

**“THE PACE OF YOUTH” AND THE  
PHANTOMS OF HOPE**

Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy,  
and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope;  
who expect that age will perform the promises of  
youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will  
be supplied by the morrow— attend to the history of  
Rasselas, prince of Abyssinia.

— Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of  
Abyssinia* (1759).



When Stephen Crane’s “The Pace of Youth” was published in 1895, the story of the young lovers escaping from the pursuit of a forbidding father had matured in the author’s mind for almost two years. According to his painter friend, Corwin K. Linson, Crane wrote the story in the spring of 1893,<sup>1</sup> but vignettes depicting the fun fair of Ashbury Park had already appeared in earlier sketches. There was a reference to merry-go-rounds in “Joys of Seaside Life,” a sketch of 1892; the long line of electric lights near the beach, the parading crowd and the theme of summer-resort illusions had been part of the piece “On the Boardwalk,” also of 1892.<sup>2</sup>

J.C. Levenson, in his introduction to volume five of The University of Virginia Edition of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, sees this as an example of Crane’s careful method of composition and revision, of the “slow process of filtering through his imagination” (xx). Obviously, this story occupied Crane’s thoughts for quite some time, and it took him a while to develop it into its final form.

Having invested so much time and energy on a story of only 4,000 words, it seems curious that a writer as conscientious as Crane would come so close to making the meaning of his story so explicit. In the climactic scene of the story, as old Stimson in an old hack pursues the young couple in their newer carriage, the narrative voice proclaims, "That other vehicle, that was youth, with youth's pace, it was swift-flying with the hope of dreams."<sup>4</sup> This comment seems like an interpretation of the action that preceded the final chase, and as thus it has been accepted by the majority of the critics who have commented on the story.

Linson began the chorus of the almost unanimous readings of "The Pace of Youth" as he merely paraphrased the text: "Youth eludes age," he wrote. G.C. Schellhorn, in a longer analysis of the story, characterizes the central theme as "boy and girl in love versus an unsympathetic father" and he elaborates on the symbolical representation of Youth's superior force. Marston LaFrance, in 1971, concludes that the story is "Crane's finest treatment of romantic love," and J.C. Levenson expresses his belief that "young love triumph[s] over forbidding age." Wolford in his 1989 publication *Stephen Crane: A Study in the Short Fiction* asserts that "The Pace of Youth' fairly sings the tune of youth: it reads like a race in the sunshine with speed, airiness, love in bloom, and a sense in youth's inevitable victory in its battle against age." Finally, Bettina L. Knapp in her 1990 book on Crane equates Stimson with "a dying past" and his daughter with "the joyous future."<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the individual studies of the story differ in the emphasis of their analysis, they all agree on the fundamental concept that Youth scores a victory over Old Age. Apart from the fact that such an observation is anything but original, the text itself supports such a reading only on a surface level.

Stimson's pursuit to stop his daughter's elopement with his employee Frank does in fact end with his surrender. The hackman stops the old horse and the vehicle carrying the young people vanishes in the distance.

Reduced to these bare facts, the story does indeed end with a triumph; but it is hard to believe that Crane, who during the same year completed the multifaceted *The Red Badge of Courage*, would content himself with a story that was so one-dimensional. It seems more likely that some readers allowed themselves to be

beguiled by Crane's cunning technique and gave in to their own delusional beliefs in the certainties of an ordered reality and to their wishful thinking about the righteous power of young love.

To be fair, it has to be said that hardly any of the critics saw "The Pace of Youth" as one-dimensional. They sidestepped the issue by shifting their attention from the subject matter to the writing style. It was here that they discovered Crane's achievement, highlighting the merit of his technique. To quote from Levenson's introduction: "Both the subjective coloring of narrative and the objective rendering of how things appear serve to undermine the assumptions, as they do the method, of common-sense realism."<sup>6</sup> It seems as if these critics wanted to brush aside the issue of the content matter, which some of them found very close to banality. " 'The Pace of Youth' presents commonplace facts," wrote Marston LaFrance; Schellhorn speaks of "a lightsome frolic of a very old theme;" and Frank Bergon, in a footnote, says that "Crane's method once again rescues a banal story from sentimentality by viewing it apart from the normal perspectives."<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis on the style and the neglect of the subject matter entail that none of the critics doubt the final outcome. For all of them, the story has a happy ending, it presents a triumph of Youth over Old Age.

A close examination of the situation that leads to the elopement and an assessment of the implications that Crane's characterization of the young people has on the final result of their action will show, however, that "The Pace of Youth" goes far beyond a simple restatement of the received wisdom that Youth triumphs over Old Age.

The traditional reading of "The Pace of Youth" rests on three assumptions:

- 1) Stimson is a negative character whose actions are motivated by nothing but his despotic will. He is inherently mean.
- 2) Frank and Lizzie are representatives of a typical pair of innocent young lovers. As they are unjustly pursued, they are deserving of the reader's sympathy.

- 3) The outcome of the story confirms a received truth: the deserving young couple prevail over the tyrannic father.

The roles of the good and the bad seem all too clearly distributed and are reinforced by a literary tradition of depicting a generational conflict. Yet the situation presented in the story is not as unambiguous as one would be tempted to believe. While it is true that Crane made use of a well-established literary theme it is important to notice the subtle changes he effected. His use of irony and logic undermine the traditional pattern of the generational conflict and allow him to refashion the familiar theme.

For one thing, Stimson is not a one-dimensional character. The text does characterize him with attributes such as "fierce," "resolute" and "redoubtable," but these intimidating qualities are balanced by the ironic juxtaposition of the repeated reference to his small size. The much-quoted beginning of the story, which presents him as a "fierce man with indomitable whiskers," invalidates any attempt to establish him as a truly terrifying character from the very start. The comment draws attention to the delusions of a man who likes to see himself as a person of central importance. The resulting incongruity of the ensuing action exposes him to the reader's ridicule: a man unable to control his own whiskers sets out to control forces of a universal dimension.

Crane hardly misses an opportunity to cut the pretentious Stimson down to size. Whenever he characterizes him with an attribute that lends him some respectability, he is bound to revoke it with an added ironic remark, and he never tires of reminding the reader of this man's small stature. Thus, despite all his self-aggrandizement the "terrible Stimson" never really comes across as anything but a "little hatless man" (11).

If Stimson himself is unconvincing as a true despot, his realm of influence, the Merry-Go-Round, has none of the attributes one would associate with a place of suffering. On the contrary, it is, by definition, a place of joy and light. The summer sunlight quite literally turns it into a golden world, (3) and it is obvious that his little customers thoroughly enjoy Stimson's little world: "A host of laughing children bestrode the animals, bend-

ing forward like charging cavalymen and shaking reins and whooping in glee" (4). Stimson's Mammoth Merry-Go-Round is a fun place, and simultaneously it is a well-ordered place where everything and everybody has its assigned function and defined purpose. As a matter of fact, everybody seems to enjoy the place: The children whoop in glee, their parents encourage, caution and applaud them, and Stimson feels a great pride in the machinery he owns and operates.

Only the lovers don't participate in this general atmosphere of joy and pleasure, although in their occupations they are well integrated in Stimson's world of amusement. Both occupy positions that lend them a certain degree of prominence. Frank stands on a raised platform from which he performs the duties that are an integral part of the carousel's fun: he operates the wooden arm from which the children try to grab the ring that entitles them to a free ride. Stimson's daughter Lizzie sells tickets from a booth with the word "Cashier" printed in golden letters.

Although the two young people perform important functions for the proper operation of the carousel, they, unlike Stimson, do not derive any satisfaction from their work. Occupying a halfway position between the parties who enjoy the clamor of the carousel, they don't belong to either one. Frank's characterization as a "general squire in the lists of childhood" (4) illustrates their subordination to their little customers, and the fact that they are employed by Stimson obviously makes them dependent on their boss.

Their position in-between two worlds is also symbolized in the ambiguity of their respective locations. While Frank's platform elevates him above the mass of children and gives him an important function in the operation of the machine, it also confines him to a narrow space which poses the danger of a serious fall. Moreover, Crane uses three ironic synonyms for Frank's location: he refers to it as a "pulpit," although the dialogues make it more than clear that this young man has absolutely nothing to preach, being barely able to communicate intelligibly in a normal conversation. In one instance, when Frank is filled with jealousy, Crane likens the platform to a "pedestal" for a "dark statue of vengeance," although this image seems comically inappropriate for the gentle Frank who hardly dares to speak to his sweetheart. Finally, Crane calls it a "perch,"

cleverly alluding to the image of the birds that he uses at the end of the story and also recalling the hawk from the beginning of the story. Here again he slyly mocks the tame Frank who is anything but a hawk, even though Stimson indeed seems to regard him as a bird of prey who threatens to intrude in his well-ordered world.

Lizzie's placement in the cashier's booth complements well the imagery of the birds: Sitting "behind a silvered netting" and peering "between the shining wires," she is literally placed in a cage. But according to the outer features it is, if not a golden, then at least a silver cage rather than a drab prison cell.

From this perspective, the world of Stimson's Mammoth Merry-Go-Round, like any other world, has definite limitations with respect to the amount of freedom it allows its inhabitants; yet it is a well-ordered universe which by virtue of its organization limits the possibilities for the occurrence of unexpected and, therefore, threatening events.

In such a mechanical world the intrusion of an irrational force like love can appear as a threat, especially if it is of the wildly foolish sort that Crane depicts. Actually, Crane is asking much of his readers if he expects them to believe in earnest that these two youths are indeed establishing a love relationship. Even for some of the critics quoted above this is not entirely easy. Schellhorn, for example, refers to the "fantastic, illogical logic of the lovers" and the "madness of young love,"<sup>12</sup> but he never questions if this is really a depiction of love rather than an attempt to satirize the illusions the two young people have about the thing called love. After having read about the solely visual attempts of the two youngsters to connect with each other, it is at least surprising for a reader to learn that "there had finally become established between the two . . . a subtle understanding and companionship. They communicated accurately all they felt" (5). If this is not enough to alert a reader to the possibility that the narrator's intention is not serious, Crane tops it off by detailing what exactly was transmitted in this supposedly subtle, accurate communication: "The girl told him that she loved him, that she did not love him, that she did not know if she loved him, that she loved him" (5). When the narrative voice finally announces the couple's recognition of their mutual love, it is presented as the result of a process that permits no other conclusions, whereas in fact it violates all logical thinking: "They fell and

soared, soared and fell in this manner until they knew that to live without each other would be a wandering in deserts" (6).

However strongly a reader may hope for the final triumph of Youth, one cannot help but feel uneasy about the young people's future. They seem callow and shallow, they have no vision that is more meaningful than their life at the carrousel. Even if it is really a desire for freedom that drives them to escape from what they perceive as their immediate prison, it seems more than doubtful that they could turn the newly won liberty to good use. They are simply too deluded to make a convincing team of victors.

There are several situations in the story that foreshadow a less than happy ending. On one occasion, the reader learns that the two young people "put [their] trust in the treachery of the future" (6). Only a little later the narrator refers to the couple as "victims" and portrays them as disoriented wanderers on a road to nowhere: "They were the victims of the dread angel of affectionate speculation that forces the brain endlessly on roads that lead nowhere" (6). At the end of the story, it is not only their brains that travel roads that lead nowhere, they themselves have embarked on a trip that holds no promise.

The depiction of the young people's vehicle racing along on the highway that "vanished far away in a point with a suggestion of intolerable length" brings to mind a poem from *The Black Riders*:<sup>18</sup>

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;  
Round and round they sped.  
I was disturbed at this;  
I accosted the man.  
"It is futile," I said,  
"You can never—"  
"You lie," he cried,  
And ran on.

Just like the man in the poem, the young couple doggedly insist on the possibility of finding something which is presumably better than what they had. In a sense the story complements the poem, and it is very interesting to note how Crane, in the poem, achieves a combination of linear and circular movements: The

man pursuing the horizon moves straight ahead but because the world is a sphere this motion is, on a larger scale, automatically transformed into a circular pattern. Applied to "The Pace of Youth," it would be possible to say that although the lovers were able to outdistance Stimson, the carousel owner, as the representative of a strictly circumscribed world, yet the facts of nature force them into another circular pattern. This pattern is certainly larger than that of the father's Merry-Go-Round but it is fundamentally the same. The young couple, always referred to as "boy" and "girl" or "the children," have only exchanged the wooden horses of the carousel for a live one.

Section two of the story shows clearly that the young couple have crossed a line and left Stimson's realm of influence. While the first part of the story is dominated by the circular structure of life at the merry-go-round, the walk along the beach and finally the route of escape establish a linear pattern. With the walk along the beach the story changes its structural design, it shifts from the repetitive pattern of the carousel's continuous circular motion to a movement in one direction. As is evidenced by the description of the beach scene, this entails a change away from the well-ordered mechanical world of Stimson's carousel, toward the incalculable forces of nature. In contrast to the reassuring aspects of life at Stimson's Merry-Go-Round, existence here is somewhat chaotic, confusing, and threatening: People intermingle, intertwine, and sometimes collide; a whirling mass of water appears like a ghostly robe; and the cool wind makes "the women hold their wraps around their throats and [causes] the men to grip the rims of their straw hats" (8). It is obvious that life outside of Stimson's Mammoth Merry-Go-Round is far less regular and secure.

Because Frank and Lizzie seemingly had a just cause in their struggle against an overbearing parent, they had hoped that nature would assist them in some way. This, they noticed, was not the case. In a moment of joyous togetherness "they vaguely wondered how the purple sea, the yellow stars, the changing crowd under the electric lights could be so phlegmatic and stolid" (10). Just like in "The Open Boat," nature takes no interest in human matters.

The reason why they nevertheless seem to be favored in the symbolic race that constitutes the climax of "The Pace of

Youth" has nothing to do with the intervention of nature or some superior justice. The reason is simply that Time is on their side. They are young and Stimson is old, and that is why they can get away from him. To call this a triumph, though, is a misnomer; it is merely the logical consequence of human existence. There is nothing permanent in their victory: At this stage of their lives, Time gives them an advantage over Stimson, but soon the factor, which is now their ally, will turn against them and reduce them to the same level of debilitation that Stimson experiences. They may have won the race against the old father, but they cannot win the race against Time itself.

The story closes with Stimson's gesture expressing "that at any rate he was not responsible." The two final sentences are all the more significant as Crane added them only shortly before his story was printed in American newspapers. Its proto-version, entitled "The Merry-Go-Round," had appeared without these sentences in an English weekly a little more than two weeks before "The Pace of Youth" came out in America.<sup>9</sup>

Since nobody accuses Stimson of anything, the question is what it is that he feels not responsible for. Since the preceding paragraph shows Stimson's realization and his acceptance of the superior powers of nature and life, it is reasonable to assume that the final sentences relate to the same fact. Now, at the end of his unsuccessful attempt to save his daughter (and maybe her suitor) from the consequences of their behavior, he acknowledges his defeat but renounces responsibility. It is true, he failed in his endeavor, but because he tried everything in his power, he feels that he cannot be held accountable for any consequences that may follow.

Here, Stimson resembles the observing I-narrator in the poem quoted above, unsuccessfully informing a fellow human about the futility of his action. He appears like an experienced father who knows so much more about life than his children; a father who wants to keep his daughter out of harm's way by confining her to the silver cage until she is mature enough to make well-founded decisions. In this sense life at his carousel can be looked upon as a form of protective custody.

While the refuge of the merry-go-round in Stimson's eyes might have protected the children from the vicissitudes of life, it also has a shielding function for Stimson himself. His carousel

symbolizes the theme of eternal recurrence, the illusion that everything will stay the same forever. Even if the people operating the machinery grow older, it is easy for them to forget this basic fact of life, since their customers always stay the same age; a carousel is frequented by children, and as they outgrow the merry-go-round and disappear, they are replaced by the following generation, thus creating the illusion of the suspension of time in the realm of the carousel. This is the world Stimson feels comfortable in because it gives him an illusion of changelessness, of perdurability. The cyclical scheme of order which pretends that everything comes round again is a very comforting thought for a man who, as the proprietor of the carousel, takes a lot of pride in his lifetime achievement. In this constructed world human beings are untroubled and free to the extent that their choices are not limited by the crucial issue of mere survival.

But the mechanical world that he constructed as a shelter against the imponderabilities of life is shattered as the two youths break out of this circle of illusions. In contrast to Stimson, Frank and Lizzie gain nothing from this hollow triumph. While the older man bravely faces the painful truth that he had hoped to banish from his artificial universe, they are unaware of all but the superficial implications of their action.

"The Pace of Youth," then, is not about the triumph of Youth over Old Age; it is about illusionary conceptions of life, about hopes that cannot be fulfilled. The young lovers succeed in escaping from the small world of Stimson's Merry-Go-Round but they remain caught in a larger scheme. Like the children on the carousel, they are "tireless racers" in a "never-ending race" moving along a road that leads nowhere (3). If there is indeed a success in the young couple's action, it consists not so much in an acquisition of greater freedom for themselves but in the destruction of a delusionary belief—a destruction of which they are ironically unaware. They dash Stimson's hope of creating and sustaining a self-contained world, rotating around itself and governed by his rules as a defense against an alien and inhuman nature.

While on a surface level Stephen Crane lets the reader see the lovers prevail in their attempt to break free from the restrictions of their lives at Stimson's Merry-Go-Round, he undercuts his tale by insisting on the universal limitations of life. It is this

counterweight that transforms the seemingly hopeful message of the story into a phantom of hope. ☞

## NOTES

1. Corwin K. Linson, *My Stephen Crane*, ed. with an intr. by Edwin H. Cady (Syracuse University Press, 1958) 28-29.
2. J.C. Levenson, introduction, *Tales of Adventure*, Volume V of The University of Virginia Edition of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, Fredson Bowers, ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970) xx. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
3. Stephen Crane, "The Pace of Youth," *Tales of Adventures*, Volume V of The University of Virginia Edition of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, Fredson Bowers, ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970) 12.
4. Linson, 28; G.C. Schellhorn, "Stephen Crane's 'The Pace of Youth,'" *Arizona Quarterly* 25.4 (1969): 334; Marston LaFrance, *A Reading of Stephen Crane* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 78; Levenson, xxvi; Bettina L. Knapp, *Stephen Crane* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1990) 147.
5. Levenson, Introduction, xxv
6. LaFrance, 76; Schellhorn, 334; Frank Bergon, *Stephen Crane's Artistry* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975) 154 n. 10.
7. Schellhorn, 336-337.
8. Stephen Crane, *The Complete Poems of Stephen Crane*, ed. with an intr. by Joseph Katz (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972) 24.
9. Cf. Robert Morace, "Stephen Crane's 'The Merry-Go-Round': An Earlier Version of 'The Pace of Youth,'" *Studies in the Novel: Special Number—Stephen Crane* 10:1 (1978):146-153.