Social ideas in the writings of Stephen Crane

Vernon Mickelson

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SOCIAL IDEAS IN THE WRITINGS OF

STEPHEN CRANE

by

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Introduction

Joseph Conrad's criticism of Stephen Crane, succinctly stated as follows:

(he is) never deep;...he is the only impressionist and only an impressionist.

struck rather definitely the keynote of all subsequent Crane criticism. Succeeding opinions, with few exceptions (and they refer to individual works, rather than to the whole body of writing) have followed that lead.

H. G. Wells, writing in 1900, the year of Crane's death, stated,

he is the first expression of the opening mind of a new period...beginning, as a growing mind must needs begin, with the record of impressions.

Van Wyck Brooks, in an article in The Freeman in 1922, wrote,

Here we have (Crane's work)...without a trace of that note of social criticism which characterized the novel of today.

It is unfortunate that we have not the opinion of Vernon Louis Parrington on Crane, but, though his judgment has been lost to us by his death before completion of his book, The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, we do have that of Russell Blankenship, a student under him, whose criticism

1. In a letter to Edward Garnett, World's Work, 53:19

Parrington quite closely. He wrote:

Crane's effectiveness lies largely in the power and skill with which he transmits impressions of light, color, sound, and physical feeling.

There has been some doubt expressed as to the thoroughness of Crane's naturalism, but doubt is unwarranted. Testing his work by the canons of naturalism, one discovers a scientific impersonality in the treatment of material, and a resolute purpose to record facts and impressions without passing moral judgment upon anything.

The estimate of another recent historian of American literature, Mr. F. L. Pattee, is this:

He led his own generation into strangenesses.... He created atmospheres rather than stories. He brought emphasis to bear on unique impressions; he was an exhibitor adept in throwing the spotlight upon selected areas. His truth, therefore, is but half truth. And totally does he lack pathos. He was an inspired reporter who wrote as he ran his pieturings of the moment.

A few critics of Crane, notably those who have made a more detailed study of his work, have indicated that Crane does express social ideas, but each such judgment has applied to individual works only. Vincent Starrett, in an estimate of Stephen Crane, emphasized the impressionistic excellences of his work, but admitted other aspects:

The story ("The Blue Hotel") fills half a dozen pages of the book; but the social injustice of the whole world are hinted in that space.

In "The Monster", the ignorance, prejudice, and cruelty of an entire community are sharply focussed.

Thomas Beer, in his biography of Crane, was concerned primarily with evoking a personality; he drew no general conclusions concerning Crane's work. The remark which follows is, however,
apropos to the idea under consideration:

His political thinking is obscured, but the violence of his rages with social and religious limitation is recalled.

Also, in an introduction to one of the volumes of the collected works, Beer had the following summarizing statement about Crane:

He was plainly drifting from the intense studies of excitement which made the force of his early period; the social critic was beginning to appear in "The Monster" and in passages of the Whilomville tales. A man so brilliantly impatient of shams had surely something amusing to say,...

Carl Van Doren, in an article in the American Mercury, wrote:

Detail by detail, he caught hold of reality as firmly as he could...then he left the rest to the ironical perception of any man of sense who might chance upon his books.

Certainly the moral tendency (of Maggie) is indisputable.

He could as in "The Monster", expose the stupidity of public opinion in a cramped province.

...the influence of Crane in England, as well as in America, was toward brilliance, toward impressionism.

What I wish to point out is that most of the critics of Crane have emphasized his impressionism while implying (or stating, as in the case of Van Wyck Brooks) that he had little or no conscious thought about the society which he portrayed impressionistically. Those critics who have seen social criticism in his work have limited it to only a few works; Beer, who presumably has spent most study on Crane, says that "the social critic was beginning to appear" in his later tales.
I do not mean to maintain that Crane's method was not impressionistic; what I wish to show is that his social thought and social ideas were a much more fundamental aspect of his work than has been indicated by any critic, that, in the matter of social criticism, at least, he was not only (in Mr. Pattee's words) "an inspired reporter".

This paper examines Crane's writings in an effort to discover and present the facts about his social ideas. By social idea, I mean formulated opinion concerning man's relation to mankind and man's group activity. At one point only, my presentation of Crane's personal religious beliefs, have I stepped outside purely social considerations, but this discussion was necessary for a full understanding of his social concept of religion.
Religion

Crane's interest in religion and Christian ethics has been traced to his birth into the family of an orthodox Methodist minister. Whatever the source of his interest, however, its manifestations in his writings can be discovered and discussed in two groups: interest in the use of religion and ethics, and interest in the relation of man to the cosmos.

"Christianity in action" might well be the title of one section of Crane's interests in religion, for again and again throughout his works, there reappears concern with society's practice of the so-called Christian virtues: truth, tolerance, charity. It is the absence of these virtues that arouses his interest and his indignation.

Intolerance in the world is reflected frequently in Crane's work from his first book, Maggie (1895), to his last, The O'Ruddy (unfinished at his death, 1900). Maggie is the story of a girl raised in the slum district of New York, a girl with no advantages of intellectual or moral education, but a girl, nevertheless, who wishes with all her heart to do right, to find some measure of happiness in self-realization. The tragedy of her life, for it is a tragedy, comes from being utterly

The mordant-sweetness of mortality, which is a species of
intolerance, is a species of intolerance presented in

death, and, apparently, desertion. But when Negroes—
Some homes that were once

cunningly, a species of the two attributes is accented.

I think this saturation of the two attributes is accented.

I think the two attributes are accented of courage:

the table, the two attributes are accented of courage.

the table, the two attributes are accented of courage.

the table, the two attributes are accented of courage.

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world, an attitude particularized in the person of the "stout gentleman in.....a chaste black coat" who "saved his respectability by a vigorous side-step". Since the principal stages in the downfall of Maggie, and her final destruction, arose directly from lack of sympathy and understanding, her story is essentially a tragedy of intolerance.

The Monster, a later story, is (as has been pointed out) condemnatory of small town prejudice and cruelty,—which are rooted in intolerance. Henry Johnson, negro servant, saves the life of Jimmie, son of Dr. Treseott, at the cost of terrific acid burns on his face. At a time when the negro's life hangs in the balance, Dr. Treseott gratefully uses all his skill and care to preserve this life, though he knows that Henry will certainly be horribly disfigured for life and probably demented. That the doctor lost his popularity and patronage through public aversion for Henry, the " Monster", shows unthinking intolerance, but this is of small moment beside the cruelty accorded the negro, victim of his own heroism. He is shunned by everyone, which is only natural, but that he is pursued and hunted unfeelingly, as a fox by a pack of dogs, is unadmirable commentary on the conduct of the average man, a commentary which gains greater force from the

5. "Maggie", in Work, X:207

ironic contrast of this attitude with the public adulation accorded Henry at the time of the rescue. The portrayal of the intolerance and cruelty of an entire community is, I believe, the fundamental purpose of The Monster.

Corollary to an intolerant Christian world is an ineffectual Christianity—as Crane finds it. George’s Mother is the conflict between an essentially religious mother and her son, that ends in the defeat of the mother. What gives this story special significance in our discussion is Crane’s only slightly veiled contempt for the religious mission, which the mother attends, and its supporters. For although this story does not show a definite conflict, with religion as one force, it is of some significance that the mother’s religious tendencies not only do not help her to understand her son, but accentuate the lack of understanding between them.

This feeling of the ineffectuality of organized religion is repeated in both volumes of his verse, a feeling of which the following is characteristically forceful and direct:

7. This attitude of Crane’s toward religious missions is amplified in a personal letter quoted by Beer, Stephen Crane, p. 140. He also brings it into the story, Maggie, where a reason for its ineffectuality is advanced: the insistence of the damnation of “you” not “us”. Further evidence of Crane’s consideration of this point is found in a personal letter in which he states that the trouble with Christianity is that it shifted its basis away from the teachings of Jesus: in Beer, p. 225.
"What?  
You define me God with these trinkets?  
Can my misery deal on an ordered walking  
Of surpliced numskulls?  
And a fanfare of lights?  
Or even upon the measured pulpitings  
Of the familiar false and true?  
Is this God?  

-------------"  

As Stephen Crane is most subjective in his poetic writing, it is there that we shall search for his personal religious opinions. The Black Riders is largely concerned with religion; War Is Kind less so.

A cursory glance at The Black Riders is sufficient to indicate Crane's preoccupation there with matters of religion; a more detailed study makes it clear that Crane definitely rejected two of the principal tenets on which Christianity is based: belief in a personal God, and belief in perpetual individual identity. Thomas Beer calls The Black Riders a raging against "Hebraic wraiths", but these lines are more fundamental in Crane's thought than Beer's comment indicates. Truly enough, he does condemn a God of wrath in several poems, but his criticism is constructive as well as destructive.

8. Work, VI:112


10. Characteristic of this condemnation is the poem ending:

So, strike with Thy vengeance  
The heads of those little men  
Who serve blindly.  
It will be a brave thing. In Work, VI:44
Constructively Crane believes that the super-mundane power usually called God is impersonal and impartial in its manifestations. The impersonality of this power appears in his poems and in his fatalistic attitude toward death in several stories. This poem expresses delightfully the idea:

A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
"The act has not created me
A sense of obligation."

That this power is impartial between man and nature appears in these lines:

...the king of the seas
Weps too, old, helpless man.
The bustling fates
Heap his hands with corpses

Negative evidence though it is, we must not overlook the significance of the fact that not one of the four men in The Open Boat, nor Henry Fleming, in The Red Badge of Courage, calls upon or thinks of God in time of great danger. But not only do they not call upon God—the correspondent in the former story considers only that Fate and "the seven mad gods who rule the sea" are cruel and that nature itself is "indifferent---flatly indifferent"; Fleming thinks of death as very desirable in the midst of battle, but "he conceived it to be nothing but rest".

Just as Crane did not recognize a God of a personal nature.

he did not believe in a personal immortality. That is the second principal constructive theme of *The Black Riders*. The clearest statement of Crane's belief in the futility of the hope of achieving an "ineffable, divine" vision occurs in the following excerpt from a longer poem:

> So again I saw
> And leaped, unhesitant,
> And struggled and fumed
> With outspread clutching fingers.
> The hard hills tore my flesh.
> The ways bit my feet.
> At last I looked again.
> No radiance in the far sky,
> Ineffable, divine. 12

Another expression of this attitude, less definite perhaps, but poetically superior, is the poem beginning "There came whisperings in the winds". The refrain of this poem, "Good-by, good-by, good-by", denies man's aspiration after things not of this world, including hope of immortality. An earlier reference—that to Henry Fleming's thought of death as "nothing but rest"—is further evidence bearing out Crane's disbelief in personal immortality.

In his second volume of poems, *War Is Kind*, Crane is concerned with religion still, but to a less extent than in *The Black Riders*. His attitude is, however, unchanged. The last poem of this volume which touches religion well illustrates Crane's ironic method:

> Ah, God, the way your little finger moved,
> As you thrust a bare arm backward
> And made play with your hair
> And a comb, a silly gilt comb!
> ---Ah, God,—that I should suffer

Because of the way a little finger moved.
The "comb, a silly gilt comb" of the fourth line, coming from a man like Crane in as personal and serious a medium as his poems are, denies possibility to a belief in a personal God.

Three poems by Stephen Crane have quite recently been discovered and published, one of which sums up neatly Crane's attitude toward God and the universe. In it there is expressed, with ironical touch, the impersonality of whatever super-mundane power exists, in the refrain, "God is cold".

In the line, "A pale hand sliding from a polished spar", one feels the futility of hope. One catches the eternality of things superior to mankind in the final line, "The sea, the moving sea, the sea".

A man adrift on a slim spar
A horizon smaller than the rim of a bottle
Tented waves rearing lachy dark points
The near whine of froth in circles.
God is cold.

The incessant raise and swing of the sea
And growl after growl of crest
The sinkings, green, soothing, endless
The upheaval half-completed.
God is cold.

The seas are in the hollow of the Hand;
Oceans may be turned to a spray
Raining down through the stars
Because of a gesture of pity toward a babe.
Oceans may become grey ashes,
Die with a long moan and a roar
Amid the tumult of the fishes
And the cries of the ships,
Because The Hand beckons the mice.
A horizon smaller than a doomed assassin's cap.
Inky, surging tumults
A reeling, drunken sky and not sky
A pale hand sliding from a polished spar.
God is cold.

The puff of a coat imprisoning air:
A face kissing the water-death
A weary slow sway of a lost hand
And the sea, the moving sea, the sea.13
God is cold.

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13. In The Bookman, 60:12, April, 1929.
WAR

Stephen Crane, in *The Red Badge of Courage*, imagina-
tively reconstructed the Civil War without having experienced
war; later, he personally participated in two wars. Altogether,
almost half his prose work concerns itself with war and war
background. We ask, therefore, what was Crane's attitude to-
ward this phenomenon of life in which he displayed such in-
terest?

*The Red Badge of Courage*, 1895, was among the first un-
sentimental, unromantic treatments of the Civil War in Am-
erica. It was Crane's first successful publication, and
became "a great popular success". It remains, today, his
best known work. Because of the undeniably excellent qual-
ity of the work, its deserved popularity, and Crane's short
life, critics have failed to observe that his later was

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14. In the collected *Work of Stephen Crane*, war stories oc-
cupy 961 pages and non-war stories 1061 pages. The latter
total includes, however, only one-fourth of *The O'Buddy*,
which, according to Robert Barr, is all that Crane really
wrote. This tabulation does not include the volume, *Great
Battles of the World*, (not included in the collected edition)
which is purely journalistic and unimaginative in its nature.

15. Russell Blankenship, *American Literature As an Expression
stories, notably those which appeared in the volume, "Wounds In The Rain," show a definite maturing of thought and attitude. When it is remembered that these later stories were based on Crane's actual participation in the dangers, both of battle and disease, of the American campaign in Cuba, this growth is to be expected. I shall indicate this hitherto unnoted development in the succeeding paragraphs.

The Red Badge is primarily, two things: a psychological study of a raw recruit in his first battle, and a panoramic canvas of war. The tremendousness of war, its mystery and inscrutability, its terror, are all vividly pictured by Crane's imagination. Much as we are kept in the mind of Henry Fleming, we constantly escape to moments of a wider view of mass movement, of a breadth of vision magnified, always, by Crane's constant insistence on the insignificance of the individual soldier. *This insignificance, this de- minution of the importance of the individual in warfare, is an ever-recurring theme in Crane's war stories; it appears both as direct statement and by implication in descriptions of battle and death. A characteristic statement is this:

The terrible voices from the hills (the cannon) told him that in this wide conflict his life was an insignificant fact, and that his death would be an insignificant fact. 16

At times, in The Red Badge, the reader attains to a

certain objectivity which makes war seem almost magnificent,
but this attainment is at the expense of sympathy for the
individual soldier. That is, if one is to view war as a
glorious spectacle, one cannot feel sympathy with the trials
of the individual soldier; Napoleon's glory becomes no
more than misdirected ego when we consider his ambitions
in their effects on the Frenchmen whom he used as his pawns.

That *The Red Badge*, in its total effect, is the negation
of the magnificence of war is true, for Crane maintains war
in its proper relationship by frequent references to the se-
renity of nature amid the tumult of war. As the story opens,
"the retiring fog reveals an army stretched out on the hills";
in the midst of a tremendous battle, "it was surprising that
Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process".
Fleming finds peace and quiet, after his flight; in kinship
with the world of trees and animals, he "wended, feeling that
Nature was of his mind". And as the story ends, Fleming
"turned...with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies,
fresh meadows, cool brooks..." This constant relation to
nature in the stress of war does show war's comparative un-
importance. I wish to show, however, that this occasional

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17. See Joseph Hergesheimer's introduction to *The Red Badge
of Courage*, *Mark*, 1; XVII.
Further corroboration of Crane's attitude in 1895 toward
war is found in a poem in *The Black Riders*, e.g., *Mark*, VI: 46
"There was a crimson slash of war,
Lands turned black and bare!"
feeling for the magnificence of war, which is in The Red Badge disappears in later stories, and that Crane's interest becomes more and more centered in the ordinary soldier.

Crane's admiration for the common soldier increases with his repeated contacts with them. In "Death and the Child", 1898, one can trace this added sympathy. War, here, "presented...a scene crowded with familiar objects which wore the livery of their commonness placidly, undauntedly."
The soldier doing his job is contrasted with the patriotic-sounding correspondent, to the discredit of the latter.

From this time on, Crane often repeats this theme of the un-heroic matter-of-factness of the soldier in the ranks; he finds it admirable. In the early part of Active Service, 1899, Crane's greater understanding of the psychology of the soldier appears in a passage of about a page, the intent of which is to show that soldiers have the pride, vanity and curiosity of the man in the street. Crane's writings about soldiers become increasingly insistent on one point: the soldier is

"Women wept.
Babes ran, wondering.
.........."

18. Though The Red Badge of Courage is almost entirely the story of one man, Crane's attitude toward him is quite impersonal and objective; in later stories, Crane's attitude becomes more sympathetic toward the soldier—the attitude of a participant.

19. "Death and the Child" was published in 1898. Crane's experiences in Greece, on which the story is based, occurred in 1897.

not heroic; he is as commonplace as every other man. But, although Crane's understanding of soldiers increased markedly through his experiences in Greece, it was limited in extent because of the foreign nature of the men; principally, "he convinced himself anew that talking through an interpreter to the minds of other men was as satisfactory as looking at a landscape through a stained-glass window."

Crane's interest in and admiration for the "regulars" reaches its height in the stories based on the American Cuban expedition. In "The Price of the Harness", Crane spends almost a page in quiet admiration of a young staff officer's devotion to his purpose; in "The Revenge of the Adolphus", Crane admires the courage and determination of men to obey orders and to carry through a dangerous task; "War Memories" records, once more, the quiet efficiency with which soldiers go about their business, whether or not that business is battle. Crane was greatly impressed by the sterling qualities of these men.

The loyalty, "l'esprit de corps", of the soldiers in Cuba to their own particular groups is several times recorded by Crane; he apparently finds this a particularly admirably quality. His sympathetic attitude toward the soldier appears more strongly even in his portrayal of the hardships of life in Cuba. Heat, lack of food and water, disease, insects, and everlasting uncertainty—these things were patiently endured by the soldiers with a fortitude which Crane highly
praises. But the quality of the common soldier which Crane praises most highly is his lack of any "sense of excellence" or personal glory. That is to say, he shows the soldier accomplishing his task with no "thoughts concerning the historic", no conception of his own bravery. Many are the instances he cites; the tale, "Marines Signalling Under Fire at Guantanamo" is a splendid presentation of this trait which Crane finds praiseworthy. Any one of the four signalmen, upon occasion, was required to stand with his back to the Spanish fire and signal to a warship on the bay. In Crane's words.

"...to deliberately stand up and turn your back to a battle and hear immediate evidences of the boundless enthusiasm with which a large company of the enemy shoot at you from an adjacent thicket is... a very great feat."

In The Red Badge, however, Fleming is always conscious of what he is doing, and takes pride in recognizing his own work. That the soldier of Crane's experience has become a man, quietly and unobtrusively efficient, going about his business, that the war of Crane's maturity has become the business of the common soldier rather than a spectacular affair, are the principal conclusions derived from a study and comparison of his early and late war stories.

Another aspect of the insignificance of the individual, which we earlier noted and which is a constant undertone in Crane's war stories, is the blindness of war movements. From the point-of-view of the average soldier, which is Crane's,
war is so tremendous and all-enveloping that the individual can gain no feeling of purpose or aim for his actions. To him, war means blind trust in superior officers, for there is no possibility of saving oneself by personal prowess alone. To shoot when in danger is, as Crane says, "a law", but one can be too easily killed by a bullet to enable each person's marksmanship to be a protection for himself. That the forces of war are blind is a constant underlying certainty in Crane's war stories. *The Red Badge*, 1895, chronicles the clash of undirected forces; the desperate attack and abortive retreat in Chapters XIX-XXI illustrates this blindness of effort. It is significant, too, that the story opens with the soldiers wondering about the aims of their forthcoming engagement and closes with the soldiers having gained no inkling of what it was all about—after having gone through a terrific battle.

"Death and the Child", 1898, Crane's best story based on his experiences in Greece, portrays the apparently aimless and indecisive Greek and Turkish batteries firing at each other all day. As further evidence of his belief that the forces of war are blind and inexplicable, Crane relates that the Spanish should have "blown to smithereens" the American troops at San Juan Hill, July 1, 1898,---but didn't.

The dwindling of feeling for the magnificence of war, the increase in concern for the average soldier as such, the conviction of the comparative blindness of the forces of war,

all point to Crane's belief that war is futile.

The causes of war, Crane has indicated, ironically, are petty. These lines are characteristic:

And blood was shed
By those who would not stand in rows
And by those who pined to stand in rows.

It is significant that Fleming, in The Red Badge, realizes he has been coerced by social pressure to risk his life against his will; he learns, too, that a Confederate soldier—nominally an enemy—is a likable person. A clear statement of this position occurs in a Cuban story:

When men go into actual battle not one in a thousand concerns himself with an animus against the men who face him.

Further, a popular and age-old justification for war is condemned in this passage:

He was irrevocably dead. And to what purpose? The honor of Spain? Surely the honor of Spain could have existed without the violent death of this poor red-headed peasant.

The most direct exposition of war and its futility in all Crane's writings occurs in "Death and the Child". The story, nominally, concerns the experiences of Pessa, a war correspondent, who decides to fight as a soldier but whose courage fails. Incidentally, the fo-titude of the soldiers is shown to advantage. The story opens on the flight of peasants from the war scene and closes with a little child who had been forgotten by his per-

23. Ibid., p. 213.
parents in their terror. That the child upon a mountain
top observing the battle is symbolic of humanity I am sure.
This passage indicated as much:

"If the men struggling on the plain had had time,
and greater vision, they could have seen this
strange, tiny figure seated on a boulder, surveying
them while the tears streamed. It was as simple
as some powerful symbol."

That the mood of this story is general is indicated by
another lengthy passage in which Crane presents his own view
of war—a picture of peoples being exploited by potentates,
statesmen, generals.

In this development of Crane's attitude toward war, we
observe increased quietness of tone. There is, in the later
stories, less of the intense excitement that grips one in The
Red Badge. It is true, probably, that as many persons are
killed in the later stories as in the earlier; yet this slaugh-
ter impresses Crane less than in his first war story. For
although his sympathy becomes increasingly attached to the
soldier, he has gained coincidentally a "philosophical" at-
titude which enables him to put such happenings in their pro-
per relationships. "War Memories", last selection in Wounds

24. "...these stupid peasants who, throughout the world, hold
potentates on their thrones, make statesmen illustrious, provide
generals with lasting victories, all with ignorance, indifference,
or half-witted hatred, moving the world with the strength of their
arms, and getting their heads knocked together, in the name of
God, the king, or the stock exchange---immortal, dreaming, hope-
less asses who surrender their reason to the care of a shining
puppet, and persuade some toy to carry their lives in his purse." In Work, XII: 257.
in the Rain is characteristic of this quiet tone, in its insistence that men in battle are merely "men terribly hard at work", in sentences like "War is death, and a plague of the lack of small things, and toil", in its reserved and sincere praise for Admiral Sampson, and in its homecoming heroes who had "no sense of excellence".

Crane's mature attitude toward war, then, is compounded from imagination and experience. Crane becomes less objective as he loses his sense of the spectacular in war, and he gains greater sympathy and admiration for the men of the army; this interest shows in the inimitably greater reality of his portrayal of the Cuban troops—a refutation of one critic's opinion that Crane's personal experience is always a false note in his work. That war is blind and futile was Crane's fundamental belief; a mature, deeply ironic poem, War is Kind, expresses this futility, this waste of men, this "virtue" of slaughter.

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Hearse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.
The unexplained glory flies above them,
Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom—
A field where a thousand corpses lie.

25. Work, IX: 268
Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,
Haged at his breast, gulped and died,
Do not weep,
War is kind.

Swift blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die,
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son
Do not weep.
War is kind.
"Every sin is the result of a collaboration," Crane concludes at the close of "The Blue Hotel". He has shown the death of a Swede as the direct result of the chance influence of five men during a storm in a small mid-west town. The gambler who committed the murder, Crane adds, "isn't even a noun. He is a kind of adverb. . . . (He) came merely as the culmination, the apex of a human movement, and gets all the punishment." To further complicate ordinary ideas of guilt, Crane shows that this gambler is a man highly respected in his community, a man of superior virtue. This is an unusual attitude toward sin (and crime which Crane makes practically synonymous with sin), an attitude which shifts responsibility for a criminal act from the shoulders of the individual to the shoulders of the many. This direct statement of a theory which has come to have many supporters at the present time is directly attached to only one story, but it may be applied to two earlier stories with illuminating result.

Maggie is, as I have indicated in an earlier chapter.

27. "It is irrefutable that in all affairs outside his business, in all matters that occur eternally and commonly between man and man, this thieving card player was so generous, so just, so moral, that, in a contest, he could have put to flight the consciences of nine-tenths of the citizens of Romper." In Work, X:127
a tragedy of intolerance, but it is, also, a tragedy of collaboration. Maggie's suicide (sin, or otherwise, is of little moment) comes from the cumulative influence of many persons and many forces. Persons who are responsible, equally or to a greater extent than Maggie herself, are her mother, her brother, and Pete. Forces which are instrumental in her destruction are the sweat-shop system and society's intolerance, particularized in the persons of the "detestable fat foreigner" and the "man in the chaste black coat." Had any one of those influences been greatly different, Maggie could have been saved to society—a desirable rescue, since Maggie was the only pure one, (that is, the only one who tried to do right in spite of circumstances according to her best knowledge) in her group. Had Pete been different, Maggie's weakness would have had no unfortunate results; had Maggie's mother or brother been forgiving and tolerant, she would never have gone into the street, even after having been ruined. Had the sweat-shop been a desirable place in which to work, Maggie would have felt less desire to escape, less desire to marry before she became "a scrawny 28 women with an eternal grievance"; had society been less intolerant, Maggie need not have been lost even after her ruin and banishment from home. Maggie's suicide is very definitely a "sin" which is the result of collaboration.

28. "Maggie", in Work, X:169
George's Mother, Crane's second novel of the slums, again shows crime to be the result of collaboration. George devolves, in the course of the story, from an unright hard-working young man to a corner "hoodlum". The influences resulting in his downfall are fewer in number, and act, probably, less directly than in Maggie; their action is, however, equally inevitable. George's mother and Bleecker are the direct influences in his downfall, his mother repelling him through lack of understanding, though working for his welfare, and Bleecker leading him to his downfall through drink and the company of men who "had come away from a grinding world filled with men who were harsh". This vague influence of an "understanding world is felt throughout the story to be as potent as either of the direct forces. Crime in this case, then, is a result of collaboration of only three persons, George's mother, Bleecker, and George himself. In this conception of crime, it need hardly be pointed out, the "collaborators" in crime are often, if not always, unaware of the direction their influence is taking. This view of crime fits in with Crane's liberal view of mankind, his sympathy with and interest in the individual as such, his insistence on tolerance and humanity toward those who are unfortunate.

29. "George's Mother", in *Mark X:34*
Further corroboration of this "collaborative" concept of sin appears in the poem from which these lines are selected:

There was a man and a woman
Who sinned.
And the man stood with her,
As upon her head, so upon his,
Fell blow and blow,
And all the people sobbing, "Fool!"
He was a brave heart.

Sexual transgression is, truly enough, a specialized form of sin, and relates itself to the double-standard of morality; yet one sees, first, public disregard of the fact that sexual sin can only result from collaboration, and, second, that, in one case at least, a collaborator in sin has recognized his responsibility.

Sin, for Crane, is something far different from the hard-and-fast morality of a Christian world; his sympathetic treatment of Maggie, a prostitute, indicates that he has thrown over orthodox notions of right and wrong. I agree with Beer's statement that "sin has become for Crane any act of disloyalty to the given purpose". In reading this definition, one must understand "conscious" sin to be meant; the "sin" in Crane's own definition, "sin is the result of collaboration," means sin in the accepted sense of Christian morality. That disloyalty, in Beer's statement, is a major part of sin in Crane's understanding harmonizes with his praise of loyalty which is noted

30. Work VI:96

31. Beer, Stephen Crane, p. 225
in the section on war.

Crane's concept of sin unavoidably carries condemnation of our theories of justice; that is, if a criminal or sinful act results inevitably from diverse influences acting blindly on a particular individual, (as Crane sees them act), to make only that individual suffer the penalty is unjust. That Crane is unable to discover justice in the world appears in his poems, of which the following lines are indicative:

Do you hope to see
The triumphal march of justice?
Do not wait, friend!
Take your white beard
And your old eyes 32
To more tender lands.

Although a story like *The Monster* is a portrayal of intolerance, the underlying feeling that such an attitude is unjust gives it its great power. There crops out in this story, as in others, Crane's conviction of the harm done by the gossip of meddlesome women. His delineation of Martha Goodwin is delightfully satirical; it is apparent from the unusual amount of space occupied by this presentation that he was emphasizing this portrait. The injustice and harm of the gossip passed around by this type of woman definitely aroused Crane, and the same woman appears again, little altered

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32. *Work*, VI:99. See also, *ibid.*, p. 57, 137


It is interesting to know that Crane wrote a story, "The Cat's March", not now in existence, concerning the artist's model in *The Third*
in *The Third Violet*, and in *The O'Ruddy*—always a troublemaker. In one poem, Crane presents his reaction to the injustice of the "might is right" theory, a theory with few professed adherents but with many practitioners:

Are not they who possess the flowers
Stronger, bolder, shrewder
Than they who have none?
The beautiful strong--- 34
Why should they not have the flowers?

This is Crane's answer:

My lord.....
The stars are displaced 35
By this towering wisdom.

It is of some significance concerning the importance of justice in Crane's life that his leading charge against newspapers is that they are a "collection of half injustices".

Crane's feeling against injustice in the world was not confined to his literary life alone. Harvey Wickham relates his early insistence on justice in a school-boy fight which Crane observed. Later we learn that "his defense of the unfortunate woman whom he alleged to have been unjustly arrested was marked by fine chivalry and a passionate defiance of bigoted convention.

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*Violet*, which again dealt with this intolerant kind of "respectable" woman. In Vincent Starrett, *Stephen Crane, a Bibliography*, p. 10.

34. *Ibid.* VI: 136
It was very characteristic of the man.

Common notions of sin are unjust, to Crane, since he finds sin a result of the influences of many persons, not the independent action of one; too, justice, in the abstract, is an unattainable hope. Withal, however, Crane, in his writings and in his private life, was on injustice wherever he finds it. A concern for justice, then, is the third fundamental social concept in Crane's writings.

Other Social Ideas,  
Present and Not Present

I.

Besides the social ideas which are fundamental in Crane's writings, namely ideas about war, about religion, and about justice, there are some social ideas of a nonfundamental nature which recur several times in isolated passages—education, fashion, and business.

In a passage in "The Open Boat", Crane indicates one weakness of educational systems; mere mechanical and ununderstanding repetition of a poem had ended by making him "indifferent" to that poem. Schools can still be justly criticized on that basis. In one of the Whilomville tales, "Making an Orator", Crane shows definitely that enforced elocution can be harmful, and most harmful to the most capable children. He concludes:

......an unfortunate boy named Zimmerman...was the next victim of education. Jimmie, of course, did not know that on this day there had been laid for him the foundation of a finished incapacity for public speaking which would be his until he died.

At the door of the educational system Crane lays the responsibility for the omnipotence of "old, plain and dull ladies", the very ladies who aroused his ire in The Monster. "This bestial force came from the education of all Americans by female schoolteachers.... so there should be more male teachers." This is one constructive

39, Beer, Stephen Crane, p. 111.
view of the American educational system, particularly on the lower levels. Another more serious criticism is contained in a personal letter by Crane. There he says, "...the cut and dried curriculum of the college did not appeal to me. Humanity was a much more interesting study." This is still a valid criticism of educational institutions.

To the current fashions in dress Crane objected very decidedly. He never cared to dress well, and was apparently negligent of personal appearances. Coincidentally, he was always scornful of anything approaching dandyism. An entire section of "London Impressions" discusses the undesirable introduction of top hats into the United States.

"...there now exist many young men who consider that they could not successfully conduct their lives without this furniture. To speak generally, I should say that the headgear then supplies them with a kind of indifference."

To the "Little Lord Fauntleroy" movement of curls and velvets which swept America immediately following the publication of that novel, Crane objected in characteristic manner; it is related that Crane incurred great wrath by having given money to "kids" to have their Fauntleroy curls cut. This incident, with changes, appears in the Whilomville tales, "The Angel Child". Fashions, then, concerned Crane in a minor way.

40. "Some Letters of Stephen Crane", in The Academy, 59:116, Aug. 11, 1900. This article is reproduced as an appendix to this essay.

Business in a general way, and the newspaper as a particular business, catch Crane's critical eye on several occasions. The man successful in business, Crane says,

...has thrust himself
Through the water of the years,
Reeling wet with mistakes--
Bloody mistakes;
Slimed with victories over the lesser,
A figure thankful on the shore of money. 42

Crane draws an equally unflattering picture of the "nouveau riches" in the poem containing these lines:

The rug of an honest bear
Under the feet of a cryptic slave
Who speaks always of baubles,
Forgetting state, multitude, work... 43

Crane speaks particularly on only one business enterprise, the newspaper, but his speech is far from praise. A newspaper is, in one poem, "a collection of half-injustices"; "a court", "a market", "a game", "a symbol", "a collection of loud tales concentrating eternal stupidities" 44 In "Irish Notes" and in Active Service, Crane again refers to the newspaper in unpraiseworthy terms, the latter reference, however, showing that the public determines what the nature of the paper shall be. This consideration of business is, however, only cursory and passing, and can not be shown to be fundamental in Crane's thought.

II.

Crane's writings ignore a much greater number of social
ideas than they discuss. Nowhere does Crane consider family and marriage as social institutions. The state does not exist for Crane beyond the vague terminology of "the government"—he does not discuss the rights and obligations of citizens. There is no consideration of social ideals as such, although democracy is approved by implication through Crane's attitude toward the common man and the unfortunate. International relations, which we should expect to find treated because of Crane's war interests, are not at all considered. The value of culture and art in a society are not discussed, although he writes about artists. Insofar as a comprehensive treatment is concerned, Crane fails to consider the industrial system and its effects, if we except the picture of the sweat-shop in Maggie. Lastly, Crane treats justice always from the ideal point of view, rarely from the social standpoint of the actual performance of a judicial system; such exception appears in "An Elocution of Grief" and is touched in Maggie.

46. These social categories are based largely on McKenzie, Outlines of Social Philosophy.
Conclusion

The most inevitable observation to be drawn from a survey of Stephen Crane's social interests is that those interests were limited in scope, although, as I have shown, intense and basic to his thought. These fundamental social convictions are: war is futile; Christianity is a failure, both as a social force and as a personal faith; justice is absent from the world.

That Crane was not primarily a social critic is the second conclusion drawn from this study. The fundamental social convictions which we have observed are not based on searching social observation; they are emotional attitudes which have been suffused into much of his writing, but which occasionally burst forth into intense expression in his poems and prose. Crane's social criticism, then, follows from his sincerity and emotional conviction on the few social subjects which have deeply concerned him; his criticism therefore has a pervasively emotional, as well as an intellectual, basis.

Crane's methods of social criticism are subtle. We have seen, throughout this discussion, that he almost never presents his ideas directly. His ironic method is his most powerful weapon, skilfully handled and seldom over-obvious. Crane is never argumentative and seldom repeats a point already made; thus one must be alive to the significance of remarks made in
passing, remarks by the author, possibly, or by any character. Crane consciously kept himself and his pet theories out of his stories, and so it is that we have found his most significant social observations bound up with the underlying spirit of entire stories.

There is, however, one significant exception to this subtle presentation of social ideas—Crane's poetry. The Black Rider, especially, is a continuous social criticism. We have noted certain aspects of that criticism from time to time, but its total effect is additionally significant. Condemnation of a god of wrath, disbelief in the existence of a personal God of any nature, denial of man's immortality, ridicule of the petty cause of war, doubt that justice will ever be found on this earth, condemnation of newspaper ethics, of the "nouveau riche", of the business ideal of accumulation of money. All these ideas make up the social weight of this volume, and give added confirmation to my belief that Crane was fundamentally concerned with social matters.

As we have seen, particularly in regard to his war attitude, as he grew older Crane dealt less and less with excitement and more with the serious side of life. Had he lived longer, I believe that his critical nature might have developed, and that he might have written searching criticism of society and social matters. This belief is greatly strengthened by Crane's planned and partly executed picaresque novel, The O'Ruddy, which
does show his social criticism coming more to the surface than at any earlier time. What form Crane's criticism would have taken, it is difficult to predict. I feel that his greatest success was attained with the short novel, like *Maggie*, and I think it likely that he would continued with that type of writing.

It is the social attitudes underlying most of Crane's writings which have, I believe, been neglected by critics; it is these fundamental elements which I have been interested in discovering. I have not been at all concerned with Crane's impressionism as a method; I have been concerned with his basic social attitudes and beliefs.

Coincident with Crane's social criticism, there is a tremendous "sense of life" running through his work. Although he is critical, I feel that it is sympathetic criticism, that this world, though not perfect, is pretty good after all; in his very concern with society and its improvement, one can discern this attitude. In the words of one critic,

Stephen Crane's notes are the notes of irony and pity...most worthy of the humane spirit.47

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Appendix

(Note: The Crane letters quoted in this article from *The Academy*, volume 59, p. 116, August 11, 1900, are valuable source material. Since I have referred to these letters in my thesis, and since this periodical is not in the University library, I thought it well to reproduce the article here.)
So some letters of Stephen Crane

Mr. John N. Hilliard sends to the Literary Supplement of the New York Times one or two extracts from some fine letters of the late Stephen Crane, which prove what a conscientious, determined literary artist he was.

The following passage is from a letter written shortly after the publication of The Red Badge of Courage, which of course, came after George's Mother and Maggie (the two Bowery tales just reissued by Mr. Heinemann):

The one thing that deeply pleases me in my literary life---brief and inglorious as it is---is the fact that men of sense believe me to be sincere. Maggie, published in paper covers, made me the friendship of Hamlin Garland and W. D. Howells;

and the one thing that makes my life worth living in the midst of all this abuse and ridicule is the consciousness that never for an instant have these friendships at all diminished. Personally, I am aware that my work does not amount to a string of dried beans---I always calmly admit it. But I also know that I do the best that is in me, without regard to cheers or damnation. When I was the mark for every humorist in the country I went ahead; and now, when I am the mark for only 50 per cent of the humorists of the country, I go ahead, for I understand that a man is born into the world with his own pair of eyes, and he is not at all responsible for his vision---he is merely responsible for his quality of personal honesty. To keep close to my honesty is my supreme ambition. There is a sublime agnosticism in talking of honesty. I, however, do not say that I am honest. I merely say that I am as nearly honest as a weak mental machinery will allow. This aim in life struck me as being the only thing worth while. A man is sure to fail at it, but there is something in the failure. That is a fine ambition for That is a fine ambition for a young writer to cherish. And it

--- The Red Badge of Courage, 1895 came chronologically between George's Mother, 1896, and Maggie, 1893 (reissued, 1896)
is the letter of a man without illusions. Stephen Crane seems to have seen with washed eyes from the very first.

Children of a country wherein reverence is discouraged have a better chance to do so than some of us.

On another occasion he wrote:

I did little work at school, but confined my abilities, such as they were, to the diamond. Not that I disliked books, but the cut-and-dried curriculum of the college did not appeal to me. Humanity was a much more interesting study. When I ought to have been at recitations I was studying faces on the streets, and when I ought to have been studying my next day's lessons I was watching the trains roll in and out of the Central Station. So, you see, I had, first of all, to recover from College. I had to build up, so to speak. And my chiefest desire was to write plainly and unmistakably, so that all men (and some women) might read and understand. That, to my mind, is good writing. There is a great deal of labour connected with literature. I think that is the hardest thing about it. There is nothing to respect in art save one's own opinion of it.

And here is a longer passage from a letter written after Stephen Crane had won his place and had retired to England to settle for a while. The letter begins with references to the reviewers of The Red Badge of Courage:

They all insist that I am a veteran of the Civil War, whereas the fact is, as you know, I never smelled even the powder of a sham battle. I know what the psychologists say, that a fellow can't comprehend a condition that he has never experienced, and I argue that many times with the Professor. Of course, I have never been in a battle, but I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field, or else fighting in a hereditary instinct, and I wrote intuitively; for the Cranes were a family of fighters in the old days, and in the Revolution every member did his duty. But, be that as it may, 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 to 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. As Emerson said: "There should be a long logic beneath the story, but it should be kept carefully out of sight," before the Red Badge of Courage was published, I found it difficult to make both ends meet. The book was written during this period. It was an effort born of pain, and I believe that it was beneficial to it as a piece of literature. It seems a pity that this should be so—that art should be a child of suffering; and yet such seems to be the case. Of course there are fine writers who have good incomes and live comfortably and contentedly; but, if the condition of their lives were harder, I believe that their work would be better. Bret Harte is an example. He has not done any work in recent years to compare with those early California sketches.

Crane concludes with the old, old lament:

Now that I have reached the goal I suppose that I ought to be contented; but I am not. I was happier in the old days when I was always dreaming of the thing I have now attained. I am disappointed with success, and I am tired of abuse. Over here, happily, they don't treat you as if you were a dog; but give everyone an honest measure of praise or blame. There are no disgusting personalities.

When one looks back at Crane's short life, packed as it was with action, his output of work seems curiously large. And when one considers how good in its way everything he published was—how tense, and studied, and complete—this output assumes a very serious air. To die at thirty-one and to have done so much with one's talents is a great achievement. It is possible that his work was done; that as he grew older he would have lost the

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* Crane was only twenty-eight years of age at his death. Born November 1, 1871; died June 5, 1900.
desire, the zest of writing, would have asked himself: "Is it worth while?"—that paralysing question. The sardonic in his nature would have had time to develop and might have stifled further energy. This is merely conjecture, of course. Meanwhile, his work exists for our admiration and pleasure, and as a noble example to young authors in a hurry.

Stephen Crane's Whilomville Stories, those studies of boy and child life which he wrote with such intense interest toward the close of his brief life and believed in so thoroughly—he told Mr. Alden, the Editor of Harper's Magazine, that his best was in them—will be issued in book form very shortly.

We are also to have his Irish novel, and two collections of short stories—Founds in the Rain and The Monster. And there is a series of studies of great battles also to be published.
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