

Crane's World of Violence and Hypocrisy

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It is commonly accepted that the situations which can best exemplify the various aspects of humanity are poverty and war. As far as this is concerned, Crane is perceptive to choose the slum life of Bowery and the Civil War as the backgrounds for his Maggie and The Red Badge. In addition, with his realistic and impressionistic description, Crane proves himself a writer who recognizes that man's survival is most often and severely threatened in these two kinds of conditions. Whether in war or in poverty, man's reaction to his situation are usually potent and intense. And it is through man's intense reactions that we can see and understand human nature most clearly. In order to survive, man has to defend himself against any possible dangers or rivals. However, man's self-defense usually involves violence. Violence is an indispensable weapon for a soldier to survive in war. It is the only armor as well for poor people to preserve themselves in a world of utmost deprivation and depravity. Furthermore, man usually uses violence to defend himself not only physically but also morally. For this sake, man most often uses violence in the name of honor. In fact, the honor man resorts to when using violence is nothing but his pride in disguise. Deep in man's heart, he always wants to prove himself stronger and superior, not only physically but also morally. Thus, in this sense, honor is the best cloak for man's pride as is violence his best weapon. And Crane's Maggie is a novel about man's inborn pride which helps create a society that demands honor but is characterized by violence and indifference, cowardice and hypocrisy in essence. For this, Crane's craftsmanship lies in that he can typify the ironical complexity of humanity, in which man's pride and tendencies toward violence and feigned honor are three of the most controlling forces of man's reactions. Thus, in the following analysis of Crane's Maggie, I shall try to study how Crane applies his artistic techniques, in Maggie, to portray how the three vital forces have great effects on man's actions. With this approach to man's pride and his use of violence in the name of honor, I believe we can have a better understanding of Crane's ironical touch upon man's cowardice and hypocrisy as represented in the cold and harsh world in Maggie.

In the opening scene of Maggie, Crane describes a children's fight, in which he suggests his understanding of violence and pride as two of the component parts of humanity. Crane describes:

A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil's Row who were circling madly about the heap and pelting at him.

His infantile countenance was livid with fury. His small body was writhing in the delivery of great, crimson oaths.¹

As Crane describes that the boy in defending the honor of Rum Alley, so are the boys from Devil's Row defending their own. The boy and his foes are in fact performing a class-war, in which they all want to prove themselves superior.² Nevertheless, Crane obviously holds a tone of mockery toward the children's war. In their fight, we observe that the children's hate to each other is strong and intense. Thus, in his fighting, the little boy, Jimmie, looks like "a tiny, insane demon" (3). And his enemies from Devil's Row are "hurling stones and swearing in barbaric trebles" (3). It is obvious that the children's barbaric swearing and intense hate make them look more like animals than civilized human-beings. Ironically, their animal-like behavior and howling shape a sharp contrast to the assumed honor of their race. And the fight which they have been engaged in is in fact a fight for their primeval pride, —the strong desire to show themselves better and stronger by defeating others through the use of violence.

What we can further infer from the scene of the children's fight is that man's pride and tendency toward violence are his inborn nature. It is our conception that children are most innocent and ignorant because they have no understanding of what the real world is like. However, Crane thwarts our belief by depicting a group of pugnacious boys who have been engaged frantically in their fight with each other. As Jay Martin points out, the scene of the children's fight is Crane's purposeful satire on the conventional "angelic-child figure."³ And in my opinion, Crane's true intention is never less than to display the theme that violence and pride are both the inherited parts of human nature. In this sense, the conception of man's tendencies toward violence and pride is in fact further reinforced with the scene of the children's war. In other words, what the children's war signifies is that man doesn't have to learn to use violence for his pride's sake. These two characteristics of human nature are parts of man's instincts; that is, he is born with them.

However, the cold and indifferent adult world, in the mean time, serves as a distinct foil to the children's heated battle. When Jimmie is bleeding to fight for his honor, some people are just watching the boys' battle with cold eye, or don't even pay attention to its happening. Crane writes:

From a window of an apartment house that upreared its form from amid squat, ignorant stables, there leaned a curious woman. Some laborers, unloading a scow at a dock at the river, paused for a moment and regarded the fight. The engineer of a passive tugboat hung lazily to a railing and watched. Over on the island, a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a grey ominous building and crawled slowly along the river's bank. (3-4)

As Crane describes, these people are only curiously and lazily watching the children's fight. Not one of them seems likely to prevent the children from fighting. In a sense, it seems to say that people in the society care nothing about who is right or wrong as long as they can go on making their own living and doing their own business. Their concern for these boys are never more than curious. However, reading this, we can hardly keep ourselves from being curious about what may come to the youths who like to use violence without being stopped or cor-

rected when they are very young. Thus, in this sense, the "grey ominous building" seems to foreshadow the children's possible future. That is, the children will some day be like the "worm of yellow convicts," who have been punished for their misdeeds.

Also in the mean time, juxtaposed against the fighting boys' pride and violence is some running boys' cowardice. Before Pete appears to save Jimmie from this besieging enemies, the other boys who are on Jimmie's side have just run away and disappeared. But when the fight comes to an end, these little boys appear again to brag about their heroic deeds. For this, Crane gives us a vivid and ironic description of the boys' inward cowardice. He writes:

Some Rom Alley children now came forward. The party stood for a moment exchanging vainglorious remarks with Devil's Row. A few stones were thrown at long distances, and words of challenge passed between small warriors. Then the Rum Alley contingent turned slowly in the direction of their home street. They began to give, each to each, distorted versions of the fight. Causes of retreat in particular cases were magnified. Blows dealt in the fight were enlarged to catapultian power, and stones thrown were alleged to have hurtled with infinite accuracy. Valor grew strong again, and the little boys began to swear with great spirit. (4-5)

Out of anger and indignation for his friends' cowardice, Jimmie fights with one of the boys from Rum Alley. With this fight "in the modes of four thousand years ago" (5), Jimmie is again defending his sense of pride through violence. However, before he can fulfill his justice by violence, he is forced to turn back home by his father. Being stopped by his father from proving himself as an honorably true fighter, Jimmie feels that "it was a degradation for one who aimed to be some vague soldier, or a man of blood with a sort of sublime license, to be taken home by a father" (5). And being unable to heal his wounded pride, Jimmie can only discharge his vehemence by beating his own sister, Maggie. It is obvious that from Crane's description we see Jimmie a boy characterized by violence, a boy who believes in violence as the only way of justifying his pride and honor.

As far as the above three scenes are concerned, Crane's technique of representation is not only ironical but also episodic and impressionistic. Firstly, the above three scenes seem to be three episodes in sequence, but they are however closely connected with the common themes of man's violence, pride, feigned honor, indifference, and cowardice. As the themes of violence, pride, and honor combine to reach an ironical effect in the beginning scene, so does the second, with its themes of social indifference, serve as an effective foil to the first. And Crane's ironical description of some of the boys' cowardice in the third scene also serves as a sharp contrast to the assumed honor that the boys have taken for granted. Thus, from the first three scenes, we notice that Crane is fond of manipulating episodic scenes to present his story, but in the mean time, these episodic scenes are combined together to reach an ironical effect with their conflicting themes.

Secondly, in the first three scenes, Crane shows as well his proclivity for manipulating color images to reinforce his impressionistic writing. As Katherine G. Simoneaux points out, Crane's "color imagery contributes forcefully to his ideology and the themes in his work."⁴ As we have seen, Jimmie is described as delivering "crimson oaths" when fighting. And his rivals

seemed to "leer gloating at the blood" upon his head. (4) In the mean time, the audience's scene is depicted as grey and yellow. With Crane's impressionistic description, the whole atmosphere of these scenes is highly intense in the boys' fight, but stagnant and inert in the audience's nonchalant and, at most, curious attitudes. Crane's application of colors to his portrayal helps us envision that the world is red and hot with fights, with violence executed in the name of honor, the violence which is in fact driven by man's pride. But in the mean time, the world is also yellow and cold with indifference and cowardice. Especially, the world Crane describes seems to promise nothing but ominous grey future for the young who grow and live in it.

Jimmie's tendency toward violence can find its root in his family background. When Jimmie has been taken back by his father, his mother acts more like a monster than a motherly figure. It is our common understanding that there is nothing in the world a mother loves more than her children. But Crane again overthrows our belief by describing how she is washing Jimmie, the blood and filth on his face. Crane describes:

The mother's massive shoulders heaved with anger. Grasping the urchin by the neck and shoulder she shook him until he rattled. She dragged him to an unholy sink, and, soaking a rag in water, began to scrub his lacerated face with it. Jimmie screamed in pain and tried to twist his shoulders out of the clasp of the huge arms.....

The woman's operations on the urchin instantly increased in violence. At last she tossed him to a corner where he limply lay cursing and weeping. (8)

Owing to the woman's violent operations on her child, there begins a family dispute between the husband and the wife. The husband believes that her wife's anger and her ferocity are triggered more by alcohol than by his son's misdeeds. And being unable to handle his domestic affairs, the father walks out and is "determined upon a vengeful drunk" (9). As Petry points out, the mother is "a major factor in the breakdown of the family unit."⁵ Alcohol is in fact the very catalyst which provokes the mother's child-abusing violence. And it is Mrs. Johnson's abuse of violence that causes the family to break down, that teaches her children as an example to show her dissatisfaction with life by means of violence. Ironically, instead of feeling ashamed of her own violence toward her son and her husband, she, on the contrary, only rocks to and fro upon a chair, shedding tears and crooning miserably to the two children about their "poor mother" and "yer fader, damn 'is soul" (9).

Crane's description of the violent family feud is impressionistic with his use of images and his language.⁶ For example, in his description of the Johnson family in chaos, Crane relies much on his employment of the building and the furniture images. When the father takes Jimmie back home, from Crane's description, we can see that they live in a "careening building" with "a dozen gruesome doorways" (6). And when the father and the mother fight again late at night, there is "a crash against the door and something broke into clattering fragments" (11). Moreover, in Crane's portrayal of the children's comprehension and fear of the family violence, Maggie is described as eating like "a small pursued tigress" (9). For this, Gullason points out in his annotation that animal imagery "reinforces Crane's view of slum life as a jungle" (9). In my opinion, the animal image also refers to the children's fear that they are pursued by their

mother's unreasonable violence, which can make them its victims any time when the mother is in bad temper, when the "rough yellow of her face and neck" flares "suddenly crimson" (8). It is for the fear of unrestrained violence from her mother that Maggie "tottered on her small legs beneath burdens of dishes," that makes Jimmie watchful and "breathless," casting "furtive glances at his mother" (9). Especially when Maggie breaks a plate, the mother howls again, and the innocent baby, Tommie, runs to the halls, "shrieking like a monk in an earthquake" (9). From above, we can see that Crane's images and specific way of expressions clusters to give us an impression that every thing about the Johnsons is related to violence and the fearful breakdown of the family. Indeed, as the building of the tenement quivers and creaks "from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels" (6), so are the hearts of the Johnsons either occupied by tendency toward violence or pressured by the weight of fear.

Born in the family of violence and poverty, only Jimmie and Maggie survive, but their understanding and conception of life are quite different. For Jimmie, as we have seen in the beginning of this chapter, he is characterized by intense pride and strong tendencies toward violence and honor. What he has learned from his mother is the way of expressing his pride or dissatisfaction through violence. This characteristic inclination becomes even more stronger as he grows up. With his own perception of life, Jimmie conceives that most people are hypocrites, who care about nothing but their own interests. For example, in the church, Jimmie sees that many "of the sinners" are "impatient over the pictured depths of their degradation" (13). When they are listening to the priest preaching, they are "waiting for soup-tickets," and ask "Where's our soup?" (13). In appearance, these people seem to be pious for their attendance to the church. Ironically, what they have kept in hearts is not God's salvation but the food they will get at the end of the preaching. In addition, through Jimmie's perception, Crane seems to point out that the conventional role of the church has been reduced to the minimum of food donation. To speak it more specifically, from Crane's description we see that the church is no more the center of life for the slum people, but only a food-donating spot which gives them gifts to go on living, not spiritually but physically.

Owing to his realistic perception of most people as hypocrites, Jimmie never conceives "a respect for the world" (13). He studies "human nature" in the gutter and in the streets (14), but only gets the conclusion that he is better and superior. Crane describes:

He maintained a belligerent attitude toward all well-dressed men. To him fine raiment was allied to weakness, and all good coats covered faint hearts. He and his order were kings, to a certain extent, over the men of untarnished clothes, because these latter dreaded, perhaps, to be either killed or laughed at.

After a time his sneer grew so that it turned its glare upon all things. He became so sharp that he believed in nothing. To him the police were always actuated by malignant impulses and the rest of the world was composed, for the most part, of despicable creatures who were all trying to take advantages of him and with whom, in defense, he was obliged to quarrel on all possible occasions. He himself occupied a downtrodden position that had a private but distinct element of grandeur in its isolation. (14-15)

In fact, Jimmie's malevolent attitude toward others reflects nothing but his own dissatisfaction with his life of poverty. On the one hand, he knows that only money can make him live better. Thus, when he has "a dollar in his pocket," "his satisfaction with existence" is "the greatest thing in the world" (14). On the other hand, owing to his own awareness of his poor situation, Jimmie, instead of admitting his own inferiority, tries to maintain his pride in face of those who look better or richer. Thus, in order to justify his pride and honor, and to prove himself "superior" (15), Jimmie, as a truck driver, likes to intrude upon the passengers in the streets unless "formidable circumstances, or a much larger man than himself" can stop him (15). Obviously, what Jimmie is trying to show by his bold and intrusive actions is that he may be poor, but he is nevertheless a man of honor. Truly, Jimmie's way of survival is to defend himself through violence. He, since his childhood, has always conceived that it is nothing but violence that can prove and justify himself as a better man physically and morally.

Furthermore, Jimmie's belief in violence corresponds to his inner fear of the fire engine. From his perception of life, Jimmie knows that it is only violence that can help man survive in the harsh world. As violence is the means of his self-defense and way of survival, Jimmie fully recognizes the fact that his horse truck is nothing more than a breakable toy in face of the huge and formidable machine. Thus, a fire engine is "enshrined in his heart as an appalling thing" which he loves "with a distant dog-like devotion" (16). It is obvious that, through Crane's description, Jimmie's understanding of life is realistic and practical. That is, the poor and the weak are not supposed to inherit the world. Only the fittest and the stronger can survive. In this sense, the fire engine, for Jimmie, is the very embodiment of force and power which can help him exhibit utmost violence to satiate his sense of pride and honor as a worthier man in the harsh world.

As to Maggie, she is an exception to the idea I have pointed out that violence and pride are two of the component parts of man's inborn nature. Her reactions to every thing that happens to her are dominated by submissiveness in her nature rather than by violence or pride. In addition, she has no understanding of man's feigned honor and cowardice of the people around her. As Crane describes, none of "the dirt of Rum Alley" seems to be in her veins (16). Maggie's submissive nature has already marked her as the most defenseless woman in the jungle-like slum life. And owing to her submissive nature, Maggie has suffered much in her family of violence. As we have seen, when her brother, Jimmie, beats her, she can do nothing but "burst into tears" (7). And in face of her mother's violence, her "small frame" can't not help "quivering" (13). And in response to Jimmie's insulting suggestion to "go teh hell or go teh work" (16), Maggie can only take Jimmie's insult submissively and choose to make her living by working in the factory of collars and cuffs, sitting among "twenty girls of various shades of yellow discontent" (17). Thus, it is obvious that as long as Maggie stays in home and is contented with her life of insults and violence, she will at least be safe and having no worry about being further harmed. However, owing to her submissive nature, her feminine weakness, —that is, her inability to defend herself in the world of violence and feigned honor, and her little understanding of what the real world is like, Maggie will surly get herself into trouble if she once trespasses upon any of the social restrictions.

Nevertheless, Maggie's embedded desire for a better life awakes when Pete appears. As Holton points out, if Jimmie, in his fight for the honor of Rum Alley was "saved" by Pete, it is the same Pete to whom "Maggie will turn in her search for a way out."⁷ Indeed, to Maggie, Pete is the kind of man who represents another way of life, —the way of life which is more joyful and more ebullient than hers. Seeing Pete's energetic way of talk with her brother, Maggie is deeply attracted by Pete. For this, Crane describes:

Maggie observed Pete.

His mannerisms stamped him as a man who had a correct sense of his personal superiority. There was valor and contempt for circumstances in the glance of his eye. He waved his hands like a man of the world, who dismisses religion and philosophy, and says "Fudge." He had certainly seen everything and with each curl of his lip, he declared that it amounted to nothing. Maggie thought he must be a very elegant and graceful bartender.

Maggie watched him furtively, with half-closed eyes, lit with a vague interest.

(17-18)

Unquestionably, in Pete, Maggie sees a man who leads a totally different way of life from hers. She fathoms as well her poverty and the chaotic conditions of her home. It is in this state of mind that Maggie, all of a sudden, sees the "broken furniture, grimy walls, and general disorder and dirt of her home "take a potential aspect" (18-19).

Unlike her brother, Jimmie, whose conception of life is realistic and practical, Maggie, on the contrary, tends to be romantic in her dream of love. On the one hand, Maggie considers Pete "the beau ideal of a man," the lover, who walks under "the trees of her dream-gardens" (19). On the other hand, she also feels inferior when calculating "the altitude of the pinnacle from which" Pete "must have looked down upon her" (19). As Maggie feels inferior to Pete in every aspects, she becomes more and more discontented with her life. Thus, it becomes "an abomination" whenever she contemplates "the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home" (20). In addition, the collar and cuff factory begins to appear to her mind "as a dreary place of endless grinding" (20). Her dissatisfaction with life and her eager yearning for Pete's love as a way of change for her life lead her to imagine that Pete is "the knight" who can save her from her life "composed of hardships and insults" (20). Specifically, Maggie's romantic dream of love is further embodied in her "purchase of flowered cretonne for a lambrequin" (20). However, ironically, the lambrequin is being hung upon "the slightly careening mantel" (20), which is symbolical of Maggie's unsteady and unsubstantiated love, the love which is romantic but fragile.

Speaking of Maggie's romantic dream of love, we see that in addition to his employment of the building, the furniture, and the lambrequin images, Crane also uses the clothes images and the artistic representation of "a play within a play" to portray Maggie's eager hope for Pete's love. As Crane describes, Maggie begins to have an "intense dislike for all of her dresses" whenever thoughts of Pete come to her (25). In fact, Maggie's aversion to her dresses, as we have seen above, also comes from her own sense of inferiority and her situation of poverty. Reflecting upon Pete's "condescension" (23), Maggie doesn't want to be so poor in appearance

before Pete. Thus, the well-dressed women walking on the streets are the ones she envies. Crane describes:

She began to note, with more interest, the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. She craved those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women (25).

Besides, when Pete takes her to watch the melodrama, Maggie rejoices "at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually surmounted the wealthy and wicked" (28). Indeed, deep in her heart, Maggie identifies herself with the suffering heroine in the play. And Pete, to Maggie, looms "like a golden sun" (26), which can warm her heart and help get rid of all the unhappiness in her life.

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