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AUTHENTICITY AND ROLE - PLAYING IN S. CRANE'S *MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study based on S. Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is to show that the loss of authenticity and autonomy occurs due to the obsession with conformity and the approval of others whose expectations determine the way in which individuals act. The analysis of the actions and reactions of the Johnsons family reveals that all family members, excepting Maggie, put on facades of conformity to please their neighbors who expect them to act in a certain manner. The discussion of the loss of authenticity shows that the best thing for individuals to do to evade this problem is to maintain a balance between their own need for authenticity and societal demands.

Key words: American literature, S. Crane, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, literary character

The advent of technology has had far-reaching effects not only on society but also on the individual. Technology has made life easier by enabling individuals to shop easily and buy whatever they need. However, technology that has provided the facilities tempting individuals to succumb to the ease of shopping has also dehumanized them, depriving them of the chance of being themselves. This technology has been surrounding individuals with objects whose purchase is sometimes more driven by external factors than an inner need. Objects as such are unnecessary and eloquent of the obsession with appearances, which diminishes authenticity for "when we consume," Sawicki quotes Baudrillard, "we never do it on our own."¹ This consumption is outer-directed. It is also reflective of the search for the approval of others whose opinions constitute a roadmap controlling the individuals' choices and divesting them of their authenticity. Authenticity that is germane to the notion of self versus society has become the cynosure of sociologists and psychologists who have defined it in many ways. Charles Taylor, for instance, argues that authenticity involves creation as well as discovery, originality, and frequently opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality.² He also holds that "there is a certain way of being that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself."³ Similarly, Maslow suggests that authenticity occurs when individuals discover their true inner nature by satisfying higher order psychological needs.⁴ Echoing Taylor and Maslow, Deci and Ryan suggest that authenticity occurs when individuals regulate in ways that satisfy their basic psychological needs for competence, self-determination, and relatedness.⁵ Repeating these views, Brian M. Goldman claims that authenticity reflects acting in accord with one's values, preferences, and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments, even if it means acting falsely.⁶ These arguments reveal that authenticity lies in the person's natural expression of his/her core feelings, motives, and inclinations in the environmental context he or she encounters. An expression as such makes life meaningful. In view of its value, authenticity has also become a staple in the works of many novelists. To take an example, Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* depicts Hester, the central character, as leaning towards authenticity, and not worrying at all about the approval of others. In stark contrast with her is Arthur Dimmesdale who does not live his own life. Like N. Hawthorne, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of The D'Urbervilles* features Tess who is a rebel in conflict with the world where she lives. Yusuf Idris, likewise, presents in *The Sin* a woman called Sana who wrestles with the environment to be a part of society and true to herself at the same time. Taken together, these authors' works feature characters leaning towards the side of authenticity as well as characters who either wrestle with the social environment to be a part of society and authentic at the same time or conform completely to the norms and conventions of society.

This act of conformity constitutes a problem for it infringes on the individual's ability to maintain authenticity. Individuals find it difficult to strike a balance between their needs for authenticity and the demands of society. If they choose to be conformists, their actions will be more based on social mores than on their feelings and beliefs. In other words, these actions will be more oriented towards the approval of others whose opinions bear on, Denisoff and Wahrman argue, "what we think of ourselves."⁷ Following Denisoff and Wahrman steps, Scott and Fulcher hold that the expectations that others have about our likely behavior are "sometimes so powerful and compelling ...that [we] may [ourselves] accept their point of view and see that identity as somehow fundamental to [our] whole personality."⁸

These expectations of others and their impact on authenticity are at the centre of Stephen Crane's attention in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, the target of this study in which I contend that public role-playing leads to the loss of authenticity, and that the obsession with respectability undermines autonomy.

To begin with, in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Crane depicts the Johnsons to whom respectability is a top

priority. Obsessed with respectability, the Johnsons' moral vision, Pizer maintains, is "dominated by moral roles which they believe are expected of them" ⁹ by their neighbors who, acting like saints, keep urging them to act in a certain way. These moral roles are played "in response to the expectations of their audience." ¹⁰ Lacking autonomy, the Johnsons are unable to govern themselves and determine how to act. Engrossed in the approval of others that undermines their autonomy, the Johnsons find themselves obliged to act in a manner that does not contradict the wishes of their neighbors. To take an example, when Maggie leaves her parents' house and goes out with Pete, the Johnsons feel embarrassed, especially when some women living next to them pay them a visit and "in the course of their conversation" ¹¹ casually wonder where Maggie is these days. After suppressing neighbors with great difficulty, Mrs. Johnson "recite[s] the whole length and breadth of her woes" ¹², asking God to forgive her daughter whose wickedness is denounced. Echoing his mother, Jimmy "publicly damn[s] his sister that he [may] appear on a higher social plane." ¹³

The Johnsons' public damnation of Maggie's behavior provides some evidence that they are keen on respectability as the primary moral goal. This respectability is a value system oriented toward approval by others, "toward an audience." ¹⁴ When Maggie falls, she is cast out by her mother and her brother "for desecrating the home" ¹⁵ and dishonoring the family. The mother and her son treat Maggie this way to protect themselves against the criticism that their neighbors may level at them if Maggie's behavior is over-tolerated. The fact that Mrs. Johnson and Jimmy cast Maggie out does not necessarily mean that this behavior is self-directed. Rather, the Johnsons' behavior seems to be a defense mechanism that aims to keep the neighbors tongue-tied and pleased with them. This means that the Johnsons are not in a position to determine and enforce the rules that govern their lives, that their action is not voluntary, and that they are only artificially in tune with the environment, acting "like the others around them." ¹⁶

This idea of being like the others is central to living in a community. As Sennett holds, communities are based on a belief in sameness, that people feel they belong to each other, and share together because they are the same. ¹⁷ Reiterating Sennett's view, Durkheim maintains that traditional communities are tied together by the fact that people share the same values, same ideas, experiences, and behavior. ¹⁸ Durkheim calls this bond of similarity holding society together mechanical solidarity that has been replaced after industrialization by one based on the division of labor which involves a "high degree of job specialization." ¹⁹ Judging the Johnsons from this perspective, it can be said that Mrs. Johnson and Jimmy are engaged in faking conformity. Anxious to maintain a veneer of respectability, they never examine their actions and their true motivations for them. They do not care whether their actions truly represent their life or not. The Johnsons' ability to think, act, and make decisions is clouded by their worrying about what others may think or how they perceive them. The Johnsons' obsession with what others expect from them causes self-deception, an act involving the burial of the true self for the beneficial perception of others. They lose their authenticity by not living their own life and not following their passions and feelings. Caught up in a whirlwind of self-deception and consumed with faking out those around them, the Johnsons' sole objective is to maintain their public image, enabling them to play the role of someone they are not. Lacking self-respect, the Johnsons do not have the courage of their mistakes. If they had self-respect, they certainly would not worry about what would happen to their reputation.

Yet this lack of self-respect does not hold true for Maggie who, judged by standards of the community, is a rebel, a maladjusted individual that is out of tune with the world around her. Refusing to play the role expected of her, and rejecting subordination that renders her behavior inauthentic, Maggie keeps going out with Pete whom she regards to be her ideal man, sleeps with him, and, after being rejected by him, practices prostitution that not only reflects the poor economic options she has in contrast with men but also constructs her as the sexual servant of men whose buying of the "sexual service" is defined as a benefit for [them]. ²⁰

This practice of prostitution also underlines Maggie's subordination, oppression, victimization, submission, and vulnerability. Because of this, prostitution should be socially objectionable and prohibited in support of Maggie's sexual autonomy that is crucial to achieving her equality with men. Moreover, Maggie uses sex to earn a living, and, therefore, her quantity of sexual contact is "not indicative of sexual autonomy." ²¹ It is worthy of noting that Maggie's resort to prostitution to earn her living reflects her failure to fit in a society in which "women's economic conditions are in need of redress". ²² This failure of Maggie is paralleled by her mother's. Overcome with her hunger for drinking, Mrs. Johnson is blinded to the reality of her being a mother who should be committed to doing the best for her children. Rejecting submission, she keeps quarrelling with her husband, ignoring her duties towards her children who badly need her love and attention. In addition to being a failure as a mother, Mrs. Johnson is unable to be a good wife for her husband who is also a failure. This repeated failure of Mrs. Johnson springs from her roles as a wife and mother. Despite this failure to play the roles expected of her as a good mother and a good wife, Mrs. Johnson is anxious to conform to the wishes of her neighbors regarding morality. When Maggie commits suicide, for instance, the neighbors keep urging her to forgive her daughter, Maggie. One of the neighbors claims: "Yeh'll fergive her, Mary!" ²³

Responding to her neighbor, Mary Johnson argues: "Oh, Yes, I'll fergive her! I'll fergive her!" ²⁴ This chain of failure endures in the family. The Johnsons' son, Jimmy, comes into this characteristic. Jimmy fails to be a good boy, and his failure to be so appears early in his life. He keeps quarrelling with the other boys in the slums, making a "fair record" before he reaches a "great age." ²⁵ Becoming the "head of the family" after his father's death and failing to be a dutiful son, he keeps quarrelling with his mother. At one time, he seizes his "mother's arm" and drags her "towards the door of their room." ²⁶ Shrieking, the mother asks her son to take his hands off her. Damning his mother, Jimmy throws out "his left hand" and writhes "his fingers about her middle arm." ²⁷

Besides quarrelling with his mother, Jimmy quarrels with his sister, Maggie, whose downfall is unimaginable to him. In contrast with his sister, Jimmy does whatever his neighbors want, for fear of contradicting their wishes. To win the approval of these neighbors he plays moral roles that are imposed on him; his own moral poses are not consistent. He objects to Pete's "ruining his sister." ²⁸ While he ascribes Pete's bad deed to his not knowing "about the rules of politeness", ²⁹ he does not look at his actions from the same perspective. Like the Johnsons, Pete and the clergyman are both keen on maintaining respectability as a moral goal. Considering Mary Johnson and her son, Jimmy, to be both responsible for Maggie's ruin and at the same time accusing them of attempting "to snare him" ³⁰, Pete shuns Maggie

whenever she approaches him so as not to threaten the respectability of the bar where he works. When she, for instance, wonders where she can go after being ruined by him, he, feeling exasperated "beyond the powers of endurance,"³¹ reprobrates her, suggesting that she go to hell. Leaving her to suffer on her own, he "slam[s] the door furiously"³² and "returns" "to his respectability."³³ This situation in which Pete seems to be more concerned with maintaining his own respectability as well as that of the bar he works at than with Maggie is incredibly painful and suggestive of women's social and economic inferiority to men in this society. The pain one undergoes after considering the whole situation springs from Pete's indifference, ruthlessness, recklessness, snobbery, bestiality, selfishness, and hypocrisy. This pain will certainly endure because Pete represents a whole class of men who under the pretext of practicing their own liberty still arrange for satisfying their desires this way without worrying at all about the harms visited upon the innocent, poor, and powerless girls whose economic plight makes them extremely vulnerable to predators who brutally exploit them, taking advantage of the absence of laws that protect them. The absence of protection-providing laws seems to be the fruit of the preoccupation with respectability which the church man Maggie approaches before committing suicide is keen on maintaining. This clergyman "save[s] his respectability"³⁴ by "a vigorous side-step."³⁵ He has "the power to save" her, but he "does not understand how to use it."³⁶ It should be argued that Pete and the clergyman are both able to help Maggie, but they do not do so lest their respectability should be threatened.

We have seen that the problem of the loss of authenticity is caused by role-playing, and, therefore, it is deeply connected with living in society. Although individuals know well that the roles they play do not reflect their own beliefs, they play them in order not to contradict the wishes of their neighbors. In so doing, they become well-adjusted individuals who are in tune with the world around them. This type of individuals is best exemplified by the Johnsons, except for Maggie, who do whatever their neighbors want for fear of being accused of not honoring social mores whose observance is a moral duty incumbent not only on them but also on all individuals in that society.

Unlike Jimmy and Mary Johnson, Maggie disregards the expectations placed upon her. Refusing to yield to external social pressure, she acts as she likes, aiming to rise socially. She does whatever she wants without worrying about approval from others whose expectations impose certain moral roles on her, and, thus, restrict her freedom of action, forcing her to act in a certain way. By going out with Pete, Maggie takes a stand for herself, honors her passion and feelings, and maintains her personal integrity. The value of these acts stems not only from their generating much respect for herself, and her having a high self-esteem but also from their being markers of her independence of others, an experience that creates the sense of wholeness, which allows her to enjoy life to the full. Moreover, these acts reflect the harmony between Maggie's behavior and principles. Being autonomous, she makes her own decisions and carries them out. In a sense, she chooses who she wishes to be and what she wants to do, bearing the responsibility of her choice. Maggie's behavior further reveals that she is standing up for what she believes in and that she is aligned with what's more important to her, which means that she is authentic.

Opposed to this image is the one that Jimmy, Mary Johnson, Pete and the clergyman construct of themselves. Lacking authenticity, each one of them subordinates autonomy to a role prescribed by the others. The choices each one makes not only justify the distance between one's visible behavior and innerness but also eat away at the inner power and integrity, the hallmarks of authenticity. Furthermore, these choices reflect those characters' attitudes toward others who are inferior to them. Lacking the power within, these characters become unsympathetic not only with others but also with themselves. Therefore, it is not a great wonder that they are all unkind to Maggie. It has been shown that Pete, the clergyman, Jimmy, and Mary Johnson have chosen respectability as their primary moral goal. This choice reflects their failure to know themselves and to act in accordance with this knowledge. Thus, this lack of self-knowledge underpins their being inauthentic, non-autonomous, attracted to others and anxious to win their approval, and unable to maintain a balance between their words and actions.

Just as the clergyman, Pete, Jimmy and Mary Johnson failed to make their actions suit their words, so also did they equally fail to strike the necessary balance between themselves and the environment. To me, this failure seems to be proceeding from their preceding failure to maintain the required balance between their words and actions or, more exactly, between their heads and hearts. Were they balanced, they wouldn't give priority to their heads over their hearts, be more outer-directed than inner-directed, care more for the opinions and the approval of others than their own feelings and needs, relegate their autonomy and authenticity to playing roles that match the expectations of others. By doing all these actions, the Johnsons lost their authenticity and made their life meaningless. Had the Johnsons looked within and concentrated more on what's good for them, their life wouldn't have become purposeless.

This failure of the Johnsons is an isolated case. It does not foreshadow the failure of Man. Humans are not, Wrong claims, "puppets of their culture" "with no real freedom of action."³⁷ In their capacity of being choice makers, humans can choose either to conform, juggle the expectations of others, or disregard them. If they choose to be conformists, they should determine how to conform and maintain their authenticity at the same time. In so doing, they can maintain a balance between their need for authenticity and the societal demands. To meet the dire need for authenticity, humans should look within rather than outside of themselves. In this respect, Taylor claims that "the source we have to connect with is deep in us."³⁸

Humans should also accept themselves, acknowledge their own qualities, and trust their own judgment. As regards conformity, they can modify their roles, without necessarily "worrying" to death "about what others think."³⁹ When they stop worrying about winning the approval of others, they can concentrate on what's good for them and get more done in their life. In this way, they can "create a life that is meaningful to [them]."⁴⁰ Although this job seems to be easy, it calls for much effort to be made, and it is also demanding. On the one hand, the demands of this job create a challenge for us and on the other, they require that we do our best to meet that challenge. So long as meeting this challenge pays off, it is a mark of our wisdom to seize this opportunity, making our choices in this direction that leads to success whose tool and key is the self.

NOTES

1. Sawicki, "On Baudrillard", p.46.
2. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p.66
3. Ibid, *The Malaise of Modernity*, pp. 28-29
4. A.H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 1968
5. Deci, E.L., Ryan, R.M. The "What" and "Why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the Self-determination of Behavior. *Psychology Inquiry* (11,2000) : 227-269
6. Brian M. Goldman, "The Role of Authenticity in Healthy Psychological Functioning and Subjective Well-Being", p.4
7. Denisoff & Wahrman, *An Introduction to Sociology*, p.141
8. Scott & Fulcher, *Sociology*, pp. 152-153
9. Donald Pizer, "Crane's "Maggie" and American Naturalism" p.189
10. ibid., 41
11. S.Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, p.40
12. ibid., 41
13. ibid., 42
14. Donald Pizer, "Crane's "Maggie" and American Naturalism" p.189
15. ibid., 189
16. David Watson, *Self-Directed Behavior*, p.3
17. Sennett, R. *The Uses of Disorder*, p.40
18. Denisoff & Wahrman, *An Introduction to Sociology*, p.141
19. ibid., p.19
20. Christine Overall, "What's Wrong With Prostitution" Evaluating Sex Work," p.722
21. Scott A. Anderson, "Prostitution and Sexual Autonomy", p.16
22. ibid., 6
23. S.Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, p.58
24. ibid., 58
25. ibid., 16
26. ibid., 29
27. ibid., 29
28. Gullason, "Tragedy and Melodrama in Maggie," p.252
29. S. Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of The Streets*, p.31
30. ibid., p.49
31. ibid., 50
32. ibid., 50
33. ibid., 50
34. ibid., 51
35. ibid., 51
36. Katherine G. Simoneax, "Color Imagery in Crane's *Maggie*, p.91-100
37. Wrong, D: "The Oversocialized Concept of Man in Modern Sociology", *American Soc.Review*, 26
38. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p.26
39. Jordana Tiger, "Authenticity as an Avenue to Living an Awesome Life", p.1
40. Thelma Mariano, "Kick the Approval Habit," p.1

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