

INTRODUCTION



Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

Stephen Crane is among the most precocious of writers, publishing *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), the first Naturalistic novel in American literature, at age 22; *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the prototype of the modern war novel at age 24; and at least 4 world classic short stories, before dying at age 28: “The Open Boat,” “The Blue Hotel,” “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” and “The Monster.” Crane was said to have been “old at twenty.” Henry James referred to him as “that genius.”

Crane is the most painterly American fiction writer, the purest Impressionist and one of the most unique stylists, in a class with James, Hemingway and Faulkner. He is one of those whose style and techniques are studied by other writers. According to the novelist Ford Madox Ford, “His influence on his time, and the short space of time that has succeeded his day, was so tremendous that if today you read *Maggie*, it is as if you heard a number of echoes, so many have his imitators been; and you can say as much of *The Red Badge*. That is simply because his methods have become the standard for dealing with war scenes or slum life.” Ernest Hemingway named Crane as one of the three best American writers among his predecessors, along with James and Twain. The influence of Crane on Hemingway is most evident in “An Episode of War” (1899). In his free verse Crane also anticipated Imagism, the movement in early Modernist poetry led by Ezra Pound.

BIOGRAPHY

One of Stephen Crane’s ancestors sailed with the explorer Sir Francis Drake; another was in the first company that landed at Massachusetts Bay in 1620; another helped settle New Haven, Connecticut in 1639; another settled at Elizabethtown, New Jersey in 1665; another was a colonel in the American Revolution; four more fought in the Revolution; and another Crane served in the Continental Congress in 1789.

Stephen Crane was born with frail health in Newark, New Jersey, the 14th child of a Methodist minister and a mother who published in religious periodicals. “Mother was always more of a Christian than a Methodist.” His family had a wholesome innocence. “Upon my mother’s side, everybody as soon as he could walk, became a Methodist clergyman--of the old ambling-nag, saddle-bag, exhorting kind.... My father died when I was seven years old. My mother when I was nineteen.” His father had preached against alcohol, tobacco, baseball, and novels, recommending total abstinence from them all. Crane indulged in them all from an early age. He once provoked a fistfight and got a tooth knocked out defending his view that the poems of Tennyson were “swill.” He reacted against sentimentality, conventional morality, Romanticism and the church. “When I was thirteen or about that, my brother Will told me not to believe in Hell after my uncle had been boring me about the lake of fire and the rest of the sideshows.”

He spent two years at a military academy, Claverack College, where he heard Civil War stories from veterans on the faculty. "When I was about sixteen I began to write for the New York newspapers, doing correspondence from Asbury Park and other places. Then I began to write special articles and short stories for the Sunday papers and one of the literary syndicates, reading a great deal in the meantime and gradually acquiring a style." He moved on to Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, where he smoked incessantly, boxed and played poker and baseball. "The fellows here raise more hell than [at] any college in the country." He seldom attended classes, spent most of his time reading and did none of the assigned course work. He decided that Tolstoy was the world's greatest writer, Flaubert's *Salammbô* was too long and Henry James's *The Reverberator* was too boring. He was advised by faculty to leave after only one semester.

"When I was at school few of my studies interested me, and as a result I was a bad scholar." Next he spent a semester at Syracuse University in New York, where he was a shortstop and catcher on the baseball team. "They used to say at Syracuse University...that I was cut out to be a professional baseball player. And the truth of the matter is that I went there more to play baseball than to study. I was always very fond of literature, though." He earned an A in an English literature course in 1891 but got distracted from his studies by taking a part-time reporting job with the *Syracuse Tribune*, covering the police courts. At the Delta Upsilon fraternity he wrote a story about a prostitute based on his observations in the slums of Syracuse, which led to the writing of *Maggie*.

Giving up baseball to be a writer, he moved to the Bowery in New York City in 1891, where Melville was dying. "I decided that the nearer a writer gets to life the greater he becomes an artist, and most of my prose writings have been toward the goal partially described by that misunderstood and abused word, realism." Besides the prostitutes, the homeless and the alcoholics for which the neighborhood was known, it was packed with immigrants crowded into little apartments. Crane lived with poor artists--Impressionist painters--as a bohemian. *My Stephen Crane* by Corwin Linson consists of reminiscences by the artist friend whose studio Crane most often frequented. His lifestyle in the Bowery encouraged a legend associating him with drinking, drugs and petty social crimes. In truth, however, according to his biographers Crane was almost never drunk, he did not approve of narcotics--except nicotine--in fact he was a shy and chivalrous gentleman. He had two unhappy romances while living in the Bowery, and he rallied to the defense of the prostitutes there.

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893)

Crane had seen the New York slums as a teenager and began writing *Maggie* at age 19 while still at Syracuse. He could not find a publisher because of its subject and its abundant profanity. It was a shocking in-your-face defiance of Victorian gentility. He had to publish it himself privately, using a pseudonym. Influenced by Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877), *Maggie* is the first American fiction to render urban slum life realistically, and is the first Naturalistic novel in American literature, blending deterministic themes with the aesthetics of Impressionism. Crane once defined this novel as "a succession of sharply outlined pictures, which pass before the reader like a panorama, leaving each its definite impression." *Maggie* is a panorama of 19 Impressionistic vignettes, scenes reeled off with much the same jerky effect as early motion pictures, yet more like a series of Impressionist sketches than realistic photographs. It is the story of a nice girl, a flower that "blossomed in a mud puddle," reared in a crowded family environment of poverty, ignorance, drunkenness and violence. Seduced and abandoned, she turns briefly to prostitution before throwing herself into the river.

"At the age of twenty I wrote my first novel--*Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*...I was always looking forward to success. My first great disappointment was in the reception of *Maggie*. I remember how I looked forward to its publication, and pictured the sensation I thought it would make. It fell flat.... It never really got on the market but it made for me the friendships of W. D. Howells and Hamlin Garland." In an effort to advertise *Maggie*, Crane rode public transit throughout New York City, conspicuously pretending to be reading a copy. In 1893 he walked up to Harlem to Hamlin Garland's flat. The gracious older writer fed him, helped him to sell a story, gave him money to pay the typist of *The Red Badge* and introduced him to Howells, the most influential editor of the day, proving himself to be a "nice Jesus Christ."

[Crane] was living at this time with a group of artists—"Indians" he called them--in the old studio building on East 33rd Street. I never called to see him there, but he often set

forth their doings with grim humor. Most of them slept on the floor and painted on towels, according to his report. Sometimes they ate, but they all smoked most villainous tobacco, for Crane smelled so powerfully of their "smoke-talks" that he filled our rooms with the odor. His fingers were yellow with cigarette reek, and he looked like a man badly nourished.... His habitual expression was a grim sort of smile." (Hamlin Garland)

The world remained as indifferent to Crane as it was to *Maggie*, except for his literary benefactors: "Of all human lots for a person of sensibility that of an obscure free lance in literature or journalism is, I think, the most discouraging."

POLITICS

At Syracuse University, mainly a Methodist school for educating missionaries, when the social reformer Emma Willard came to visit the campus, Crane refused to meet her. He said she was a fool. He also argued with one of his professors over religious doctrine and against St. Paul. At the same time, his sympathy for the poor disposed him to consider social remedies: "I was a Socialist 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." His friend and mentor the powerful Howells had become a Socialist by the time Crane knew him. Socialism was becoming politically correct among some intellectuals at the time, but was hotly opposed by Twain and other major figures including Crane, a much greater writer who deviated from Howells in politics, morals, aesthetics and vision.

The Red Badge of Courage (1895)

"The latter part of my twenty-first year I began *The Red Badge of Courage* and completed it early in my twenty-second year... It was an effort born of pain--despair, almost; and I believe that this made it a better piece of literature than it otherwise would have been." *The Red Badge* is the prototype of the modern war novel, said to be, as a work of art, the greatest war fiction ever written--greater than Tolstoy. Serialized first in various newspapers, when published as a book it received excellent reviews, especially in England. It made him famous, though it left him as poor as ever.

LATER CAREER

As a journalist, he traveled to the west and as far as Mexico, where he was almost murdered. His experiences led to the writing of "The Blue Hotel" and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." "I suppose I ought to be thankful to *The Red Badge*, but I am much fonder of my little book of poems, *The Black Riders* (1895). The reason, perhaps, is that it was a more ambitious effort. My aim is to comprehend in it the thoughts I have had about life in general, while *The Red Badge* is a mere episode in life."

He drove himself as if he anticipated dying young. "Last week I finished my new novel: *The Third Violet* [1896]. It is the story of life among the younger and poorer artists in New York." Also in 1896 he met and fell in love with Cora Taylor, an older woman with two failed marriages but only one divorce, who was the madame of an elegant seaport nightclub and brothel in Jacksonville, Florida called Hotel de Dream. She is said to have been intelligent, charming, patient and loyal, with a good heart. Crane then published another short novel, *George's Mother* (1896), described by Howells as "the study of...a poor, inadequate woman, of a commonplace religiosity [like Crane's mother], whose son goes to the bad. The wonder of it is the courage which deals with persons so absolutely average, and the art that graces them with the beauty of the author's compassion for everything that errs and suffers."

Crane met Theodore Roosevelt, the commissioner of the New York City Police and later President, in 1896, and sent him a signed copy of *George's Mother*. Roosevelt responded with a letter of appreciation indicating that he had enjoyed reading *Maggie* and *The Red Badge*. The police force at the time was notoriously corrupt and Roosevelt was trying to reform it. Crane wrote a series of articles criticizing police conduct in the streets, citing one incident in the Tenderloin district near Broadway. He had interviewed a "chorus girl" and was helping her aboard a streetcar when the authorities arrested her on the false charge of soliciting. He was warned to back off by the arresting detective and several other officers, who threatened that he would jeopardize his reputation if he defended the girl in court. Crane did so anyway, testifying that

the girl was innocent, however guilty she might have been at other times. He called the arresting detective a liar and complained to Roosevelt, who ignored him. Thereafter, from late 1896 to the end of his life, Crane was harassed by the New York police whenever he returned to the city.

“The Open Boat” (1898)

He became a star reporter during the heyday of yellow journalism. On his way to cover a rebellion in Cuba, he survived a shipwreck, the basis for what is considered his greatest short story, “The Open Boat,” a perfect model of Naturalist themes and Impressionist style and techniques. His terse free verse poems express antagonism toward the conventional God, in the tradition of Melville and Twain, but without denying the existence of God. They envision a grim indifferent Naturalist universe without denying free will, and they are Existential without denying the possibility of salvation, which in “The Open Boat” (1898) is a religious hope symbolized by a pale, remote, perhaps inaccessible star.

EXPATRIATION

Cora Taylor took him in and cared for him after his ordeal at sea. In 1897, when Crane covered the Greco-Turkish War, she followed him to Greece as the “first woman war correspondent.” After the war, they settled in England as man and wife. His exile was motivated in part by a desire to escape from the false legend that he was a bohemian lowlife and from political harassment in New York. He is one of the many artists who became expatriates in response to American philistinism, including Henry James, Ezra Pound, Hemingway and other Modernists. In England he became friends with some of the greatest novelists of the day--James, Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, and Ford Madox Ford.

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898 he responded as if he had been drafted. He tried to enlist in the U.S. Navy but was informed by a medical examiner that he had tuberculosis. While covering the war in Cuba and Puerto Rico for the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers, exhausting himself and contracting a fever, he lived under harsh conditions. He smoked incessantly, had a poor diet and decaying teeth. Unlike the celebrity popular novelist Richard Harding Davis (1864-1916), Crane was modest and did not glory in his role as a war correspondent, though he displayed a debonair bravery in combat that anticipated Hemingway. On one occasion, wearing a white raincoat on the front line, he stood up in full view, exposing himself to Spanish rifle fire.

In 1899 he settled with Cora Taylor in a crumbling 14th century manor house in Sussex, England. The huge ruin had only one primitive toilet and many bats. Friends including Henry James attended benefit parties to raise money for him. He wrote frantically to pay debts, producing a poor novel about the Greek War called *Active Service* and another book of poems, *War Is Kind* (1899). One day in 1900 he leaned over to pat a dog and his mouth filled with blood.

DEATH

In a last effort to save him, with the financial help of friends Cora arranged to take him on a stretcher to a sanitarium in the Black Forest of Germany. But it was hopeless. At his bedside was a friend, Robert Barr, who promised to complete his unfinished novel *The O'Ruddy*. He spoke his last words to Barr: “Robert--when you come to the hedge--that we must all go over (he gasped slowly)--it isn't bad. You feel sleepy--and--you don't care. Just a little dreamy anxiety--which world you're really in--that's all.” Cora took his body back to the United States and saw him buried in the Crane family plot in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Then she went back into business as a madame.

REALISM

The 14th child of anybody might feel disposable. The 14th child of a Methodist minister and a conventional religious mother is a likely candidate for rebellion. Crane writes as if he was born with a grim ironic smile. Irony is his basic attitude. He identified with Realism as represented by Howells and Garland because it rejected the prevailing sentimental literary traditions of Victorianism, debunked illusions, defied gentility and contradicted Romanticism with satire, parody, and wit. Crane is a much more defiant, ironic,

complex and talented debunker than Howells or Garland. He is most a Realist in his (1) basic anti-Romantic posture; (2) authentic dialogue; (3) focus on the most common people; (4) depicting characters as social types; (5) search for general truths through objective portrayal of representative types and situations.

NATURALISM & IMPRESSIONISM

Realism sprouted two outgrowths, Naturalism and Impressionism, both expressed by Crane, who fused the themes of one with the aesthetics of the other, first in *Maggie*. Naturalism was in vogue in Europe. In America it emerged from Realism before the battle against sentimentalism had been won. Crane shared the sympathy for victims that inspired American Naturalists--mainly Norris, Dreiser and London. It is appropriate to call *Maggie* the first Naturalist novel in American literature, but with a qualification: It is the first to attribute fate to the deterministic forces of environment, but it does so only in the case of Maggie, and some critics have argued that even Maggie has choice, which differentiates Crane from determinists such as Zola and Dreiser. He declared in a letter about *Maggie* that environment was a "tremendous thing"--he did not say it was *everything*. The ironic moral tone throughout the novella, typical of Crane, especially the satire of hypocrisy, implies that Pete and Jimmie and Maggie's mother are to some extent responsible for their actions.

In Crane as in Hemingway and Faulkner, the emphasis on deterministic forces makes more admirable the characters who strive and succeed in overcoming them. Yet some critics, following Walcutt, have seen Crane as a determinist, a pure Naturalist. They overlook such contrary evidence as (1) the consistent irony and satire in Crane that constitute moral judgments holding characters accountable, most obviously at the end of *Maggie*, "The Blue Hotel" and throughout *The Red Badge*; (2) the ridicule of Henry Fleming for denying to himself that he enlisted of his own "free will" (*Red Badge* III); (3) Crane's exaltation of heroes, which would make nonsense of his laudatory rhetoric if he did not believe in free will--Jim Conklin, the tattered man, the dead man in the woods, the Confederate color bearer, Wilson and eventually Henry in *The Red Badge*; the old Henry in "The Veteran"; the black Henry in "The Monster"; Collins in "A Mystery of Heroism"; and Billie the oiler in "The Open Boat"; (4) the heroes such as Jim Conklin who are Christ-evoking; (5) the patterns of moral redemption; (6) the religious hope like a pale star; (7) his aesthetics and techniques, which are consistently Impressionist, the opposite of Naturalist aesthetics.

CRITICS

Many critics have been frustrated in their efforts to categorize Crane: "Was he primarily a Realist, a Naturalist, or an Impressionist?" asks one. He was a Realist who emphasized Naturalist themes with the aesthetics of a painterly Impressionist, using consistent irony. The most helpful critics of Crane are Pizer, Greenfield and Nagel.

STYLE

Like Hemingway, as a reporter Crane learned to write effective short declarative sentences. As it evolved, his prose style became a dynamic blend: (1) His irony detaches perspective and appeals to intellect. (2) His Naturalist themes likewise detach the reader with a cosmic perspective, a focus on deterministic forces and a tendency to see characters as specimens, frequently comparing humans to animals. Irony and deterministic themes detach while (3) Impressionist techniques immerse the reader in the action like a participant and (4) the rhetoric affirming the heroism of exemplars inspires a belief in free will and "the sublime absence of selfishness." The unique dynamism of Crane's prose style derives from the tension between irony and Naturalist themes on the one hand, and the psychology induced by Impressionism and exemplary heroic conduct on the other.

Michael Hollister (2015)

HEMINGWAY PRAISES CRANE

"There was no real literature of our Civil War, excepting the forgotten *Miss Ravenell's Conversion* by J. W. DeForest, until Stephen Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*. Crane wrote it before he had ever seen any war. But he had read the contemporary accounts, had heard the old soldiers, they were not so old then, talk, and above all he had seen Matthew Brady's wonderful photographs. Creating his story out of this

material he wrote that great boy's dream of war that was to be truer to how war is than any war the boy who wrote it would ever live to see. It is one of the finest books of our literature. It is all as much of one piece as a great poem is.... Actually *War and Peace* would be greatly improved by cutting; not by cutting the action, but by removing some of the parts where Tolstoy tampered with the truth to make it fit his conclusions. The Crane book, though, could not be cut at all. I am sure he cut it all himself as he wrote it to the exact measure of the poem it is."

Ernest Hemingway, ed.
Men at War
(Crown/Berkley 1942-71) 9-10

CRANE ILLUSTRATES SPINOZA (1632-1677)

"Because we act for conscious ends, we suppose that all processes have such ends in view; and because we are human we suppose that all events lead up to man and are designed to subserve his needs. But this is an anthropocentric delusion, like so much of our thinking. The root of the greatest errors in philosophy lies in projecting our human purposes, criteria and preferences into the objective universe.... Good and bad are relative to human and often individual tastes and ends, and have no validity for a universe in which individuals are ephemera... We are free only to the extent that we understand."

Will Durant
"Spinoza"
The Story of Philosophy (1926) 133

HIGHLIGHTS OF CRITICISM

"In Crane's own day it was common to call him an Impressionist and to associate his techniques with those of the studio....Impressionism, however, has often served merely as a vague description of Crane's color sense and of his highly distinctive narrative technique and prose style. More recent critics who are absorbed in the possibility of discussing Crane as an Impressionist have refined their use of the term in several ways. One group has sought to define his Impressionism by locating its source in Crane's contemporary world....On the whole, it has been less difficult to find literary sources for Crane's Impressionistic aesthetic...Stallman's belief that Crane's style is 'prose pointillism' suffers from the inevitable fuzziness that results from the translation of brush and canvas terminology into literary practice and effect....

Perosa and Overland closely examine Crane's point-of-view technique, his episodic structure, his imagery and symbolism, and his syntax and diction. Rogers means by Impressionism in Crane not the usual emphasis on his color imagery and fragmentary narrative method but rather Crane's belief that reality is shifting, fleeting, and evanescent and therefore that experience is ultimately solipsistic....The long-standing interest in Crane as an Impressionist is brought to a climax by James Nagel's excellent *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism* (1980). The major advance represented by Nagel's book is in the fullness, clarity, and precision of his examination of this difficult area of Crane's studies. Nagel does not so much cast new light on Crane's Impressionism (except perhaps in the relationship between Crane's irony and his Impressionistic techniques) as sum up with admirable good sense where we stand. He is perhaps weakest in his excessive preoccupation with Naturalism as the 'villain' in Crane criticism...

Walcott's remark that Crane is probably closer to Expressionism than Impressionism is fully and brilliantly explored by Weimer, who concludes that Crane's fragmentation and stylization of experience are less related to the eye of the Impressionist painter than to the intellect of the Expressionist playwright. Although Crane's fellow writers have tended to consider him principally as an Impressionist, academic criticism, with its ideological bent, has more frequently approached him as a Naturalist. Much of this criticism straitjacketed Crane in an abstract definition of Naturalism ('pessimistic determinism' or the like) and served little purpose except to pigeonhole him neatly....To Walcott, Crane is the one major example in American Naturalism of a complete and coherent determinist. Walcott successfully discusses *Maggie* as a deterministic novel, but in his analyses of Crane's later work, including *The Red Badge*, he overemphasizes deterministic threads in a complex pattern of themes....Gullason attempts to identify the various threads of

Naturalism apparent in all of Crane's work and career; he concludes that Crane has Naturalistic qualities but is an untypical Naturalist in theme and style....

Inevitably, *George's Mother* has attracted the greatest attention from Freudian-minded critics. Often a Freudian reading of this novel is awkwardly applied to other major works by Crane... Jungian readings of Crane tend to concentrate on *The Red Badge of Courage* and Crane's concept of the hero.... Shulman cogently traces the movement in Crane's fiction (and presumably in Crane himself) from an 'outcast' to a 'community' social ethic, culminating in an excellent reading of 'The Open Boat'... [in] the controversial reading of *The Red Badge* by R. W. Stallman... Christian symbolism is at the heart of all Crane's work... Few readers of Crane would deny that Christian symbols and themes pervade his work, but most would probably echo Isaac Rosenfeld's early comment... that Stallman 'is working his poor horse to death'.... The general import of... responses is that Stallman has woven a disparate group of images into a theme which is extraneous to or contradicted by the themes present in the plot and characterization of the novel....

Cazemajou interprets *Maggie* as an allegory of redemption, *George's Mother* as a banal allegory of the Fall, and *The Red Badge* as largely shaped by the imagery and theme of *Pilgrim's Progress*.... In a series of closely reasoned studies which usually draw upon Crane's best work, a number of critics have discussed Crane's cosmic vision as a complex entity that defies easy classification.... Most of these critics accept Greenfield's view that Crane's work exhibits a 'balance between the deterministic and volitional views of life'.... Daniel G. Hoffman, in *The Poetry of Stephen Crane*, locates the specific source of Crane's symbolic technique in an Emersonian aesthetic... Solomon believes that many of Crane's themes have their origin in his conscious parody of late nineteenth-century popular literary formulas and subjects--slum reform and temperance writing, Romantic war fiction, the dime western, and children's stories.... Crane also has come within the compass of the critical movement which finds most major writers to be Existentialists.... Critics find that Crane's work exhibits the Existential themes of the absurdity of ethical values and the isolation of man in an amoral, Godless universe....

Cazemajou's final chapter, in which he attempts to demonstrate Crane's stylization of experience through metaphor, symbolism, and allegory, is one of the most ambitious such efforts in recent criticism.... LaFrance's thesis... is that Crane was a moral ironist; that is, that he was always an ironist but that his irony was directed principally against those who refuse to accept responsibility for their actions and beliefs.... To Bergon Crane is not seeking to judge man but rather to render the complexity and ambiguity of immediate experience as it is encountered by a distinctive temperament.... James B. Colvert... believes [Crane] is not a Realist in the sense that he attempts to describe what he sees; rather, he constantly stylizes his depiction of experience to conform to his inner vision of life as largely a confrontation between weak and deluded man ('the little man') and the world at large, a world dominated by an indifferent Nature ('the mountain')."

Donald Pizer, ed.
"A Guide to Criticism"
The Red Badge of Courage
(Norton Critical Edition 1962-94) 121-30

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