“The Blue Hotel” and the Ideal of Human Courage

Though “The Blue Hotel” has been accounted one of the best things that Stephen Crane did, the meaning of that performance has been as variously interpreted as the meaning of The Red Badge. A number of critics have seen the tale as having as its central theme the brotherhood of man: against a universe which in its indifference seems hostile and malevolent, man can only maintain order and meaning in his life if he recognizes and fulfills his responsibility as a link in “the magnetic chain of humanity.” Some have seen the tale as meaning we are determined creatures, that the complexity of human behavior is so great and our knowledge of what goes on around us so imperfect that we have no control over our destinies when we are involved with other human beings. If the former statement is the theme, then we are all responsible to and for each other. If the latter, then no one is responsible. Needless to say, these two possibilities are antithetical. Yet there seems to be in the story evidence sufficiently strong to demonstrate to nearly all critics the truth of one of these propositions. The best support of either position is to be found in the conclusion.

Let us assume for the time being that the story intends to point out that we are determined creatures, victims of an inexorable necessity, exercising no control over our fates. What happens when we examine the famous speech of the Easterner near the end of the story?

We are all in it! This poor gambler isn’t even a noun. He is a kind of adverb. Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede. Usually there are from a dozen to forty women really involved in every murder, but in this case it seems to be only five men—you, I, Johnnie, old Scully; and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement and gets all the punishment.

The analogy likening the gambler to a part of a syntactical structure, and to a modifying word rather than to a word determining basic meaning, like a noun or verb, suggests that the gambler had little control over his fate and the Swede even less. As an adverb he is meaningless until he becomes attached to some verb, adjective, or other adverb which will allow him a function. It is quite clear in retrospect that had the events at the hotel occurred differently, then the gambler most likely
would not have been intimidated by the Swede and would not have killed him. The gambler had absolutely no control over what happened at the hotel and in this sense came "merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement and got all the punishment." The Swede dies because of his limited and imperfect knowledge. Had he chosen to grab any man at the table but the gambler, he probably would not have been murdered. It would seem, as one critic has so ably put it, that Crane "has absolutely shown that men's wills do not control their destinies."  

But what happens if we look at the last section from the point of view of one who would see the meaning of the tale as primarily involving the brotherhood of man theme? First of all it is quite obvious that regardless of Crane's intentions the Easterner intends to say that all men share the burden of responsibility for evil, that faced by a universe which has no regard for him, man must recognize the necessity of his involvement with other men. Seen from this vantage point, the Easterner's statement, "The Swede might not have been killed if everything had been square," implies the possibility of the action turning out differently from the way it did. When the Easterner further says, "Johnnie was cheating. I saw him.... And I refused to stand up and be a man. I let the Swede fight it out alone. And you—you were simply puffing around the place and wanting to fight. And then old Scully himself! We are all in it!" he means the indicate responsibility, to point out the guilty. It is also quite clear here that the cowboy, whose experience and sensibilities are quite limited, is intended to present the less satisfactory point of view toward the events preceding the last scene. He fails completely to comprehend the meaning of the Easterner's statement about the complicity of the five men in the murder of the Swede. "Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?" he asks naively. It seems clear enough that the answer to the cowboy's question would be a restatement of what the Easterner has said already, that men have responsibility toward each other; hence the theme of the brotherhood of man.

Now if the Easterner's statements interpret truly the preceding action as indicating the necessity of human beings acting responsibly toward each other and if one feels that the story shows "that men's will do not control their destinies," then some kind of adjustment must be made between the two alternatives since they are mutually exclusive. One way of dealing with the problem is by discounting the Easterner's comments at the end of the story. This to me seems impossible to do because I detect nothing there which would indicate a disparity between the attitudes expressed by the Easterner and Crane's attitudes. One anxious

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critic goes so far as to say that "the Easterner’s speech is swelling with self-importance and half-truth." This seems to me an entirely erroneous reading of the last section, a reading creating far more problems than it solves because we have then to deal with the cowboy’s reaction to the Easterner’s speech and certainly Crane’s attitude is not the same as the cowboy’s. There is no reason to suspect that the Easterner interprets the preceding events wrongly.

Another way of "proving" that the theme of the story is not the brotherhood theme is by dismissing the final section as being "tacked on." The inadequacy of the theory that the conclusion is "tacked on" becomes immediately apparent when we consider the extent to which it has been prepared for by the preceding action. Certainly it was necessary, if Crane’s intention—whatever that was—were to be fulfilled, that the reader know that Johnnie had in fact cheated in the card game. Though we are surprised to learn this, it is not a shock if we remember that at the beginning of the story, when Scully returns to the hotel with the new guests, Johnnie is playing cards with a farmer. The two are arguing. Shortly afterwards when they are playing High-Five, the game being played later when Johnnie is accused of cheating, the play is again stopped by an argument: "The play of Johnnie and the gray-beard was suddenly ended by another quarrel. The old man arose while casting a look of heated scorn at his adversary. He slowly buttoned his coat, and then stalked with fabulous dignity from the room." We do not know what the two are arguing about, but it is not difficult to imagine that the farmer had seen Johnnie cheat, but, knowing the code of the West, did not dare accuse him directly.

It ought also be considered that the character of the Easterner is such that he might very well keep silent about seeing Johnnie cheat. He is a meek man. It is he who is most affected by the cold, and it is he who attempts to prevent the fight between Johnnie and the Swede. He is the least outspoken among the men in the story, and he is the least strongly moved by the curious responses of the Swede. His primary intention seems to be to avoid conflict of any kind. Too, he is shown to be a sensitive enough individual that it might indeed occur to him that he and the others are to some degree responsible for the outcome of the central action of the tale.

Those who dismiss the conclusion are having their cake and eating it too because prior to the last section there is little to suggest determinism, or that "men’s wills do not control their destinies." These critics have taken one of the possible interpretations of the last section. The error

comes about as a result of our too great willingness to see in Crane's work a kind of consistency which really isn't there. His writing is as varied as it could possibly be. Because we see determinism in some of his earlier work we should not expect to find it in everything he did. He worked this problem out in *Maggie* and *The Red Badge* and never returned to it again. Those critics who have seen fit to give support to the assumption that "The Blue Hotel" shows that men do not control their destinies have little more than the weather to point to as proof of their claim. They feel apparently that since the weather serves as such a constricting force on the activities of men that it determines men's actions rather than limiting them. The only other support for this position prior to the concluding section is the fact that there exists a causal relation between what happened at the hotel and the Swede's death. It would seem that the murder was an act of necessity, inevitable. But is this really saying any more than that in fiction plot usually proceeds from character? Is it not true that in every worthwhile piece of fiction ever written that there is a causal relation between character and event? In the same manner that we can show that the Swede's death occurs out of necessity we can show that most fiction is deterministic. But this is no more satisfactory than are those arguments which intend to prove that we in life are determined creatures.

On the other hand the brotherhood theme is developed during the course of the narrative, but in a way different from the Easterner's interpretation of the meaning of what has occurred. The Easterner suggests that each of us should be his brother's keeper, yet the story implies that that view is not in itself an adequate solution if we mean by "adequate solution" whatever would have prevented the Swede's death. Scully does all within the range of his possibilities to protect the Swede, to alleviate his fears, to prevent conflict between him and the other men. Yet the conflict occurs and the Swede is eventually murdered. Even after the Swede has had a drink and becomes most obnoxious Scully admits by his manner "his responsibility for the Swede's new view point." It is only when Scully is exasperated beyond his endurance that he turns against the Swede. Before that point his intentions have been the very best, and he acts as well as one whose intentions are good can act given the limitations of his knowledge.

Up to the point of the concluding section the brotherhood theme is developed in a kind of obverse manner. Though a reader might conclude prior to that section that men should recognize the necessity of mutual involvement, he is not likely to see, as the Easterner sees, that "we are all in it," that the responsibility for the Swede's death is a social responsibility extending beyond the group immediately involved in the
circumstances leading up to the event. Up to the final section Crane's attitude toward him leads us to believe that the responsibility for his death rests with the Swede alone; we are then shown the other side of the coin when the complicity of the others is revealed, especially of Johnnie and the Easterner.

The tone of the first eight sections indicates that Crane has very little sympathy for the Swede. Whereas his attitude toward Henry Fleming is at least ambivalent, his attitude toward the Swede is untempered by any charitable feeling. As readers our attitude toward the Swede is likely to be the same as Crane's. We are led by Crane to judge the Swede negatively because he exhibits no redeeming qualities. His view of his situation and of other people is completely distorted, his reactions odd and perverse. Until he takes the first drink of whiskey, he, like so many of Crane's other characters, is entirely at the mercy of his own distorted view of himself and his surroundings. Such a fearful person as he cannot function in the world even moderately well. After the drink of whiskey in Scully's upstairs room, his bravado is proportionately as great as his fear had been before. And like that fear, it too is founded on a distortion of reality. Not only is his courage false courage, a temporary courage which will last only as long as his inebriation, but it also is dependent upon his erroneous notion that he has risen superior to the situation he saw in the beginning, that he has come to manipulate those who only moments before intended to murder him. Distortion becomes compounded upon distortion. In his cups he becomes totally obnoxious, intimidating everyone, and revealing rudeness, crudity, vulgarity, and cruelty so great as to render sympathetic judgment of him extremely difficult if not impossible.

In order to arrive at a statement of theme of "The Blue Hotel" it is necessary to determine whether the Swede is representative of mankind, for if he is, this story is a more bitterly satirical indictment of man than has heretofore been recognized. There are two places in the text implying that he is. One is the famous passage in the eighth section of the story:

He might have been in a deserted village. We picture the world as thick with conquering and elate humanity, but here, with the bugs of the tempest pealing, it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamor of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smitten, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb. The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life. One was a coxcomb not to die in it. However, the Swede found a saloon.
The whole passage is a comment on the Swede and a further manifestation of the author's negative attitude toward him. The irony is intended to display the degree to which the Swede's image of himself is out of touch with things as they are. But the feeling directed toward the Swede spills over onto mankind as a whole, endowing him with a conceit and a blindness equal to those of the Swede. The two levels of meaning here in this passage are at odds. When Crane says, "One was a coxcomb not to die in it," he means both that one who has separated himself from mankind and attempts to face alone the universe such as it is has little chance of survival (compare Harry Morgan's statement in To Have and Have Not, a man alone has little chance), and that men are fools to attempt to survive in an indifferent universe. The former statement is supported by what has gone before, the latter isn't. What has gone before suggests that man's survival depends not on conceit, but on his involvement in the human community. The passage is an outstanding bit of nihilistic rhetoric which unfortunately interferes with the focus of the story.

The other passage implying that the Swede is representative of mankind and that his problems should be seen as the problems in general of mankind describes the stabbing of the Swede by the gambler: "There was a great tumult, and then was seen a long blade in the hand of the gambler. It shot forward, and a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon." It is not only the Swede's body which is seen ironically as a "citadel of virtue, wisdom, power," but any human body is subject to the irony of the passage. Again the generalization is not supported by what has heretofore occurred. The statement would be justified were it applicable only to the Swede, whose false and distorted image of himself has caused him to feel as though he were a superior person. But as it is, the central events of the tale have not indicated that men in general have a similarly distorted image of self. The last line of the section, "This registers the amount of your purchase," must certainly refer only to the Swede, for his demise has occurred largely because of his character. In this story Crane desires to express negative, hostile feelings toward mankind, but these emerge only at specific points in the tale and are not integrated within the plot. He associates these venomous feelings with the Swede because he is the person Crane dislikes most in the story, but since the Swede has problems peculiar to himself, different from the problems of anyone else in the story, since he stands so much apart in his individuality, we have no reason, so far as achieved content is concerned, to consider him representative of mankind.
The central movement of “The Blue Hotel” traces the development and eventual outcome of the Swede’s isolation from other men, his retreat away from the world into a world of his own imagining, a world in which he feels himself to be one who manipulates his environment rather than one manipulated by it. From the very beginning the rather bizarre reactions of the Swede to his situation set him apart from the other men in the hotel. His shrill, nearly hysterical laughter begins to unite the others with the bond of normalcy in the face of the aberrant behavior of the Swede. He evokes an increasingly hostile response from Johnnie and the cowboy, who find themselves unable to cope with the situation.

At every turn the Swede interprets external events in the light of his preconceived notion of what the West and Westerners are like. The hostility engendered in Johnnie and the cowboy can only be a sign that they intend to kill him. The Easterner’s refusal to see the situation as he sees it can only mean that the Easterner is part of the conspiracy against him. When Scully follows him upstairs to his room, appearing at the door with his face lightened and enshadowed by the lamp he carries, he appears to the Swede like a murderer. Mistakenly considering himself alone and an outcast from the society of men, he indeed becomes just that, creating a world in which he is powerless and a victim of the machinations of others. Nothing the patient Scully can do or say can shake the Swede’s fixed idea.

After the Swede has taken the first drink from Scully, he becomes intoxicated with drink and with power, feeling that he is at last in control of the threatening situation. It is not that he sees the others truly, that he sees they do not intend to murder him; rather he feels in control of these potential murderers. But by his overbearingness and aggressiveness he manages further to isolate himself from the others in whom he has already aroused suspicion and antagonism by the strangeness of his responses. When finally he accuses Johnnie of cheating, he severs himself entirely from the group. He welcomes the chance to avenge himself on these enemies by thrashing one of their number. After the fight is over and the Swede has vanquished his opponent, the Easterner senses the victor’s feeling that his overweening confidence has been vindicated: “There was a splendor of isolation in his situation at this time which the Easterner felt once when, lifting his eyes from the man on the ground, he beheld that mysterious and lonely figure, waiting.” Later, having left the hotel, the Swede finds pleasure in the wind and driving snow, feeling that his new-found strength is so great that he can survive in isolation. From the heights of his towering pride the Swede looks down upon men, and, unable to distinguish his similarity to them,
feels free of the limitations imposed on men by the nature of things. Far from being "tacked on" or a distorted interpretation of the preceding action, the final section of "The Blue Hotel" complements what has gone before. We learn in the first eight sections that the Swede is primarily responsible for his own death, that it occurs as a result of his character. The last section rounds out the tale by revealing the complicity of others in the event. The view of the Easterner is limited (but not distorted) because in his analysis he fails to include the Swede himself as one of those responsible. But we are misreading the tale if we take the Easterner's interpretation of the action to mean that the Swede is absolved of responsibility, that he had no other choices to make. That is, unless one wishes to engage in the arguments about determinism in life, for there is no more in the tale to suggest that the Swede is determined than there is to suggest that we in life are determined.

We can account for the negative attitude of the author toward the Swede by reference to the theme of the story: against a universe which in its indifference seems hostile and malevolent, man can only maintain order and meaning in his life if he recognizes and fulfills his responsibility as a link in "the magnetic chain of humanity." The point is that no matter how reprehensible the Swede was, there are others, who, though not equally as guilty as the gambler, are nonetheless stained. The tale could easily have been about the Easterner, about a sensitive and well-meaning man, whose inability to be brave at a critical moment causes him to be involved in an act which he himself would never commit, he having failed to fulfill a responsibility not always easily fulfilled. Like the author, he too sided against the Swede, yet he does not attempt to deny his involvement in the murder.

Still the problem of tone which appears in others of Crane's works occurs in regard to his attitude toward the Swede. Crane's attitude toward the Swede is too harsh. One does not regret that the Swede cannot be a tragic figure since he is among the worst of mankind as Crane has created him. One might feel, however, that a reader would be more in sympathy with the Easterner's interpretation of the affair if he were not asked to forget so quickly the great degree to which the Swede is responsible for his own death. When we are told that his death "registers the amount of his purchase," we are likely to agree that such an unworthy person did indeed get what was coming to him. It is difficult to conceive of what the Easterner calls a "sin" in the story as being less than the fulfillment of poetic justice. Because Crane has been so harsh in his judgment of the Swede, we are likely to feel as the cowboy feels, "He [the gambler] don't deserve none of it for killin' who he did." It is an error in execution that our sympathies should be with the
Easterner and not at all with the Swede, who, after all is dead. We should be sorry he is dead, but Crane does not permit sympathy for him within the confines of the tale.

Seen in proper perspective "The Blue Hotel" is of a piece with the rest of Crane's fiction. At the beginning of the story the Swede's problems are not entirely different from the problems faced by the little man of The Sullivan County Sketches, by George Kelsey of George's Mother, or by Henry Fleming. Each of these characters has the problem of discovering an identity, of freeing himself from constricting influences (fear, parental authority, certain natural forces requiring will to overcome) and thus arriving at a position allowing him to find out his own strengths and limitations, to find his own place in the world and his own relation to the cosmos. The Swede, as we first see him, is so out of control of himself that he is nearly hysterical. As the victim of his fear, he is incapable of acting freely; he is manipulated by his fear of death. In this sense the Swede is every character in Crane's fiction who is afraid of dying, every character who, because he is psychically encumbered in one way or another, is ineffectual in the world, and thereby unable to deal with that world.

But "The Blue Hotel" differs in its treatment of this character in some very important respects. With other characters like the Swede, notably Henry Fleming and George Kelsey, Crane has shown an essential concern with their movement from that state in which the individual has only the most limited control over what he is and does, to a more desired state where the individual can function as freely as humans can function through the exercise of conscious will—from nonconsciousness (willessness) to consciousness (wilfulness). But here, Crane is not concerned with the matter of development. In fact he short-circuits the movement from one state to the other by simply having the Swede take a drink. After taking a drink the Swede loses all fear.

Now we see in another story which Crane wrote, "The Duel That Was Not Fought," an examination of the question, is courage untempered by discretion meaningful? His concentration on this question precluded the necessity of concern for the development of his character to a state of fearlessness. If we look at "The Blue Hotel" from this point of view, another level of meaning emerges: courage untempered by discretion is not valuable, nor is discretion (the Easterner is discreet in not backing up the Swede's charge against Johnnie) worthwhile if it replaces courages. If these two alternatives are viewed in relation to the idea of mutual responsibility among men, we see that neither is a responsible attitude.

If this reading of Crane's famous story has the least validity, it should
be abundantly clear that men have the capacity to stave off evil through the recognition and fulfillment of responsibility to and for each other. This, as was said in the beginning, precludes the possibility of any kind of strict determinism defining men as necessarily victims not only of nature, but of other humans as well. In the much earlier work, Maggie, we have firm evidence that people are of necessity victims of each other. But as Crane developed beyond the attitudes expressed there, he began to see greater human possibility. That possibility is expressed in "The Blue Hotel," for there we see defined at once what men are and what men through the fulfillment of the ideal of human courage can and should be. Though courage and responsibility do not assure survival—"The Open Boat" tells us that—they offer the best hope in a world in which survival against an indifferent and seemingly hostile universe is at best uncertain.

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