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Stephen Crane's Concept of Death

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After contemplating the peculiar way Stephen Crane treats death in his fiction, Thomas Beer concluded that “the mistress of this boy’s mind was fear.” But there is nothing in either the fiction or the life to suggest that Crane had any extraordinary fear of dying. The evidence points instead in an entirely different direction: he seems to have developed early a coherent concept of death that was fixed, rigid, and unmodified by later experiences because it dictated the way he perceived those experiences. This concept of death informed all his writings, not just his fiction, and determined the way he lived. For once in talking about the procrustean Stephen Crane it is possible not only to gain insight into an important aspect of his psyche but also to reconstruct its development.

Death is abrupt in Crane’s fiction. From time to time someone dies and the reader gets neither warning nor explanation. A paradigm is the terse opening to the fourth chapter of Maggie: “The babe, Tommie, died.” There is no preparation for Tommie’s death so the announcement is shocking. It anticipates Jimmie’s casual “‘Well, . . . Mag’s dead’” at the beginning of the last chapter, but the foreshadowing goes unnoticed until relatively late because Maggie is the only sympathetic character in the story. There is, however, parallelism here: Maggie and her baby brother Tommie are both innocents. So while a fatal tumble into the river is the bawd’s inevitable end in the kind of cautionary tale Crane was playing against, he projects it as ultimate injustice.

This is the second characteristic of death in Crane’s fiction: death is unjust. It strikes for no real—often not even any apparent—reason and strikes at those who least deserve it.

The third characteristic is the skewed responses death evokes in the living. Sometimes survivors respond mawkishly; always they respond inappropriately. The responses are surprising because decorum is violated. Tommie, for example, “went away in a white, insignificant coffin, his small waxen hand clutching a flower that the girl, Maggie, had stolen from an Italian.” Of course she had intended to express sentiment, but in an environment that
suppressed honest emotion all she attained was sentimentality. And that, in turn, foreshadows the way she is mourned: the wake in Mary Johnson’s apartment is blatant melodrama, exposing the mourners’ hypocrisy.

Whenever someone dies in Crane’s fiction things happen that way. Although his treatment of death in literature certainly has something to do with his sense of irony, it evidently was not merely a literary device. Crane’s concept of death resulted from the way he understood life. The intriguing feature of that is sequence: in this area Stephen Crane did not do as Realists are supposed to have done and study situations in order to get at their essence; he seems to have selected situations, almost certainly without intending to do so, which verified conclusions he had drawn already. Of course the best place to see this aspect of his mind is his journalism.

Crane first saw a shooting war on 4-6 May 1897 at the Battle of Velestino in the Greco-Turkish War. In his earliest report of the battle he narrowed in from its military significance to the death of a single soldier, who went in the chance way predicted by The Red Badge of Courage: “One lieutenant, standing up back of the trench, rolling a cigarette, his legs wide apart, and in a careless attitude, was shot through the neck.” The sentence cadence reinforces the surprise and senselessness of the lieutenant’s death. No matter what war Crane covered from then on, he reported every individual death as having struck abruptly and without good reason. And, no matter what the war, whenever his attention turned from the corpse to the living, their responses shocked him. On 5 April 1898 he covered a military funeral in the Spanish-American War. What struck him was the contrast between attempted solemnities and the bystanders’ behavior; the result was “A Soldier’s Burial That Made a Native Holiday.”

The epitome of how Crane made reality validate his concept of death is the way he said John Blair Gibbs died. Gibbs was a medical doctor who volunteered for service when the Spanish-American War was declared. He was appointed acting Assistant Surgeon. On the night of 11 June 1898 Gibbs was killed by a sniper. It evidently affected Crane strongly because he wrote about Gibbs’s death three times. The first two were reports for the New York World which together noted only that Gibbs was “shot by a hidden enemy,” fell in front of his own tent, and took ten minutes to die. A year later, however, Crane was in England writing his
"War Memories" and took the occasion to explain just what happened.

On 9 June 1898, when the troops at Guantanamo Camp were raised by shots that seemed to signal an attack, Crane roamed around trying to find some other noncombatant with whom he might huddle for comfort. That was how he met Gibbs. The attack that night never came. In hysterical relief the two men saw the situation as funny. There was shooting again the next night and again Crane shared his huddle with Gibbs. This time bullets flew around them while they hugged the ground in fright. So when the ritual sniper fire burst out the third night Crane ritualistically sought out Gibbs. But before Crane found him the fire became so heavy that Crane had to hit the dirt. Nearby he heard the awful sound of a man who had just been hit and was dying "hard." Crane began wishing that the man would die soon so that the noise would stop. It did stop. At that very moment an adjutant came searching for Doctor Gibbs:

A man answered briskly: "Just died this minute, sir." It was as if he had said: "Just gone around the corner this minute, sir." Despite the horror of this night's business, the man's mind was somehow influenced by the coincidence of the adjutant's calling aloud for the doctor within a few seconds of the doctor's death. It—what shall I say?—It interested him this coincidence.

Gibbs' death, at least in Crane's mind a year later, fit the pattern. Of course people do die that way and others do respond inappropriately. There are other ways of dying and other kinds of responses too. But not in Crane's writings. In them everyone dies just one way and people react just one way. And Crane knew how people die and how other people react as early as the time he began writing serious fiction, which was long before he saw his first death on a battlefield. His concept of death, therefore, had to have been developed before he was twenty-one years old, when he began writing Maggie.

Stephen Crane's concept of death seems to have its roots in the death of his father, the Rev. Dr. Jonathan Townley Crane, and the incredibly protracted funerary activities following it. The father was only sixty-one years old, in apparent vigor, energetically serving his flock at the Drew Centennial Methodist Episcopal Church in Port
Jervis, New York. Although he had been sent there less than two years earlier, the minister had qualities that immediately won the community as well as his own congregation. “He was a great, fine, simple mind,” Stephen remembered.

He was so simple and good that I often think he didn’t know much of anything about humanity. Will, one of my brothers, gave me a toy gun and I tried to shoot a cow with it over at Middletown when my father was preaching there and that upset him wonderfully. He liked all kinds of animals and never drove a horse faster than two yards an hour even if some Christian was dying elsewhere. . . . He worked himself to death, my people thought.

Shortly before 11 A.M. on Monday, 16 February 1880, while he was working on a new book and young Stephen presumably was in school, the Rev. Dr. Crane suffered a heart attack. When Stephen returned home, his father was dead.

Stephen Crane was only eight years old then and this was his first experience of death in his immediate family. No great knowledge of psychology is needed to understand how he might conclude that his father’s abrupt death was unfair. Then came an extravaganza of public mourning that continued nearly a month. For Jonathan Townley Crane was a public man whose death became a public event. Thirty-seven years of ministry had taken him to increasingly important pastorates; nine years as President of Pennington Seminar turned a foundering male institution into a successful coeducational school; several years saw him as Presiding Elder of two important conferences in the New Jersey District. He also was well known for his writings, including five books which applied church doctrine to practical life. When he married Mary Helen Peck in 1848 the Rev. Dr. Crane assured particular attention to his accomplishments: she was the daughter of George Peck, one of three brothers who all left their marks on Methodism throughout the years following its transplantation to America. All of these distinctions were memorialized in a long obituary his widow wrote and the Port Jervis Daily Union published on the day he died. The obituary concluded with a glimpse of his private life that confirms his son’s recollections:

The Doctor was a pleasant, genial personage, always
dignified, yet cheerful and companionable. His home life was where he shone the brightest and he was one of the best fathers that ever lived.

During the nineteenth century the Daily Union was a four-page tabloid with page three reserved for local news. Almost every day the next month it reported effects of the minister's death on the village. A Temperance Society meeting at which he had been scheduled to speak on 17 February was turned into a memorial service for him, duly reported; tributes were published; the full text of a sermon on his death preached at the adjacent Presbyterian Church was spread over two issues; there was a complete account of the funeral at his church.

In fact there were two elaborate funerals. One was in Port Jervis on 19 February. "The audience was one of the largest, if not the largest, ever assembled in the church," noted the Daily Union. Mary Crane later remembered that "over fourteen hundred people passed reverently by, to look upon him for the last time." That was more than twelve percent of the village population, more than twice as many people as there were members in the church congregation. Twenty-one clergy from Methodist churches throughout the district came to pay their respects and five clerics representing the various denominations in Port Jervis were there too. There was a choir, a prayer, a reading of the 90th psalm with choir accompaniment, scriptural reading, and a eulogy.

From Port Jervis the body, the family, and the attendant ministers went by train to Elizabeth, New Jersey, for the second funeral. It was an even larger and more elaborate event than the first. On Friday, 20 February, friends from throughout the region, members of the various churches in which the Rev. Dr. Crane had served, joined with more than one hundred ministers and a host of others for services in St. James's Methodist Episcopal Church conducted by a full dozen ministers. At last, at the conclusion of this funeral, the body was transported to the family plot at Evergreen Cemetery where friends and family laid it to rest.

"And so we laid his body away under the evergreens," Mary Crane recalled, "amid the scenes of his childhood, as a flood of golden sunshine burst upon the scene." That is one point of view. Another is the eight-year-old boy's, who must have gone through it all puzzled, hurt, angry, and wondering what any of the ritual had to do with his feelings for the father he had just lost suddenly and
unfairly. They were feelings that lasted to the end of Stephen Crane’s life. As Beer tells it, Crane once said to someone, “We tell kids that heaven is just across the gaping grave and all that bosh and then we scare them to glue with flowers and white sheets and hymns. We ought to be crucified for it! . . . I have forgotten nothing about this, not a damned iota, not a shred.” 12

NOTES

1 I am grateful to Robert E. Couture of the Port Jervis (N.Y.) Union-Gazette for invaluable assistance in that city; to Janet Katz for research assistance there; and to the Committee on Research and Productive Scholarship, University of South Carolina, for a grant that partly funded the research used here.


3 An argument to the contrary would begin obviously with “The Open Boat” and “The Five White Mice,” two stories that treat fear of dying. But both undercut and repudiate it. “The Five White Mice” concludes that fearing death is non-utilitarian, while in “The Open Boat” the one man who dies is the one man who has earned the right to live.

4 Many who observed Crane during the Spanish-American War remarked at the easy way he risked his life. Most thought him foolhardy. Captain George F. Elliott took another view and mentioned Crane in dispatches for bravely serving as an aide in the fighting at Cuzco in mid-June. Even while Crane lay dying during the spring of 1900 he faced the inevitable with apparent coolness. Any suggestion that all this was the outward and visible sign of someone trying to mask real terror would have to carry an enormous burden of proof.


Crane did not write about Gibbs in the trailer to “In the First Land Fight” as indicated in The University of Virginia Edition: it was a fact piece added by someone else in the World editorial room. What appears in the last five paragraphs of the report as published in that edition, therefore, should be disregarded. The remainder was a collaboration between Crane and his superior Ernest McCready, with McCready writing
or taking dictation as Crane told him the story. Crane was too stunned to write.


9Beer, Stephen Crane, pp. 40-41.

10The first and last paragraphs seem to have been supplied by the newspaper but the bulk anticipates Mrs. Crane's sketch published nine years later and reprinted in Thomas A. Gullason, ed., Stephen Crane: Perspectives and Evaluations (New York: New York University Press, 1972), pp. 29-35.

11Port Jervis Daily Union, 25 February 1880. This report is inaccurate in having the Elizabeth funeral on Saturday, 21 February.

12Beer, Stephen Crane, pp. 41-42. Crane's bent had to have been reinforced by two other deaths in his immediate family that succeeded his father's. In 1884 when Stephen was twelve his adored twenty-eight-year-old sister Agnes died "suddenly": in fact she had suffered illness but she and their family kept it from him. And in 1886 when Stephen was fourteen his twenty-three-year-old brother Luther was killed in a railroad accident.