she met on the avenues" (29). But this interest in presenting herself in a manner above her current social standing began prior to her first date with Pete. At their first meeting, Maggie is quite taken by Pete's appearance:

> He sat on a table…and dangled his checked legs with an enticing nonchalance. His hair was curled down over his forehead in an oiled bang…His blue double-breasted coat, edged with black braid, buttoned close to a red puff tie, and his patent-leather shoes, looked like murder-fitted weapons…Maggie thought he must be a very elegant and graceful bartender. (Crane 20)

In Pete, Maggie sees a person that represents what she interprets as the elegance and gracefulness of New York. With his fancy clothing and ability to show Maggie a world that she had only dreamed of before, she feels the need to become closer to him. Pete is, after all, the conduit through which Maggie can gain access to the world outside the Bowery. Through him, she can become one of those "well-dressed women she met on the avenues".

The reader first sees her aspirations for social elevation when, after first meeting Pete, Maggie attempts to makeover her squalid apartment in an effort to impress her would-be knight:

> Turning, Maggie contemplated the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home. A clock, in a splintered and battered oblong box of varnished wood, she suddenly regarded as an abomination…Some faint attempts she had made with blue ribbon, to freshen the appearance of a dingy curtain, she now saw to be piteous. (23)

This is one of the first moments in Crane's novella in which the reader sees Maggie ashamed of her current situation. This shame springs "suddenly" after she meets Pete and realizes that he represents her escape from her family. Maggie goes a step further though and attempts to remake her home into a place worthy of Pete's presence. She spends her money "in the purchase of flowered cretonne for a lambrequin" (Crane 23) and in doing so creates "a debased parody of the cluttered Victorian parlor [sic], with its plush fabrics, upholstered furniture, and copious bric-a-brac" (Lawson 599). Clearly, Maggie wishes to remake her home and herself in the image of a higher social class.

If there remains doubt as to whether Maggie aspires to elevate her social standing, Crane puts it to rest when he describes Maggie's thoughts following her and Pete's date:

> Maggie always departed with raised spirits from the showing places of the melodrama. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually surmounted the wealthy and wicked. The theatre made her think. She wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen … could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory (32).

The reader has seen how Maggie strives to remodel herself and her home in an attempt to elevate her own social standing. However, as a woman, Maggie is unable to accomplish this without the assistance of a man. Fortunately, she has such a man in her sights in the form of her "elegant and graceful bartender," a man who is admittedly "stuck on [her] shape" (22). While her efforts are not as overt as trading sex for money, it is clear she sees the advantages of a relationship with Pete. This is not to say that her affections for Pete are not genuine, but merely that she is cognisant of the economic and social benefits of the relationship. Ultimately, Maggie's hopes of escaping her situation are not realized. Pete does not turn out to be the knight Maggie hoped for and her family rejects her after they discover that Pete and Maggie have been intimate. Cast out of her home without Pete to rescue her, Maggie turns to prostitution. Where she once used her sexuality to advance her social standing, Maggie must now use it as a means for survival. However, it's not her use of sexuality as a means for social elevation that works against Maggie but rather her reliance on Pete as a facilitator. This reliance on a man to assist her social advancement is a major point of divergence between the heroines of Crane and Capote's novellas.

Like Maggie, Holly Golightly also looks to escape a less than desirable past and transcend her current social standing. Yet, unlike Crane's protagonist, Holly is portrayed as the architect of her own environment and existence. Halfway through Breakfast at Tiffany's, we learn the truth about Holly Golightly's – or Lulamae Barnes's – past through her estranged husband, Doc:

> 'Twas Nellie, my oldest girl, 'twas Nellie brought 'em into the house. She come to me one morning, and said: "Papa, I got two wild yunguns locked in the kitchen. I caught 'em outside stealing milk and turkey eggs." That was Lulamae and [her brother] Fred […] Story was: their mother died of the TB, and their papa done the same – and all the churren […] they been sent off to live with different mean people. (Capote 64-65)

Once we learn of her past, we can begin to see the parallels between Holly and Maggie Johnson. Both experienced a less than ideal childhood, and they both sought to transcend their pasts to improve their present circumstances. According to Doc, once he took Holly in and married her, her life changed dramatically: "We all doted on her. She didn't have to lift a finger, 'cept to eat a

piece of pie" (65). Like Maggie, Holly's perspective on life changed once she was exposed to the world outside her past borders. While Maggie's longing for a higher social standing peaked with her excursions with Pete to the playhouse, Holly's longings came from reading magazines. As Doc claims:

> We must've had a hunnerd dollars' worth of magazines come into that house. Ask me, that's what done it. Looking at show-off pictures. Reading dreams. That's what started her walking down the road. Every day she'd walk a little further: a mile, and come home. Two miles, and come home. One day she just kept on. (Capote 65-66)

There is no doubt that Holly's upbringing was difficult, her life with Doc and his four "churren" was not much better. Doc states that she wanted for nothing, but by leaving her life in rural Texas, Holly sought to reinvent and elevate herself to a place where life with Doc would never allow her to be: the highest social circles of New York City. She accomplishes this by using her sexuality to her advantage. While Maggie Johnson uses her sexuality as a tool for social advancement, and then later as a means of survival, the same cannot be said of Holly.

Through subtle references, it is made clear that Holly makes her living as a high-class call girl. The narrator mentions male visitors to Holly's apartment and Holly herself makes thinly-veiled references to her own occupation. When Holly buys the narrator an expensive birdcage for Christmas, he is concerned about the cost. Holly merely shrugs in response and says, "A few extra trips to the powder room" (57). Further references to Holly's career come when she tells the narrator that "any gent with the slightest chic will give you fifty for the girl's john, and I always ask for cab fare too, that's another fifty" (26).

The impression is given that Holly is a particularly sought after prostitute, especially among the upper echelon of New York City, and she uses this to advance her own cause of social elevation. Of all of the clients, Holly is most attentive to those of the greatest wealth. We need look no further than Rutherfurd "Rusty" Trawler as an example. The narrator tells us, Rusty was made "a millionaire, and a celebrity, all at the age of five" (37). The reason for Holly's attentiveness to those clients of hers with great fortunes is obvious: they offer her the greatest opportunity for social advancement. With the money she earns from prostitution, she is able to acquire the things associated with a higher social standing: designer clothing and the occasional trip to Tiffany's. In addition, Holly shares this fascination with the finer things in life with Maggie. Both women long for an escape from their ordinary lives, and both see the acquisition of expensive and elegant possessions—such as clothing—as the embodiment of that escape.

They both use sexuality with the same goal in mind, but our reactions to the two women and their means of social elevation greatly differ. There is a great sense of pathos felt for Maggie. This has a great deal to do with the way in which Crane presents his heroine. She is portrayed as a victim of her environment, a woman who is unable to escape the boundaries of the Bowery. Crane gives us hope for Maggie when she meets Pete, but these hopes are soon dashed when we realize that, although Maggie uses Pete to help her escape, he still uses her for sexual gratification. As a result, Maggie must turn to prostitution as a means of survival. Crane's

portrayal of a woman forced into prostitution is indicative of the cultural attitudes toward prostitution in America in the late nineteenth century: as the century came to a close, more of an emphasis was placed on social factors that caused prostitution, rather than the individual (Riegel 437). Maggie's plight is seen as a systemic problem, and an unavoidable one.

Holly, in contrast, is quite different. Capote portrays her as a woman empowered by her sexuality. Though she is a prostitute, she is nobody's victim. While Breakfast at Tiffany's was first published in 1958, the character of Holly Golightly is reminiscent of the "new woman" of the 1920s. This idea of the "new woman," or "flapper," was known for her command over her own sexuality (Held 236). And, if nothing else, Holly can certainly be said to have command over her own sexuality. Though she sells that sexuality, she does so on her own terms, to whomever she chooses. Crane and Capote portray their heroines very differently, and reactions to them are evidence of this. However, at their core, both Maggie and Holly commodify their sexuality with the intent of transforming their lives through social elevation. It is only the styles of the authors that make them different.

Works Cited

Capote, Truman. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. 1958. London: Lowe & Brydone Printers Ltd., 1964. Print.

Crane, Stephen. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and Other Short Fiction*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2006. Print.

Held, John. "Sweet Sexteen." *The American New Woman Revisited*: A Reader, 1894-1930. Ed. Martha H. Patterson. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2008 : 236-242. Print.

Lawson, Andrew. "Class Mimicry in Stephen Crane's City." *American Literary History* 16.4 (2004): 596-613. Print.

Riegel, Robert E. "Changing American Attitudes Toward Prostitution (1890-1920)." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29.3 (1968): 437-452. Print.