

abraham cahan,
stephen crane
and the romantic tenement tale
of the nineties

david m. fine

American Studies has published a number of related reinterpretations of urban fiction, poverty and sex rôles in this period; several provide solid reinforcement for Mr. Fine's arguments; others suggest qualifications. Being inveterately immodest about the quality of studies published in the journal, we enthusiastically commend the following to readers of this article:

SHELDON NORMAN GREBSTSIN, "DREISSER'S VICTORIAN VAMP," IV, 3. Adds depth to what Mr. Fine says about the fallen urban woman: Carrie "is precisely that mixture of strengths and weaknesses which the nineteenth century conceived her to be, but . . . is at the same time in her unrequited sexual sins the first modern heroine."

KENNY A. JACKSON, "ROBERT HERRICK'S USE OF CHICAGO," V, 1, 24. A strong study of the reaction of another novelist of the same period to the city.

NORTON MEZVINSKI, "AN IDEA OF FEMALE SUPERIORITY," II, 1, 19. Evidence from the history of the WCTU, of all things, on contemporary definitions of the nature of women.

WILLIAM W. NICHOLS, "A CHANGING ATTITUDE TOWARD POVERTY IN *The Ladies' Home Journal*: 1885-1919," V, 1, 13. Sometimes the urban poor are *not* sentimentalized in commercial slum fiction. The middle-class "guide" appears in both articles.

ROBERT W. SCHNEIDER, "STEPHEN CRANE AND THE DRAMA OF TRANSITION: A STUDY IN HISTORICAL CONTINUITY," II, 1, 1.

———. "FRANK NORRIS: THE NATURALIST AS VICTORIAN," III, 1, 13. Two terrific reinterpretations which serve as correctives to accounts which see naturalists (is Crane really a naturalist?) as more radical than they really were.

WARREN I. TITUS, "THE PROGRESSIVISM OF THE MUCKRAKERS," I, 1, 10. Intellectually related to the two articles by Schneider, and useful for providing political correlative for what was going on aesthetically.

—SGL

In 1896 Appleton's published Abraham Cahan's first novel, *Yekl, A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, and reissued Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, brought out privately and pseudonymously three years

earlier. Neither the Bowery nor the immigrant Lower East Side of New York were new subjects for fiction at that time. For more than a decade magazines had been featuring stories and sketches of slum life. The city's "other half" had become, by the mid-nineties, a product of proven marketability, one which the writer who wanted to demonstrate his contemporary social relevance could hardly resist. What made the almost simultaneous printing of *Maggie* and *Yekl* significant was that in these two slim first books, Crane and Cahan—then unknown to each other and from entirely different backgrounds—launched a dual assault upon the romantic conventions which had come to be identified with the tenement tale. While neither author was able to avoid entirely the condescending tone which had always characterized the fictional treatment of the poor, the protagonists in these two novels were far different from the self-sacrificing, noble, and heroic tenement dwellers readers of the nineties had come to expect in their fiction. The slum denizens of Crane and Cahan were vain, assertive and self-seeking, and in portraying them as such, the authors undermined the sentimental assumptions of the popular tenement tale.

No two contemporaries could seem less alike. In background, training, and temperament they belonged to different worlds. Cahan, the son of an impoverished Talmudic scholar from a small *shtetl* near Vilna, emigrated penniless to America in 1882 among the advanced guard of the large Russian-Jewish migration which was to last through the second decade of the twentieth century. At the age of thirty-six he had established himself as a cultural leader of New York's Lower East Side ghetto. He had worked in sweatshops, served as a "walking delegate" to the new unions springing up in the ghetto, taught English to immigrants in East Side night schools, helped edit the Yiddish *Arbeiter Zeitung* and published articles and sketches in both the Yiddish and English press.¹ His active life would continue for more than a half-century, dominated by his successful editorship of the *Forward*, which he turned into America's largest circulation Yiddish daily. With the possible exception of *The Rise of David Levinsky*, his fiction would be forgotten.

Crane, by direct contrast, was the son of an upper-middle class New Jersey Methodist minister. He spent his adolescent years not in a Russian *shtetl* but in Asbury Park, an affluent New Jersey resort. And his knowledge of the slums was not, like Cahan's, the product of enforced daily contact, but of his fascination with the submerged population of the Bowery and Tenderloin districts, where he spent a good deal of his time between 1891 and 1895. *Maggie* was written early in 1893 when he was living with some students in an East Side rooming house.² When the book was reissued in 1896, he was only twenty-five, and he would live but four more years, his fame as a writer assured with the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1895.

If, then, Cahan drew his materials directly from the life he knew first-hand and Crane from life observed from the perspective of an out-

sider, the two stories don't reveal this difference. A similar ironic and detached point-of-view pervades both books. William Dean Howells noted the similarity between the two novels and paired them in a review for the New York *World*. Of Cahan he said:

I cannot help thinking that we have in him a writer of foreign birth who will do honor to American letters. . . . There is much that is painful in his story, as there is much that is dreadful in Mr. Crane's work, but both of these writers persuade us that they have told the truth and that as conditions have made the people they deal with, we see their people.³

Howells was no stranger either to Cahan or Crane in 1896. He had read the 1893 version of *Maggie*—Crane had sent him a copy—and was impressed by the young writer's uncompromising urban realism. In January of 1896, after *Red Badge* was published but before the reissue of *Maggie*, he wrote Crane, "For me, I remain true to my first love, 'Maggie.' That is better than all the 'Black Riders' and 'Red Badges.'" ⁴ He went on to contribute the Preface to the 1896 English edition of *Maggie*. Howells was also interested in Cahan's early work. Attracted to an early ghetto sketch, "A Providential Match,"⁵ he sought out Cahan in 1892. They met in Howells' home, and encouraged by the famous man to write a novel about ghetto life, Cahan set out to work on *Yekl*, which he completed in 1895.⁶ Howells was pleased with the manuscript and saw to its publication with Appleton's after both Harper's and McClure's had rejected it.

Despite Howells' praise, both books were uniformly denounced for their sordid treatment of the lower class. Reviewers did not question the propriety of treating slum or ghetto material in fiction; the tenement tale was well established both in England and America and stories of slum life were enjoying a vogue. What they attacked was the relentless depiction of rapacity and avidity they found in these books. The reviewer for *The Nation*, for instance, labeled Crane "a promising writer of the animalistic school," which he defined as "a species of realism which deals with man considered as an animal . . . but which neglects, so far as possible, any higher qualities which distinguish him from his four-footed relatives, such as humor, thought, reason, aspiration, affection, morality, and religion." Similarly, the reviewer of *Yekl* in *The Bookman* asked, "Does Mr. Cahan wish us to believe that the types of life of the ghetto thus represented are truly representative of his race? That it is as sordid, as mean, as cruel, as degraded as he has shown it to be? For . . . throughout the work there is not a gleam of spirituality, unselfishness, or nobility."⁷

To the reviewers both books exuded the odors of "Zola's stinkpot." *Maggie* and *Yekl* had become part of the larger battle fought over the limits of realism in the eighties and nineties. Cahan and Crane, like Zola

before them, were guilty of turning men into beasts. How far they had come from the romantic conception of the poor in the tenement tale tradition can be seen by looking briefly at that tradition.

The genesis of tenement fiction both in England and America can be traced first of all to the spread of slums throughout such cities as London, New York and Chicago in the late nineteenth century and to the warnings of the social consequences of slums presented in such books as Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes in New York* (1872), Charles Booth's multi-volume *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1889 and 1897) and Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Articles on slum life were appearing in all the journals advocating a concern with contemporary problems. In 1890 *Arena* introduced a series on poverty in American cities and under Benjamin Orange Flower's editorship continued throughout the decade to feature exposes of the slums.⁸ In 1891 *Scribner's* began a symposium on "The Poor in the Great Cities" (published in book form in 1896) which featured such contributors as Jacob Riis, Walter Besant and Joseph Kirkland. The rapid growth of the immigrant population, the proliferation of labor warfare, the physical spread and increasing density levels of the city's traditional slum areas and the public outcries over rising rates of urban crime, vice and disease all combined to make the slums increasingly visible and topical as the century drew to a close. The American City had taken on a foreign and tattered appearance which suggested endless literary opportunities.

Moreover, although neither the new realism nor naturalism necessitated the treatment of the urban poor, writers were drawn to the subject because it offered a radical deviation from the genteel, Victorian norm of the drawing room. They sought to mirror in fiction what the social scientists, settlement workers and reform journalists were revealing about the new urban America. But however realistic was the impulse behind slum fiction, the product was generally romantic and sentimental. The native-born and immigrant poor alike were portrayed in story after story as ignorant and innocent victims of economic forces beyond their control, but free from the moral debilities the journalists and social scientists were linking with destitution. Environment crushes bodies in these tales, but leaves souls untouched. Poverty is rarely degrading; more often it is ennobling. Men are hard-working, honest and uncomplaining; women self-sacrificing, courageous and either inviolable or cruelly betrayed. If the heroine yields to the seducer, it is only after a long, hard struggle, as in the case of Cora Stang, the beautiful slum flower in Edgar Fawcett's *The Evil That Men Do* (1889).

In other words, the daily horrors of slum life, the wretched sweatshop and tenement house conditions which the urban reformers were describing in the press, were often enough dramatized in fiction, but the moral implications of these conditions—the effect on inner character—formed little part in the fiction. Sensational journalistic exposes of the brutal

crimes, bestiality and rapacity bred by slum life may have been an important factor in drawing story tellers to the slums; however, the portrayal of the poor in slum fiction derives more from the conventions of romantic, sentimental nineteenth century fiction than from the contemporary journalistic reports.⁹ Howells, whatever his own squeamishness and ambivalence when it came to the slums,¹⁰ took note of this pervasive sentimentality in slum fiction. In an 1895 editorial on the popularity of Edward Townsend's Bowery gamin, "Chimmie Fadden," he wrote that middle class readers "must have toughness idealized, and they must have the slums cleaned up a little . . . if they are to have them in literature."¹¹

Jacob Riis' work reveals this characteristic shift which occurred when the reform journalism became fiction. In *How the Other Half Lives*, a collection of articles, accompanied by photographs, on New York's slum neighborhoods, he insisted repeatedly that the slum environment is degrading as well as destructive, but in his fictional sketches collected in *Out of Mulberry Street* (1897) the poor retain a kind of moral innocence, faith and idealism in the face of their poverty. A few of his sketches can be cited to illustrate this. In one, a young waif's belief in Santa Claus so touches the older gamins in a dormitory for street youths that they gather their meager savings to fill his Christmas stocking. In another tale, a young tough, arrested when the police break up a gang war, escapes his arresting officers to rescue an infant he sees wander in front of an oncoming streetcar. In still another, an old ghetto slippermaker works day and night at his trade in a tenement flat, depriving himself of food and sleep in order to have *Yom Kippur* day free to worship and fast. Riis claimed in the Preface to *Out of Mulberry Street* that the material for these stories came from "the daily grist of the police hopper in Mulberry Street" (where as a police reporter he was assigned), but his treatment of the material, his nagging insistence on the unsung heroism of his slum dwellers, suggests a stronger fidelity to the conventions of fiction than to the facts the reform journalists—himself included—were digging up.

It is to Riis' credit as a story-teller that he doesn't rescue his characters from their poverty. There are none of the sudden and melodramatic reversals of fortune for the worthy poor which one finds in the slum novels of Dickens and George Gissing in England and Edward Townsend (and of course Horatio Alger) in America. Death is prevalent in these sketches—usually in the form of a bizarre accident resulting from unsafe living and working conditions. Taken collectively, these mawkish stories of Riis all seem to say that the slum environment destroys life but not the indomitable spirit of the poor. Physical impoverishment is not to be equated with spiritual impoverishment.

This blend of cynicism and sentimentality, the stance which resulted perhaps out of necessity from the police reporter's experience, characterizes the greater number of the period's tenement tales. Many of the writers, like Riis, were reporters who found the brief story focusing on the sin-

gle incident—only a step removed from the journalistic sketch—the most congenial medium for depicting slum life. They were more interested in representing the elemental struggle between man and his environment, acted out every day in the slums, than in extended plot or character development. Often a collection of stories set in a single locale (a neighborhood, a block or even a single tenement building) with some of the same characters reappearing gives the semblance of a novel, but in such collections there is rarely any continuity of plot from episode to episode. The practice of grouping tenement sketches in this way may have originated with Arthur Morrison's London collection, *Tales of Mean Street* (1894). It appears in America in James Sullivan's *Tenement Tales of New York* (1895—largely West Side New York Irish), Julian Ralph's *People We Pass* (1896—German and Irish youths in a single New York tenement house), Alvan Francis Sanborn's *Moody's Lodging House and Other Sketches* (1895—Boston's poor Irish settlement around Turley Street) and Isaac Kahn Friedman's *The Lucky Number* (1896—a mixed immigrant community in Chicago).

Another way of grouping tenement tales was around a central character whose adventures could be followed in serialized publication. By far the favorite of such heroes was the plucky, resourceful street arab—the kind Riis liked to write about and Edward Townsend so successfully exploited in his “Chimmie Fadden” sketches for the *New York Sun*. “Chimmie” is a Bowery tough who rescues the upper class heroine when she is assailed on a “slumming trip” and is rewarded by being given a job as footman to the girl's father, affectionately referred to by Chimmie as “'is whiskers.” In a long series of monologues Chimmie tells of his experiences among polite society, allowing Townsend to reveal through his young innocent the fundamental moral honesty of the slum boy in contrast to the deviousness and connivances of the rich.¹² Other popular versions of the idealized tough presented in serialized form were George Ade's “Artie” and Richard Outcault's comic-strip creation, “The Yellow Kid” (born in the Sunday edition of the *New York World* in 1895).

The focus in fiction on the street tough is not surprising in light of the concern for the plight of the slum child voiced by all the reformers. “The reform of poverty and ignorance must begin with the children,” Riis maintained.¹³ The slum child was both the most pathetic victim and, if he could be reached through schools, settlements and the church, the best hope for an end to the recurring cycle of urban crime, immorality and disease. What emerges in the fiction, though, is the street youth as hero more than as victim. Unlike Jimmie, the brother of Crane's heroine, the gamins in the popular slum fiction are more valorous than discrete, and they are kept occupied in tale after tale in rescuing women from would-be assailants or burning tenement buildings, and children from the paths of oncoming trains. A slight variation on this theme is James Sullivan's “Slob Murphey” (in *Tenement Tales of New York*). “Slob” is

despised by the neighbors in his West Side Irish tenement house because of his often cruel practical jokes. But when he lies dying after being crushed beneath the hooves of a milk-wagon horse, he experiences beatific visions and in his last words implores his father to give up the drinking which has caused the family so much misery.

In the same way that the idealized gamin in most slum fiction differs from Crane's Jimmie, the slum girl who appears in these stories offers a striking contrast to Maggie. As James Colvert points out in his introduction to the recent Virginia edition of Crane's *Bowery Tales*, Crane adopted many of the attitudes and assumptions about the slum girl from the popular reform tracts. Whether or not he had actually read the works of Thomas DeWitt Talmadge (author of *The Mask Torn Off*), J. W. Buel (*Metropolitan Life Unveiled*) or Jacob Riis, he was well aware of the prevalent point of view which regarded the slum girl in terms of virtue overwhelmed by a corrupting environment.¹⁴ Relating *Maggie* to attitudes found in reform tracts of the eighties and nineties is a familiar strain in recent Crane scholarship, one which has all but replaced the earlier emphasis on Crane's debt to Zola and French naturalistic sources.¹⁵ Marcus Cunliffe in a short piece in 1955 outlined some of the "American Background" of *Maggie*, and since then this has been a common element in discussions of the work.¹⁶

The treatment of Crane's heroine certainly follows the broader lines of the "virtue overwhelmed" theme found both in the reform tracts and the popular fiction, but Crane's story differs from other versions in his having resisted casting Maggie in the role of the long-suffering heroine struggling to maintain her purity against the wiles of a ruthless seducer—often from the upper classes. In Fawcett's *The Evil That Men Do*, for instance, the heroine succumbs to her seducer only after a long, hard struggle—with him and with herself. She ends, typically, as a prostitute and finally is murdered. A far different version of the slum flower is the heroine of Edward Townsend's *A Daughter of the Tenements* (1895), who rises from the world of sweatshops and fruit-stands to a successful career as a dancer. In a letter to Katherine Harris, to whom, presumably, he had sent a copy of the 1896 *Maggie*, Crane wrote with what seems like some bitterness: "My good friend Edward Townsend—have you read his *Daughter of the Tenements?*—has another opinion of the Bowery and it is certain to be better than mine."¹⁷

One further observation about the popular slum romances before we return to Crane and Cahan: in most of these stories we see the poor through the eyes of a sympathetic, benevolent middle class narrator drawn to the slums as a reporter, a settlement worker or a young writer in search of urban local color. Sometimes the narrator is a young writer who, like Crane in his early Bowery sketches, has undergone "an experiment in misery," disguising himself as a Bowery bum in order to discover the truth about the "other half." The point of view of this persona, then, is

like that of his readers, whom he conducts on a kind of guided tour of the slums. Alvan Francis Sanborn, who in *Moody's Lodging House and Other Tenement Sketches* (1895) and *Meg McIntyre's Raffle and Other Stories* (1896) provides a wealth of Boston Irish local color, is just such a narrator. He claims to have disguised himself as an unemployed laborer to live among the poor in a cheap rooming house. What he discovers among the "tough" Irish, though, is what Bret Harte discovered among the rough-and-tumble gamblers and prostitutes of the Sierra mining towns: honor among thieves and a deep sense of loyalty and sacrifice for which, he says, one looks in vain among the "better" classes. Brander Matthews, a professor of literature at Columbia, invented for his *Manhattan Vignettes* (1894) the narrator Rupert de Ruyter, a Knickerbocker writer whose search for local color leads him to the Mulberry Street Italian ghetto, where he finds the life "unfailingy interesting." Such narrators gave to middle class readers the kind of poor they wanted to believe in and expected in their fiction. Occasionally, derisive stereotypes appeared, reinforcing some of the community attitudes toward particular immigrant groups. We have, for instance, the stiletto-bearing Italian in Matthews' "In Search of Local Color" (*Manhattan Vignettes*) and the vulgar, brutal Jewish "sweater" in James Sullivan's "Cohen's Figure" (*Tenement Tales of New York*), but generally the portraits were idealized and sentimentalized, evading some of the unpleasant truths the reformers were uncovering.

A short summary like this can, of course, only hint at the direction the tenement tale was taking in these years. But it should serve to set off the achievements of Cahan and Crane, whose slum novels were published at the height of the popular literary interest in the urban poor.

Aggressive, self-seeking and self-justifying, the characters in *Maggie* and *Yekl* recognize no obligations to others if such obligations stand in the way of their desires. As Pete uses and discards Maggie when Nell comes along, Yekl abandons his "greenhorn" wife and child for the more Americanized Mamie Fein. Uncomfortable moral insights or sensations are dismissed as not being applicable to them. Pete insists to the end that he is a "good feller." Jimmie dismisses the similarity between his own seductions and Pete's violation of his sister. He "wondered vaguely, if some of the women of his acquaintance had brothers. Nevertheless, his mind did not for an instant confuse himself with those brothers nor his sister with theirs."¹⁸ He will not admit to himself for long the thought that Maggie "would have been more firmly good had she better known why." (115) Maggie, after her "fall," instinctively shrinks from the "painted" women in the music hall. (108) And disconsolate Mary Johnson cries "I'll fergive her" after the girl's suicide. Similarly, Yekl ("Jake") justifies his abandonment of his wife by blaming her for holding him back. Like Pete, he sees himself as a gallant, and wallows in self-pity at his fate after Gitl and their child arrive in America:



MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD: A plate from a condescending do-gooder tract (Lillian W. Betts, *The Leaven in a Great City*, 1902) of generally Progressive sentiment. The book suggests, by the by, the complexity of middle class attitudes toward the tenement dweller, who is seen both as an object of sentimental hopes and as a scary and "swarthy" menace to national virtue. We run the cut because of the mention of dancing in the ghetto (see page 103).

All his achievements seemed wiped out by a sudden stroke of ill fate. He thought himself a martyr, an innocent exile from a world to which he belonged by right; and he frequently felt sobs of self-pity mounting in his throat.¹⁹

Earlier, when he saw his three-year-old son at Ellis Island, he "began to regard him, with his mother, as one great obstacle dropped from heaven, as it were, in his way." (75-76)

Jake is not in love with Mamie, but with the image of himself as a "Yankee" or an "American feller," an image sustained by the impression that he is an attractive blade to Mamie and the other working girls who attended "Professor" Joe Peltner's ghetto dancing academy. Maggie too is victimized by a false estimate of herself and her world. She is enthralled by the glitter of the tawdry music halls to which Pete takes her and believes literally in the "transcendental realism" of the Bowery melodramas, which celebrated the "hero's erratic march from poverty in the first act, to wealth and triumph in the final one." (71) Trapped by inadequate romantic conceptions of life, Maggie and Jake fall victim to a world which will not come around to them. They attach themselves to false ideals and to false lovers. Pete and Mamie are their deliverers,

avatars of the bright night world outside. Pete, Maggie's "knight," swaggers into the Johnson flat and

As Jimmie and his friend exchanged tales descriptive of their prowess, Maggie leaned back in the shadow. Her eyes dwelt wonderingly and rather wistfully upon Pete's face. The broken furniture, grimey walls, and general disorder and dirt of her home of a sudden appeared before her and began to take a potential aspect. Pete's aristocratic person looked as if it might soil. (47)

This passage can be compared to one in *Yekl* in which Mamie, overdressed, struts into Jake's tenement flat. Just as Maggie sees Pete as her champion, Mamie represents to Jake the possibilities of a larger, freer world, a world to which he had once belonged but from which he was unjustly banished:

Her perfume lingered in his nostrils, taking his breath away. Her venomous gaze stung his heart. She seemed to him elevated above the social plane upon which he had recently . . . stood by her side, nay upon which he had had her at his beck and call; while he was degraded, as it were, wallowing in a mire, from which he yearningly looked up to his former equals, vainly begging for recognition. An uncontrollable desire took possession of him to run after her, to have an explanation, and to swear that he was the same Jake and as much of a Yankee and a gallant as ever. (112-113)

Thus while Pete steps into the Johnson tenement flat to announce to Maggie what the world might hold for her, Mamie calls on Jake to remind him of what he has had and lost. Perhaps Maggie is less to be blamed than Jake. It can be argued that she had little real choice, but to Jake too "environment is a tremendous thing." He is ensnared in a world whose borders are the tenement and sweatshop. Alone, lonely and bored, he had sought out and found—before the arrival of his family—some glitter in the night world of the ghetto, and now with his "greenhorn" wife and a son who hardly knows him on the scene, he misses desperately the glitter.

When Cahan's novel opens, Jake is already enmeshed in Mamie's sleazy world and unwilling to send for his wife. He is the "allrightnik," the recent immigrant who flaunts his claims to being an American by aping the most raffish manners of his adopted land. In much the same way that the opening scene of *Maggie* (Jimmie's valiant struggle for the "honor" of Rum Alley) sets the ironic tone of that book, the first chapter of *Yekl* establishes the pattern for Cahan's novel. Clean-shaven, unlike his bearded fellow-workers, Jake sits at his sewing machine in an East Side sweatshop loudly boasting about his knowledge of American life. He argues the superiority of Boston over New York and speaks knowingly of John L. Sullivan's career and prize-fight betting. In contrast to Bernstein, the presser, who studies English from a book propped up against

his machine, Jake learns his English from life, which to him means boxing, baseball and the dancing academy. To the “ladas” of the ghetto he plays the role of gallant, feeling no compulsion to let it be known that he has a wife and child in Russia waiting for him to send money for a boat ticket. In the land where a Yekl can become a Jake, Gitl and the past come to mean less and less to him. A statement Larzer Ziff has made about Crane’s story applies as well to Cahan’s: “What Maggie is is the result not of the action of her environment on a plastic personality, but rather the reaction of that environment to the proposals made to it by her pretensions and her longings.”²⁰

The proposals made to the environment by both protagonists, it should be pointed out, are not identical. Maggie and Jake seek freedom from intolerable confinement, but the kind of freedom each seeks is different. Whereas Maggie wants only to escape the endless squalor and brutality of her existence at home, Jake wants to escape his “greenhorn” status. He is searching—though in the wrong places—for an American identity and not simply an end to his poverty. Maggie Johnson belongs to an Irish-American family and lives in an Irish enclave in Manhattan, but the fact of her “Irishness” is in no way crucial to the story. Jake’s conflict, on the other hand, is directly related to the fact that he is an East European Jew and a recent immigrant, living culturally on the very margin of American society. Jake is a man who has sold his birthright for a distorted version of Americanization. What the immigrant Jew loses in his attempts to become Americanized is a theme which occupied Cahan throughout his fiction, and which is given its fullest expression in *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917).²¹ As a novel about immigrant acculturation, *Yekl* deals with a subject which became increasingly popular with writers as the vast presence of South and East European immigrants made itself felt in the last decade of the century.

More significant, though, than the difference in the precise focus of the two short novels is the realization that at the height of the popularity of the romantic tenement tale they brazenly defied the conventional attitudes which characterized these tales. In these two novels poverty is not ennobling, women not inviolable, men not always hard-working, stoical and uncomplaining. Poverty does affect character and not for the best. Moreover, in these works there is no middle-class narrator between us and the slums, no kindly guide leading us through the exotic netherworld of the city, interpreting for us, moralizing, justifying. Instead of the romantic slum tale’s predictably and superficially ironic revelations of the nobility of the downtrodden, these two books achieve an irony which is both more profound and more fundamental in the opposition between their protagonists’ deluded, romantic self-images and the reality demonstrated in their actions.

Maggie and *Yekl* were attacked not because slum material was unattractive to a genteel reading public, but because the portraits of the

slum dwellers in these works were not the kinds with which audiences of fiction had become accustomed and felt comfortable. In refusing to conform to the sentimental and romantic assumptions of the popular tenement tale, these two books failed to win the immediate positive recognition they deserved, but in refusing they also brought American fiction a little closer to the twentieth century.

California State University, Long Beach

footnotes

1. Ernest Poole's interview of Cahan, "Abraham Cahan: Socialist, Journalist, Friend of the Ghetto," *The Outlook*, XLIX (28 Oct., 1911), 467-468, is useful as a brief biographical source. An account of Cahan's early career in New York can be found in Ronald Sanders, *The Downtown Jews: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation* (New York, 1969), *passim*.
2. Recent scholarship has corrected the earlier belief that Crane was working on *Maggie* in 1891 while he was a student at Syracuse. He was at that time writing a story about a prostitute, but it cannot be assumed that this story later became *Maggie*. For accounts of the errors in dating, see the introduction by James Colvert to the Virginia edition of *Stephen Crane: The Bowery Tales*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1969) and the introduction to the facsimile (1893) edition edited by Donald Pizer (San Francisco, 1968).
3. "New York Low Life in Fiction," *New York World*, 26 July, 1896, II, 18.
4. *Stephen Crane: Letters*, ed. R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes (New York, 1960), 102.
5. This tale was later included in the collection, *The Imported Bridegroom and other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (New York, Appleton's, 1898). See Sanford Marovitz, "The Lonely New Americans of Abraham Cahan," *American Quarterly*, XX, 2 (Summer, 1968), 205.
6. Rudolph and Clara Kirk, "Abraham Cahan and William Dean Howells: The Story of a Friendship," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, LII (Sept., 1962), 27-57.
7. *The Nation*, LXIII (2 July, 1896), 15; Nancy Houston Banks, "The New York Ghetto," *The Bookman*, IV (Oct. 1896), 157-158. For an English account of Crane in line with the above, see H. D. Trail, "The New Realism," *Fortnightly Review*, LXVIII (Jan., 1897), 63-67.
8. "During the first five years of *Arena*, we published over fifty carefully prepared contributions dealing with the problems of advancing poverty and its attendant evils." Benjamin Orange Flower, *Progressive Men, Women, and Movements of the Past Twenty-five Years* (Boston, 1914), 120.
9. Eric Solomon in *Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1966), discusses in the first chapter the influence of both nineteenth century sentimental fiction and reform journalism on the body of slum fiction produced at the end of the century. Slum fiction, in treatment, seems closer to me to the former than to the latter, though the reform literature may have suggested the literary possibilities of the subject. Solomon's point in this chapter is that *Maggie* parodies both of these conventions.
10. Sanford Marovitz in "Howells and the Ghetto: The Mystery of Misery," *Modern Fiction Studies*, XVI, 3 (1970), 345-362, illustrates the writer-critic's ephemeral and rather shallow commitment to the denizens of the ghetto.
11. *Harper's Weekly*, XXXIX (1 June, 1895), 508.
12. "*Chimmie Fadden*"; *Major Max*; and *Other Stories* (New York: Lovell, Coryell, 1895) is a collection reprinted from sketches which appeared in the *New York Sun* and *San Francisco Argonaut*.
13. *The Poor in Great Cities* (New York: Scribner's, 1896), 92. See also William I. Hull, "The Children of the Other Half," *Arena*, XVII, 91 (June, 1897), 1039-1050.
14. Introduction, *Stephen Crane: The Bowery Tales*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1969), li-iii. *Stephen Crane's Maggie: Text and Context*, ed. Maurice Bassan (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1966), provides a selection from these and other reform writers.
15. Colvert, in the Introduction to *Bowery Tales* cited immediately above, dismisses the likelihood that Crane was influenced by Zola's *L'Assomoir* as has been assumed by many literary historians, among them Lars Ahnebrink, xliii-xlvi. See Milne Holton, "The Sparrow's Fall and the Sparrow's Eyes: Crane's *Maggie*," *Studia Neophilologica*, XLI, 1 (1969), 115-129, for a brief review of the shifting critical perspectives on *Maggie*.
16. Marcus Cunliffe, "Stephen Crane and the American Background of *Maggie*," *American Quarterly*, VII, 1 (Spring, 1955), 31-34. In addition to this piece, those by Solomon, Colvert and Pizer cited above all discuss the novel in the context of contemporary reform documents.
17. Quoted in Edwin Cady, "Stephen Crane: *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*," in Hennig Cohen, ed., *Landmarks of American Writing* (New York, 1969), 179. In the same letter is the famous remark by Crane that "at the root of Bowery life is a sort of cowardice."

18. *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (New York: n.p., 1893), 114. Subsequent page references to *Maggie* shall be from this first (1893) edition and shall be indicated parenthetically in the text.

19. *Yekl, A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (New York: Appleton's, 1896), 93-94. Subsequent page references shall be from this edition and indicated parenthetically in the text.

20. *The American 1890's: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York, 1966), 192.

21. Sanford Marovitz discusses this theme of loss in "The Lonely New Americans of Abraham Cahan," *American Quarterly*, XX, 2 (Summer, 1968), 196-210. My own unpublished dissertation, "The Immigrant Ghetto in American Fiction, 1885-1917" (U.C.L.A., 1969) treats this theme also, 149-180.



Vertical text or markings on the right edge of the page, possibly a page number or a reference code.