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## MODERN PICTURES OF WAR IN STEPHEN CRANE'S SHORT STORIES



Of his twenty-two short stories dealing with the subject, Stephen Crane composed four "pictures of war" that were and still remain innovative, provocative, and modern, namely "A Mystery of Heroism," "An Episode of War," "Death and the Child," and "The Upturned Face."<sup>1</sup> Collectively, they made a significant contribution to Crane's periodic literary battles against the traditional and stereotyped fiction of his day, and are deserving of a place in the company of his great "civilian" stories, "The Open Boat," "The Blue Hotel," "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," and "The Monster."

The four pictures mirror the Civil War, the Greco-Turkish War, and an imaginary war in the country of Spitzbergen. In drawing upon the recent past, contemporary reality, and the remote world of Spitzbergen, Crane, with his ironic vision, voice, and art, was more mature and more steadily and keenly focused on the day-to-day lives and the commonplace reality of men at war than in his classic, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Along with his great "civilian" stories, "A Mystery of Heroism," "An Episode of War," "Death and the Child," and "The Upturned Face" proved that the short story, and not the novel, was Stephen Crane's true *métier*.

With his ability at genre-crossing that he demonstrated in *Red Badge*, Crane added both body and substance to his highly individualized, fundamentally hybrid short story craft. On a smaller and surer scale than in *Red Badge*, he created mood and tonal paintings; dramatic and cinematic scenes, with sparse yet telling dialogue; psychological nuances; lyric and poetic reverberations; and the rhythm and pattern of music, in what were anti-stories for their day.

By telling and showing his four pictures in episodes or scenes, Crane was both battling the traditional short story and transforming it. The carefully orchestrated plot, with beginning, middle, and end, a clearly evolving climax and resolution, a character or characters to illustrate a standard and popular theme—none of these were acceptable to him. Crane instinctively knew this meant surrendering to the artificial, the contrived, and the prearranged, when he was aiming to discover and reflect the “real” and the “true.”

To liberate his imagination and his art, Crane employed the loose and open episodic form, partly acquired from his “schooling” in impressionistic painting, and that gave him the freedom, the mobility, and the flexibility to make impromptu twists and turns, ironic, dramatic, poetic, psychological, and cinematic probes into the nature of things. In this way Crane surrounded and revealed his inimitable pictures of war.

Two of Crane’s pictures, “An Episode of War” and “The Upturned Face,” predicted the modern art of minimalism, “less is more.” He already showed this tendency in “A Mystery of Heroism,” an anecdote from his *Red Badge* that he turned into a short story. In it he skirted the “big picture,” crowded with people, places, and actions; and opted instead for a narrow, localized, almost private view underscored in the subtitle of the story: “A Detail of an American Battle.”<sup>2</sup> This initial focus on a single “detail” helped Crane to release and display his greatest strengths: originality and intensity. By concentrating on brief episodes or scenes that he developed from workaday “details,” Crane engaged his reader in a one-to-one relationship to humanize, personalize, and universalize the daily “routine” events facing men at war.

Crane opens each of his pictures with a “domestic” detail. During the battle between northern and southern armies in “A Mystery of Heroism,” the private Fred Collins has a sudden urge for a drink of water. A lieutenant in “An Episode of War” is in the act of dividing coffee rations to representatives of his squads. “Death and the Child” depicts the flight of Greek peasants from the war zone. A lieutenant and an adjutant in “The Upturned Face” are making preparations to bury a fallen fellow officer named Bill.

Several features of Crane's episodic craft are revealed in the process and come to dominate the four pictures. All begin *in medias res*, that is, near the end of things; in using this technique, Crane bypasses the mechanical plot for a naturally unfolding scene or episode. All are involved in a tentative journey and often a "mystery," in which nothing is resolved, but matters build to a climax or anticlimax, to a seemingly "pointed" ending. The endings, however, remain "pointless," raising more questions than they answer.

Crane does all of these things with his minimalist eye. He first fixes on a domestic detail, then he extends and expands it with broader details to show its deeper and more complex relationship to universal themes. Although the four episodes suggest a similar pattern of development, they are strikingly individualized pictures of the life of war. Crane "arrests" his scenes or episodes long enough to fill in the shades and hues of their unique landscapes, and the stance of the individual character or characters toward initial details that lead to more complicated ones, thus affecting the cumulative experiences of each scene or episode.

Crane opens "A Mystery of Heroism" with the broad environment of war in the foreground—"the incessant wrestling of the two armies" and the "impressive" labors of the artillerymen (623). Within this environment, and only momentarily, an infantryman of Company A, Fred Collins, steps out from the background to level a complaint: "Thunder, I wisht I had a drink. Ain't there any water round here?" (623). A "complementary" sentence immediately follows: "There goes th' bugler!" Very early Crane has sounded the discordant ironic note that pervades the entire episode and points to the core experience of the "mystery" of heroism. Here Crane also puts into motion the double mood of life and death.

With his deft impressionism, Crane captures the once natural and now unnatural landscape to reflect and measure the ravages of war. First, there is the natural landscape: "Sometimes they of the infantry looked down at a fair little meadow which spread at their feet. Its long, green grass was rippling gently in a breeze" (623). Then, there is a rush of dissonant "music," the havoc of war: the "civilian" house half torn by shells and by the axes of soldiers, who are looking for firewood; the heated

discussion between two privates of Collins' company, "involved [in] the greatest questions of the national existence"; the battery "engaged in a frightful duel"; the "torn body" of a member of a "swing" team; the colonel ordering his infantry force to safer shelter; and a wounded lieutenant. In the midst of this many-sided panorama, Collins repeats his desire for water—"I wisht I had a drink"—which takes on a shrill "lyrical" quality, and completely out of place in a "theatre for slaughter" (624).

In his solo journey into no man's land to a well for water, Collins comes to and remains in the foreground to illustrate his essentially symbolic role. His private journey transforms into a public one, both in physical and psychological terms, making visible the invisible enigmas surrounding the myth of heroism.

"An Episode of War" opens with a lieutenant in the foreground as he distributes coffee rations at the breastwork (671).<sup>3</sup> When he is wounded, other details come into play before he begins his journey to the rear lines, the field hospital, and the key irony and the moral center of the episode. Before this point, still other details are revealed. The corporals and representatives of the squads, in their compassionate response to the lieutenant's wound, foreshadow the later and more impatient response by the doctor who attends to the lieutenant's wound. At first "the men about him gazed statue-like and silent, astonished and awed by this catastrophe which had happened when catastrophes were not expected—when they had leisure to observe it" (671). Then, in a spirit of sympathy and camaraderie, they, like the lieutenant, stared at the wood "as if their minds were fixed upon the mystery of a bullet's journey" (671). They take leave of "their stone-like poses" when the orderly-sergeant sheathes the lieutenant's sword in its scabbard for him. Yet his helpless situation places the lieutenant in a special status: "[a] wound gives strange dignity to him who bears it" (672). It also explains his new-found sixth sense, "as if the wounded man's hand is upon the curtain which hangs before the revelations of all existence . . . and makes the other men understand sometimes that they are little" (672).

When he makes his journey to the rear lines, the lieutenant sees "many things which as a participant in the fight were unknown to him" (672). It leads to the crux of the episode, and poignant and painful revelations.

The most abbreviated episode—really a graphic, abrupt scene—is “The Upturned Face.”<sup>4</sup> Placed next to “A Mystery of Heroism,” and “An Episode of War,” it forms part of a stereopticon. With remarkable skill, Crane forestalls an almost nonexistent *in medias res* long enough to prepare a final perspective. A small cast of characters in the foreground—two officers and two enlisted men—and the background of unceasing fire between the Spitzbergen infantry and Roslund’s sharpshooters, put the life of the scene into motion. Of primary importance are the mood shifts, especially the adjutant’s, and the somber tone that envelope the rite of burial (1283-1287). The literally stationary journey in “The Upturned Face” exposes both the outer and critical danger as well as the inner psychological pain and spiritual torment facing Lean and the adjutant on one level and the privates on another.

No longer the minimalist but his own kind of maximalist (where “more is more”) in “Death and the Child,” Crane creates the “big picture” in one of his longest short stories. He combines the “romance” of *Red Badge*, the literal realism of a correspondent’s war, and the cryptic tragic and epic power of his *Black Riders*. In the story’s opening, Crane is *in medias res* but with a difference. He presents a densely packed scene, not only of peasants running in fear and terror, but the distant blue bay, the white town, and a high vista “that a bird knows when . . . it surveys the world, a great calm thing rolling noiselessly toward the end of the mystery”—a convergence of sea, sky, and hills; the relation of “men, geography, and life” (943).

It is in this setting that the war correspondent Peza appears, who acknowledges from the outset that he knows nothing of war, that he is a “student” (944). He receives his preliminary education, his baptism of fire, by witnessing the “sharp terror” of the fleeing peasants and hearing the distant roar of Greek and Turkish artillery. This serves as a backdrop to Peza’s journey of self-discovery, as well as his limitations as a representative “new” man.

The journeys in the four episodes that follow the preparatory rites of *in medias res* bring out into the open the range and depth, the fullest “exposure” of Crane’s pictures of war, reinforced and substantiated by his varied art.

Collins' journey in "A Mystery of Heroism" invalidates the age-old notions regarding the meaning and value of heroism. To Crane, heroism is a mysterious amalgam of various paradoxical attitudes, and forces the interplay of selfish and private needs and wants (Collins' urge for a drink of water); rational and irrational behavior ("It seemed to him [Collins] supernaturally strange that he had allowed his mind to maneuver his body into such a situation"); ambiguous and ambivalent impulses (Collins' fear, courage, bravado, desperation, shame, pride, surprise, panic); and group pressure (Collins taunted by his fellow troopers, and called a "lad" by the colonel [628]). The climactic close to Collins' journey is really anticlimactic, underscoring the tentativeness of heroism and its fragile nature. The empty bucket sounds and resounds with aftereffects—of the praise lavished upon Collins by his fellow troopers, and the hollowness of his feat, with Collins graceless under pressure, where pride, panic, and group pressure have "conspired" to make him an "accidental" hero (631).

In his journey to the rear lines in "An Episode of War," the lieutenant achieves his corrective vision by moving from a short view to a long view of the real nature and hazards of war. On the surface, though, the lieutenant's journey seems to be a rehearsal of the beginning scene of the episode, with the reference to coffee and the concern of fellow soldiers, now the officers, acting as wound dressers.

But all this is misleading. The stragglers the lieutenant meets indicate in advance the latent powers of his own sixth sense: "They [the stragglers] described its [the field hospital's] exact location. In fact these men, no longer having part in the battle, knew more of it than others. They told the performance of every corps, every division, the opinion of every general" (673).

Now, the lieutenant's own sixth sense comes to the forefront, first incidentally, without his seeming to recognize it, when he observes "a man with a face as grey as a new army blanket . . . serenely smoking a corn-cob pipe. The lieutenant wished to rush forward and inform him that he was dying." Then the lieutenant is overpowered by his sixth sense, helpless to make use of it in that taut and ominous scene with the doctor:

The lieutenant had been very meek but now his face flushed, and he looked into the doctor's eyes. "I guess I won't have it [his arm] amputated," he said.

"Nonsense, man! nonsense! nonsense!" cried the doctor. "Come along, now. I won't amputate it. Come along. Don't be a baby."

"Let go of me," said the lieutenant, holding back wrathfully. His glance fixed upon the door of the old school-house, as sinister to him as the portals of death. (674-675)

The closing paragraph of "An Episode of War," where the lieutenant, with the loss of an arm, shows stoical grace under pressure, is really anticlimactic, a false catharsis. He is masking his despondency, his agony and rage, the heavy price he has paid for duty and honor.

The "journeys" are several, subtle, and stationary in Crane's remarkable vignette, "The Upturned Face." The call for privates to prepare a grave for the dead officer Bill; the officer Lean's grim duty of going through his dead companion's clothes; Lean and the adjutant together lifting then dropping the body into the grave; the prayer service; and the burial itself—all accentuate and heighten the pace, the tone, the moods of the journeys. The taut, somber tone and the moods—"troubled and excited," "hurried and frightened"—also and more importantly reflect the psychological journeys of the "aggrieved" privates, and Lean and the adjutant (1283). The stress and strain show especially in the adjutant, who "croaked out a weird laugh. It was a terrible laugh which had its origin in that part of the mind which is first moved by the singing of the nerves" (1284).

Inanimate "actors"—the pick and the shovel—contribute to the deadly finality of the journeys, especially the devastating, eerie, "lyric" and choric incremental sound of the word "plop" (1287). The matter of "directions" also affects the journeys: the horizontal line of fire of the Spitzbergen and Rostina troops; the elaborate prayer to a higher Supreme Being; the "pendulum" swing of the shovel; the way the earth is thrown on Bill's body—first on his feet, last on his face. All together add up the falseness of the mystique of war, its terrible cost to man's humanism; yet

the true and steadfast loyalty, duty, sacrifice, and courage shown by the living for a fallen comrade. With his minimalist art, Crane crafted a picture, reminiscent in some of its features to the macabre and grotesque power of Goya's *Disasters of War*.

Peza's journey in "Death and the Child" provides both a close-up and a distant view of the landscape of war, an arena of life and death, in the broadest and most comprehensive of Crane's stories dealing with combat. He achieves a tragic and epic scope by combining the fabric of fiction—character, dialogue, scene, mood, action, climax, and "denouement"—with the literal and factual newspaper headlines, and the social, economic, and political history of the times. The end result is a "non-fictional" war story. In a sense, "Death and the Child" is also a private journey for Crane, to prove to himself that the guesswork of *Red Badge* was "all right," and it was. But it was "not all."

On one level, in using Peza as a guide, Crane surveys and reflects on the public and contemporary perceptions of the politics, the machinery, and the philosophy of war. He brings all of these factors to three-dimensional life, and makes them dramatic and palatable by merging them within the province of fiction. In one place, the narrator of the story states:

Certainly this living thing [war] had knowledge of his [Peza's] coming. He endowed it with the intelligence of a barbaric deity. And so he hurried; he wished to surprise war, this terrible emperor, when it was only growling on its throne. The ferocious and horrible sovereign was not to be allowed to make the arrival a pretext for some fit of smoky rage and blood. (954)

In another place, the narrator spells out the power of politics:

Peza was proud and ashamed that he was not of them, 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 to-

gether in the name of God, the king, or the Stock Exchange—immortal, dreaming, hopeless asses who surrender their reason to the care of a sitting puppet, and persuade some toy to carry their lives in his purse (954).

The narrator describes further, and with some irony, the mundane effects of politics: "Other officers questioned Peza in regard to the politics of the war. The king, the ministry, Germany, England, Russia, all these huge words were continually upon their tongues" (956).

On its deep and profound level, Peza's journey is a discovery and recovery of man's failings, even as he is educated at one of the fountains of learning, Italy. Crawling and disheveled, in the presence of one of God's messengers, the "cherubic" child of the mountain, Peza faces his judgment and the bankrupt experience of war in the anguished cry of the child—repeated twice—"Are you a man?" (963).

Whether in static, brief, or extended scenes or episodes, Crane confronts head-on the mystery of existence, and pictures of life's "little ironies." "A Mystery of Heroism," "An Episode of War," "The Upturned Face," and "Death and the Child," while "pointless," reverberate with aftereffects; they are all momentary stays against the eternal presence and paradox of the life of war. Individually and collectively, they rehearse man's tragic fate in active service, his pain, torment, rage, and stoicism, and his struggle to retain and sustain his humanism against all odds.

In one way or another, Crane adds to the perspectives and dimensions of the everyday life and the routines of war, to the humanism of his short stories, with his constant art. He melds the inanimate and the animate worlds into an all-embracing oneness. He is poetic: in his striking images—e.g., "The battle lines writhed at times in the agony of a sea-creature on the sands" ("Death and the Child" 950); in his use of the pathetic fallacy and personification—e.g., ". . . a battery was arguing in tremendous roars with some other guns . . ." ("A Mystery of Heroism" 623); in incremental repetition, poetic and lyrical in effect—e.g., the several and cumulative references to "the wood," "the hostile wood," and "stared at the wood" ("An Episode of War" 671); in

his reliance on the "sense" of sounds, on onomatopoeia (the devastating use of "plop" in "The Upturned Face" 1287).

Crane is dramatic, not only in the intensity of an act or a scene, he is dramatic in his use of a Greek device—*stichomythia*—where Collins' fellow troopers anonymously debate in one-line statements among themselves his action to go for water—e.g., "What's he goin' to do, anyhow? . . . Say, he must be a desperate cuss" ("A Mystery of Heroism" 628). Crane anticipates "cinematic" effects in his use of close-ups and long shots, adding to both immediacy and distance of scene, character, pace, tone, and mood—e.g.,

The two officers looked down close to their toes where lay the body of their comrade. The face was chalk blue; gleaming eyes stared at the sky. Over the two upright figures was a windy sound of bullets, and on the top of the hill, Lean's prostrate company of Spitzbergen infantry was firing measured volleys. ("The Upturned Face" 1283)

Crane is often psychological, sounding the inner voices of his characters, and the impact on their outer actions or inactions—e.g., the scene between the lieutenant and the "busy" doctor ("An Episode of War" 674). He is musical—e.g., "In the dismal melody of this flight there were often sounding chords of apathy" ("Death and the Child" 944). Crane makes skillful use of counterpoint and dissonance; of stasis; of slow, moderate, fast tempo and pace; of the idyll; and the coda. They help to expose the conflicts and ironies, the stress and strain, the momentariness of peace amidst the persistent destructiveness of war. In Part II of "Death and the Child" there is a telling display of counterpoint and dissonance, as the child plays on a mountain while the battle rages on the plain; then the child is, ironically, "stirred" from his "serious occupation" to view the distant battle (950). The shifts in rhythm and pace are carefully modulated in "A Mystery of Heroism." An idyll, a momentary reprieve, even occurs in the generally fast-paced "Mystery of Heroism," when Collins rationalizes:

He was then a hero. He suffered that disappointment which we would all have if we discovered that we were ourselves capable of those deeds which we most admire in history and legend. This, then, was a hero. After all, heroes were not much. (628)

There is an effective and modern coda to "An Episode of War." It is a rounding off, a conclusive ending, which is ironically inconclusive, really a "double" ending:

And this is the story of how the lieutenant lost his arm. When he reached home his sisters, his mother, his wife, sobbed for a long time at the sight of the flat sleeve. "Oh, well," he said, standing shamefaced amid these tears. "I don't suppose it matters so much as all that." (675)

All the episodes are simple yet subtle examples of symbolism, where Crane projects and extends the nature of war and the price paid, even though he begins and ends with seemingly incidental details. He is overt in "Death and the Child" as he describes the child in tears, who has time for "greater vision" while the men on the plain have less: "It was as simple as some powerful symbol." Crane is less simple at the story's close. Following the child's words, "Are you a man?" the narrator summarizes:

Peza gasped in the manner of a fish. Palsied, windless, and abject, he confronted the primitive courage, the sovereign child, the brother of the mountains, the sky and the sea, and he knew that the definition of his misery could be written on a wee grass-blade. (963)

When these multi-leveled arts are channeled into his four pictures, and linked with Crane's well-known and much discussed painterly skills—of moods, tones, and colors—they reveal their important relation to the body and substance of his impressionism and naturalism, and his irony and realism.

In "A Mystery of Heroism," "An Episode of War," "The Upturned Face," and "Death and the Child," Crane combined his first profession as a creative artist and his second as practicing journalist. From both his inexperience with war (*The Little Regiment and Other Episodes of the American Civil War*) and his experience (*Wounds in the Rain* and *Last Words*), Crane produced only a few outstanding stories and many pedestrian ones. There was some truth to his partly ambivalent complaints in his letters of January and February 1896. In one, he said: "I have invented the sum of my invention in regard to war and this story ("The Little Regiment") keeps me in internal despair." In another, he was more blunt: "I am engaged in rowing with people who wish me to write more war-stories. Hang all war-stories." Crane's frustration showed in Civil War stories such as "Three Miraculous Soldiers" and "A Grey Sleeve," where he succumbed to wholesale artifice;<sup>5</sup> and in Cuban war stories such as "The Lone Charge of William B. Perkins" and "The Second Generation," where he catered to popular tastes and popular magazines (*McClure's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*), with one-dimensional, slick adventures and misadventures.

But "A Mystery of Heroism," "An Episode of War," "The Upturned Face," and "Death and the Child" were worth it, for Crane left an imposing legacy to modern writers of war, beginning with Hemingway, who respected his literary style, poetic sensibility, and ironic vision.<sup>6</sup>

A definite link exists between Crane and Hemingway in their short stories on war and related themes. The extended vignette of fleeing Greek civilians at the beginning of "Death and the Child" prepares for the starker vignette, "Minarets stuck up in the rain out of Adrianople across the mud flats," and the "revolutionary" new fiction of *In Our Time* (1924, 1925). The tough and tender scenes and situations in "A Mystery of Heroism," "An Episode of War," and "The Upturned Face"—especially the latter two—were valuable lessons for Hemingway.

In the end, Stephen Crane's four pictures demonstrate his innate talent, where he probed the "romance of war" with his powerfully acute realistic sensibility. He was no carbon copy of past and present literary traditions, nor of his literary fathers, Garland and Howells. Not only was he an avant-gardist of 20<sup>th</sup>-century writing in America, he remains even now one of our

contemporaries. With his highly individualized art and vision, Crane broke through a forest of clichés to create incisive yet kaleidoscopic modern pictures that he transformed into permanent etchings of the life of war. ☞

## NOTES

1. Stephen Crane, *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry*, J.C. Levenson, ed (The Library of America: New York, 1984). Subsequent references to these texts are parenthetical.

Two stories, "An Episode of War" and "Death and the Child," remained uncollected during Crane's lifetime. Twenty others were collected in *The Little Regiment and Other Episodes of the American Civil War* (1896), *Wounds in the Rain* (1900), and *Last Words* (1902).

The phrase "pictures of war" is drawn from the English critic, George Wyndham, and his sensitive and glowing essay of *The Red Badge of Courage*, "A Remarkable Book" (*The New Review*, January 1896). Wyndham's phrase was reused as the title of the volume, *Pictures of War* (July 1898), which included *Red Badge* and *The Little Regiment*.

2. This subtitle was removed in the book version (*The Little Regiment*) of the story.

3. This story has an intriguing history. It was meant for publication in *The Youth's Companion*, but was unacceptable to the editors in 1896, probably due to its violence (suggested in its original title, "The Loss of an Arm"); the magazine eventually published "An Episode of War" in March 1916. It did appear during Crane's lifetime, in England, in *The Gentlewoman* magazine (1899).

The plain and direct style, without subtle images and symbolic flourishes, suggests that Crane was writing "An Episode of War" for uninitiated youths, introducing them to the ways of war.

4. "The Upturned Face" probably served as a model for Irwin Shaw's antiwar play, *Bury the Dead* (1936). The implied and muted undertones of Crane's "drama" (he planned it for theatrical presentation) were translated into an angry and defiant condemnation of war, in a basically melodramatic-surrealistic absurdist, nightmarish play by Shaw.

5. Crane was entangled with his romantic sensibility, which surfaced in "Three Miraculous Soldiers" and "A Grey Sleeve," and elsewhere. In the two Civil War stories he labored with romance, sentimentalism, and melodrama, very seriously, but with nothing resembling his well-known critical irony. He created one-dimensional characters, awkward and stagy dialogue, silly twists and turns of shopworn plots, and a pedestrian style. Only when he looked at romance realistically, as in *Red*

*Badge* and in stories like "A Mystery of Heroism," did his powers as an artist become clear and apparent.

6. In his several reading lists, Hemingway mentioned "The Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel." In his 1968 *Paris Review* interview, John Dos Passos recalled that "Ernest . . . talked a lot about style. He was crazy about Stephen Crane's 'The Blue Hotel.' It affected him very much." In *Men at War* (1942), Hemingway praised *Red Badge* as a "poem."

Hemingway did have his eye on the opening of *Red Badge* for the opening to his own *Farewell to Arms*. The grim humor and sardonic swagger in "The Blue Hotel" found their way into "The Killers." The symbolic and epic flights of "The Open Boat" helped Hemingway in the shaping of *The Old Man and the Sea*.