

UNIT 6

STEPHEN CRANE (1871-1900)

THE OPEN BOAT & THE BLUE HOTEL

I. INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

By the age of twenty-eight he had published enough material to fill a dozen volumes of a collected edition and had lived a legendary life that has grown in complexity and interest to scholars and readers the more the facts have come to light. The son of a Methodist minister, but he systematically rejected religious and social traditions, identified with the urban poor, and 'married' the mistress of one 'of the better houses of ill-fame' in Jacksonville, Florida. Although he was temperamentally a gentle(kind, amiable) man, Crane was attracted to -even obsessed by- war and other forms of physical and psychic violence. He frequently lived the down-and-out life of a penniless artist; he was also ambitious and something of a snob; he was a poet and an impressionist: a journalist, a social critic and realist. In short, there is much about Crane's life and writing that is paradoxical; he is an original and not easy to be right about.

The distinctive restless, peripatetic quality of Crane's life began early. The last of fourteen children, Crane moved with his family at least three times before he entered school at age seven in the small town of Port Jervis, New York. His father died in 1880, and after a tentative return to Paterson the family settled in the coastal resort town of Ashbury Park, New Jersey, three years later. The next five years, as his biographer and critic Edwin H. Cady has observed, 'confirmed in the sensitive, vulnerable, fatherless preacher's kid his

fate as isolator (aislador)'. Crane never took to schooling. At Syracuse University he distinguished himself as a baseball player but was unable to accept the routine of academic life and after one semester left with no intention of returning. By 1891 he had begun to write for newspapers, and he hungered for immersion in life of the kind that his early journalistic assignments caused him to witness at close hand.

A couple of jobs with New York newspapers proved abortive, and Crane spent much of the next two years shuttling between the seedy (shabby; cutre) apartments of his artist friends and his brother Edmund's house nearby Lake View, New Jersey. In these years of extreme privation, Crane developed his powers as an observer of psychological and social reality. Encouraged by the realistic credo of Hamlin Garland, whom he had heard lecture in 1891, Crane wrote and then -after it had been rejected by several New York editors- published in 1893, at his own expense, a work he had begun while at Syracuse: *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, which initiated the trend of literary naturalism in America. The mass audience of the time sought from literature what *Maggie* denied: escape, distraction, and easy pleasure in romances which falsified and obscured the social, emotional, and moral nature of life.

The same syndicate that took *Red Badge* (and made his fortune improve), assigned him early in 1895 as a roving (itinerante) reporter in the American West and Mexico, experience which would give him the material for several of his finest tales - "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and "The Blue Hotel" among them. In the spring of that year, *Then Black Riders and Other Lines*, his first volume of poetry, was published. It was too experimental in form and too unconventional in philosophic outlook to win wide acceptance. *The Red Badge of Courage* appeared in the fall as a book and became the first

successful American work to be realistic in the modern way. It won Crane international acclaim at the age of twenty-four.

In all of his poetry, journalism, and fiction Crane clearly demonstrated his religious, social, and literary rebelliousness; his alienated, unconventional stance also led him to direct action. After challenging the New York police force on behalf of a prostitute who claimed harassment at its hands, Crane left the city in the winter of 1896-97 to cover the insurrection against Spain in Cuba. On his way to Cuba he met Cora Howorth Taylor, the proprietress of the aptly named Hotel de Dream in Jacksonville, Florida, with whom he lived for the last three years of his life. On January 2, Crane's ship *The Commodore* sank off the coast of Florida. His report of this harrowing(horrenda) adventure was published a few days later in the *New York Press*. He promptly converted this event into "The Open Boat". This story, like *Red Badge*, reveals Crane's characteristic subject matter -the physical, emotional, and intellectual responses of men under extreme pressure- and the dominant themes of nature's indifference to humanity's fate and the consequent need for compassionate collective action. In the late stories "The Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel", Crane achieved his mature style. In both of these works we can observe his tough-minded(inflexible, dura) irony and his essential vision: a sympathetic but unflinching(inquebrantable) demand for courage, integrity, grace(armonía), and generosity in the face if a universe in which human beings, to quote from "The Blue Hotel", are so many lice(piojo; canalla) clinging "to a whirling, fire-smote(herido por el fuego), ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb(bulbo, bombilla)"(58).

In the summer of 1897 Crane covered the Greco-Turkish War and later that year settled in England, where he made friends, most notably with the English writers Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells, and Ford Maddox Hueffer (later

Ford) and the American writers Henry James and Harold Frederic. The following year he covered the Spanish-American War for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*.

In the last months of his life Crane's situation became desperate; he was suffering from tuberculosis and was hopelessly in debt. He wrote furiously in a doomed(destined, condemned) attempt to earn money, but the effort only worsened his health. In 1899 he drafted thirteen stories set in the fictional town Whilomville for *Harper's Magazine*, published his second volume of poetry, *War Is Kind*, the weak novel *Active Service*, and the American edition of *The Monster and Other Stories*. After a lung hemorrhage, he wrote a series of nine articles on great battles and completed the first twenty-five chapters of the novel *The O'Ruddy*. In spite of Cora's hopes for a miraculous cure, and the generous assistance of Henry James and others, Crane died at Badenweiler, Germany, on June 5, 1900.

As Emerson had seen the man of nature and the poet in Thoreau and Whitman, Garland found in Crane the artist he could describe but could not himself become. His biographer, Thomas Beer, said 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 record of his 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. With Zola he shared the philosophy of the romance experimental, with De Maupassant and Turgenev the sensory acuteness, the brevity, and the repressed intensity of impressionistic art.

Even in his early stories Crane was far in advance of the psychological knowledge of his contemporaries. His understanding of the effects of

environmental and instinct on the individual anticipates the theories of the behaviorists, the social psychologists, and the psychoanalysis of a decade or more later.

II. CHRISTIAN (OR PAGAN) VISION OF THE WORLD?

Crane somewhat brought to focus in his person, as well as in his work, the searing(punzante) skepticism of a generation that was too young for the Civil War but just old enough to sense from it America's now unparalleled power in human affairs. If "God is dead", as we have heard often in recent years, he first died around the 1890s and nowhere in America with such finality as in the prose and poetry of Stephen Crane. Crane's particular theme was that the world at large is a senselessly(sin sentido) violent cosmic process unrelated to the longings(anhelos), ideas, and beliefs of the human beings who (only in their own eyes) are its favorite victims. Although Crane was often smart-alecky(sabihondo), "fresh", cocky(chulo), very young indeed, he was more mature than Hemingway and the most influential American spokesman for a stoicism that had to be learned by many "fine consciences" as the nineteenth century expired to the Wagnerian music of blood lust(deseo, codicia), imperialism and war. His style was never an end in itself; Crane's was very deliberate(premeditado) and highly colored in order to work on our conventional feelings in the most provocative way. His sensibility is aggressive, stoic, humorous, not frivolous, as the power of literature lies in the ability to concentrate, condense, reduce hammer into shape(forjar) certain intractable images. Crane was a man whose head was turned in one direction and was never able or willing to look in another.

For Crane, "War is life and life is war", so that the determining factor is the invisible and indecipherable makeup (composition) of the individual that either saves or destroys him within the life situation: the pressure of others. "Art is a child of pain", and this pain lies in the irrevocable fact and also in the fact that a character can deal with the pressure, an artist can describe the situation, only on the shortest possible leash (trahilla, cuerda), or on the slant (inclinación, pendiente). The concept of "slant" refers to the fact that there is only a narrow, and even crooked (tortuoso), field in which to operate. People are single lines of force traveling in a predetermined direction. There is nothing to be done except to show one line of human force acting on another. So in a totally disbelieving age, art is possible. Because there is nothing more to life than appears on the surface.

Just why Crane turned next to the Civil War as a subject for *The Red Badge of Courage* is not clear. He may have wished to appeal to a popular audience and make some money; he later described the book as a "pot-boiler (obra hecha para ganar dinero)". The narrative, which depicts the education of a young man in the context of struggle, is as old as Homer's *Odyssey* and is a dominant story-type in American literature from Benjamin Franklin through Melville, Hemingway, Malcolm X, and Saul Bellow. Crane was not so much working within or against this tradition as he was departing (apartarse) sharply from it; that is, Crane is distinctively modern in conceiving personal identity as complex and ambiguous and obliging his readers to judge for themselves the adequacy of Henry's responses to his experiences.

III. CRANE'S LITERARY DEVELOPMENT: REALISM, NATURALISM & IMPRESSIONISM

The occasional use of personification as a device of characterization, and of zeugma (elípsis de un término enunciado en otra oración/sintagma) as figure, reveal studied classical tendencies. Daniel G. Hoffman has said that, "Crane was a literary chameleon, writing in almost every fashion then prevailing: naturalism, impressionism, psychological realism, local color, native humor". If Naturalism is described as an historical period, as is sometimes the case, then Crane may be considered part of it, perhaps even the originator of it in American literature with the publication of *Maggie* in 1893. But if Naturalism consists of themes involving pessimistic determinism, atavism, and evolutionary concepts with both genetic and socio-economic implications, if omniscient narrative methods help generate these themes, as do related and dominant symbols, then Naturalism played a minor but undeniable role in Crane's fiction.

The most influential single work in American literature to grow out of the origins of Impressionism in the 1890s was clearly *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the first American impressionistic novel to attain widespread popular attention in both Europe and the United States.

Although there is virtually nothing naturalistic about *The Red Badge of Courage* and most of Crane's other works, there really is something especially in the Bowery tales, such as *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. Of the stories with naturalistic elements, perhaps the finest are "The Men in the Storm" and "An Experiment in Misery". Epistemological (de los métodos del conocimiento científico) processes are far more important than deterministic forces: perception, blindness, self-serving (autocomplaciente) delusion, and the tragic

consequences of worldly innocence pressed into confrontation with reality. Nature is more often indifferent or inscrutable than hostile, free will plays a more important role than either chance or fate. Nearly every aspect of artistic methodology points toward Impressionism rather than Naturalism, even in the Bowery tales. Moreover, Crane's use of irony in all of his important works is patently discordant with Naturalism, which most often grinds (conduce) on with steadfast (resuelta, firme) seriousness toward the revelation of tragic inevitability. There is an ironic disparity at the heart of Crane's work, some distortion or paradox or misinterpretation that gives the narrative an ironic impulse beyond the bare structure of events. The most frequent source of such irony is false estimate of self, a disproportional sense of stature that often leads to a climactic scene of diminution.

Naturalism tends toward epic scope in length and focus; Crane's works consist of episodic units of extreme brevity. Naturalism employs an omniscient narrator who, in largely expository passages, analyzes the themes of the narrative; Crane's work utilizes restricted narrative stance which projects the interpretations of the characters and eschews (renuncia a, evita) authorial comment. Naturalism uses symbolization to enforce its main concerns; Crane uses sensory images and imagistic correlatives drawn from the minds of the characters to reveal not the narrator's "truth" but the psychological state of the characters. Naturalism builds, with straightforward sincerity, toward elevation and broad social significance; Crane's works tend ironically toward reduction and specificity, to individual human concerns. Naturalism forces its characters into the common lot, into a condition shared by other members of the group; Crane's Impressionism, with its stress on unique sensory evocations and personal interpretation of experience, tends toward isolation, individuality, discrete human personalities.

Realism plays a much more significant role in Crane's fiction on nearly all levels. Both movements employ similar characters, common folk drawn from middle-America and portrayed in everyday situations. Although both Realism and Impressionism use objective narrative methods, realistic works have somewhat more access to information derived from sources beyond empirical data. Biographical background is more important in Realism than in Impressionism, and realistic works often provide such information directly or devise a dramatic method for its revelation. But ethical issues are incapable of resolution in impressionistic works in which the central character is struggling to perceive reality and in which his grasp of circumstances is incomplete. The irreducible norm of Realism is that reality is known and recorded; the assumption is not certain in Impressionism. As a result, Realism concentrates more on determining what to do about reality, Impressionism more on attempting to define and understand it.

Within these polarities, Crane's fiction is decidedly impressionistic rather than realistic. Although many of his works touch on various ethical matters, very few of them use a moral crisis as a climactic moment. Far more of them have as a central scene some key juncture in the growth of a character in which something is realized, perceived in a new way, or not perceived when it should have been. There is no injunction (mandato) for brevity in Realism; since reality is known, it can be represented as a continuum of experience, reasonably stable, certain, comprehensible. On the other hand, in Impressionism reality is in rapid flux.

There is little distinction here between the structural units of the short stories and these of the novels: both tend to be composed of episodes of a few pages strung together by continuities of character and place but not of action. Crane was not a psychological realist in the Jamesian sense in that he did not

portray with any sophistication the major psychological theories of the day, unique aberrations of thought or feeling, extraordinary psychic trauma. Indeed, what was compelling (convincente) about the mental lives of his major figures is their normality. Crane's psychological "realism" is notable as an epistemological (de los métodos del conocimiento científico) record of sensory experience, followed by internalization, reflection, fantasy.

Certainly there is a dramatic psychological realism in *The Red Badge*, which overpowers (overcomes, subdues) any dimension of historical scene. Here [*Red Badge*] is a naturalistic view of heroism unknown to the war romances of the time, with the possible exception of those of Bierce, but its bitterness was lost on most of its readers because the hero seemed to be following the usual formula and discovering his manhood by violent action. His reportorial (chronicle, report) art achieves its maturity in "The Blue Hotel", the scene of which is laid in a Nebraska town in midwinter. The correspondent again appears with three companions in "The Open Boat", this time the captain, the cook, and the oiler (como de las máquinas, el 'aceitero'). This story, Crane's masterpiece achieves its effect by understatement (descripción mesurada y comedida; sutileza). In this and other Western, Mexican, and Cuban tales and sketches where he is recording his mature observations on life in moments of crisis, Crane achieves that instantaneous balance between reality and imagination which makes for great art. His vivid impressions of life, with their linking of instinct and circumstance to chain the individual will to its own tragic issue, had provided a pattern for the writing of the next generation. (Hemingway, Steinbeck)

(Also "The Blue Hotel" and "The Open Boat"). Even Crane's journalism shows much more gift for psychological process than for descriptive detail.

His work shares with the norms of American Realism a rejection of many of the tendencies of Romanticism, including stylistic elevation, transcendental metaphysics and pantheism, symbolization, allegorical plots and characters, and a general inclination to represent people and events as emblematic of a significance beyond themselves. As did most realists, Crane portrayed ordinary people who spoke in the vernacular and confronted situations drawn from within a common range. But unlike the realists, Crane depicted an unstable, changing world in the process of being perceived. Things "seem" to be a certain way in Crane: they "are" in Realism.

Certainly, *The Third Violet* and *Active Service* were influenced by the popularity of Genteel (finas, elegantes, de buen tono) novels of the trials of young love, which reveal their influence in artistry as well as in subject and plot. *The O'Ruddy* shares many of these tendencies while affecting the norms of the picaresque in a manner perhaps influenced by Crane's trip to Ireland with Harold Frederic and the latter's *The Return of the O'Mahony*.

But beyond these aberrations, Crane's fiction continued to utilize the fundamental devices and themes of Impressionism to the end of his career, from his tales of Whilomville, to those of the American west, to his dramatic stories of war. Crane's world is remarkably unsettled (inestable), tentative, inscrutable for his time, and his characters display the uncertainty, anguish, and sense of isolation more common to the Modern sensibility than that of the late nineteenth century. His objective mode of presentation and ability to portray tragedy with understated (comedida, sutil) emotion are a dramatic foreshadowing (prefiguración; anuncio) of what would become hallmarks of the style of Ernest Hemingway. There is no background, no expression of sympathy by the narrator, no moral opinion offered, no conclusions drawn. He shared his impressionistic style with other writers such as Hamlin Garland,

Henry James, Harold Frederic, Ambrose Bierce, Kate Chopin, and the English Ford Maddox Ford and Joseph Conrad.

Crane is in essence no realist, and at his best a symbolic artist (which extends Realism). 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. Crane is always dealing with paradox of man, the paradox of his plight(situación difícil). Crane wrote out of the Flaubertian style, not the Balzarian. His work is sparse(poco denso), crisp(resuelto), sensory; there is no authorial presence, little unobserved(inadvertida) description and even less judgment, and few wasted words. The ultimate impact of his work is aesthetic. There is little call to social action, no program of economic reform, and rarely a word of popular social theory. It also points to the brevity and sharpness of Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Caroline Gordon, and to parts of John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, and a host of other writers who used impressionistic themes and devices in their work.

The relativistic realities of Crane's Impressionism play a key role in the development of what came to be known as Modernism, especially in its sense of an indifferent and undefinable universe and a lack of individual significance. His evocative and surrealistic(super-fantastic) imagery predicts similar strategies in Expressionism. In his Impressionism, in its empirical(from experience) isolation, are the seeds of Existential alienation and resultant despair and anguish; the interpretive uncertainties of his Impressionism foreshadow the absurdity of the French New Novel and much of Post-Modernism. The aesthetics of Crane's Impressionism, especially its anti-didacticism and art-for-art's sake implications, bear some similarities to such recent developments as Sur-Fiction in the United States.

The enthusiastic interest in Crane's fiction that emerged in the 1920s, and the enormous attention paid to his life and work in modern scholarship, attest (at least) to the continuing value of his contribution, a contribution that is fundamentally and inextricably (inseparably) part of the development of literary Impressionism.

IV. *THE OPEN BOAT* (1897)

Crane's finest short story and one of the masterworks of the nineteenth-century American literature, "The Open Boat" is, as its subtitle indicates, "A Tale Intended to Be after the Fact. Being the Experience of Four Men from the Sunk Steamer *Commodore*". "The Open Boat" is a fictional reworking of subsequent events that occurred in the thirty hours he spent with the ship's captain, the cook, and an oiler in a tenfoot dinghy on the Atlantic off the coast of Florida before the craft capsized in the surf of Daytona Beach on the morning of 3 January and William Higgins, the oiler, drowned. Crane intended in "The Open Boat" to be accurate, but rather than a simple rendition of experience, he strove for an interpretation that had broad social and metaphysical significance. The story appeared in the June 1897 issue of the *Scribner's Magazine* and was collected in the American and English editions of *The Open Boat*.

"The Open Boat" employs ironic narrative juxtaposition, contrasting the preoccupations of the four men in the boat against a detached perspective. As the opening line of the story ("None of them knew the color of the sky", 907/1) suggests, the men have a severely restricted (subjective) view limited almost entirely to the waves that "menace" them. In contrast, the omniscient narrator

views the scene objectively and comments, somewhat abstractly and without utility, that "Many a man ought to have a bath-tub larger than the boat which here rode upon the sea"(907/2). A few paragraphs later in the story the limitations of the men become even more acute: "As each slaty(color pizarra) wall of water approached, it shut all else from the view of the men in the boat...(908/3)" Juxtaposed to their restricted view is a detached observation by the narrator: "Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtlessly have been weirdly picturesque"(908/4). The effect of the passage is not to stress the "picturesqueness" of the scene but to suggest that moments of great intensity vary in their significance according to the perspective from which they are seen. The reader is led to consider the plight of the men from both an abstract view and one closely identified with the situation in the boat. This is one of the ways that Crane was able to reconcile intrusive passages of omniscient comment with the restrictive assumptions of Impressionism:

Perhaps nowhere else in Crane is impressionistic technique and credo as well illustrated as in "The Open Boat"...use of unusual metaphors to convey the incredibility of man's plight in an indifferent universe; a swift juxtaposition of scenes; several settings described so that scenes resembling impressionistically rendered paintings are evoked; a frequent use of terse(breve, conciso) dialogue; and an almost total adherence to technical distance in presentation resulting in an objective detachment on the part of the author. (Kenneth E. Bidle)

One necessary qualification of Bidle's formulation is to attribute the detachment to the narrator rather than to Crane himself. As author, and especially as a man who had experienced similar events himself, Crane may well have had personal feelings and ideas beyond those expressed by the narrator and the characters.

The men are relative strangers, but in the face of their common danger, they establish an unexpected community, a subtle "brotherhood"(911/III) on the sea. In the microcosmic world of the dinghy(/g/), a collaborative society with divided functions is established. As if to underscore(emphasize) the insignificance of the individual, only the oiler is given a name, Billie. (918/II)

If the "objective" pole of impressionistic narration is the rendering of pure sensation, the "subjective" extreme is the revelation of mental activity derived from the associations of sensory data, a method close to stream of consciousness but short of expressionistic modes (in which the mind radically distorts external reality, renders surrealistic images without external impulse, and violates both spatial and temporal sequence in its representation of subjective states). Written prior to the formal introduction of stream of consciousness and the development of Expressionism, Crane's work in the 1890s exemplifies the intermediary tendency to allow occasional subjective distortion of empirical data rather than the full expressionistic attempt at the objectification of internal experiences:

Although Crane's greatest achievements are in those means by which he rendered the "spectacle of the affair" -striking use of color, flashing imagery, cinema-like shifting of the points of perception, phrases of synesthetic(cambio de características sensoriales) appeal, dialogue, cadenced(con ritmo, cadencia) sentences- he also took significant steps toward internal impressionism. Crane not only effectively conveys his characters' thoughts and feeling through narrative means and impressionist techniques, but he also displays an acute knowledge of the process of mental flow. (Benjamin D. Giorgio, in his dissertation "Stephen Crane: American Impressionist")

In two of Crane's short stories, "A Man and Some Others" and "The Open Boat", the chorus technique pertains more directly to the underlying themes, especially those concerning death. In "The Open Boat", the refrain(estribillo)

is rendered as representing the generalized thinking of the four men in the boat. Again the concern for death is central to the thinking of the men, and once more this preoccupation is set off against cosmic indifference. The narrator introduces the refrain as an approximation of thought: "As for the reflections of the men, there was a great deal of rage in them. Perchance they might be formulated thus..."(914/4). The narrator's projection of these thoughts as mental flow provides the first and most complete statement of the refrain:

If I am going to be drowned -if I am going to be drowned -if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?...Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. She is an old hen who knows not her intention... The whole affair is absurd... (914/4)

Implicit in the refrain is the men's preoccupation with danger, their protest against what they consider to be an unjust Fate, their sense of absurdity in human events, and their egotistical rage. The second appearance of the refrain is somewhat abbreviated but suggests the same theme as does the third reiteration.

As in the other chorus examples in Crane's work, the refrain mode here is a curious synthesis of stream-of-consciousness narration and intrusive(intenso) narrative projections. The device reveals thought formulated by the narrator which provides a tentative interpretation of the action, one later refuted by the events themselves. It is certainly not, as it has sometimes been regarded, an omniscient passage that provides a reliable statement of the theme of the story. Rather, it reveals that the thinking of the men is cosmological presumptive(presunto, sospechoso), assuming the malevolence of controlling agents in the universe. The first instance of the refrain occurs during an

assessment of danger by the four men; the second, after it becomes clear that a man on shore waving his coat is not, as they had hoped, signaling the appearance of a rescue mission; and the third, during the night when the correspondent sees a shark. (920/5)

It is at this point, the beginning of section six, that the narrative point of view leaves the collective consciousness to become associated almost exclusively with the mind of the correspondent, and as it does so the theme shifts from the concerns of action and danger to epistemology, a change that parallels the alteration in the view of nature from hostile to indifferent. The change in the correspondent's thinking develops from his protest to a new realization that "nature does not regard him as important"(920/7), a view objectified by a distant star: "A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos(drama, patetismo) of his situation"(920/9). The correspondent had never before empathize with the plight of Caroline Norton's self-pitying sentimental hero: "It was less to him than the breaking of a pencil's point"(921/3). Now even this bathetic(de lo sublime a lo trivial) jingle(retintín, slogan) arouses in him a sense of the importance of human community. In the fourth section, midpoint of the story, no help is forthcoming from the people on the shore, who apparently are merely involved in the recreational activities of a resort.(917/2) Later a similar realization follows the appearance of the tower on the beach: "The tower was a giant...flatly indifferent"(923/3). Here, in this passage, are two of the most explicit impressionistic themes in Crane's works: the recognition of a distinction between reality and what man perceives as reality, between "nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men"(923/3), and the development of a perception of nature as indifferent.

There is a considerable diversity in Crane's handling of the unusual narrative method of the chorus-refrain. It varies from the narrator's projection of an interpretation of the events to his rendering of a quasi Romantic statement by various elements of nature, to a stream-of-consciousness revelation of precognitive thought, to a generalized statement of what characters "must" be thinking. Although he dabbled in traditional first-person methods, and on occasion used omniscience, the tendency throughout his work is to restrict sources of information, to create countering points of view, to suggest ironically the limitation and erroneous interpretations of the principal characters.

Perversely, for reasons Crane purposefully leaves unexplained, the oiler, who is the only competent sailor in the dinghy, drowns, a circumstance that denies the simplistic Darwinian doctrine of the survival of the fittest as well as the lifesaving efficacy of the bond of human brotherhood. Despite the cooperative union established in the dinghy, each man must swim to shore alone when the moment of crises comes. In the death of the oiler is symbolized not only the indifference of nature but the ultimate isolation of man.

There is thematic development in "The Open Boat" that is evident in the growth of perception from the first statement that "[n]one of them knew the color of the sky"(907/1) to the conclusion that the surviving men "felt that they could then be interpreters"(926/7). But this ambiguous statement seems to refer only to their increased understanding of perceptual realities and the problematic nature of interpretation; it does not confer any particular meaning to their experience or imply that human beings can achieve a rational understanding of their fate.

On a more immediate level, what Crane was able to achieve, better than any previous writer in America, was the illusion of a sensory reality being

apprehended by a character. His empirical intensity required the rendition of sharp but relatively brief units of sensation, the result for his fiction was a structure involving numerous episodes unified by continuities of theme and character. Even the speech of the shipwrecked men is abrupt and composed of disjointed and apparently disordered sentences, to create impressions of confused motion and change. Often a single episode will begin with a sensorially descriptive passage rendered before the narrator moves into the portrait to record dialogue and describe action from within the scene. In the process, the narrative perspective often becomes identified with the mind of a single character, resulting in an immediate apprehensional awareness of the fictional world of the character. The restriction to a third-person identification with the mind of a character, or even several characters, reveals the extent to which individual human beings comprehend only partial truths of the world about them, delude themselves about their knowledge, and live within a continuous matrix of distortion and self-serving (autocomplacient) reconstruction of data.

The reader's mind is first exposed to the narrator and then, as the narrator's perspective is fused with that of a character, identified with that character and drawn into his perspective. The resultant emphasis is on psychological reality, on a concern for the human receptor of sensory experience rather than external reality itself. This emphasis, among others, clearly distinguishes Crane's works from the standard realistic fiction of his time. His narrative methods, almost without exception, portray a world that is "ephemeral, evanescent, constantly shifting its meaning and hence continually defying precise definition". (Rodney O. Rogers on Crane's works and French impressionistic painting). Narrative restriction, limitations of sensory data, distorted interpretations of information, modulations among differing points of

view, these are Crane's basic methods of presentation. As a close analysis of the other dimensions of his art reveals, these narrative strategies are related to his episodic plots, sensory imagery, and epistemological themes involving perception and realization.

In "The Open Boat", which fuses the naturalistic Realism of *Maggie* and the impressionistic realism of *The Red Badge*, Crane established himself among the foremost engineers of the techniques of modern fiction.

V. THE BLUE HOTEL (1898)

The best of Crane's Western stories and one of his handful of fictional masterworks. "The Blue Hotel" was published in *Collier's Weekly* in two parts, on November 26 and December 3, 1898. The story was collected in *The Monster and Other Stories*.

"The Blue Hotel" begins and consists in a set of extreme, improbable circumstances. The setting of "The Blue Hotel" is a bleak(inhospita) prairie town in northern Nebraska named Fort Romper, where the incongruous presence of the Palace Hotel, grotesquely,

painted alight blue, a shade that is on the legs of a kind of heron(garza), causing the bird to declare its position against any background... was always screaming and howling in a way that made the dazzling winter landscape of Nebraska seem only a gray(dismal, gloomy) swampish(abrumador) hush(silencio). (36)

One morning, Patrick Scully, the proprietor of the hotel, has the deceptive(misleading) good fortune of securing three guests for his establishment from a train passing through town. One of them is a

"shaky(precario; tembloroso) and quick-eyed(de vista aguda)"(27) man known only as the Swede, the second is a cowboy named Bill, who is on his way to a ranch; and the third is an Easterner, meaningfully called Mr. Blanc. From the beginning the Swede evinces a paranoid fear based on fictional representations that the West is a dangerous environment, and in the middle of an afternoon card game he proclaims his conviction that he is in danger of being killed in the hotel and he must leave immediately. In order to allay(relieve, alleviate) the Swede's fears and retain him as a guest, Scully affirms that Fort Romper is a civilized community that will soon have electric streetcars and a new railroad line. "Not to mention the four churches and the smashin' big brick schoolhouse. Then there's the big factory, too. Why, in two years Romper'll be a me-tro-pol-is"(43-44). He takes the Swede into his own room and shows him photographs of his little girl who had died and of his oldest son, who is a lawyer in Lincoln, "an honored an' respected gentleman"(44-45). While Scully attempts to reassure the Swede, the Easterner, the cowboy, and Scully's son, Johnnie, sit around the glowing stove in the hotel parlor and reflect on the origin of the Swede's fears. Although the game is recreational and no money is involved, this violation(cheating) of the anachronistic social code of the West, still prevalent despite Scully's disclaimers(denials), is an intolerable insult, and a fistfight ensues outside the hotel in the storm, Johnnie spurred on(arengado) by the cowboy, who shouts, "Kill him! Kill him! Kill Him!"(54) fights valiantly but is badly beaten. The Swede is now obliged to leave the hotel in the midst of the blizzard(ventisca), and as he struggles down a lonely Fort Romper street, blinded by the wind-driven snow, Crane comments on the hubris(orgullo desmedido) of man's failure to apprehend his significance in the incomprehensible and indifferent

universal scheme, an arrogance that paradoxically makes his brief survival possible:

He might have been in a deserted village. We picture the world as thick with conquering(victoriosa) and elate(regocijante) humanity, but here, with the bugles(clarín) of the tempest pealing(repicando), it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamour of wonder to these lice(piojos; canallas) which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smote(herido por fuego), ice-looking, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb(bulbo; bombilla). The conceit(engreimiento, presunción) of man was explained by this storm to the very engine of life. One was a coxcomb(petimetre) not to die in it. However the Swede found a saloon. (58)

The Swede dies in the saloon, a resort of convivial(sociable, festiva) humanity, rather than in the storm, a perceptibly hostile manifestation of nature. In the saloon are a bartender and a group at a table consisting of two businessmen, the district attorney, a gentlemanly professional gambler, reminiscent of John Oakhurst in Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat", whose veneer(apariencia) of respectability has gained him a limited social acceptance in Fort Romper. The Swede attempts to bully the gambler into drinking with him and when the man refuses grasps him by the throat and drags him from his chair:

There was a great tumult, and then was seen a long blade in the hand of the gambler. It shot forward, and a human body, this citadel(reducto) of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon. The Swede fell with a cry of supreme astonishment. (62)

After the others leave the saloon, the Swede's body remains, "its eyes fixed upon a dreadful legend that dwelt atop of the cash-machine: "This registers the

amount of your purchase"(62), implying that the Swede has created the Wild West of his imagination, that his disturbed mental state and his actions have brought about his death, and that his isolation and distortion of reality are ultimately responsible for what occurred.

In a ninth and final section of the story, however, Crane seems to obscure and even obviate this judgment with a different moral view indicating that a failure of community is in large part responsible for the tragedy. The cowboy is frying pork over the stove of a cabin(departamento) on the Dakota line(route, train, border) when the Easterner enters carrying a newspaper and informs him that the gambler has received a mere three-year sentence for the murder of the Swede. The cowboy speculates that the Swede would not have been killed if he had not initiated the series of events that began with his accusation that Johnnie was cheating, again implying that the Swede bears almost exclusive responsibility for his fate. The enraged Easterner denies this by asserting that he knew Johnnie was cheating and that there was a conspiracy of silence, a collusion(confabulación) that led to the Swede's death:

I let the Swede fight it out alone. And you -you were simply puffing(bufando) around the place and wanting to fight. And then old Scully himself! We are all in it! This poor gambler isn't even a noun. He is a kind of an adverb. Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede... Usually there are from a dozen to forty women really involved in every murder, but in this case it seems to be only five men -you, I, Johnnie, old Scully, and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement, and gets all the punishment. Bewildered(perplejo) and resentful(resentido), the cowboy unwittingly(sin darse cuenta) affirms his own culpability in the lack of communal action that is responsible for all that occurred by blurting out(descolgarse con), "Well, I didn't do anythin', did I? (63-64)

Antithetical interpretations have been advanced to explain the speech of the Easterner at the conclusion of "The Blue Hotel". Some critics view it as an affirmation of the Howellsian doctrine of complicity or the existential necessity for human brotherhood in a viable society, a theme also advanced, but not definitively or exclusively, in "The Open Boat". Others find a naturalistic outlook (perspectiva) confirming the irresponsibility of the individual in a world he never made and cannot control, and still others see the final section as "tacked on (añadido, consecuencia)", resulting in a logical gap between the Swede's obvious responsibility for bringing about his own death and the Easterner's insistence on undiminished group culpability. The Easterner's failure to include the Swede as among those responsible for the tragic finale seriously undermines his doctrinaire exposition. Also a subject of debate is the hyperbolic nature of the Easterner's speech, which Crane may have intended as a burlesque of either literary naturalism or the theory of complicity itself.

One man can terrorize a group; one man alone can disturb the daily run of things. The totally unexpected character of the Swede lies in the fact that he constantly amazes. And amazement (asombro) is a form of humor. It is characteristic of Crane's art, which is never emotionally on one level. The Swede's immediate effect is funny, hysteria-making, for he cannot be understood, believed, or absorbed into the normal run of things.

What is equally funny in the story is Scully's amazement that such forebodings (aprensiones, premoniciones) should be heard in his town. Scully is the caricature of normal business dealing with...Hitler. His efforts to calm the Swede down by liquoring him up turn the Swede into a quarrelsome (pendenciero) buffoon who calls Johnnie a cheat at cards and then knocks him during the fight. The clumsiness (torpeza) of the men fighting in

the snow, against the snow, is as funny as all the attempts of the others to take the Swede down, to placate and normalize him, to absorb him into the banal life of the boarding house.

The Swede sees his future death and he will not be released from his strange intuition. He makes it happen. The point is made at the end: every sin is a collaboration. Whether he set it up or not by his fear, the Swede was done in ('eliminado') by the group as a whole. Perhaps, it has something to do with the difficulty of a character being put in an alien environment and his desire to cooperate. From this point of view the story could be seen as having an existentialist quality, for the Swede aims at his own destruction, and there is a certain element of fate which affects the lives of everybody involved.

But demonstration means not only the exposure of a secret pattern, but the process or logic of life itself. We see that the crazy startling (sorprendente) humor of the savage denouement (desenlace) makes the unexpected a factor to the end. In other words, not the "moral" of the story but the weirdness of the situation is what remains with us. For what is a "blue" hotel in a snowstorm but a bad dream about ourselves? What is exposed, lonely, shrieking (chillona) Nebraska landscape but another ominous (agorera) image in the bad hours of the night? What is the Swede, at once villain and victim, but the ominous fortune-teller in all of us predicting what we alone will bring to pass?

The drama is contained in the two card games. The beauty of Crane's story is in the mood he creates with his literary images, in the description of the characters, the whole feeling of the place. So the zany (estrambótico, loco) is a bridge to the horrible, and the horror remains a threat hanging over (cerniéndose) us. This is a great story, for we can recognize ourselves in it without knowing why, Crane made a world, a funny crazy American world, out of the most anxious inner consciousness.

The political content of the story is not only universal but timeless: the strong irony with which he deals with the myths and legends of the West, with the same illusions the Swede believes in. The contradictory endings of "The Blue Hotel" with their problematic balance of causes for the ultimate tragedy illustrate Crane's modernistic awareness of the multiplicity and partiality of individual perceptions of any event and the futility of attempts to impose coherence on the chaos of existence.