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Nature and the Metropolis: Naturalism in Stephen Crane's *City* and Jack London's *Wilderness*

Keywords

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**Nature and the Metropolis: Naturalism in
Stephen Crane's City and Jack London's Wilderness**

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The landscapes of the wilderness and the city are polar opposites. The wilderness consists of broad, open space that has not been altered by humanity. The city, conversely, is a place completely dominated by humanity and its machines. Despite these seemingly irreconcilable differences, Jack London's short story "In a Far Country" and Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* similarly portray the specific space allotted to the characters within the larger framework of their respective environments. Both works, set in the first years of the twentieth century and enveloped in the idealism of manifest destiny, portray characters that are confined to

severely limited spaces amid vast, rich landscapes. Their imprisonment is most obvious in their literal confinement within the physical space of their environment; however, the characters are also confined by social and ideological factors. Their confinement within particular spaces in their landscapes demonstrates a basic tenet of Naturalism, which is that the indifferent natural environment controls the characters.

The wilderness and the city are landscapes distinctive in form and structure. The landscape Jack London creates in his short story "In a Far Country" is a world in the extreme wilderness of arctic Alaska, a world often devoid of life, light, and movement. The high plateau of the interior Alaskan wilderness is open space, literally miles of untouched terrain where countless acres of barren tundra are preponderantly covered with snow and ice. New York City, on the other hand, as portrayed by Steven Crane in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, was a space dense with human and mechanical motion where urban growth, due to immigration, "reflected the new spatial order of the industrial city" (Mohl 36). The landscapes of the wilderness and the city are different in form

and structure; however, they share similar characteristics in the way they represent possibilities and potential for the characters. Although London's and Crane's characters are confined to limited spaces, the characters find themselves in the context of immense landscapes, which are attractive because they represent the possibility of escalating physical, social, and economic mobility.

Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* revolves around the Johnsons, a family living in New York City in the late nineteenth century. It is a tale of survival in the city's slums, which stand in contrast to the profusion of cultural, architectural, industrial, and economic wealth also to be found in the city. Even though Crane's narrator focuses primarily on tenement neighborhoods, he is conscious of the potential opportunities in the city. Alluding to this wide, prosperous landscape, Crane's narrator observes "an atmosphere of pleasure and prosperity" (51) as "(a)n endless procession wended toward the elevated stations" (51). With the tremendous flow of immigrants into

New York City in the late nineteenth century, a unique multicultural conglomeration emerged, creating an atmosphere rich in diverse customs, traditions, and cultures.¹ With architectural creations and innovations emerging in New York City in the nineteenth century, architectural landmarks² added to the wealth of the city through the aesthetic qualities of the constructed landscape. Additionally, and more directly poignant to Crane's characters, New York City was a place of industrial and economic prosperity.

In a similar fashion, the expansive setting for London's short story "In A Far Country" represents the possibility of upward mobility. The wilderness is a broad, boundless arena, abundant in aesthetic beauty, but attractive to the characters primarily because of its wealth of natural resources. London's story concerns Cuthfert and Weatherbee, two men who submit themselves to the harsh realities of the arctic in hopes of finding gold, but as "the lure of the north gripped the heartstrings of men" (374), Cuthfert and Weatherbee come to realize they are incapable of enduring such hardships. They join a mining party headed for the Yukon and when winter envelops them,

they are left at an abandoned cabin to wait out the winter. Although London's narrator focuses primarily on their imprisonment within the diminutive cabin, he is aware of the enormity of the northern landscape when he mentions "the magnitude of all things" and "the immensity of the snow-covered wilderness" (384). North of Edmonton, Alberta, the starting point of the characters' expedition to the Yukon, lie thousands of miles of uninhabited land, full of untouched natural resources; gold, the most prominent of these resources, is the driving force behind Cuthfert's and Weatherbee's willingness to leave their comfortable homes and endure the asperity of the arctic wilderness.

Both the city and the wilderness are large landscapes, attractive to the characters because of the potential for freedom and success; however, by clearly displaying nature's control over the characters, London and Crane place their characters in situations where they are imprisoned by their environments. When commenting on *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Stephen Crane said, "The purpose was to show that environment is a tremendous thing in this world, and often shapes lives

regardlessly" (Fitelson 108). Likewise, Jack London describes his adherence to Naturalism in "In A Far Country" when he said that his tales of the Alaskan Gold Rush "involved people in fundamental struggles with nature's indifference and cruel power" (Huntington Library Online). The control of the environment and the characters' subsequent imprisonment is manifested through their predetermined roles in society. As the stories progress and reality sets in, both sets of characters learn of their entrapment. Whether it be the wilderness or the city, the socially imposed limitations of the characters' environments directly control them, resulting in an incarceration that limits movement within their socio-economic sphere, directly effecting the events and consequences of their lives.

Nature acts as an imprisoning force in "In a Far Country" by catalytically determining the societal roles of Cuthfert and Weatherbee. The winter climate in the Yukon River basin is one of the harshest in the world, and it is these severe conditions that bring to the surface the innate weaknesses of Cuthfert and Weatherbee, creating a rift between them and the other members of the mining party

which leads to the expatriation of Cuthfert and Weatherbee from the group and eventually to their deaths. When "the world rang with the tale of arctic gold" (374), Cuthfert and Weatherbee left their homes in the continental United States and joined a party of men who traveled to the Yukon in search of a claim. As the conditions grew worse and travel became tiresome, nature's harshness acted as a mechanism that separated the two from the rest of the group.³ Cuthfert and Weatherbee's intrinsic inability to cope with these difficult environmental conditions makes them outcasts in their society; "their comrades swore under their breaths and grew to hate them" as they were "shirks and chronic grumblers" (375). London's narrator dubs them "the Incapables" (378) and warns about the lazily weak and uncooperative attitudes of Cuthfert and Weatherbee in the face of environmentally induced hardship when he says, "When a man journeys into a far country, he must be prepared to forget many of the things he has learned . . . and often times he must reverse the very codes by which his conduct has hitherto been shaped" (374).

Through their placement in a social hierarchy, Cuthfert and Weatherbee find themselves trapped by their surroundings, a placement that contributes to their fate. Likewise, the characters in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* experience the same confinement as they too occupy a predetermined societal role. Within the context of Naturalism, this confinement is symbolic, the characters can conceivably move within the larger landscape of the city, but forces outside of their control influence them, ensuring their confinement to the tenement neighborhoods.⁴ Crane deliberately places Maggie, her family, and the other characters in his novella in a neighborhood dominated by large, densely populated tenement houses. The overpopulation of the ill-structured buildings produced a situation of spatial imprisonment for Maggie and her family, creating an environmentally induced cage for the characters within a specific societal role.

At one point, Nellie, a young resident of Maggie's tenement neighborhood, tries to escape her environment, but is forced to return as the man she left with "didn't have as many stamps [money] as he made out" (43). This demonstrates

the inability of the characters to escape their spatial allotment because they cannot attain the necessary means to leave. This "class-stratified, industrialized city" (Rothschild 108) created a prison-like situation in the tenements, guaranteeing the ever-widening gap between the wealthy and the poor; despite any hope for social mobility, the Johnsons could be assured a stagnant economic position among the social degenerate.

Although they suffer confinement to a specific space, the characters of both works are drawn to their respective landscapes of the wilderness and the city because of the possibility for social and economic mobility, the illusory possibility that they can control their lives. Both *London* and *Crane* present these two landscapes as large, prosperous areas that suggest the potential for physical movement. The wilderness offers the enticement of space on which humanity has not yet inscribed its presence. New York City, in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, provided a system of public transportation that offered unprecedented convenience and ease of physical movement for much of the city's population.⁵

The arctic wilderness of the Yukon is also an area with potential for freedom of physical movement. The 964 miles from Edmonton, Alberta to the junction between the Porcupine and Yukon rivers, the approximate location of Cuthfert and Weatherbee's cabin, consists of boundless, untouched terrain. Movement within that area is virtually unrestricted as travel by dog sled is possible wherever there is snow. More than merely corporal, however, the symbolic nature of the wild as an open limitless arena leads to an ideological sense of uninhibited mobility, a feeling of the absolute emptiness and vastness of the wilderness and the freedom with which it is associated. London's narrator explains the characters' feelings of insignificance while enveloped in the virtually illimitable wilderness by affirming that Cuthfert felt "the infinite peace of the brooding land" (383) and the "vast solitudes" (383) beyond which linger "still vaster solitudes" (383).

The city and the wilderness are both settings that provide ample opportunities for physical movement. A basic theme in Naturalism, however, is that "free will is an

illusion," and in "In A Far Country" and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, London's and Crane's characters fall victim to the indifferent "affecting and afflicting forces of nature" (Pizer 7) as they are not able to move freely within their broad landscapes. They are confined to specific spaces within the immense areas that surround them.

The characters in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* are physically imprisoned in three specifically limiting spaces; they are confined by the tenement houses, the tenement neighborhoods, and the industrial sites similar to the factory Maggie briefly works in. All of these areas are exceedingly small and crowded, restricting the characters from freedom of physical movement. Maggie describes the crowds of denizens as "vast" (22), saying that, "the great body of the crowd was composed of people who showed that all day they strove with their hands" (22). Additionally, Maggie expresses her vision of the tenement interior when she observes that her apartment consisted of a "small room . . . which seemed to grow even smaller" (19). Later, Maggie reflects on the factory as a "dreary place of endless grinding" (250). She felt

that "(t)he air in the collar and cuff establishment strangled her," and she knew that "she was gradually and surely shriveling in the hot, stuffy room" (25).

Just as the characters in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* are incapable of meaningful physical movement within their respective spaces, Cuthfert and Weatherbee are trapped in a spatial prison when they are forced to spend a winter in an abandoned miner's cabin. The other men in the mining expedition left the two of them when, because of their innate mental and physical weaknesses, they refused to travel any further. The cabin is a limiting space of "ten by twelve" (381),⁶ in which Cuthfert and Weatherbee are imprisoned by the harshness of the arctic Alaskan winter. With no means of escape, as they are left without a dog sled team, they are forced to wait out the winter within the confines of the cabin. At times they tried to escape as they "fled into the outer cold. But there was no escape. The intense frost could not be endured for a long time" (381).

In addition to the extreme temperatures, the crushing effect of perpetual darkness limits and controls Cuthfert and

Weatherbee even further. They receive their first taste of sunlight when "January had been born but a few days" (386); it lasted for a brief few seconds, however, and the "half-sobs" (384) of Cuthfert and Weatherbee demonstrate their emotional weakness when faced by the arctic darkness. As a result of their fear and inability to leave the cabin for the "snow-covered wilderness" that is "cold and dead and dark" (384), Cuthfert and Weatherbee are controlled by their landscape; they are forced into the "little cabin that crowded them" (381). Eventually, as the winter slowly wears on, their imprisonment maddens them and they kill each other in a fit of rage.

As Cuthfert and Weatherbee are imprisoned within a diminutive space amid a vast and boundless landscape, the characters in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* are confined in specific spaces in their tenement neighborhoods, which are surrounded by the larger landscape of New York City. By showing the immensity of the wilderness and the city and then paradoxically demonstrating their characters' imprisonment within their respective spaces, London and Crane debunk the ideals of manifest destiny as they present images of the

characters' incapacity to dominate or control their natural surroundings.

Although the landscapes represented in the two works are opposites in terms of form and structure, they are both expansive areas that hold the potential for freedom, but as London and Crane construct their narratives, the characters find themselves confined in small, oppressive spaces. Their environments control them as they are denied access to the larger, potentially advantageous landscapes and are forced to live out the remainder of their lives in a state of oppressed imprisonment.

Notes

¹ In 1890, New York City was the largest city in the United States with over 1.5 million people; of those, 42 percent were foreign born (Mohl 15, 20).

² In 1890 New York City's World Tower became the world's tallest building, surpassing the second tallest building at the time, the Trinity Church (Burrows 1051). Additionally, Grand Central Terminal became an important architectural symbol in the city as it is often called, both literally and figuratively, "the gateway to the city" as over 400,000 people pass through it every day (Goldstone 223).

³ Winter temperatures in the Yukon River basin of eastern Alaska, the approximate location of the mining party, can average one hundred and forty degrees below zero, where "(f)lesh may freeze within 30 seconds." Additionally, average winter temperatures in the region range from forty-five to seventy-five degrees below zero while the annual total snowfall can exceed one hundred and thirty inches (Alaska State Climate Center Online).

⁴ The physical growth and expansion of the city promoted social fragmentation and differentiation as people sorted themselves out by class, ethnicity, and race; with the working class and the poor, such as Maggie and her family, concentrated in the urban center (Mohl 37).

⁵ In 1878 the New York Elevated Railroad Company, centralized in Manhattan, connected the other four boroughs together by expanding tracks, cars, and the frequency of departures. By 1882, the mileage of track was over five times greater than it was only four years earlier (Burrows 1054). Additionally, in 1883, Manhattan became progressively more connected with the rest of the city as it was linked with Brooklyn by means of the Brooklyn Bridge (Goldstone 106). Furthermore, Nan A. Rothschild notes that urban developers during this time crystallized the layout of the city streets in an attempt to “promote social and commercial progress through spatial organization” (4).

⁶ These are the exact dimensions of the living space within a tenement house apartment, as described by Jacob A. Riis in *How the Other Half Lives* (19).

⁷ According to the National Weather Service, on November 18, at this approximate latitude, the sun dips below the horizon and does not shine again until January 24 (Alaska State Climate Center Online).

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