The Effect of Poverty on Women Slum Dwellers in New York as Seen in Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets

Dona Alicia, S.Pd. M.Pd.; Dina Angraini, S.S.
1STKIP PGRI Sumatera Barat; 2Universitas Andalas, Padang
1aliciadona@yahoo.co.id

Abstract


Keywords: Poverty, Women Slum, Dwellers, Stephen Crane

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is social problem which relates to the fact that exists in society. Poverty is also considered as condition in which people can not fulfill their primary needs because they have very low income. As a result, there are many problems that occurred due to the poverty since it gives big effect to individuals who lives under this condition. Poverty is as much as moral problem that invites the big attention of many people.

Poverty is one og themes that can be found in literature. Novel as one kind of literary works, is also able to show the reality of society.” A literary works is not only the imagination of its author, but also the author’s life time experience or the real events occurred in the past time which then retold (
wellek and Waren 95). There are many literary works which picture about poverty condition and its effect especially for the writers who lived in realistic period of American literature.

American communities show great concern with the problem of poverty. Poverty is not a new condition in America. There is still large class of American living below poverty line, and there are still great problems with alcoholism and abuse in families. Immigration that happened in 19th century in America caused the shocking poverty at the time. As the result, many people lived in the tenements which bad conditions can increase the death rates.

The writer is very interested in doing the research on Maggie: A Girl of the streets because of some essential reasons. The first reason is that Stephen crane, the author of Maggie: A girl of the streets, is known as one of the greatest writer s of American literature who lived in the realistic period of American literature. He was a young writer who had produced several novels, short stories and poems which all of them were dealing with environment and the depiction of the reality of life for the poor. Some of his works are The Red Badge of Courage(1894), his masterpiece novel and it become his best seller and also attracted a great deal of positive notice, the bridge Comes to Yellow sky and The Blue Hotel (1895) based on his experiences in the Western United States and the territories, The Black Riders ( 1895). The Little Regiment (1896). George’s Mother ( 1896), The Open Boat ( 1897), The third violet (1897). Literary Historian classified him as a realist, naturalist or an impressionist since most of his work are realistic and naturalistic (Solomon,3).

The second reason is that Maggie: a Girl of the Street is one of Crane’s great piece of work that starkly portrays the life of tenement slum area of New York City’s Lower East side during the late nineteenth century. He focused on the majority of people in America’s growing cities: the poor and the desperate poverty stricken families of the tenement and the streets. How the condition of New York and its society is, and also the effect on women in the late 19th century, are exploited here clearly. Hereby, in this analysis the writer focuses on the poverty and its effect on women slum in New York.

The third reason is that Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of The Streets (1893) is one of the best, if not the Earliest, naturalistic American Novels. It is the harrowing story of a poor, sensitive young girl, Maggie, who is uneducated, has alcoholic parents that utterly fail her. Due to love and the eager to escape from her violent home life and poverty condition, she allows her self to be seduced into living with a young man, who soon deserts her. Her desire to change their life has become boomerang for her. When her self-righteous mother rejects her, Maggie becomes a prostitute to survive, but soon commits suicide out of despair.

The experience of Maggie’s life and the sociological content of the novel attract the writer to analyze it and choose the title: The Effect of Poverty on women Slum Dwellers in New York as reflected in Stephen Crane’s Maggie : A Girl of The Streets as her main topic. The writer believes that all of Maggie’s life and family have close relationship with the poverty condition in New York.
These are the reasons why the writer is interested in doing some research on Maggie.

REVIEW ON RELATED LITERATURE

Crane’s Maggie: a Girl of the Streets (1893) is sympathetic study of an innocent and abuse slum girl’s descent into prostitution and her eventual suicide. According to review in The Francisco Chronicle of August 8, 1896, Stallman, Crane’s Maggie can strike an emotional chord in the reader’s hearts since it is a powerful sermon. The setting of that story makes him interested, as he writes in her essay:

“Maggie” id powerful sermon on the need of missionary work among the heathen in the tenements of our big cities, and it cannot fail to open the eyes of many who have only taken a sentimental interest in a class that seems no nearer to them. (1)

From the quotation above, Stallman implies that the environment where Maggie was born makes crane’s readers emphasize that it was so difficult to escape from the life in the tenement.

Similarly, the writer Hamlin Garland also writes about how bad the condition in the slum is, he believes that this story is the most truthful study of the slum. In his Reviews on Maggie, he states:

It deals with poverty and vice and crime, but it does so, not out of curiosity, not out of salaciousness, but because of a distinct art impulse, the desires to utter in truthful phrase a certain rebellious cry. It is the voice of the slum. His book is the most truthful and unhackneyed study of slums. (2)

From his review on Maggie, Garland really wants to convince us that this story reflected the real condition in the slum life, he states that it is the voice of the slum so, from his essays, he clearly shows that can be only deemed as naturalistic. Moreover, through this story, Crane shows us the condition of the tenements which is full of poverty and starvation in the slum life.

Additionally, Brianne is interested in the character of Maggie, the protagonist in this story. She concludes that Maggie’s character undergoes changes from the beginning until the end of the story. As she writes in his essays “Maggie the Girl of the Streets” and innocence states:

“Maggie, A Girl of the Street” by Stephen Crane is an illustration of the morals and views of innocent in the early 1990’s. The story chases the young and innocent into a life of sinfulness. The opinions of all of those around her change during her growth, and express the ideals of life during the time. (2)

From the quotation above, Brianne implies that this story reflects the life in the early 1990’s. Maggie as an innocent girl can change into a sinfulness life due to the forces of environment around her. It can be seen in Maggie. In her writing, Brianne assumes that what happen to Maggie is actually not her false, because she is born in such harsh condition and she is only the victim.

However, Jared pace was interested in the ironic meaning that found in Maggie. In his essay title Crane’s use of Irony in Maggie, Jared pace wants to state that Crane uses the Irony as a tool to juxtapose truth and perception and to
engage the reader in his viewpoint of socioeconomic determinism, as he writes in the following quotation.

“Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Street tells of a young girl who initially blossoms in the urban slum, but is eventually driven to prostitution by environment. Their environment is devoid of morality, and it twists their perceptions into contradictory beliefs. Crane uses irony to illustrate the dissimilarities between reality and perceptions and to guide the reader to obvious conclusions concerning socioeconomic conditions. (1)

In his essay, Pace writes that Crane contrasts the reality and perception of Jimmie’s fight on top of the gravel heap to show that, due to the “survival” of the fittest” mentality of the slums, e needlessly endures the attack because he values strength. The rock fight in the beginning of the book is described as a medieval conflict where Jimmie defends Rum alley” honor. All above are some examples of irony that he writes in his essay. In this case, the writer has different point of view with him, because she is interested more in the poverty condition of Maggie’s family and her society, not in the irony in Maggie.

The Theoretical Framework

In order to gain a sufficient analysis on the novel above, the writer bases her analysis on relevant theory on literature. The theory used in this analysis will be supported by the sociological approach.

The writer applies the sociological of literature in order to make it more focused to analysis. According to Swingewood:

Sociology of literature must be to discover the “the core of meaning” which one finds at the heart of different works and which express many aspects of thoughts and feeling on subject as varied as social class, work, love, religion, nature and art.(16)

By applying this theory, the writer is intended to see the depiction of the real life trough the object that presented in the novel. So, by using this theory, the writer can prove the correlation between reality and the fiction to help her in exploring the problem sated in the tittle.

In analyzing this novel, the write uses sociological approach since she highlights the novel from the sociological point of view, as stated by Guerin: “American naturalists like Stephen Crane (Maggie : A Girls of the street) can especially be studied from sociological point of view, for themselves were conscious of the effect of society on individuals” (273)

Sociology, actually is the human behavior whose study focuses on people as a social creature. The object of this analysis is society with its problem.

Clearly, sociological approach is focused more to the aspect of social life and its effect on individuals that is reflected in the literary work. By using theories and supported by an approach, the writer hopes that she can reach a better understanding in analyzing this novel.
The Wretchedness life in the Slum Caused Many People live in Tenements

The harsh living condition in the late nineteen century of New York has brought people live in the tenements of slum area. Many of them lived in object of poverty. Consequently, there were disintegration and abuses in the families, for most of them are suffering, they found only the lowest un skill jobs available to them since they have very limited skill.

What is tenement? The law defines it as a house” occupied by three of four families, living independently and doing their cooking on the premises; or by more than to families on a floor, so living and cooking and having a common right in the halls, stairways, yard, and the like.

The term “tenement” originally meant a multiple family rental building. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, it referred to slum buildings. The first tenement were built in New York in 1850. They were considered improved housing for the poor. This prompted builders to add air shafts to the tenements. Living conditions in the tenement were extremely crowded.

The Photographer and Journalist, Jacob A Riss, in his best known book How The Others Half Lives (1890:440) says that:

“ Their large room were partitioned into several smaller ones, without regard to light or ventilation, the rate of rent being lower in proportion to space or height from the street: and they soon become filled from cellar to garret with a class of tenantry living from hand to mouth loose in morals, improvident in habits, degrade, and squalid as beggars. It was thus the dark bedroom, prolific of untold depravities” (440)

From the quotation above, Riis implies that tenement building is full of crowded conditions. It is out of good standard of living. Neatness, order, cleanliness, was never dreamed of in connection with the tenement-house system.

Many tenements did not have indoor plumbing or running water. Sewage collected in out houses and rats were prevalent, carrying and spreading disease, often to children. There were also epidemics of typhoid, cholera, tuberculosis and pneumonia throughout East Coast Cities.

Women as the Victim of Poverty

Living below poverty in the slum of New York has effected women’s life. Poverty gives the big effect on women. Women as a soft creature can be easily affected by environment. Women of the slum grow up under the condition which repress all the good impulse, stunt the moral growth and it was difficult to change their life.

Poverty has caused many women and girls become uneducated, they has no money to get education due to their poor condition. As the result, they do not have skills. So their jobs are categorized as low workers. The wages they get are actually not enough to support their family’s need, but they didn’t have other options to find another job since they don’t have skill.

Living below poverty in the slum area also force women turn to prostitution. Women, upon finding minimal chance to earn money as employer
in society, were often driven to prostitution, the only business to promise an income. Poverty had let women walk on the path of sin and destitution which robbed her of her childhood and innocence.

Actually, prostitution in the nineteen century was perhaps one of the most degrading positions for a woman. Being identified by dress, make up, and forward mannerisms, a women employed within the business that is avoided by all respectable persons. Once tainted by the moral sin, a woman could never return to good graces.

DISCUSSION

The Effect of Poverty on Women Slum Dwellers in New York As Seen in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets

In this chapter, the writer is going to concentrate on how women are affected by poverty condition in the slum on New York City. This chapter is divided into four subchapters. The first subchapter is about the big desire to marry a rich man in order to escape from poverty. The second is about the distance relationship between mother and daughter. The third and the last are about Maggie as low wage worker and prostitute. The writer divides her analysis into four subchapters for she finds that these four topics are really shown in this novel. The writer finds that the connection between poverty and women is so prominent in this novel.

Related to the previous chapter, New York as one of big cities in America also grew rapidly. The coming of immigrations to New York has caused the problem of poverty occur. People in New York face the necessity of working in sweatshops and factory, the alcoholism of parents, the overall poverty of themselves and those around them. Obviously, in this novel, Crane also concentrates on poor condition of people in America’s city in New York. Most of them don’t have any skills. As a result, it’s hard for them to find some jobs to support their lives. It is supported by Sara Sherman in her essays on February 7,(2001:1) state that, Crane focused on the majority of people in America’s growing cities: the poor and desperate and the plot of Maggie: a girl of the Streets, Crane also realistically portrays many sociological aspects of this time period such as harsh factory work, prostitution, inadequate sanitation and the poverty of tenement life.

From the quotation above, it is clear that Crane highlights from the sociological point of views that many problems have occurred in New York at the time, such as poverty of tenement, harsh factory workers and prostitution. So, Crane doesn’t tell New York fifth avenue mansion but the horrible conditions that they live in since all the people in the city are poor. Through this novel, Crane wants to demonstrate that people in the slum have no more code because destitution has caused no religious impulse around the. As a result violence increases and Crane describes it well.

In order to make the analysis more focused, the writer only focuses her analysis on the effect of poverty condition of slum on women, how poverty
affects the relationship between mother and daughter and the relationship with a man. The writer believes that living below poverty has pressed all the good impulse religious norm, stunt the moral growth of human being, and all of that effect women’s life.

**Desires to marry a rich man**

In this novel, Crane describes Maggie as young woman who has a big desire to marry a rich man since her first goal in life is to escape her poverty, her mud-puddle prison. Here, Crane uses “prison” to symbolize her poverty environment which means that Maggie has been trapped in it and can’t go out. It is also supported by Mary Baba in her essay that; “Crane calls the bowery a “prison” in order to gives us the idea of how terrible Maggie’s environment.

In chapter 3, it is written that the poor women in the slum area in New York really want to get married with the rich man in order to get more economic freedom. This phenomenon is also pictured by Crane in his novel. Through the character of Maggie, Crane wants to emphasize that she is reflection of women in slum area who believe that well-marriage can make life better.

It is shown that Maggie feels attracted to Pete in her world of illusion because her big desire makes her dream that one day Pete will marry her. The writer’s opinion, Maggie has been trapped in her illusion that keeps her living in a fantasy world, which shows that she doesn’t control her life. She cannot control her choice. She hopes that Pete can rescue her from her condition of poverty, and he can also take her far away of the Bowery.

In this story, Crane also describes Pete as Maggie’s boyfriend who takes her on dating with him. Maggie is trapped by her fantasy world and tries to imitate the acts of the stage. She thinks that Pete is her knight and like a medieval knight that will save her and be her protection.

The writer finds that Crane present Maggie as a girl who is native but creative enough. She began for the first time to notice how tattered and hideous her home was. Because of this, she tried to design her home with hope that it will attract Pete’s attention.

Here, Crane shows that Maggie is slightly creative for she tries to make some changes in her home. Although what she has done was not too worth, but it is a good effort to get Pete’s attention. Here, the writer argues that the relationship between Maggie and Pete is not a serious love relationship. Maggie believes that Pete is serious and in love with her, in fact he is not, for doesn’t love Maggie honestly. Maggie is only regarded as an object of sex. He deceives Maggie with his style as if he is a richman whereas he has the same level as Maggie. Crane shows that what Maggie has done proves that she can be easily seduced by a young man in order to change her life.

In fact the writer finds that Pete is just a vulgar man, rude and sexiest immersed in the world of vice and prostitution, a man that doesn’t appreciate the inner purity of Maggie. It can be seen from what he had done to Maggie. Maggie thinks that being with him is going to change her life, but actually, she doesn’t realize that she is just stuck in the same world she is trying to escape. In
addition, it is seen that the phenomenon happened to Maggie who marries such as a rich man is Pete shows the reality which exists in New York at that time. Marrying a rich man is the main goal of women who live in the slum area in order to escape from their misery and suffering.

**Distant relationship between Mother and Daughter**

In general, mothers and daughters have special bond. Mothers nurture and teach their daughters about life. They love them unconditionally and try to help them grow up civilized and mature woman. However, this isn’t found in the relationship between Maggie and her mother, Marry Johnson. Marry Johnson is an abuse and alcoholic mother. She shows no concern, warmth, and love for her family, especially her only one daughter. Living in an environment of New York slum with such filth and poverty could never fathom her for getting out of living in the slums.

The writer finds that in Marry Johnson’s case, due to the poverty condition that she lives in, she was very unhappy and miserable with life. She turns to alcohol to cope with her feelings of despair and turns to abuse behavior to express her misery.

Through this story, Crane gives the image that growing in a poor condition in the slum area has usually caused the dysfunctional family. It can be seen in this novel that Marry doesn’t care about her daughter and vice versa. As a result, there is a distance relationship between two of them. There is no family feeling between them. What in Mary’s mind is always drinking, as shown in the following quotation:

Her mother drank whiskey all Friday morning. With lurid face and tossing hair she cursed and destroyed furniture all Friday afternoon when Maggie come home at half-past six, her mother lay asleep amidst the wreck of chairs and table.

This quotation shows that Marry is drunken minded. Her life can not be far from whiskey. She can not behave as a good mother. After drinking, she becomes brutal person by destroying furniture and then, lay asleep on the floor.

In chapter 3, it is stated that poverty has caused that the abuse in the family. This phenomena is reflected in this novel since Crane chooses to write about bad relationship between mother and daughter as example of abuse in the family of slum area, such as they have no money for living, as a result, they tend to think illogically since they often use their coarseness. Therefore, there is no family feeling between them.

The writer finds it is interesting that Crane presents two characters a mother and daughter, whose perceptions in life are different. Mary faces her life desperately. Through this story, Mary physically and mentally beats her daughter. She must often takes her hardship out on her daughter. Thus Maggie doesn’t share her mother’s contempt for the world. Despite her hardship, she still has hopes and dreams about the future.

From this story, Crane shows the readers that raising in a poor environment has caused the distance between mother and daughter. They never chat as other mothers and daughters do. Here, Maggie’s mother never talks to
her about boys and life. She couldn’t explain these to her daughter whereas Maggie needs to know about that. As a result, Maggie doesn’t be careful in her relationship between her boyfriend since she doesn’t know much about boys. It can be seen when she loses her virginity.

Here, the writer argues that Maggie can not be blame on what happened to her. This is not fully her mistake. Crane portrays Maggie as a naïve young woman who doesn’t know much about life and boys since her mother never explain about that. That’s why she can be easily trapped in his boyfriend’s seducing. The writer feels that her mother must be responsible for what happened to her.

Ironically, Marry doesn’t realize that she fails as a mother because in this story, there is no description of Crane that indicates that Marry regrets her attitude. What Crane shows in this novel is only her coarseness to her daughter. She doesn’t know that her brutal behavior and drinking habit have made her forget that she has a daughter who really needs her love. Crane describes that from the beginning of the story, she tries to pretend that she is a good mother. But actually, she is an alcoholic and a prostitute who beats her daughter and acts like she is the best mother in the world, but that’s not true.

From all above, it can be said that Mary isn’t good mother at all and Crane successfully shows that she is a bad mother for Maggie. Therefore, there is no moral teaching can be learnt from such behavior for she doesn’t love her daughter. But we must also balance the fact that she is trapped by her poverty environment too. Living below poverty has caused abuse in the family. Additionally, it is clearly shown in this novel that women at that time don’t care about the harmonious relationship in their family. They are forced in to a living where they don’t have anything because they are very poor Irish immigrants. They are more concerned about their economical problem. As a result, there is no concord in the relationship between mother daughter.

**Become a Prostitute**

In this chapter, the writer will discuss how living below poverty has led Maggie to the path of sin, as prostitute, and robbed of her childhood and innocence. She has to choose to be a prostitute to survive. Here, the writer believes that Crane chooses to write about prostitution because it serves too often as the last resort for many women who need money to support themselves. Being explained in chapter 3, Riis states that it’s a known fact that women’s wages have no limit since the path of shame are always open to her.

The writer believes that prostitution is not only used to illustrate vice, it is a theme used by Crane to show that in this period, the 1890s, as Zenaida lockard writes in her essays Life as Prostitute in the Nineteen Century on 31,January 2002 : “Stephen Crane Places his protagonist among this class of impoverished women. A Poverty – stricken girl turned prostitute.

In this story, Maggie’s brother, Jimmie, gives her two alternatives of her life. He tells that she must either go to hell or go to work. Crane describes that Maggie travels through the city of New York, her first going to a place where rich people live, then the theaters, restaurant, and eventually returns to the
river, the place where she used to live. In her journey, she meets many characters that represent each part of these districts. She realizes that she is not happy and she has no one that cares about her and someone that means something for her. She can feel that she is alone and everyone has abandoned her. So, she drown her self in the river to escape from all her poverty and unhappy life. And to escape of selling her self to the fat man that comes to her.

Crane states:

At the feet the river appeared a deathly black hue. Some hidden factory sent up a yellow glare, that lit for a moment the waters lapping oily against timbers. The varied sound of life, made joyous by distance and seeming upapproachableness, came faintly and died away to a silence. From the above quotation, Crane Shows her death with some sympathy, because of inability to overcome her battle, she ends her life by committing suicide in the river. Here, Crane wants us to understand that the conditions and events that lead Maggie choosing that alternative are not Maggie’s false but the forces that she cannot control. Hence, the writer finds that it is her fate since. Maggie was destined when she was born to a life of misery and poverty.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing Maggie: A girl of the streets by Stephen Crane, the writer comes to some important points in this novel. The novel can be categorized as sociological novel, because it is reflection of the poverty condition in the slum of New York and its effects on women dwellers in the late nineteenth century. The writer concludes that the novel has setting when Irish immigration arrived in America in the nineteenth century that caused the problem of poverty occurred in each city, especially New York. This problem is organized well in this novel. Poverty has caused slum area emerged in the city. The prominent problem is the tenement that is considered the typical building in the slum life of New York

Through the analysis, the writer finds out that poverty, which is reflected in this novel, in the 19th century, gives the effect to women slum dwellers of New York. The big desire to marry a rich man that is believed as away to escape the misery in the slum life is one of the four effects that the writer finds in her analysis.

The second effect that is drawn in the novel is the distance relationship between mother and daughter. As being implied in the novel, the destitution has caused the abuse in the family. Mother doesn’t nurture her daughter and the daughter also doesn’t care about her mother. As a result, there is no family feeling between them.

The third effect that is shown in this novel is become low-wage worker. The writer can assume that the poverty has caused women become uneducated for there is no money for that. As a result, being worker is the appropriate job of their skill. Although they can only get small earning and work in unventilated room, they still work in order to survive.

The last point of the effect of poverty on women slum is that they are pushed to prostitution. As a result of having no education and skill, they don’t
have other choice, except walk on the street, as prostitute. Thus, they can easily get good income without skills.

In writer’s opinion, this novel vividly pictures the poverty condition and its effect on women dwellers in New York. From what the writer has found in this analysis, she concludes that Crane successfully depicts the poor condition of Irish immigrants in New York into his novel. The writer has found the similarity of the fact in reality with the story in the novel. From this novel, the writer sees that Crane wants to show that poverty has made the women become hopeless. As a result, their lives and tragically. Finally, the writer hopes this work will give benefit for those who read it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY