

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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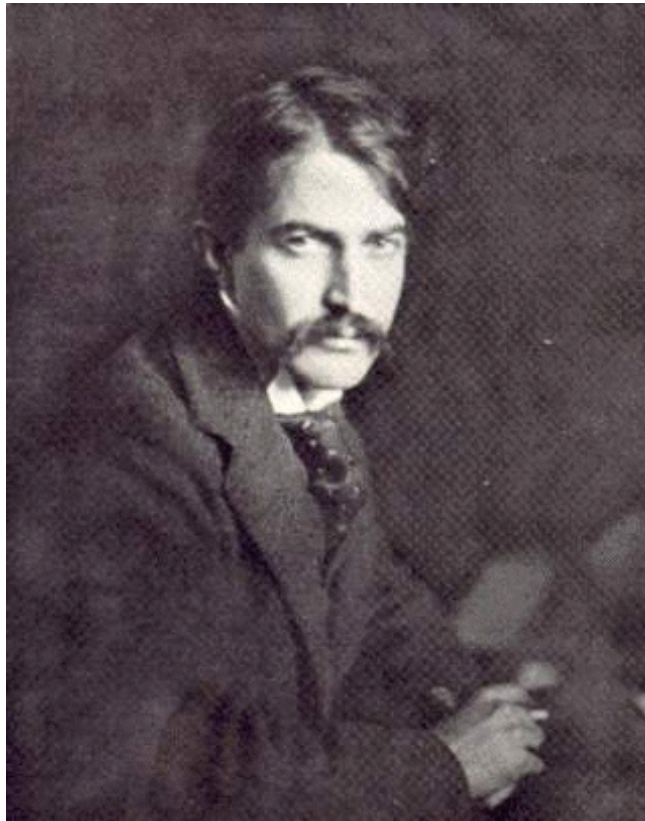
## Chapter 6: Stephen Crane (1871-1900)

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

-- From *War Is Kind*, 1900

A brilliant writer, Crane was dead at twenty eight. Nevertheless, in an extraordinary burst of energy, he produced two great books *Maggie* and *The Red Badge of Courage*, wrote impressive poems, and ninety pieces of short fiction. His depiction of ghetto life and the deprivation of war made him internationally well known. True to naturalism, Crane shows his characters trapped in situations which they cannot control. Still, these characters show courage and valor in the

## Primary Works

*Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, 1893; *The Red Badge of Courage*, 1895 ([E-Text](#)); *The Black Riders*, 1895; *The Black Riders and Other Lines*, 1895 (poems); *George's Mother*, 1896; *The Third Violet*, 1897; *The Open Boat & Other Tales of Adventure*, 1898; *War is Kind*, 1900 (poems).

## *The Red Badge of Courage*: Discussion

Main Characters: Henry Fleming, often called simply "the youth" and once nicknamed "Flem"; Mrs. Fleming, his mother; Jim Conklin, often called "the tall soldier"; Wilson, often called at first "the loud soldier"; Lieutenant Hasbrouck; Colonel Macchesnay; the Tattered Man, one of the two major unnamed characters; the other is the Cheery Voice. In addition, some nineteen other officers and men are named but are unimportant; many minor characters are kept anonymous; Henry's hometown girl friends are identified as "a light-haired girl" and "a darker girl."

## | [Top](#) | Selected Bibliography 1980-1999

Benfey, Christopher E. G. *The Double Life of Stephen Crane*. NY: Knopf, 1992. PS1449 .C85 Z554

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Sorrentino, Paul. ed. *Stephen Crane Remembered*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2006.

## Study Questions

1. Analyze the natural "forces" that the characters struggle against in "The Open Boat." How do they deal with their lack of control over those forces?
2. Despite the apparent irrationality of its characters, "The Blue Hotel" moves logically and inexorably toward its conclusion. Study the evidence of irrationality in the story's portraits of human behavior; then describe the linear progression by which the Swede's initial comment-"I suppose there have been a good many men killed in this room"-comes to control events.
3. In "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," Jack Potter's marriage appears to alter forever Scratchy Wilson's perception of reality. Argue that, for Crane, marriage itself becomes an external force. Does the story's humor mitigate the oppressiveness of this force?
4. Explore the relationship between Crane's poems and his fiction. Does Crane's choice of the lyric poem allow him to develop aspects of his major themes that his fiction does not fully explore?

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## | [Top](#) | Stephen Crane (1871-1900): A Brief Biography

### A Student Project by T. J. Hunter

Stephen Crane was born in New Jersey in 1871. His father was a Methodist minister. His mother was the daughter of a Methodist minister, and as Edwin Cady observes in his biography of Crane: . . .Protestant ministers have contributed gifted children to the world out of all genetic ratio to their numbers (29).

If Protestant ministers do tend to have gifted children, it seems most likely that this is because of the schooling that these children underwent, but this doesn't explain Stephen Crane. He entered school a year late, but in just a few weeks jumped ahead two grade levels because he was already fully literate. He never really seemed to be personally driven to succeed academically, and dropped out of more than one school. In fact, the only thing he seemed to receive from all his years of primary and secondary school was a love of sports, of baseball in particular (Berryman 17).

He was shy, and taciturn, which drove away possible friendships, and this in turn made him even more withdrawn. Even at a young age he had no close friends. Being labeled a P.K, a preacher's kid, didn't help much either as this stereotype left little room for understanding Stephen as an individual (Cady 27). He was always skinny, spindly and unhealthy looking, though in his early years his health was not too bad.

His father died in 1880, leaving the young man in the care of his mother. She was strongly religious, and young Stephen rebelled against that by taking up cussing and smoking.

He seems to have been more interested in the appearance of rebellion than the actuality, as Cady reports, . . . He gloried in the appearance of what was evil to his elders. But careful observers noted that he lit cigarettes and let them burn to ashes in his stained fingers, that he slid a drink around on a bar and left it unconsumed (pg. 34). He never attended church with his mother except for once, half-drunk on red wine.

As Crane finally gave up on formal education and began writing for money, he moved to New York to study and live among the poverty stricken. As he tried to get a major written work published, he fell into deeper and deeper poverty

himself, and refusing the aid of his family, he grew sick. According to Cady's biography, Crane's destitute living through the years of 1892 - 1894 . . . Ruined his teeth, wracked his body, and doubtless presented him with the tuberculosis. . . It affected his psyche and imagination profoundly. If nothing else, it confirmed emphatically his intellectual and perhaps temperamentally necessary conviction that the condition of human life is war (pg. 42).

It was during this time that Stephen Crane wrote his famous war novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*. He began to write it simply for money as a potboiler novel, a historical romance set in the Civil War, but soon gave in to his artistic genius and wrote it right. Some pages were originally written on butcher paper, and by the time he was finished, Crane was so poor that he didn't own any shoes.

It was also at this time that he discovered the poetry of Emily Dickinson (Cady 44). It is hard to understand how he could have afforded to study her books in his poverty, but it reminds me of the mediaeval writer Desiderius Erasmus who said, When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy food and clothes. In some way Stephen afforded the books of Dickinson's poetry, and he liked them well enough that he wrote his own.

He published his first collection of poetry, *The Black Riders and Other Lines*, in 1895, after his *Red Badge of Courage* brought him recognition as a great author. These poems did not bring him much acclaim, and few biographies even seem to mention them. His second book of poetry, *War is Kind and Other Lines*, was published in 1899 after Crane had a series of adventures, at home and overseas.

He began a long-term relationship with a woman named Cora Stewart in 1896. She owned and ran a house of prostitution, and was still married at the time she met him. Though she was never divorced from her first husband, she may have become married to Crane while in France, though no marriage certificate has ever been found (Cady 56).

Crane took an extended trip to the (still somewhat wild) American west and Mexico as a syndicated journalist. He was also a correspondent when sailing on the ship *Commodore*, a vessel carrying contraband munitions to Cuban rebels before the Spanish-American war, but was shipwrecked off of the Florida coast. This gave rise to his famous story, *The Open Boat*. He reported during the Greco-Turkish war and then wrote a book about his experiences there.

As a correspondent during the Spanish-American war, Crane contracted malaria in addition to the tuberculosis that he already had. He took as bad care of himself here as he had in New York, working as hard as the soldiers themselves, and his health hit rock-bottom. He finally collapsed in delirium and after medical treatment returned to Cora.

Living with her in England, he became friends with Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells and Henry James. He wrote extensively to pay off the mounting debts that Cora was running up, but couldn't keep up. Finally his tuberculosis got the better of him, and in 1900 he died after multiple attacks of hemorrhaging >from the lungs. He was twenty-eight years old (Cady 73).

Common themes and issues explored in Crane's works include: Nature's indifference to humanity, fallen humanity, effects of colors on the human mind, harsh realities of war, father/son relationships, betrayal, guilt, repentance, rebellion, religion, and the physical, emotional, and intellectual responses of people under extreme pressure (Chao, Strosberg, Ng).

Literary techniques used in Crane's works include: Tough-minded irony, allusions to war and fighting, comparisons and contradictions, dramatic personification, intertwined themes of sin and virtue, and a vision of a demand for courage, integrity, grace, and generosity in a tough world (Chao, Strosberg, Ng).

With all the attention to *The Red Badge of Courage*, not many people pay attention to Stephen Crane's works of poetry. His poetry does not seem to be taught in high schools, even though it seems like a natural there, with its clear language and varied themes. The poetry does seem to have a large following on the Internet, where there are quite a few examples on favorite poems web sites such as the very large *Poems For Planet Earth* anthology at <http://redfrog.norconnect.no/~poems/>, and this public interest in the poetry of Stephen Crane may someday lead to a greater academic interest, and more widespread recognition of his diverse works.

#### Works Cited

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