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THE USES OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST  
IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL OF THE 1890s:  
CRANE'S MAGGIE, DREISER'S CARRIE,  
CHOPIN'S EDNA PONTELLIER

I propose to bring together three American novels of the 1890s. All three have become securely established as classics of national literature. All three feature heroines in their centers and by this characteristic participate in the realist-naturalist phenomenon of exploring new thematic: social, philosophical, and psychological concerns through the medium of the female protagonist. Whereas Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* still appeared more of an exception than the rule, with the great realists, European as well as American, a woman character in the center of the novel became almost more usual than a man. Evidently, with the realists, the tissue of society could not be properly examined without analysing marital and familial relations. Writers of the naturalist generation make further use of this innovation.

It seems, however, pertinent to notice that Hawthorne employed a female protagonist in *The Scarlet Letter* because a woman on her own, deprived of the protection of a husband, was unconditionally exposed to the chastisement of the normative system. Setting Hester, rather than any of the male characters, directly in conflict with the repressive Puritan society dramatizes the central issue of the novel. Because Hester is a woman, her life is more open to external pressures and so her battle to justify her own right to self-determination must seem more heroic. It is, I suggest, a similar recognition of the relatively greater openness of female life to the external determinants that the naturalist writers share with Hawthorne. But, of course, they utilize the perception from within a different philosophical and aesthetic context.

My definition of naturalism follows the argument of the chapter on "Naturalism and the Languages of Determinism" in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. There Lee Clark Mitchell maintains that "American literary naturalists are bound together by historical context and

philosophical determinism" and not by any "particular attitude or assumption, ... specific technique or style". ... "The particular constellation of influences at work on writers now thought of as naturalists disappeared with World War I. By contrast, realism is generally agreed to transcend a specifically historical era, since it seemed to depend on a set of mimetic conventions coterminous with the life of the novel" (p. 545).

Even publication stories of the selected novels underline the intensity of the historical conditioning at that literary moment. All three books became something of publishing scandals and their distribution was obstructed. Crane felt that he had to release *Maggie. A Girl of the Streets* (1893)<sup>1</sup> under the assumed name of Johnston Smith. Dreiser was so discouraged with the publisher's treatment and the critical reception of *Sister Carrie* (1900)<sup>2</sup> that he stopped writing fiction for several years. *The Awakening* (1899)<sup>3</sup> also came as a shock to the genteel reading public, causing hostility among the critics and bitterness for the author. Another novel relevant here is Hamlin Garland's *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895) whose text, however, I could not locate in Poland. And one can look to Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) for further exploration of almost all the thematic concerns of the aforementioned books.

The earliest of the stories, Crane's *Maggie. A Girl of the Streets*, is a New York slum novel whose highly stylized setting is to convey the brutality, not so much of a particular social milieu, as of the Universe. Naked force and fighting instinct rule throughout. Individuals assert themselves in such a world through violence inflicted on others. Their aspirations and pleasures exclusively concern the gratification of appetite. In the well known opening of the novel small boys fight with elemental abandon and fury while the indifference of adult spectators sanctions youth violence as the norm. The scene leads in crescendo to a series of fights between adults and then between adults and children. Finally, it is Maggie who gets trapped and beaten while Jimmy is listening to her screams from the safe distance of the hallway. He does not venture to help his sister, though a moment ago she was trying to give him whatever sympathy and comfort she could offer under the circumstances.

When the initial series of fights subsides, we learn in the very first sentence of chapter IV that "The babe, Tommie, died". He was, of course, the weakest one and "He went away in a white, insignificant coffin, his small waxen hand clutching a flower that the girl, Maggie, had stolen from

<sup>1</sup> S. Crane, *Prose and Poetry* (New York: The Library of America, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Th. Dreiser, *Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt. Twelve Men* (New York: The Library of America, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> K. Chopin, *The Awakening* (London: The Women's Press, 1978<sup>2</sup>).

an Italian". Maggie is thus marked as the next one to go in some "insignificant" way, for her responses of clumsy tenderness and craving for beauty express a strain of weakness that in a reality governed by self-serving instincts associates her with the "babe". Unlike her mother, who can fight back and win the upper hand in contests with the children's father, Maggie has no fighting instinct. Her basic instinct is for love. That it does not develop into self-love and self-protection is precisely what makes Maggie unfit to survive. Maggie's mother takes it out, in fits of drunken fury, on whoever and whatever comes her way. Maggie, by contrast, seeks escape in the fictional reality of the melodrama shows, to which Pete takes her in an effort to impress on her his superiority of taste and powers:

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 imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory. (p. 37)

Thus *Maggie* is hardly a slum novel in the sense of aspiring to a credible, full picture of slum life. Much more, it is a programmatic novel of a young writer fascinated by the deterministic view of the Universe. The slum setting becomes stylized so that it represents a world governed by primitive instinct and brutalized strength. The contrasted women figures in it, i.e. Maggie and her mother, are equally stylized to show the alternatives available: adjustment with all its repulsive consequences or elimination with all the betrayal and disillusionment involved. In the surroundings dominated by physical violence, where emotional bonds and moral norms are empty conventions skillfully manipulated for the gratification of selfish interests, Maggie with her melodramatic cravings for beauty and moral order stands for the helpless, and hopeless, doomed romantic attitude. Verisimilitude is not the point. The point is to inculcate the bleak truth of the deterministic vision and Maggie serves both as a foil to it and as demonstration of the workings of its inexorable law.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Many critics have commented on Crane's acquaintance with the theories of Darwin, on Maggie's utter passivity, and on the ideological inconsistency of the novel which, on the one hand, seems to ask for some sympathy for Maggie and on the other, to postulate nothing but outraged revulsion as reaction to the remaining characters. If everybody is absolutely determined by circumstances, everybody is equally innocent and deserving of sympathy, the usual argument goes. My own position coincides with Donald B. Gibson's statement at the end of his chapter "Crane Among the Darwinians": "... *Maggie* has at its center a completely passive character, one incapable of dealing with her environment in any manner. The ambivalent attitude expressed by Crane toward such people should perhaps suggest his dissatisfaction with the deterministic scheme. He could not accept it nor could he let it go"

In a manner looking forward to *The Sound and the Fury*, the degradation to prostitution and the squandering of Maggie's capacity for love symbolically assess the nature of reality under the new law. In other words, Maggie's romantic qualities fall victim to the doctrine of Social Darwinism. But unlike *The Sound and the Fury*, where Caddie's fall is followed by the corruption of her daughter, Crane's novel has to end with Maggie's death since the essence of the cultural change lies not in the commercialization of old values but in the recognition of the brutal mechanisms of personal survival. In the new scheme they have nothing to do with virtue or moral order but everything to do with physical advantage, with aggression and violence. Crane thus shares the insight of some of the most important American writers that the female experience visibly indicates developments in the culture, that woman's situation is the barometer of change.

Resembling Crane's later works in its acceptance of the deterministic outlook, *Maggie* is less like them in the helplessness of its moral outrage discernible behind the savage irony. The choice between Maggie's fate and her mother's fate is really no choice at all, merely a demonstration that the social survival of the fittest means, in fact, the survival of the animal in man. The centrality of the female protagonists in the novel dramatizes the ruthless law since both the annihilation of the young potential for purity and love in Maggie and the beastly degradation of the ideal of motherhood in the character of her mother mock the dearest and the most sentimentalized of the romantic and genteel cultural conventions. Crane's more mature works will go beyond the simple focus on the mercilessness of the rules of survival. More typically, they will point to ways in which man wrestles his humanity from the inhuman forces that govern the Universe, regardless of how disproportionately little strength he commands. These later works, however, usually feature male protagonists. In *Maggie* Crane needed an absolutely helpless figure in the center. Who could be more appropriate than a girl endowed, except for her background, with the characteristics of the romantic virgin?

It is a well-known fact that Carrie Meeber combines in her career the experience of the Dreiser siblings. She is literally Theodore Dreiser's sister and young Theodore himself, who full of wonder lust and still at an impressionable age, ventured out to Chicago on his own. Dreiser's at the time shocking lack of moral judgement on Carrie was not so much motivated ideologically by his reading of Spencer, Huxley, and Tyndall or, Crane-like, by his reaction against the romantic upbringing as, somewhat

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(*The Fiction of Stephen Crane*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1968, p. 39). Accordingly, the slum setting in the novel functions first of all as situational context for the new law, and not as a section of social reality to be presented and explored.

similarly to Kate Chopin, by a considerable degree of identification between the writer's and the heroine's personal experience. Dreiser shares Carrie's aspirations and her passion for self-growth overriding every conventional moral scruple. With the keen insight of a destitute immigrant child, he understands that material comfort is the condition *sine qua non* of every kind of advancement.<sup>5</sup> In Carrie's eyes, as in the eyes of that other archetypal visionary of American success – Jay Gatsby, material possessions: nice clothes, beautiful interiors, places where one dines or seeks entertainment acquire a truly transcendent luster. They point to life's ever new, ever finer possibilities. The thing is to keep the inner sensibility alive to the potential. The thing is not to let the imagination die. Thus, more than Maggie, more even than Edna Pontellier, Carrie is a type of an artist, not by her aesthetic sensibility, her talent or discipline, but by the unhesitating fidelity to the vision within. Everything in her life gets subordinated to that vision. The men she lives with are important only by the possibilities they open up and only until she becomes ready to go further on her own.

What makes Carrie so strong is that she is purely instinctive. Yet Dreiser is not interested in exploring the psychology of female sexuality, neither is he really interested in shocking with the novelty of sexual explicitness. Carrie's "fall" is rendered in the novel indirectly, through recounting a dream her virtuous but miserable sister dreams that night. In the dream, she is vainly trying to protect Carrie from going down the old mine shaft or sinking in unfamiliar waters or falling off a rock. Carrie's primary instinct is for improving the quality of her life. The nature of the improvement is not very specific. She wants what at the moment she does not have but what her range of vision at the particular stage of her development makes her capable of appreciating. Drouet with his showy elegance must precede the quality conscious style of Hurstwood, just as the chorus-girl success naturally comes before dreams of a serious acting career. Carrie's vision, thus, is a matter of instinct, of developing and educating through experience an appetite for the quality of life, more than it is a product of conscious aspiration to some aesthetic or personal goal. Incorporated in Carrie is an

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Kazin expressed most sensitively the instinctive quality of Dreiser's insight into what drove American life in the last quarter of 19th century: "... Dreiser was walking the streets of Chicago, the symbolic city which contained all that was aggressive and intoxicating in the new frontier world that lived for the mad pace of bull markets and the joys of accumulation. He was not of that world, but he understood it. Who could resist the yearning to get rich, to scatter champagne, to live in lobster palaces, to sport the gaudy clothes of the new rich? It was easy enough for those who had made a religion of their desire; it was easier still for a poor young writer who had been so hurt by poverty and the poor that the call of power was the call of life" (*On Native Grounds*, New York: Doubleday, 1956, p. 63-4). Leslie Fiedler called *Sister Carrie* "a Portrait of the Artist as a Girl Gone Wrong" (*Love and Death in the American Novel*, revised edition, New York: Stein and Day, 1975, p. 252).

insatiable human urge to move beyond what is given. When this instinct is lost, when it no longer provides the driving force, the march of life turns into sliding toward death, as Hurstwood's decay and ruin demonstrate. Although Carrie does not become a mother, she nevertheless personifies the life principle. Its essence for Dreiser is not nourishment but aspiration, the constant crying of the inner voice "I want, I want, I want". Carrie's figure becomes symbolized in consonance with such an expansive, romanticized conception of determinism. She prefigures the later female protagonists of *The Great Gatsby*, *Manhattan Transfer* or *The Day of the Locust*, whose main function in the novels is to symbolize the allurements and disillusionment of the mirages of desire. But whereas Daisy Buchanan, Ellen Thatcher and Fay Greener are held responsible for the moral and physical destruction of their partners to exactly the extent to which the male protagonists have been seduced by the false values of the culture which the women embody, Carrie is free from all responsibility. This is because Carrie is simply the law of life. The other side of it is Hurstwood, who incorporates the law of death. The sympathy we feel for Carrie has little to do with morality or the lack of it and everything to do with choosing life rather than death. It is instinctive like Carrie herself: Dreiser's sister, but first of all – ours.

Unlike Maggie, who embodied a sentimentalized stereotype of the female capacity for love and so had to be destroyed in confrontation with life ruled by the principle of adjustment for survival, unlike Edna Pontellier, who wanting to test the power of the many determinants preventing her from leading an authentic life, eventually had to confront the biological trap of motherhood, Carrie is helped rather than hindered in her ascent by the recognition of her gender and her sexuality as marketable goods. Realizing quickly that hard work, no matter how virtuous, will never give her access to the things she desires, Carrie as a woman still has resources on which to draw at the start of her career without coming in conflict with the law (at it happened in the case of Dreiser's later male hero). If for Edna Pontellier the recognition of her own sexuality becomes an added vulnerability, Carrie, from very early in the game, treats her body and her emotions as she does the men she lives with, as instruments for pursuing her aspirations. Her sex and sexuality become a resource in her struggle for the position of advantage. The price of such an abuse of herself is the emotional emptiness she feels at the end of the novel, when she realizes with some pain that her audiences also treat her merely instrumentally, that her friends "bow and smile in acknowledgement of her success" (p. 453) but that in fact she is alone pursuing a mirage "of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hills of the world." (p. 455)

*The Awakening* takes a different attitude. The initial premise of this novel seems the exact reversal of the premise in Henry James's *The Portrait*

*of a Lady* (1881). While Isabel Archer began with a willful insistence on choosing her own way in life and in the climax of the story accepted full responsibility for her mistaken decision, Edna Pontellier's initial discovery is precisely that she never knew what she was doing, even when she was getting married and having children. Edna's drama then is a struggle not for the freedom to shape but to unshape her life, to disentangle it from the determinants that have moulded her fate without her own conscious consent. Edna wants to shed responsibilities and dependencies that had beset her while, so to say, she was not looking. She is prepared to accept only those that are vitally related to her new, self-determining identity. Edna's program, thus, is a program of psychological realism, a Jamesian program and a Jamesian ambition. Her findings, however, are convergent with the postulates of naturalism: she cannot free herself from the forces that pull at the strings of her life. Even if she defies the conventions of social respectability, even if, conveniently, she may feel that her children are well taken care of, there still remain her own sexual instincts which betray her into relations she refuses to accept as part of her real self. Old doctor Mandelet formulates the principle of life's brutal ways most clearly:

The trouble is ... that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature, a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost. (p. 184)

In her struggle for the right to self-determination Edna needs, first of all, a partner who would have courage equal to her own in defying the conventions of respectability, yet at the same time refuse to take advantage of her, even when aware of her vulnerability. The two men she gets entangled with apart from her husband illustrate the difficulty, more, the impossibility of finding such a partner. Arobin can defy the conventions but he has no scruples exploiting "the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements". Robert, on the other hand, lacks the nerve to stake his life on their love. Still, in the final count, in choosing death it is nature more than the accepted social norms that Edna defies. Nature has trapped her into a life-long responsibility for her children:

The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. (p. 189)

The finality of her entrapment in the bondage of motherhood, from which there is no escape except through a radical denial of life, gets inculcated during Edna's participation in Madame Rattignolle's labour

ordeal. She got through her own dazed by the "odor of chloroform", hardly conscious of the brutality of this supposedly supreme female experience. Madame Rattignolle's injunction "Think of the children", she realizes, constitutes the motto of every mother's life after that. And so swimming to her death, Edna asserts her freedom to choose against the deterministic power of nature. But, exactly as in the world of *Maggie*, rebellion against the animal in man equals inability to survive. Despite the challenging, triumphant gestures Edna makes at the end of the novel undressing "to stand naked under the sky!", despite the seductive sensuousness of the closing sentence: "There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air", the fact of the suicide as an escape from the life, whose pattern is dictated rather than chosen, retains its dead end quality and its pessimistic ring. The alternatives are presented in the self-sacrificing life of Madame Rattignolle, who cultivates even her musical talent only in the service of family life or in Mademoiselle Reisz, whose life seems impoverished and distorted by the fact that she had to give up not only the expectation of material comfort but so much of the human intercourse in order to remain loyal to her art. Edna, it seems, was asking more than it is humanly possible to have.

Her story is, in fact, a version of Huck Finn's story without the romantic benefit of the "Territory" for which to "light out". The Territory is not there not so much because the frontier had been closed (it was already closed in Huck's time as well). The Territory is not there because Edna became painfully conscious of the lifelong responsibility of motherhood, which she did not knowingly assume, yet is pressed to accept as the only fulfillment of womanhood. *The Awakening* thus points to all the twentieth century novels in whose centers stands a single protagonist trying to secure for herself (or himself) a margin of freedom for personal fulfillment in the conditions of intensifying entrapment.

What all the three novels share in their use of the female protagonist is the awareness of the several ways in which both culture and nature turn women into objects, more often than not with women's own, unconscious or willing co-operation. The realization makes it clear why a female protagonist must have seemed attractive to the naturalist writers. A woman was obviously more drastically determined in her life choices. The forces that converged on her life were comparable in their intensity to the forces that converged on the male protagonists in such extreme situations, as for instance, war.

Heroines in the center of the three novels help to expose the determinism of human existences but, even more importantly, they highlight the moral indifference of the mechanisms of survival. Kate Chopin's perception goes furthest here, since she seems to be suggesting that it is nature itself that



turns an individual woman, a fine sensibility and often a talent, into but an instrument for the prolongation of the species, with utter disregard for her personal aspirations. Social conventions and the structure of family life only reinforce that basic pattern. The bitterness of the perception sends Edna swimming to the point of no return. Despite its enticing sensuousness, the ending of this novel seems to me bleakly in tune with the naturalist vision. On the other hand Carrie, who does not have to deal with the dilemma of motherhood, seems most modern in her recognition of the reality of the power struggle at the base of the whole game of love and life. She is quick to recognize that her gender and sexual attractiveness are her only weapon. Wielding it freely, she follows the instinct for self-advancement only to realize at the end of the novel that she too is being used, even as she has used others. Except for the act of suicide, we never really stand in the center of our lives able to take full charge. Female protagonists proved serviceable to the naturalist writers in inculcating this truth. Beyond that, the way in which the three novels of the 1890s present and use their female protagonists points to the developments in the American novel in the twentieth century, where women figures powerfully absorb major symbolic functions and female experience, intimately analyzed becomes emblematic of the dilemma of modern man, who torn between the need for emotional fulfillment and aspirations to power and career repeatedly finds the two desires incompatible.

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#### FUNKCJONOWANIE POSTACI KOBIECYCH W POWIEŚCI AMERYKAŃSKIEJ KOŃCA XIX WIEKU

W powieściach amerykańskich publikowanych w ostatniej dekadzie XIX w. i początkach XX w. szczególnie uderza częste występowanie postaci kobiecych w rolach głównych bohaterów. Do analizowanych w artykule powieści: *Maggie. A Girl of the Streets* Stephena Crane'a, *Sister Carrie* Theodore'a Dreisera i *The Awakening* Kate Chopin nietrudno byłoby dodawać dalsze tytuły, np. *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* Hamlina Garlanda (1895) czy *The House of Mirth* Edith Wharton (1905). Tę nagle eksponowaną rolę postaci kobiecych, kontrastującą z tradycją amerykańskiej powieści romantycznej, która właściwie (z wyjątkiem *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne'a) ignorowała kobiety, wiąże po przeanalizowaniu powieści z filozoficznym i ideologicznym wpływem naturalistycznego determinizmu. Kobiety w rolach głównych bohaterek pozwalały pisarzom ze szczególną ostrością demonstrować potęgę i bezwzględność sił warunkujących

jednostkowe losy ludzkie, a także lub może przede wszystkim – ich całkowicie amoralny charakter. W ten sposób losy bohaterek nie tylko ilustrowały, ale wręcz zostały utożsamione z istotą przemian kulturowych, funkcjonowanie zaś postaci kobiecych w takich powieściach, jak np. *Siostra Carrie* Dreisera zapowiada już wyraźnie symboliczną rolę kobiet w reprezentatywnych powieściach amerykańskiego modernizmu: *Wściekłości i wrzasku* Faulknera, *Wielkim Gatsbym* Fitzgeralda czy *Dniu Szarańczy* Westa.