

ANALYSIS

“An Episode of War” (1899)

Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

Beginning with vivid imagery in the midst of action, this story is typical of Stephen Crane: economical Impressionism rich in ironies with the archetypal themes of justice, war and wounding. The close-up focus with lack of peripheral context gives a timeless universality to the situation that will be characteristic of Modernism. The first irony is that the lieutenant is not shot in combat but while distributing coffee. He is not named nor particularized, conveying that the military depersonalizes and war dehumanizes. He is dividing coffee in a war dividing the country, trying to be just in a small matter that is magnified out of proportion: “He was on the verge of a great triumph in mathematics.”

Their temporary peace and the order of civilization are destroyed in a flash by a bullet, displacing reason with emotion: The lieutenant “looked quickly at a man near him as if he suspected it was a case of personal assault.” Of course the ironic point is just the opposite, that it is a case of impersonal warfare. Although the event seems random, or a matter of chance, since the lieutenant is an officer he would be singled out by snipers, and the rebels were known for their marksmanship. Getting shot transforms him on the spot from a soldier into a wounded soul: “He looked sadly, mystically, over the breastwork at the green face of a wood.” The “green face” metaphor is an example of Impressionist detail distinctive of Crane. When he tries to sheath his sword with his left hand, his men lean back in awe, as he seems “endowed with a trident, a sceptre, or a spade.” The shock has induced a primitive mythological consciousness in the group that personifies their leader as the prospect of death: “A wound gives a strange dignity to him who bears it...as if the wounded man’s hand is upon the curtain which hangs before the revelations of all existence...and the power of it sheds radiance upon a bloody form.”

Ironically, though rendered helpless, he has become spiritually powerful, endowed with a “terrible majesty.” His wounding increases his perception and understanding: “As the wounded officer passed from the line of battle, he was enabled to see many things which as a participant in the fight were unknown to him.” He sees men “working like slaves to hold their ground,” a reminder of the issues compelling men to this war. An artillery battery “swept in curves that stirred the heart... The sound of it was a war-chorus that reached into the depths of man’s emotion.” This archetypal sound conveys a deeper, darker reason for the war, rooted in human nature: the battery “had a beautiful unity, as if it were a missile.” Satan is beautiful in *Paradise Lost*. War, weapons and battle likewise can have a terrible unifying beauty that entrances men, as expressed in Crane’s symbolic Impressionism: “The lieutenant, still holding his arm as if it were of glass, stood watching this battery until all detail of it was lost, save the figures of the riders, which rose and fell and waved lashes over the black mass.” A poet as well as a painter in words, Crane rhymes “glass” with “mass” for emphasis, while his phrase “black mass” evokes the evils of war.

Crane’s similes convey that, sadly, human war is part of Nature: the battery sounds like “the crash of waves on rocks”; the shooting “crackled like bush-fires” and sometimes “like thunder.” The lieutenant comes upon stragglers who, “no longer having part in the battle, know more of it than others...The lieutenant, carrying his wounded arm rearward, looked upon them with wonder.” Seeing the battle has become a metaphor of seeing life. These stragglers are participants who now have a detached perspective informed by experience, an objectivity that contrasts with the lieutenant’s pain and wonder. When an officer binds his wound, “The lieutenant hung his head, feeling in this presence, that he did not know how to be correctly wounded.”

Appropriately, the field hospital tents are grouped around an old school-house, contrasting forms of education—later a theme of Hemingway. The busy surgeon who attends him is a friendly person who turns into a professional and, ironically, “seemed possessed suddenly of a great contempt for the lieutenant. This

wound evidently placed the latter on a very low social plane.” A wounded soldier expects to have earned respect. This is a major theme of Crane and Hemingway: There is no justice in life, society or Nature.

To facilitate his efforts to save as many lives as possible under extreme pressure in the worst of circumstances, the overworked battlefield surgeon must dissociate, intimidate, and even lie to wounded patients: “Come along, now. I won’t amputate it. Come along. Don’t be a baby.” Amputation was a quick fix in combat. The surgeons had too many patients to do intricate operations. At the battle of Gettysburg, there were many large piles of amputated arms and legs. The lieutenant is suspicious and resists this lesson while staring at the door of the school-house “as sinister to him as the portals of death.” Although this doctor is a morally neutral representative of his profession, Crane may have been influenced by the fact that battlefield surgeons in the Civil War were paid \$50 per amputation.

When the lieutenant returns home, his sisters, mother and wife “sobbed for a long time at the sight of the flat sleeve.” The story ends with the irony that, just as the doctor lied to him on the battlefield, he lies to his womenfolk on the home front: “‘Oh, well,’ he said, standing shamefaced amid these tears, ‘I don’t suppose it matters so much as all that’.” Like the doctor, the one-armed veteran dissociates emotionally in an effort to pacify others and to improve his ability to function. In addition to its setting in war, this story has other characteristics later conspicuous in the fiction of Hemingway, who expressed admiration for Crane: extreme economy, terse dialogue, understatement, the iceberg principle, and the themes of wounding, dissociation and grace under pressure. Hemingway’s father was a doctor and he depicts the dissociation of doctors both positively, in Dr. Valentini in *A Farewell to Arms*, and negatively, in Dr. Adams in “Indian Camp.”

Michael Hollister (2015)