ANALYSIS

"The Blue Hotel" (1898)

Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

I

A cinematic long shot of the Palace Hotel at Fort Romper would isolate its blue color against the background of gray. Fort Romper is a frontier town on the Nebraska prairie, so unlikely a place for a palace the opening juxtaposition of names is a joke, calling attention to the themes of human aspiration and delusion. Small towns in the frontier west competed to attract railroad lines, each aspiring to grow into a great city, as indicated by placenames such as Paris, Texas and Moscow, Idaho. As Old Scully says, "Why in two years Romper'll be a met-tro-*pol*-is." There is also an ironic clash between the aristocratic ideal of a palace and the western ideal of romping free and fighting Indians.

Both the hotel and the legs of a heron are light blue, both stand for ideals and both are out of place out here on the plains. But whereas the blue heron legs blend into the natural environment when standing in water, the hotel is a "howling" contrast to its environment. The hotel is an outpost of civilization where ideals such as justice and honor have been established and are maintained—barely--by Old Scully. The heron is a natural metaphor of transcendent ideals because it flies in the archetypal space of the Sky, it is the color of the sky, and it is also a waterbird like those in William Cullen Bryant's "To a Waterfowl" (1818) and in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" (1886). Old Scully the owner chose the color blue to attract customers passing from the railroad station, associating the hotel with the icon of Progress.

As places where a diversity of people come together, a hotel is often a metaphor of the larger society. Here on the frontier, men are gathered around a stove playing cards--a common thematic motif that emphasizes chance, as in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Scully is a benevolent proprietor who tries to keep the peace, which is threatened not by the quarreling locals playing cards but by the outsider, the Swede, the greenhorn from the east who has illusions about the West.

II

The hotel shelters them all from the blizzard, the "fury" of Nature. The guests sit around the stove, play cards, smoke pipes and assent "with grunts of masculine contentment." The Swede disturbs the peace when he misunderstands the routine quarreling and boardwhacking of the card players: "His laughter rang somehow childish." He gets nervous, "as if he expected to be assaulted." Then paranoid and deluded: "Oh, I see you are all against me. I see--" and backs himself into a corner, terrified he is going to be killed. Outside the snow is turning blue and the wind is blowing something against the hotel "like a spirit tapping"--now associating the color blue with terror and cold as well as with the spiritual dimension. The Swede "made the gesture of a martyr." In his ignorance and fear, his paranoid anticipation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

III

Upstairs, Scully tries to pacify the Swede by showing him a picture of his children, appealing to his heart, then by resorting to whiskey: "The Swede laughed wildly." The character who is supposedly the most civilized--the one identified with Europe--goes wild. "The Blue Hotel" dramatizes the fragility of civilization and the fatal power of delusions.

IV

The men around the stove speculate about what is the matter with the Swede. When the Easterner suggests he's been reading dime novel westerns, the cowboy protests with civic pride that Nebraska is civilized: "This ain't Wyoming, ner none of them places." The traveling Easterner says it isn't wild

anywhere in the west anymore—"not in these days." The Swede is living in the past. Drinking whiskey gives him "a grandeur of confidence" and a "bullying" attitude. He talks "arrogantly, profanely, angrily." He was scared, but now as Johnnie says, "he's too fresh." Old Scully, Johnnie's father, stands up for civilization, defends the Swede and demands justice for all in his hotel.

V

At supper the drunken Swede "fizzed like a fire-wheel," extending a motif of circular movement in Nature and futility in violent human effort. Rather than allow the men to kick the Swede out of the hotel, in trying to be a good host Scully encourages "all his madness." The reckless Swede is so inflated by alcohol that he challenges the men to a game of cards: "In his tone there was always a great threat." When he accuses Johnnie of cheating, the ensuing altercation overturns the game board, scattering the cards. No one listens to Scully anymore as civilization breaks down. Finally even Scully agrees to violence: "We'll let them fight."

VI

They go outside into the wind blowing flakes like "bullets." This is how men go to war. "The covered land was blue." Ideals and order are a cover of virtue over more permanent human nature like the snow. Ironically, the violence has been provoked by ideals of justice and honor, like most wars. Johnnie is "serene yet ferocious, brutish yet heroic"--a specimen of paradoxical human nature. Crane renders the action with Impressionist techniques: "the Easterner's mind, like a film, took lasting impressions of three men...For a time the encounter in the darkness was such a perplexity of flying arms that it presented no more detail than would a swiftly revolving wheel." The wheel extends the motif of futile circularity in human affairs, the lack of moral progress. "Occasionally a face, as if illuminated by a flash of light, would shine out, ghostly and marked with pink spots." The color, similes, rapid movement and blurriness of detail are characteristics of Impressionism.

Johnnie is the apparent western hero in this fight against the aggressive outsider, innocent of the allegation by the Swede, who has been making false accusations all day. The locals cheer him on, hating the Swede like a lynch mob. The descent from peace in the warm blue hotel into barbaric violence outside in the cold blue snow ends realistically, not ideally, with the heavy Swede severely beating Johnnie.

VII

Now the cowboy wants to fight the Swede, but Old Scully reverts to his role of representing civilization, by imposing order and fairness. When the Swede checks out of the hotel, he mocks the cowboy and others who had yelled for Johnnie to "Kill him! Kill him!" When he is gone, once again even Scully shares in a communal outburst of rage so intense it sputters into speechless exclamations--verbal impotence--a circular and futile return to their murderous attitude during the fight.

VIII

Crane sounds like a Naturalist when he calls humans "lice" and personifies in the Swede "the conceit of man." In the saloon, where the Swede drinks more whiskey and boasts of beating up Johnnie, the patrons are not cowboys of the Old West: "Two were prominent local business men; one was the district attorney; and one was a professional gambler of the kind known as 'square'." Also contrary to western stereotype, the gambler is a "trusted and admired" pillar of the community with "a real wife and two real children in a neat cottage in a suburb, where he led an exemplary home life... In all affairs outside his business...this thieving card-player was so generous, so just, so moral, that, in a contest he could have put to flight the consciences of nine tenths of the citizens of Romper."

Inflated by whiskey and vainglory, the Swede grows angry that no one will drink with him and lays a hand on the gambler--an offense. Twice the belligerent oaf demands that the gambler drink with him and twice the gambler declines in a "tone of heroic patronage." The Swede is repeating the pattern of his behavior in the blue hotel, except that he is wilder here in the saloon. He tries to impose his will on the gambler by strangulation. Defending himself, the gambler stabs the Swede to death as easily as if he "had

been a melon." Crane's tone mocks human self-importance epitomized in the Swede, who dies staring at the cash register on the bar: "This registers the amount of your purchase." He bought it. He paid with his life for his ignorance, his delusions, his fear, his character, his choices and his conduct--the ultimate price of his triumph in the blue hotel.

IX

If the story had ended with section VIII, it might be seen as deterministic, an example of Naturalism, but the last section of the story is moralistic in tone, which would make no sense if people have no free will and are not responsible for their actions: The Easterner tells the cowboy that the gambler's three-year sentence for killing the Swede "was a light sentence." He also reduces determinism by emphasizing chance, as expressed by the metaphor of gambling at cards in both the hotel and the saloon: "Yes, a thousand things might have happened."

The Easterner represents City/head/reason/morality/responsibility/puritanism, according to social type and archetype. The cowboy, his thematic opposite, represents Countryside/heart/feeling/independence /freedom/pastoralism. Crane is urbane. The cowboy is wrong. He is the ignorant one, the fool who mocks the Swede as a fool. The Easterner confesses from a guilty conscience that, in truth, he saw Johnnie cheat the Swede. He emphasizes moral culpability, insisting that all the men there--himself above all--are responsible for actions against the Swede that led to his death, motivated by their false perception, dislike and a lust for blood: "We are all in it!" In the moral tradition of New England, he calls what they did to the Swede a "sin."

As usual in Crane, the story ends with multiple ironies: The cowboy, in denial and "rebellious, cried out blindly into this fog of mysterious theory: 'Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?'" He is explicitly blind. He is the one who kept yelling "*Kill him!*" He incited the Swede. Because the Easterner is implicitly correct that Johnnie was in fact cheating, he has all the authority in arguing that we have free will and are responsible for our actions, contrary to the cowboy's denial. The final ironies are that the paranoid Swede also proved to be correct in predicting his own death, and that he got himself killed.

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