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# Understanding the American Subaltern: An Exploration of Complex Literary Characters Through Socio-Cultural Lenses

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Understanding the American Subaltern:

An Exploration of Complex Literary Characters through Socio-Cultural Lenses

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English

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## Abstract

This project involves the exploration of three novels—Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Ann Petry’s *The Street*, and Toni Morrison’s *Sula*—that feature main characters who are members of the American subaltern. By analyzing each of these characters through a combination of theoretical lenses including Marxism, Feminism, and Post-colonialism, I have developed my own interpretation of these novels that is sensitive to the systematic forces—such as institutionalized racism and sexism—that leave the characters with limited access to social mobility. Through an investigation of the intersections of race, gender, and socio-economic class, I have gained a more nuanced understanding of the complex situations that these characters must navigate, the limited options that they have available to them, and the decisions that they make. A central goal of this research is to explore the ways in which these novels can be used as teaching tools in secondary classrooms to help students develop an understanding of the systems of oppression in the United States, recognize and address injustice in and out of the classroom, and develop a sense of empathy and understanding for the American subaltern.

## Introducing Purpose and Process

The current climate in the United States of America has inspired me to investigate methods of promoting empathy and understanding through literary education. The campaign and presidential election of Donald Trump has led to a resurgence in racist, sexist, and xenophobic attitudes and policies that seem to contradict key American ideologies dealing with freedom and acceptance. However, the recent degrading, inhumane treatment of refugees, immigrants, and people of color in America is not something new. Social hierarchies based on race, religion, country of origin, gender, and socio-economic status have existed for centuries. Popular American concepts claiming to promote equal opportunity for success and the celebration of diversity all come with exceptions that simultaneously perpetuate the systematic oppression of marginalized groups, or the subaltern, and ensure the power and success of dominant culture. In an attempt to develop a more complete understanding of the history behind these systems and their effects on people, I began an exploration into three novels—Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Ann Petry’s *The Street*, and Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. These texts, spanning from the 1890’s to the 1970’s, feature main characters who are forced to navigate environments rooted in racist, sexist, and classist systems of oppression. Through the process of completing close-readings of the novels, conducting extensive secondary research on their historical contexts, and examining other scholarly criticisms and interpretations of these novels, I have developed complex and insightful methods of examining the main characters’ plights. To transfer this conceptual understanding into a more personal and empathetic one, I focused on the following questions when analyzing their actions, choices, and situations: What access do these characters have to agency, social mobility, and other forms of control over their bodies, perceived identities, and daily lives? To what extent are these characters able or equipped to subvert, push back

against, and work within these oppressive systems based on their particular historical and geographical situations? Keeping the previous questions in mind, how successful are these characters? Consideration of these questions while studying these novels through a variety of lenses including Marxism, Feminism, and Post-colonialism, has allowed me to transition from being frustrated by these characters to being frustrated for them and more sensitive to their individual situations. My own exploration and development of a reading that emphasizes empathy and understanding provides me with insight into how incorporating such interpretations into secondary classrooms may help foster productive methods of recognizing various forms of prejudice.

While investigating the socio-historical contexts and literary interpretations of Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*, I found that an overwhelming amount of scholarship tends to analyze the characters of Maggie, Lutie, and Sula in an over-simplistic manner highlighting only their biggest flaws: prostitution, murder, and betrayal. I expected to find myself disagreeing with less nuanced critical approaches that suggest these characters are victims of external forces beyond their comprehension, unable to fend for themselves, and/or somehow to blame for their circumstances. However, I had initially considered these approaches, such as Reader Response and Donald Pizer's Naturalism, to be outdated. I had not anticipated coming across so many 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarly articles that continue to criticize and pity these characters without attempting to understand the socially constructed systems of oppression influencing their situations and actions. On one hand, finding trends in various sources that provide me with room to push back and develop my own approaches to these novels is exciting. On the other, realizing how much work we as a society still have to do in order to recognize the problematic, influential, and socially constructed

systems of oppression in America is daunting. Only when we begin to recognize the root of the problem can we attempt to understand the actions of those whom these systems affect negatively, choosing not to blame the individuals, but rather the systematic racism and sexism that diminishes their options.

### **Physical Environments vs. Socio-Economic Environments: Combatting Naturalist**

#### **Readings of Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets***

Just as no artist nor author creates in a vacuum, no human being is truly born into this world—or, in this case, into American society—as a blank slate with a completely open future. Although it would be far too simple and unfair to then argue that any individual faces an unchanging, pre-determined fate, the systems that dominate American society cause each of us to inherit privileges, disadvantages, or a combination of the two based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, ability, etc.. However, if readers, scholars, or authors lack awareness of the systemic, socially constructed quality of these racism and sexism, for example, they have the potential to use novels such as *Maggie: A Girl in the Streets* to reinforce these systems through misunderstanding and/or manipulation. Unfortunately, Donald Pizer's theory of Naturalism, arguably the most popular lens through which scholars interpret *Maggie*, does exactly this.

Within the realm of Naturalism, which suggests that people are products and victims of their physical environments, scholars such as Pizer rely heavily on Social Darwinism. According to *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, Social Darwinism refers to “the theory that human groups and races are subject to the same laws of natural selection as Charles Darwin had perceived in plants and animals in nature,” and that “the weak were diminished and their cultures delimited while

the strong grew in power and in cultural influence over the weak.” This suggests that advocates of both Social Darwinism and Naturalism believe that the biological makeup, which easily translates to race and ethnicity, of each individual predetermines his or her fate. Therefore, when reading *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, which the editor of the Norton Critical Edition, Thomas A. Gullason deems “the first major naturalistic novel in America,” we may be tempted to pity Maggie for being subject to “the overpowering effect of the environment” (Pizer 186). While this may not appear to be a negative or damaging interpretation on the surface, Naturalistic readings focus solely on Maggie’s physical and biological environment (i.e. the tenement building in which she lives and her status as an Irish immigrant), completely disregarding the oppressive systems that condemn her to these environments. Naturalistic approaches that suggest we should feel pity for Maggie and judge her family as immoral, ignorant, and the cause of her downfall do nothing to address the reason why tenement buildings exist in the first place.

Conducting a more in-depth analysis of Maggie’s situation in which we consider the options available to her as an Irish immigrant in the 1890’s, we might begin to question why we should feel sorry for Maggie and not her family. We might begin to question whether the so-called immoral and ignorant behavior of her family is not an inherent result of their biology or behavior, but rather the result of a system that intentionally places Irish immigrants toward the bottom of a social hierarchy. This analysis becomes even more complicated when we begin to ask what it means for Maggie to be not just an Irish immigrant in America but also a young woman living in a patriarchal society. When we explore the intersections where various aspects of social identity, such as race and gender, meet, we can begin to understand how the oppressive effects of racist and sexist systems compound. From here, we can explore how such intersections relate to an individual’s economic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal situations, and

finally develop an understanding of the extent to which these situations influence the choices that he or she makes.

### **The Myth of the American Dream**

The United States of America has branded itself with the words freedom, democracy, and opportunity, but is it really a country in which each citizen, regardless of social class, has the potential to achieve the American Dream? As James Truslow Adams writes in his 1931 publication, *The Epic of America*, “[the American Dream is] that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (“James” 1). He continues, saying that it is “a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and to be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (“James” 1). On the surface, Adams seems to be pointing towards the equal opportunity for success that people typically think of in relation to the American Dream. However, if we consider this original definition in relation to the concepts of Pizer’s Naturalism and Social Darwinism, we may begin to see Adams’ focus on “innate” ability as problematic. Then, the American Dream becomes both the idealistic branding on which America prides itself and one of many myths that attempting to hide the inherently flawed systems of oppression at the country’s core. At its root, the American Dream furtively perpetuates a strict hierarchy that insists on preventing social mobility rather than encouraging it.

While James Truslow Adams’ original conception of the American Dream is problematic as is, it strangely becomes even more dangerous and damaging for members of the subaltern

when misinterpreted. Similar to the theory of Naturalism, popular misinterpretations of the American Dream that wrongly assume we all start from a place of equal grounds and that the only distinguishing factor between us is our willingness to work hard and persevere ignore the inheritance of privileges and challenges. The meritocracy of the United States, which has developed very closely with this popularized interpretation of the American Dream, fails to consider how systematic and structural factors—such as socio-economic class, race, and gender—influence an individual’s ability to achieve “success.” Success in this context represents having an source of income and a set of morals, both of which must be determined acceptable and respectable by dominant American cultural standards. However, there are other, more productive methods of measuring success that take into account the fact that not everyone has equal means of achieving this type of success. Considering that the myth of the American Dream is so pervasive in the mindset of America, it makes sense that all three texts are steeped in this myth, whether or not authors Stephen Crane, Ann Petry, and Toni Morrison did this intentionally. Regardless, these authors reveal the dangerous and damaging qualities of the popularized misinterpretations of the American Dream by creating realistic main characters who, while outside the dominant culture, are just as prone to believe in this dream, even if, and especially when, dominant culture deprives them of it.

The setting of the earliest novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) by Stephen Crane, is a representation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during which America was becoming an industrialized nation and experiencing a surge of immigration. Although James Truslow Adams coined the term American Dream during the Great Depression, this setting of hardworking immigrants is easily associated with the popularized misinterpretation of this dream. The title character, Maggie Johnson, is a young, naïve, Irish immigrant living with her alcoholic mother and father

and her two brothers in a crowded, dirty tenement building in a poverty-stricken area of New York City. Despite her harsh surroundings, Maggie clearly has a sensitivity that manifests in various ways, including her decision to steal a flower when her baby brother, Tommie, dies (Crane 13). This action, although technically a crime, suggests that Maggie has good intentions and wants to honor her brother in an acceptable manner. Her sensitive side suggests she aspires to a better life for herself, one in which she would not have to steal to acquire a flower. However, because of her status as an Irish immigrant girl living in poverty, Maggie has limited options for this achieving upward mobility. As her brother, Jimmie, puts it, “Yeh’ve edder got teh go teh hell or go teh work,” suggesting that she can work in prostitution or in a factory (Crane 16). Wanting to follow a more socially acceptable and respected path, Maggie takes a menial factory job making “collars and cuffs” (Crane 17). However, as “the air of the collar and cuff establishment strangle[s] her,” Maggie envisions a third option (Crane 25). The better life that she imagines for herself involves the respectable and acceptable roles of wife and mother, so Maggie’s self-worth seems to increase when she “[begins] to see the bloom in her cheeks as valuable” (Crane 25). When Maggie meets Pete, whom she assumes is “a very elegant and graceful bartender,” her desire to achieve a life full of happiness and love, and to escape her physical environment, begins to seem possible.

Upon meeting Pete, Maggie indulges in romantic fantasies depicting “dream-gardens” in which she walks with “a lover” (Crane 19). To Maggie, Pete is a “knight...who openly defied” what she sees as an “earth composed of hardships and insults” (Crane 20). She eagerly wants to impress him by demonstrating her domestic abilities, so she attempts to improve her home setting with a handmade “lambrequin,” or decorative mantel scarf (Crane 20). However, by the time Pete comes to get Maggie for their date, her drunken mother has destroyed her hard work,

leaving the tenement room in complete shambles. The two still leave for their date, and even though Pete completely fails to notice any of Maggie's attempts to impress him, she continues to see him as her knight in shining armor. Due to her romantic aspirations and fantasies, Maggie fails to realize that Pete does not see her as marriage material. As a man living in a patriarchal society, Pete has more access to better jobs and the ability to live relatively more freely than Maggie does as a woman. While Pete shows interest in spending time with Maggie, he clearly is not interested in marrying her, as that would mean relinquishing some of his freedom and money. We get a glimpse of Pete's intentions and Maggie's misinterpretation of them when after taking her to a show, Pete asks for a kiss, feeling entitled to it. Maggie, "startled" at first, denies him and "nervously" runs into her tenement when he gets aggravated (Crane 25). Torn between her desire to be the ideal wife and mother and the fact that Pete does not view her as marriage material, Maggie's already limited options dwindle. Even if she wanted to, Maggie is not equipped to survive tenement living like her mother, nor is she equipped with the skills necessary to be a successful sex worker like Nellie. Thus, Maggie turns to the only other option available to her: death.

Having lost her reputation for sleeping with Pete out of wedlock, Maggie's family disowns her and her community shuns her. Even though Maggie chooses to reject the path of prostitution and returns home to her family seeking support after realizing that Pete's interest in her was only temporary, everyone considers her ruined and worthless. Despite this, Maggie does not devalue herself, "She [does] not feel like a bad woman. To her knowledge she [has] never seen any better" (Crane 39). Even when she has no one left to support her, Maggie makes the conscious decision to maintain her virtue by jumping into the river in order to avoid being raped or attacked by the man who's "small, bleared eyes, sparkling from amidst great rolls of red fat,

[were sweeping] eagerly over [her] upturned face” (Crane 53). Therefore, Maggie’s decision to jump into the river represents the only act of true agency left available to her that will allow her to maintain a sense of self-value. Without romanticizing her death, perhaps we can entertain the idea that Maggie’s death is an act of self-reclamation, not an act of desperation.

An analysis of Lutie Johnson, the main character of *The Street* (1946) by Ann Petry, provides another example of how a concept such as the American Dream cannot operate successfully within a system that inherently marginalizes and oppresses people based on categories of identity such as race and gender, as well as socio-economic status. Like Maggie, Lutie is a young woman living in a poverty-stricken area of New York City and eager to make a better life for herself. The most significant difference between the two is that Lutie is an African-American woman. While Irish immigrants like Maggie experienced some form of ‘racial’ or cultural oppression, the socio-historical framework of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that “blamed the moral failings of the poor” and “the shaping power of [the physical] environment” for the inability of immigrants to achieve the American Dream was largely eliminated by the 1940’s (Myers 3). If Maggie’s story took place in the 1940’s, side-by-side with Lutie’s, their lives would have looked very different. The socio-historical framework that employs and normalizes the particularly brutal forms of hostility and prejudice used to dehumanize African-Americans did not end with the abolishment of enslavement. The ingrained systems of oppression that intensified with enslavement have only transformed into Jim Crow laws in the South and segregation in the North. Today, we continue to see the effects of systematic racism in the mass incarceration of people of color and wide disparities in economic and educational opportunities for African-Americans. Therefore, analyzing Lutie requires us to consider the intersectionality of her situation and compounded oppression that affects her as an African-American woman.

Throughout *The Street*, Lutie Johnson experiences waves of determination and doubt, struggle and hope, as she navigates the intersections of racism and sexism and attempts to make a better life for herself and her eight-year-old son, Bub. Needing money to support her family because her husband, Jim, is struggling to find employment, Lutie takes a job doing domestic work for a rich, White family in Connecticut. There, with a window into the middle-class, Lutie “absorbed some of the same spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough” (Petry 43). With this mindset, influenced by the popularized version of the American Dream, Lutie works extremely hard. She saves money and sends it back to Bub and Jim in New York, hoping to achieve some sort of upward mobility. However, Lutie eventually learns of her husband’s infidelity and makes the decision to leave him, moving herself and Bub into a dark, cramped apartment on a street in Harlem. Lutie’s focus is always on her son, and while Bub’s well-being is the ultimate, driving force behind each decision that she makes, her generally strong sense of intuition, analytic, and reasoning skills help guide these decisions. We get a glimpse of Lutie’s thought process when she talks herself into leasing the apartment, “You’ve got a choice a yard wide and ten miles long. You can sit and twiddle your thumbs while your kid gets a free education from your father’s blowsy girl friend. Or you can take this apartment. [...] No, she decided, not that apartment. Then she thought Bub would look cute learning to drink gin at eight. ‘I’ll take it,’ she said grimly” (Petry 21). Despite the fact that Lutie recognizes the poor, generally unfavorable conditions of life on that street in Harlem, she actively weighs the options available, ultimately believing that, for the time being, Bub will have the best chance at a positive life by moving away from his father and his grandfather. While the dingy apartment in Harlem may not seem like an ideal physical environment in which to raise Bub, Lutie understands that her race and

economic status will not afford her anything better. Lutie attempts to improve her job opportunities through furthering her education. She takes pride in graduating high school and after each long day of work, she juggles taking care of Bub and “[forcing] herself to go to night school—studying shorthand and typing and filing” (Petry 55). Despite her attempts to follow this acceptable path to social mobility, her efforts are continuously thwarted. Regardless, for much of the novel, Lutie remains hopeful that she will be able to get a better-paying job, move Bub into a better neighborhood, and essentially achieve a version of the American Dream.

Having tirelessly searched for a respectable means of making enough money for herself and Bub to escape their physical environment of the street, Lutie understandably views bandleader Boots Smith’s interest in helping her make a living as a singer as an offer too good to be true. Not only is Lutie forced to deal with the racial and economic struggles imposed upon her as a member of the American subaltern, she also has to work to protect herself as an African-American woman in a society that constantly hypersexualizes and abuses women of color. Unlike Maggie whose lack of self- and worldly-awareness kept her from seeing Pete for what he really is, Lutie understood that “if you were born black and not too ugly, [being propositioned by white men to have sex for money] is what you get, this is what you find” (Petry 321). Due to Lutie’s developed awareness of her intersectional status as a woman of color, she senses that even though Boots Smith faces similar racialized oppression as an African-American, patriarchal society grants him with privileges to which she does not have access. Lutie’s recognition that, while Boots is not nearly as representative of dominant American culture as his White boss, Junto, Boots does represent the oppressive system that values her only as a sexual, easily manipulated object. Therefore, we can interpret Lutie’s decision to protect herself from further violence and rape by “striking, not at Boots Smith, but at [...] a figure which her angry

resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against,” as an act of subverting dominant culture by choosing to value herself (Petry 429). While it would be inappropriate to condone Lutie’s failure to stop striking Boots after getting the opportunity to escape, we can begin to understand the pent up anger at multiple oppressive systems that lead Lutie to erupt in this way. Rather than seeing Lutie’s action as cold-blooded and evil, we might try seeing it as a momentary reclamation of power.

Although I am advocating for a critical reading of *The Street* that considers the complex intersectional pressures that Lutie faces as a Black woman, and, in turn, acknowledges the strength and agency that she demonstrates given her limited options, I do not wish to condone or romanticize her brutal killing of Boots. Author of “‘It Could Have Been Any Street’: Ann Petry, Stephen Crane, and the Fate of Naturalism,” Don Dingledine takes an alternate path when interpreting Lutie’s. He claims that “between the lines in the closing paragraphs of *The Street* are glimmers of hope, hints of alternative endings,” suggesting that Lutie might actually be able to achieve upward mobility in her next life in Chicago (Dingledine 89). Later in the article, he states, “The hope at the end of Petry's novel lies in the recognition that environments can be modified, that society can work to change such streets and thus to alter the fates of those living on them” (Dingledine 98). This optimistic interpretation of *The Street* attempts to combat traditional Naturalist theory by suggesting that yes, Lutie’s physical environment has a strong effect on her fate, but her environment, and therefore fate, can be changed. However, Dingledine’s interpretation fails to recognize the impact of racist and sexist systems, which reinforces the idea that Lutie faces “overwhelming and inscrutable forces” (Dingledine 89). Critical readings such as this do nothing to help Lutie’s situation, and instead allow for the perpetuation of the systems of oppression trapping her.

### **Redefining Womanhood: The Problem with Setting Inaccessible Standards**

As we transition from the 1940's, during which Petry is writing *The Street*, to the 1970's, during which Morrison is writing *Sula*, we are also transitioning from the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement to a focus on the cultivation and celebration of Black identity. When analyzing Morrison's novel, the focus on Black identity, and, more specifically, Black female identity, manifests in Sula's rejection of the American Dream and White culture. Unlike Lutie who does not necessarily aspire to be White, but who wants access to the American Dream and to the same success and respect that is only available to members of the White middle-class, Sula pursues her own version of success that is completely separate from dominant cultural standards. Sula's idea of success is rooted in the process of cultivating and maintaining her identity as a Black woman.

After her childhood best friend, Nel Wright, gets married, Sula takes the opportunity to explore the world outside of the small, Ohio town called the Bottom. We learn during a conversation between Sula and Nel that throughout the ten years that Sula is away, she attends college, focusing on her studies rather than "nightclubs, and parties" (Morrison 99). Mapping the educational trajectory from the historical context of *The Street*, where Lutie's graduation from high school is a huge moment of success, the fact that Sula is able to go to college shows that time presents her with relatively more opportunities. While Sula does take advantage of this opportunity to further her education, she chooses to return to the Bottom rather than see where it might take her in a larger city. At this point, it is likely that Sula would have had some awareness of the fact that even with a graduate degree a woman of color such as herself would not have been able to scale the socio-economic ladder very far. Regardless, like all of Sula's choices, her decision to return is rooted in her desire to maintain her identity with pride and self-love. It is

likely that Sula would have experienced a larger sense of double-consciousness during her time in the White washed world of the city than during her time in the—mostly Black—Bottom. Defined by W.E.B. du Bois, double-consciousness refers to the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” experienced by African-Americans (du Bois 11). Considering that staying outside of the Bottom would mean living in a city where White culture permeates the ways in which people of color understand themselves, her decision to return is not an act of failure but an act of agency and self-knowledge. Along with recognizing the necessary conditions in which she can best love herself Sula’s process of cultivating and maintaining her identity also manifests itself in taking control of her sexuality.

At a young age, Sula develops her own understanding of self-ownership and female sexuality by observing the actions of two greatly independent women: her mother, Hannah Peace, and her mother’s mother, Eva Peace. Young Sula watches as her grandmother playfully “tested and argued” with her “flock of gentlemen callers,” and watches her mother’s “sweet, low, and guileless” flirting (Morrison 43, 42). While it might not seem appropriate for a young girl to be so aware of the fact that her mother would often enjoy her male callers throughout the house, we must acknowledge the possibility that Sula’s upbringing, though untraditional, is not damaging. In fact, we can read it as educational and even healthy, for when Sula “[sees her mother] step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier,” she learns “that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable” (Morrison 44).

Along with this understanding of female sexuality, Sula and her childhood best friend, Nel Wright, “[discover early on] that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and

triumph was forbidden to them, [and therefore] they had set about creating something else to be” (Morrison 52). While Sula’s view of black female sexual power helps her to subvert the “dominant codes of womanhood” which “consist of ‘four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity’ (qtd. in Carby 23),” through adulthood, Nel ends up holding on to these White, patriarchal standards (Pittman 7). This slight ideological dissonance between once inseparable friends might account for why Sula refuses to see her unintentionally damaging choice to sleep with Nel’s husband as the evil act of betrayal for which Nel and the rest of the town see it. Through the process of reclaiming and redefining the subjectivity, self-identity, and sexual agency that dominant American culture constantly denies characters like Lutie, Sula may betray a friend and commit selfish acts to get there, but she is ultimately successful. Soon before Sula’s death, she attempts to explain to Nel the value of living for one’s self by saying that “keeping a man [...] ain’t worth more than me,” and asserting, “my lonely is mine” while “[Nel’s] lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to [her]” (Morrison 143). These words are incredibly powerful, and they suggest that Sula feels victorious in her goal of cultivating and maintaining her own identity. Yes, she dies alone, but she dies loving herself, and that is an optimistic death.

### **Transferring Analysis to Secondary Classrooms**

When choosing a novel, it might seem as if the majority of American youths gravitate toward stories featuring either easily relatable or delectably evil characters. In fact, the text may seem even more appealing if it involves a combination of the two, between which the line of good and bad is starkly drawn. These texts can act as sometimes much-needed, simply entertaining escapes from reality. However, it is often the case, that, in academic settings, these

youths are studying much more complicated texts featuring frustrating characters. While teachers may initially find it much more difficult to generate engagement and understanding for these frustrating characters among their students, if they are able to learn how to do so and be successful at it, they might find that it is possible for students to relate to, empathize with, and better understand these so called frustrating characters.

Considering that all three of the examined novels—*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* by Stephen Crane, *The Street* by Ann Petry, and *Sula* by Toni Morrison—feature the kind of complex, frustrating characters mentioned above, my method of analyzing them can be transferred and applied to other novels of the like. Furthermore, the method of analysis that I explore throughout this paper acts as a foundational step toward developing a curriculum that can help guide students toward understandings about the American subaltern similar to my own. Each of these novels have the potential to help us understand the plight of the American subaltern, which has nothing to do with “innate” ability and everything to do with institutionalized racism and sexism. Therefore, they have the potential to generate inquiry, empathy, and action among students.

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