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PREVIEW

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STEPHEN CRANE: THE REBEL

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STEPHEN CRANE: THE REBEL

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PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

Stephen Crane never entirely repudiated traditional concepts, although a study of his life and works reveals his rebellious tendencies.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

A LIFE OF REBELLION

Stephen Crane was one of the first authors who dared to write about the American tragedy which lay beneath the surface of the "Gilded Age." The United States, a new country with idealistic and optimistic concepts, was slow to recognize the evil trends in its society. The American Victorians sought to minimize the moral and spiritual poverty of their social order by adopting a code of pretense and concealment. Men such as Crane, acutely attuned to the sufferings of mankind, considered the superficiality and sentimentality of the "Genteel Tradition" as "so much cotton in which mankind likes to pack itself."¹

It is evident in retrospect, that the end of the nineteenth century was a time ripe for rebellion. Authors such as William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris began to turn from romantic illusion to a more realistic type of literature. Stephen Crane not only

¹Carl Van Doren and Mark Van Doren, American and British Literature Since 1890 (New York, 1940), p. 59.

broke with the traditional approach to writing, but went far beyond his contemporaries into the realm of naturalism. His rebellion against the accepted taboos and customs released undercurrents of pessimism and despair which were to become the main stream of American thought.

Through the pages of history move men whose rebellious minds repudiate the conventional ideas and mores of their era. Their revolutionary innovations are often prophetic of trends to follow. By some, such creative artists are hailed as geniuses, and by others they are derided as "crackpots." Often alone in a strange world of their own imagination, they leave their mark on the literature or art of a nation. Time alone can determine the value of their contribution or the validity of their claim to fame. Such a reactionary artist was Stephen Crane, whose ideas shocked many of his contemporaries.

Crane was a man who expressed many conflicting ideas. His paradoxical mind cannot be explained in one or a dozen terms, but, above all, he was a rebel. Rebellion against convention led him to live a Bohemian existence. Rebellion against the tenets of his family

resulted in a repudiation of the Christian God. Rebellion against Victorian hypocrisy and indifference caused him to write about the depraved areas of society. Oddly turned phrases and unusual techniques resulted from his refusal to conform to the accepted standards of writing.

Perhaps it is not enough to know that a man rebels, but to seek the causes for his rebellion. The many possible motivations for Crane's renunciation of accepted concepts are complex and elusive. However, a study of his life and works offers some interesting clues to the genesis and development of his unorthodox views.

Stephen, the youngest son of the Methodist minister, Jonathan Townley Crane, was born on November 1, 1871, in Newark, New Jersey. The family had been prominent in the history of the state. There had been Cranes in the Colonies as early as Queen Anne's time, and their signatures frequently appeared on historical documents. Stephen, the name of a well known ancestor who served in the Continental Congress, was selected with care for the last son of Jonathan Crane.

As a child, Crane has been described as "good, quiet, and frail."² He was the baby of a large family, and the favorite of both parents. His father's sermons were known to be cut short during his youngest child's frequent illnesses. His mother adored the son who had arrived after most of her children were grown and away from home.

The entire Crane family was highly religious. The Reverend Dr. Crane had written numerous articles on theology, and on the mother's side "everybody as soon as he could walk, became a Methodist clergyman--of the old ambling-nag, saddlebag, exhorting kind."³

There seemed to be little in the pious, conformist atmosphere of his home which might account for the rebellious attitude of young Stephen. However, it is known that much of his protest began in early childhood. One critic is of the opinion that "all of Crane's best works sprang in effect from one dominant emotional experience: the episode of childhood and infancy."⁴

²Thomas Beer, Hanna, Crane and The Mauve Decade (New York, 1941), p. 23.

³Stephen Crane, "Letters," in Stallman (ed.) Stephen Crane: An Omnibus (New York, 1952), p. 690. Henceforth referred to as Crane, "Letters."

⁴Maxwell Geismar, Rebels and Ancestors (Boston, 1953), p. 73.

It is impossible to determine how early the seeds of rebellion began to grow beneath Stephen's passive exterior. Many childhood influences must have combined to produce such a reaction. His rebellion began with a dislike of his own name. After his literary success, Crane answers an editor's query about his name as follows:

Occasionally interested persons have asked me if Stephen Crane was a nom de guerre; but it is my own name. In childhood I was bitterly ashamed of it, and now, when I sometimes see it in print, it strikes me as being the homliest [sic] named [sic] in created things.⁵

One event which made a lasting and vivid impression on Stephen was his father's death. Although Jonathan Crane died when the boy was only eight, the sensitive young mind was deeply impressed. Years later, the intensity of his emotion was described by Crane in these words:

We tell kids that heaven is just across the gaping grave and all that bosh, and then we scare them to glue with flowers and white sheets and hymns. We ought to be crucified for it. . . . I have forgotten nothing about this, not a damned iota, not a shred.⁶

⁵Crane, "Letters," p. 639.

⁶Thomas Beer, op. cit., p. 24.

Throughout his life Crane was singularly pre-occupied with death. The fear and rebellion against the traditional funeral he experienced at the time of his father's death were never forgotten. Death in all of its aspects became one of his major themes.

Biographers and critics have found Crane's emotional reaction toward his father an interesting subject for analysis and speculation. The cruel, almost inhuman fathers frequently found in works by Crane have often been identified with his own parent. John Berryman in his biography of Crane attempted to develop a neurotic pattern of hatred and jealousy toward Jonathan Crane. This analysis of Crane's attitudes developed along Freudian lines presents an interesting argument. However, the evidence offered for Berryman's interpretation does not seem conclusive. Crane's references to his father reflect no such animosity. He once wrote that Jonathan Crane was "a great, fine, simple mind."⁷ Again he referred to the elder Crane as a man "so simple and good I often think he didn't know anything about humanity."⁸

⁷John Berryman, Stephen Crane (New York, 1950), p. 304.

⁸Beer, op. cit., p. 239.

The origin of Crane's rebellion is a moot question. Although the cruel fathers of his stories suggest a rebellion against the Reverend Crane, more plausibly they might reflect the author's attitude toward the stern Jehovah of the Old Testament. Jonathan Crane had indubitably preached of Hell, everlasting punishment, and a God of wrath and vengeance. His son, always sensitive to nuances of thought and alert to any injustice, may have given his fictional characters the traits of God, "the Father." In Crane's books, the fathers resembled miniature gods who meted out punishment to trembling members of the family group. In his poetry Crane refused to believe in the Diety who "thundered loudly," and cried in rage:

Kneel, mortal and cringe
and grovel and do homage.⁹

Crane was one of the first American poets to express the idea of a God who had lost control of his handiwork. He penned these lines of bitter repudiation of the Christian Diety:

⁹Stephen Crane, Collected Poems of Stephen Crane (New York, 1951), p. 55.

God fashioned the ship of the world carefully,
 With the skill of an all-master
 Made He the hull and sails,
 Held He the rudder
 Ready for adjustment.
 Erect stood He scanning His work proudly.
 Then--at fateful time--a wrong called,
 And God turned heeding.
 Lo, the ship, at this opportunity, slipped slyly,
 Making cunning noiseless travel down the ways,
 So that, forever rudderless, it went upon the seas.¹⁰

However, not all of Crane's poems expressed rebellion against the Christian God. The teachings of his childhood seemed to linger in the recesses of his mind. No atheism is found in such lines as these:

The voice of God whispers in the heart
 So softly
 That the soul pauses,
 Making no noise,
 And strives for these melodies,
 Distant sighing, like faintest breath,
 And all the being is still to hear.¹¹

Although Crane showed rebellious tendencies throughout his life, he often used his protests to gain recognition and attention. In 1894, he submitted a group of poems to Copeland and Day.¹² The publishers rejected many of those which were most atheistic and rebellious. Crane refused to have such a volume printed. "It is the anarchy which I

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 41.

¹² Boston publishers of experimental poetry.

particularly insist upon," was his comment.¹³

Crane's revolt against his parents's tenets, as illustrated by his poetry began at an early age. As he expressed it later:

I used to like church and prayer meetings
when I was a kid but that cooled off and when
I was thirteen or about that, my brother Will
told me not to believe in Hell after my uncle
had been boring me about the lake of fire and
the rest of the sideshows.¹⁴

Once he had taken a stand against the church, he never recanted. A niece recalled that "no power on earth could have dragged him into a church."¹⁵

This is the way one of his brief poems expressed his attitudes:

Two or three angels
Came near to earth.
They saw a fat church.
Little black streams of people
Came and went in continually.
And the angel was puzzled
To know why people went thus,
And why they stayed so long within.¹⁶

Jonathan Crane's death marked a turning point in young Stephen's life. He was no longer the carefully

¹³Crane, "Letters," p. 692.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁵Helen Crane, "My Uncle, Stephen Crane," American Mercury, Vol. 31, January 1934.

¹⁶Crane, Collected Poems of Stephen Crane, p. 34.

protected favorite. His mother was busy writing religious tracts and giving lectures in an effort to supplement a meagre income. Although her way of life was never criticized outside the family circle, her "vacuous, futile, psalm singing that passed for worship,"¹⁷ was a source of marvel to her youngest son.

Crane often seemed to repudiate all that his parents had held dear, but at times his mother's actions showed a similar pattern of non-conformity. One example of her deviation from Victorian prudishness was her caring for a woman who had an "accidental baby."¹⁸ Her friends "had the famous feminine aversion to that kind of a baby."¹⁹ but, according to Crane, his mother was "more of a Christian than a Methodist."²⁰ In his first novel, Maggie, he voiced a rebellious cry at the indifference of society to such "victims of circumstance."²¹

¹⁷ Helen Crane, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁸ Crane, "Letters," p. 691.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.