

## ANALYSIS

“The Monster” (1898)

Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

“The *Century* rejected the...story on the grounds that it was ‘too horrible.’ ‘The Monster’ tells the story of an amiable Negro who, in saving a child from a burning laboratory, has his face disfigured by flaming acid. He becomes an object of horror and repugnance to the townspeople, who wish to lock him up because of his transformation. Dr. Trescott, the father of the child, defends the ‘monster’ and is consequently ostracized by his fellow-citizens. William Dean Howells said: “‘The Monster’ is the greatest short story ever written by an American’.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“The Whilomville of Crane’s fiction is the memory town of his boyhood in Port Jervis, New York.... The story is mainly written in a plain flat prose, both in the establishment of the situation and in the long denouement, as if there were nothing special in the tale of Dr. Trescott, his child Jimmy, his Negro coachman Henry Johnson, and the townspeople of Whilomville. After Henry’s rescue of the boy from a fire which leaves the rescuer an imbecile [true?] faceless monster, the doctor’s refusal to give up the care of his servant and benefactor alienates the squeamish townsmen more and more. In a sense, the story is just a fable satirizing conventional citizens who are enthusiastic for the heroic deed and repelled by the uncomfortable responsibility that follows.

But when we look for the convincing source of the doctor’s loyalty, for which his social happiness and indeed his economic survival are the apparent cost, the sanction of his conduct is something more than his given character: it is the horrifying ordeal of fear, the trial by violence which creates the brotherhood of men who undergo it. The stunning climactic scene, in which the doctor’s chemicals glow beautifully into a surrealist garden of destruction, translates the reader into the experience of hell, and the image so endures that the doctor, alone among the characters, seems to share the apprehension of the frightful truth. The brief incident in high key, set off against the muted color of the other scenes, establishes a moral center for the story.

With that center giving form to the plot, the thinness of characterization becomes an advantage instead of a liability. Thus, while Henry Johnson is little more than a stock literary Negro, the use of such a stereotype has its value: the townspeople’s blindness to his humanity becomes plausible, and the doctor’s conduct is a feat of perception as well as courage. And the stereotype itself, inviting condescension without obligation, has a relevant historical meaning: Henry is a kind of stage-Negro, not a creature of the plantation legend, and the society which sees him thus has no semi-feudal tradition which can serve as a guide to loyalty. What was true of Henry as a Negro is all the more true when he becomes a characterless and faceless man, the logical extension of his special case. The story in effect criticizes both the conventions of prejudice and the morality of the cash nexus.”

J. C. Levenson  
*Major Writers of America II*  
(Harcourt 1962) 395-96

“‘The Monster’ is primarily concerned with the moral problem that confronts a rather prosperous and highly respected physician, Dr. Ned Trescott, when his small son, Jim, is saved from death in a fire by Henry Johnson, the Trescotts’ young Negro stableman.... Henry and the others who lose face in the story ultimately save face; and those who try to save face, however sympathetic one must sometimes be with their problems, finally lose face in the light of Henry’s significance....

Jim, the Trescotts' son, foreshadows and encompasses the entire action in miniature at the outset: playing in the garden with a toy locomotive, he accidentally destroys a peony and is gently reprimanded by his father, who decides that the child must stop playing with the train for the day. 'During the delivery of the judgment the child had not *faced* his father, and afterward he went away, with his head lowered, shuffling his feet.... It was apparent from Jimmie's manner that he felt some kind of desire to *efface* himself' (the emphasis is mine). At the end of the story, Jim must save face before his little friends—his own society—by going up to the terrifying monster, Henry, who is seated in the sun with a heavy veil about his head, and touching him on the shoulder; Henry's courage in saving Jim is thus weighed against the child's face-saving 'courage' as he dares to approach the monster-savior....

Bella Farragut, Henry's friend who had announced their engagement when she thought him dead of his bravery, loses face completely when he returns to court her sociably after his recovery; unable to look at him, she 'threw herself face downward on the floor, while the monster sat on the edge of the chair gabbling courteous invitations.' One can continue in this way throughout the story, noticing how even on the simplest linguistic level the losing of face is imitated again and again. At the end of the story, Dr. Trescott 'kept his face in the shadow' as he refuses to dismiss his feeling of responsibility for Henry... This conflict between losing and saving face, between appearance and reality, light and dark, impression and fact, is finally one between social and individual value....

Henry, as a perfectly good man, is equated with God rather than with any possibility for strictly human conduct: he is like God totally different from man, veiled from the eyes of man from the time when 'the bandages on the negro's head allowed only one thing to appear—an eye, which unwinkingly stared at the judge....' Cooped up in a small room while Alek is caring for him, Henry is treated rather like the fearful Old Testament God—Alek's wife 'adopted the attitude she used always in church at funerals'....

Crane everywhere organizes his details into microscopic patterns that duplicate the over-all pattern which is the whole story.... Trescott's capacity for moral sensitivity, his response to Henry's act, places him, then, in the position of the peony at the opening of the story; and it is his son, Jim, who is finally responsible for...his insoluble problem. Jim tries to revive the peony, 'but the spine of it was hurt, and it would only hang limply from his hand. Jim could do no reparation.' And neither can the doctor when he has tragically healed Henry and thus paradoxically healed himself.... If Crane believed anything he believed that man's acceptance of social responsibility is the means, and the only means, for his personal fulfillment as individual."

James Hafley  
"The Monster' and the Art of Stephen Crane"  
*Accent* XIX  
(Summer 1959) 159-65

Michael Hollister (2015)