

A Study of "Nature" in Stephen Crane's Short Stories

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1. Naturalism in Stephen Crane's Fiction

We know that the early works of Stephen Crane were classified as naturalistic. We know that later critics, impressed less by *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* than by *The Red Badge of Courage* and the late short stories, called him impressionist. We know that recent criticism, impressed by Crane's use of certain highly charged metaphors, labels him symbolist.

The use of such categories reflects the critic's need for classification in the final disposition of an author, but there is a sense the most important authors defy such pigeonholing. Stephen Crane is one of these. His short career, lasting less than ten years, was marked by change. Crane was a transitional figure. He participated in "the beautiful war" between cleverness and truth for a while, but, as an artist he was never wholly committed to it. There is as much difference between *Maggie* (1892) and the short story *The Blue Hotel* (1898), as there usually is in works written by two altogether different authors. *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and *The Open Boat* (1897) stand somewhere between the two, containing qualities of each, but representing in themselves identities apart from each other and from the preceding and following works.

There is, however, an aspect of Crane's work where he changed

very little. All his fiction, regardless of technique, dealt with nature as a force affecting his characters. In *Maggie*, which is the most anomalous of his major works, not the most characteristic, as the early critics seemed to believe, nature is a force thwarted by social evil, where impulses lead not to happiness, but to misfortune. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, natural forces compete within the person of the hero as well as in the conflict of opposing armies. In *The Open Boat*, man is nature directly and close at hand, the power of nature naturally and symbolically portrayed. In *The Blue Hotel*, it is the uncontrollable urge of fear, set against an implacable nature, that determines the events of the story.

In Crane's life, as in his works, there is a certain consistency within inconsistency. As a young student, journalist, and author, he felt the need to rebel against prevailing social and literary. As a literary rebel, he should surprise no one by seeing himself engaged in a dispute between opposing literary armies. Because he considered the establishment of his own creed as a choice between extremes (as in actual warfare), it would be surprising had he not gone to an extreme in formulating it in his early years. It would have been equally surprising, had he not followed this by plunging into life as a reporter of man's greed and misery, associating by choice with Bowery bums in soup kitchens and flop houses, becoming a defender and friend of drunks and prostitutes, viewing this life as the real thing. Crane appears consistent in his regard for the life of the American West, conceiving of it as a land of action and traveling across it to experience the "real" life of cowboys, bandits, and revolutionaries. He sought to learn the truth about war by visiting battlefields in Cuba and Greece.

Yet Crane was at home in literary discussions of a much cleverer sort than his rejection of "the clever school" would indicate. He became with Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Huffer, whose concerns with literary matters were anything but simple. Socially, too, his home in England, where he the last years of his life, was a far cry from the New York slums and the western plains. He lived in Brede Place, an ancient and pretentious English house, taking pride in its aristocratic traditions, taking pleasure, too, in such social amenities as dressing for dinner, perhaps from an unconscious urge to make the manner conform fittingly to the background.

The inconsistency in Crane's writing can best be exemplified by calling attention to the fact that, while Crane believed that true art should be the artist's own experience, many of his works, including his most famous novel, came before he had any personal experience of the kind depicted. Also, when he did write from experience, he showed himself not reluctant to modify the factual events wherever necessary to serve his aesthetic ends.

Crane wasted his genius. Under the mistaken notion that only those who have suffered shipwreck can become its interpreters, he expended himself in a search for experience. Willfully and needlessly he risked his life—among bandits in Mexico, under shellfire in Cuba and Greece as war correspondent, and off the Florida seacoast as a filibustering seaman in the disaster that befell him when he survived shipwreck only after suffering thirty hours at sea in a ten-foot dinghy. It was natural that Crane should want to see actual warfare after writing about it, and four years later as war correspondent in the Greco-Turkish War he tested the psychologi-

cal truth of his imagined picture. But at what a cost! Exposures endured in Cuba wrecked his health and impaired his art. Nothing vital came from his war experiences. His imagination, as one friend said, "worked better in a room than on a battlefield." (C. Lewis Hind: *Authors and I* 1921)⁽¹⁾ And the pity of it all is that it could have been otherwise. He could have lived in one of his brothers' and done his writing there: he could have retreated from life to calculate it from a distance as Hawthorne and James did. Instead, he chose to get as close to life as possible. Garland, meeting him in McClure's office one day, said to him earnestly:

"Crane, why don't you cut loose from your associations here? Go to your brother's farm in Sullivan Country and get back your tone. You don't look well. Settle down to the writing of a single big book up there, and take your time to do it..."

Impulsively thrusting out his hand to me, he said—I'll do it—Alas! He did not. He took a commission to Greece and report a war. On his return from Greece he went to Cuba."⁽²⁾

He wanted to get at the real thing, and so he stood all night in a blizzard in order to write *Men in the Storm*: to get at the real thing he spent a night in a Bowery flophouse in order to write *An Experiment in Misery*: to get at the real thing he traveled across the Western prairies, and out of it he got *The Blue Hotel* and *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*: and out of Mexico he got *Hoses—One Dash!*: and other sketches: and out of Cuba and Greece impressions of war for *Wounds in the Rain*, stories like *Death and the Child*, and the novel *Active Service*. The geminal idea of the story being a symbolic storm—the storm of social strife? Familiarizing himself with New York tenement life certainly was not necessary for the germinal idea of *An Auction*, in which he depicts

the social shame of a poor couple whose household goods are auctioned off amidst the derisive mockery of a parrot and a gaping crowd.

In his quest for and immersion in experience, Crane stands at the headstream of what has been defined as the dominant American theme and literary trend—exemplified in Hemingway, Anderson, and Thomas Wolf, who put the same premium on personal experience. Considering how much personal experience he had to draw upon, he put it to very little significant use. At his best he used not the experienced event but the event distilled for its thematic potentialities. The exception is *The Open Boat*, but here the personal experience served simply as the canvas for the re-created picture. *The Open Boat* was an immediate transcript of personal experience, but it is personal experience transformed into an impersonal and symbolic representation of life—the plight of mankind tossed upon an indifferent sea. The calculated design and significance of the story can be explained by no source other than the conceiving imagination of the artist. Crane excels in the portrayal of mental turmoil, and for this psychological realism his creative imagination required no first-hand experience. *The Open Boat* and *Horses—One Dash!* are his most directly autobiographical tales, but most of his fiction is only remotely autobiographical. It is seldom that Crane presents minute descriptions of people or scenes, and details of locality are not photographically recorded. The locality of *The Blue Hotel* has symbolic import and could have been painted with no first-hand knowledge of it. He could have written *The Blue Hotel* without leaving New York City. The fight that he witnessed and tried to stop during an incident in Lincoln, Nebraska, because the fight

depicted in *The Blue Hotel*, but the general idea for the story might just as well have had a literary source. *The Blue Hotel* has been called “a Hemingway story,” but in germinal conception it follows Robert Louis Stevenson’s formula: a certain scene and atmosphere suggest the correlative action and persons for that particular locality, and they are so used as to express and symbolize it. The atmosphere of the old blue hotel, the psychic quality of its screaming blue, imples and foreshadows the action that expresses it—the murder of the Swede.

The critical point to make about the notion that artists cannot reproduce the actualities of life without first experiencing them is that the exact obverse is, in fact, the truth. “I decided that the nearer a writer gets to life, the greater he becomes as an artist.” Yet Crane’s own art was at its greatest when he wrote at some distance from the reality he had experienced or when, on the other hand, he wrote out of no personal experience at all. His best works do not vindicate or support the creative principle that generated them.

What are the proper uses of personal experience? Thomas Wolfe, learning from wasted experience, tried to find the answer—too late to be use to him.

Anc now I really believe that so far as the artist is concerned, the unlimited extent of human experience is not so important for him as the depth and intensity with which he experieuces things.⁽³⁾

The depth and intensity of the artist’s personal experience does not distinguish him as artist. Fitzgerald likewise exploited personal experience, sometimes shamefully, but he was an artist who knew how to convert it into an imaginative construct. Mark Twain’s

explanation for not continuing to write novels was that "capital"—personal experience—was not sufficient by itself.

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- (1) C. Lewis Hind: *Authors and I*, p. 73—4.
 - (2) Hamlin Garland: *Roadside Meeting*, p. 203—4.
 - (3) Thomas Wolfe: *The Story of Novel*, p. 586.

2. Interpreter of Nature

Though *The Open Boat* is of a piece with Crane's major fiction, it stands apart from other works in style, characterization, and tone.

Crane did not have to invent any plot for *The Open Boat*: he transcribed the whole from his own experience. Yet it is as much an invention as *The Reluctant Voyagers*—his first attempt at a sea-story. Crane always was concerned to get facts down with scrupulous fidelity to the truth of experience, and he went to extraordinary pains to be certain that the fact in *The Open Boat* squared with what actually happened. To find out whether he had them right, he checked them with the captain of the *Commodore*.

Stephen Crane's Own Story, the news report he filed about his personal adventure, appeared on the front page of the *New York Press* on January 7, 1897. Crane gives a clear report of his filibustering expedition, from the first moments aboard the *Commodore*, the ship that is to take Cuban insurrectionists and ammunition from Jacksonville to the island of Cuba, until the ship finally sinks in a storm and the crew take to the boats and eventually reach shore. A sense of personal excitement keeps breaking through the unadorned, measured prose of the newspaper story. Crane seems to be exulting in the details of an event in which he has actually participated: no longer the imagination, but the memory, informs the violent

events.

The news story describes the Commodore only vaguely. At first the ship seems powerful and placid, but the sound of its whistle is a sad wail. For the reporter, however, there is a feeling of exhilaration because of the danger, even though custom insists that he hide his emotions. Crane allows the unromantic facts to stand out: the ship rams into a mud bank, and they “were men on a ship stuck in the mud. A certain mental somersault was made once more necessary.” (p. 256)⁽¹⁾ The characters who reappear in *The Open Boat* are first described in the newspaper article—the portly cook, the tough captain, and a “certain young oiler named Billy Higgins” (p. 259), who leads the engine-room bailers. The reporter and these three end up in a boat together after the ship goes down. The emphasis of Crane’s report is on the first moments of the wreck—the attempts at towing rafts, the seemingly gratuitous death of the first mate, who hurls himself into the sea with a look that shows “it was rage, rage, rage unspeakable that was in his heart at the time (p. 264).

Crane is tight-lipped throughout the whole open boat part of the report, as if he had already conceived the fiction to be formed from these facts and wished to reserve his essential story. “The history of life in an open boat for thirty hours would no doubt be instructive for the young, but none is to be told here and now” (p. 265). Crane the reporter insists that he would like to tell the story at once in order to make evident the “splendid manhood” of Captain Murphy, who gave orders in the wild waves as if he were on a battleship, and of Billy Higgins, who, according to the dispatch’s closing lines, was found “lying with his forehead on sand

that was clear of the water, and he was dead" (p. 265). Crane the artist, however, reserved the story of Captain Murphy for *Flanagan and His Short Filibustering Adventure* (published in August 1897): in *The Open Boat* (published in June 1897) Crane told the story of Billy Higgins, and of the correspondent, and of man versus the sea. The profundity of Crane's personal experience obviously is important to the fiction, for, as he says in the news story, "Here was death, but here also was a most singular and indefinable kind of fortitude" (p. 263). The documentary article sticks to the facts that can be related without the distortion or heightening that marks the distinction between reportage and art—even realistic art. And Crane's sea fiction also probes the meaning of death by water as well as the nature of life in a small boat. For the rendering of these complex events—as disturbing, intellectually, to Crane as was the death of the nuns at sea to Gerard Manley Hopkins—Crane's own sense of involvement as a participant insists upon a mood of irony charged with compassion. *Stephen Crane's Own Story*, and even *Flanagan and His Short Filibustering Adventure*, might have been the work of the traditional cynical newsman: *The Open Boat* towers above these works largely because of its urgency and pain. Crane's fiction adds details and rhetoric to his true story, adornments that an early realist aesthetician has described as permissible if these accessories are effective in making the characters harmonize more with the events in which they take part. It is noteworthy that Crane concentrates in his sea fiction on materials that he held out of a news story.

The Open Boat is a story of human behavior under extreme pressure, of the eternal conflict between man and nature, of the in-

dividual's night sea journey to self-knowledge. The setting is incidental: Crane is not interested in nautical details, the exotic color of the sea life. Yet the sea and the actions of four men in an open boat do provide a metaphorical framework for Crane's story. The boat, Throughout Western literature, has been a key symbol. According to W. H. Auden, there are two views of a ship: as a vessel isolated in the ocean—thus a microcosm of society—and as a vehicle of escape the shore—thus an image of freedom. The boat in which the correspondent comes to some kind of terms with external nature and with his own nature fits simulataneously both of Auden's categories.

If thought of as isolated in the midst of the ocean, a ship can stand for mankind and human society moving through time and struggling with its destiny. If thought of as leaving the land for the ocean, it stands for a particular kind of man society as contrasted with the average land dwelling kind.⁽²⁾

The corespondent's ordeal at sea story will be at once an escape from and an immersion in society. The impact of Crane's sea story on the reader comes from the sence of human engagement that permeates the traditional apparatus of sea fiction and transforms the tightly wrought prose into a richly symbolic narrative.

Characters, events, scene, dialogue, plot, extention of time, all the elements of the short story are selected with care in *The Open Boat*, selected from the diffuse observation that went into Cran's two other treatments of his shipwreck experience. In Crane's *The Open Boat*, as in *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Monster*, Crane simplifies his material and attempts to reduce his setting to the barest essentials, in order to approach the ultimate meaning

and value implicit in the events. While the philosophy behind this tale may seem naturalistic, even nihilistic, and Crane's view of nature is undoubtedly harsh, the technique is realistic, although at times it borders on the surrealistic.

For men, a captain, and oiler, a cook, and a correspondent, who have been shipwrecked find themselves in a small boat on a heavy sea, closely and intimately confronting the great force of nature—the waves the “were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall.” (p. 29)⁽³⁾ In the midst of danger, the correspondent feels that a subtle brotherhood of men was established, it dwelt in the boat and each man felt it warm him. After much more rowing, the men finally bring the boat within sight of an inhabited beach, but they cannot understand the frantic signals of the man on the shore, just as he is unable to hear their shouts. In the human predicament, communication fails.

Now a new misery must be endured, a night sea journey in the open boat. “A night on the sea in an open boat is a long night”—the sense of fellowship grows even stronger. One aspect of the knowledge that slowly comes to him during the silent, hopeless, long night makes up the philosophical core of *The Open Boat*. Man is not important.

Rowing all alone in the darkness with the others plunged in exhausted sleep, the correspondent begins to think:

If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?” (p. 41)

His thrice-repeated cry, so much like an incantation, leads him

to the following contemplation :

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not main the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples.

A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she says to his. Thereafter he knows the pathos af the situation. (p. 51)

The pathos is that nature does not care, and all that is left is for man to care for himself.

Three of the men in the story to reach shore safely, but a fourth, the oiler, drowns in the surf.

It seemed that instantly the beach was populated with men with blankets, clothes, and flasks, and women with coffee-pots and all the remdies sacred to their minds. The welcome of the land to the men from the sea was warm and generous : but a still and dripping shape was carried slowly up the beach, and the land's welcome for it could onld be the different and sinister hospitality of the grave. (p. 61)

For the drowned oiler there was, pathetically, none of the ceremony accorded the survivors. But nature was not to blame. The man had been simply too exhausted, or too unlucky, and such is the danger man runs when he finds himself pitted against nature. Yet there were rewards in the comradship of the struggle and in the hospitality of the welcome given the survivors, even in the beauty of nature viewed from a respectful distance. It was for the men after their ordeal.

When it came night, the white waves paced to and from in the moonlight, aud the wind brought sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters. (p. 61)

With the knowledge that nature was powerful, but indifferent to the plight of man, Crane had achieved a general definition of nature and of man's relation to it. He had also hinted at a relationship between man and man, portraying it as a form of ceremony, as something sacred to men's minds: but he had shown it as something secondary to the struggle, almost accidental. He had also hinted at the part chance plays in man's relationship with nature, but again he had not dealt with it in detail, had not himself, perhaps, discovered how great a part he really conceived it to be.

The Open Boat is the furthest development of a theme which interested Crane all through his career, the relationship of man to nature. If we consider the major themes of his fiction, fear death, courage, identity, isolation, it becomes clear that these nearly inseparable abstractions are intimately related to his concept of nature, so closely related in fact that we can say that his concern with them stems from his conclusions about the relationship between man and nature. In Crane's fiction nature has essentially three levels of meaning: it is first of all external, visible nature—trees, rocks, grass, animals. It means also "the laws governing physical phenomena in the universe," those principles regulating the bodily processes, the changes of the seasons, climatic conditions. Finally nature has a metaphysical meaning suggesting the essential character of the universe, of the agency responsible for the operation of the laws of nature, in short, God.

The surface level of nature in this story, external, visible nature, allows the three men, especially the reporter, he being the protagonist, to make inferences about the other two levels of meaning inherent in the total concept. At the beginning of the story the "waves

were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt navigation.” (p. 29) At the end of the story “the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight.” (p. 61) A great deal has happened between the two points in time, more than simply a change in the weather. It is aesthetically fitting that the sea should be a rough, perious sea at the opening of the story where it is important that the precariousness of the situation of the characters be emphasized. Similarly it is fitting that at the end of the story, after the reader has followed the characters through their adventure, the sea be calm and apparently docile, at least in comparison with its appearance at the beginning of the story. Just as the fear of the characters have been allayed once they have been saved, so are the fears for them experienced by the reader. At the beginning of the story the sea is described as having the conscious intention of swamping the dinghy, of drowning the four men. The waves are “wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall” (p. 29) as though consciousness of some kind were working against them. Every waves is “just as nervously anxious to do something effebtive in the way of swamping boats” (p. 31) as every other. “It was not difficult to imagine,” we are told, “that this particular wave was the final outburst of the ocean, the last effort of the grim water.” (p. 31) The crests of the waves “snarl” as though expressing hostility toward the passengers of the boat. In the second section of the story sea gulls are near the boat. They appear “uncanny and sinister in their unblinking scrutiny” (p. 33) of the men, and are somehow “gruesome and ominous.” (p. 33) As observers we know the sea is in fact not hostile, that the sea gull are not actually gruesome and ominous. But the men in the boat have this to learn. After the two opening sections of the story

the refernces to the sea as hostile are few and scattered until the final section of the story where they disappear altogether despite the fact that there are enough descriptions of the sea in which Crane could have included such references had he chosen to do so.

The second level of nature, that involving the operation of the laws governing physical phenomena in the universe, occurs of necessity in any story simply because we are, by the fact of our existence, our physiological makeup, confined within certain limitations. Like all other things in the world we are subject to the laws of gravity, to the laws governing falling bodies, and so forth. Ordinarily we pay little attention to such considerations, largely because the operation of these laws is taken for granted. But in much of Crane's work the case is different. He directs our attention to nature in general and to this particular facet of nature having to do with its workings. He does so because he feels that man, in order to realize his fullest potential, must be free. He becomes free through the exercise of consiousness, will, against the non-conscious forces of nature, which by virtue of their impersonal operation constrain him.

In *The Open Boat*, as elsewhere, the antagonist in the story is apparently external nature. However, it is not only visible external nature threatening the men in the boat. Their survival depends likewise on their ability to withstand the nearly unendurable physical torture brought about by their struggle, as well as on their ability to manipulate the boat properly in the face of fatigue and ever-impending catastrophe. They are fatigued because they have not had sufficient rest and nourishment, and because they have had to put forth tremendous physical exertion in order to maintain control

of the boat. The state of their bodies is explainable in terms of physiological principles just as the activity of the sea can be explained in terms of geophysical principles. Against the operation of all these forces over which they have no control they pit their will to endure.

Since we learn in the story that nature does not in any conscious manner direct hostility toward men, we might expect to find instances in the story where nature's operation is as helpful as it has been hindering. And so we do. When the men use the captain's overcoat as a sail, the wind cooperates quite nicely and they make steady progress over the waves without the necessity, for a while, of rowing. Seemingly stationary mats of brown seaweed allow the men to mark their progress toward the land. At the time the captain needs a stick to make a signal flag he finds one floating near the boat. Near the end of the story, when reporter is caught in a current, a wave comes along and frees him from the immediate danger, the same wave, possibly, which drowned the oiler.

A third remove from external, visible nature is nature as the manifestation of God. Crane does not discuss God directly in his fiction as he does in his poetry, yet one is likely to feel the presence in the fiction of those attitudes toward God explicitly expressed in much of his poetry. He was not an atheist. How inconsistent it would be for an his fiction in the only way his materials would allow him to—by talking about nature. When he discusses fictionally the relationship between man and nature, he is in effect discussing the relationship between man and God, for what meaning does it have to attribute attitudes of any kind to nature in and of itself? I do not mean to suggest that Crane identifies nature and God:

they are by no means equivalent. But in Crane's thinking God is responsible for the character of nature. Hence man's relationship to His work, nature, is indicative of man's relationship to Him. The benevolence, hostility, or indifference of nature is the benevolence, hostility, or indifference of God.

The Open Boat shows how one man, the reporter, through direct experience with nature, learns to interpret it truly. Several references in this tale point clearly toward metaphysical matters. The thrice-repeated refrain is the most obvious reference.

If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? (p. 41)

I suspect that Crane had no particular deities in mind when he referred to "the seven mad gods who rule the sea," but meant only to suggest some agency, metaphysical in character, responsible, at least in the eyes of the reporter, for the predicament of the men. This agency, the reporter feels, has allowed him to come within sight of safety only to snuff out his life before he reaches land. He has not simply been "allowed" to come thus far, but has in fact, we learn in the next line, been "brought" within sight of safety. The refrain, we might reasonably conclude, suggests that the agency which seems to the men responsible for their predicament is fate, especially since after the refrain occurs for the first time, Fate is explicitly named. The third time the refrain is repeated, its meaning is somewhat altered by its context. Judging from the lines following the refrain, we will likely conclude that the fate alluded to before becomes at this point a more complex fate.

During this dismal night, it may be remarked that a man would conclude that it was really the intention of the mad gods to drown him, despite the abominable injustice of it.....

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not main the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers.

Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot, he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands supplicant, saying, "Yes, but I love myself."

A high cold star on a winter night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation. (p. 51)

No longer does fate threaten to destroy the men in the boat, but nature. "Nature here certainly does not mean external, visible nature, for surely the sea is there to be jeered as a visible expression: nor does "nature" mean the laws governing physical phenomena, for visible nature manifests nature's laws. If whatever is to be addressed, to be pled to has existence at all, its existence must be transcendent, it must have intelligence, and it must be, in the mind thinking above, responsible for the precariousness of the situation of the men in the boat. In short, nature here means God, and to the men in the boat, who despite His indifference desire to live, He is like "a high cold star," unfeeling and aloof from the affairs of men. This becomes even more clear in the final passage dealing with the problem of the relation of the men in the boat to nature, a passage detailing the thought of the reporter about the meaning of the situation of the open boat. From the boat the reporter sees a windmill on the shore.

This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of

the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent. (p. 56)

In the next line we learn that one having this perception is "impressed with the unconcern of the universe." The analogy of the first line of this passage likens nature to an indiffenent giant. "Nature" here means first of all external, visible nature. It also means "nature in the vision of men," or as a manifestation of God, for what is nature in the vision of men but this? Furthermore, "nature" here could hardly refer to the system of laws governing physical phenomena in the universe, for how meaningful would it be to characterize a law of physics as "indiferent"? Isn't indifference inherent in the term itself, the idea of a "benevolent" physical law being a contradiction in term? The tower is not simply "a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants." It is God, standing with his back to men. To be "impressed with the unconcern of the universe" is to be convinced that no benevolent agency rests at the center of the cosmos. Man is alone, Crane says here.

The three refrains occur before the passage quoted before about the indifference of nature, and are the unarticulated feeling of the four men in the boat. The last statement about the predicament of the men is an insight occurring only to the reporter and representing not a contradiction in Crane's view of nature, but a reassessment on the reporter's part of his relation to nature. Neither fate nor nature has a desire to dispose of him as the refrain implies they do: no agency has allowed him to come as far as he has. Nature

is indifferent, showing neither favor nor disfavor. This insight allows him to accept the death of the oiler in the end without bitterness. Nature or fate has not snuffed out the best, the strongest of them, but one of them, and it might have been any one.

(1) All page reference for subsequent quotations are to R. W. Stallman, ed., *Stephen Crane: Stories and Tales*.

(2) W. H. Auden: *The Enchafed Flood*, p. 66.

(3) All page references for subsequent quotations are to Wilson Follet ed., *The Works of Stephen Crane; Vol. 12*.

3. Out in the Far West

The Blue Hotel opens with a character known only as "the Swede" and two other strangers as they leave the transcontinental express train at a small Nebraska town, Fort Romper, during a snow-storm. The three men engage rooms in a nearby family hotel, the Palace Hotel, painted a light blue. The words are very important; "Palace" implies an unreal, romantic, fairytale setting; "Romper" indicates something childish; and blue is a color usually associated with innocence, childhood, fair skies. The color is absurd and declares itself against any background, clashes with the town, and also like a child, is "always screaming and howling." (p. 93)⁽¹⁾ The hotel is neither Eastern nor Western; it is a world unto itself. The setting is strange, to be sure, but in its childishness it is a parody of the traditional atmosphere of Western fiction. Here men gamble, as in Western tales, but not for money; here men fight, as always in Western fiction, but not with guns—rather, with their fists. The inhabitants of the hotel are equally parodies of the conventional Western fictional figures, who should be strong, silent

men of action. Those who come to the Blue Hotel talks; they don't act. It is not until the narrative reaches the saloon that we discover real Westerners, and these, to the Swede's discomfiture, act but don't talk.

Then they settle down to an evening of waiting in the hotel's public parlor. It is evident at once from the peculiarity of the Swede's actions that he is a "badly frightened man." (p. 95) What he fears, we soon surmise, is the unfamiliarity of the surroundings, this unfamiliarity heightened by the storm outside and by the presence of men he does not know. These men are the two strangers, called by Crane only "the Easterner" and "the cowboy," and the hotelkeeper "Scully" and his son. The Swede appears to believe himself in the West of legendary badmen, and he soon begins to feel that the others have designs upon him, that he will be robbed or beaten or killed. Crane describes in sea images the hotel room where the men sit around a warm stove that defies the blizzard outside. There is a "turmoiling sea of snow," and the room is an "island of the sea." (p. 96) While the surface of these images indicates safety for the guests, we know from *The Open Boat* that danger lurks in every wave. The card game terrifies the Swede, and his paranoia begins to grate on the other men. Once he appeals to his fellow Easterner to support these fears, but the latter refuses to respond. Perhaps Johnnie has been cheating at this early stage, and the Easterner already knows it; then the Swede has reason for his dime-novel terror, and he is truly the victim of a conspiracy, a conspiracy of silence. It ought also be considered that the character of the Easterner is such that he might very well keep silent about seeing Johnnie cheat. He is a meek man. It is he who is affected

by the cold, and it is he who attempts to prevent the fight between Johnnie and the Swede. He is the least strongly moved by the curious responses of the Swede. His primary intention seems to be to avoid conflict of any kind. Too, he is shown to be a sensitive enough individual that it might indeed occur to him that he and the others are to some degree responsible for the outcome of the central action of the tale.

When the Swede announces that he will leave, his fellow travelers have no regrets, for the Swede has been obstreperous in speech and act; but the innkeeper considers it his duty as host to pacify his guest. He takes him to his room and gives him a drink of whiskey. He extolls the town of Romper, saying there will be "a line of ilictric street-cars" here by sprin, and :

"there's a new railroad goin' to be built down form Broken Arm to here. Not to mintion the four churches and the smashin' big brick schoolhouse. Then there's the big factory, too. Why, in two years Romper'll be a met-tro-pol-is." (p. 103)

He shows the picture of his "little girl that died." (p. 104) He tells the Swede that his oldest son is a lawyer.

Meanwhile, in the public room, the other men have been discussing the Swede. The Easterner says :

"Oh, I don't know, but it seems to me this man has been reading dime novels, and he thinks he's right out in the middle of it—the shootin' and stabbin' and all."

"But," said the cowboy, deeply scandalized, "this ain't Wyoming, ner none of them places. This is Nebrasker."

"Yes," added Johnnie, "an" why don't he wait till he gits out West? (p. 107)

When the Swede returns to the room, the whiskey and the innkeeper's words seem to have calmed him. He leaves the room for a glass of water, and the innkeeper confirms the Easterner's guess: "It was only that he was from the East, and he thought this was a tough place." (p. 109) When Johnnie insists that he still thinks the Swede "too fresh," his father reprimands him:

"I keep a hotel," he shouted. "A hotel, do you mind? A guest under my roof has sacred privileges. He is to be intimidated by none. Not one word shall he hear that would prejudice him in favor of going away. I'll not have it. There's no place in this here town where they can say they ever took a guest of mine because he was afraid to stay here." (p. 109)

Nevertheless, the son, Johnnie, is right. The Swede is too fresh; but even when the Swede claps the innkeeper too heartily on his injured shoulder, the innkeeper's code prevents him from taking offense. When the Swede proposes a game of cards, an entertainment he has formerly rejected, the two travelers and Johnnie unenthusiastically sit down with him. They have played only a short time when the Swede accuses Johnnie of cheating. In the quarrel that follows, Johnnie challenges the Swede to a fight. Although the others try to dissuade the two men, they finally go outside the house to do battle. Here the Swede's fears revive when he realizes that the others all want Johnnie to win, but the innkeeper, still true to the code, insists that it will be a fair fight.

Crane shows how conscious he is of his technique here. The narrator breaks into the action to announce that any room may be tragic or comic—and we realize that comedy can lead to tragedy. Again, everyone acts according to type: the accusing Swede is

aggressive, the accused Johnnie defensive, the Easterner pale, the cowboy bovinely confused, Scully loud. In contrast to later bar-room scene, the present action is crowded, bustling, ineffectual, as the men tumble and shout in their attempts to deal with the situation, witnessed by the "fat and painted kings and queens" (p. 113) of the tramyled playing cards. The Easterner, the voice of logic, importunes and questions the value of a fight over a game of cards. But the Swede is adamant, and the men go outside for the fist fight that is more like the childhood combats in Whilomville than the real duels of the West. The wild storm comments on man's puniness and stupid verbosity by tearing their words out of their mouths and scattering the valueless arguments out of terms that seem overwrought. Scully is "the iron-nerved master of the ceremony," the Swede is "pale, motionless, terrible," and Johnnie is "serene yet ferocious, brutish yet heroic." (p. 117) It is here that Crane mentions the prelude's having in it a tragedy far greater than the tragedy of action—for the prelude is in the Easterner's mind, and his tragedy, the human tragedy, is greater than a fight, greater even than death. Thus the terms are not excessive, for the primary victim is not the Swede but the Easterner, who knows yet cannot act upon his knowledge; he is the betrayer. The final editorial section of *The Blue Hotel*, then, is not extraneous, because if the Easterner's mental reactions are the essence of the tragedy, then his feeling of guilt is of utmost importance.

In the fight that follows, the Swede finally wins. Weary, but flushed with victory, he now prepares to leave the hotel. Even the landlord raises no more objections. The Swede has put himself outside the small society of the hotel now finally through an arrogance

in victory that alienates even his considerate host. As he makes his way through the blankness of wind and snow, the author-narrator takes the occasion to comment :

He might have been in a deserted village. We picture the world as thick with conquering and elated humanity, but, here, with the bugles of the tempest pealing, it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamour of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smitten, ice-locked, diseasestricken, space-lost bulb. The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life. One was a coxcomb not to die in it. (p. 124)

The Swede makes his way to a saloon. Isolated and proud, he enters a saloon, in every way the opposite of the hotel. The lamp outside the saloon is red. "In front of it an indomitable red light was burning," (p. 124) to Crane the color of death, as blue is of life, a concept he insists on :

the snowflakes were made blood-colour as they flew through the circumscribed territory of the lamp's shining. (p. 124)

In the room are a bartender and four men playing cards, one of them a professional gambler. The gambler, we are told, holds his position in the town by a rigidly defined code, as elaborate as that held by the landlord. He was allowed to fleece unwary travelers and boastful farmers, but he was considered by the men of the town as an admirable and trustworthy person. The Swede comes among these men, full of pride in his victory, further elated at having found asylum from the storm. He attempts to get the men to drink with him. Because of his arrogant manner, they all refuse. Finally, he attempts to force the gambler to take a drink, grasping

him by the throat and dragging him from his chair. The gambler pulls a knife and stabs the Swede, piercing, as Crane says:

.....this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power.....as easily as if he had been a melon. (p. 129)

Where the man fell, his eyes seemed:

.....fixed upon a greadful legend that dwelt atop of the cash-machine: "This registers the amount of your purchase." (p. 130)

It is one of those marvelously rich lines that Crane exults in. In Western slang, the Swede has bought his load; in the context of the story, he has finally paid the price that Scully twice refused, and it is the price for his pride—and his isolation, the solitude that he finally finds on the floor of the saloon.

In the opinion of many readers, *The Blue Hotel* should properly have ended at this point. The most recent is R. W. Stallman, who has written most forceably on the subject:

This point marks the legitimate end of the story. Crane spoiled the whole thing by tacking on a moralizing appendix. The off-key tone is at odds with the tone of the preceding part, and the theme that his beginning prepared for stands at odds with the trumped-up theme announced in the totally irrelevant and nonironic conclusion.⁽²⁾

Stallman's objection could be more easily examined had he stated clearly what he thought the theme to be that Crane had prepared us for. Given the broadly ironic clue of the cash register, we might say that the story illustrates how man's actions determine the kind and amount of punishment he is to receive. But this would be contrary to all that Crane had said about his characters

in the past, even earlier in the same story, where he speaks of man as lice, peopling an extremely unpleasant globe. It might be that Stallman finds a successful irony in the story at this point by seeing the legend on the cash register as meaning exactly the opposite of what it says; but, again, there seems little in the story to justify such a reading, and the method itself would be contrary to Crane's normal use of such symbols.

In the final section, Crane shows us the Easterner and the cowboy meeting at a later date, when they discuss the light sentence given the gambler for killing the Swede. They speculate on various things that might have been done to prevent the death. The Easterner says:

"The Swede might not have been killed if everything had been square." "Might not have been killed?" exclaims the cowboy. "Everything square?" Why, when he said that Johnnie was cheatin' and acted like such a jackass? And then in the saloon he fairly walked up to get hurt?" (p. 131)

The cowboy's conclusions are just about what any reader's would be at this point in the story, but they reduced the Easterner to a rage because he knew better. With a reversal as neatly ironic as anything he had ever written, Crane has the Easterner reply:

"Let me tell you something. Listen! Johnnie was cheating." (p. 131)

With this bit of information, the whole meaning of the story has taken on another dimension. It was not merely the Swede who was responsible, who had failed out of simplicity, ignorance, and fear; it was the Easterner, who knew but had not the nerve to say that Johnnie was cheating; it was even the hotel keeper,

who allowed the fight to go on against his better judgment ; above all, of course, it was Johnnie, who even more wilfully than the Swede had violated one of the simplest of all codes by cheating in a game played "for fun." As the Easterner says :

" We are all in it. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede." (p. 131)

It is clear now that the machine did lie. It did not register the true amount. But a machine that even makes such a claim represents a reflector of man's confidence. The true machine is the universe—nature ; and we already know what this machine registers concerning man—nothing. The story is about man's struggle for some identity in the face of nature's indifference. What motivates the struggle is man's conceit. His method of conducting it is to seek the protection of the code that binds him to his fellowmen. Johnnie and the gambler, although they violated one code, were protected by another. The code protected the cowboy because he was too stupid to know what had happened ; it protected the Easterner because he was too shrewd to admit he knew it had been violated. The Swede was insensitive to the code that bound the others, so he confronted them as he confronted the storm, fearfully but defiantly. Ironically, he was right to have feared for his life, but for the wrong reason. No one had designs on him, least of all nature. It was ignorance that killed him, ignorance of the manner by which men cling together for protection against both the inner and the outer nature. His ignorance of the code dislocated the social structure, which dislocation, like a chain reaction, affected all of those social atoms—men—with whom he came in contact. Events

exploded in the Swede's death and the gambler's crime. As the Easterner rightly surmises, the events that followed the fight at the hotel might have been predicated, for they were as logically determined as the pressing of a number on the cash register.

(1) All page references are to Wilson Follett ed., *The Works of Stephen Crane*; Vol. 10.

(2) Robert Wooster Stallman: *Stephen Crane; Stories and Tales*, p. 269—270.

4. The Closing of the Frontier

The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky is a jewel of excellence exquisitely carved. Except for *The Open Boat*, the purity and clarity of its conception and execution are unparalleled in Crane's work. The awkward phrasing, the faulty diction, the strained, vague metaphor so characteristic of even Crane's work are not present to spoil this story. It escapes being simply melodrama because it is in part comic, the tone indicating that the author is not taking his material entirely seriously. It also delves into the characters of Jack Potter and his new bride, revealing to the reader that their lives extend beyond the immediate conflict described in the tale.

The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky is perfectly structured. Each section leads brilliantly toward the climax, the confrontation of Jack and Scratchy. The first section gently scoffs at the tradition of romance in the Western story. The newly-weds, Marshal Jack Potter of Yellow Sky and a bride who is neither pretty nor young and who has been a cook before her marriage, contribute to a travesty of the familiar Western love plot, in which marriage comes at the end and in which the couple is usually young and handsome. Much of the humor derives from the behavior of Potter and his

bride, who are awkward and embarrassed in the great Pullman car—an Eastern, dignified sanctum replete with Victorian ornament and Negro porters. Indeed, the act of marriage itself strikes Potter as a betrayal of the Western, Yellow Sky ethos. He is condemned in his own eyes for betraying two tradition: he has tarnished the persona of Marshal, a figure fearsome and independent, and he has tampered with the custom of partnership—he has not consulted his male friends.

The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky is a study of identities. Although insecure in his new role as married and responsible official, Jack Potter is conscious of his change from his former role as the lone marshal, ever ready for a fight. His opposite, Scratchy Wilson, cannot face his own two roles. For in reality Scratchy is the town bum, an aging cowboy who is an anachronism. When Scratchy is sober, we are told, “he wouldn’t hurt a fly,” but when he is under the influence of spirits, he sets out with guns blazing in search of a fight. He plays with the town as if it were a toy, terrorizing it and disrupting its order: storekeepers lock their doors and housewives pull closed their shutters. In order to sustain this conception of himself, Scratchy must define it against his antagonist, Marshal Potter in his earlier guise as typical marshal of the Old West, untrammelled and quick on the draw. The serious element of this comic tale comes from Scratchy Wilson’s recognition that, with Potter’s shucking off his character as mythic marshal, Scratchy cannot retain his own particular dream role as mythic Western gunfighter.

When Potter and his bride debark from the Eastern train, so involved is he in his new identity as husband that he forgets his

Western position—and assumed the station agent's excitement stems from the sight of him with a woman. But it is the marshal that the agent is seeking, not the fleeing bridegroom. The second part of the story opens in a world of complete contrast to the Weary Gentleman Saloon, twenty-one minutes before the train bearing the Potters is to arrive. The time shift enables Crane not only to sketch rapidly the plot situation but also to evoke the familiar Western background. Crane supplies an Easterner, a drummer, to serve as an outside observer who must learn about the local mores and the customary epic drunks of Scratchy Wilson that disturb the dozing atmosphere. Scratchy's beings are formulaic, and the formula depends upon Marshal Potter to bring the ceremony of shouting and shooting to a halt by engaging in a ritual fight with Scratchy. The bar is locked, and its inmates, supported by the two Western staples (guns and whiskey) that have turned Scratchy loose, take cover. Scratchy's position in the Yellow Sky social order becomes manifest: he is "a wonder with a gun,"⁽¹⁾ "the last one of the old gang that used to hang out along the river here," and, when sober, the "nicest fellow in town." That is, Scratchy is a living cliché of the Old West, a quick draw, a deadly shot, a rough with a heart of gold: in every way outdated. And the section closes on that most hackneyed of all Western dime-novel phrases, echo of a thousand descriptions of Indian or badman attacks, "Here he comes." The travesty is that this attack is reduced to the singular absurdity of one old man.

If the ambience of the first part of the story is that of the East and of the second the West, the third section is emblematic of the Old West diminished and perverted by the modern East.

Scratchy, the ur-Westerner, enters wearing a maroon shirt of the sort “made principally by some Jewish women on the East Side of New York,” and boots with “red tops with gilded imprints, of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England.” (p. 97) In the face of encroaching civilization Scratchy is a child. In his whiskey rage, Scratchy stalks the streets like a midnight cat. His identity emanates from the gun: “The long revolvers in his hands were as easy as straws: they were moved with an electric swiftness. The little fingers of each hand played sometimes in a musicians way.” Meantly shooting at a stray dog, fiercely demonstrating his prowess with a gun, Scratchy is playing with the town, his toy. The climax of his excursion is to be, as always, the duel with the marshal. No one is present, however, when the howling, cursing, shooting Scratchy arrives at Potter’s residence, and the old man churns “himself into deepest rage over the immobility of a house”—which is, unknown to Scratchy, now a home.

All worlds meet in the final episode when the relic of the Old West runs into the new bourgeois and his wife. The narrative brings together the modes of thriller, comedy, and realism. The staple of Western fiction, two strong men face to face, meets with mockery once more, just as in *Horses—One Dash* and *The Five White Mice*. The tradition in this case cracks wide open because the marshal is unarmed. Marriage has removed him from the Western scene: “He was stiffening and steadying, but yet somewhere at the back of his mind a vision of the Pullman floated: the sea-green figured velvet, the shining brass, silver, and glass.....all the glory of the marriage, the environment of the new estate.”

Scratchy's world crumbles, the circle breaks: "There ain't a man in Texas ever seen you without no gun. Don't take me for no kid." But Scratchy is a kid—in a kid's costume, playing a child's game, in the world of children's books and dime novels, in his case sadly, in the realms of second childhood.

The word "world" is Crane's own. Stunned with the news of the marriage—the phrase must be repeated for him five times—Scratchy is unmanned. "'No!' he said. He was like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world," And Scratchy is quick to grant that "it's all off now," the traditional duel, and the actuality of the Old West of myth, of gunfighters and marshals. If the marshal is a married householder, then the gunfighter, the opponent, is—nothing. This "foreign condition of marriage" returns Scratchy to his unviable role of a "simple child of the earlier plains." He is indeed a kid, and, shoving his outmoded weapons into his holsters for what will be the last time, he departs. "His feet made funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand." The image is a particularly rich one. As in the gunnel of an hourglass, the sands of Scratchy Wilson's time have run out: he leaves his footprints on these sands as his dreams end and his life closes in.

The tone of the total work is dual, but not ambivalent. Crane has at least two levels of meaning working here, one serious, the other comical, nearly farcical. He was able to keep them separate in *The Bride* as he was not always able in earlier works. His serious level remains serious, his comic level remains comic: Crane's kind of comic. The characters are viewed consistently and objectively in a manner not entirely characteristic of Crane's best work. Too often he becomes so involved with his characters that he is unable

to keep them at a proper distance, but this does not always result in serious flaws unless he is unsure of his feelings toward the characters. Then problems arise. No such problems arise here. This is one of the few stories seeming to have beneath it a broad, sympathetic understanding of humanity. There is nothing of the desperate fury, the intense anxiety appearing in the fiction where Crane is too personally involved.

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- (1) All references for subsequent quotations are to Wilson Follett ed. *The Works of Stephen Crane; Vol. 12.*

5. The Town Where I Will Live No More

In certain respects *The Monster* is the most ambitious piece Crane ever attempted. No other story is as broadly critical of society, nor is there any other work portraying in such realistic detail the life and character of a whole town. Usually Crane's concern is with depicting individuals whose problems are mostly private rather than social in nature. We often get a sense of the presence of society, but the makeup of the large social group is either impressionistically rendered or otherwise suggested. Here numerous townspeople are portrayed individually, each of whom has a part in forming the social attitudes of the town. By no means, however, has Crane forsaken his primary interest in the plight of the individual. Despite the larger canvas, here too his greatest concern is with an individual, one whose values come into conflict with those of the social body. This is the point at which *The Monster* touches Crane's major interests in his other fiction. How will the individual fare who stands alone, facing great odds and having only his own

internal strength to rely on? The larger problem explored in the short novel is a perennial one: the man of principle faced with either compromising, thereby gaining certain pragmatic goals, or strictly maintaining his principles and relinquishing more worldly values. The particular circumstances under which this large problem occurs suggests a theme especially relevant to our time and one indicating a great deal of insight and awareness, be it conscious or not, on Crane's part: the relationship between white and Negro in modern society.

The plot of the novel is a typically careful, marvelously controlled and organized, simply and clearly constructed form. As in his war novel, Crane employs twenty-four sections. Here each is quite short, and each part ends with a line that is at once climactic and brutally ironic. There are three major characters: Dr. Trescott, the leading physician of the pleasant town of Whilomville; his little son, Jimmie, probably eight years of age; and the family coachman, Henry Johnson, a handsome, proud, warm Negro who is a friend and advisor to the little boy, a pretentious dude in the eyes of the citizens who view the town from the vantage point of the barber shop, and a figure of romance and impeccable manners to the Negro community of Watermelon Alley. Although Crane alternates his narrative point of view from one to the other seemingly at will, it is the author's voice that controls the narration. In brief outline what happens is this: a fire breaks out in the Trescott home, and Henry manages to save little Jimmie: but in the process the Negro is so badly burned that there is no hope for his survival. Dr. Trescott saves Henry's life, however, and the Negro lives to become an object of horror to the townspeople, since

the flames have totally destroyed his face and his reason, and his grotesqueness frightens children. Despite the doctor's efforts to provide a refuge for the victim, his benevolent act backfires as the citizenry turn more and more of their wrath upon the doctor and his wife, finally refusing to patronize him and ostracizing her. The story ends with nothing resolved.

The story opens on an idyllic setting familiar to stories of smalltown life. Little Jimmie is playing railroad engine and accidentally destroys a peony stalk. Dr. Trescott, busily cutting the lawn, cannot understand Jimmie's request for attention to his crime, but finally comprehends and warns him not to play any more that day. Upon closer reading, we may see that the diction foreshadows the controlling idea of the story. Jimmie goes back to the cut flower and tries to repair it, but he cannot do it. Jimmie is but a boy: he cannot accomplish the godlike act of restoring the dead life. His godlike father, however, who is shaving the lawn as if it were a priest's chin, cannot understand what Jimmie has learned about nature, in his garden full of robins and cherry trees. But Dr. Trescott don't understand the lesson. The lesson is lost on him, and he will later challenge this law of nature. But the doctor is not prepared to deal with the monstrous events that lurk in the shadows of their Eden.

The dramatic center of the story is in the six sections, from the section four to the section nine, which encompass the main action, the fire and the rescue—narrated in Crane's at times lean, at times richly fleshed, prose. He approaches the events from three different narrative angles. The fact that the main physical action of the story ends less than halfway through the book shows that

the ethical center is of greater importance. It is not the making of the monster that is of the essence, but what the monster makes of the town.

At first, the narrative concentrates on the crown, for the people of Whilomville will be spectators of the dramatic action but prime movers of the ethical action. Then, Crane takes a second approach to the fire by moving back to time before the alarm has been sounded and focusing on the peaceful neighborhood when the first wisps of smoke appear from the Trescott home. He personifies fire into fire imps, and the reference to the flames is: "This outbreak had been well planned, as if by professional revolutionist." (p. 40)⁽¹⁾ The imagery is richly appropriate to the basic motif of the plot: the overthrow of the Trescotts' social position. Just as the society of fire imps destroys the wooden house, so the result of the fire will be a revolution that drops their social edifice. In both cases, the theme is the fall of the house of Trescott.

Now the action appears through the consciousness of Henry, who has raced to the rescue. This seventh section is easily the most vividly written in the book, tense, dramatic, and full of verbal as well as literal pyrotechnics. Crane brings forth the terror of hellfire, partly through his poetic descriptions, partly through Henry's horror, and partly through contrast with the seemingly innocent vision of the white-robed Jimmie bathed in a beautiful rosy light of reflected flames.

The conflict between Henry and the flames recalls the psychological power of Crane's war fiction such as *The Red Badge of Courage*. Indeed, Crane's expression of the idea that fear comes when there is still hope of escape, when the mind must work and not submit,

is a profound insight.

He was no longer creature to the flames, and he was afraid of the battle with them. It was a singular and swift set of alternations in which he feared twice without submission, and submitted once without fear. (p. 44)

There may be excesses in the five paragraphs that combine an impressionistic indulgence in color with a naturalistic reduction of man to the status of an animal—or a wailing Nagro who echoes the sadness of the swamps. In the burning laboratory Henry finds animated odors, “alive with envy, hatred, and malice.” Yet the flaming room has a wonderful beauty.

The room was like a garden in the region where might be burn burning flowers. Flames of violet, crimson, green, blue, orange, and purple were blooming everywhere.” (p. 45)

We are naturally reminded of the heavenly garden at the story’s start. In this hellish torture garden the flames are alterately savagely cruel and beautifully tender—like a “panther,” an “animal,” and “eagles” with “talons,” or of “delicate, trembling, sapphire shape like a fairy lady.” (p. 45) The serpent fire both caresses and destroys. It should be noted that the doctor’s chemicals add greatly to Henry’s agony in the garden. The climax of this part is fantastic and sadistic, lovely and hateful. The snake-like ribbon of flame moves down the slant:

At the angle it waved its sizzling molten head to and fro over the closed eyes of the man beneath it. Then, in a moment, with a mystic impulse, it moved again, and the red snake flowed directly down into Johnson’s upturned face.

Afterward the trail of this creature seemed to reek, and amid flames and low explosions drops like red-hot jewels pattered softly down it at leisurely intervals. (p. 46)

The religious overtones such as snake, garden, and fire, the sexual note, and the realistic situation combine into a prose amalgam that is in strange contrast to the ironic, controlled, almost stark prose of most of the story. Perhaps Crane was indulging in fine writing here: but in the context the fire provides the dramatic high point, the reason for the ensuing social dilemma that will be handled drily and coolly. Therefore the rich and beautiful prose may be justified.

The first part of the novel is very tightly filled with action and description. After the climactic fire, the attention is on the ethics of Dr. Trescott's decision to save the ghastly vegetable that was once Henry Johnson, and on society's inability to comprehend or accept the unusual. The pace is slower, and the narration of action gives way to the analysis of motives. The relative slowness of the final fifteen sections is effective, for as the affair works itself out, following the laws of social prejudice, there is a certain dragging inevitability and hopelessness that succeeds the climax of the physical drama. The decisions of the ethical drama are more complex, the results less easy to envision. The destruction of a man by prejudice is more complicated and less dramatic than the destruction of a house by fire.

Community opinion treats the result of the fire in two ways. Henry, so badly burned that he has no longer any face, must die: and he will die a hero, a hero, even a saint. As the story makes clear, the community is wrong in both cases. Henry never does

die, and Dr. Trescott is responsible for bringing this Lazarus back from near death. Section eleven contains one of the most impressive scenes in all of Crane's fiction. Dr. Trescott, the man of science and good will, debates with Judge Hagenthrope, the man of law and realism, over the wisdom and morality of saving Henry's life. By serving Henry the doctor will be usurping Christ's role in character. In Chapter twelve of "St. John" we find the story of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. The chapter tells about the chief priests' waiting to be rid of Lazarus, and about the blindness of the Jews who will not believe in Him. In Bethany where a feast is prepared for Christ, "Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with Him." The Judge accuses Trescott of Christlike deed:

"He will be your creation, you understand. He is purely your creation. Nature has very evidently given him up. He is dead. You are restoring him to life. You are making him, and he will be a monster, and with no mind." (p. 56)

Obviously Trescott is not Christ: he embodies some of the attributes of Christ though not all: he is not divine, nor is he intended to be. He might as well have added a footnote at the beginning of the story directing the reader to the Lazarus story.

Beyond the character of Dr. Trescott, the story has broad implications involving his relationship with Henry. It is significant that Henry is a monster, faceless, and a black man, who, when, freed from the confines of his social and economic position, becomes a frightful menace to society. Before Henry has lost his face and his mind, he has seemed safe to those around him, a recognized, though subservient, member of the general community. But when

as a result of his insanity he is no longer restrained by the customs of the country, he becomes like some frightful and terrifying apparition embodying the deepest fears of the community. Henry seems to Whilomville to be what Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* actually is: a monster created by his condition as a Negro in America. Henry is in fact harmless. It is only in the clouded eyes of the community that he is a threat, a threat to the Negroes of the town as well. He threatens them because they too fear this man unconstrained by the rigid system of manners which Crane shows Henry participating in prior to his derangement and disfiguration.

But despite the recital theme, which may strike us as especially significant today, *The Monster* is finally a story about human responsibility. If Henry Johnson is a monster, he is only so because he has been made one. The desire of the community to be rid of him, to get him out of sight, is the desire to recognize no responsibility for the man. Only Trescott knows that he is responsible for this "monster," this monster who cannot and will not go away. On this level the final resolution of the story is predetermined. Dr. Trescott has no other alternative: he is tied to his creation.

Only one other person in the story, Martha Goodwin, recognizes the human responsibility involved, understanding, by implication, why Dr. Trescott acts as he does. Interestingly enough, another Martha is the person who serves Christ's feast at Bethany in John 12:1. It is Martha Goodwin who speaks in favor of Dr. Trescott when her sister and a neighbor present the attitude of the town that:

“.....You can't go against the whole town,” piped Kate, following her leader rapidly. “‘The whole town,’” cried Martha. “I'd like to know what you call ‘the whole town.’ Do you call these silly people who scared of Henry Johnson ‘the whole town’?” (p. 69)

But ironically, she alone of the townspeople is treated with singular derision. Prior to her defense of Dr. Trescott, she has been presented as the town busybody, a gossip, who has been hardened to life by the early death of her betrothed.

In regard to social misdemeanors, she who was simply the mausoleum of a dead passion was probably the most savage critic in town. (p. 83)

The story ends in the snow of winter, closing the cycle from early summer. And like the anticlimax of the “plop” that undercut the close of *The Upturned Face*, so the tea party with his small-town story ends reveals the punctured balloon of Mrs. Trescott's social claims. A whimpering anticlimax, surely: yet the fifteen empty teacups, the woman's desolation, the sound of the wind and the snow lashing the house, indicate an actual, not just a teapot tempest.

As he sat holding her head on his shoulder, Trescott found himself occasionally trying to count the cups. There were fifteen of them. (p. 102)

Thus the story ends in defeat and irresolution, with a bleaker vision than that evoked in most of the realistic stories of small-town life.

(1) All page references for subsequent quotations are to Wilson Follett ed., *The Works of Stephen Crane*; Vol. 3.

6. Conclusion

Stephen Crane was the lonely artist just out of his teens and working at times in an obscurity like that of Nathaniel Hawthorne in his solitary chamber, and had developed out of an ancestral and moral chemistry that might have produced a minister, a soldier, or a ballplayer rather than a writer. He had, however, abandoned the letter, though not the spirit, of his minister father's gentle Methodism. Or, if we remember Crane's conscious pride in his military heritage that dated back to the Revolutionary War and his performances as drill captain at Claverack, we can easily see how he might have become a soldier. Or, despite his frail constitution soon weakened by incessant smoking, he might have played professional baseball after his display of skill at varsity shortstop while attending Syracuse. Like most occupations, the ministry, the military, and sports had in common the ideal of a code of moral or physical perfection against which men measured their individual worth. This was true as well of the splendid procession of Art, which Crane approached gingerly as a reporter of Jersey shore news for the New York Tribune. The tension between ideal code and individual performance defines the limits and makes clear the ironical gestures of Crane's art. Crane never abandoned the somewhat romantic conception of the code, retaining a singularly pure vision of the truth of primitive Christianity, of the nobility of military behavior, of the excellence of the sportsman's code, of the high purpose of art. From the beginning, in fact, he measured himself, other men, and the whole of society against such standards, and was equally aware of his own deficiencies and of the failure

of most men through their overweening vanity, their childish or psychopathic delusions, or their failure of magnanimity.

The works of the most authors, certainly major authors, have a great degree of unity, but Crane's works don't have it because of several rather obvious reasons. His fiction does not take place in any particular region or country. It does not generally deal with broad types of characters. Some of it is not intended to be serious. Some of his work is midway between reportorial writing and light fiction. The range of quality of his published work is greater than that of most good authors, some being very good and some being embarrassingly bad. In notably few instances can we say that he was involved with particular themes or subjects at particular times during his career; he was likely to write about any one of his themes at any time. Though there certainly must have been development *Maggie* and *The Open Boat*, it is no clearly defined development. The essential difference between these two works seems to me a difference in Crane's attitude toward his material rather than a great increase in technical skill.

Very often Crane's attitude toward his material as revealed by his tone accounts for qualitative differences among his best works. When he dealt with his innermost concerns, problems of tone almost invariably arose. This suggests that all too frequently Crane failed to achieve sufficient aesthetic distance between himself and his materials. Thus Crane does not achieve sufficient aesthetic distance from the Swede in *The Blue Hotel*. He bears consistent malice toward him, a great error since it deprives the Swede of his humanity, making it impossible for the reader to recognize him as representing mankind, as Crane intends. In *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*

problem of tone do not arise, because it does not involve Crane's innermost feelings. He does not take Scratchy or the Sheriff seriously, and there is never any doubt on the reader's part about whether he should view them seriously. *The Open Boat* also suggests that Crane's attitude toward his materials is well under control. Except in one or two minor instances he manages to sustain a consistently sympathetic attitude toward his characters, never viewing them as fools whose opinions should be doubted because they are fools. Even when the protagonist, the correspondent, interprets nature wrongly, he is not treated with the devastating irony. In *The Open Boat* there is an underlying compassion for humanity seldom found in Crane's fiction.

The problems Crane's major characters find themselves involved in often reveal the degree to which he was attuned to the pulse of his age. In his fiction he was working out in that form many of the same problems confronting the leading thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often coming to similar conclusions. Crane obviously was not a systematic thinker, nor did he intend to be. Yet he articulated in fictional terms a number of the important questions of the age. Like many other thoughtful persons, he was concerned with coming to terms with the conception of man presented by science in the nineteenth century, especially biology. What, asked Crane, is the relationship between man and nature? To what degree is man involved in the processes of nature? Can intelligence, conscious effort, direct events in the world to any meaningful degree? To what extent does Darwin's description of evolution in nature describe man in society? If the conclusions of Darwinism are true, what is the relationship

between man and God? There are the larger questions. Their ramifications specifically describe the themes of most of Crane's work.

Another theme linking him to the intellectual climate of his time is the significant matter of the disappearance of the frontier and the impingement on the West of the orderliness of the East. *The Blue Hote*, *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky* are works incorporating in various degrees this theme. Frederick Jackson Turner's explication of the effect on American history of the closing of the frontier,⁽¹⁾ begun only a few years before Crane dealt with the subject, is undoubtedly one of the most important historical thesis to be developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Any work on the intellectual history of ear will show relevance to Crane's major themes in his serious fiction.

It was only two decades after his death that readers and critics began to understand more clearly his importance as one of the first of the "modern" American Writers. A generation ago when Crane was somewhat neglected, Earnest Hemingway could speak of him, in *The Green Hills of Africa*, as one of America's good writers.

The good writers are Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain. That's not the order they're good in. There is no order for good writers.⁽²⁾

Hemingway's judgments were often whimsical, as his omission of Melville and Whitman shows, but this particular judgment was going in the right direction in that it paid some heed to the true importance of Crane. His importance in the twentieth century has been in part because he was in touch with a great number of the

problems which this century has seen as basic. At the same time, he wrote about these issues in a way that distinguishes him as one of the most modern authors. It was moral security sense of abiding loss that gave Crane's work the peculiarly pessimistic flavor that was so congenial to the twentieth century. Standard formulations of conduct and piety were widely questioned and widely abandoned, and writers sought to make sense of what remained either, like Edith Warton, by using the past as a fixed point from which to judge the present, or by creating a romantic discipline of the self. Fitzgerald moves in this latter direction, and Hemingway apotheosizes it. But despite the impressive connections one can indicate between Crane's sensibility and Hemingway's,⁽³⁾ we cannot in all fairness say that Crane "anticipated" Hemingway, for the apotheosis of the self was distinctly alien to Crane's nature. Crane is harder at the core, and in one sense more deeply skeptical than later admirer. And it was this very sense of disaffiliation is Crane, of a profound questioning of social verities, of the isolated figure facing a retreating cosmos, above all of the brutality and senselessness of war that made this strange rebel of the late nineteenth century seem very relevant to the spirit of the twentieth century and to its major literary figures.

② Vernon L. Parrington: *Main Current in American Thought*, Vol. 3. p. 159.

(2) Earnest Hemingway: *Green Hills of Africa*, p. 15.

(3) Philip Young: *Crane and Hemingway*, in *Stephen Crane; A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 52—56.

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