

IMPRESSIONISM IN THE PROSE FICTION  
OF STEPHEN CRANE

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IMPRESSIONISM IN THE PROSE FICTION  
OF STEPHEN CRANE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

American literary criticism has been much concerned in recent years with the group of writers commonly known as naturalists. A discussion of this group usually begins with Stephen Crane and Frank Norris in the 1890's and extends through such novelists as Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and James T. Farrell. The one thing that these writers have in common is the belief--emphasized more by some than by others--that man is a more or less helpless pawn to cosmological, social, or psychological pressures. Such writers, it has often been pointed out, have been the real shapers of American fiction; they, more than any other group, have determined the subject matter and method of treatment of the characteristically American novel during the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Since most naturalistic novels are concerned with sociological problems, much of the criticism has been sociological. In some cases, critics have rated works of a sociological nature higher than other works by the same writer for no other reason, apparently, than that the

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, George Snell, The Shapers of American Fiction (New York, 1947).



sociological works seemed, because of their subject matter, to be more worthy of praise.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, technical and artistic considerations have often been neglected. Indeed, many novels of the naturalistic school have hardly been worthy of technical study. In their determination to tell the truth about society and man in society as they see it, naturalistic authors are often tempted to neglect stylistic grace of expression and artistic principles of construction in amassing sometimes tedious details proving their deterministic views of life, to choose and develop exceptional characters in exceptional circumstances, and to desert their professed attitude of scientific detachment and assume a reforming attitude.<sup>3</sup> Such practices can and often do lead to bad art.

This study will examine the works of a writer whose style is radically different from that of his contemporaries, who owes little to writers who came before him, and one who, although he had considerable influence on those who came after, had so individual a manner of writing that he seems to be unique in American letters. Stephen Crane's style of writing is what most distinguishes him; philosophically, he

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<sup>2</sup>See Ludwig Lewisohn's remarks on Maggie and "An Experiment in Misery" in his Expression in America (New York, 1932), p. 320.

<sup>3</sup>Russel Blankenship, American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind (New York, 1949), pp. 515-516.

is one of the naturalists, with certain differences that will be examined later. His first published novel, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, has been termed the "first piece of undisguised naturalism produced in this country,"<sup>4</sup> his earliest short stories, the Sullivan County Sketches, contain only two examples of the hero's having a hand in directing his destiny,<sup>5</sup> and The Red Badge of Courage and such stories as "The Open Boat" are universally acclaimed as reflecting the helplessness of man in the grip of forces over which he has no control. ] The standard literary history of the United States points out that Crane's work "shows the stamp of European naturalism and contributed to the break of American literary history with the English tradition."<sup>6</sup> However, it goes on to deny that Crane is a complete naturalist, reserving that distinction for Theodore Dreiser. His Sister Carrie, published soon after Crane's death, was the first wholly original work of naturalism published in the United States, the first novel to satisfy Zola's demand that the novel exhibit the certainty, the solidity, the practical application of a work of science.<sup>7</sup> Crane was a naturalist

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<sup>4</sup>Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America: Ideas on the March (New York, 1941), p. 85.

<sup>5</sup>See Melvin Schoberlin, "Introduction," The Sullivan County Sketches of Stephen Crane (Syracuse, N. Y., 1949), pp. 17-18.

<sup>6</sup>Robert E. Spiller and others, editors, Literary History of the United States (New York, 1948), II, 1022.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 1016-1017.

in many of his works; he was certainly the precursor of a long stream of naturalistic writers; yet certain qualities in his writing separate him from the naturalists and make him unique in his age. It is with the technical aspects of Crane's artistry, and especially with those qualities of style and treatment of subject matter that go under the term impressionism, that this study is concerned.

The term impressionism as used in regard to literature derives from the impressionistic school of painting, so called because of a canvas exhibited by the French painter Monet, at the first public exhibition of the new group in 1874, called "Sunrise--An Impression."<sup>8</sup> As a new school of art the impressionist painters were united by the technique of controlling light play, making it come from a given source; and by working with primary colors on canvas, laying them side by side in small blobs with no shading by the brush, leaving the eye to blend the colors. The form of the object depicted was blurred and indistinct, the artists being concerned rather with the effect of the mass on the eye than with line and distinct form. There was no especial concern with subject matter in regard to convention or tradition; instead, a subject was chosen wholly in regard to its susceptibility to artistic treatment. As a result of

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<sup>8</sup>Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction (New York, 1934), p. 35.

these methods, the usual impressionistic painting is highly realistic, but not in the same sense that a photograph is realistic. Nature is depicted, but only in its instantaneous aspects, in a flash as it were. The sense of reality is forged in the mind of the spectator.<sup>9</sup> In its concern with color and atmosphere, its decreased emphasis on form, its eclecticism in choice of subject matter, the impressionist school of painting was a departure from French academic art, a movement toward a new kind of realism. The spirit behind it was soon to have repercussions in literature, in sculpture, in music--in all the arts.

Although there is in American literary history no definite "school" of impressionist writers, there are nevertheless certain writing methods which can be said to foreshadow impressionism, and the growth of the new method can be traced in broad outline. In the first place, post-Victorian novelists began to abandon three major tendencies of the Victorian novel, tendencies that were antithetical to literary impressionism. They were the penchant toward making the novel a blatant and undisguised vehicle of moral edification; the fondness for talking over characters with the reader, taking sides and letting the reader know how he should feel toward them; and the passion for explaining characters, making the reader understand how the characters'

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<sup>9</sup>Willard Huntington Wright, Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning (New York, 1915), pp. 83-88.

actions under certain conditions illustrate the laws of human nature in general.<sup>10</sup> In a word, intrusion of the author into the story, characteristic of the Victorian novel, came to be considered bad art. By the time of Henry James most writers had come to feel that the story should tell itself, should be conducted through the impressions of the characters without interruptive comment by the author. This new artistic practice tended to give verisimilitude to the novel, to give a sense of reality and esthetic pleasure not always found heretofore. It was a great step toward the impressionistic method in writing.

Moreover, the post-Victorian novel exhibits a declining emphasis on form, a movement toward what has been called the "discontinucus mode of writing."<sup>11</sup> In rendering the "feel" of an action, writers came to place less emphasis on the dramatic shape of the novel, preferring to gain their effects through well-rendered passages that would make the reader experience in himself what the characters were experiencing. The best way to do this was to describe in as vivid a way as possible how the incident was affecting the character himself, or, better yet, to depict the actual thoughts of the character as they ran through his mind

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique (New York, 1932), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Cazamian, "The Method of Discontinuity in Modern Art and Literature," Criticism in the Making (New York, 1929), p. 67.

rather than give a mere report of what he was feeling.<sup>12</sup> Although this method might result in a certain disproportion in form, it would nevertheless give a stronger sense of reality to the reader and help him to identify himself with the character, to feel as the character felt. Thus it was that the "depth-wise" cutting, the probing of the psychology of the characters, came to be an important feature of the novel. More and more space was devoted to mental rather than physical action, to the workings of the characters' minds rather than to objective action. This practice is seen at its best, perhaps, in the work of Henry James, who, along with Joseph Conrad and Crane, has been given credit for being the protagonist of literary impressionism in Anglo-Saxondom.<sup>13</sup>

The developing characteristics of the post-Victorian novel just named: the disappearance of the author from the story, the decreased emphasis on form, the concern with rendering of the thoughts and feelings of characters, were common in many novels that were not necessarily impressionistic at all, even though these practices were pointing toward impressionism. True impressionism went much farther:

In literature, the term impressionism has twofold significance. In the first place it implies that the object depicted is invested with an atmosphere not

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<sup>12</sup>Beach, pp. 383-384.

<sup>13</sup>Ford Madox Ford, "Techniques," The Southern Review, I (1935-36), 26.

always attending it. Presumably this atmosphere is due in part to the temporary mood or fixed disposition of the observer. In transmitting to another the image of the object, the observer is transmitting also his mood or disposition. In the second place, impressionism seems to imply a heightening of the representative rather than the imitative quality of the details used to depict the object; that is, the object is suggested by salient features and not reproduced by minute elaboration. This is usually accomplished not merely by the omission of the unessential but by the intensification of the essential.<sup>14</sup>

Impressionism, then, is subjective and selective, two traits that run counter to the usual method of naturalistic novels and period novels, the first of which prided itself on its objectivity, the second, on exactitude of contemporary detail, and both of which were in favor while impressionism as a technique was coming into its own.

Even Hamlin Garland, who prided himself on being a veritist, one who depicts persons, situations, and objects as objectively as possible, had impressionistic touches in his works, realizing that impressionistic methods might at times give a sense of reality that would not be possible otherwise. Hence, there is much subjectivism, the "true mark of impressionism,"<sup>15</sup> in his writing. In the creation of atmospheres, however, the depiction of temporary moods of the observer with such strength that the reader feels them to the core of his being, Garland did not excel. It

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<sup>14</sup>Walter L. Myers, The Later Realism: A Study of Characterization in the British Novel (Chicago, 1927), pp. 23-24.

<sup>15</sup>Cargill, p. 83.

remained for Crane, through a combination of esthetic theory and natural predisposition, to achieve this goal. There can be little doubt that Garland, who knew Crane and was enthusiastic about his possibilities before Crane came into the public eye, had Crane in mind when he wrote in 1894:

It is safe to say that the fiction of the future will grow more democratic in outlook and more individualistic in method. Impressionism, in its deeper sense, means the statement of one's own individual perception of life and nature, guided by devotion to truth. Second to this great principle is the law that each impression must be worked out faithfully on separate canvases. . . . The higher art would seem to be the art that perceives and states the relation of things, giving atmosphere and relative values as they appeal to the sight.<sup>16</sup>

Selectivity, another hallmark of impressionism according to Myers' definition, may be effective or ineffective in fiction, success depending largely upon whether or not the details selected are sufficiently well chosen and forcefully rendered. Therefore, when a writer chooses to be rigorously selective in his work, he must be sure that he seizes on just the detail that will give the exact impression he is trying to create. One of the commonest methods of insuring the effectiveness of the detail, once it is chosen, is to heighten it, to make it startling to the reader so that he will grasp its significance immediately and will not forget it. Thus, [impressionism leans toward vivid, sometimes startling imagery, favors a colorful vocabulary and a

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<sup>16</sup>Hamlin Garland, Crumbling Idols (Chicago, 1894), pp. 50-51.



flamboyant style, and utilizes symbolism to heighten effects. These artistic methods, used judiciously, take the place of documentation and the insistence on detail: the imagination of the reader is put to work. The author himself, more than likely, sees things at a rapid glance, as in a snapshot, and with equal rapidity transfers his impressions to his readers.<sup>17</sup> The concern is with imaginative, not scientific truth. ]

A concomitant of the developing impressionistic spirit was a growing interest in the short story.<sup>18</sup> As has already been pointed out, impressionism interests itself in the creation of atmospheres and of moods, and is highly selective in its presentation of detail. The result, among writers affected by the impressionistic spirit, was attempts at shorter forms. Poe had pointed out a half century earlier that a given mood could be sustained for only a short period of time in writing. The impressionist interested in producing a single mood in a story would almost inevitably write short works, or, if his subject was unsuited to the short story, his longer work would tend to be a succession of scenes instead of a sustained narrative. Thus, Maggie and The Red Badge of Courage are typical of the method of writing that led to the break-up of the "well-made"

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<sup>17</sup>Blankenship, p. 525.

<sup>18</sup>Louis Weinberg, "Current Impressionism," The New Republic, II (March 6, 1915), 125.

novel.<sup>19</sup> The subordination in Crane of plot, at times the elimination of it, was a direct result of the impressionistic spirit.

*Subordination  
plot to  
impression*

The foregoing discussion of the growth and methods of literary impressionism, being general, can only suggest the techniques of impressionistic writing. The works of an impressionist must be examined for a fuller understanding of the method and a demonstration of its artistic efficacy. Crane, not given to discussion of his artistic beliefs and practices, nevertheless spoke of himself with fervor as an impressionist;<sup>20</sup> his "vivid impressions of life. . . provided a pattern for the writing of the next generation;<sup>21</sup> and, after the publication of Maggie and The Red Badge of Courage, he was the most important proponent of impressionism in American letters.<sup>22</sup> The works of Stephen Crane provide an excellent example of impressionism at work.

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<sup>19</sup> Beach, p. 321.

<sup>20</sup> For an account of one of the rare occasions when Crane discussed his own artistic theories, see John Berryman, Stephen Crane, The American Men of Letters Series (New York, 1950), p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> Spiller, p. 1026.

<sup>22</sup> Schoberlin, p. 14.

## CHAPTER II

### MAGGIE, GEORGE'S MOTHER, AND EARLY STORIES

#### From Journalism to Art

Crane began gaining experience in journalism as early as 1888, when he was sixteen years of age. His brother Townley, who ran a press bureau at the New Jersey resort town of Asbury Park, frequently allowed the lad to write articles about the local news for various newspapers during the summer of that year.<sup>1</sup> For the next four years Crane wrote a great deal for newspapers, first under the aegis of Townley and, later, independently. He must have thought of himself as destined for journalism, the glamorous trade of such popular heroes as Richard Harding Davis and Rudyard Kipling. Indeed, his newspaper writing during these years is considerable when we take into account his youth and the fact that he was desultorily continuing his schooling until the summer of 1891. In the fall of that year he struck out on his own in New York, without spectacular success, but nevertheless managing to sell a number of articles to the New York papers during the following months.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Berryman, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

During the summer of 1892 the prospect appeared especially bright, for the newspapers were beginning to take his fiction. Beginning on July 3, five of the Sullivan County Sketches appeared in the New York Tribune on succeeding Sundays, and during the same month several miscellaneous press articles appeared in the same paper.<sup>3</sup> Crane must have felt that he was at last gaining a firm foothold in journalism.

Then occurred an incident that forever closed the columns of the Tribune to him and did much toward turning him to art rather than journalism. This was the account of the parade of the New Jersey councils of the Junior Order of United American Mechanics which Crane, working again for his brother Townley on the coast, wrote for the Tribune for Sunday, August 21, 1892. The irony of the piece, directed less toward the laborers than toward the bourgeois spectators, was too much; opposition papers played the article up as a vicious attack on labor. The public-conscious staff of the Tribune (Whitelaw Reid, owner and editor, was running for Vice-president on the Republican ticket) decided to get rid of this dangerous reporter, and Crane was summarily fired.<sup>4</sup> In one day, several years of preparation for a

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<sup>3</sup>Schoberlin, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>For a good account of this disputed episode, together with the text of Crane's article, see Ibid., pp. 6-11.

journalistic career were destroyed, or, at least, seriously damaged; it was to be two years before Crane found himself in as promising circumstances as those of the summer of 1892. They were to be busy years, however, and important to his art; for it was during this time that he did much of his major work, including revisions of Maggie, completion of George's Mother, the writing of a number of short stories and sketches, and the bulk of the work on The Red Badge of Courage. In this chapter the Sullivan County Sketches, Maggie, George's Mother, and other short stories written during the period before his fame with the publication of The Red Badge will be examined. Although George's Mother was completed after The Red Badge had been put into final form,<sup>5</sup> it is so closely akin to Maggie in both conception and execution that it should be considered along with that work.

#### The Sullivan County Sketches

The ten sketches or short tales known as the Sullivan County Sketches are uneven in quality and are experiments at best, but they nevertheless show incipient qualities of Crane's later style of writing and conception of situations. There are four characters throughout the series, only two of

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<sup>5</sup>See Crane's letter to Garland in Robert Wooster Stallman, editor, Stephen Crane: An Omnibus (New York, 1952), pp. 603-604. All references to Crane's letters will be to the collection in this volume unless otherwise stated.

whom have an integral part in the action, the "little man" and the "pudgy man." The other two, the "tall man" and the "quiet man," are only incidental and, save for giving more intensity when violent situations are developed, might as well have been left out. Already Crane exhibits in the manner of reference to the characters his common practice of not naming his people at all, or, at most, naming them late in the story and then only incidentally. There is no character development in the sketches: the little man and the pudgy man, perpetual antagonists and rivals, are "flat,"<sup>6</sup> that is, they are constructed around a single idea or emotional response. Their personal qualities are seen in the first story of the series that one reads; they have a stock response to every situation, and they never change. Throughout subsequent sketches the interest is in situation alone.

The situations in which the little man and the pudgy man find themselves are based on two emotions, [fear and rage, emotions which look forward to the two dominant emotions of Henry in The Red Badge of Courage. In these sketches, however, the fear is never felt by the reader; he stands outside the story as he is to do in most of Crane's work until the appearance of The Red Badge. [The men feel

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<sup>6</sup>For an excellent discussion of the flat character and its uses in fiction, see E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (New York, 1927), pp. 103-111.

real fear, but at times it seems contrived and artificial, even before the usually ridiculous denouement that is a characteristic of the stories. The rage of the little man at finding himself in an uncomfortable situation quickly turns to fear which remains with him after the reader feels only the irony, the incongruity, of the situation. Thus, in "Four Men in a Cave," the little man's rage at being forced to lead the procession in the cave turns to horror when they find the fearful man in the hollow room. His "gleaming glance" sweeps over the group, coming to rest on the face of the little man, where it stays and burns:

The little man shriveled and crumpled as the dried leaf under the glass.

Finally, the recluse slowly, deeply spoke. It was a true voice from a cave, cold, solemn, and damp.

"It's your ante," he said.<sup>7</sup>

The "little volume" that the cavedweller held in his hands turns out to be a pack of playing cards. Ruined by gambling, he had retired in his madness to the cave, where the four men chanced to stumble upon him.

The same conception underlies "A Ghoul's Accountant." In this story the little man is kidnaped by a "ghoul" who takes him to a secluded house where there is another creature like the ghoul waiting. When the accountant speaks, it is to ask this earth-shaking question: "'Stranger, . . . how

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Crane, The "Sullivan County Sketches" of Stephen Crane, edited by Melvin Schoberlin (Syracuse, N. Y., 1949), p. 28.

much is thirty-three bushels of pertaters at sixty-four an' a half a bushel?"<sup>8</sup> The terror of the little man is always mocked; the guiding motive of the stories is scorn at man's pretentiousness and egotism, of irony at his petty triumphs and failures. Especially is this true of "The Mesmeric Mountain," one of the best of the sketches, in which the little man, after great effort and pain, finally conquers the mountain which had been exerting, it seemed to him, evil influences seeking his ruin. When he reaches the top he swaggers with valor, his hands scornfully in his pockets: "'Ho! . . . There's Boyd's house and the Lumberland Pike.'" Nothing had happened; the mountain is motionless under his feet.<sup>9</sup> In view of what had come before, the little man's egotism fails to nauseate only because of the irony.

In the sketch "Killing His Bear," Crane's writing is less nervous and angular than usual in these first stories, although the metaphors are pure Crane. Not given to long descriptive passages, Crane nonetheless had great ability in evoking a picture in the mind of the reader, as the opening passage shows:

In a field of snow some green pines huddled together and sang in quavers as the wind whirled among the gullies and ridges. Icicles dangled from the trees' beards, and fine dusts of snow lay upon their brows. On the ridgetop a dismal choir of hemlocks

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 85.



crooned over one that had fallen. The dying sun created a dim purple and flame-colored tumult on the horizon's edge and then sank until level crimson beams struck the trees. As the red rays retreated, armies of shadows stole forward. A gray, ponderous stillness came heavily in the steps of the sun.<sup>10</sup>

Crane is here experimenting in metaphor and the use of color, two outstanding characteristics of all his writing, even though some of his later work moved toward a more subdued, fluid manner. Conversely, in this passage Crane's imagery is not so startling nor his use of color so prominent as in some of his later work. Nevertheless, there are six color adjectives in the passage. Melvin Schoberlin, who first collected all of the Sullivan County Sketches into one volume, has pointed out that there are one hundred thirty-nine adjectives denoting color in the sketches: gray, thirty-nine; black, twenty-two; red, twenty-one; yellow, fifteen; brown, eleven; white, seven; green, six; blue, four; silver, two; orange, one; purple, one; and miscellaneous hues, ten.<sup>11</sup> The famous Crane style was already developing.

In their being built around one ironical situation, their use of color and sometimes startling imagery, their unconcern with character development, their freedom from authorial intrusion, their concern with moods and the

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>11</sup>Schoberlin, p. 15.

portrayal of emotion rather than the development of a plot, the Sullivan County Sketches point toward the later Crane, even though the sketches themselves are clearly apprentice work.

### Maggie

Long before Crane wrote the Sullivan County Sketches he had conceived a story of a girl of the Bowery who becomes a prostitute. The manuscript went through several revisions before it finally emerged in the form that we know it now, as Maggie: A Girl of the Streets. Crane apparently had a crude draft of some kind as early as his days at Syracuse University, where he spent the spring term of 1891 before leaving because of poor academic work.<sup>12</sup> It is certain that he worked at the story in December, 1891, for he showed the manuscript to a friend in January, asserting that he had written it in "two days before Christmas."<sup>13</sup> The characters were yet without names, an omission corrected in the next few months. In March Crane was trying to interest publishers, showing the work at that time to Richard Watson Gilder of the Century magazine. Gilder thought it too grim and outspoken, too "honest,"<sup>14</sup> and refused to publish it.

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<sup>12</sup>Stallman, pp. 6-7.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Beer, Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters (Garden City, N. Y., 1927), pp. 80-82.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

In November of 1892, then, Crane borrowed \$1,000 from his brother William and went to New York with the fourth draft, probably, of Maggie. He had 1,100 copies printed by a firm whose name is now lost for \$869, listing the author's name as "Johnston Smith."<sup>15</sup>

The book which was intended to set New York aflame was a miserable flop. Not until The Red Badge of Courage brought fame to Crane was Maggie republished and read by anybody other than Crane's friends and a few chance readers. In 1896, after the triumphant reception of The Red Badge, the American reading public was ready for Maggie; in 1893 it was not. There are many reasons why the work should have puzzled or outraged those few who read it upon its private publication--in American letters it was a work written in a new key.

The story<sup>16</sup> of Maggie is simple: a girl grows up in the slums of New York curiously innocent and unaffected by her

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>16</sup>The terms story and plot as used in this paper are in accordance with those definitions given by Forster, p. 130, in which he defines story as "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence," and plot as "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality." The purpose of the story in narrating the life in time is to appeal to the simple instinct of curiosity in people. The entire novel, however, includes life by values. Plot appeals to a higher type of curiosity because it deals with motives and causes (whether deliberate or accidental, conscious or unconscious), and because it appeals to our esthetic sense in our noticing the author's arrangement of material and his emphasis upon causal events. Forster, pp. 47-49.

sordid surroundings, meets and falls in love with a singularly egotistical friend of her brother, and is seduced by the man. Driven from home by her hypocritically outraged mother, she is soon deserted by the young man, tries unsuccessfully to become a prostitute, and finally drowns herself in despair.

In Maggie the reader has no great awareness of plot development by narration of events; instead, there is a succession of scenes which the mind of the reader unconsciously welds together as he reads. This is characteristic of the impressionistic plot, which holds the attention of the reader through emphasizing situation, setting, and drama within particular scenes. ✓

As in the Sullivan County Sketches, there is no concern on Crane's part with character development: none of the characters change one whit with the exception of Maggie herself. She cannot be the same toward the end of the story as she was at the beginning, but Crane does not show the workings of her mind toward the end. In this, Crane differs from his method in The Red Badge, where the reader is shown Henry's thoughts throughout the work. However, Crane's not showing Maggie's mind does not result in any diminution of the reader's understanding of her situation and pity for her (the pity greatly tempered by Crane's irony): he sees from her actions how she feels, he knows her bewilderment and despair, so that he is prepared for the conclusion of the

piece, which comes, as was pointed out by a contemporary of Crane's, with "that quality of fatal necessity which dominates Greek tragedy."<sup>17</sup> Instead of carrying the reader through the workings of Maggie's mind, of writing pages of exposition of Maggie's thoughts, Crane makes him feel her situation and know her reactions toward it by means of a few well-chosen scenes.<sup>18</sup> For example, when she and Pete sit in the saloon with the "woman of brilliance and audacity," Maggie's bewilderment is not insisted upon; Crane makes the reader feel it through the action itself, which in this scene is dramatic.<sup>19</sup> The book as a whole alternates between the dramatic and pictorial<sup>20</sup> methods of treatment of material, with the pictorial dominating, but Crane's treatment of Maggie is

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<sup>17</sup>William Dean Howells, "An Appreciation," The Work of Stephen Crane, edited by Wilson Follett (New York, 1925-1927), X, 135.

<sup>18</sup>If any particular event is shown at a particular time in a novel, with the author concealing himself and the point of view being that of the reader or one of the characters with whom he can identify himself, a scene will result. The scene is a piece of action brought immediately to the level of the reader. Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction (London, 1935), pp. 71-72.

<sup>19</sup>A scene is treated dramatically when the facts of the scene are to the fore and the mood of the character counts for little. The characters act and talk; there is a sense of the dramatic present as they work out the issue. Beach, pp. 148-149.

<sup>20</sup>Pictorial treatment of a scene by an author makes the reader face toward the author himself rather than to the events of the story. The scene or event is regarded primarily in the mind of the author or that of one of the characters, the emphasis being on mood more than on the event itself. Lubbock, pp. 69-70.

almost completely objective. Crane never asks the reader to sympathize with her; indeed, Crane never asks him to feel in any particular way about any of the characters. He presents them as they are, and the reader may feel about them as he pleases. (Of course, by controlling his material Crane controls the reader's attitude toward the characters, but he is never felt as the insistent author in Maggie.)

Several critics have objected that Crane's characters are not real, but are abstractions, symbols, as in a morality play.<sup>21</sup> To a certain extent such criticism is valid; Crane's characters have no life outside the stories in which they appear. But is it not a canon of art that a character need appear to be genuine only within his given sphere of action?<sup>22</sup> Although one cannot extract Crane's characters from the works and breathe life into them so that they live as independent creations--as some of Dickens' characters do, for example--, they nevertheless remain vivid in the works themselves: there are no false characters, characters who do not fit the roles assigned them, in any of Crane's mature work. Pete and Jimmie are hardly distinguishable in their attitudes toward life and their mental processes, but they play their roles with no incongruity; they are thoroughly

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<sup>21</sup>See Arthur Hobson Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey (New York, 1936), pp. 532-533.

<sup>22</sup>Forster, pp. 96-97.

believable. As to the criticism that Maggie's mother is inconsistent in being surprised at Maggie's seduction,<sup>23</sup> can any illogical and inconsistent action of the mother's fail to be in character, given a woman of her qualities? Berryman speaks quite to the point about characterization in Crane when he says that no life is strongly imaginable for Crane's characters except what he lets the reader see.<sup>24</sup> In the limits of the work, however, in the crisis which forms the nexus of every Crane story, his characters live and have meaning. Although Crane does not show or tell his readers everything about them, he gives the impression that he himself knows everything about them, which in the hands of a good writer gives validity to characters.<sup>25</sup>

In structure Maggie is episodic, with much utilization of scenes. The discontinuous mode of writing is much in evidence in this work, but the high points are presented in scenes, with a minimum of narration by the author tying them together. It is a tribute to Crane's artistry and powers of visualization that he could have built a novel so naturalistic in effect, so convincing in its determinism, without using the main device of the naturalists, the accumulation of details. For there is no doubt of Crane's purpose in

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<sup>23</sup>Quinn, p. 533.

<sup>24</sup>Berryman, p. 290.

<sup>25</sup>Forster, p. 97.

writing Maggie; the story itself is living proof even if he had not announced his intentions several times. Inscribed across the cover of a copy of Maggie presented to Hamlin Garland in 1893, probably the copy Garland reviewed in the Arena, Crane wrote:

It is inevitable that you will be greatly shocked by this book but continue please with all possible courage to the end. For it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless. If one proves that theory one makes room in Heaven for all sorts of souls (notably an occasional street girl) who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people. . . .<sup>26</sup>

The method Crane chose to show the environment is what is important, what sets him off from the dozens of other writers of his day who concerned themselves with writing about the slums.<sup>27</sup> The first fourteen pages of the work consist of three scenes which lay the groundwork of the story. Crane sets up his situation, the milieu in which the action is to take place, entirely by scenes in these pages. The action is dramatic, and even though Crane as the author does most to carry the scenes forward--there is not a great deal of conversation--there is no sense of the omniscient author *Point of view* telling about this particular section of New York; rather, the reader feels that he is a spectator to the action and is

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<sup>26</sup>Stallman, pp. 594-595. Crane repeated this inscription almost word for word on two other extant copies of Maggie. See Stallman's note on these pages.

<sup>27</sup>Walter Fuller Taylor in his The Economic Novel in America (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1942), pp. 79-81, discusses Maggie in relation to the anti-slum literature of Crane's time.



in some way involved himself. Crane is giving the "feel" of the sordid surroundings in which Maggie is growing up. In the first scene, little Jimmie is in bloody battle with the urchins of Devil's Row; in the second, he is conducted to the veritable hell that passes for home; in the third, the atmosphere of the type of home Maggie and Jimmie are growing up in is made more palpable by several smaller pictures--details of a larger whole--of the brutality rampant there.

With the background set, Crane abruptly jumps ahead a number of years to a description of Jimmie, now grown up. The scenic method is abandoned temporarily and Crane contents himself with expository description alone for five pages. The fact that he succeeds in establishing Jimmie's character so vividly is a tribute here to his power of language, of vivid phrasing, instead of to the dramatic efficacy of his technique. Mere description could have been fatal; Crane's colorful prose, however, redeems him from what might otherwise have been an artistic blunder. It is difficult to quarrel with a writer who uses passages like the following: "Jimmie's occupation for a long time was to stand at street corners and watch the world go by, dreaming blood-red dreams at the passing of pretty women. He menaced mankind at the intersections of streets."<sup>28</sup> Despite Jimmie's brutality, Crane shows that Jimmie had a soul, as

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Crane, The Work of Stephen Crane, edited by Wilson Follett (New York, 1925-1927), X, 152.

the following rather lengthy passage--lengthy, but worth notice--shows:

He had been in quite a number of miscellaneous fights, and in some general barroom rows that had become known to the police. Once he had been arrested for assaulting a Chinaman. Two women in different parts of the city, and entirely unknown to each other, caused him considerable annoyance by breaking forth, simultaneously, at fateful intervals, into wailings about marriage and support and infants.

Nevertheless, he had, on a certain star-lit evening, said wonderingly and quite reverently, "Deh moon looks like hell, don't it?"<sup>29</sup>

Expository presentation of character in the hands of Crane is something more than a dull thing.

As if to make up for the expository passages, Crane immediately presents a dramatic scene in Maggie's home with Pete, Jimmie's flashing young bartender friend, dazzling Maggie and Jimmie with his account of his power over people, whether owing to his lordly presence or to his fists. From this point the novel moves rapidly. There are several scenes showing Pete's whirlwind courtship of Maggie, a powerful scene in which the drunken mother drives Maggie, virginal thus far, directly into Pete's arms by accusing her of fornication, several short studies of hypocrisy among Maggie's mother, Jimmie, and the tenement women, a dramatic scene in Pete's place of work when he and the outraged Jimmie--who thought that every sister but his own could be ruined--fight, and, finally, the scenes showing Maggie's

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 155-156.

complete rejection by the world: first by her mother and Jimmie, second by Pete, by conventional religion (symbolized by the clergyman), and last by society in general, symbolized by the various men whom she accosts on the last long, despairing walk to the river. Crane intensifies the irony with two final scenes: Pete in a saloon, drunkenly informing the world that he is a "goo' f'ler" and being mocked by the "woman of brilliance and audacity"; and Maggie's mother in maudlin, hypocritical grief saying that she will forgive Maggie. Crane's sense of novelistic architecture was already masterly.

After the reader finishes Maggie, he feels that he has been driven hard, as indeed he has. The story, stark in its outlines, nevertheless must be told convincingly; and the conflicts inherent in the plot--childhood versus the harsh influences of the Bowery, Maggie's attempt to escape through Pete, Jimmie's relations with the world and the other characters, Pete's being fooled by the world which he considered himself the master of--all have to be worked out. And Crane does not resolve the plot complications by a mere report; he shows their resolution dramatically. He makes the reader feel that he is present. In the hands of some other writer the short novel could have been presented at much greater length--it is doubtful that Crane could have done so successfully--but there is no value in speculation on that score. With his abruptly introduced scenes with very little

or no connecting narration; with his characters who at first glance appear shadowy but take on form during the action; and with his point of view<sup>30</sup> equated for the most part with that of the characters--even though he tells the story in the third person--the result is that there is no consciousness of authorial intrusion or contrivance. Crane produced, in his first serious artistic attempt, a novel that has become a landmark in American letters.

In addition to the impressionistic plot structure of Maggie, Crane's writing in this novel shows characteristics that were to be a part of all his best writing in the future. Although he devoted an unusual amount (for Crane) of space to exposition on Jimmie's personal qualities, he demonstrated in several places in the work his facility at establishing character in a few deft strokes of the pen. The first glimpse of Pete occurs during the fight Jimmie had as a child, but it is enough to establish his character firmly: the reader knows as much from the passage which follows as he needs to know. Indeed, all that he learns later of Pete does not broaden the first picture of him; it merely intensifies it:

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<sup>30</sup> Basically speaking, the point of view is concerned with who tells the story, who possesses the facts and is empowered to narrate them. Carl H. Grabo, The Technique of the Novel (New York, 1928), p. 33. The omniscient author as narrator is now generally frowned upon. The whole question of point of view has come in for much examination as to its effect on the structure of the novel. For opposing views on its importance, see Lubbock, pp. 86-88, 251; and Forster, p. 121.

Down the avenue came boastfully sauntering a lad of sixteen years, although the chronic sneer of an ideal manhood already sat upon his lips. His hat was tipped over his eye with an air of challenge. Between his teeth a cigar-stump was tilted at the angle of defiance. He walked with a certain swing of the shoulders which appalled the timid.<sup>31</sup>

The reader knows Pete already as Maggie should have known him; but to her starved sight he appeared as he thought himself to be, a charming and romantic man of the world.

Crane's use of color and the heightening of details of atmosphere are everywhere apparent. Maggie's mother is pictured in one of her rages: "Her glittering eyes fastened on her child with sudden hatred. The fervent red of her face turned almost to purple. The little boy ran to the halls, shrieking like a monk in an earthquake."<sup>32</sup> Intense pressure is behind all of the writing, making the work, on close examination, appear to be over-written. But Crane's language satisfies--it is powerful and unusual, but it does not distract from what Crane is doing; rather, it makes easier Crane's purpose of making the reader feel as he intends him to feel. Crane's genius for making things clear without direct statement is one of the true marks of his impressionism. The reader understands without Crane's having to explain. Examples of this are manifold; one of the best is the passage which renders Maggie's shrinking shame before

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<sup>31</sup>Crane, Work, X, 138.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

the eyes of the neighbors when her mother first drives her away: "As the girl passed down through the hall, she went before open doors framing more eyes strangely microscopic, and sending broad beams of inquisitive light into the darkness of her path."<sup>33</sup> Again, instead of saying that Mrs. Johnson was frequently thrown into jail, Crane puts it this way: "His [Jimmie's] father died, and his mother's years were divided up into periods of thirty days."<sup>34</sup>

Crane never preaches in his writing as he was preaching in the inscription on the copy of Maggie he gave to Garland. If his purpose was to show that environment is a tremendous thing and that street girls can go to heaven, as the author he never says so: he lets the events of the story themselves make it clear. In his staying outside his work, taking no overt stand as the author, Crane was following the common practice of impressionism, one of the goals of which was to keep the author, his comments and prejudices, out of works of fiction.<sup>35</sup>

*cut* Maggie is Crane's first work about other people and his first to deal with life very seriously; the Sullivan County Sketches were about himself and his friends in highly

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 203-204.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>35</sup> Ford Madox Ford, The English Novel from the Earliest Days to the Death of Joseph Conrad (Philadelphia, 1929), p. 144.

*Cr* exaggerated situations,<sup>36</sup> and they made no serious comments on life, or made them so feebly that we are not impressed. Indeed, Crane himself recognized soon after he wrote them that the Sullivan County Sketches were a false start. He apparently changed his esthetic and his outlook on life soon after; for in 1896 he wrote to Lily Brandon Munroe, a woman with whom he had close relations for several years:

*cut* You know, when I left you [he is speaking of 1892] I renounced the clever school in literature. It seemed to me that there must be something more in life than to sit and cudgel one's brains for clever and witty expedients. So I developed all alone a little creed of art which I thought was a good one. Later I discovered that my creed was identical with the one of Howells and Garland. . . .

If I had kept to my clever Rudyard-Kipling style, the road might have been shorter but, ah, it wouldn't be the true road.<sup>37</sup>

*cut* There are in addition to this other important references to the year 1892, the year in which Crane finished Maggie and began working on The Red Badge of Courage, even though it was to be nearly three years before the latter work was published. In a copy of The Red Badge presented to Howells he wrote:

To W. D. Howells this small and belated book as a token of the veneration and gratitude of Stephen Crane for many things he has learned of the common man and, above all, for a certain re-adjustment of his point of view victoriously concluded some time in 1892.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>See Schoberlin, p. 18, for identification of the characters.

<sup>37</sup>Stallman, p. 648.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 620.

Cowell
 Again, in 1895 he wrote of the time he was finishing Maggie: "I decided that the nearer a writer gets to life the greater he becomes as an artist, and most of my prose writings have been toward the goal partially described by that misunderstood and abused word, realism."<sup>39</sup> If Crane was thinking of himself as a realist, it is natural that he should have aligned himself with Howells and Garland, the two leading exponents of realism in his time. But, as Berryman points out,<sup>40</sup> his writing is not at all like that of either of the older writers. His determination to get at the truth was like that professed by the other two, but his method of doing it was entirely different. In 1893, before he had written any of the things just quoted, he equated impressionism with truth in a discussion with a friend, saying that no man could be great who was not an impressionist, since greatness lay in knowing truth. Although he expected not to be great himself, he hoped to get near the truth.<sup>41</sup> Crane himself, then, seems to have recognized that his own artistic quest, with its use of irony as a guiding characteristic, was a new approach in American writing. The first biographer of Crane, a keen student of the 1890's, has called Maggie the "first ironic novel ever written by an American."<sup>42</sup> Irony was to be a hallmark of all Crane's

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 627.

<sup>40</sup> Berryman, p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> Beer, p. 85.



writing, and what he learned in 1892 made its mark on his writing throughout his career.

### George's Mother

George's Mother, Crane's second short novel of the Bowery section of New York, was not published until 1896, after the great success of The Red Badge of Courage. Maggie was republished the same month. Since the only previous publication of the latter work was Crane's private printing of it several years earlier, which had no circulation among the general public, Crane in effect gave the readers of the 1890's two books on the Bowery within the same month. Although George's Mother was not completed until November, 1894, when The Red Badge had been revised and was ready for its first publication in shortened form in Philadelphia and New York papers, it is so akin to Maggie in form and conception and was composed so soon after that it should be considered along with that work. Crane must have thought of it as a companion-piece of Maggie, for he wrote to Garland in November, 1894: "I have just completed a New York book that leaves Maggie at the post. It is my best thing."<sup>43</sup> Crane is wrong here, but George's Mother has its virtues and compares fairly favorably with Maggie, always considered one of Crane's masterpieces.

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<sup>43</sup>Stallman, p. 604.

There is no more story than in Maggie, and the plot is developed in the same impressionistic manner. George, a sturdy young laborer, lives with his adoring mother in the Bowery section of New York. The only surviving child of his widowed mother, he is the cynosure of her existence, the sun around which her little planet revolves. Except for not attending prayer meeting with her and not hanging up his jacket when he comes home, he can do no wrong. It develops that he can do wrong; he falls in with companions who introduce him to the good fellowship to be found at the corner saloon, at length loses his job, and gives his mother such sorrow that she suffers a stroke and dies. This is the situation; around it Crane builds one of his studies of Bowery life, of human relationships, and of the frailty of the will when confronted with a problem with which it has only a weak inclination to cope.

There are even fewer characters than in Maggie, George and his mother being the only two that matter. George's companions, Bleecker, Jones, and several more, are hardly more than ciphers, a device to show the way George gets his pleasure in the little world of the back room of the saloon. As in Maggie, character establishment is deft and sure. After two paragraphs of opening description, a setting of the scene, George is introduced in this manner:

A brown young man went along the avenue. He held a tin lunch-pail under his arm in a manner that was

evidently uncomfortable. He was puffing at a corncob pipe. His shoulders had a self-reliant poise, and the hang of his arms and the raised veins of his hands showed him to be a man who worked with his muscles.<sup>44</sup>

There are echoes in this passage of descriptive technique used in Maggie. Pete was described as walking with a "certain swing of the shoulders which appalled the timid,"<sup>45</sup> and Mr. Johnson was introduced in an almost identical manner.

Up the avenue there plodded slowly a man with sullen eyes. He was carrying a dinner-pail and smoking an applewood pipe. As he neared the spot where the little boys strove, he regarded them listlessly. But suddenly he roared an oath and advanced upon the rolling figures.<sup>46</sup>

Crane, interested in economy of words, used devices like the descriptive passages quoted to achieve his effects: they are short and clear. He does not tell the reader that George is always home from work at a certain time; he shows the little old lady doing battle with the kitchen and looking at the clock anxiously. George's punctuality and dependability are made plain without Crane's having to spell it out; and the main preoccupation of the mother (next to her brooding concern for her son) is evident when she sings while working: "Should I be car-reed tew th' skies/O-on flow'ry be-eds of ease. . . ?"<sup>47</sup> The reader is not surprised, then, when she asks after supper, with a great deal of hesitation, that

<sup>44</sup>Crane, Work, X, 19-20.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

George accompany her to prayer meeting that night. He is not surprised when George refuses, but the vigor of the refusal is somewhat startling; George drops his fork and replies, "Say, you must be crazy."<sup>48</sup> After his mother goes off alone, resembling "a limited funeral procession,"<sup>49</sup> he sneaks off to the saloon where Jones, the former acquaintance he had happened upon that afternoon, has promised him a fine evening with a bunch of good fellows. Dazzled by the camaraderie he finds there, George can be counted among the lost from that evening forward. There is perhaps greater character change in George's Mother than in Maggie. The heroine of the latter work, although she becomes a prostitute in the end, is as innocent as she was at the beginning--Crane perhaps insists on this a little too much--but George, a dependable if weak son at the beginning, quickly degenerates into a Bowery tough, member of a gang which terrorizes citizens at street corners. However, Crane's interest in these two early novels is not in characterization, but in situation, the inevitable end of an affair in which people of a certain type are involved.

The structure of George's Mother is episodic and scenic, just as that of Maggie was. Most of the scenes are pictorial rather than dramatic, although some of them give a sense of the dramatic present that allows them to seem

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

dramatic even though the events are strained through the author's mind. The first scene shows George walking down the street, meeting his former acquaintance Jones, and going into the saloon with him. There they drink, something new for George, and Jones invites him to come that night to meet the crowd. The second scene shows George's mother busily preparing for her son's return, getting anxious when he fails to come at the wonted hour, experiencing sweet relief when her apprehensions of his lying a bloody corpse on the street are dispelled at his return, and George's painful refusal to attend prayer meeting with her. The third scene shows the good fellowship George finds at the saloon. The manly courtesy of the group Jones introduces him to, their unflinching good manners and tact, greatly impress him. This is George's view. Crane's piercing irony is at work all the time, but in such a way that we never feel it as authorial intrusion.

Each man explained, in his way, that he was totally out of place in the before-mentioned world. They were possessed of various virtues which were unappreciated by those with whom they were commonly obliged to mingle; they were fitted for a tree-shaded land where everything was peace. Now that five of them had congregated it gave them happiness to speak their inmost thoughts without fear of being misunderstood.<sup>50</sup>

The men are shown in two aspects at the same time: as George sees them, and as they really are.

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

As in Maggie, where Crane interposed a long character exposition of Jimmie, in George's Mother he leaves the events of the story after George's evening in the saloon, with its following hangover and George's satisfaction to stay home for a week, to give a rather lengthy (compared to the brevity of the work) characterization of George. It is well-written, but neither dramatic nor scenic, as Crane's episodes usually are. The apparent reason for having these expository sections in the two works is that Crane needed to establish character firmly, yet keep within the limits of a short work. He wrote only one lengthy novel, Active Service, and that late in his writing career; his forte was the short work. Consequently, expository passages such as the one about George in George's Mother and Jimmie in Maggie were necessary, even though they were not Crane's usual method. In each of these two examples, however, Crane's style saves him from what might have been a technical error in construction. Most of the section in George's Mother gives the feeling of a sort of subdued stream-of-consciousness method, making it less obvious as exposition. There is no feeling that Crane is standing alongside the character, explaining what he is like; instead, the reader intercepts the thoughts for the most part as if they were coming through George's mind. Thus, when Crane writes that George has dreams of grandeur for the distant future, when men, and more particularly women, will think of him with

reverence, the reader seems to be seeing the dreams as they pass through George's head, even though Crane does not employ the stream-of-consciousness technique; indeed, his rigorous selection of detail is the antithesis of later expressionism. In Crane's method the reader seems to see George's thoughts and at the same time enjoy the brilliant irony without losing any of the sense of authorial detachment characteristic of Crane.

He had a vast curiosity concerning this city in whose complexities he was buried. It was an impenetrable mystery, this city. It was a blend of many enticing colors. He longed to comprehend it completely, that he might walk understandingly in its greatest marvels, its mightiest march of life, sin. He dreamed of a comprehension whose pay was the admirable attitude of a man of knowledge. He remembered Jones. He could not but admire a man who knew so many bartenders.<sup>51</sup>

It is during this account of George's dreams for himself that Crane links George's Mother with Maggie by having George see Maggie on the tenement steps and believe himself to be in love with her. Actually, he is not in love at all; Maggie is merely an excuse for him to indulge in dreams of what he could do if he or circumstances or something were different. Crane's irony here is most penetrating. George continues to dream futile dreams of Maggie, futile because he is incapable of making any advances toward her, only to direct one day to the Johnson apartment a very lordly-looking

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 43-44.

character who has inquired directions of him. It is Pete, of course; all the time George is thinking that "if he could only get a chance to rescue her from something, the whole tragedy would speedily unwind."<sup>52</sup>

After the interruption of the scenic method to characterize George, Crane returns to it and holds until the end. There are two particularly good scenes, that of George at old Bleecker's private party, and George at the prayer meeting, where he finally goes at his mother's insistence. The party scene is the longest of any scene in either George's Mother or Maggie, and is perhaps the best rendered of all. The scene is consistently pictured through George's impressions, even though it is in the third person, as is the entire novel. The reader does not have the impression that Crane is merely reporting what is happening, even though, in essence, that is actually what he is doing. Artistic illusion, that delicate necessity of good novel-writing, is in this scene steadily maintained.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>53</sup>Lubbock, pp. 257-258, has pointed out that in the third person an author may use a character's field of vision and keep as faithfully within it as though the character were speaking for himself. Using the method, an author has much greater latitude than one might think. The picture can be rich and full because it is at once the author's and creature's; the author, while adopting and sharing the position of the character, can at the same time supplement his vision. Moreover (Lubbock does not mention this), he can subtly satirize his characters' perceptions or lack of them, as Crane constantly does, by virtue of being in position of phrasing the thoughts in such a way that the irony is completely under control.



The style of writing in George's Mother is the nervous, jagged style of Maggie. There is the same use of color to enhance mood, the same rigid selectivity of detail, and, even though there is not so much rendering of the "unholy" atmosphere of the tenement, as in Maggie, atmospheres are made real. Crane devotes a number of short passages to showing the life of the city, its bustle and activity. All of this is related to a theme of George's Mother, the conquering of respectability by the brutality of the city. The theme, really an undertone, is suggested in George's dreams of worldly grandeur for himself and his mother's oft-repeated desire--voiced because of fear that he will not--that he be a "good boy." (At bottom, she is as certain as George that, somehow, grandeur will come.) The theme is presented forcefully in passages such as the following:

In a dark street the little chapel sat humbly between two towering apartment houses. A red street-lamp stood in front. It threw a marvellous reflection upon the wet pavements. It was like the death-stain of a spirit. . . . [The city] seemed somehow to affront this solemn and austere little edifice. It suggested an approaching barbaric invasion. The little church, pierced, would die with a fine illimitable scorn for its slayers.<sup>54</sup>

The symbolism in this passage is related to the conflict between George's weakness and his mother's hopes for him. Early in the book, when Mrs. Kelcey asked George to go to chapel with her, he was furious: "A vision came to him of

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<sup>54</sup>Crane, Work, X, 65.

dreary blackness arranged in solemn rows."<sup>55</sup> George preferred drink, itself presented by Crane in symbolic passages. When George met Jones, they "made toward a little glass-fronted saloon that sat blinking jovially at the crowds. It engulfed them with a gleeful motion of its two widely smiling lips."<sup>56</sup> Mrs. Kelcey, waiting for George, had had her attention caught momentarily by a brewery which was "towering over the other buildings."<sup>57</sup> And, at the party at Bleecker's, "upon a sidewall the keg of beer created a portentous black figure that reared toward the ceiling, hovering over the room and its inmates with spectral stature."<sup>58</sup> Crane was already using symbolism to good effect, and in The Red Badge of Courage and some of his later stories symbolism would figure even more prominently.

From the story of George's Mother, the ruin of a young man by drink, one might think that Crane was the sort of crusader dear to the hearts of the reformers of the nineties. He was no such thing; nor was he an apologist for environmental determinism. Crane lets the reader draw his own morals; he is interested only in rendering situations. George's Mother is not on record as having been praised by Frances Willard. Crane regarded the Bowery, the scene of most of his early work, as neither the rigorously

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., pp. 25-26.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

deterministic environment it has often been called, with great justification, nor as a place that should be "cleaned up" by high-minded reformers. Several years after writing the Bowery novels and sketches, he wrote to a young lady who had asked him some question about Maggie:

In a story of mine called "An Experiment in Misery" I tried to make plain that the root of Bowery life is a sort of cowardice. Perhaps I mean a lack of ambition or to willingly be knocked flat and accept the licking. . . .

I had no other purpose in writing Maggie than to show people to people as they seem to me.<sup>59</sup>

The methods Crane adopted to show people to other people virtually assured his success among those readers who were willing to look at life in all its aspects, who did not demand that the novelist hold himself rigorously to the smiling aspects of the American scene, and who appreciated the technical experiments that were being made in novel-writing.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup>Stallman, pp. 655-656.

<sup>60</sup>This is not to say that Maggie and George's Mother took either the critics or the reading public by storm. Two respected critics, Harry Thurston Peck and H. D. Traill, roundly condemned the two works in contemporary reviews, and it is likely that the genuine popularity of The Red Badge, which had been issued prior to the 1896 publication of the two Bowery works, influenced some reviewers to write more favorably of the shorter works than they might have otherwise. For favorable and unfavorable reviews, see "Two Books by Stephen Crane," The Critic, XXVIII (n. s. 25) (June 13, 1896), 421; H. T. Peck, "George's Mother," The Bookman, III (July, 1896), 447-448; and H. D. Traill, "The New Realism," The Fortnightly Review, LXVII (n. s. 61) (January, 1897), 63-65.

### The Bowery Tales and Other Stories

During the period between 1892 and the end of 1894 Crane was hard at work, finishing within those years the works already discussed in this paper, his poetry included in The Black Riders, The Red Badge of Courage, and a number of short stories and sketches. Of the latter, several deal with the Bowery section, in which Crane was deeply interested throughout this period. Two of the best of these are "An Experiment in Misery," written early in 1894 for a newspaper syndicate,<sup>61</sup> and "The Men in the Storm," uncertain in date but probably of the time of "An Experiment." The latter sketch relates how a young man, down on his luck even though he has evidently seen better days, gets a denizen of the Bowery to guide him to a flophouse, where they spend the night. The next morning they find a cheap eating place and have breakfast, wandering down town to sit aimlessly all day on benches. As a study in atmosphere, the sketch is superb. The description of the flophouse is almost stifling to the reader. The following sentence is typical of the way Crane makes the reader feel what his characters are feeling:

Shortly after the beginning of this journey [into the flophouse] the young man felt his liver turn white, for from the dark and secret places of the building there suddenly came to his nostrils strange and unspeakable odours, that assailed him like malignant diseases with wings.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Berryman, p. 81.

<sup>62</sup>Crane, Work, XI, 26.

There is a good bit of death symbolism in the sketch. In the room where dozens of men are crowded together to sleep, the young man finds that his bed is "like a slab." A locker standing near his bed has "the ominous air of a tombstone." One of the lodgers is a "corpse-like being" who lies in a "stillness as of death." Throughout the room there is "a strange effect of a graveyard where bodies are merely flung."<sup>63</sup> In this way Crane shows, without having to spell it out, that the inhabitants of the flophouse are really dead so far as the world is concerned. The tone of the piece is a combination of irony and pity, and, as Stallman has pointed out,<sup>64</sup> anticipates "The Open Boat" in its theme of solidarity. By 1894, when "An Experiment in Misery" was written, Crane was moving rapidly toward the patterning of imagery and the use of symbolism to heighten his effects.

"The Men in the Storm" is similar to "An Experiment"; in this piece men are waiting for the opening of a charitable house where the homeless can get a bed and breakfast for five cents. The men are introduced only after a page and a half of description of the whirling city, with good citizens hurrying home through the cold to their suppers. The storm is, of course, symbolic of the social storm that caused the homeless men to seek aid at such a place. They

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-28.

<sup>64</sup>Stallman, p. 11.

wait and wait with the patience of cattle, although there is some shoving among the men. Except for several passages of direct statement in which Crane interrupts to explain that not all the men are shiftless, the sketch has consistency of conception and execution. Crane was not always able to keep out of his stories--occasionally he lets his own feelings interpose--and in this one he steps in to explain rather than to show. But such lapses of artistry are rare.

Crane frequently uses the same characters over and over, much in the manner of William Faulkner but without the epic and architectonic conception of the latter. In a series of stories written in the spring of 1893,<sup>65</sup> Crane used as a main character the baby Tommie of Maggie. These "Baby Sketches," three in number, are among the ephemera of Crane's early work, although there is a pathos in them, a sympathy underlying the objective manner of presentation, that makes them worthy of him. "An Ominous Baby" relates Tommie's stealing a toy red fire-engine from another child. Perhaps it is symbolic of the spirit of the Bowery, which takes what it wants without thinking of the rights of others. "A Great Mistake" tells of Tommie's stealing some fruit at the stall of a vendor. The baby's purposefulness is well portrayed, and when the vendor catches him, he extracts from the small hand a lemon, probably symbolic of

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<sup>65</sup>Berryman, p. 69.

the bitterness of Tommie's life. The third, "A Dark Brown Dog," is by far the best of the three. Tommie picks up a little dog, which at first he abuses but finally adopts and loves with an intensity heretofore unfelt in his life. One day his father, in a drunken rage, flings the little dog out the window of their fifth-floor tenement. Tommie leaves the room. "It took him a long time to reach the alley, because his size compelled him to go downstairs backward, one step at a time, and holding to the step above."<sup>66</sup> Crane was never sentimental, but he could express pathos when he chose.

"A Desertion" is curiously reminiscent of Maggie. A girl returns home from work in the evening, finding her father sitting quietly at the table in the darkening apartment. She had passed through a group of gossiping women of the tenement, who had prophesied among themselves that she would come to no good end. She talks to her father, telling him the events of the day and trying to get some response from him; she imagines him to be angry with her because she has come in late and has not fixed his supper. Suddenly she realizes that he is dead; and her cry of horror is interpreted by the gossipers in the hall as the signal that he is driving her out of the apartment into the streets. Crane always had an intense interest in fallen women, and he also

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<sup>66</sup>Crane, Work, XI, 124.

had, Berryman points out,<sup>67</sup> a tremendous compulsion to rescue them. These aspects of Crane's psyche probably explain his choice of subject matter, but are of little worth in investigating the art of the stories. As art, "A Desertion" is of little consequence except as an example of contrived irony in a single scene; for in a sense her father is driving her into the streets.

Of little consequence also is "The Reluctant Voyagers," an account of two men washed out to sea on a raft. The tone of the story, a mixture of the serious and the comic, is not in keeping with the subject; in tone it is a return to the manner of the Sullivan County Sketches and is no better than those first attempts at writing. There is humor, to be sure, and humor is rare in Crane, but he might have chosen his situation better if he wished to write a humorous story. One of the men says to the other, when they find that they have drifted far out to sea: "So! This all comes from your accursed vanity, your bathingsuit, your idiocy; you have murdered your best friend."<sup>68</sup> Stallman is just when he says that "The Reluctant Voyagers" is "fifth-rate Crane."<sup>69</sup>

Throughout his writing career Crane did uneven work. For every Maggie there are two "The Reluctant Voyagers."

<sup>67</sup>Berryman, p. 300 and passim.

<sup>68</sup>Crane, Work, XI, 205.

<sup>69</sup>Stallman, p. 415.



However, in his early writing, the writing between 1892, when the Sullivan County Sketches were published, and the end of 1894, when The Red Badge of Courage appeared as a newspaper serial, he at last found a form and a style, and his writing exemplifies this early most of the technical features that make him one of the outstanding stylists in American letters. But throughout the period under discussion in this chapter, Crane remained unknown to the general reading public. It was only in 1895, with the publication of The Red Badge of Courage in book form, that he became a literary success. Nearly all of the works discussed in this chapter were printed after 1895, although all were composed before then. They show that Crane's art was developing, that he was a master of impressionistic technique in his first short novel, and that, on the basis of these writings, one might expect much of him. The Red Badge of Courage, which is Crane's peak in artistry as a novelist (he was yet to write some great short stories), was built on things he had learned in writing the works just discussed.

## CHAPTER III

### THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE

The chronology of the composition of The Red Badge of Courage is obscure. The best account is that of Stallman, who had access to the Crane notebooks and has made a careful study of the matter. He shows that Crane had a manuscript of The Red Badge as early as the spring of 1893,<sup>1</sup> and that he had been working out the novel in his mind for a considerable time before that. Stallman and Berryman have done Crane criticism a signal service by refuting the Crane legend of hurried if inspired composition, a legend given status by the first biographer of Crane<sup>2</sup> and by the off-hand manner of a few of Crane's journalistic pieces. The facts show that Crane worked carefully if somewhat desultorily on The Red Badge for over a year, especially during the period of his sojourn at the Art Student's League during the fall and winter of 1893, where he engaged in lively discussion of the manuscript with his artist friends.<sup>3</sup> Completed about February, 1894, the work was submitted to several publishers before it finally appeared as a serial, in abbreviated form,

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<sup>1</sup>Stallman, p. 210. A complete discussion of the manuscripts of The Red Badge is on pp. 201-224.

<sup>2</sup>Beer, p. 228.

<sup>3</sup>Berryman, pp. 72-73.

in the Philadelphia Press, December 3-8, 1894. The book-length version was brought out in early October of 1894 and was published the following month in England.<sup>4</sup> It was not until the publication of The Red Badge in book form that Crane elicited serious attention as an emerging American writer; as has been noted, nothing in book form had been published except the abortive and unread private issue of Maggie until The Red Badge brought Crane sudden renown.

The general praise<sup>5</sup> was not unmingled with calumny and critical obtuseness. The Red Badge was called "an interesting and painful essay in pathology,"<sup>6</sup> it was censured for having no story,<sup>7</sup> Crane's rare descriptive passages were "like stereopticon views insecurely put on the canvas,"<sup>8</sup> examples of bad grammar were gleefully and copiously cited,<sup>9</sup> and the work was detected by an Army general with literary pretensions as "a vicious satire upon American soldiers and

<sup>4</sup>Stallman, p. xxiii.

<sup>5</sup>See Berryman, pp. 125-132, for a good discussion of the reception of The Red Badge.

<sup>6</sup>"The Red Badge of Courage," The Spectator, LXXVI (June 27, 1896), 924.

<sup>7</sup>"Recent Fiction," The Dial, XX (Feb. 1, 1896), 80.

<sup>8</sup>"The Novels of Two Journalists," The Bookman, II (November, 1895), 219.

<sup>9</sup>"The Author of The Red Badge," The Critic, XXVIII (March 7, 1896), 163. J. L. Onderdonk, "A Red Badge of Bad English," letter published in The Dial, XX (May 1, 1896), 263-264.

American armies."<sup>10</sup> In other quarters, however, the book was recognized for what it was: a work of conscious literary craftsmanship employing a new technique. One of the most perceptive reviews stated that Crane was "a great artist, with something new to say, and consequently, with a new way of saying it";<sup>11</sup> another mentioned Crane's quick eye for color, and especially the significance of its relation to the events and emotions being shown;<sup>12</sup> and a sensible letter in The Dial pointed out that, despite the grammatical lapses, the novel as a work of art needed no literary justification.<sup>13</sup> Thus was Stephen Crane brought to the attention of the reading public.

The critic who complained that The Red Badge had no story cannot be dismissed lightly if he is taken on his own terms; for it is quite true that, on the surface, little seems to happen in Crane's novel. A young recruit engages in his first battle, becomes terrified and runs, joins a group of wounded soldiers in the rear and witnesses the death of a close friend, decides to return to his regiment,

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<sup>10</sup>A. C. McClurg, "The Red Badge of Hysteria," letter published in The Dial, XX (April 16, 1896), 227.

<sup>11</sup>George Wyndham, "A Remarkable Book," The New Review, XIV (January, 1896), 32.

<sup>12</sup>"The Red Badge of Courage," The Critic, XXVII (n. s. XXIV) (Nov. 30, 1895), 363.

<sup>13</sup>Sidney Brooks, "Mr. Stephen Crane and His Critics," letter published in The Dial, XX (May 16, 1896), 297-298.

gets a lick on the head from a fear-crazed soldier which he passes off as a battle wound to explain his absence from his unit, participates in a charge and acquits himself creditably, and finally decides that he is a soldier and a man because he has seen war at its worst and is no longer afraid of it or of himself. Put in this fashion, it might be said that there is little or no story, for there is no love interest, a mere handful of characters who do very little, and little of the "adventure" that many people expect in a novel. Almost all of the action takes place within the mind of the boy in a period of about two days and in a very limited geographical area. But if Forster's definition of a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence is accepted as valid, the events as they pass through the mind of the soldier and his reaction to them provide the story: there is no need for a great number of characters engaging in various adventures, nor for a love interest. Since the time of Henry James, subjective action, events as they pass through the mind of a character, has been proved to be as valid story material as the objective action of, say, the chronicle novel or the picaresque novel, and Crane was well aware of the validity of subjective action as proper story material. The critic who complained of the lack of story either did not like Crane's method or was so unfamiliar with it that he was unable to appreciate it.

Wyndham, reviewing the work shortly after its publication, felt no such qualms:

Mr. Crane, for his distinction, has hit on a new device, or at least on one which has never been used before with such consistency and effect. . . . He traces the successive impressions made...from minute to minute, during two days of heavy fighting. He stages the drama of war, so to speak, within the mind of one man, and then admits you as to a theatre.<sup>14</sup>

And the drama of war as it is reflected in Henry's mind, with his reactions to it, forms the story, a rather formidable one when regarded in this light.

Plot and story are closely related, since both of them are essentially a narration of events. However, it makes considerable difference in the form and structure of a novel which of the two the writer chooses to emphasize. If he is interested primarily in story, he is likely to write a fast-moving work with a great many characters, a work in which adventure follows adventure with sometimes startling rapidity and without very much logical causality. The interest of the reader will be in what happens next, and it is the task of the author alternately to excite and then satisfy the reader's curiosity until the author finds a convenient stopping place. If the writer emphasizes plot, he likewise presents a narrative of events in some manner, but the emphasis is on causality, on the why of things. An author who wishes to stress causality and the significance of the

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<sup>14</sup>Wyndham, p. 33.

effects produced by the causes must construct his story in such a way that interest in causality will take precedence in the mind of the reader over the primitive curiosity of wondering what happens next. Moreover, if the author is attempting to write a novel that makes a serious comment on life, he must avoid the pitfall of romanticism, that lapse in perception (sometimes deliberate) which causes a writer to make a plot "in accordance with our wishes, not with our knowledge," a plot that is "a fantasy of desire rather than a picture of life."<sup>15</sup> Crane, [who] was interested in making a serious comment on life in The Red Badge, was faced with the problem of constructing a plot that would excite the attention of the reader, would make him interested in motives rather than in mere action, and would allow Crane through the characters and events of the book to make a presentation that the reader would recognize and appreciate as a picture of life rather than a fantasy of desire. This he attempted to do by showing us the thoughts and feelings of a youth in that most intense of all situations, war. ]

[The choice of subject matter was probably both personal and esthetic. One critic remarks that Crane was "drawn to war because it occasioned a sense of life at its highest pitch and challenged his own skill in conveying sensations

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<sup>15</sup>Edwin Muir, The Structure of the Novel (New York, 1929), p. 23.

sharply."<sup>16</sup> War was always fascinating to Crane; after The Red Badge brought him fame, he took every opportunity he could find to observe war at first hand, making an attempt to observe the Cuban revolt, an attempt which failed because of a ship-wreck, and covering both the Greco-Turkish War and the Spanish-American War as a newspaper correspondent. There is evidence to show that his pursuit of war was in part owing to a desire to test the material of The Red Badge of Courage against reality,<sup>17</sup> but the early appearance in his writing career of The Red Badge and the large number of war stories in his total work show that the subject had intense interest for him from the first.

Whatever Crane's reasons for choosing the particular subject may have been, his treatment of it was unusual. The story was meager, and the plot avoided the heroics which might be expected in a work about war. Moreover, Crane chose to write a subjective novel rather than an objective one, which meant that he would have to be careful in his handling of the point of view. But all of the features of The Red Badge--the point of view that of a chief character, the intensity of the action, the few characters, the limited time span and the restricted geographical area in which the action takes place--contributed toward the dominant

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<sup>16</sup>Van Wyck Brooks, The Confident Years: 1885-1915 (New York, 1952), p. 139.

<sup>17</sup>Berryman, p. 174.



impressionism of the work, the literary method toward which Crane had been moving in his earlier writing.

A great deal has been written about Crane's natural propensity for short works. It is true that all of his works of literary merit are short; his longest work, Active Service, the only one of his novels which could not be classed quite properly as a novelette, is an artistic failure. It is also true that Crane's stories are often constructed around situations, so that there is little emphasis on plot,<sup>18</sup> the narration being handled in an impressionistic, somewhat disjointed, manner. But if Forster's definition of a plot as "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality," is expanded to a definition of plot in a larger sense, that is, as a marshalling of characters and incidents to an end, which is the expression through a design or pattern of some philosophy, esthetic or moral, in which the author believes<sup>19</sup>--if this is done, it can be shown that Crane did not neglect this particular aspect of the novel in The Red Badge of Courage. The characters and incidents are indeed marshalled to an end, and the philosophy inherent in the design is both esthetic and moral. Inherent it had to be, for Crane was never one to lead his reader by the hand to the conclusions

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<sup>18</sup>Stallman, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup>Grabo, p. 320.

he wished him to reach. In 1897 he wrote in a letter to one of his friends about The Red Badge:

" . . . I endeavored to express myself in the simplest and most concise way. If I failed, the fault is not mine. I have been very careful not to let any theories or pet ideas of my own creep into my work. Preaching is fatal to art in literature. I try to give the readers a slice out of life; and if there is any moral or lesson in it, I do not try to point it out. I let the reader find it for himself. The result is more satisfactory to both the reader and myself.<sup>20</sup>

Just what is the lesson or moral of The Red Badge, then, and how did Crane marshal his characters and incidents to make the moral clear?

The main character of the work--almost the only character--is introduced early, and it is plain from the quiet desperation of his thought what the tenor of the work is to be. After the opening two pages, in which the scene is briefly set and the fact that the troops have not yet been under fire is established by an argument over whether the men are finally to move out or not, there is this passage:

There was a youthful private who listened with eager ears to the words of the tall soldier and to the varied comments of his comrades. After receiving a fill of discussions concerning marches and attacks, he went to his hut and crawled through an intricate hole that served it as a door. He wished to be alone with some new thoughts that had lately come to him.<sup>21</sup>

He speculated on the nature of the enemy troops, soon to be encountered, but "there was a more serious problem. He lay

<sup>20</sup>Stallmen, p. 673.

<sup>21</sup>Crane, Work, I, 23.

in his bunk pondering upon it. He tried to mathematically prove to himself that he would not run from a battle."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the problem of the work is set very early, and the problem of conduct is to be the question throughout the work. Everything else relates to it: the youth's feeling of isolation from his fellowmen, his rationalizing when he does break and run during his first engagement, his alternating convictions of nature's benevolence, malignance, or indifference, his shock at witnessing the death of his friend, which is the beginning of his redemption, his becoming an automaton in battle and quite accidentally becoming a hero, and his final discovery that he has outgrown the "brass and bombast" of his youth and has become a man. The youth's problem is that of moral conduct, and Crane's moral is that man's salvation lies in spiritual growth,<sup>23</sup> in ridding oneself of brass and bombast, as the youth did, and seeing life as it is.

Crane's task was to present his material in such a way that both the youth and the reader would learn the lesson, and at the same time he had to keep from giving the appearance of "rigging" his material. He had to present his "slice of life" in such a way that it would be a clean slice, that is, a shaped, consciously wrought, meaningful piece of experience rather than a shapeless, meaningless

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>23</sup>Stallman, p. xxx.

mass of the stuff of which experience is made, but lacking direction. There are three cuttings that a novelist can make in presenting a slice of life: the lengthwise in time, producing probably a chronicle novel; the breadthwise in space, producing a broad, comprehensive picture of a large group of people or of a society; or the depthwise, producing a psychological novel that examines the mind of man.<sup>24</sup>

Crane, choosing the latter, was employing a method that during his time had not been very thoroughly exploited. His conception of the work largely determined his form and treatment of material. The limited subject matter--the record of a youth's mental impressions during two days of fighting--presupposed a work that would, because of its clearly defined subject matter, have unity. The consciously controlled point of view tended to give form to the work, a unity and form that it might not have had without it. Speaking of novels in general, Lubbock makes a point that applies to The Red Badge: "When the point of view is definitely included in the book, when it can be recognized and verified there, then every side of the book is equally wrought and fashioned."<sup>25</sup> Finally, in the rendering of the thoughts and impressions of the main character, Crane

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<sup>24</sup>Beach, p. 425.

<sup>25</sup>Lubbock, p. 116. For another statement on the artistry inherent in careful control of the point of view, see Beach, p. 218.

employed a language and style that were new, full of strange colors, startling imagery, abrupt alterations of mood, religious symbolism where it might be least expected, and words and phrases that were carefully calculated to express or evoke particular emotions. [Introducing the problem early in the story, Crane takes the youth through a bath of fire that the reader can participate in and appreciate, since the controlled point of view makes it easy for the reader to feel himself a part of the action. At the same time, however, Crane keeps his youth at a distance, even when he appears to be entering his mind most freely; this, coupled with the inevitable Crane irony, keeps the reader from losing himself completely in the consciousness of the boy. This is one of the strong features of Crane's method, for the reader experiences on two levels: first, as the chief character does, insofar as he identifies himself with the character; second, as an outside observer, watching dispassionately what is taking place before him. More and more writers during the past fifty years have been attempting to create this sense of double vision in their works, finding it extremely difficult;<sup>26</sup> it is a tribute to Crane's technique that, in a period when technique had relatively little thought given to it, Crane should have attained in good measure a goal that

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<sup>26</sup>Leon Edel, The Psychological Novel: 1900-1950 (New York, 1955), pp. 100-101.

has been sought after in the psychological novel throughout the twentieth century.

The plot development depends upon the youth's making discoveries about himself and about life in general; there is little else that matters. Sometimes other people are involved, sometimes the youth makes the discoveries privately. The plot therefore has unity and logical development only insofar as the youth's discoveries about himself have logical causality and are arranged in such a way that the meaning of the work becomes clear. Early in the book when it is learned that the problem of the youth is whether he will run in battle or not, the interest of the reader is in the story, in primitive curiosity about whether he will or not. [But during the long period between stimulus and action the attention of the reader becomes focused more and more on the youth's mental state, and his interest transfers itself to plot, the narration of events with the emphasis on causality, on the reasons why the youth has a particular attitude, and on the characters and events of the story as they affect the youth's mental attitude.]

The youth's first discovery of major importance occurs when he finds that he is not the only man in the army who is not a paragon of bravery. His friend Wilson, designated usually as the "loud soldier," comes to him before their first engagement and lays a heavy hand on his shoulder:

"It's my first and last battle, old boy," said the . . . [lad], with intense gloom. He was quite pale and his girlish lip was trembling.

"Eh?" murmured the youth in great astonishment.

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 "I'm a gone coon this first time, and--and I w-want you to take these here things--to--my--folks." He ended in a quavering sob of pity for himself. He handed the youth a little packet done up in a yellow envelope.

"Why, what the devil--" began the youth again.

But the other gave him a glance as from the depths of a tomb, and raised his limp hand in a prophetic manner, and turned away.<sup>27</sup>

Henry is no longer isolated; there is at least one other person in the world somewhat like him. And, he exults later, that person confessed to despair and he had not!

In reading The Red Badge it is necessary to distinguish between the youth's fleeting impressions and those experiences that become a part of him, that have to do with molding his character permanently. This is hard to do, for all of his experiences appear to strike him with the same force of impact. The reader is required to judge carefully, the best way being to watch the youth's actions carefully in order to determine which of his fleeting impressions disposes him to unequivocal action. The movement of The Red Badge is based on flux and change, but in the end certain conclusions can be drawn.

While the youth is wrestling with his problem he has alternating moods of estrangement from his fellowmen and of a sense of solidarity, of oneness, with them. A little

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<sup>27</sup>Crane, Work, I, 56.

while before his friend Wilson betrayed his fear by giving the youth the packet, the youth had flared up at Wilson when the latter evidenced unconcern about the approaching battle:

He felt alone in space when his injured comrade had disappeared. His failure to discover any mite of resemblance in their view-points made him more miserable than before. No one seemed to be wrestling with such a terrific personal problem. He was a mental outcast.<sup>28</sup>

But a little later, when the first skirmish is taking place, he feels himself to be at one with the others.

There was a consciousness always of the presence of his comrades about him. He felt the subtle battle-brotherhood, more potent even than the cause for which they were fighting. It was a mysterious fraternity born of the smoke and danger of death.<sup>29</sup>

And, when the enemy is repulsed:

So it was all over at last! The supreme trial had been passed. The red, formidable difficulties of war had been vanquished.

He went into an ecstasy of self-satisfaction. He had the most delightful sensations of his life. Standing as if apart from himself, he viewed that last scene. He perceived that the man who had fought thus was magnificent.<sup>30</sup>

But when the enemy charge is renewed:

He slowly lifted his rifle and, catching a glimpse of the thick-spread field, he blazed at a cantering cluster. He stopped then and began to peer as best he could through the smoke. He caught changing views of the ground, covered with men who were all running like pursued imps, and yelling.

To the youth it was an onslaught of redoubtable dragons. He became like the man who lost his legs at the approach of the red and green monster. He waited

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 64-65.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 71.



in a sort of horrified listening attitude. He seemed to shut his eyes and wait to be gobbled.<sup>31</sup>

The youth does what he had feared he might do. He runs.

Wandering about in the rear, the youth alternately feels shame because he deserted his comrades and anger at them for being fools in not attempting to save their lives, as he had done. Then occurs an episode which is one of the distinct steps in the plot structure of the novel. The youth comes into a wood where all is peaceful and quiet; by rationalizing he has arrived at the tentative conclusion that nature is peaceful and accords with his wish to preserve himself. "He conceived Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy."<sup>32</sup> His first warning of the falsity of his position occurs when he notices an animal dive into a pool and emerge with a fish--as he walks on he is "going from obscurity into promises of a greater obscurity"<sup>33</sup>--but the great awakening has not yet come. He reaches a place that is described in terms of a church, the ultimate symbol of peace: "At length he reached a place where the high, arching boughs made a chapel. He softly pushed the green doors aside and entered. Pine needles were a gentle brown carpet. There was a religious half light."<sup>34</sup> There he finds the decaying body of a dead soldier, the eyes staring straight into his own. They exchange a long look,

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

and Henry, terrified, runs back in the direction of the fighting. What he has learned in the "chapel" is that there is no assurance anywhere, that appearances are deceiving, and that nature is indifferent to the fate of men. The youth's damnation--his feeling of guilt and estrangement--is still a personal conviction, and is not to be changed until near the end of the work, but the chapel scene and the episode following it mark the beginning of his redemption.

This is the famous scene in which the youth witnesses the death of Jim Conklin, a friend whom he had known before entering service and with whom he had been, evidently, from the beginning. Henry, after fleeing the wood where he had seen the dead man, joins a group of wounded soldiers who are straggling along in the rear. He is bedeviled by a "tattered soldier" who unknowingly rubs salt in Henry's "wound"--by this time a real one of guilt--by advising him to be careful: "'Yeh look pretty peaked yerself. . . . I bet yeh've got a worser one than yeh think. Ye'd better take keer of yer hurt. It don't do t' let sech things go. It might be inside mostly, an' them plays thunder.'"<sup>35</sup> Unable to shake off the tattered soldier, Henry manages to divert his embarrassing attentions when the two of them see the tall soldier, Jim Conklin, lurching along in the ranks, obviously near death. They manage to get him off the road, where he is in imminent danger of being run over by rushing

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

artillery wagons, and into the fields. In a very powerful scene, Jim dies. This scene, because of its power, has engaged the attention of Crane critics since the publication of The Red Badge, but it was only some four years ago that its real meaning was first pointed out in relation to the whole work.<sup>36</sup> Its meaning will be discussed when the symbolism of the novel is examined. It is enough here to state that the episode is the beginning of Henry's redemption, for he leaves his aimless wandering in the rear and goes back to the fight. It is to be a long time before he settles the problem of conduct to his own satisfaction, or to the reader's, since he has many lapses into self-delusion and error, but at least it is a start. The Jim Conklin incident as a step in plot development is a most important and significant one.

If the episode in which Wilson, the "loud soldier," betrays his fears to Henry and lessens (although temporarily) Henry's sense of isolation is the first important plot development, the episode in which the packet is returned should not be overlooked as an example of Henry's sustained capacity for self-delusion. By this time Wilson has found himself; Henry has not. When Henry returns the packet, his feelings are thus:

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Wooster Stallman, "Introduction," The Red Badge of Courage, The Modern Library (New York, 1951), pp. v-xxxvii.

His self-pride was now entirely restored. In the shade of its flourishing growth he stood with braced and self-confident legs, and since nothing could now be discovered he did not shrink from an encounter with the eyes of judges, and allowed no thoughts of his own to keep him from an attitude of manfulness. He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man.<sup>37</sup>

His mistakes were bad enough: running away from battle, deserting the tattered soldier, who was himself in a bad way, and allowing the accidental clout on the head he had received from a panicky soldier to be accepted as a wound of battle. But the greatest of all, his self-delusion, has not yet been revealed to him as a fault; he is still too much a victim of the idea of the value of social rather than personal integrity. He sometimes has thoughts that it is not "handsome for him freely to condemn other men,"<sup>38</sup> but he pushes them aside.

The next significant advance of the plot occurs when Henry finds out how easy it is to be what the world calls a hero. Fighting against an enemy charge, he goes into a kind of trance, furiously loading and firing into the advancing troops. He comes to his senses to find the men about him staring at him in awe: the enemy had withdrawn a few minutes earlier, leaving him with nothing to shoot at. His pride at achieving public vindication for private guilt is tempered,

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<sup>37</sup>Crane, Work, I, 135.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

however, by the knowledge that his heroism was not of conscious volition:

Regarding it, he saw that it was fine, wild, and, in some ways, easy. He had been a tremendous figure, no doubt. By this struggle he had overcome obstacles which he had admitted to be mountains. They had fallen like paper peaks, and he was now what he called a hero. And he had not been aware of the process. He had slept and, awakening, found himself a knight.<sup>39</sup>

The remainder of the book is devoted to a diversionary charge in which Henry and his fellows participate. Just before the charge, Henry and Wilson overhear the general of the division characterize their regiment as "mule-drivers," but Henry is not very resentful of the epithet; it merely makes him feel his own insignificance. As usual in the work, Henry never has the same feelings for long. A little later, after Henry has harangued the men into continuing the charge when they had begun to fall back and has been publicly commended for his bravery, he decides that he will do nothing further:

The youth had resolved not to budge whatever should happen. Some arrows of scorn that had buried themselves in his heart had generated strange and unspeakable hatred. It was clear to him that his final and absolute revenge was to be achieved by his dead body lying, torn and guttering, upon the field.<sup>40</sup>

But this is soon forgotten, and he is in the midst of the final charge. They surge forward to the goal, a fence-row,

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

only to find--crowning irony!--that they have been ordered to withdraw.

It is in the last chapter of the work that Henry makes his great discovery about himself. The reader has become so accustomed to Henry's altering moods that this last one might be mistaken for just another in the long train if it were not for a certain force behind the writing and for the new outlook's being a logical effect of the youth's experiences. Crane refuses to guarantee anything; he knew too well that human beings find it impossible to remain always constant. But Henry, at the end, realizes that he was in error, not so much in running, but in deserting the tattered soldier in the fields when he needed help. Henry's transgression was a selfish abdication of his duties toward his fellow man and his own sense of right. He is still human enough to be glad that the mistake was performed in secret, but he realizes that his experiences have wrought a profound change in him. The passage in which this is best shown needs to be quoted in its entirety for Henry's new vision to be made clear:

Yet gradually he mustered force to put the sin at a distance. And at last his eyes seemed to open to some new ways. He found that he could look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly. He was gleeful when he discovered that he now despised them.

With this conviction came a store of assurance. He felt a quiet manhood, non-assertive but of sturdy and strong blood. He knew that he would no more quail before his guides, wherever they should point. He had

been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man.

So it came to pass that, as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath, his soul changed. He came from hot plough-shares to prospects of clover tranquilly, and it was as if hot ploughshares were not. Scars faded as flowers.<sup>41</sup>

The youth's assurance is not in vain; he has emerged from the fray with a new understanding.

The foregoing lengthy discussion of the plot movement of The Red Badge was undertaken to show that Crane could write a unified, well-designed novel. Maggie and George's Mother lack the coherence of The Red Badge, and Crane never again wrote a novel that was as well designed as the latter. But Crane wrote only two works later that approach or exceed it in length, and in each of them he dealt with entirely different material. After The Red Badge, it is the short works that best exemplify Crane's artistry.

It is not so much the plot development by incidents that gives unity to The Red Badge, however; it is the symbolism in certain incidents that, taken together, fuse the work into a unified whole. Crane was not a practitioner of the "well-made" novel, which may be defined as a strongly plotted novel surveying humanity from the standpoint of genteel good taste; indeed, the extreme realism which Crane did much to initiate contributed greatly toward bringing about the decline of the well-made novel of his time.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>42</sup>Beach, p. 321.

Nevertheless, the plot of The Red Badge plays a more important part in the structure of the novel than is popularly supposed, and resembles the plot of the usual well-made novel of the last two decades of the nineteenth century:

In the well-made novel the plot was greatly reduced and subordinated to the psychological interest; or, rather, identified with it. The plot was strictly confined to some narrow spiritual issue. But this issue, which limits the plot, gives it its sharp definition and makes it a plot.<sup>43</sup>

In The Red Badge it is the symbolism that elucidates the spiritual issue and, as the reader looks back over the novel in his mind, gives certain parts of the plot structure a special significance.

The subject of the novel is the problem of moral conduct, and the theme is that it is only through change, through immersion in the elements of experience themselves, that man can conquer his fears and weaknesses, can grow spiritually. To make these things apparent, Crane used a great deal of religious symbolism, somewhat obscure, it is true, but undeniably contributing to the meaning of the novel. Read with attention to it and to its meaning in terms of development of plot and theme, the novel gains immeasurably as a work of art and as a comment on life.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 403.

<sup>44</sup>The religious imagery in The Red Badge and its significance in supporting the theme and meaning were first pointed out by Stallman in 1951. The exegesis in this paper is based on his in works previously cited, but is an extension of it in some instances.



Crane's symbolism is not obtrusive, but it is there for the careful reader to see and appreciate. It is most apparent in the Jim Conklin episode, which, when viewed in light of the theme, is the most significant in the whole work.

Henry, wandering about in the rear after running, feels himself to be an outcast. He is shown to be like that first and greatest of all outcasts, Cain:

Because of the tattered soldier's question he now felt that his shame could be viewed. He was continually casting side-long glances to see if the men were contemplating the letters of guilt he felt burned into his brow.<sup>45</sup>

The Jim Conklin episode is the beginning of Henry's regeneration, although it is to be a long time before his salvation is made complete and acceptable, either to him or to the reader. Read closely, the Jim Conklin scene is clearly a crucifixion, a sacrifice which is the basis of Henry's release from estrangement, from selfish egotism. The initials J. C., when taken with other descriptive passages, can hardly be accidental. Jim is presented in this scene in the following terms:

There could be seen a certain stiffness in the movements of his body, as if he were taking infinite care not to arouse the passion of his wounds.<sup>46</sup>

His look was fixed again upon the unknown. He moved with mysterious purpose, and all of the youth's offers he brushed aside.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Crane, Work, I, 92.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., pp. 92-93.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

A little later, from the viewpoint of Henry and the tattered soldier:

They began to have thoughts of a solemn ceremony. There was something rite-like in these movements of the doomed soldier. And there was a resemblance in him to a devotee of a mad religion, blood-sucking, muscle-wrenching, bone-crushing. They were awed and afraid. They hung back lest he have at his command a dreadful weapon.<sup>48</sup>

And then, after Jim dies:

As the flap of the blue jacket fell away from the body, he could see that the side looked as if it had been chewed by wolves.

The youth turned, with sudden, livid rage, toward the battlefield. He shook his fist. He seemed about to deliver a philippic.

"Hell--"

The red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer.<sup>49</sup>

The wafer is the dipped Host, of course, symbol of absolution and salvation. This famous metaphor, sometimes praised as an example of Crane's colorful style and sometimes blamed as an amateurish straining for effect, is, when properly understood, seen to be not just a whim of writing, a merely decorative image, but an integral part of the meaning of the book.<sup>50</sup>

A little later, religious imagery is used to reinforce Henry's desire to immerse himself in battle, the only way in which he can achieve peace: "In the battle-blur his face

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>50</sup>Crane may have unconsciously echoed a phrase in Kipling's The Light That Failed. Scott C. Osborn, "Stephen Crane's Imagery: 'Pasted Like a Wafer,'" American Literature, XXIII (November, 1951), 362. But his use of the image was conscious and particularized, unlike Kipling's.

would, in a way, be hidden, like the face of a cowed man."<sup>51</sup> In his longing for salvation he even has a puerile desire for a painless martyrdom. Thinking of the lucky dead, he feels cheated.

They might have been killed by lucky chances. . . before they had had opportunities to flee or before they had been really tested. Yet they would receive laurels from tradition. He cried out bitterly that their crowns were stolen and their robes of glorious memories were shams. However, he still said that it was a great pity he was not as they.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, near the end of the work, Henry loses his self-consciousness and approaches the spirit of Jim Conklin: "He himself felt the daring spirit of a savage religion-mad. He was capable of profound sacrifices, a tremendous death."<sup>53</sup> He did not die physically, but he died to his old life of pride and self-delusion. The theme and structure of the work is greatly enhanced by Crane's use of symbolism.

The point of view in The Red Badge is almost wholly that of the youth, and Crane's handling of it contributes a great deal to the impressionism of the work. The impressionist novelist, like the impressionist painter, sees his subject less in terms of outline and more in terms of the mass which strikes the eye.<sup>54</sup> His problem as an impressionist writer is to transfer the impression to the reader as he himself sees it. Crane solved the problem by presenting the

<sup>51</sup>Crane, Work, I, 107.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>54</sup>Beach, p. 383.

material through the eyes of the youth. The youth sees things impressionistically, and since there is no obvious shifting of the point of view, the reader accepts the way in which the material is presented as perfectly natural. Here is a typical example of the kind of thing Henry sees and the way in which he renders it:

The guns squatted in a row like savage chiefs. They argued with abrupt violence. It was a grim pow-wow. Their busy servants ran hither and thither.

A small procession of wounded men was going drearily toward the rear. It was a flow of blood from the torn body of the brigade.

To the right and to the left were the dark lines of other troops. Far in front he thought he could see lighter masses protruding in points from the forest. They were suggestive of unnumbered thousands.<sup>55</sup>

Most of the battle scenes are restricted, for Henry cannot see very far in the dust and smoke. When the scene is widened, Crane is always careful to justify it.

He stood, erect and tranquil, watching the attack begin against a part of the line that made a blue curve along the side of an adjacent hill. His vision being unmo-  
lested by smoke from the rifles of his companions, he had opportunities to see parts of the hard fight. It was a relief to perceive at last from whence came some of these noises which had been roared into his ears.<sup>56</sup>

And on the occasions when the point of view is that of the whole regiment, as sometimes happens, there is no incongruity with the dominant point of view of Henry alone. A point that should be stressed is that, even when Crane slips, mixing the point of view, when he fails to keep as firm control over it as he might, there is no sense of

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<sup>55</sup>Crane, Work, I, 69.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

incongruity on the reader's part: he is not aware of a break in the narrative. Crane did not handle the point of view with the strict attention that James did, but his instinctive craftsmanship kept him from transgressing against the method, once he had set it up; in spirit, if not always in actuality, it is wholly consistent. Joseph Hergesheimer put the matter justly over thirty years ago:

He [Henry] is singularly candid; and all the sentences, all the pages, have an air of coming from him. Even the lyrical beauty of the objective descriptions, impossible for him to formulate, take the shape and fervour of his inherited reactions to them.<sup>57</sup>

The methods Crane chose to render reality, to give the reader the "feel" of the action as well as a reconstitution of it in the plot structure and in the story, have to be considered in a study of The Red Badge. A great deal of his success can be ascribed to his consistency in handling the point of view. But there were other problems. Just what was Henry to see, and how was what he saw to be rendered to the reader? Such matters as selectivity of details, word choice, the use of conversation, and the narrative method enter into this problem.

The most immediate trait of The Red Badge, when read as a war novel, is the lack of documentation. A thorough-going naturalist would have felt constrained to give many more

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<sup>57</sup> Joseph Hergesheimer, "Introduction," The Work of Stephen Crane, edited by Wilson Follett (New York, 1925-1927), I, xiv.

facts about the men than Crane does: how they were dressed, the kind of arms they carried, what they had to eat, and all of the other facts that are interesting in themselves but may or may not be a direct contribution to a novel. Crane gives his readers none of these. In giving the feel of the action, he relies upon forcefulness of picture to make the situation vivid to the reader, and neglects accuracy of detail and documentation. Nor does Crane feel that he must expatiate upon the meaning of the various episodes in his own person. In The Red Badge, as in almost all his work, he keeps carefully in the background. To make his facts seem real to the reader, he gives them just that meaning which they have for Henry, whereupon they become meanings for the reader also. The Jim Conklin episode is a good example. Without value as a mere fact, it is of vital importance to the work because of its meaning to Henry. Most of the episodes in the book are of this nature. Dissolved in Henry's consciousness, they become richer and fuller for it; and they therefore have a fuller meaning for the reader.

The Red Badge is a relatively short novel, and Crane was faced with the problem of selecting the details for presentation through Henry's mind that would contribute most to the total effect of the novel. Grabo, speaking of the problem of selection of details, states:

Two criteria for selection there are: the incident may be told because it is vivid, interesting in itself; or because it is, in some way, significant, falling, that

is, into a pattern whereby the author imposes some sort of an interpretation upon experience.<sup>58</sup>

Crane always selects his details with the latter view in mind; he is always conscious of the need for rendering only those details that will add to the narrative flow of the novel. It is true that Crane wrote before the stream-of-consciousness method had been developed--what the reader is given is not a flowing stream of thought, but a narrator's report<sup>59</sup>--but his writing gives the reader the illusion of seeing the characters' thoughts, and is without that occasional defect of the extreme stream-of-consciousness method whereby so much superfluous detail is offered that the story is encumbered.<sup>60</sup> Crane in The Red Badge created the illusion of the reader's seeing into Henry's mind and watching its operation, but he avoided the slowing down of the narrative which is a common feature of later psychological novels. It was a happy medium to strike.

The narrative of The Red Badge is conducted by the pictorial rather than the dramatic method, although some of the individual scenes rise to the level of drama because of their immediacy. The events are reflected in the mirror of Henry's consciousness and are bathed in the particular mood that is his at the time. This reflection and immersion

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<sup>58</sup>Grabo, p. 257.

<sup>59</sup>Edel, p. 22.

<sup>60</sup>C. John McCole, Lucifer at Large (New York, 1937), p. 98.

account for the peculiar descriptive method employed in The Red Badge. Crane could not abandon Henry to describe scene on his own, lest the illusion of the novel be shattered; therefore, he blent the descriptions with action. As an example, when Henry is in the final battle, very busy himself, he nevertheless sees what is going on about him, and his impressions take the form of a blurred but vivid picture:

Once the youth saw a spray of light forms go in hound-like leaps toward the waving blue lines. There was much howling, and presently it went away with a vast mouthful of prisoners. Again, he saw a blue wave dash with such thunderous force against a grey obstruction that it seemed to clear the earth of it and leave nothing but trampled sod.<sup>61</sup>

Although the narrative method is essentially pictorial, scenes often rise to the height of drama because of the absolute absence of the author and the dramatic quality of the scene. Especially during conversations--and there is much conversation in The Red Badge, although much of it is in short snatches--the narrative partakes as much of the dramatic method as of the pictorial.

The Red Badge of Courage, when compared with the earlier works, is seen to be a distinct advance in artistry. Crane served his apprenticeship in Maggie and the others, and he learned a great deal from them. The most important advance, perhaps, is in consistency of treatment. Both

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<sup>61</sup>Crane, Work, I, 183.



Maggie and George's Mother had long expository passages in which the characters were described but not shown; The Red Badge is free from this. The Sullivan County Sketches frequently averred that the characters were in a rage of anger or a paroxysm of fear, but the reader never felt their emotions himself, as he does in The Red Badge. The plot structure of the earlier novels failed to have the structural unity of The Red Badge; and the narrative flow of the former was vastly improved in the latter. But above all, Crane in The Red Badge rendered experience in such a way that it made a comment on life that is universal in its application. In the view of Henry isolated from society by his own fears and weaknesses, the reader sees in the working out of the problem the art of fiction at its best. The rendition of the action in terms of situation and scene, not from the point of view of the author, but in such a way that the reader makes it a part of himself, is one of the highest goals of the fiction-writer.<sup>62</sup> And that Crane was able to do in The Red Badge of Courage.

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<sup>62</sup>Allen Tate, "Techniques of Fiction," Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, edited by John W. Aldridge (New York, 1952), p. 41.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LATER WORKS

During the first half of 1895 Crane went on an extended trip into the West and Mexico for the Bachelier Syndicate, ranging from such diverse points as New Orleans to Arizona, and ending at Mexico City. Although in ill health, he must have felt hopeful about his career and his personal fortunes, despite the fact that none of his most serious works had as yet been "properly" published. Behind him were Maggie, George's Mother, a number of short stories, The Red Badge of Courage, and his poems collected as The Black Riders, the latter two works being on the brink of publication in book form. The Red Badge had already been published in various newspapers in a shortened version, and newspapers and publishers were willing to invest in him as an author, although he was as yet unknown to the public.<sup>1</sup> While in the West and Mexico, he wrote little besides the required dispatches, but he was absorbing material that would appear in a group of later tales, all of which enjoyed reasonable success. During the trip itself, he appears to have written only one story, and that on the subject of war, entitled "A

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<sup>1</sup>Berryman, pp. 97-98.

Mystery of Heroism."<sup>2</sup> A Poe-like fantasy, "A Tale of Mere Chance," could possibly have been written in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Three Mexican stories were written in 1895, after Crane returned: "Horses--One Dash,"<sup>4</sup> "The Wise Men,"<sup>5</sup> and "A Man and Some Others,"<sup>6</sup> but most of his stories based on his Western experiences were written during the next year, and some of them much later, after "The Open Boat."

A probable reason for Crane's postponement of some of the Western tales until long after he had returned was that he was busy throughout the latter part of 1895 on a novel, The Third Violet, and during that fall and the following spring was working on some war stories which were collected and published in 1896 under the volume title The Little Regiment, the name of one of the individual stories. It is easy to understand why Crane should have undertaken The Third Violet at this time: his friends and editors were urging a longer work on him;<sup>7</sup> and after selling The Red Badge he must have felt more certain of his ability to handle longer works than he had attempted previously. The Third Violet, however, is an artistic failure. The love story proved utterly untractable to Crane, and the book

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>4</sup>Stellman, Stephen Crane, p. 479.

<sup>5</sup>Berryman, p. 112.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

falls into two disunited sections, the first dealing with the vacation idyll and the second with the hero's bohemian life in New York. Crane failed to unite the two structurally, and he forced a happy ending on the story. His editor, Ripley Hitchcock, was dubious about the work, and Crane himself realized that he had fallen far below his performance in The Red Badge. Writing to Hitchcock in January, 1896, he showed that he was aware of the weakness of the novel:

I think it is as well to go ahead with The Third Violet. People may just as well discover now that the high dramatic key of The Red Badge cannot be sustained. You know what I mean. I don't think The Red Badge to be any great shakes but then the very theme of it gives it an intensity that a writer can't reach every day. The Third Violet is a quiet little story but then it is a serious work and I should say let it go. If my health and my balance remains to me, I think I will be capable of doing work that will dwarf both books.<sup>8</sup>

Inscribed in a copy that he gave away in June of 1897 was one of his laconic comments that, in this case, must have been serious: "This book is even worse than any of the others."<sup>9</sup> After the work had been serialized in newspapers in the fall of 1896, he refused to rewrite it for book publication, saying that to do so would be "dishonest";<sup>10</sup> the truth probably was that he knew he could make little of the book as it was conceived and written, and decided to give it up as a bad job. The Third Violet is wholly unlike Crane's

<sup>8</sup>Stallman, Stephen Crane, pp. 645-646.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 660.

<sup>10</sup>Berryman, p. 131.

previous work, being mostly conversation, and that of the most insipid sort, with none of the subjectivity and pictorial presentation of scenes that allowed Crane to exercise his best talents. Ford Madox Ford, who knew Crane well and is reasonably perceptive in his comments about him, seems to be alone among critics in expressing a fondness for the work.<sup>11</sup> Crane's economy of phrasing, usually effective in either exposition or subjective rendering, is at work in The Third Violet, but the jerky, unimportant dialogue and the thin, over-compressed scenes fail as narration and as picture. A fairer estimate than Ford's is that of a contemporary review, which, speaking of the dialogue, complained that Crane "blotted out individuality without offering any legitimate artistic substitute."<sup>12</sup> All that The Third Violet has to recommend it is a story, not a very good one at that, so that it, along with Active Service and the few short stories in which the love interest figures prominently, joins the list of Crane's failures. Personal crises of other kinds were more amenable to Crane's talent.

#### The Mexican Stories

The kind of situation that Crane exploited best in all of his stories is that of a man facing some sort of crisis,

<sup>11</sup>Ford, "Techniques," p. 26.

<sup>12</sup>"The Third Violet," The Critic, XXX (n. s. 27) (June 26, 1897), 438.

often death, the tale being constructed upon the man's reaction to the crisis. This situation is embodied in "Horses--One Dash," the first in order of composition of the stories with a Mexican setting. Richardson, an American, is traveling in Mexico with a Mexican servant. Stopping in a hotel for the night, he is awakened by loud talking just outside his room. A Mexican desperado bursts in and announces that he is going to kill and rob the "rich" Yankee. There is a long, intense scene in which the two men stare at each other, the Mexican somewhat disconcerted by Richardson's apparent stolidity. Actually, Richardson is in an agony of fear. The Mexican is temporarily diverted by the arrival of some girls brought in for him and his men and retires into the next room, announcing that he will return later. During the revelry Richardson summons enough courage to slip out, and he and the servant flee on horseback, the bandits giving pursuit until the chase is stopped by the appearance of some Mexican rurales. The story is exciting and well-written, despite some defects of handling which mar the total effect. Richardson's emotions during the confrontation scene are made real, but the story breaks in half after his escape from the dark little room, haunted by the proximity of Death just beyond the hanging curtain. The second part of the story belongs to the horses as much as to Richardson, and neither part belongs entirely to the reader because of a few examples of direct authorial comment. Right in the middle

of a passage which makes the reader himself feel Richardson's plight as the desperado glares at him, Crane breaks in and spoils the illusion, making the reader aware that he is being told a story rather than being presented one:

My friend, take my advice, and never be executed by a hangman who doesn't talk the English language. It, or anything that resembles it, is the most difficult of deaths. The tumultuous emotions of Richardson's terror destroyed that slow and careful process of thought by which he understood Mexican. Then he used his instinctive comprehension of the first and universal language, which is tone. Still, it is disheartening not to be able to understand the detail of threats against the blood of your body.<sup>13</sup>

Such comments make the reader feel that the whole affair is Richardson's plight, not his. There is pictorial power in the scenes as Richardson sees them, and his impressions are forcefully rendered so long as Crane keeps out of the work; but the occasional intrusions mar it, and the departure from unity of conception, which allows the story to fall into two halves, keeps it from being one of Crane's great stories, even though it is, with "The Five White Mice," the best of his Mexican works. When Crane departs from the impressionist canon of complete objectivity of treatment (even though the action may be subjective), his stories suffer.

Two other stories with Mexican settings written during 1895 and 1896 fall below "Horses--One Dash." They are "A Man and Some Others," and "The Wise Men," the latter probably the first of three stories with two "kids," the New

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<sup>13</sup>Crane, Work, XII, 207.

York Kid and the San Francisco Kid, as main characters.<sup>14</sup>

"The Wise Men" has no theme, being merely an account of the two kids' bet that a fat bartender can beat another acquaintance of theirs in a footrace, whereupon the fat bartender surprises everybody, the kids included, in doing so. It has few touches of Crane's impressionistic technique. "A Man and Some Others," likewise deficient in impressionistic technique, nevertheless embodies a typical Crane situation, that of a man facing death. It is weakened by a long discourse Crane makes on the background of the American sheep-herder who is the hero, sketching in his past life in the United States. All of this is of little importance in the story as it is being presented, and keeps the piece from having the intensity of Crane's impressionistic manner as found in his best work.

Of the stories dealing with the kids, the best is "The Five White Mice," which has a further importance in showing a change in Crane's philosophy. It is a unified whole, even though there are two separate scenes, because Crane designs the first scene in such a way that it foreshadows the magnificent second scene, the crux of the story, in theme. The New York Kid joins some Americans in a saloon and gets into a dice game with them, the one who loses being required to take the entire group to the circus. At last all are

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<sup>14</sup>Berryman, p. 112.



eliminated except the New York Kid and one other person, who throws five queens. The Kid throws four times and gets four aces. On the fifth throw, he quickly covers the die with the cup and offers to bet fifty dollars that it, too, is an ace. There are no takers; his calm assurance makes cowards of the whole group even though the odds against him are astronomical. Lifting the cup, he shows the crowd a ten; and the party leaves for the circus after the Kid has turned down, regretfully, the proposal of the Frisco Kid and another friend, Benson, that the three of them go out for a night of roistering. Passing through the streets late that night, the sober Kid encounters the other and Benson dead drunk. There is a collision with some shadowy figures, an oath or two, and the three friends find themselves backed against a wall by three Mexicans whose hands greedily hover about the place where their knives are kept. The remainder of the story, some seven pages, is concerned with the sober Kid's thoughts at this moment of imminent death. It is with surprise that he remembers his revolver. He is even more surprised when he finds that he has the strength to draw it. The thoughts that go through his mind while all this is taking place are in the manner of The Red Badge, and, although the scene is pictorial--the reader's attention is on the Kid's thoughts rather than directly upon the action--the scene has a dramatic impact that is possible when pictorial scenes reach a certain height of intensity.

Only in a small way is the rendering interrupted by Crane making comments as the author, and in at least one of these intrusions his purpose is to show the reader the rapidity of the Kid's thoughts and their fusion into one impression. He does not achieve his purpose, since any break is an intrusion and tends to shatter the spell, no matter how apt the comment might be.

These views were perfectly stereopticon, flashing in and away from his thought with an inconceivable rapidity, until, after all, they were simply one quick, dismal impression. And now, here is the unreal real: Into this Kid's nostrils, at the expectant moment of slaughter, had come the scent of new-mown hay, a fragrance from a field of prostrate grass, a fragrance which contained the sunshine, the bees, the peace of meadows, and the wonder of a distant crooning stream. It had no right to be supreme, but it was supreme, and he breathed it as he waited for pain and a sight of the unknown.<sup>15</sup>

A likely explanation for Crane's writing passages like this one is that he was giving conscious thought to the problem of showing the human mind in action. Similar passages appear in several of the works after The Red Badge, showing Crane's interest in the problems inherent in subjective rendering of material. The later stream-of-consciousness writers attempted to show the stereopticon views flashing in and out with inconceivable rapidity; but they, too, failed to achieve exactly what they desired, since, after all, the mind of the reader can never be completely equated with that

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<sup>15</sup>Crane, Work, XII, 171.

of a character. In giving the illusion of equation, however, Crane was ahead of the writers of his time.

The change in philosophy that "The Five White Mice" illustrates is a movement toward a relaxation of Crane's belief in determinism, a movement toward a belief in the efficacy of personal endeavor. Circumstances do not always determine a man's fate, he seems to say; for the Kid changed his situation completely even though he was convinced that he was going to die, no matter what he did. The Kid was surprised when the Mexicans showed sudden fear: like Henry Fleming, he had thought that he was the only person capable of it. In almost all of Crane's work determinism seems to bulk large, for his characters are shown in crises which, in most cases, are not of their making; and the outcome of the situations very often depends almost entirely upon a chance word, thought, or gesture. But in The Red Badge it was seen that the youth's chief concern was the problem of moral conduct, and he decided at the end of the work that conduct determined one's fate, at least insofar as one was willing to make a conscious attempt to determine his fate. In "The Five White Mice" the element of chance, at first glance, appears to determine everything. Benson thinks that he has put the whole situation in a nutshell at the end of the story:

Benson suddenly propelled himself from his dreamful position against the wall. "Frisco Kid's all right. He's drunk's fool, and he's all right. But you

New York Kid, you're shober." He passed into a state of profound investigation.

"Kid shober 'cause didn't go with us. Didn't go with us 'cause went to damn circus. Went to damn circus 'cause lose shakin' dice. Lose shakin' dice 'cause--what make lose shakin' dice, Kid?"

The New York Kid eyed the senile youth. "I don't know. The five white mice, maybe."<sup>16</sup>

There it is--chance. But Crane shows clearly that it was not chance that determined the matter; it was the Kid's own doing. When he faced the crowd and bet fifty dollars on an almost impossible dice combination, with no one daring to call his bluff, the mood was already set for the encounter in the dark streets. The Kid discovered that he was not entirely at the mercy of chance in the dice-throwing scene, and he proved it in the street when he faced the Mexican who was curved like a Grandee. At the end, both the Kid and the reader know that the situation was not resolved by the five white mice of chance, although the "senile" Benson and the other Kid do not.

As a group, the Mexican stories are second-rate Crane. The range of artistic excellence among them is wide, however; "The Five White Mice" ranks near some of Crane's best work, whereas "The Wise Men" must be counted as mere entertainment. "A Man and Some Others" and "Horses--One Dash" rank somewhat below "The Five White Mice." Crane's impressionism is not so evident in these stories as in The Red Badge of Courage, "The Open Boat," and some of his best

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 174-175.

stories on war. It is even less evident in The Monster of 1897 and in most of the work after "The Open Boat" of 1898, after which time ill health, financial troubles, and pressure from his publishers caused Crane to write rapidly and journalistically. A fair judgment is that Crane is at his best when he writes most impressionistically, that is, when he refrains from making direct comment in the stories, when he concerns himself with characters' moods and emotions, when he gives the "feel" of an action instead of a report of it, when he uses symbolism to heighten his effects, and when he discards plot for a single action presented in a primarily pictorial manner. These things he did not always do in the Mexican stories.

#### The War Tales of 1896

Crane's interest in war, evident throughout his writing career, resulted in 1896 in a book of war stories published as The Little Regiment, the title of the lead story in the volume. One of the stories, "A Grey Sleeve," was written as early as 1894, "A Mystery of Heroism" was written in Mexico, and the rest of the collection was written some time during 1895 and 1896. Of the title story, Crane said in a letter to a friend in November, 1895:

I am writing a story--"The Little Regiment" for McClure. It is awfully hard. I have invented the sum of my invention in regard to war and this story keeps

me in internal despair. However I am coming on with it very comfortably after all.<sup>17</sup>

About the same time he said that "The Little Regiment" would be positively his last thing dealing with battle.<sup>18</sup> Fortunately, he was wrong, for "Death and the Child," "An Episode of War," and "The Upturned Face" were to follow within the next three years. Not so fortunately, Crane was to expend a great deal of energy in writing such works as "War Memories" and Great Battles of the World; but he was in need of money during the closing years of his life, and it would be unreasonable to expect of a man slowly dying of tuberculosis that all of his work be of uniformly excellent quality. Like the Mexican stories, the tales in the war volume of 1896 are uneven. That being so, how much more likely that the work during 1899 and early 1900, the closing months of Crane's life, should fall below most of the works written at the height of his artistic powers.

The best story of the group published in 1896 is "A Mystery of Heroism," embodying as it does the usual ironic situation, restricted action, and discovery of the chief character about himself that is characteristic of Crane's best work. In many of his stories the discovery takes the form of a change in vision, in outlook on life, or it takes the form of a sudden disillusion. The latter is the theme

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<sup>17</sup>Stallman, Stephen Crane, p. 632.

<sup>18</sup>Berryman, p. 131.

of "A Mystery of Heroism." Collins, the hero, is foolishly persuaded to attempt to get water from a nearby well during a lively shell and small-arms bombardment. He gets back to his company with a bucket of water, in itself a miracle, only to have the water spilled in a playful scuffle between two young lieutenants. The empty bucket on the ground symbolizes Collins' disillusionment: he has found that it is nothing to be a hero.

Crane's impressionism is in evidence throughout the story. The situation itself is well adapted to impressionistic handling, there being no plot, only a situation; and much of the action is subjective, being shown through Collins' eyes. The opening part of the story is a picture of the battlefield as seen through the eyes of the company. Later, the point of view shifts to Collins, so that it gradually restricts as the story progresses. When Collins and his thirst are introduced, he is dared to go to the well, accepts the challenge--and the center of interest becomes Collins' reactions to what is taking place. Indeed, Collins' reactions are the action of the story. In the hands of a more conventional story-teller than Crane, the interest might be mere curiosity about whether Collins will make it through or not, but as Crane handles it, the interest is in Collins' view of the situation. "A Mystery of Heroism" is in essence a miniature Red Badge of Courage: the treatment of material, the organization, the theme are very

similar. Collins' feelings at a given time are as tentative as Henry's, and as subject to change. They do change, and with almost lightning rapidity. Within seconds he has two entirely different reactions to his plight as he goes toward the well:

. . . he had no full appreciation of anything, excepting that he was actually conscious of being dazed. He could feel his dulled mind groping after the form and colour of this incident. He wondered why he did not feel some keen agony of fear cutting his sense like a knife. He wondered at this, because human expression had said loudly for centuries that men should feel afraid of certain things, and that all men who did not feel this fear were phenomena--heroes.

He was, then, a hero.<sup>19</sup>

But a few seconds later:

Collins suddenly felt that two demon fingers were pressed into his ears. He could see nothing but flying arrows, flaming red. He lurched from the shock of this explosion, but he made a mad rush for the house, which he viewed as a man submerged to the neck in a boiling surf might view the shore. In the air little pieces of shell howled, and the earthquake explosions drove him insane with the menace of their roar. As he ran the canteens knocked together with a rhythmical tinkling.<sup>20</sup>

The transience of mood is a recurring motif throughout Crane's works. This trait of impressionism was described some fifteen years after Crane's death, when the method had been observed in the short story, especially, but had not been studied out very well:

Impressionism as a technique is a means of recording the transitory nature of phenomena and the fluidity of motion. As a principle it is based on the

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<sup>19</sup>Crane, Work, II, 102.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 103.



philosophy of change. As painters, as writers, as musicians, impressionists are not so much men of strong convictions and deep words as they are craftsmen recording the flitting sensations of an ever changing world. The chief interest of impressionism is the ephemeral.<sup>21</sup>

The ephemeral does bulk large in Crane; but the impressions of the characters in his best stories are grouped into a design, so that the stories have a meaning, a significance that causes them to rise above the level of mere entertainment but does not strike the reader as conscious didacticism.

In "A Mystery of Heroism" the selection of details follows the impressionistic method of selecting only those necessary to give weight and validity to the scenes and action. Hence, only those things are presented in setting a scene that appeal to the senses strongly: much color, striking little snapshots of action, sounds, and odors. When someone yells that the bugler is hit, Crane with a few brief strokes of the pen suggests the picture to the reader but does not fill it in for him, leaving the filling in to the reader's own imagination:

As the eyes of half the regiment swept in one machine-like movement, there was an instant's picture of a horse in a great convulsive leap of a death-wound and a rider leaning back with a crooked arm and spread fingers before his face. On the ground was the crimson terror of an exploding shell, with fibres of flame that seemed like lances. A glittering bugle swung clear of the rider's back as fell headlong the

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<sup>21</sup>Weinberg, "Current Impressionism," p. 124.

horse and the man. In the air was an odour as from a conflagration.<sup>22</sup>

In this passage, typical of the brief and flashing pictures found throughout the story, it is perhaps the bugle swinging clear as the man falls that gives the reader a sense of completeness: it is the kind of thing one might see in the second it takes a man and horse to fall to the ground. In the passage in which Collins suddenly realizes his danger and begins to run to the safety of the well, he notices only one thing besides the shells flying around: his canteen is banging against his hip. Used effectively, discriminated detail can fulfill the function of many sentences of documentation when a writer is trying to fix a scene in the reader's eye, or make him understand the way the mind of a character is working.

"The Little Regiment," "Three Miraculous Soldiers," "An Indiana Campaign," and "A Grey Sleeve," other war stories of 1896, are more conventional in conception than "A Mystery of Heroism," and lack the design and power of that work. "An Indiana Campaign" is in the vein of "The Reluctant Voyagers," one of Crane's early attempts at a mixture of the comic and serious. In the war story, the humor arises from the ambitious campaign of an old, retired army officer to capture an escaped rebel prisoner reported in the woods near a Northern village, the rebel turning out to be only the town drunk.

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<sup>22</sup>Crane, Work, II, 95-96.

"A Grey Sleeve" is built on a common theme of the last third of the nineteenth century: how, now and then,

. . . love crosses the lines and a Confederate girl magnanimously, though only after a desperate struggle with herself, marries a Union officer who has saved the old plantation from a marauding band of Union soldiers. . . .<sup>23</sup>

In Crane's story, the romance just begins to bloom. Charming but slight, "A Grey Sleeve" is not in Crane's usual manner and suffers when compared with most of his work.<sup>24</sup>

"Three Miraculous Soldiers," another of the group, is notable among Crane's short stories for an almost unbroken point of view, that of a young girl who is hiding three rebel soldiers in the family barn when a group of Northern soldiers arrive and take the barn over for themselves. The rebels

<sup>23</sup>Carl Van Doren, The American Novel, 1789-1939 (New York, 1940), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>Crane apparently recognized his ineptness at writing love stories, for he attempted few of them. Shortly before The Little Regiment was published, he planned a Civil War play with Clyde Fitch, the dramatist, which was never written. Fitch wanted a woman in it; Crane refused. Beer, p. 148. In Beer's brief remarks on the matter, the clear implication is that the chief, if not the only, difference between the two men was the question of having a woman in the play. However, there were probably more pressing reasons for the play's being dropped. Crane was not good at making plots, and his writing talent ran more toward pictorial presentation than toward dramatic. It is extremely doubtful that he would have been able to help Fitch very much either in conceiving or in writing a play. On another occasion he discussed a play with Conrad over a period of time, the two of them planning to write it, but again, no attempt was made. Conrad admitted that the idea was not a good one. Joseph Conrad, "Introduction," Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters (Garden City, New York, 1927), p. 29.

take refuge in a feedbox, eventually tunnel out, and escape. Crane's pictorial talent is not shown to good advantage in this story; and the girl, who is terrified for the Confederate troopers, does not evoke much sympathy even though the story is hers and the reader sees almost nothing except what she sees. Her mind is the center of interest, but the whole situation has little impact as it is presented. The question arises whether the mind of one of the soldiers might not have been a better place for Crane to stage his story.

The title story of the group, "The Little Regiment," is not the best, as Crane may have thought; that distinction goes to "A Mystery of Heroism." The subject of the title story is the relationship between Dan and Billie, twin soldiers in the same company who love each other dearly and are inseparable. They quarrel over a trifle and quit speaking to each other. During a patrol one of them fails to return and is presumed lost; the other studiously feigns indifference. The first turns up eventually and the two are reconciled when they exchange quiet greetings. The subject lacks the importance of that of "A Mystery of Heroism," and the story lacks the intensity that is characteristic of Crane's best war tales. Although the writing evokes pictures and feelings quite well, the pictures and feelings are not important nor arranged in a pattern of meaning. There is less rendering of mood and sensations, a quality in which Crane always excelled, than in his best work; and

passages like the following, giving a picture of the camp in a few well-chosen words and images, are too rare for the story to be representative of Crane at his best:

Ultimately the night deepened to the tone of black velvet. The outlines of the fireless camp were like the faint drawings upon ancient tapestry. The glint of a rifle, the shine of a button, might have been of threads of silver and gold sewn upon the fabric of the night. There was little presented to the vision, but to a sense more subtle there was discernible in the atmosphere something like a pulse; a mystic beating which would have told a stranger of the presence of a giant thing--the slumbering mass of regiments and batteries.<sup>25</sup>

Although the imagery of this passage is typical of Crane, the sentences are somewhat longer than in his earlier work, and in their increased length and subdued tone show a development toward the more fluid style found in many of the stories after The Red Badge.

Taken together, the stories on war published in 1896 fall below The Red Badge of Courage and most of the stories of 1897 and 1898. Crane had remarked when writing The Third Violet that the high dramatic key of The Red Badge could not be sustained; and it is true that only occasionally in his stories written after it did he rise to the level of the war novel. The Mexican stories and the war tales of 1896 are in the Crane idiom, however--compact, colorful, and, in the best of them, designed with imagery and metaphor to make worthwhile comments on life. The fact that they do not

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<sup>25</sup>Crane, Work, II, 40-41.

reach the level of The Red Badge of Courage does not preclude their excellence, nor does it preclude their being impressionism at a high level in the American short story.

1897 and 1898: "The Open Boat," "Death and the Child," and "The Blue Hotel"

In 1896 Crane had written a number of works on war, but he had never observed war at first hand. This he wished to do very much. When the Cuban insurrection against Spanish rule broke out in 1896, he felt that he at last had an opportunity to test his imaginative constructs against reality. In November he went to Jacksonville, Florida, in hope of getting to Cuba to report the insurrection and to observe it at first hand. For the next seven weeks or so he lounged around Jacksonville, observing the activities of the more or less openly operating contraband smugglers, and waiting for an opportunity to go to the island. At last, on New Year's Eve, he sailed as a seaman on the tug Commodore, which was loaded with rifles, ammunition, and Cubans going to the island to fight. On January 2, after having previously gone aground once, the ship began to leak badly, and sank just beyond viewing distance of the shore. Crane found himself and three other men in a dinghy, the life boats already full and gone, on the rough water.<sup>26</sup> Out of his

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<sup>26</sup>Berryman, pp. 155-165, has a good account of the incident and a discussion of some of the problems connected with it. Contemporary newspaper accounts of the wreck, one of them by Crane, are reprinted in Stallman, Stephen Crane, pp. 448-476.

experience was to come shortly after one of his best stories, "The Open Boat."

Although the facts of Crane's story follow closely the facts of the actual incident, "The Open Boat" is far from being a mere report; all that one has to do to see the difference is to compare the story with Crane's account of the matter which he wrote for the newspapers.<sup>27</sup> "The Open Boat" is based on fact, but it is designed as a work of art. The muted narrative of the story suits the quiet desperation and fatigue of the men; it is the tone that does most toward making the story what it is. The limited scene and muted tone are set in the opening paragraph:

None of them knew the colour of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colours of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose, and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks.<sup>28</sup>

As they row toward the shore, they are aware that full day has come because of a change in the color of the sea and occasional glimpses of the sun. At length they see a

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<sup>27</sup> Reprinted in Stallman, Stephen Crane, pp. 464-476, from the New York Press of January 7, 1897.

<sup>28</sup> Crane, Work, XII, 29. Gorham B. Munson, Style and Form in American Prose (Garden City, New York, 1929), p. 170, points out that the vocabulary of "The Open Boat" is limited to words that denote sensible objects and emotions, so that the circumstances of the struggle are particularized and personal, not generalized and intellectual.

"small, still thing on the edge of the swaying horizon. . . precisely like the point of a pin"<sup>29</sup> which turns out to be a lighthouse. Distances are suggested in such details as this.

The story has a rhythm of alternating hope and despair, just as The Red Badge does. When the first shock of the situation has passed, the men light cigars which have miraculously remained dry and talk of immediate rescue; their hope soon changes to despair when they see that they cannot take the small dinghy through the surf. All day they hover just outside the danger point, waiting for someone to see them, but nobody does. That night they have to row to keep the boat pointed into the waves, and the next morning their hopes are dashed again when the crowd of people and what they think is a lifeboat turns out to be a bus-load of vacationers from a hotel. There is no boat; they will have to swim for it. Their successive feelings of despair and hope through the long day, the night, and the beginning of another day recall those of Henry Fleming.

The dominant feeling of the men is that of loneliness, of estrangement from the rest of mankind. Crane shows this feeling by symbol and tone, never by direct statement:

As darkness finally settled, the shine of the light, lifting from the sea in the south, changed to full gold. On the northern horizon a new light appeared,

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<sup>29</sup>Crane, Work, XII, 35.



a small, bluish gleam on the edge of the waters. These two lights were the furniture of the world.<sup>30</sup>

During the long night, nature's word to man is only "a high cold star on a winter's night."<sup>31</sup> As they get closer to the beach the next day, a windmill seems to be "a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants."<sup>32</sup> Finally, when the correspondent is near to shore but is helpless in the grip of a current,

. . . the shore, with its white slope of sand and its green bluff topped with little silent cottages, was spread like a picture before him. It was very near to him then, but he was impressed as one who, in a gallery, looks at a scene from Brittany or Algiers.<sup>33</sup>

Everything is unreal to the men except the facts of their situation and the subtle bond of brotherhood between them.

As in The Red Badge, subdued symbolism is used with telling effect in "The Open Boat." The men are saved at the end, but only after one of their number has been sacrificed. The oiler, the strongest of the lot, is found face downward in the shallows, his back broken; in this story his symbolic function is the same as that of Jim Conklin in The Red Badge. His fate is foreshadowed early in the story when he steers with "a thin little oar. . . [that] seemed often ready to snap."<sup>34</sup> The man who plunges in and drags the men ashore at the end is pictured thus: "A halo was about his

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 47-48.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

head, and he shone like a saint."<sup>35</sup> As Conrad remarked without explaining, "The Open Boat" is a symbolic tale;<sup>36</sup> and the theme is similar to that of The Red Badge. It is only through immersion in the destructive element--in The Red Badge, war, in "The Open Boat," the sea--that regeneration is obtained. The men at the end of "The Open Boat" have had an experience which will color their lives from that time forward:

When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.<sup>37</sup>

Like Henry, they better understand themselves and the world they live in as a result of their experience.

The Cuban insurrection having come to naught so far as Crane's eternal quest for war was concerned, he next turned toward Greece and the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, serving as a war correspondent during that brief conflict.<sup>38</sup> In June he arrived in England with Cora Taylor Stewart Crane,<sup>39</sup> who had evidently followed him to Greece from Jacksonville, and began a residence which was to last for the rest of his life save for an absence during the next year to report the Spanish-American War in Cuba. The early period of Crane's

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>36</sup>Conrad, "Introduction," p. 13.

<sup>37</sup>Crane, Work, XII, 61.

<sup>38</sup>Berryman, pp. 172-178.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

English residence was very productive; in the first nine months he wrote The Monster, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," "Death and the Child," and "The Blue Hotel."<sup>40</sup> The first is a social study of persecution in a small American town, unlike Crane's manner in the impressionistic works; the third is a product of his Greek experiences; and the other two are based on the Western adventure of 1895. In addition to these, he was writing on a long novel which, like all his attempts at longer works save for The Red Badge, turned out to be a failure. The novel, Active Service, and "Death and the Child" are the only works based on his first direct view of war in Greece.

In contrast to "The Open Boat," "Death and the Child" is almost completely subjective: the mind of Peza, the correspondent of Greek blood who wants to get into the fight for his homeland, is the center of interest in this tale. Accordingly, Crane had a good opportunity to employ his impressionism in dealing with emotions. As in most of Crane's stories, Peza in this one makes a discovery about himself: he finds that he does not matter to nature. This theme, used in a number of Crane's works, is definitely naturalistic, and would seem to be a clear indication of Crane's determinism. But in "The Five White Mice" and The Red Badge it was seen that Crane is not a consistent

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

naturalist. The truth of the matter is that Crane must have felt differently at different times about deterministic influences. Moreover, there is a two-edged sword in the question that the child asks Peza, an implication of moral cowardice. When the question is asked, Peza is not a man.

Peza observes carefully all the amenities which he thinks are a part of war, so that the stage is set for the puncturing of his pride. There is the punctilious observance of form when he volunteers his services to the officers he meets; his posturing as he walks among the men is somewhat puerile. Like Henry, he is soon to find that war in actuality is not like war in romantic novels and adolescent dreams. His first doubts of the wisdom of his noble conduct come when he puts on the bandoleer of a dead soldier:

"Peza, having crossed the long cartridge-belt on his breast, felt that the dead man had flung his two arms around him."<sup>41</sup>

As he walks along the lines to his battle station, he encounters death in a manner reminiscent of Henry in the chapel scene:

He looked behind him, and saw that a head, by some chance, had been uncovered from its blanket. Two liquid-like eyes were staring into his face. The head was turned a little sideways, as if to get better opportunity for the scrutiny. Peza could feel himself blanch. He was being drawn and drawn by these dead men, slowly, firmly down, as to some mystic chamber under the earth, where they could walk, dreadful figures, swollen and blood-marked.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Crane, Work, XII, 265.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

It is then that Peza runs. The point of view briefly switches to the other men, who feel somehow vindicated when this stranger in the new white helmet dashes toward the rear. Some of them think he has been wounded in the neck, for he is tearing wildly at the bandoleer--but Peza thinks that the arms of the dead man are encircling and choking him.

Through the child, a symbol of the misery of life in a world of war, and also of the enduring quality of life, Peza learns that he is not the most important person in the world. Looking up at the baby, who stolidly stares down at him as he lies on the ground, Peza realizes abruptly that "the definition of his misery could be written on a wee grass-blade."<sup>43</sup> In several of Crane's earlier stories, the baby Tommie had represented a peculiar elemental force, a being of this world but strangely out of it, regarding with complete equanimity the vicissitudes of adult emotion. The child in "Death and the Child" has the same imperturbability: he is a manifestation of the impassivity and durability of nature. As a symbol, he serves his purpose in bringing about Peza's change in vision.

However, as H. G. Wells has observed, perhaps he serves his purpose too well,<sup>44</sup> that is, he is too obtrusively

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>44</sup>H. G. Wells, "Stephen Crane From an English Standpoint," The North American Review, CLXXI (August, 1900), 235.

introduced, and the application of the symbol is insisted upon a little too much. Wells points to "Death and the Child" as the beginning of a movement in Crane toward generalization, an increasing abandonment of the highly individual manner characteristic of Crane's earlier work. The reviews were calling for longer works than Crane had been doing; no doubt Active Service was an attempt on Crane's part to follow the advice of the critics.<sup>45</sup> But "Death and the Child" shows only the beginning of the decline; Crane's vigor is still apparent. Peza's emotions are as sharp and particularized in the subjective passages as those of most of the characters in the earlier works.

The creation of atmosphere and the depiction of action in isolated scenes, two traits of Crane's impressionism, are strongly represented in one of the stories written soon after the Greek story, "The Blue Hotel." Although it lacks the subjectivity of much of Crane's impressionistic writing, "The Blue Hotel" illustrates Crane's concern with the effect of color on the human psyche,<sup>46</sup> the driving tempo of much of his work, the depiction of an isolated scene by discriminated details, and the suggestion of atmosphere, in this case a kind of insanity caused by fear, that is

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>46</sup>A friend of Crane's says that Crane first became interested in the psychological effects of color after reading a passage in Goethe on the subject during his school days. Berryman, p. 24.

characteristic of his best writing. The mood of the story is set at the beginning by the blue hotel itself, which was "always screaming and howling in a way that made the dazzling winter landscape of Nebraska seem only a grey swampish hush."<sup>47</sup> The hysterical laugh of the Swede, who is convinced that he is going to be killed in this town which he regards as the lawless West, finally has the same effect on the reader that it does on the men in the story: he ought to be driven away. After a long string of outrageous actions brought on by his insane fear, the Swede is driven away, but it is then too late: the train of circumstances leading to his death have long been under way. When the Swede finally is killed, the fitness of the whole series of events, the inevitability of the action, is apparent even without the final coda which Crane included in the work unnecessarily, explaining through the conversation of the cowboy and the Easterner, many months later, that the Swede's death was the apex of a movement set in motion at the time of his appearance.<sup>48</sup> The Swede, through his own crazed actions, forces the issue of his fate; his eyes are fixed on the legend atop the cash register as he lies dead

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<sup>47</sup>Crane, Work, X, 93.

<sup>48</sup>The underlining of the moral of the story by adding an unnecessary explanation, unusual with Crane, was first pointed out by Wilson Follett, "The Second Twenty-Eight Years: A Note on Stephen Crane," The Bookman, LXVIII (January, 1929), 536.

on the floor: "This registers the amount of your purchase."<sup>49</sup> Still, they were all in it--Scully, his son, the cowboy, the Easterner, the bartender--all of them, not just the gambler who wielded the knife, the Easterner maintains later.

The stories discussed in this section of the paper, "The Open Boat," "Death and the Child," and "The Blue Hotel," were written during a period of great creativity, and are among Crane's best work. Crane's impressionism began to wane soon after 1898, however, with his powers in general. Many works followed: The Whilomville Stories, "War Memories," Great Battles of the World, Cuban tales such as "The Second Generation" and "His Majestic Lie," and, notably, several war tales which included "An Episode of War" and "The Upturned Face," the latter two ranking with "A Mystery of Heroism" in general excellence. Almost all of the work after 1898 is, however, sheer journalism or poor art. Crane's impressionistic method is best studied in only a fraction of his total work, although the method is evident to some extent in almost all of it. The Red Badge of Courage is, of course, his peak performance as an impressionist. Following closely after are Maggie, George's Mother, war tales such as "A Mystery of Heroism," Western and Mexican tales such as "The Blue Hotel" and "The Five

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<sup>49</sup>Crane, Work, X, 130.



White Mice," and, in the same category with The Red Badge of Courage, that greatest of Crane's short stories, "The Open Boat." Crane's impressionism is hard to isolate from other methods of presentation, but a conclusion that can be fairly drawn is that Crane is almost always good when he is writing impressionistically.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Impressionism as a writing technique is a highly individual matter, but there are certain practices which, if observed, tend to make a work impressionistic in nature. Of major importance is the author's keeping out of his creation, never discussing the characters with the reader, explaining them and letting the reader know how he should feel toward them and their actions. Instead, the impressionistic writer tries to control his material in such a way that he achieves his effects naturally, the events of the story determining the reader's reactions. — A

The impressionist writer is interested in rendering the feeling of action rather than in giving a report of it; consequently, he tends toward presentation of subjective material, making the mind of one of the characters the center of interest. He is more concerned with the reactions of the character toward the action than with objective action in itself.

Finally, the impressionist writer frequently only suggests the facts of a scene or of an action, letting the imagination of the reader build on the selected and intensified details, often symbolic in nature, that the author

presents. Because of the rigorous selection of only the necessary elements and the rejection of everything else, plot is of decreased importance in an impressionistic work. As a result of the subordination or elimination of plot, short forms, notably the short story, are a frequent concomitant of the impressionistic spirit and method.

One of the first American impressionists, Crane reveals himself in his earliest works as a proponent of the impressionistic style and method. The Sullivan County Sketches, although they are very minor work, point toward Crane's later development, especially in the short story, in certain qualities: their being built around one ironical situation, their use of color and startling imagery to give the effects Crane wished to produce, and their concern with moods and portrayal of emotion rather than with the development of plot or character. <sup>\* Footnote B</sup> Maggie and George's Mother, as well as the short stories and sketches written before The Red Badge of Courage, show a continued development of Crane's impressionistic style and method of treatment.

The Red Badge of Courage represents the peak of Crane's impressionistic technique. Its concern with subjective rather than objective action, its depiction of isolated scenes and situations which fuse finally into an ordered whole, its pictorial brilliance, its use of symbolism to give extra-realistic effects, make The Red Badge Crane's outstanding work and the best example of his impressionism. ]

The careful handling of the point of view and the scenic rather than expository conduct of narrative show that Crane gave much thought to the methods by which he might gain his effects.

The later works indicate that Crane was generally more at home in the short story than in longer works, and that he excelled in the presentation of single situations in which subjective treatment and a change in vision of a character figure prominently. His novels, save for The Red Badge of Courage, are <sup>called</sup> artistic failures, and the works in which the antagonist is social rather than personal, as in The Monster, lack the power of his personal, impressionistic work. After 1898 there is a progressive decline in his artistry, especially the impressionistic aspects of it, although ~~there are~~ <sup>AND ONLY</sup> isolated stories and scenes in the latest <sup>LATER</sup> work ~~that~~ have all the power and artistry of his earlier writings.

The sources of Crane's impressionism are obscure. Crane was unusually reticent about his artistic theories, so that conjecture about the reasons for his developing his particular style and method can be only tentative at best. This paper makes no attempt at such a task, limiting the inquiry to an examination of the manifestations and extent of Crane's impressionism within the various works themselves. Taken together, the works show that Crane was an impressionist in most of his writing and that, when he wrote

according to canons of impressionism, he seldom wrote badly. As the chief example of impressionism in American literature, his works are worthy of close attention.

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