

HUMOR



Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

ANALYSIS

“The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” (1898)

This was Crane’s favorite of his stories. It opens with a railroad train, the popular icon of progress in the 19th century. Riding the train creates illusions, as suggested by the west appearing to sweep “into the east.” Since the railroad is making the west accessible to people in the east--like this story--the illusion is true in a figurative sense. The story, however, moves from east to west like the train, which is said to extend a thousand miles across the state “and never stops but four times.” Likewise the story stops four times at section breaks. The sense of simultaneous double movement, eastward and westward, establishes the tone of irony always present in Crane.

“The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” is an allegory of the civilizing of the West by the East, personified in the bride. Dime novel westerns were read like comic books by soldiers on both sides during the Civil War and continued to be popular thereafter. Conventions of the genre were already so well established by 1898 that Crane was able to parody them in this story, over a decade before Hollywood began to exploit them in movies. As a Realist, Crane debunks misconceptions that were sweeping eastward in popular culture from the pens of Bret Harte and lesser writers out West. “The Bride” is a comic response and “The Blue Hotel” a moral response to popular Romanticism about the West.

The newly married pair seem out of place in the sagebrush of frontier Yellow Sky, a placename evoking “the hour of daylight,” or the dawn of civilization. The groom, who turns out to be the sheriff or marshal, is said to be shy, ironically contradicting what one might expect of a tough lawman on the frontier, but modesty and shyness around women had been traditional traits of the western hero since Cooper established the prototype in Natty Bumppo earlier in the century and they continued to be so in the movies as displayed by John Wayne, Gary Cooper and others. Jack Potter, this example, has progressed from horseback, but seems smaller on a train. The bride, contrary to the romantic stereotype, “was not pretty, nor was she very young.” Nor is she educated, as indicated by her use of “ain’t.” In both the real and the

romantic Wests, the brides often were schoolmarms from the east. Newlyweds attract so much attention and so commonly behave alike, they are social types: “Historically there was supposed to be something infinitely humorous in their situation.”

Jack Potter shows off the luxury of their Pullman coach as if promising his bride a comparable luxury in the future, with the pride of a booster on the Yellow Sky Chamber of Commerce, rather than as a sheriff like Wyatt Earp. The lush opulence of their transport is conveyed by prose style as well as by vivid imagery, with heavy alliteration, assonance and even rhyme: “Her eyes opened wider as she contemplated the sea-green figured velvet, the shining brass, silver, and glass, the wood that gleamed as darkly brilliant as the surface of a pool of oil.” Crane induces the effect of luxury by repeating this description at the end of the story. The exact repetition makes his words sound like a mantra and his “vision”—the mock religious materialism that prevails in society—transforming in its power: “Their surroundings reflected the glory of their marriage that morning” (during yellow sky) in the city of San Antonio.

Marriage has civilized the Sheriff. Next he will be buying a crib and investing in life insurance. His elation “made him appear ridiculous to the Negro porter,” who is by race a realist, with less opportunity for elation in white America. The newlyweds are such humorous social types they temporarily displace the black porter as an object of “derisive enjoyment.” Racial roles are reversed on the railroad of life. Now, ironically, the black man becomes a snob and a bully: “He oppressed them.” A black waiter serves them with “equanimity” and “benevolence” but enjoys patronizing them. All of this reduces the western hero to the butt of jokes.

The characters are such conventional social types in such a familiar situation, the story becomes a parody of the popular western—and a parody too of generic western movies over a decade before their advent. As in this “romantic” dialogue: “‘We are due in Yellow Sky at 3:42,’ he said, looking tenderly into her eyes. ‘Oh, are we?’ she said, as if she had not been aware of it. To evince surprise at her husband’s statement was part of her wifely amiability.” Jack Potter’s wedding present to his wife is a watch, a traditional icon of civilization, purchased in the City. As the train approaches Yellow Sky he begins to worry about how his community will react to his surprising marriage: “He had committed an extraordinary crime. Face to face with this girl in San Antonio, and spurred by his sharp impulse, he had gone headlong over all the social hedges.”

Ironically, the Sheriff has committed a crime. Usually the most disciplined of men, he was “spurred” like a horse by a sharp impulse and got married. There are not supposed to be any “social hedges” in a frontier town. That is one reason for living on the frontier. But it turns out that there are social hedges here too, which bar marriage to a western hero, at least *without getting permission!*—indicating just how powerful the taboo remains: “His friends could not forgive him. Frequently he had reflected on the advisability of telling them by telegraph, but a new cowardice had been upon him. He feared to do it.” A brave man in facing real death, Potter is a social coward and now he is a “traitor to the feelings of Yellow Sky.” He resolves to hide from the town. He and his bride “slunk away” with the black porter laughing at them.

II

As in a western movie, cut to the saloon in Yellow Sky. It is called the Weary Gentleman saloon but there are no gentlemen in sight, only cowboys, shepherders and a drummer, a traveling salesman. All are alarmed by the news that Scratchy Wilson is drunk and is coming this way to raise hell. The town is no longer safe. Scratchy embodies the Wilderness, what remains of it, in this allegory of civilizing the West. “He’s about the last one of the old gang that used to hang out along the river.” The bride has come to establish the Garden and Scratchy is a snake, though a harmless one as it turns out. The salesman is the dude, the ignorant greenhorn from the City.

Anticipating his arrival, patrons scare the salesman by turning Scratchy into an archetypal monster—“a wonder with a gun”: “He’s a terror when he’s drunk. When he’s sober he’s all right—kind of simple—wouldn’t hurt a fly—nicest fellow in town. But when he’s drunk—whoo!” They hope Jack Potter gets back soon to confront Scratchy. The reader conditioned by dime novels or, later, by western movies, anticipates a shootout on the main street. The name Scratchy evokes a lice-infested lout. At the sound of a shot,

followed by three wild yowls—“*Here he comes!*”--the reader is prepared for the entrance of the villain, probably in dirty buckskin with a long scar, or--as in so many movies--in black hat and black leather, the last gunslinger in the Old West.

III

Instead, the monster appears in a flannel shirt made principally by some Jewish women in New York and in boots “of the kind worn by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England.” The ironies are comical. As evident in his clothing, Scratchy is no longer wild. He is like a little boy playing cowboy. He is already so much civilized that half the time he is the nicest man in town. And though he gets drunk, he has yet to kill anybody. Jack Potter once had to shoot him in the leg. His swaggering tirade in the street is boyish and Crane’s perspective deflates him: “The calm adobes preserved their demeanor at the passing of this small thing in the middle of the street.”

The effect is similar to that in a Bugs Bunny cartoon when the loud yelling badass gunslinger Yosemite Sam is heard shooting wildly into the air and turning a corner reveals himself to be as short as a little boy in a huge cowboy hat and a mustache longer than he is tall. “The man called to the sky. There were no attractions. He bellowed and fumed and swayed his revolvers here and everywhere.” He proves himself a villain by shooting at a dog, then by shooting out the windows of his best friend. But he is a little boy villain: “The man was playing with this town; it was a toy for him.” Looking for a fight, he swaggers over to the house of Jack Potter: “Presently there came the spectacle of a man churning himself into deepest rage over the immobility of a house.”

IV

Potter and his bride walk “sheepishly and with speed.” They are like sheep too in being vulnerable to a wild animal--a beast in their Garden. Turning the corner they come face to face with Scratchy, who points a gun at the groom’s chest. “Potter’s mouth seemed to be merely a grave for his tongue... He exhibited an instinct to at once loosen his arm from the woman’s grip, and he dropped the bag to the sand.” The pun conveys that, suddenly, civilization as represented by the woman has become “baggage.” The bride’s face “had gone as yellow as old cloth. She was a slave to hideous rites, gazing at the apparitional snake.” She does not know Scratchy and demonizes him in a reflex of fear. From her perspective, Scratchy is the iconic snake in her Garden, virtually Satan.

The confrontation of Jack and Scratchy parodies the convention of the shootout on main street in the generic western, except that the Sheriff is unarmed: “‘I ain’t got a gun on me Scratchy,’ he said. ‘Honest, I ain’t.’” Then he recalls his vision of luxury in the Pullman car, repeated word for word, “the environment of the new estate.” His new estate is civilization by marriage, which tames him, based on his experience that, even drunk, Scratchy is not wild enough to shoot him. The confrontation also parodies the dialogue with heavy dialect in dime novel westerns, implying that Scratchy is immature, whereas Jack has grown up by taking on the responsibilities of marriage. “Don’t take me for no kid,” Scratchy says. He sneers, “Been to Sunday-school?” The steepled church at the end of a main street is an icon of civilization in the generic frontier town. Scratchy has such faith in their ritual of the Old West, he does not even notice the bride, let alone comprehend the meaning of marriage:

“‘Married!’ said Scratchy. Seemingly for the first time, he saw the drooping, drowning woman on the other man’s side. ‘No!’ he said’.” In denial, he is dumbfounded in the presence of a lady: “He was like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world.” The bride disarms the outlaw: “‘Well,’ said Wilson at last, slowly, ‘I s’pose it’s all off now’.” The “it” is a resounding understatement, referring to the entire culture of the frontier West. “He was not a student of chivalry; it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains.” Scratchy becomes a little more civilized himself by surrendering, even attaining a dignity that is suggested by the use of his last name at the end. In his disappointment, “He was looking at the ground,” which leads downward to the last sentence of the story: “His feet made funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand.” The image evokes the icon of an hourglass, as time is running out for the frontier culture. As in an hourglass the end of the story is a downer--an anticlimax. The conventional shootout never happens and the bride prevails. As he trudges away into the sunset forever, Scratchy embodies the Old West.

Michael Hollister (2015)

