

35 CRITICS DISCUSS

Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

“Why is he not immensely popular? With his strength, with his rapidity of action, with that amazing faculty of vision--why is he not? He has outline, he has colour, he has movement, with that he ought to go very far. But--will he? I sometimes think he won't. It is not an opinion--it is a feeling. I could not explain why he disappoints me--why my enthusiasm withers as soon as I close the book. While one reads, of course, he is not to be questioned. He is the master of his reader to the very last line--then--apparently for no reason at all--he seems to let go his hold.”

Joseph Conrad
Letter to Edward Garnett (1897)

“His success in England began with *The Red Badge of Courage*, which did, indeed, more completely than any other book has done for many years, take the reading public by storm. Its freshness of method, its vigor of imagination, its force of color and its essential freedom from many traditions that dominate this side of the Atlantic, came—in spite of the previous shock of Mr. Kipling—with a positive effect of impact. It was a new thing, in a new school....

I suppose that it must have been said hundreds of times that this book is a subjective study of the typical soldier in war. But Mr. George Wyndham, himself a soldier of experience, has pointed out in an admirable preface to a re-issue of this and other of Crane's war studies [*Pictures of War*], that the hero of the *Red Badge* is, and is intended to be, altogether a more sensitive and imaginative person than the ordinary man. He is the idealist, the dreamer of boastful things brought suddenly to the test of danger and swift occasions and the presence of death....

‘The Open Boat’ is to my mind, beyond all question, the crown of all his work. It has all the stark power of the earlier stories, with a new element of restraint; the color is as full and strong as ever, fuller and stronger, indeed; but those chromatic splashes that at times deafen and confuse in *The Red Badge*, those images that astonish rather than enlighten, are disciplined and controlled....It seems to me that, when at last the true proportions can be seen, Crane will be found to occupy a position singularly cardinal....Was ever a man before who wrote of battles so abundantly as he has done, and never had a word, never a word from first to last, of the purpose and justification of the war?...

He is the first expression of the opening mind of a new period, or, at least, the early emphatic phase of a new initiative—beginning, as a growing mind must needs begin, with the record of impressions, a record of a vigor and intensity beyond all precedent.”

H. G. Wells
“Stephen Crane: From an English Standpoint”
The North American Review CLXXI
(August 1900) 233-42

“New York was essentially his inspiration, the New York of suffering and baffled and beaten life, of inarticulate or blasphemous life; and away from it he was not at home, with any theme, or any sort of character. It was the pity of his fate that he must quit New York, first as a theme, and then as a habitat; for he rested nowhere else, and wrought with nothing else as with the lurid depths which he gave proof of knowing better than anyone else.”

William Dean Howells
North American Review
(December 1902) 771

“In his art he is unique. Its certainty, its justness, its peculiar perfection of power arrived at its birth, or at least that precise moment in its birth when other artists--and great artists too--were preparing themselves

for the long and difficult conquest of their art. I cannot remember a parallel case in the literary history of fiction....His art is just in itself, rhythmical, self-poising as is the art of a perfect dancer. There are no false steps, no excesses. And, of course, his art is strictly limited. We would define him by saying he is the perfect artist and interpreter of the surfaces of life. And that explains why he so swiftly attained his peculiar power and what is the realm his art commands.”

Edward Garnett
Friday Nights
(Knopf 1922) 205

“He had a quiet smile that charmed and frightened one. It made you pause by something revelatory it cast over his whole physiognomy, not like a ray but like a shadow....Contempt and indignation never broke the surface of his moderation simply because he had no surface. He was all through the same material, incapable of affectation of any kind, of any pitiful failure of generosity for the sake of personal advantage, or even from sheer exasperation which must find its relief....Though the word is discredited now and may sound pretentious, I will say that there was in Crane a strain of chivalry which made him safe to trust with one’s life.”

Joseph Conrad
Introduction
Stephen Crane, by Thomas Beer
(Knopf 1923) 5, 7, 9-10

“I am old enough to remember the blast that *The Red Badge of Courage* made in 1895. It was an episode not matched in American letters, before or since. *Leaves of Grass* [by Whitman] sneaked in quietly and almost furtively; *The Spy* had been prepared for by *Precaution* [both by Cooper]; Mark Twain was already a national figure when he published *Huckleberry Finn*; *McTeague* had forerunners and was expected. But *The Red Badge of Courage* came like a flash of lightning out of a clear winter sky; it was at once unprecedented and irresistible. Who was this astonishing young man? A drunken newspaper reporter in New York?...The miracle lifted newspaper reporting to the level of a romantic craft, alongside counterfeiting and mining in the Klondike. More, it gave the whole movement of the nineties a sudden direction and a powerful impulse forward. At one stroke Realism was made its goal—not the old flabby, kittenish Realism of Howells’s imitators, with its puerile labouring of trivialities, but the sterner, more searching Realism that got under the surface—the new Realism that was presently to flower in *McTeague*, and then in *Sister Carrie*, and then in a whole progression of books...

Maggie, in 1896, remained an almost unknown book; it existed only in an obscure and shabby edition, bare of Crane’s name; it was not until after *The Red Badge* that it was to come out between covers. The latter made Crane; not *Maggie*. And more, perhaps, than any other book, it made the thing we call American literature today. Crane never wrote another long story as good as *The Red Badge*....His method, in truth, was grossly ill-adapted to the novel, properly so-called. He had, so to speak, no literary small talk; he could not manage what the musicians call passage work. His superlative skill lay in the handling of isolated situations; he knew, too, how to analyze them with penetrating insight, but beyond that he was rather at a loss: He lacked the pedestrian talent for linking one situation to another. This weakness threw him naturally into the short story, and there he was instantly at home. The short story gave him all the room he needed—and no more.

Better, perhaps, than any other of his stories, ‘The Blue Hotel’ reveals his singular capacity at its best. The episode there related is obviously the last scene in a long drama: the life of a nobody. The short story in America owes more to him than he has got credit for. He loosened and extended its form, he quickened its tempo, and he greatly enriched its substance. The drive of a powerful originality was in him. He was, within his limits, one of the noblest artists that we have produced.”

H. L. Mencken
Introduction
The Work of Stephen Crane X (Major Conflicts)
ed. Wilson Follett
(Knopf 1926) ix-xiii

“The good [American fiction] 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...All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*....It’s the best book we’ve had....Crane wrote two fine stories. “The Open Boat” and “The Blue Hotel.” The last one is the best.”

Ernest Hemingway
Green Hills of Africa
(Scribner’s 1935) 22

“He is American literature’s ‘marvelous boy.’ Like the Bowery, he was elemental and vital. He would sleep in a flop house to taste the bitter of experience. He loved living. And adventure enough was crowded into his eight sick years of manhood. He looked at life clearly and boldly, knew its irony, felt its mystery and beauty, and wrote about it with a sincerity and confidence that spring only from genius.”

Vernon Loggins
I Hear America
(Crowell 1937) 23

“Crane left on me an impression of supernaturalness that I still have. It was perhaps the aura of that youth that never deserted him--perhaps because of his aspect of frailty. He seemed to shine--and perhaps the November sun really did come out and cast on his figure, in the gloom of my entry, a ray of light. At any rate, there he stands...radiating brightness. But it was perhaps more than anything the avenging quality of his brows and the resentful frown of his dark blue eyes. He saw, that is to say, the folly and malignity of humanity--not in the individual but in committees.”

Ford Madox Ford
Portraits from Life
(Houghton 1937) 24

“After a year at Lafayette and another at Syracuse he gave up formal education, to live precariously by writing for newspapers in New York. Little used to reading, he admired Tolstoi and Flaubert so far as he knew them, but he was impatient of his genteel American contemporaries, whom he called insincere. His own observations in the slums and along the Bowery had convinced him that life was not what books made it out...Crane was often comic, more often ironic, and always pungent. His private indifference to conventional opinions and habits caused him to be credited with legendary wild oats...Among the novelists of his decade Crane stood out as Poe had among the poets of the mid-century, with as much scandal as fame in his reputation....Too much a realist to fall in with contemporary romancers, he was too much a poet to follow the course laid down by such systematic naturalists as Zola. Crane’s voice was so individual that he did not come into the honor due him till another age, when it became evident that he had spoken with the voice of a generation later than his own....Modern American literature began with him.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 229, 231-33

“Critics of Crane seem to have agreed upon two aspects of his mind and art worth emphasis, his technical contributions to the short story, and his naturalistic philosophy....Crane was not wholly a naturalist. He did not let a Naturalistic view of the universe lead him into an amoral social philosophy of survival of the fittest, of life as a state of war on the social level...The forces of destiny are blind and impersonal and cannot be conquered, as we see in ‘The Open Boat’; but the forces of society, those which lead to the social evil seen in *Maggie* and other of his stories, are man-made forces, and can be controlled by man, who set them in motion. The world of Nature we can only face with stoicism; the world of society, however, can be reshaped...The individual, then, Crane feels, must adjust himself to two spheres of life, Nature and society. In relation to the former he is powerless; his relation to the latter ought to be one of humanitarianism, tolerance and justice...Evil finds its origin not in individual man but in institutions, in society.”

Russell B. Nye
“Stephen Crane as Social Critic”

“For all its beauty, Crane’s best work was curiously thin and, in one sense, even corrupt. His desperation exhausted him too quickly; his unique sense of tragedy was a monotone. No one in America had written like him before; but though his books precipitately gave the whole aesthetic movement of the nineties a sudden direction and a fresher impulse, he could contribute no more than the intensity of his spirit. Half of him was a consummate workman; the other half was not a writer at all....His gift was a furious one, but barren; writing much, he repeated himself so joylessly that in the end he seemed to be mocking himself with the same quiet viciousness with which, even as a boy, he had mocked the universe.”

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds
(Reynal 1942) 71-2

“‘Let it be stated,’ wrote his biographer Thomas Beer with acute understanding, ‘that the mistress of this boy’s mind was fear.’ Poverty, innate cruelty, war, and death are the themes of all his best work as they were in Ambrose Bierce, yet there is little in his life or reading to account for the pessimism and the sensibility of his tales and poems. The poverty, illness, and early death of this member of one of the oldest and most respected families in Newark, New Jersey, seem to have resulted from the pressure of nervous energy rather than circumstance. He lived intensely a life of his own choice.

The record of that life is confused and shrouded in myth, for, like Poe, he threw himself into his fiction and was not unwilling to become a part of it. His own reticence and the jealousy of lesser ‘Bohemians’ conspired to distort into a legend of drink, drugs, and petty social crimes the simple facts of a small-town boyhood as the Methodist minister’s youngest son, a few years of slumming in New York City’s nascent artist colony, another few reporting the color of the West and South as far as Mexico for a newspaper syndicate, involvement as a correspondent in the Cuban and Greek comic-opera wars of independence, and a final attempt to find in English manor-house life the haven that his country was too busy to supply. It is the familiar story of romantic youth seeking escape from life into art and achieving a fleeting mastery before the overtaxed body gives way. The term of twenty-nine years, the late marriage to an older woman, and the death by consumption at a health resort follow an almost classic formula. Mastery was achieved in a half-dozen short stories and novelettes, near mastery in three short novels and in innumerable sketches, but two more ambitious novels failed. His slim volumes of epigrammatic and symbolic verse give him a minor but significant place in American poetry....

A direct influence of Darwin, Spencer, Haeckel, or their American popularizers cannot be established. Rather he seems to have absorbed these influences at second hand through Russian and French writers. For Tolstoy’s *Sebastopol* and *War and Peace* he confesses an early enthusiasm, but probably because of his interest in war rather than for deeper reasons. Of Dostoevski and Turgenev he admits no knowledge, yet internal evidence makes such knowledge possible. His tales, in theme and form, bear a striking resemblance to those of De Maupassant and he knew Flaubert early in *Salambo*, even though he resented its length. There is no doubt that he took direct inspiration from these French realists, and even more certainly from Zola, for *L’Assommoir* probably provided the plot for *Maggie*, and *La Debacle* bears a close resemblance to *The Red Badge of Courage*, though he denied ever having read it. His work shows the stamp of European Naturalism and contributed to the break of American literary history with the English tradition. With Zola he shared the philosophy of the roman experimental, with De Maupassant and Turgenev the sensory acuteness, the brevity, and the repressed intensity of Impressionistic art.

This can be said even though the superficiality of his acquaintance with these writers be acknowledged. It is probable that discussions with fellow artists--mostly painters--who shared the makeshift lodgings at the ‘Art Students League’ on East Twenty-third Street in 1891-1892 had more direct effect on him than had any reading. Such sources can never be traced with accuracy, but the selection of an Impressionist painter as hero of his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Third Violet* (1897) is revealing. The adolescent love story is Crane’s own in essential respects and he tells it as a painter in prose. Monet’s paintings he knew.

Maggie (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) came directly from these associations, the first a Bowery story based on observation, the other a wholly imaginative analysis of a boy's first battle experience in the Civil War. Yet the difference between them is not as significant as some critics have averred. Both are Impressionistic studies of elemental fear, the one as shame, the other as failure of courage in action. Each takes as central character a youth, impersonal and typical (their names were assigned later), facing life at its crisis, and each analyzes the profound emotional forces bearing upon a point in time by presenting the color and movement of circumstances governing events from the outside and the strong psychological drives from within. To Crane, Maggie Johnson and Henry Fleming are elemental woman and man in the first moment of meeting with death....

His reportorial art achieves its maturity in 'The Blue Hotel,' the scene of which is laid in a Nebraska town in midwinter. Crane, as 'the correspondent,' is gathered in by the cheerful Irish host as he steps from the train with a cowboy, a quiet Easterner, and a Swede. The tone of the action is set by the light blue of the hotel 'always screaming and howling in a way that made the dazzling winter landscape of Nebraska seem only a grey swampish hush.' The premonition of the Swede that he will be murdered is but the inner reflection of this screaming blue, the manifestation of Crane's own tense fear. His murder by the professional gambler is an act of necessity; the force which makes it inevitable is beyond any single person in the action....

The 'correspondent' again appears with three companions in 'The Open Boat,' this time the captain, the cook, and the oiler. A simple record of the actual wreck of a filibustering vessel off the coast of Florida, this story, Crane's masterpiece, achieves its effect by understatement. Its opening sentence, 'None of them knew the color of the sky,' exactly describes the negative mood of the men in the dinghy. The blue of the sea is slaty, canton-flannel gulls fly overhead, brown mats of seaweed float by to measure movement and distance, the black and white of trees and sand mark the near but unobtainable shore line, and when at last the carmine and gold of morning is painted on the waters, it seems that the impending fate of drowning within sight of help must come to them all. The lone death of the oiler, strongest of the group, is the culminating irony....In no other story does Crane understand his fear so clearly and state it so effectively. Yet here he is apparently recording merely an event which happened to him, without altering a fact or a sequence....

His two longer tales based on early memory, *George's Mother* (1896) and *The Monster* (1899) are less incisive but explore psychological problems even more deeply. The first is only remotely autobiographical, but it suggests, in its analysis of the degenerating effects of too solicitous a mother for the last of her many sons, a possible clue to the emotional complex at the core of Crane's fears. The second is the most horrible of his tales. Though it has been erroneously linked to the school of Poe and Bierce, horror is not its primary purpose. The reaction of a small town to the imbecile [true?] Negro who has saved Jimmie Trescott from fire, only to have his face burned away and his mind destroyed, is Crane's major experiment in social satire. The sin is communal, but it appears inevitable as convention conspires with natural law to reject its own morality....He gave to the Naturalistic short story its characteristic form, later to be exploited by Hemingway, Steinbeck, and a host of others."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1021-26

"Crane was one of the first post-Impressionists....He began it before the French painters began it or at least as early as the first of them. He simply knew from the beginning how to handle detail. He estimated it at its true worth--made it serve his purposes and felt no further responsibility about it. I doubt whether he ever spent a laborious half-hour in doing his duty by detail--in enumerating, like an honest grubby auctioneer. If he saw one thing in a landscape that thrilled him, he put it on paper, but he never tried to make a faithful report of everything else within his field of vision, as if he were a conscientious salesman making out an expense account."

Willa Cather
Willa Cather On Writing
(1926; Knopf 1949) 69-70

“Crane was perhaps as original as an author can be, and be valuable....More interesting by a good deal is the influence he exerted, great and distinct upon Conrad, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, very decidedly upon others of his contemporaries and then upon Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, even Sinclair Lewis, as well as T. E. Lawrence, F. Scott Fitzgerald, more recent figures....

There is no evidence in the poetry or outside it that he ever experimented in verse. Instinct told him to throw over metrical form, visions were in his head, and he wrote them down... As for ‘anticipation’: some of the later people probably learned from him (Pound mentioned him early, and it was Sandburg who introduced Sherwood Anderson to his verse)....I take the steady drift of our period toward greater and greater self-consciousness, an increasing absorption in style, to be what has obscured the nature of his work and delayed its appreciation....‘War Is Kind’ is perhaps his finest poem....But a considerable number of Stephen Crane’s poems, once their range is found, will be remembered. They do not wear out and there is nothing else like them....His poetry has the inimitable sincerity of a frightened savage anxious to learn what his dream means. Moving from Crane’s poetry to his prose, we recognize the same sincerity, the same bluntness, the same hallucinatory effect, the same enigmatic character, the same barbarity....

Crane’s work is a riot of irony of nearly every kind...Mencken dated modern American literature from *The Red Badge of Courage* [1895]. The new *Literary History of the United States*, coming to hand as I write, dates it from the reissue of *Maggie* in 1896.”

John Berryman
Stephen Crane
(William Sloane 1950; Meridian/The World 1962) 264, 274-77, 287

“Most of the writers whom it was proper to admire in his time he cordially detested; for good measure, he also detested Oscar Wilde, whom it was most improper to admire. He even confined his admiration of Mark Twain largely to *Life on the Mississippi*. He had some admiration for Flaubert and later for James, and he once declared, inaccurately, that his ‘creed’ was identical with that of Howells and Garland. Tolstoy he called ‘the writer I admire most of all,’ yet he found grave faults even in *War and Peace* and humorously declared that he would like to rewrite it and show how it ought to have been done....He points the way for the Naturalists in *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets*; he anticipates the ‘stream-of-consciousness’ writers in *The Red Badge of Courage*; his poems were years ahead of the Imagists....The poems may have been influenced by Emily Dickinson or Olive Schreiner, but to Amy Lowell they seemed more suggestive of the French symbolists and of certain Chinese and Japanese poets whom Crane certainly did not know.... When Crane was rediscovered in the 1920’s, it became the fashion to belabor the editors and critics of the ‘nineties for the disgusting Puritanism they showed when they failed to appreciate *Maggie*.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 212-13

“Crane explicitly compared his own general literary intentions with the technical and philosophical implications of what the French Impressionists, as he conceived them, were attempting in color. One of Crane’s sisters, Mary Helen, was an artist and taught art classes in Asbury Park in the late eighties and early nineties. While attending Claverack Academy from 1888 to 1890, Stephen fell in love with Phoebe English, an art student, who gave him some of her paintings. They remained friends to about 1892. Crane scholars generally mention his ‘innate sensitivity to color’ and even his reading in Goethe’s theories on color while at Syracuse University....

After his dismissal from the New York *Tribune* in 1892 and the disappointment following the publication of his novel, *Maggie*, in 1893, Crane lived and spent a great deal of time during the next two years in the old building of the Art Students League, then located on East Twenty-Third Street. Most of the inhabitants were struggling artists. These ‘Indians,’ as Crane called them, included [list of 7 painters]. This setting and several of these men appeared in *The Third Violet* and in many of Crane’s sketches. He was also associating with other cliques of artists....There can be little doubt that Crane identified his own miserable fate as a writer during this period with the misfortunes of his artist friends. Crane drew upon his recent experiences with the ‘Indians’ at the old Art Students League building in ‘Stories Told by an Artist in New

York.' The sketch, born of its author's observation of the artistic struggle for existence within the jungle of the city, reveals a wry humor....

Several of his early dispatches for the New York *Tribune* were characterized by an Impressionistic manner which may well have been formed by his familiarity with the method of the graphic artist....David Ericson, Crane's artist friend, recalled that when the young novelist was writing *Maggie* he went down to the slums with an artist: 'They were gone about a week.'...A novel, Crane explained...'should be a succession of...clear, strong, sharply-outlined pictures, which pass before the reader like a panorama, leaving each its definite impression.'...He frankly admitted the limitations of the writer's art in 'War Memories': 'I bring this to you merely as an effect—an effect of mental light and shade, if you like; something done in thought similar to that which the French Impressionists do in colour; something meaningless and at the same time overwhelming, crushing, monstrous'."

Joseph J. Kwiat
"Stephen Crane and Painting"
American Quarterly IV
(Winter 1952) 331-38

"A writer of indisputable genius, Crane died prematurely, leaving a body of work which, while excellent in itself, gave promise of still better work to come....His fame rests upon a few poems, several short stories, and two short novels--*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). As a poet, Crane is an interesting link between Emily Dickinson and the Imagists of the 1910's. As a writer of fiction, he is important both as an early Naturalist and as an expert craftsman....*The Red Badge* is an acute psychological study of the raw recruit in action. Technically, the book is comparable with James's mature work in that the story, though written in the third person, is managed consistently from the point of view of the distraught soldier.

Crane was above all else (and in a sense applicable to comparatively few American writers) the disinterested artist. He aimed at complete honesty of treatment. He wrote with economy, restraint, and a respect for point of view. He chose words precisely and created images which are colorful and Impressionistic. He was a master of irony. It was ironical that a nice girl like Maggie should have 'blossomed in a mud puddle.' It was ironical that the soldier, Henry Fleming, should have gained courage through an accidental knock on the head. Man's self-importance, to Crane, and his self-pity were ironical in a universe indifferent to man....

['The Open Boat'] is Crane at his best. Sustained point of view, restraint, ironical wit, poetic images and cadences, and Poe's virtue of totality--these are some of the characteristic qualities of Crane which make 'The Open Boat' one of the short masterpieces of modern American prose....In contrast with 'The Open Boat,' 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky' is short on irony but long on humor. The story seems to have explosive force, but the force ultimately fizzles. The intrusion of civilization (marriage) on the frontier suddenly changes all of the rules of the game. If there is a gain in law and order in the small plains town of the west, there is also a loss of robust vigor and wild fun. Although there is much that is hilarious about the passing of the old and the coming of the new in Yellow Sky, there is also something a little sad. In this story, Crane exploited his experiences on his 1895 travels into the American West, combining the blusteriness of frontier humor with traditional western materials."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 637-38, 656

"Stephen Crane spent his short life in revolt against the genteel tradition and against the orthodoxy of his parents. Only ten when his father died, Crane was reared by his pious mother in Asbury Park, New Jersey, a rigorously Methodist community....Haunting the Bowery slums familiarized Crane with the hopeless, pitiful life of the city's destitute and provided material for his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893)...This novel foreshadowed Crane's whole literary career with its flat rejection of middle-class morals, its realistic language, and its ironic conclusion...

Meanwhile, aged only twenty-two, Crane began work on his major novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Without any experience of war, he created one of the most convincing stories of combat ever written in his story of a raw Civil War recruit whose reactions in battle, varying from unthinking fear to frantic aggression, are shown to be the products of pressures and instincts over which he has no control. Here, as in his first novel, Crane appears to follow the belief of Naturalism that humans are at the mercy of passions and instincts as well as their social and economic environment. Crane believed that if the writer conceives that man has no free will, he cannot legitimately make moral judgments on behavior. Therefore Crane condemns neither the prostitute on the streets nor the coward in the trenches. Yet he seems to have been little influenced by Zola or other foreign writers who held similar views. Crane was not a theorist, as was another American Naturalist, Dreiser.

His fiction seems to be shaped as much by poetic Impressionism as by Naturalism, for he devoted a great deal of study to the refinement of his spare but mannered style and the shaping of his colorful images....He was also recognized for his ironic free verses published in *The Black Riders* (1895) and *War Is Kind* (1899). In technique these poems were somewhat indebted to the writing of Emily Dickinson, to which Howells had introduced him, and, like her poetry, they anticipated the methods of the Imagists."

James D. Hart & Clarence Gohdes
America's Literature
(Holt 1955, 1966) 755-56

"Crane once told a friend: 'It was on the Bowery that I got my artistic education.' This was the first phase of one whom the novelist [H. G.] Wells described as 'beyond dispute, the best writer of our generation.' Just out of college in 1891, Stephen Crane had come to New York as a newspaper man....He studied the bums and outcasts... Crane hoped to be able to picture these scenes with some of the intensity of Tolstoy....But it was *The Red Badge of Courage* that made Crane famous overnight...Henry might have been one of Homer's figures, as he might easily have been one of the hardy intuitive quiet young men whom Whitman nursed in the hospitals in Washington in war-time....He once remarked, 'It must be interesting to be shot.' He was drawn to war because it occasioned a sense of life at its highest pitch and challenged his own skill in conveying sensations precisely....

He was a bridge in poetry between Emily Dickinson and the 'free-verse' poets. Howells had read Emily Dickinson's poems to him and he had written *The Black Riders*, suggested by them. The frequent ellipses and the economy of style of these bitter little verses were to leave their mark on the poetry of the future.... He was interested in the types that fascinated Hemingway later in Key West and Cuba...Crane's touch...was invariably light and swift. To use one of his own phrases, he wrote with the 'pace of youth'."

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America
(Dutton 1956) 184-85

"Among the *avant-garde* writers of the 1890's, Crane was most clearly the herald of the twentieth-century revolution in literature....Even more than Garland, Norris, Dreiser, or Robinson--his contemporaries--he made a clean break with the past in his selection of material, his craftsmanship, and his point of view. It was his nature to be experimental. At twenty he wrote *Maggie*, our first completely Naturalistic novel. By the age of twenty-four he had produced, in his earliest short stories and his masterpiece, *The Red Badge of Courage*, the first examples of modern American Impressionism. That year, in his collected poems, he was the first to respond to the radical genius of Emily Dickinson, and the result was a volume of Imagist Impressionism twenty years in advance of the official Imagists. He was in every respect phenomenal....

Crane's first two novels, and the short stories that he was already writing, were faithful to an expressed creed which, if it came more directly from good journalism than from close study of the European Naturalists, produced much the same results in practice. He was convinced that if a story is transcribed in its actuality, as it appeared to occur in life, it will convey its own emotional weight without sentimental heightening, moralizing, or even interpretive comment. This view coincided with what he knew of the

objective method by which the French Naturalists achieved a correspondence between their style and their materials; and he was initially in agreement with the Naturalistic belief that the destiny of human beings, like the biological fate of other creatures, is so much determined by factors beyond the control of individual will or choice that ethical judgment or moral comment by the author is irrelevant or impertinent. His example, however, found little response until the next century, when Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and many others were illustrating the same viewpoint.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature 2, 3rd edition
(Norton 1956-67) 940-42

“[Henry Seidel] Canby, writing his useful study of the short story in 1909, was well aware of the importance of Hawthorne, Poe, James, Harte, and the local colorists. He ignored the importance of the beast fable, and with some reason, since there had not as yet been either a Disney or a Thurber to dramatize its persistent vitality. More surprising is Canby’s complete overlooking of Stephen Crane, who in 1909 was nine years dead, and whose work in the 1890’s had entitled him to honor not only as one of the few masters of the short story but as the first of the moderns.

Crane is one of those figures who are in danger of having a small body of their best work anthologized to death. He lived so fast and died so young that in spite of his extraordinary productiveness much of what he wrote was certain to be flawed. Of all his stories, only ‘The Open Boat,’ ‘The Blue Hotel,’ and ‘The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky’ are without weakness or soft spot, and from among these an anthologist must choose. Yet it is no disservice to a reader to give him one of these three, for all of them are superb. The real disservice--the real falsification of the tradition--would be to leave Crane out or try to represent him by less than his best.

For he had a picture-making eye (the quality that Bliss Perry said was the prime qualification of a short story writer) of an extraordinary kind. Everything in his stories is intensely, sometimes luridly, visualized: images glare from the page like things seen in a lightning flash. His prose has a nervous pace and a tension that we have come to think of as peculiarly modern-American; despite Crane’s addiction to metaphor and Hemingway’s avoidance of it, there is no modern closer to Crane in tone than Hemingway. Crane’s power of evocation was extraordinary, and how much more concentrated and focused could one get than Crane gets in ‘The Open Boat,’ where the place hardly extends beyond the boat’s gunwales, the time covers only the duration of the voyage, and the action is unbroken from the opening line that jolts us into the story in one of the most justly celebrated of beginnings; ‘None of them knew the color of the sky’?

If Crane had had only his vivid Impressionism to contribute to the short story, he would be prominent in its history. But he had as well a mind that was somehow in circuit with that body of image and myth, call it racial memory or cultural inheritance or what you will, that lets his most innocent and external observation suggest, often most powerfully, something deeper. He was a symbolist apparently by accident, perhaps sometimes even unconsciously; he never gives the impression of having worked for his depth, as Hawthorne does. He stumbles upon his meanings; they rise from his soil like stones pushed up by frost. In his way, he was a great simplifier; his figures often have an almost surrealist exposure to space and eternity and the indifferent universe. But a great amplifier belongs in the short story if he belongs anywhere in literature; and Crane’s Bohemianism and stoicism, his persistent irony, his nervous pace and suggestions of depth psychology have made him peculiarly impressive to modern readers. If he did not himself at once influence the course of the short story, he reflected a change in temper and tone and technique that was already in the air in the 1890’s, and that after the interruption caused by a resurgence of sentimental romance in the early 1900’s, and by World War I, was to become the characteristic modern tone.”

Wallace Stegner
Introduction
Great American Short Stories
Wallace & May Stegner, eds.
(Dell 1957) 20-22

“I think the most important thing to say about Stephen Crane is that he is a great stylist. He puts language to poetic use, which is to use it reflexively and symbolically. While his concept of the soldier as Everyman establishes the kinship of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) with modern novels of war, and his naturalistic outlook in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), which initiated the trend of literary Naturalism in America, links him with modern novels of slum life, his importance remains, however, not in the fact that he brought new subject matter into fiction but rather in the fact that he was an innovator in techniques of fiction and a unique stylist. It is the same with Henry James and Joseph Conrad: in style and technique they transcended their age. ‘Hew out a style,’ said Henry James. ‘It is by style we are saved.’

Crane stands in close kinship with Conrad and Henry James, the masters of the Impressionist school. All three aimed to create ‘a direct impression of life.’ Their credo is voiced by Conrad in his celebrated preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*: it is ‘by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see.’ Their aim was to immerse the reader in the created experience so that its impact on him would occur simultaneously with the discovery of it by the characters themselves. Instead of panoramic views of a battlefield, Crane paints not the whole scene but disconnected segments of it--all that a participant in an action or a spectator of a scene can possibly take into his view at any one moment. Crane is a master at creating illusions of reality by means of a fixed point of vision.

‘None of them knew the color of the sky’--that famous opening sentence of ‘The Open Boat’ (1897)--defines the restricted point of view of the four men in the wave-tossed dinghy. It establishes also the despair-hope mood of the men, and the final scene repeats the same contrast mood. The same device of double mood patterns *The Red Badge*....In ‘The Open Boat’ even the speech of the shipwrecked men is abrupt and composed of ‘disjointed sentences.’ Crane’s style is itself composed of disjointed sentences, disconnected sense impressions, chromatic vignettes by which the reality of the experience is evoked in all its point-present immediacy....

Crane wrote with the intensity of a poet’s emotion, the compressed emotion that bursts into symbol and paradox.... Irony is Crane’s chief technical instrument--it is the key to our understanding of the man and of his works. Paradox patterns all his best works and defines their kinship one to another....In ‘The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky’ (1898), Potter represents the idealistic world of spiritual values whose force lies in its innocence, and Wilson represents the non-imaginative world of crass realities. This same conflict, *the conflict between ideals and realities*, ruled Crane’s struggle as artist and gave both his life and his art all their bitter ironies...

‘The good writers,’ said Hemingway, ‘are Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain. That’s not the order they’re good in. There is no order for good writers.’ Modern American literature has its beginnings in Mark Twain and Stephen Crane. As for their acknowledged influence on Hemingway, *The Red Badge* looks back to *Huckleberry Finn*--both are patterned by ironic episodes--and forward to *A Farewell to Arms*. The leitmotifs central to all three novels are themes of death and deception or betrayal. In all three novels the education of the hero ends as it began, in self-deception. They are all three ritualistic, mythic, symbolic works dealing with heroes in quest of selfhood or self-identity....In *The Red Badge*, an Impressionistic painting notable for its bold innovations in technique and style, and in ‘The Open Boat,’ which fuses the Impressionistic Realism of *Maggie* and the symbolic Realism of *The Red Badge*, Crane established himself among the foremost engineers of the techniques of modern fiction.”

R. W. Stallman

Foreword

The Red Badge of Courage and Selected Stories
(New American Library/Signet 1959) vii-x

“The narrative design of Crane’s best fiction is defined by the tension between two ironically divergent points of view: the narrowing and deluding point of view of the actors and the enlarging and ruthlessly revealing point of view of the observer-narrator. To the men in the open boat the universe seems to have shrunk to the horizon and to have concentrated within its narrow limits all the malignant powers of creation; but the longer view of the narrator reveals this as a delusion born in the men’s egotistic assumption that they occupy a central position in Nature’s hostile regard....

For Crane again and again interprets the human situation in terms of the ironic tensions created in the contrast between man as he idealizes himself in his inner thought and emotion and man as he actualizes himself in the stress of experience. In the meaning evoked by the ironic projection of the deflated man against the inflated man lies Crane's essential theme: the consequence of false pride, vanity, and blinding delusion....The movement of the tales is always toward the ironic deflation of 'the little man.' Despite his delusions of grandeur, he usually ends up in ignoble and humiliating defeat....Like Henry [Fleming], the correspondent comes to know that the best experience of his life is the object lesson in humility and self-sacrifice, that in a cold and indifferent cosmos, illusions of friendly or hostile Nature notwithstanding, the best values are realized in humble human performance."

James B. Colvert
"Structure and Theme in Stephen Crane's Fiction"
Modern Fiction Studies V (1959) 209-219

"We get near his essence in H. G. Wells's remark that Crane's writing suggested Whistler rather than Tolstoy; Wells is the only European critic to have kept in mind the distinguishing American character of Crane's work....*The Red Badge of Courage* is not simply one of the earliest Realistic novels about war written in Tolstoy's skeptical and anti-Romantic spirit; it is a poetic fable about the attempt of a young man to discover a real identity in battle....Crane, by an astonishing bound of imagination, has created battle as the simple and confused soldier sees it, but for reasons that are psychological, i.e., he is describing an interior battle, a battle of the spirit. The battle itself is compared at times with a mad religion...The desire of all the Crane heroes is to find an identity by belonging to something....

In his psychological observation and in his ear for speech Crane is one of the founders of American Realism as we have known it since his time. In him it moves towards the fabulous and poetic; occasionally it sprawls and becomes rhetorical—see the end of *Maggie*....Crane always sharpened the irony of his writing and rigorously censored what there was in him of the didactic. He is not cynical but his view of life is a hard one: We must fight to live but we shall get nothing out of it. We live and die alone....

Crane was a brilliant Impressionist and has strong affinities with the Impressionist painters. As they sought to record infinitesimal particles of light, he sought to record the innumerable glints of significant natural and psychological detail in the prolonged battle scene of *The Red Badge of Courage*. It is a search sustained by a poetic fervour which usually subsides before it becomes rhetoric, and then rises again with a sealike motion as it meets the next incident. He is always simple and explicit, alert for the random irony."

V. S. Pritchett
Introduction
The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories
(Oxford 1960) vii-xii

"Stephen Crane was peculiarly the child of this age--if only because the brevity of his life kept him from knowing any other. He almost completely lacked the sense of the past that his older contemporaries Henry James and Henry Adams had in uncommon measure. They new full well that the Civil War had driven them from the America they were brought up to understand; Crane, born in 1871 into the thoroughly disrupted postwar era had no such memory of order to help him comprehend the disorder around him: *The Red Badge of Courage* and the Civil War represent very nearly the limit of his reach into the past. On the other hand, his chance to accumulate experience was cut off early. He died of tuberculosis in 1900, when Theodore Dreiser--also born in 1871--had not yet published a novel....

The conventions of popular literature, with all their sensationalism and sentimentality, dominated Crane's experience...While his lively eye for contrasts between popular illusion and the way things happen might have freed him from the conventions he scorned, he neglected other ways of overcoming the limitations of his milieu. Having early and rightly concluded that direct observation was much more valuable than a fraudulent literary version of reality, he erroneously decided that books were only for the scholar's idle time. He lived hard and observed much, but read little. Within the circumscribed range of his experience, he was undoubtedly one of James's 'people on whom nothing is lost'; but his famous irony was the necessary instrument of an intelligence which had so little material on which to work....

A subversive irony is his most striking means of transcending the historic situation into which he was born. Crane's attack on popular culture is the most consistent and varied theme in all his work...The same thing may be said of all his best work, that it passes the test of high seriousness as well as technical virtuosity. Despite his limited background, he attained this twofold qualification of the genuine artist. The great social and moral questions which are traditionally the substance of literature enter his work also, even though they come in indirectly and without the usual signs. If he scorned to preach like the moralizing authors of popular fiction, he nevertheless learned to shape the significance of the unsaid. If he lacked the recognizable techniques of the acknowledged masters, he developed literary methods of his own....

Concerning his technique, much that he did may be recognized as the reinvention of Jamesian devices: the foreshortening that compresses Maggie's downward career and death into a couple of pages, for example, or his concentrating and intensifying his drama by using the mind of a character as its register. But the pictorial quality of his work, a matter of both style and method, repays a closer look: it is the signature of Crane's imagination. His earliest work shows the knack for vivid phrase which he gradually disciplined into a style. The prose which evolved from his apprenticeship is best described by analogy to painting: Hamlin Garland's enthusiasm for Monet and the Impressionists and Crane's own life with artist friends (whose studios he haunted and often camped in during his luckless New York years) both help account for the visual effects in his writing. Impressionism in painting developed from the Realistic tradition.

As Garland understood it, the new practice avoided a literalist rendering of the parts for the sake of catching a true impression of the whole: though Crane could as easily have learned about unity of effect from Poe, or from literary trial and error, Garland was useful in reconciling that aim with Howells' theories. But Crane's own understanding of the painters went deeper than that: He watched his friends record color and light more truthfully as they freed themselves from realistic conventions of seeing. Once, while with his brother in the country, he is reported to have said: 'Will, isn't that cloud green?...But they wouldn't believe it if I put it in a book'....

Considering Crane's ironic relation to popular culture--both dependent and profoundly antagonistic--there is rather too much poetic justice in the fact that his life tended to the pattern of a bad novel: We are forced to remind ourselves that he actually lived what his average countrymen collectively dreamed....He personally knew hunger, exposure, mortal danger, lonely resistance to convention, and self-doubt worse than all, and he could infer from experience his reactions to imaginary ordeals. Hence his candid reply, when he heard that readers took him for a veteran of the Civil War, had been that he learned the emotions of *The Red Badge* on the football field. The transfer of feelings became the main resource of his storytelling, to the exclusion of other techniques that he might have learned from the masters of fiction....

While he could vividly imagine his own response to almost any crucial situation, he was not strong at imagining other kinds of people. The figures in his tales seem to be individuated mainly by circumstances, and their character to be defined by a few primary emotions like fear and courage. Just as the author stands apart from traditional culture, they stand apart from traditional characters, for the nineteenth-century novel presented people as the rich compound of personal and social history, ideals and knowledge, as well as circumstances and temperament. Crane's bent for short fiction can be inferred from his being interested less in the structure of society than in the rendering of situation, less of the sum of character than in the response to a particular crisis. The archetypal event for him, whether experienced or imagined, is intense and isolated, the undergoing of an ultimate trial....

Superficially, Crane's religious upbringing as a Methodist had a light hold upon him....Crane slipped from religion before he had intellectual reasons to offer for his defection. Having already become a Naturalist in belief, he was not much disturbed by the metaphysical problems that might have been raised for him by Darwinian biology and modern science. He gathered the new knowledge more or less from the air, and he absorbed it easily: his sardonic poem on social Darwinism is of a piece with his poems on newspaper half-truth, churchgoing, or success, all of them alike rebellious against the prevailing culture. What little he knew of the scientific revolution did not cause his disbelief, it merely confirmed it....

Crane's verse gives his religious opinions with what seems to be the candor of direct emotional expression. The God of Wrath and the God of sacrificial redemption both appear literally in the poetry rather than by remote suggestion as in the prose. Of the two conceptions of divinity, Crane believes in the latter...But he also believes that the former presides over the world and he affirms his moral defiance... Crane offers a middle-class schoolboy's version of rebellious Ahab's [defiance]....The figure of the victim recurs again and again in Crane's narratives, as if the sacrifice were necessary to the initiation into truth. Here, too, the logic of the Naturalistic world which his fiction presents resembles the logic of Crane's inherited religion."

J. C. Levenson
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 383-85, 387-88, 391-94

"Though Stephen Crane did not begin his literary career as a poet, he felt that his best work was done in his volume of poems, *The Black Riders* (1895). He was fond of its 'ethical sense' which reflected his 'ideas of life as a whole'; specifically, the volume contained abstracts of the ideas in his fiction. But Crane probably realized that in his verse he sounded too much like a preacher reading sermons (he despised 'preaching' in art) and that he was too cryptic. The endless parodies of his work, and the lack of a wide, appreciative audience made him return to poetry only once more, in 1899, with *War Is Kind*. Still, the best features of his poetic technique were carried over into his fiction so that Crane is, as Carl Van Doren once stated, a 'kind of poet among storytellers'....

Crane rightly sense that he functioned best in short episodes and dramatic scenes, where he gained in concentration, in taut power, and in unity (the 'totality of effect or impression' [Poe]). Usually in his longer novels, especially *Active Service* and *The O'Ruddy*, Crane lost his sustained control, and his effects were sprawling and melodramatic. The reverse was true of *The Third Violet*, where many scenes in the novel 'were too compressed.' Crane has a perpetual warfare with the novel form. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* he considered too long, especially the latter, which he felt could have been done in 'one third of the time...It goes on and on like Texas.' Zola's novels bored him, particularly the length of *Nana*; and in a general summary of this work, he said: 'He hangs one thing to another and his story goes along but I find him pretty tiresome.' He was critical of the long novels of Mark Twain; he thought Thomas Hardy overtreated his materials, and that Henry James was too 'diffuse.' Even his own *Red Badge* Crane considered too long....

Ambrose Bierce's *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891) excited him, and pointing specifically to 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.' Crane said: 'Nothing better exists. That story contains everything'... Finally, the largest single inspiration to Crane seems to have been Poe. Thomas Beer mentions that 'Crane liked Poe's rhythmic prose as a boy.' And in 1895, when Willa Cather met Crane in Lincoln, Nebraska, she found him 'reading a little volume of Poe that he carried in his pocket.' Often accused of a lack of bookishness by the critics, Crane was really secretive about his reading habits. In his own library, Crane had novels and tales by Kipling, Henry Fielding, Harold Frederic, Henry James, and Sir Walter Scott...And he knew the writings of William Dean Howells, Balzac, Dostoevsky, and others....

Some of his 'protest' stories include 'An Experiment in Misery,' 'An Ominous Baby,' and 'An Experiment in Luxury.' His literary philosophy--partly Naturalistic--developed from his close observation of the violent and subhuman life of the slum dwellers. This revealed more clearly than ever before his humanitarianism, a trait which he admired in his favorite author, Tolstoy. Like Walt Whitman, he too felt a kinship for the oppressed: the prostitute, the dope addict, and the hobo. These New York experiences were probably responsible for turning him to socialism for two weeks, but 'when a couple of Socialists assured me I had no right to think differently from any other Socialist and then quarreled with each other about what Socialism meant, I ran away'....

Like Chekhov, Crane continually thought in terms of 'staging' his fiction. A close study of 'The Open Boat,' among others, shows that Crane experimented and enriched his materials with the aid of dramatic techniques. For in this story, Crane was more anxious to render than to report; he was far more concerned at the dramatic, not the narrative level; and he focused on dialogue and on a series of crisis scenes and episodes to achieve a remarkable sense of immediacy....His ideal in writing was to get as close to reality as

possible, in the best Naturalistic fashion; to prove his point, he slept in a flophouse to get the atmosphere for 'An Experiment in Misery'....Crane's ironic-Impressionistic method in *Maggie*, and not the subject of prostitution, so bewildered the editors they missed his compassion completely. Mark Twain may have sounded the note of irony in American literature, but it was not modern like Crane's, whose abrupt, disconnected, flat statements and darting, rapier-like ironies seemed too arty and too hating. Crane had to wait until the 1920s before he could be understood at all on his own terms.

He was too modern in other ways: his Impressionism seemed to be an affectation and made no sense; his symbolism was ignored; his stories lacked the conventional plot; and his curse words were unacceptable (they were usually deleted by his American publishers). To illustrate the conservatism of the decade, one need only point to Frances Willard who censured Richard Gilder for allowing the word 'rape' in his *Century Magazine*. Later, Gilder, as Crane's own publisher, complained about 'swearing in fiction' as late as October 1896. Realism was making some headway in the 1890s, but Crane's art was too extreme even for his fellow Realists and literary fathers, Garland and Howells. When he confessed that his 'little creed of art' was 'identical with the one of Howells and Garland,' and that this 'readjustment of his point of view' was concluded in 1892, Crane was too radical and too progressive for them....Crane was almost single-handedly carrying on the real battle of Modernism in literature....

A related problem, stressed by some critics, is that because Crane wrote enough to fill twelve volumes in nine years he wrote too hastily--he was a hack. Crane encouraged this view, for he mentions that he wrote *Maggie* in a few days, *The Red Badge* in ten days, and 'The Monster' in a week....Crane continually revised and corrected some of his work. Yet Conrad, who watched Crane write, insisted that his friend did not need to rewrite. Crane's manner of writing poetry adds to this myth. Hamlin Garland recalled with amazement how Crane turned on his 'poetic spout' and produced complete poems at a moment's notice.... Crane's confessions to Willa Cather in 1895 gave insight into his literary methods. To her he admitted that while the writing of a story was brief, it took months before 'he could get any sort of personal contact with it, or feel any potency to handle it.' Referring to *The Red Badge*, he said he wrote the novel in nine days but that he 'had been unconsciously working the detail of the story through most of his boyhood.' He said he led a 'double life,' writing in 'the first place the matter that pleased himself, and doing it very slowly; in the second place any sort of stuff that would sell'....

He worked in terms of episodes because he was anxious to dramatize or to sketch in a situation. Many of his stories are in fact called 'sketches' or 'scenes.' By using other devices from the other arts, like painting, Crane buried plot further and so enriched the form of the short story. The technique of Impressionism he seems to have learned from his friends at the Art Students' League in New York; Hamlin Garland espoused the theories of French Impressionism as early as the 1880s; and there was available in English a book of sketches by French symbolists and Impressionists, *Pastels in Prose* (1890). A few of Crane's stories—'The Silver Pageant,' 'Stories Told by an Artist,' and *The Third Violet*--reveal his attraction to art and the artist. Both Conrad and Garnett were convinced that Crane was the 'complete Impressionist.' Like Conrad, Crane was anxious to make one 'feel' and to make one 'see.' He wanted to convey the sensations produced on the sensibility of his characters, and like the Impressionist painters, he sketched the 'fluid play of light' on his heroes, as he interpreted aspects of their natures....

By using color imagery and color contrasts, Crane approximated the painter's attempt to merge objects with their surroundings and at the same time to capture the separateness and the fast-changing face of life. To Crane, the universe was abrupt, indefinite, and chaotic, and he caught this rhythm in the movement of his Impressionistic prose. A recent critic, Robert Hough, notes the influence of Goethe's *Theory of Colors* (1810). In one place, Crane had mentioned his interest in Goethe's theories. Crane, then, learned about the psychology of colors not only from Impressionism but also from Goethe, who demonstrated how colors created certain states of feeling, how they defined a situation, and how they helped to paint dramatic and panoramic effects. Most important, colors to Goethe and to Crane became useful as symbols: dull yellow was linked to decay and death; red to high tension; cold colors to darkness and violence....

In still another way, Crane lessened the value of a mechanical plot. As he painted striking yet isolated scenes, Crane made each episode become part of a moving picture, so that his art is properly linked with cinematic techniques. In 'The Blue Hotel' the Easterner's 'mind, like a film, took lasting impressions of

three men--the iron-nerved master of the ceremony; the Swede, pale, motionless, terrible; and Johnnie, serene yet ferocious, brutish yet heroic.' Crane depended on rapid movement, on change, on gnarled and disconnected effects. His vision was scenic; and his lack of transitions suggested the chaos and dislocations in the life of his fictions. What Crane succeeded in doing, then, by imposing the various arts on the plot, was to prove that the short story could be a fluid and flexible medium of expression. By itself, plot hampered Crane.

Another charge leveled against Crane is that he cannot create characters. In his best stories his people are often thought of in general terms, like the soldier, the cook, and the correspondent. If they do have names, they have common ones, like Billie, Henry, and Jimmie. While the characters seem wooden and one-dimensional, Crane keeps them typical and anonymous because he is interested in the dual nature of man. He translates the inner effects on a character as he faces a crisis situation, usually death; at the same time, Crane contrasts this inner tension with the character's outer self, usually a static and confident portrait. By this method, Crane posits the appearance-reality motif: man as he thinks he is; and man as he really is. Then he follows the struggle--the war--between man's will and courage, and the world of chance, fate, and Nature. Sometimes man is victorious; and even when he loses, he has at least accepted a challenge to his dignity. The Crane hero, then, is left anonymous and typical in order to mirror symbolically the isolated and grotesque life of man who is warped by his own ego or temporarily frustrated or rendered helpless by his illusions, by his environment, and by Nature.

Critics have felt safest with the themes of Crane's fiction. They have mentioned many plausible ones: the initiation theme; the discovery of self; ideals versus realities; death and rebirth; the moral problem of conduct; the theme of absurdity; themes relating to courage, cowardice, loyalty, isolation, and disenchantment; the search for social acceptance; and others. One ironic theme, however, dominates Crane's short fiction from the very first: crime and punishment...

[In his later fiction] his Impressionism is now subdued for better effect; he is more direct and more dependent on understatement. In fact, 'An Episode of War' and 'The Upturned Face' are amazing forecasts of Hemingway's style and subject. Crane captures the stark tragedies of war in 'The Price of the Harness,' 'An Episode of War,' and 'The Upturned Face.' With a maturer vision and a maturer style he strips his materials to the barest essentials and by this achieves a more powerful impact....Crane's most ambitious stories, and at the same time his greatest, are Greek--Greek in the sense of being like classical tragic drama. These stories include 'The Open Boat,' 'The Blue Hotel,' 'The Monster,' and 'Death and the Child.' All are struggles of endurance, where man tests himself and his meaning against his environment, chance, fate, and Nature.

Like Greek tragedy, these stories begin in order and end in chaos or death. And the major characters (not always heroic) are pitted against an epic-like background, where they dramatize the clash of man's primitive instincts and his civilized ideals. To Crane, man is lost, but he can find meaning in brotherhood ('The Open Boat') and in courage ('The Monster'). But there is terror and absurdity in Crane's vision also....His great stories are as modern as ever. His themes and his art are as living as those of Ernest Hemingway, who was deeply influenced by him."

Thomas A. Gullason, ed.
The Complete Short Stories & Sketches of Stephen Crane
(Doubleday 1963) 20-24, 31, 33-37, 42, 44-45

"Crane's motive was not to diagram conditions or assert universal truths but to produce a certain kind of composition, a vivid showbox of serial impressions in an appropriate style....Crane's work is artful, original, concentrated, indistractable sometimes to the point of a mesmerizing intensity. Nevertheless it lacks mass, moment, tenacity; it has not power of imposing itself beyond reversion on our fully extended consciousness of experience....Crane possesses as a writer an irresistible authority that is nevertheless transient, provisional....Everything convincing in Crane's work turns on visionary images which have, as they succeed one another, the hallucinatory serenity and intactness of dream images."

Warner Berthoff
The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919
(Free Press/Macmillan 1965) 227, 230, 233

“The two volumes of extremely unconventional verse that were published by Stephen Crane in the nineties, with their unrhymed lines of irregular lengths, their nihilistic fables and their laconic irony, were quite unlike anything else that had ever been written in America--or rather, they resembled nothing except, a little, certain other unconventional writers. Mr. Daniel G. Hoffman, the author of *The Poetry of Stephen Crane*, suggests that Crane as poet may have owed something to Ambrose Bierce's *Fantastic Fables* in prose. It has also been thought that Crane may have been influenced by some poems of Emily Dickinson's that are supposed to have been read to him by William Dean Howells. Mr. Hoffman can find only one line of Crane's which may betray a debt to Miss Dickinson: 'A man adrift on a slim spar' may echo her 'Two swimmers on a spar'.”

Edmund Wilson
Patriotic Gore
(Oxford 1966) 500-01

“Because they eschew buffoonery and irreverence, Crane's parodies of Romantic and sensational fiction differ from the usual parodies produced by such vigorously anti-Romantics as Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Frank Norris...Crane sliced away the traditional excrescences, and reclaimed what was of artistic value in the familiar genres by applying his own stark techniques of style and setting to such overwrought themes as heroism in battle or such sentimental themes as loss of innocence in the big city....

Crane throughout his work combined the comic with the serious. He often used a vocabulary of clichés that he restored to their original force, as he found new and deeper uses for the idiom, by refracting a serious view of life through traditional plots....Crane wrote parodies of every genre in which he worked, scoffing at the formulae of each while retaining its emotive power...His best short parodies take aim at the French novel, the stage melodrama, and the mystery story....Crane frequently managed to extract from the subliterate forms he parodied the archetypal or mythical story that underlay the stereotype. He reached below surface Realism toward a view of man's comic and terrible freedom of choice....

For Crane the chain of being was only too clear: At the top was a harsh, uncaring, Hardy-esque god; at the bottom was a basically good, weak, striving man. Somewhere in the middle, both dominating man and on occasion being conquered by him, was society. Crane's poetry, for the most part, was dedicated to the metaphysical problems raised by man's relation to his god. His fiction, on the other hand, portrayed man struggling to survive in his society....The controlling tone in Crane's fiction was humorous, ironic, darkly serious, experiential, self-conscious...Like [T. E.] Hulme, Crane believed in a dry hardness of art, and mocked the vague and eloquent. In the short, almost elliptical quality of his best prose, Crane echoed the Imagist concept that one perfect image might be better than a lengthy work.”

Eric Solomon
Stephen Crane: From Parody to Realism
(Harvard 1966) 4-18

“Crane was the legitimate successor to Henry James and the more Jamesian aspects of Howells, in his concern to delineate the character of the American sensibility....‘Crane's whole dark view of existence,’ Philip Young has said, ‘of man damaged and alone in a hostile, violent world, of life as one long war which we seek and challenge in fear and controlled panic--it is all an amazing forecast of Hemingway.’ Hemingway himself has written that he inherited three good writers as an American--Twain, James, and Crane; and of Crane's tales he prefers ‘The Open Boat’ and ‘The Blue Hotel.’ The last one is the best. These along with ‘The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky’ are Crane's finest short stories....

Crane resembles no author so much as Henry James. Like James, Crane draws his readers into the life of his fiction by making them experience a sequence of sensations. By pretending to be, like his reader, merely a spectator of the life he dramatizes, he appears to pass on this life to the reader without distortion.... The intense concentration of Crane's fiction fulfilled James's notion of what American fiction should be--direct, subtle, brief, and concerned with the sensibility of man and so with the inner sense rather than the outward plot of the novel. It was no accident that when Crane moved to England he settled near Henry James and Joseph Conrad. For, as Ford Madox Ford said of these writers, ‘the approach to life is the same with all...three: they show you that disillusionment is to be found alike at the tea-table, in the slum, and on the tented field’....

And the Master (from whose criticism Crane learned most of what he first knew of French literature) brought the dying twenty-seven-year-old author five manuscripts for his opinion...It is recorded on good authority that at a party Crane and James went off alone to discuss questions of style. Unlike Twain, Crane was enthusiastic about James's fiction. He pronounced *The Portrait of a Lady* a 'masterpiece,' and said of James's difficult novel *What Maisie Knew* that it was 'alive with all the art...at the command of that great workman.' In short, each writer deeply respected and understood the other's delineation of the modern sensibility. Crane, Ford Madox Ford said, had 'a deep reverence and a great affection' for James, while the Master 'constantly alluded to Crane as "that genius," and I have heard him say over and over again, "He was a great, great genius".' It is the deepest of testimonies by the best critic of the age to the kinship of art which the two men shared."

Jay Martin
Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 55, 65, 70

"It was he who established the code of experience that Ernest Hemingway later perfected. For Crane it evolved into a tough literary creed which proclaimed, 'A man is born into the world with his own pair of eyes, and he is not responsible for his vision--he is merely responsible for his quality of personal honesty'....

Crane is difficult to label. In his own time he was called either an Impressionist or a decadent; but as later criticism sought a perspective on the literary nineties he was variously considered a Realist, a Naturalist, a symbolist, a parodist, and even a Romantic. But among the first entries in a notebook kept by his wife is a quotation that sounds like Crane is trying to explain himself: 'The true artist is the man who leaves pictures of his own time as they appear to him'....Always he strove to compress experience, to render much in little. His poems are curt dramas in form and situation, and his fiction depends ultimately on the episode, on brief actions that are complete in themselves. Even his novels are developed through a linked succession of essentially discrete moments....He draws upon the vernacular and occasionally the obscene as well. Popular songs, bawdy ballads, street expressions, popular religion, sportswriters jargon--he roams with deceptive ease through mass culture and high culture alike....

[In "The Open Boat"] since the correspondent's viewpoint is most intimately revealed, his conclusion of Nature's indifference dominates until the sacrificial death of the oiler, the man who had been mainly responsible for the spiritual strength of the men in the boat, effectively redeems the significance of life. Then the correspondent's eloquence can be recognized for what it is--reiterated self-pity....In 'The Blue Hotel' the Swede's conceit has prepared his destiny. His insistence that he will be murdered in this microcosm of the universe forces the event. He has made his purchase. But as the Easterner realizes, other people collaborate, however unconsciously, in one's fate, and the cowboy's disclaimer ironically punctuates the truth. The story does not end there, however. Like the Swede, the reader has made his own purchase. At the end of the penultimate section of the story he probably has accepted the cowboy's indictment of the Swede; with the true climax before him, then, he must judge himself implicated in the collaborative sin....

'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky' becomes a far different story. Disrupt a familiar pattern as it nears completion and the result is comic. Here the pattern is that of the all-too-familiar melodrama of the Western shoot-out developing along rigid traditional lines. But there the badman isn't really bad enough to accommodate a new dimension in his ritualistic gunfight with the marshal. The rules have been broken; the game must be called off. Beneath all this, however, there is serious insight into the continuing pattern of change in American life. The frontier has gone, leaving Scratchy behind. And soon another era will pass, and Potter will become an anachronism as well....In 'The Knife,' a kind of child story because of the role in which the white community casts the Negro, Alek Williams learns another lesson. Recognizing his betrayal by Peter Washington, Williams manages to protect him by manipulating the role of man-child. His new ability gains him superiority over both Washington and Si Bryant. In a most ironic way, boys become men in Crane's Whilomville."

Joseph Katz, ed.
The Portable Stephen Crane
(Viking 1969) vii-ix, xviii, xx

“A group of writers (superficially called Naturalists)...pushed the exploration of American masculinity much farther. Dreiser, Norris, Garland, London, Stephen Crane, Richard Harding Davis, and David Graham Phillips were interested most of all in depicting men under conditions of intense struggle, whether in war, in the capitalist economic system, on the frontier, or anywhere else away from the constraints of female civilization. With these writers, the enormous rift that had opened up in the heart of American life in the early 1800s--the split that made the novel far more feminine than it had ever been before and in effect banished our rough American masculinity from polite fiction--began to close.

Women’s fiction led to James’ and Howells’ Realism (and in another direction, to the triumphs of local color), and Realism led to ‘Naturalism.’ The split in gender roles had banished the American man from the parlor; two or three generations later, he would be allowed back in. Howells and James, two distinctly unmasculine figures, were the crucial middle men--and the best writers--in this large historical movement.”

Alfred Harbegger
Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature
(Columbia U 1982) 65

“That Crane was a literary prodigy is obvious. That he furnished American literature with a group of memorable tales and one novel-length masterwork is not at issue. The *kind* of writing Crane produced is what sparks controversy. Crane examined the inevitable conflict between self-made images that comfort and external facts that undercut Romantic visions. But in his literary methods, was he primarily a Realist, a Naturalist, or an Impressionist?...Was he attempting to judge conventional society as a Realist does, did he prefer to analyze its elements coolly in the manner of the Naturalist, or was he most interested in imprinting Impressionistic images for their own sake on his readers’ minds? The ironic tone that pervades Crane’s narratives makes it difficult to determine his motives.”

Martha Banta
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 944-45

“Crane’s interest in environmental determinism links him to late-nineteenth-century Naturalistic writers like Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser, but he is untypical in avoiding their often heavy factual documentation; instead, he usually selects his facts scrupulously and defines his characters with sharply focused comments and images. Such compression and vivid imagery have led numerous critics to see in his writing a literary parallel to Impressionist painting. Crane is comparable to both Naturalists and Impressionists in his desire to shock readers with new and often disturbing ideas and perceptions....in nearly hallucinatory detail. His intuition enabled him to be among the first writers to describe the effect of the modern bullet upon the soldier’s perception of space in landscape.”

Donald Vanouse
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 689-90

Michael Hollister (2015)