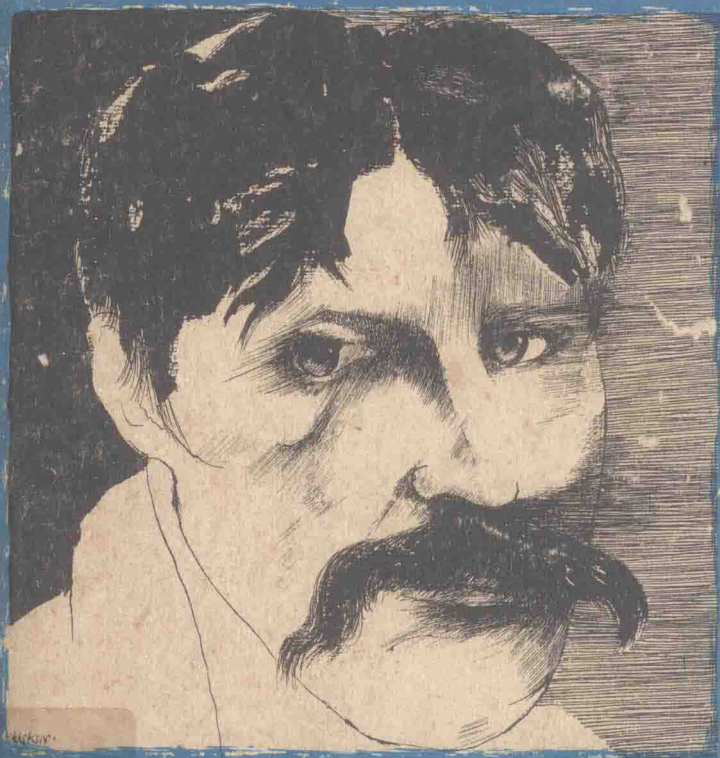


*GREAT SHORT WORKS OF*  
*Stephen Crane*



THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE /  
MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS /  
THE MONSTER /  
AND EIGHT SHORT STORIES /

*Great Short Works*  
*of*  
Stephen Crane

*Introduction by*  
James B. Colvert



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"An Experiment in Misery" was first published in the *New York Press*, April 22, 1894. "A Mystery of Heroism" appeared first in the *Philadelphia Press* (August 1 and 2, 1895) and was included in *The Little Regiment* (1896). "An Episode of War" was written in 1899 and was published in England in *Last Words* (1902). "The Upturned Face" appeared first in *Ainslee's Magazine* in March, 1900. "The Open Boat" appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* (June, 1897) and then in *The Open Boat and Other Stories*, published in 1898. "The Pace of Youth" was first published in the *New York Press*, January 18 and 19, 1895. "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" was first published in *McClure's Magazine*, February, 1898. "The Blue Hotel" was first published in *Collier's Weekly* (November 26, 1898) and was included in *The Monster* (1899 and 1901).

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*The Blue Hotel*

## Introduction

by  
James B. Colvert

ALTHOUGH Stephen Crane's fiction is often described as "realism" (especially in literary histories), the term is inappropriate and misleading. It is inevitably applied, however, for Crane was doing his major work during the years when realism, under the powerful sponsorship of William Dean Howells, was sweeping the field in American fiction. And like the realists, Crane chose certain characteristic subjects and themes—slum life, war, prostitution, and alcoholism—and insisted upon the freedom to treat them from unorthodox points of view. In this limited sense he is a realist.

But, Crane's fiction is radically different from that of the realists, and this difference, carefully considered, helps us to grasp the special significance of his work. At bottom his sense of reality is quite apart from those of, say, Norris, Dreiser, Garland, and Twain; for when Crane *sees* something—an object, event, or person—he does not assume (as they do) that it is a fixed, definable, irreducible fact that would carry the same meaning for any normal, truthful observer. To Crane, reality was complex, ambivalent, ambiguous, and elusive, as much a matter of the play of a peculiarity of mind as of a quality or character in the object itself. This the reader must constantly bear in mind if he is to avoid the errors of those who complain that his fiction lacks "realistic" authority, is irrational, inconsistent, and illogical. Trying to understand *The Red Badge of Courage* as a straightforward, naturalistic description of war, the reader will find it difficult to explain why we never seem to see things as they "really are" in "real" life. In the book, armies on the march are not likely to appear simply as columns of troops but rather as gigantic dragon-serpents winding their ways over brooding hills. Bursting shells become strange "war blossoms." Bubbles in a stream appear to the distressed hero, whose mind shapes

the perceived world into its own sinister reality, as sorrowful, reproachful human eyes.

This is to say that Crane's prose is metaphorical rather than literal and discursive, to point out the poetic quality of his style. But it is also a reminder that the style is a reflection of his special way of seeing, and that these elements in his fiction, his style and vision, are finally one and the same thing. The hero of the novel recreates, through Crane's imagination, of course, the external world in whatever image best expresses or serves his egotistical yearning, hopes, and fears. In his sentimental self-portrait Henry Fleming sees himself as a hero of nerveless courage and reckless derring-do, winner of the hearts of maidens and the admiration of his comrades in arms. But he also suspects, fearfully, that he is really a coward, and his problem is to refashion the world into a new "reality" by which he can justify or rationalize his failures as a man and soldier. This world, brilliantly imagined, he sees alternately in two ways: as a terrible threat to his self-indulgent egotism, as when it appears in the guise of dragons and serpents, and as a victim of his own awesome power of destruction, as when he imagines in a crucial scene that he has triumphed over a range of threatening mountains. Crane himself, as the narrator describing these mental events, provides a mocking commentary, pointing up Henry's confusion with a flow of relentless irony.

The main elements of the novel, then, are Fleming's hallucinatory images, his hopelessly sentimental vanity, and the narrator's ironic mockery. And when we observe that Henry's conceits usually have some reference to his interpretation of the natural world—forest, mountains, streams, sky—it occurs to us that his anxiety is really over the uncertain question of his relation to the whole universe, as if he somehow expects Nature to be the final arbiter of his success or failure as a hero. Nature, he arrogantly assumes, will turn out to be either his friend or enemy, and throughout the book he is anxiously trying to read the signs of one or the other of these dispositions toward him. The forest to which he turns for comfort after his ignoble flight from his first battle seems at first to be friendly, a crooning, solacing Mother Nature who provides the little chapel-like bower for the refreshment of his troubled spirit. But when he

stumbles upon the obscene corpse in the very nave of the cathedral-like grove, Nature seems cruelly hostile, mocking the trust that he has placed in her. Tricked by his self-glorifying sentiments into the belief that she must recognize him either as friend or foe, he never for a moment considers, as does the narrator, that Nature is after all simply indifferent to him. In its deepest sense, then, *The Red Badge* examines Henry's tormented effort to identify himself with Nature, and in so doing touches upon a basic religious problem—one that Crane attacked more directly in his book of poems, *The Black Riders*.

Taking this approach to the book, the reader perhaps finds a special significance in a key passage in Chapter XVII which describes Henry's emotions when he learns that his blind charge against the enemy has made him a hero.

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.

Here in these reflections are the main elements of the novel: the vainglorious hero, the image of Nature as an adversary, and the critical irony of the narrator. The passage in effect summarizes the meaning of the novel up to this point and marks a crucial turning point in the narrative. The most revealing point is that Henry is thinking in terms of a victory, *not* over the confederate enemy or his fear of them, but of a victory over Nature, as if he sees his new condition as a vengeful triumph over the hostile forest which refused him solace in the cathedral-like bower. Henry's real enemy is Nature or, by extension, the whole universe. Mountains, fields, streams, the night, the sun itself, appear in his distorted point of view as living presences, monstrous and terrible. He sees the "red eyelike gleam of hostile campfires set in the low brow of distant hills," the "black columns of enemy troops disappearing on the brow of a hill like two serpents crawling from the cavern of night." Crossing a stream Henry imagines that the black water stares back



at him with "white bubble eyes," and he sees lurking in the shadows of the woods terrible "fierce-eyed hosts." Thus his cowardly flight in his first battle is not from enemy soldiers, but from the redoubtable dragons of his egotistical imagination, from the approach of horrifying "red and green monsters."

These images of a sinister Nature take a variety of metaphorical forms—monsters, dragons, ogres, serpents—but the most characteristic is the hostile mountain. It occurs regularly in *The Red Badge*: "a dark and mysterious range of hills . . . curved against the sky," "the low brows of distant hills," careening boulders, "a cliff over which one tumbles at midnight." The image occurs in variation in many of Crane's stories, always in the guise of an adversary. In "The Open Boat" it is the threatening horizon which is "jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks." In his imagination the hero of *George's Mother* sees his problems in the image of "granite giants," as "peaks" that lean threateningly toward him, or as "chasms with inclined approaches." Crane ends "An Experiment in Misery" with a description of big-city buildings in another variant of the image: they are buildings of "pitiless hues . . . sternly high, forcing regal heads into the clouds, throwing no downward glances." But this is an extension of the mountain which Crane usually associates with the natural, not the man-made, world. It is not mere coincidence that both the heroes of *George's Mother* and *The Red Badge of Courage* see themselves in moments of supposed triumph as victors over a hostile Nature. Henry Fleming thinks that he has found the vanquished mountains to be merely "paper peaks," and George Kelcey once sees himself in a daydream as "a stern general pointing a sword at the nervous and abashed horizon." In Crane the figure symbolizes the conflict between man and the universe and underscores the futile morality of sentimental self-aggrandizement.

Like most writers whose fiction touches upon a profound personal problem, Crane tells the same story again and again. The deluded, vainglorious hero, forever misinterpreting, making outrageous assumptions about his place in the universe, appears in "The Blue Hotel" as the crazy Swede who, because he has overpowered a human adversary in a fist fight, assumes that he has also

asserted himself successfully against the world in general. In a brilliant passage describing the Swede in a snow storm after his fight Crane writes:

We picture the world as thick with conquering and elate humanity, but here with the bugles of the tempest pealing it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamour of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smitten, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb. The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life.

Here we find once again the major elements of Crane's art: the egotism of the hero, the indifference of nature, the irony of the narrator.

The same basic pattern underlies "The Open Boat." The correspondent is astonished to find the meaning of the sea and his relation to it so difficult to grasp. It seems furiously hostile (the waves, the sinister gulls, the shark); but it seems also somehow sympathetic (the gentle calm of the sea, its picturesque beauty, the lovely pattern of gulls in flight); but then again it seems flatly indifferent (the high cold star, the distant tower). Which mood, the correspondent asks, is the true one? He is the only hero in Crane's fiction who is permitted to see through the tricks his egotism plays on him to find an answer. Nature is neither hostile or sympathetic; it is simply indifferent:

The tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent.

The tough-mindedness of this conclusion—which is the author's as well as the correspondent's—is indeed in the spirit of realism, but it is a point of view hard come by and, moreover, no doubt fleeting and uncertain, if we judge by the usual case in Crane's fiction. For il-

lusion in Crane is more permanent than "reality," even when they can be distinguished.

At first glance Crane's studies of big-city slum life seem closer to the ideal of realism than *The Red Badge* or "The Open Boat," but neither *Maggie* nor "An Experiment in Misery," is in the reportorial, analytical style which is the hallmark of realistic fiction. From Crane's own statement that his intention in *Maggie* was "to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless," one might argue that the novel is in the tradition of the tough-minded naturalistic analysis of a social condition—which in a sense it is. But this is not the only point, perhaps not even the most important point, to be made about *Maggie*. Crane was perhaps nearer the mark in a letter to a young woman who had complained that *Maggie* was morbid and offensive:

I do not think much can be done with the Bowery as long as [the people there] are in their present state of conceit. A person who thinks himself superior to the rest of us because he has no pride and no clean clothes is as badly conceited as Lillian Russell. 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.

Crane is concerned here with the moral responsibility of the individual, not with the deterministic power of a social condition. And as the statement suggests, moral capability depends upon the ability to see through the illusions wrought by pride and conceit—the ability to see ourselves clearly and truly. In this sense, *Maggie* and "An Experiment in Misery" play variations upon the themes developed in *The Red Badge*, "The Open Boat," and "The Blue Hotel"—the moral consequences of human delusion.

The language of *Maggie* plays constantly on two opposing and contradictory aspects of life in the slums. It evokes on the one hand the violent and sordid, and on the other false interpretation and evaluations. The description of the fight between the slum gangs in the open-

ing pages is representative: "howls" and "roars" of "wrath," "barbaric" cursing, the "fury" of "convulsed faces" play off ironically against the pitifully unreal interpretation of the event by the combatants, whose false feelings are reflected in such epithets as "champions," "victors," "honour," and "ideal manhood." Jimmy Johnson is "a tiny insane demon" whose "infantile countenance" is "livid with fury." All the boys wear "the grins of true assassins." But as they withdraw from the battle, the boys begin to see the event in terms of heroic self-aggrandizement:

They began to give, each to each, distorted versions of the fight. Causes of retreat in particular cases were magnified. Blows dealt in the fight were enlarged to catapultian power, and stones thrown were alleged to have hurtled with infinite accuracy. Valor grew strong again, and the little boys began to brag with great spirit.

Though Crane is characterizing children here, it is essentially the same with the adults in his fiction; like Henry Fleming, the correspondent, and the Swede, they are in varying degrees the victims of grotesque self-estimates.

The beer hall and theater scenes in *Maggie* make the same point with the heroine, who finds in the mummery, illusion, cheap splendor, and vulgar sentiments of the melodrama a false ideal of values. She is transported by "plays in which the dazzling heroine was rescued from the palatial home of her treacherous guardian by the hero with beautiful sentiments." These melodramas, with their "pale-green snow storms," "nickel-plated revolvers," and self-sacrificing rescues were "transcendental realism." No wonder she mistakes the swaggering Pete for a knight.

"An Experiment in Misery," a justly famous sketch of Bowery life, has been much praised by literary critics. Edward Garrett saw in its "nervous audacity of phrasing . . . the quality of chiaroscuro of a master's etching," an observation exactly to the point. It depicts the Bowery, not in realistic terms, but in the brilliant imagery of a kind of prose poem. To the human derelicts "strewn in front of saloons" around Chatham Square even ordinary

things seem sinister and threatening. Footprints on the muddy sidewalks are "scar-like impressions." The elevated train stations squat over the streets like "some monstrous kind of crab." And behind the "somber curtains of purple and black," street lamps glitter "like embroidered flowers." Crane's poetry transforms the fetid and murky flop house into a house of dead souls, a morgue of the human spirit. A locker at the head of a cot stands "with the ominous air of a tombstone," and across the floor men are lying "in death-like silence, or heaving and snoring with tremendous effort, like stabbed fish." One "corpse-like being," beneath whose "inky brows could be seen . . . eyes exposed by partly opened lids," lay in "this stillness of death like a body stretched out expectant of the surgeon's knife." It goes without saying that this is hardly the circumstantial language of realism.

*The Monster* is more "normally" realistic, less consciously artful in its imagery and metaphors, despite occasional exceptions like the brilliantly chromatic description of the catastrophic fire which disfigures Henry Johnson. The book generally, though, is a rather straightforward dramatization of another of Crane's themes—the malice of self-righteous respectability, a prominent motif in *Maggie* and its companion piece, *George's Mother*. Like Mark Twain, Crane detested herd thinking and feeling and the viciousness of mob morality, and in *The Monster* he probed beneath the surface of small-town life, which he portrayed with genial humor in other Whilomville stories, to point up the moral destructiveness of social snobbery. In this sense, the realism of *The Monster* anticipates Sinclair Lewis' unflattering exposés of village life in the nineteen-twenties.

Unlike "An Experiment in Misery" the brief story "The Pace of Youth" is known hardly at all. Yet it is nearly as good as any of Crane's short stories, skillfully sustained in tone and sense of movement. At the end it develops an unexpected depth, for it becomes a story about the father as well as about the lovers. The happy bobbing of the couple's flying carriage with "that little pane, like an eye, that was a derision to him" is to the father a symbol of the power of youth "to fly strongly into the future and feel and hope again, even at a time when his bones must be laid in the earth." The outraged father

is pathetic, an impotent old man whose failure to reduce the infinite promise of life leaves him with "the astonishment and grief of a man who has been defied by the universe."

These stories and novels are representative of Crane's art at its best. It is not the art of the realist but of an impressionist, and one is not surprised that Crane, living in a time when literary realism was drawing its practitioners from the ranks of journalists, was never successful as a newspaper reporter. He could not, as Howells was advocating, represent the world as it "actually is"; in his best work he transformed the mere appearance of things into the poetry of impressionism, and when he was good, as he often was, revealed the inner reality of the world he observed.

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