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The Existential Aesthetics of Stephen Crane

by

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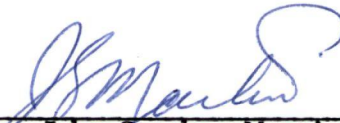
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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "The Existential Aesthetics of Stephen Crane", submitted by Roger Godfrey Legge in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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ABSTRACT

The fictional works of Stephen Crane are primarily existential in nature, where the internal flow of absurdity and despair is followed by free will and courage, ultimately leading to the protagonists' realization of "authenticity" through a knowledge of self-identity. This existential modality towards self-identity is manifested differently in each of the works with which I will be concerned: Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, The Red Badge of Courage and "The Open Boat." To this end, all of the central characters are led to question their place and purpose in the cosmos, and all explore the nature of the "Isolato" within this scheme.

I will examine these integral concepts of existential thought in the fiction of Stephen Crane, drawing attention to the contemporaneity of his work for today's readers. The paradigmatic definition of existentialism set out by Jean-Paul Sartre and summarized in his landmark essay "The Humanism of Existentialism" will serve as a starting point.

Utilizing examples from the texts of Crane's works and the psychotherapeutic doctrines of Frankl, May, Laing and Fallico in support, I will show that the fears of the central characters are symptomatic of a lack of self-identity (isolation of the inner self) which can only be resolved through a condition of existential awareness and, most importantly, acceptance of the absurd and contingent

nature of life. Thus the attainment of an authentic life is not a direct result of divine intervention, but rather of the conscious decision of the character to confront; to choose to act in the face of the absurd. This results in what Crane meant by the term "courage." It therefore becomes apparent that Crane's aesthetic is clearly rooted in his humanistic vision.

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The Existential Aesthetics of Stephen Crane

INTRODUCTION

There were many who went in huddled procession,
They knew not wither;
But, at any rate, success or calamity
Would attend all in equality.

There was one who sought a new road.
He went into direful thickets,
And ultimately died thus, alone;
But they say he had courage.

Stephen Crane, #17, "The Black Riders"

The first serious attempts at Crane criticism appeared in 1923, notably with the publication of Thomas Beer's Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters. It contained an introduction by Joseph Conrad which gave credibility, albeit posthumously, to Stephen Crane as an artist whose work was worthy of intense critical scrutiny.

The trend started by Beer towards an analysis of Crane's work, however, has created difficulties for today's scholars. Many of Crane's works (certainly all of his novels and the majority of his most important short stories) have traditionally been analyzed and re-analyzed from a predominantly Christian stance; that is to say from the point of view of moral obligation based upon religious commitment. From this stance three major themes arise, namely those of initiation, myth, and ironic

transformation. Certainly, these themes fit well with Crane's fiction, particularly with The Red Badge of Courage. Here we see the initiation of young hero Henry Fleming into manhood through the mythic construct of separation and return, and the ironic transformation from childhood to manhood via the death and destruction of war. From a religious viewpoint, there is a wealth of material that can be used for didactic purposes.

Such a trend is, therefore, not surprising when we consider that as the son of a Methodist minister (and even named after the Biblical martyr) Stephen would have been expected to possess a predisposition to spiritual matters. The religious implications were even more severe on his mother's side, for "everybody as soon as he could walk became a Methodist clergyman of the ambling-nag, saddlebag, exhorting kind."¹ Crane's mother "lived in and for religion."² However, Crane himself had said on more than one occasion that he "was not very friendly to Christianity as seen around town."³ Stephen did have, it is true, a predisposition to religion and spirituality, but it was, in the main, very ironic and generally highly cynical.

This is not to say that the Christian moralist approach is without value, for at its root is solid scholarship as well as good intention. Indeed, the serious Crane student invariably obtains a deeper insight of the man and his work when he is considered in this light. The

insight is incomplete, however, because of the one-sidedness of the critique. As Donald Pizer writes about Maggie: A Girl of the Streets:

Crane is . . . using the idea of salvation and damnation as a rhetorical device to attack smug, self-righteous moralism. . . . The entire novel bears this critical intent. . . . Maggie is thus a novel primarily about the falsity and destructiveness of certain moral codes.⁴

The problem thus occurs when one decides to step outside the mainstream and approach the work from an apparently diametrically opposing view. Surely, one might say, the major criticism from the 1920's to the present day would have shown a greater interest in other modalities if there was a need. After all, Crane had always striven to give his readers a "slice of life" in his fiction, and considering his background what could be more natural than a moralistic or religious interpretation. Moreover, Crane's fiction easily lends itself to such interpretations by the very nature of its content. Many of his stories contain symbol, metaphor and allegory rich with the paraphernalia of Christianity: clergymen, references to God and the devil, biblical paraphrasing and the like.

It is my contention, however, that Crane was vastly more concerned with the human condition than previous critics have given him credit for. He was a humanist,

considering man from within the reality of his existence, and the implications of this existence in relation to an overall scheme of cosmic proportion. The religious paraphernalia is primarily used in an ironic sense, and any moral message is left for the reader to determine:

I try to give readers a slice out of life, and if there is any moral or message in it, I do not try to point it out. I let the reader find it for himself.⁵

This method allows Crane to put even more emphasis on despair, making the fall of his characters more tragic, or their rise to redemption more spectacular. Crane was more concerned with man's achievements, interests and capabilities rather than abstractions of theology, such as philosophical considerations about the existence or non-existence of God. This is consistent with his "slice of life" methodology. Crane's fiction is, in a word, existential. In fact, we shall see that existentialism implies humanism, that one is virtually inseparable from the other.

Thus, an analysis of Crane's fiction, if it is to be responsible, must contain the existential and humanistic dimensions. So convincing is the evidence with regard to Crane's existential modality that he seems to anticipate the modern European existential movement.

Now it is hardly sufficient merely to insist that

Crane's aesthetics is existential; it becomes necessary to establish a firm concept of the term if we are to be sure of its applicability. To this end, I find it satisfactory to draw upon the paradigmatic definition of existentialism as set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in his landmark essay "The Humanism of Existentialism."⁶ In this essay, Sartre elucidates the main facets of his method of philosophizing.

Primary to the concept of existentialism is the notion that existence precedes essence. We merely exist, without knowing a reason for our existence. This is the basic premise of atheistic existentialism, and is to be distinguished from Christian existentialism (as Sartre calls it). Atheistic existentialism produces a sounder view of reality, according to Sartre, because of its logical flow:

It means that first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterward defines himself. . . . Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. . . .

Man is nothing else but what he makes himself.

Such is the first principle of existentialism.⁷

Thus, essence is formed only as man lives his life, freely choosing what he will make of himself. The Christian existentialists hold that man does indeed freely choose what he will make of himself, but disagree with the atheistic

existentialists on the matter of existence and essence. Man, according to the Christian concept, is the product or realization of divine intelligence before his actual existence. Sartre disputes this stance, since to accept the Christian concept is to accept that man has already been made what he will be before his physical existence. To say that God has done this for man negates the possibility of man to choose for himself what he will be, which to the atheistic existentialist is at the very least contradictory.

Now the application of this notion is straightforward in that it makes everyone responsible for himself, his own existence and individuality. Moreover, because we exist and fashion our own image at one and the same time, "the image is valid for everybody and for our whole age."⁸ Thus, one creates an image of his own choosing, and in doing so creates an image for all men.

As a result of man's choosing of his own image, man is in deep anguish, which is to say that the individual is aware of the great responsibility he has undertaken by choosing all men. Any action that the individual chooses to take, including not choosing at all, is taken for all mankind. Thus anguish is, in a sense, desirable, since it leads to creative action rather than to the complacency and quietism promoted by Christianity.

Man is also forlorn; since God does not exist, there is

no longer an a priori Good, and therefore there are no values: "no excuses behind, no justification ahead. We are alone with no excuse."⁹ As such, man's life is also contingent; his existence is based upon chance and fortuitousness. His life, his existence, is absurd because there is no external justification for his contingency.

Now absurdity is the crux of existentialism. But, if life is absurd, why embrace life? As Sartre writes, individuals

are condemned to despair; for they discover at the same time that all human activities are equivalent (for they all tend to sacrifice man in order that self-cause arise) and that all are on principle doomed to failure. Thus it amounts to the same thing if one gets drunk or is a leader of nations.¹⁰

Yet while the drunkard resorts to quietism, the leader of nations reveals that he is the being by whom values exist.¹¹ He has recognized the absurdity of existence, which includes the irrationality and unpredictability of life and events, but freely chooses how he will confront it. Life is therefore embraced because the action of the leader of nations is all that he has to give his existence meaning, to give it essence. In the process of making this choice, however, man is alone, isolated. He is in despair.

Despair, according to Sartre, is a manifestation of the

fact that there is nothing, no God, no scheme, which can adapt the world to man's will:

Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life. . . . In other words, a coward is responsible for his cowardice. He has made himself a coward by his acts. The problem is, people want cowards to be born that way.¹²

It is evident by the foregoing, then, that existentialism defines man only in terms of action, and that "action is the only thing that enables man to live. Consequently, we are dealing here with the ethics of action and involvement."¹³ As such, man is given greater dignity as he relies upon himself. This does not preclude the possibility of relying upon others, but merely accepts the fact that if one is disappointed for some reason because he has relied on someone, he cannot pass judgement because he has been disappointed. As there can be no pre-established pattern of human nature, man can only make his essence as he lives. While man may seek out essences, he must keep in mind that essences are merely constructs from existences. Essence is therefore historical, and the individual can only understand himself from the past. Yet, he can only live his life forward, being concerned, as we have said, with his

past achievements and future capabilities. The present therefore becomes a flight towards the future, eventually leading to self-identity and authenticity. It is a process of what Crane meant by the term courage, and it is the basis of his aesthetics.

We find in a substantial number of contemporary critical analyses an insistence that the bulk of Crane's work is a study of human fear based upon certain physical circumstances which lead to the mental and physical isolation of the individual from his fellow man, from God, and from nature. The result is a moral and ethical paralysis of the character. They also consider that the protagonists undergo a moral regeneration which allows them to withstand and rise above this fear. This moral regeneration is manifested by a display of courage, such as the acceptance of and active participation in warfare, confronting a violent killer face to face, or opposing nature under some life-threatening condition. In some cases, it is suggested that the experience of regeneration is divine in nature, which may be a valid interpretation. Unfortunately in these interpretations there is little or no importance attached to the individual's free will and choice in his achievement of authenticity, and Maggie, The Red Badge of Courage and "The Open Boat" are above all works about authenticity.

Utilizing examples from the texts of Crane's works, we shall see in the following chapters that in truth the fears

of the central characters are symptomatic of a lack of self-identity, or isolation of the inner self, which can only be resolved through a condition of existential awareness and, most importantly, acceptance of the absurd and contingent nature of life. Thus the attainment of an authentic life is not necessarily a direct result of divine intervention, but rather of the conscious decision of the character to confront; to choose to act in the face of the absurd. This is entirely consistent with the existential concepts of Jean-Paul Sartre and the aesthetic vision of Stephen Crane.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 R.W. Stallman, Stephen Crane A Biography (New York: George Braziller, 1968) 4.
- 2 Stallman, A Biography, 5.
- 3 Stallman, A Biography, 74.
- 4 Donald Pizer, "Stephen Crane's Maggie and American Naturalism" in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979) 192.
- 5 Stephen Crane, The Poems of Stephen Crane ed. Joseph Katz (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1976) xlviii.
- 6 Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism" in Essays in Existentialism ed. Wade Baskin (New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1964) 31-62.
- 7 Sartre, "Humanism," 35-36.
- 8 Sartre, "Humanism," 37.
- 9 Sartre, "Humanism," 41.
- 10 Jean-Paul Sartre, Being And Nothingness trans. Hazel C. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966) 797.
- 11 Sartre, "Humanism," 49.
- 12 Sartre, "Humanism," 49.
- 13 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 797.

Chapter I

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets

Love walked alone.
The rocks cut her tender feet,
And the brambles tore her fair limbs.
There came a companion to her,
But, alas, he was no help,
For his name was Heart's Pain.

Stephen Crane, #41, "The Black Riders"

In 1893 Crane published his first novel, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, and immediately found himself at odds with both the general and the literary public. Richard Watson Gilder, publisher of Century, had rejected it in 1892 ostensibly because of its profanity, but more than likely because it tended to be "too honest and cruel." "There was no visible sentiment,"¹ Gilder said of the novel, echoing the pronouncements of a number of other publishers Crane had approached in the hope of finding a printer. Finally, after being declined by a number of publishing and printing houses in both New Jersey and New York, Crane took matters into his own hands. Under the pseudonym of Johnston Smith, Crane published Maggie himself, at exorbitant cost, ironically through a printer of religious tracts and medical pamphlets. It was not an instant success, and rumours abounded that Crane had paid people to read the novel while

riding the elevated train in New York, making sure that the title was readily visible to the other passengers.

Whether or not the rumours of Crane's somewhat dubious marketing methods were true, there can be no doubt that sales were slow. Gilder's rejection of the book in 1892 seemed to reflect the sanctimonious moral attitude possessed by the middle and upper class New Yorkers. Religious tracts, books and periodicals were in abundance, delivering messages of damnation, repentance and salvation. The evils inherent in consorting with "painted ladies" were a favourite topic, as were indulgences in alcohol and tobacco. Rarely, however, was child abuse or any other serious social problem dealt with, and all were glossed over by the use of vague allusions and inappropriate comparisons. The emphasis lay in repentance as one's only route to eternal life. Maggie contained no such edification: "[I have] no other purpose in writing Maggie than to show people as they seemed to me. If that be evil, make the most of it."²

Yet while New Yorkers were busy shunning the book, the trades of prostitution, illegal gambling and so on were continuing to do a brisk business, supported not the least by judges, politicians and other pillars of the community. It was obviously one thing to preach the rigorous lifestyle demanded by Christianity, and quite another to live it. This was one of the great ironies of Bowery life; those who were so outspoken against the "vice" of the slums ultimately

condoned its existence by clandestinely supporting it. The clergy turned a deaf ear to the poor, the rich retained prostitutes as escorts and mistresses and patronized the saloon dance girls. Judges rarely heard child and wife abuse cases. This irony was apparent in Crane's work, and he was not a popular man in many circles due to his unnerving faculty for calling a spade a spade. True to his own beliefs, he rarely criticized or sermonized to the slum dwellers or the middle classes. He left it for his readers to look inside themselves to see if they liked what they saw.

All was not completely lost however, for some of the less narrow-minded critics were impressed with Crane's work. Edward Marshall, editor of the New York Press wrote in his editorial column that Crane:

has not failed to touch vice in his book where he has found it in real life, but he has not gilded it. He has painted it as it is: he has not made it clandestinely attractive. In this he rises far above such other Americans--Fawcett and Salters notably. . . . It is the kind of truth that no American has ever had the courage to put between book covers before.³

Hamlin Garland and William Dean Howells took on Maggie as a cause, defending it in the name of verism and evoking an Emersonian appreciation of the "familiar and the low" rather

than "the great, the remote, the romantic."⁴ As highly regarded authors in their own right, Garland and Howells were able to expand Crane's readership by diffusing the moral implications of the novel's subject matter, choosing instead to emphasize the artistic merits of Crane's "naturalistic" literary techniques. The friendship cultivated between the three was evident for much of Crane's life, and he felt forever in debt to them for their kindness. Indeed, the support of Garland and Howells was of primary importance to Crane over the balance of his career.

Thus, it can be seen that while religious propaganda of the crudest fire and brimstone mentality proliferated, the trend towards "realism" and "naturalism" in literature (in their myriad number of definitions) was beginning to come into vogue. Crane had read translations of Emile Zola's L'Assomoir (1877) and Gustav Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1857) and he was familiar with the reactions they had caused overseas. No doubt he also understood and sympathized with both authors over the abuse they had to endure because of their firm adherence to the portrayal of life as they saw it. It was perhaps natural, then, that Crane should be compared to the literary realists of modern Europe in his portrayal of American slum life, and the comparison is made to the present day. Edward Stone, for example, in his English Literature Notes essay entitled "Crane and Zola," feels that he has confirmed Berryman's thesis that Crane's

Red Badge of Courage was influenced by Zola's L'Assomoir, making a questionable connection between the "hot Plowshares" of Henry Fleming and the "burning plowshares" of Gervaise's alcoholic husband.⁵ Yet while Crane was impressed with the character of the streetwalker Nana, he found Zola's literary technique "pretty tiresome" in general, appreciating nevertheless his sincerity.⁶ Crane does not acknowledge a debt to Flaubert, but there can be little doubt that he would have been pleased as an artist to be included with such great literary company.⁷

It was Crane's realism then, that propelled Maggie into the eye of the American critical storm of the late 1890's, for the public, ironically, was simply not ready to be confronted in fiction with what it saw in everyday life. Today the realist and naturalist techniques are viewed not so much by themselves, but rather by their implications as functions of the overall aesthetic value of the work of art. Crane's realism is part of his psychology as artist in the rendering of the piece, and Crane's art itself can be a reflection of an existential aesthetics such as we find in the ontological writings of Sartre or Camus.⁸

The realism in the work of Stephen Crane as a literary technique is therefore significant in what it leads to, namely his emphasis upon the critical influence of environment, both physical and psychological, on the daily lives of individuals. From the standpoint of today's reader

however, the significance must be realized in the contemporaneity of the work, and it is precisely here that Crane succeeds so well. His characters speak to us and affect us probably more so today than they did the men and women of his own time, for we are infinitely more aware of the psychological impact of loss of self-identity.

It is this contemporaneity then, that insists we pay heed to what Crane has to say. From the point of view of existence, the concrete here and now of the individual being, Crane rightly chooses environment as his starting point.

The story of Maggie is simple enough. Maggie Johnson, along with her younger brothers Jimmie and Tommy, are the children of a physically and mentally abusive alcoholic mother and her weak, surly alcoholic husband. The product of 1890's tenement slum life in New York city, their futures are grim. Tommy dies while still an infant, and Jimmy becomes a beer truck driver while Maggie goes to work in a sweatshop collar and cuff factory. She is eventually taken in by Pete, an older friend of Jimmy's. Because of her naivete, Maggie sees Pete as the only one who can lead her out of her mean existence. This is highly ironic, since she becomes more deeply involved in a world that she wanted to escape, and is typical of Crane's methodology. Her dream comes to an abrupt end after she yields to Pete sexually,

for Pete, unknown to Maggie, is a pimp. After being rejected by Pete, Maggie is thrown out of her home by her drunken, sanctimonious mother, and prostitution becomes her only means of survival. Degraded, isolated and full of despair, her life comes to a premature end when she dies--either due to suicide or murder--near the dark, oily waters of the East River.

Throughout this simple plot, complex descriptions of the slum environment and the people who live there are frequent, giving credence to Crane's insistence upon realism. In a letter to Hamlin Garland, Crane stressed the point in no uncertain terms:

[Maggie] tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes peoples lives regardless. If one can prove that theory, one makes room in heaven for all sorts of souls (notably an occasional street girl) who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people.⁹

Here "regardless" can be seen to mean whether or not people choose to do anything about their personal circumstances, and whether or not there is a God who influences temporal events.

This notion is particularly useful in a discussion of Crane's aesthetics, for the environment is constitutive of reality; its form is concretized through physical existents.

As such, the environment is a reality which must be confronted and dealt with by the individual. The existential aesthetics insists that as man is free to choose what he will be, he can challenge the deterministic bondage of the "naturalistic" environment. How the individual chooses to do this is, as we have seen, a primary concern in existential philosophy, as we recall that what the individual chooses for himself is also chosen for all mankind. Man cannot alter the circumstances or conditions that he finds himself faced with, such as the environment. He simply chooses to take a stand against these conditions--a task which is really not a "simple" one at all. This, according to the psychiatrist Victor Frankl, is the only way in which an individual can authenticate his existence, or in other words become fully human:

Man must make his choice concerning the mass of present potentials [or possibilities within himself] . . . He must decide . . . what will be the monument of his existence.¹⁰

But environment refers not only to the physical elements of the Bowery, but also to the spiritual. From the outside, the Bowery appears to be an immoral place populated by thousands of fallen souls. From the inside, however, the Bowery is actually amoral, although the residents, like Mary Johnson, possess a sentimental middle class morality promulgated by the slum missions. This false morality allows them to judge

others without first judging themselves. Maggie, who had "none of the dirt of Rum Alley . . . in her veins" is not competent to deal with these contradictions, and she will ironically die, pure as she is, by the false morality of others.¹¹

Thus, in Maggie the environment is presented as indifferent and even hostile, as if it were itself sentient. Crane brings this about by depicting the Bowery area of New York as if it were in a perpetual state of disorder, chaos and decay. Its inhabitants reflect this state of disorder as we see from the story's opening lines:

A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honour of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at the howling urchins from Devil's Row, who were circling madly about the heap and pelting him. His infantile countenance was livid with the fury of battle. (6)

Automatically the theme becomes one of conflict and war with the attendant implications of disorder and chaos. The heap of gravel becomes a microcosm in the infinite universe of New York city, and in the next few paragraphs we find additional references to "Devil's Row," hell, warriors, savagery, blood and blows. Indeed, it appears to be a description of hell. God is nowhere to be found in Rum Alley.

The first paragraph of Chapter 2 gives a deeper insight into the hell that is the Bowery; the street urchin who

tried to defend his strategic heap of gravel is described as "a brave soldier" and "man of blood with a sort of sublime license" (6) who is ironically being escorted home by his father:

Eventually they entered into a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and gutter. . . . In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags and bottles. In the street infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles. Formidable women, with uncombed hair and disordered dress gossiped while leaning on railings, or screamed in frantic quarrels. Withered persons, in curious posturings of submission to something sat smoking pipes in obscure corners. . . . The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels. (6)

Here we see the influence of Flaubert mentioned earlier, particularly with regard to the personification of buildings. Crane is ambiguous, for not only do the buildings stand in a "dark region," but they can also be considered as dark regions themselves. The "home" to where Jimmy is led by his father is a constituent of the personified building which gives up "loads of babies to the street and gutter" (6). Crane's symbolism reflects a grim duality of nature,

for the buildings are womb-like givers of life, yet representative of dark caves, which are associated with Hades. The building as dark cave, Cirlot suggests, has an underlying image of the dark, violent unconscious, and we should not find it surprising that cave and hell are etymologically related in the German.¹² Moreover, the building images in this sense are distinctly archetypal, which is consistent with the general theme of the environment's negative influence upon the individual. Alan Rose has examined urban chaos and disorder metaphorically as the archetypal initiation of the hero through the Fall, which if applied to Maggie demonstrates her flawed vision due to her naivete. She is thus led to the destructive forces of disorder against which she is powerless to defend herself.¹³

We are also given our first glimpse into the existential despair of the tenement residents, "Withered persons in curious submission to something" (6). This "something" is existence and its absurdity. It is a recognition of contingency without external justification, and its product is loss of self-identity. Again, Frankl rightly asserts, I believe, that loss of self-identity prohibits the individual from fulfilling any of the possibilities available to him, and his life becomes meaningless.¹⁴ This is manifested by the existential ennui which is found in many of Crane's characterizations, such as

the tall, sublime man in Chapter 16. These "withered persons" have in effect chosen, by their inability to come to terms with their existence, a life of hell. This submission will also be found in Maggie, but Maggie eventually defies this oppressiveness, as we shall see.

The disorder and chaos inherent in the hell motif is continually amplified throughout the story. The father, for example, bent upon a "vengeful drunk" ostensibly due to a fight with his wife tells the patrons of a bar: "My home reg'lar livin hell. Damdes place! Reg'lar hell! Why do I come an' drin' wisk' here thish way? Cause home reg'lar livin hell! (11). Further references of "Go teh hell," "Deh ol' woman ill be raisin hell," "volcanic wrath," and so on, extend the image (11).

In making a comparison between Shakespeare and Kafka, Lionel Trilling tells us that "the cruel irrationality of the conditions of human life are forced upon us by the puerile gods who torture us not for punishment but for sport."¹⁵ This is precisely Crane's stance. He was not prone to argue the existence or lack of existence of a God or gods. Indeed, as we have seen he undoubtedly had some kind of belief system. His belief however, seemed to hinge upon the notion that God, if he did exist, appeared to take a laissez-faire interest in human life, except when it was efficacious to make life for man utterly miserable. As such, the existence of God was problematic, as man was quite

capable of making his life miserable without supernatural assistance. Crane's Poem #13 reflects this belief:

If there is a witness to my little life,
To my tiny throes and struggles,
He sees a fool;
And it is not fine for gods to menace fools.¹⁶

As the story develops, the irrationality of man's existence is made vividly clear with Crane's description of the death of the youngest of the Johnson children:

The babe, Tommy, died. He went away in a white, insignificant coffin, his small hand clutching a flower that the girl, Maggie, had stolen from an Italian. She and Jimmy lived. (13)

Crane does not tell us why or how Tommy died because his death, like the white coffin, was insignificant to the world and to the gods. Just as matter-of-factly, Crane tells us merely that Maggie and Jimmy lived. They lived, as Tommy died, only as a matter of contingency. Contingency is continually emphasized, as we see in the scene with a group of street people waiting for a hot meal at a mission church. God did not exist for them despite the exhortations of the preacher:

You are damned, said the preacher. And the reader of sounds might have seen the reply go forth from the ragged people: Where's our soup?
[Jimmy's] companion said if he should ever meet

God he would ask him for a million dollars and a bottle of beer. (13)

For Jimmy, this contingency, this brutal reality of existence and its concomitant irrationality and absurdity, was acceptable. He was an integral part of all existence: "On the corners he was in life and of life. The world was going on and he was there to perceive it" (14). In the Bowery, Jimmy chose to confront this absurd existence by fighting any time the opportunity presented itself. As the "god-driver" of a beer truck, he considered the entire scene a kind of "aggravated idiocy": Jimmy "had an ungovernable desire to step down, put up his flame colored fists and . . . dispute the right of way. . . ." (15). His personal aesthetic is also a reflection of the Bowery life tempered, however, by his understanding of his own contingency, as we see when Crane depicts him in a poetic mood of sorts: "Nevertheless, he had, on a certain star-lit evening, said wonderingly and quite reverently: 'Deh moon looks like hell, don't it'" (16).

Maggie is re-introduced in Chapter 5 with the famous line: "The girl, Maggie, blossomed in a mud puddle" but only to designate the passage of time, for we find Jimmy telling her that as she is now older she must either become a prostitute or find a job (16). Finding work in a collar and cuff factory, she and twenty other girls "of various shades of yellow discontent" worked long hours at arduous labour,

making clothing for upper class New Yorkers (17). Yet while Jimmy willingly participated in the hell that was the Bowery, Maggie chose another, less obstreperous path. The Bowery "dirt disguised her. Attired in tatters and grime, she went unseen" (16). That this is so is most significant, particularly in comparison to her brother, for Maggie's enclosure and isolation is represented by the naturalistic bondage of the collar and cuff factory, whereas Jimmy is in and of life, a god-driver. Both Maggie and Jimmy suffer the same existential dilemma--the reconciliation of the absurdity of life with the facticity of their existence--yet they react to it in diametrically opposed ways. Moreover, neither can be faulted, as we shall see, for their individual solutions. Maggie is exemplar of Crane's artistic duality in this regard, for while we have noted that his emphasis on the influential nature of the environment is of primary importance to Crane, the existential aesthetics gives us a dramatic example of how the individual may confront and overcome such dilemmas.¹⁷

More completely introduced by way of Maggie here is Pete, the young Bowery tough whose dandy-like fashion and caustic attitude serve as a facade for a foolish and insecure drunkard and pimp. His conversation consists almost entirely of examples of his great physical prowess in the way, for example, that he ejects rambunctious and violent patrons from the establishment where he worked as a

bartender. Crane tells us only that "Maggie observed Pete" (17). We realize from the context, however, that her observation is not an indifferent one. Moreover, Crane uses this technique to get the reader to see the characterization through the naive eyes of a young girl, intentionally putting us on the wrong track as it were, precisely as Maggie herself did. Thus we are told that

[Pete's] 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 . . . he declared that it amounted to nothing. (17)

Pete, as a man of the world, must therefore be included in the "nothing" of his assessment of life, and indeed his actions later on in the story confirm our suspicions. Unfortunately, Maggie felt that he was the "beau ideal of a man" for Pete would eventually be responsible for her fall (19). To her Pete openly defied the world and its hardships and he was therefore deserving of her admiration.

Crane devotes a chapter exclusively to a saloon scene where Pete takes Maggie on their first date. As with previous chapters, it serves to accentuate the theme of chaos, as we see for example with the stage action:

After a few moments rest, the orchestra played crashingly, and a small fat man . . . began to roar a song and stamp back and forth before the foot-lights. . . . He made his face into fantastic grimaces until he looked like a pictured devil. .

. .(24)

This typifies Crane's ironic mockery of human existence in the Bowery, and is echoed again in Chapter 14. The imagery is reinforced with Maggie's and Pete's visit to a dime museum with its rows of deformed freaks, and a connection is therefore made between the freaks of the saloon and those of the dime museum, which demonstrates the universal ugliness and chaos in the souls of the Bowery residents. Here Maggie also attends a melodramatic play in which the audience, including Maggie, vociferously participates by hissing at the villains while encouraging the hero and heroine in their journey from poverty to wealth and triumph. Crane uses the play metaphor here to emphasize the illusion of life and the disillusionment of its participants. It is fitting then that Crane utilizes the stage metaphor again near the end of the story in order to demonstrate Maggie's death to the Bowery.

It is here that we also see the first significant sign of Maggie's rejection of enclosure:

The air of the collar and cuff establishment strangled her. She knew she was gradually and surely shrivelling in the hot stuffy room. The

begrimed windows rattled incessantly. . . . The place was filled with . . . noises and odours. (25)

Here the collar and cuff factory is representative of both the physical and spiritual bondage of the Bowery, and it is not merely coincidental that Maggie's fall begins on its downward spiral from this chapter.

The continual tone of the novel is one of destruction, which foreshadows Maggie's destruction near the end of the story. The apartment that Maggie lives in with her parents has been reduced to rubble by her mother--ironically given the name Mary by Crane--in a drunken fit of wrath, ostensibly upset at Maggie's frequent visitations with Pete. Mary throws Maggie out of the house to salve her own conscience:

An' now, git out an' go ahn wid dat doe-faced jude of yours. Go teh hell wid him, damn yeh, an' a good riddance. Go teh hell an' see how yeh likes it. (30)

Indeed this is precisely what Maggie will do, and is summed up ironically and succinctly by Crane in the last line of the chapter: "She went" (31).

Jimmy finds out that Maggie has become a prostitute for Pete by this time. He decides that a physical beating of Pete is called for, ostensibly as an act of support for his sister. The confrontation occurs in and comprises an entire

chapter, of which the following is representative:

Each head was huddled between its owner's shoulders, and arms were swinging. . . . Feet scraped to and fro with a loud scratching sound upon the sanded floor. Blows left crimson blotches upon pale skin. . . . The rage of fear shone in their eyes and their blood-colored fists swirled. (36)

This scene reminds us of the fight between Jimmy and another Bowery child in the opening lines of Chapter 1, and we see that Jimmy has not changed. Nor for that matter has the Bowery. The battle proves nothing, however, ending in a draw, and we eventually find Maggie again with Pete in a saloon: "Her life was Pete's and she considered him worthy of the charge" (38).

Ultimately Maggie finds that her belief in Pete's love for her is unfounded, as he leaves her for one of his other women, the prostitute Nell. Maggie is not capable of fighting for the man that she loves because she is only of the Bowery, not in it as Pete and Jimmy are. Making one last attempt to talk to Pete in the hope of maintaining their relationship, Maggie visits him and is told in no uncertain terms that she is no longer wanted. Like her mother Mary earlier in the novel, Pete also tells her: "Oh, go teh hell" (50). The futility of her circumstance is underscored with the line: "Maggie went away" (50). Wandering "aimlessly"

Maggie asks herself out loud the classic existential question "Who?" (50). She has now lost all sense of personal identity. She decides to speak to a church minister on the street in recognition of the spiritual help he represents, but the clergyman "gave a compulsive movement and saved his respectability by a vigorous side-step. He did not risk it to save a soul" (51). Cast out of society by the environment, her family, her lover and finally the church, Maggie becomes nameless; lowest of all the things on the earth, just as Pete and Jimmy will become nameless in the last two chapters. From this point in the novel Maggie will no longer speak out loud. In her despair, the most appropriate language, indeed her most powerful language, will be that of silence. Crane's aesthetics will transform this silence from a symptom of despair to a symbol of challenge. The stage is now set for her existential act of defiance against the naturalistic bondage of the Bowery environment.

Of the novel's nineteen chapters, Chapter 17 provides the crux, for it is here that Crane's existential aesthetics is fully demonstrated. Chronologically these events occur several months after Maggie has been forsaken by Pete, and we are now presented with an image of a fashionable woman who uses the tools of the actor, such as facial and body movements, to draw attention to herself from prospective clients.

Maggie has become an experienced prostitute by this time, knowing that she should start in the better areas of the city, making every effort to attract the wealthy clientele. As such, we find her working initially in the fashionable theatre district, which as mentioned earlier also serves to emphasize the illusion of the world as stage.

Ironically, Crane no longer uses her name in telling of her movements. She has become a nameless entity: "A girl of the painted cohorts of the city" now fully absorbed into the "throng emerging from the places of forgetfulness" (51-52).

Unsuccessful in her solicitations near the theatres, Maggie moves consecutively through less desirable areas in her search for clientele, symbolizing her rapid fall into existential and spiritual despair. Crane catalogues the people that she meets on her way, who represent most of the major economic and social segments of the city, and as such are universally representative of man in Crane's eyes. There is the tall, sublime man with the look of existential ennui, and the stout, pompous gentleman with a sneer. A businessman bumps into her and apologizes, calling her Mary, a subtle reference perhaps to the biblical character of Mary Magdalen and the New York mission notion that, at least in the eyes of the un-enlightened men of New York, all women are troublemakers and whores. Moving past the brightly lit avenues into "darker blocks," Maggie's spiritual despair is again emphasized. She meets a young man in a derby hat, a

labourer, an innocent young boy with a look of "unconcern" on his face, reminiscent of Maggie as a young girl. She passes by a drunken man who "wails to himself" with a "dismal voice," finally reaching the darkest regions of the city near the river. Here she meets a man with "blotched features" which recalls no less than five earlier descriptions of Mary Johnson as well as the descriptions of her father, Tommy, Jimmy and Pete. These physically blotched characters are blotched in spirit also. Even little Tommy, who was no more than a baby, was in the Bowery rather than of it, and as such was condemned to die long before his time, as indeed all the characters died long before their times, even though they still physically lived. Continuing on Maggie meets a "ragged being with shifting and blood-shot eyes and grimy hands" (53), nameless to the extent that he is considered only a being; an existent with no more human life than a stone or a bit of paper.

At last Maggie moves into the darkest area of the city almost right at the edge of the East River, and comes upon a man who follows her to the river's edge. He is a picture of perversion and death:

When almost to the river the girl saw a great figure. . . . a huge fat man in torn and greasy garments. His grey hair straggled down over his forehead. His small bleared eyes . . . amidst great rolls of red fat, swept eagerly over the

girl's upturned face. . . . His whole body gently quivered and shook like that of a dead jelly fish. (53)

We are not told of Maggie's death directly, but rather by Crane's use of impressionistic imagery as we find in the very next paragraph, which also concludes the chapter and, symbolically, Maggie's life:

. . . the river appeared a deathly black hue. Some hidden factory sent up a yellow glare, that lit . . . the waters lapping oilily against timbers. . . . sounds of life . . . came faintly and died away to a silence. (53)

The implications here are complex and will be dealt with below. At this point it is sufficient to say that Maggie's death was not a simple death at all, but exemplar of the authentic life of a courageous woman.

We eventually find Pete, drunk, in a saloon surrounded by some of his "girls." He has become nameless, now referred to only as "the man," "he" or "a man" by Crane, except when others talk about him or address him directly. Pete, like Maggie, has also lost his spiritual self which is again symbolized by the blotches on his neck. A "woman of brilliance" assigns a final name to him at the end of the chapter: "'What a damn fool,' she said, and went" (56).

In the last chapter Jimmy tells his mother of Maggie's death. Jimmy is now nameless, referred to by Crane as "A

soiled, unshaven man" or "the man," as is his mother, who is called only "the woman" and is distinguished from the other women present only by her clothes. The scene is a portrait of irony in that Mary, described as looking like a "fat monk" while eating at her table, now decides that she will forgive her daughter, as she is now dead. Their language, we are told, "was derived from mission churches" (57), which is a deliberate attack by Crane on the hypocrisy of the Christian church, and more specifically the Bowery missions, fat from its oppressiveness over others, forgiving only when it is too late, offering to help when help is no longer needed.

Here we are meant to see that there is no salvation for these people of the Bowery. They have lost touch with themselves spiritually and their lives have become meaningless. Ironically, their only attachment to humanity is their genuine mourning for Maggie, and it is, therefore, only Maggie's death that has disrupted the naturalistic, deterministic and inhuman lives of the tenement dwellers.

Crane's story of the life and death of Maggie Johnson, the innocent girl "who blossomed in a mud puddle," was meant to draw attention, as we saw earlier, to the influence of the environment upon the "have not" city dwellers. Crane wanted to demonstrate that not all prostitutes or people of the so-called lower elements were necessarily of bad heart.

In Maggie's case, her turning to a life of prostitution was a method of survival in the hostile universe of the Bowery. Moreover, the lower elements of society are not the only ones that are subject to existential ennui or despair, and Crane spares no effort to show that the wealthy and educated suffer spiritually from the environmental influences of modern life in a large city just as the desperate and poor. As we have seen, it is the wealthy and educated who frequent the "places of forgetfulness" in the fashionable theatre area of the city. Crane purposely draws our attention to the "withered persons" mentioned earlier in comparison to the well-heeled individuals near story's end, and we see that there is really little difference between them.

We have seen that Maggie, out of all of the other characters in the novel, was the only one untouched by Bowery dirt. This is so even though she becomes a prostitute. The American psychiatrist R.D. Laing, a specialist in schizoid behaviour, sheds some light on Maggie's apparently erratic behaviour, moving as she does from innocence, naivete and humanistic sensitivity to a highly experienced prostitute, all in a matter of months. In Maggie, the themes of disorder and chaos of city life, particularly in the case of the poor and disadvantaged, are well documented in Laing's psychoanalytic theory. He feels that this degree of disorder frequently leads to a loss of

self-identity through what he calls "primary ontological uncertainty." The external, existential realities of life in the modern city make many individuals susceptible to schizoid impulses in varying degrees which can lead to feelings of alienation, enclosure, petrification, and eventually annihilation. The individual is terrorized by reality and the recognition that he or she is merely a "thing" in the world.¹⁸

Maggie Johnson fits perfectly into Laing's concept, as she suffers from almost all of the symptoms mentioned above. Her ontological insecurity can easily be traced to the violence she experiences in her family life and her shattered illusions of her place in the cosmos which is the Bowery. She has become "de-personalized," to use Laing's terminology, which is characterized by brief forays into social life in order to stop persisting feelings of impending internal death, followed by a rapid withdrawal from these same social situations. In order to exist spiritually, Maggie needed someone to believe that she did in fact exist. Without this recognition, she would, spiritually speaking, cease to exist. Pete did in fact supply Maggie with this recognition, but his eventual spurning of her love had the net effect of increasing her ontological insecurity. But what are the existential-aesthetic implications of this psychological portrait? Maggie, considering her spiritual nature, is placed in the

difficult position of having to immediately become responsible for herself and her actions, which is to say that she experiences an existential dilemma with extremely high anxiety. She must decide if she has the courage to exist in the environment of the Bowery, both physically and spiritually, and then to choose how she will confront the unchangeable conditions of the bondage and enclosure of this environment. This notion directly contradicts Bettina Knapps' theory that the saloons and theatres of the city are places of sanctuary, "holy places" from which Maggie is eventually cast away. This kind of idealism is perhaps not surprising on the part of Knapp, for she considers the beer halls of the novel to be something akin to a "nice, family-oriented place. . . ." ¹⁹ This is difficult to accept, for Crane's text clearly shows that the Bowery is the last place one would ever want to raise a family. Indeed, the Bowery is represented metaphorically by the theatre of an earlier chapter where we saw Crane's ironic mockery of existence with the grotesque antics of the grimacing and leering fat man.

Maggie, therefore, has only two options: to live, or to die through suicide. If she chooses life, she must then tread the path that her needs demand. The choice of death is entirely another matter, and one that sometimes only the very courageous and enlightened are able to make. That she survives by prostitution is merely academic. If she chooses

to die, then she must do so for a good reason, and her death will give authenticity to her tragic life. For Maggie, death is far better than prostitution, in which rejection is always immanent. Indeed, rejection is a form of spiritual death for Maggie as we saw with her reaction to Pete.

In all fairness it should be noted here that there is absolutely no textual evidence to support the assumption that Maggie committed suicide. Indeed, Parker and Higgins, whose investigative bibliographical work is surprisingly ignored by many critics, hold that the suicide interpretation is merely adventitious rather than authorial.²⁰ Here it is sufficient to recognize that the Christian moralist approach to an interpretation of the novel would suffer immensely if Maggie were supposed to have been murdered, since there could be no moralistic message of punishment and salvation that many critics are fond of to this day. Yet Parker and Higgins fail to recognize that an interpretation of suicide, while it may be adventitious, is also aesthetically more sensible, since their "murder" approach also caters to moralistic readings. If Maggie had indeed been murdered, a case could be made for the "Fallen Woman" and the perils of turning to a life of vice and sexual pleasure. I have no doubt that Crane was purposely ambiguous in this regard, since to die to the despicable world of the Bowery is, as I have said, just as courageous as choosing to live in it but not be of it.

Either choice--to live or to die--existentialistically speaking, is sufficient to authenticate one's existence, even if the choice is death. As Arturo Fallico writes:

If [man] chooses to be himself--to exist authentically--he "steps out," or "stands out" as the very word "exist" implies, and takes his chances about being any being at all. . . . He must endure the nothingness that he is, or else descend into the open tomb of the physical universe which awaits him in any case. . . . All men die in the same way, no matter what theories they hold about it. . . . Any man who can choose a good reason for dying, dies well; the only man who dies unsuccessfully is the one who dies like a thing suffering the senseless changes of objects whether he wills it or not.²¹

Maggie, by initially choosing to become a prostitute, survives, and does so in a much more comfortable way, relatively speaking, than if she had chosen to remain in the physically and mentally suffocating sweat shop collar and cuff factory. Moreover, it allows her to maintain a certain degree of illusion and myth about herself, as she did about the culture and refinement of the heroine of the play in Chapter 8. In taking her own life, Maggie demonstrates an awareness of her existential condition. Maggie is the only Bowery resident who "blossomed in a mud puddle." She could

not possibly be expected to put up with the physical conditions of the Bowery spiritually, since to do so would be to condone and accept the forces that killed her brother Tommy and which made her life so full of despair. She therefore chooses out of necessity to take a stand against the deterministic environment, thereby authenticating her life. Maggie knows that she cannot change the Bowery, but she will not let the Bowery change her, either. By choosing to take this stand, to withdraw from the Bowery existence by suicide, she becomes--paradoxically--more fully human. The only proviso here is that the choice must be made in "good faith" by the individual. She must, in other words, believe that her choice is the best one that she can make given the contingency of existence.

Nor is her solution an act of cowardice. Indeed, given the requirements of "taking a stand" and of "good faith," suicide, far from being a cowardly act is in fact a highly courageous act which can also authenticate one's existence. Maggie in effect lets her silence, through her death, speak for her, since she was not heard in any other way. Her silence becomes more powerful, more meaningful, than any other kind of language. When the friends of the family get together in support of the remaining members of the family, it is the most attention and recognition that Maggie has received over her entire existence. Moreover, her death allows her mother to come to an understanding with Maggie,

ironic as it is, in her "forgiveness" of her daughter's action. Crane in fact frequently noted that the Bowery itself is cowardice, not the numerous Maggies that live and die there.²² The fact that the individual is no longer alive to dwell on his action or discuss it with his friends is academic, as it is the act of choice that matters. The future is merely contingent and therefore does not alter the significance of the act itself. As such, Maggie's life, through her death, was indeed authentic.

Maggie is therefore a story of life rather than death. Far from being a pessimist, Crane was undeniably an optimist in his belief that man could survive and succeed if he only had the vision to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles placed in his path at every turn. Again, how one chooses to do this existentially is the important factor. Maggie's belief in the redemptive value of love or her turning to prostitution can hardly be considered sinful under the circumstances.²³

Thus we see that Maggie does indeed possess vision, and as we shall see, other central characters of Crane's fiction have it as well. Henry Fleming, the hero of Crane's most famous work The Red Badge of Courage, and the four castaways at sea in "The Open Boat" are excellent examples.

NOTES

CHAPTER I.

1 Stallman, A Biography, 67.

2 Stallman, A Biography, 73.

3 Stallman, A Biography, 72-73.

4 Stallman, A Biography, 74.

5 Edward Stone, "Crane and Zola" in English Language Notes (#1 September 1963) 46-47.

6 Stallman, A Biography, 74.

7 Flaubert, like Crane, emphasized the importance of the environment, presented in meticulous detail, upon the psychology of his characters: the personification of the landscape, the painful realities of slum life, the new becoming hideous, the innocent becoming disillusioned, the fall into despair.

8 Sartre's La Nausee (1938, English trans. Nausea, 1949), Le Mur (1939, The Wall, 1948), Kean (1954, Kean, 1960) and Camus' L'Etranger (1942, The Outsider, 1946) and Le Myth de Sisyphe (1942, The Myth of Sisyphus, 1955) are exemplar.

9 Stephen Crane, Stephen Crane: Letters ed. R.W. Stallman, L. Gilkes (New York Univ. Press, 1960) #17, 14.

10 Victor E. Frankl, Psychotherapy and Existentialism

(New York: Washington Square Press, 1967) 57.

¹¹ Stephen Crane, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979) 16. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses by page number only in the text of the thesis.

¹² J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols trans. Jack Sage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) 40.

¹³ Alan Rose, "Sin and the City: The Uses of Disorder in the Urban Novel" in Centennial Review (#16, 1972) 203.

¹⁴ Frankl, Psychotherapy, 57.

¹⁵ R.D. Laing, The Divided Self (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986) 40.

¹⁶ Crane, Poetry, 15.

¹⁷ Modern critics generally refuse to acknowledge Crane's existential aesthetic probably because of his well documented insistence upon naturalistic strategies of interpretation, a stance no longer acceptable in modern literary studies because of its one-sidedness.

¹⁸ R.D. Laing, The Divided Self, 56-57.

¹⁹ Bettina Knapp, Stephen Crane (New York: Ungar Pub. Co., 1987) 52-53.

²⁰ Hershel Parker and Brian Higgins, "Maggie's Last Night: Authorial Design and Editorial Patching" in Studies in the Novel (10:1, Spring 1978) 64-75. Many critics hold that the last two paragraphs of Chapter 17 demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt two key aspects of the work,

namely that the disgusting man near the river shows how debased Maggie has become by consenting to sell sex to such a repulsive figure, and that she committed suicide in recognition of her act, tired of such a futile existence. Fredson Bowers, for example, insists that suicide is Maggie's only intent, basing his reasoning on a line in Chapter 17: "She hurried through the crowd as if intent upon reaching a distant home. . . ." Bowers fails to recognize that Maggie acts this way in Chapter 16, not a prostitute as yet, because she realizes that if she walked about aimlessly men assumed she was a prostitute, while if she walked as if she was intent on getting somewhere in a hurry, men would leave her alone. Bowers' interpretation is therefore too much to ask of the text.

21 Arturo Fallico, The Quest For Authentic Existence (Stockton: College of the Pacific Press, 1958) 52-53.

22 Stallman, A Biography, 75.

23 W.B. Stein, "New Testament Inversions in Crane's Maggie" in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979) 171.

Chapter 2

The Red Badge of Courage

"Tell brave deeds of war."

Then they recounted tales:
"There were stern stands
And bitter runs for glory."

Ah, I think there were braver deeds.

Stephen Crane, #15, "The Black Riders"

The Red Badge of Courage, generally regarded as Crane's best work, was first published in 1895, and has long been considered an important constituent of the American literary canon. An excellent example of "naturalistic" fiction, the novel is unique for its time because of its unromantic view of war and its effect on the lives of individuals. It is also a matter of curiosity to some extent, for it is well known that Crane had never participated in or witnessed a battle of any kind prior to the writing of the story. That he was able to compose such a vivid account of warfare attests to his creative genius.

If we accept Beer's story, Crane had decided, during an argument with a friend, that he could write a better war novel than Zola did with Le Debauche (1892), even though he had never seen battle action of any kind.¹ George Wyndam,

British Undersecretary of State for War, wrote in the London New Review of 1896: "Indeed, I think that Mr. Crane's picture of war is more complete than Tolstoi's, more true than Zola's."² High praise indeed, yet justified, I think, particularly from an aesthetic point of view, as we shall see.

In setting out to write what he considered "a real story of the Civil war," Crane visited Fredericksberg, Virginia in 1893 in order to interview Confederate veterans. His research comprised mainly of these interviews and bits and pieces of information from newspapers, but on the whole The Red Badge was concocted in long creative spurts. He was an artist of peculiar writing habits, and his work, particularly his poetry, was generally composed spontaneously and without premeditation of any kind.

The Red Badge, as mentioned, was composed differently in comparison to his poetry. Joseph Conrad once mentioned that Crane had contrived every image, phrase and metaphor, every impression patterned with another.³ We are thus given a unique opportunity to study Crane's aesthetics first hand, and we are not disappointed by any lack of subject matter. Moreover, we are able to see a distinct and continuing maturation of this aesthetics from Maggie, since the emphasis in The Red Badge is upon the psychology of an individual created from a far more personal vantage point than we found with the character of Maggie Johnson. Crane's

personal philosophy had, by this time, become more developed and concrete, his existential aesthetics more apparent than ever before.

Crane based The Red Badge ostensibly upon the historic Battle of Chancellorsville of May 1st to the 4th in 1863 during the American Civil War. Union General Joe Hooker had established some 70,000 troops at Chancellorsville--located midway between Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia--in the hope of pushing Confederate General Robert E. Lee back to the south. Lee was badly outnumbered with only 45,000 troops under his command, but in a daring move he sent Stonewall Jackson and 26,000 men in a wide sweep around Hooker's position, crushing his exposed right flank. In the ensuing three days of battle, Hooker had lost 17,000 men, and beat a hasty retreat north of the Rappahannock River in order to avoid total destruction. Lee carried on to Pennsylvania, where he and a main force of the Confederate Army would eventually lose the decisive Battle of Gettysberg to the Union forces of General Meade.⁴

In The Red Badge, Crane shows a Union victory, and we can, therefore, assume that the battle of which he wrote was only a part of the overall action. Nevertheless, the battle provided him with sufficient material to create not only an excellent piece of war fiction, but also an outstanding psychological study of the battlefield as seen through the

eyes of an individual soldier.

R.W. Stallman, while acknowledging the psychological aspects of the story, argues that The Red Badge is essentially a religious allegory with the central theme of spiritual growth and redemption.⁵ His reasoning is legitimate in the light of a Christian moralist interpretation, but some of his more questionable explanations will be dealt with in the novel's analysis below. It would be far more correct, as we shall see, to say simply that The Red Badge is allegorical, which is to say that it expresses, through fiction, through symbol and metaphor, certain generalizations and truths about man's existence.

There can be no doubt that The Red Badge is a story of a spiritual quest for self-identity, but it is not necessary to read "Christian" when we speak of spirituality. As in Maggie, Crane frequently and deliberately puts us off the track in The Red Badge with biblical paraphrasing and religious imagery. We would do well therefore to remember that Crane was ironic and cynical about institutionalized religion in general, and the content of The Red Badge is no exception. It is a psychological study of fear and courage of its protagonist; a kind of impressionistic interpretation of the inner spiritual life of one who is desperately confused about the meaning of his existence. As such, its metaphors, wholly contrived, as we recall, are dark and

representative of isolation:

Like the "Weltnacht" of modern existentialism, it controls [Crane's] vision of human destiny. Beginning with Maggie, his requiem for the God of Christianity, he commits himself to record the anxiety, the frustration, the despair, the irrationality, and the absurdity of existence. In this perspective, both life and death are emptied of meaning . . . and, as a consequence, man is denied the catharsis of tragedy.⁶

In The Red Badge, Crane continues the development of the absurdity motif as we saw in Maggie through the protagonist's self-deception. He redefines good and evil, as Stein correctly notes, since idealistic virtues such as bravery, fortitude and integrity possess little or no meaning in a universe that denies the importance of man.⁷ It is therefore difficult to see how redemption can be claimed for Henry by the "moralist" critics.

As in Maggie, The Red Badge utilizes a simple plot which allowed Crane constant opportunities to develop and emphasize his naturalistic and existential stance. Henry Fleming--or the "youth" as he is called until Chapter 13--the protagonist, is a sensitive young man and the son of simple farmers, indicating his irreducible ties to the earth and commonsense abilities. He has been observing Union

soldiers heading off for war, and decides to enlist in a company which has been forming in a nearby village. His intentions are romantically motivated, having

. . . dreamed of battles all his life--of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him. . . . He had imagined peoples secure in the shadow of his eagle-eyed prowess.⁸

Truly, Henry has not the slightest idea of the real constitutives of battle. Rather, his thoughts are governed by what the "public" perceives to be certain standards expected of a young man.

Through a series of events, Henry loses the last vestige of self-identity that he had possessed from such "public" conventions, and deserts his comrades while under enemy fire. During his flight, Henry comes to terms with this loss, rediscovers his spiritual self, and returns to play a significant role in his company's ultimate victory over the enemy.

It is here that the moralist approach is invoked, since, as we noted in the introduction, the themes of initiation, growth and redemption through mythic constructs of a religious nature seem to be apparent. But this spiritual rediscovery is not, as we saw in Maggie, necessarily one of a religious nature, but rather of an existential recognition of isolation in an indifferent world which allows the protagonist to carry on into the fray

fully aware of what ends he might meet with. There is no moral to the story as such, no exhortation to follow Christ to the cross, secure in the knowledge of an eternal afterlife. It is a glimpse into the fears all individuals have when confronted with their mean existence. What they do in this recognition, what their actions consist of, is the real test of authenticity. Like Maggie, the individual can go out of the world with courage, through death and into a silence that speaks loudly, or like Henry, remain in the world, utilizing courage to confront the absurdity of life, possibly meeting with death in the process, or possibly continuing to live. Dying or living are merely postures; how one lives or dies is the real issue; both living and dying require the courage to be one's true self, situated in the world of action. Whatever the result, the isolation remains. Only how the individual acts in the face of it can be altered.

The opening scene of The Red Badge shows an army resting on the hills in early morning, the fogs slowly burning off and revealing the seemingly changing landscape. As nature begins to stir, so do the soldiers, their own biology tied to the clock of nature itself. They, like Henry, are also tied to the earth.

With the stirring of nature and man, Henry's consciousness also stirs. While he listens to the tall

soldier--Jim Conklin--give his less than expert opinion of the battles and the strategies of these battles yet to come, he begins to question his romantically motivated enlistment. His mother had accepted his decision to enlist unwillingly, but nevertheless gives him advice, as mothers are supposed to do at such times, which foreshadows the confusion Henry will face in the coming months:

I don't know what else to tell yeh, Henry,
excepting that yeh must never do no shirking,
child, on my account. If so be a time comes when
yeh have to be kilt or do a mean thing . . . don't
think of anything 'cept whats right. . . . (9)

This passage, innocent as it might first appear, opens up a number of problems by begging the question "What is right?," since to be killed or to do a mean thing to another seem to exclude any sane notion of what constitutes "right." Henry's mother still calls him a child, yet expects him to act like an adult and not shirk his duty. Henry, a short while before firm in his intentions and believing he knew what actions were right and what actions were wrong, is no longer sure of anything. Indeed, upon leaving his mother, he felt "suddenly ashamed of his purposes" (9). He is confused, as he rightly should be, since there is nothing in life that can prepare an individual for such circumstances.

Sartre, in "Humanism," gives us an example that matches Henry's dilemma almost exactly. In his discussion on the

subject of "forlornness"--which is a result of the existential recognition that if there is no God, there is no a priori Good, and therefore no moral values--we are told about a young man who also wanted to leave his mother in order to fight the Nazis so that he could avenge his brother's death.⁹ How does he know what to do? Who could help him choose? Not Christian doctrine, since it gives no indication which choice would lead to the greater good. Values, Sartre tells us, are vague at best, and all one can do is to follow one's instincts in order to avoid the contradictions inherent in this kind of situation. Moreover, the only way to confirm the value of the decision is to perform an act which confirms and defines it. Yet since one requires the logic to justify the act, a vicious circle of reasoning results, leaving the individual confused and unsure of his initial decision.¹⁰

If Christian doctrine--or any other kind of religious doctrine for that matter--does not help the individual choose, then what is left? Only the existential view, since regardless of what the choice is, the individual alone decides the meaning it will have. Neither religious doctrine nor another individual or group may make the decision for us. Henry makes the choice to leave and then decides what the choice means to him, but because he has not yet authenticated his life, because he has not at this time found his true spiritual self-identity, he suffers from

self-deception and hence uncertainty. The entire novel conforms to this existential premise of action and authenticity in one's life. Again, as seen from Crane's ironic viewpoint the notion of moral regeneration is difficult to accept.

Thus we find Henry confused and experiencing ambivalent feelings about his life. To his dismay the military life is not at all what he envisioned it to be. Instead of "Greeklike struggles" there are seemingly endless journeys from camp to camp and monotonous daily routines, reflecting life as it is out of the army as well: "He was drilled and drilled and reviewed, and drilled and drilled and reviewed" (10). His major difficulty was in trying to keep warm. He finds himself to be only a part of a larger whole, his self-identity absorbed into a "vast blue demonstration" (10). In his boredom he attempts to prove empirically to himself, through mathematics, that he would not run from battle, and with these thoughts he begins to question his own abilities of manhood with its concomitant public insistence of "courage." His spiritual quest had begun:

It had suddenly occurred to him that perhaps in a battle he might run. He was forced to admit that as far as war was concerned he knew nothing of himself. (11)

For days Henry tried to establish an answer to his question to no avail, but ironically his lack of a precise answer to

himself resulted in a lucid perception that would have momentous implications for him later in the story:

He finally concluded that the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze. . . . He reluctantly admitted that he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer. To gain it, he must have blaze, blood, and danger. (14)

This is consistent with classic existentialism, since thought alone is not adequate to establish the authenticity of one's life. Action of some kind is required. Henry has only considered the possibility of running from a small battle on a relatively small battlefield, cosmically speaking. Battle is here used by Crane as a metaphor for a larger battle, that of the absurdity of existence in an indifferent or possibly hostile universe. Until Henry recognizes the larger implications, he will continue to be a part of the vast "blue demonstration," lacking in his own identity and suffering spiritually as a result.

Not only has Henry begun to question his own abilities and motivation, but he has also begun to question those of his comrades. No longer certain of anything, even the landscape begins to appear to him as mystical, filled with "dark shadows" that moved like "monsters"; the men moved in columns like "serpents" under a "fairy blue" sky until night, when the newly lit campfires gave the whole affair a

"weird and satanic" effect (16-17).

Thus Crane deliberately draws our attention to Henry's inner uncertainty, for his self is in conflict with, as mentioned earlier, certain standards of behaviour which are entrenched, absurd as they are, in the mind of the public. They seem indeed to be mystical, with only some vague supernatural origin as their basis. Henry's existential dilemma now begins to manifest itself.

Another night, another gray dawn and another move of the regiment is accompanied by the lifting of the fog and the spattering sound of gun fire. As in Maggie, the theme of war in The Red Badge is emphasized through the motifs of disorder, chaos and disarray, symbolizing Henry's state of mind in his awareness of the inevitable and impending battle. Finding that he has no opportunity to run from the regiment, he begins to blame everything and everyone for the predicament he has found himself in, thereby increasing his despair through his self-deception:

He had not enlisted by his free will. He had been dragged by the merciless government. And now they were taking him out to be slaughtered. (21)

Blaming everyone but himself is the natural reaction for Henry in this instance, and it indicates the first part of the process of the quest for self-identity. It is this process, rather than the product of the quest itself, that is the ultimate purpose of the novel. Stein elucidates:

The setting of war is the perfect theatre in which to conduct this examination. . . . the sudden immersion into inexplicable chaos brings into consciousness all the doubts about the meaning of life that one has under the intimidation of convention, over the years prudently repressed. When the codes of values . . . no longer offer ways to order . . . to bear the horrors of experience, the . . . individual engages in a distressing mode of self-questioning. . . . Who am I? How does this I fit into this . . . world? When he discovers that he cannot answer these, he encounters the fundamental absurdity of himself and of his universe.¹¹

This is precisely the dilemma Henry experiences. Since he cannot understand why he is in such a situation, he lacks the ability to strike forward and accept his personal isolation. The self-identity that the world supplied to him through its vague and abstract codes of morality is lost, and he looks desperately for an answer, any answer.

Moving through a stand of trees and brier, the column of soldiers come across a dead soldier:

The ranks opened covertly to avoid the dead corpse. The invulnerable dead man forced a way for himself. . . . [Henry] vaguely desired to walk around and around the body and stare; the impulse

of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question. (22)

The Question is actually a number of different questions, as we saw above with Stein, and asked so poetically by the correspondent in "The Open Boat": "If I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?"¹² Existence simply defies explanation. It is absurd, it is nothingness, and the individual that recognizes this absurdity sees that he is the subject of forces beyond his control. Again, to survive in this awareness, to be able to hold on to and even develop one's self-identity in the face of this awareness is the path to authenticity. Henry's previous "eagle-eyed prowess" as a soldier has been shattered. We are told that his war ardor "faded to nothing" and that "Absurd ideas took hold of him" such as the notion that nature was obviously hostile and threatening (22-23). Like the correspondent, he realizes that he is condemned to swim in this void of absurdity and purposelessness. Yet even though he eventually finds that nature is merely indifferent, the absurdity of it all will not be altered. To compensate Henry continues to indulge in his self-deception. The generals are idiots and only he, of all the other men in the entire corps, can see with any clarity the dangers that they faced. He feels that he should step forward and make his thoughts known, but the words do

not come.

At length the men begin to dig in, "erecting tiny hills in front of them, using stones, sticks, earth, anything they thought might turn a bullet" (24). These pitiful little hills symbolize the individual's futile efforts in erecting psychological defences which are completely inadequate to defend against the despair of their existential dilemma. As soon as they have them built, they are ordered to move to another position, in the story because of the shifting battle line, psychologically because existence is contingency. Presently Henry becomes impatient for the battle to begin, not so that he can prove himself, but so that he can be killed, thus ending his problems with the whole affair:

Regarding death thus out of the corner of his eye he conceived it to be nothing but rest, and he was filled with a momentary astonishment that he should have made a . . . commotion over the mere matter of getting killed. He would die; he would go to some place where he would be understood. (25)

Henry thus continues his self-deception, since he forgets his "neat little plan of getting killed" as the battle begins to build, gazing in astonishment at the ever approaching destruction. His confusion is dramatically increased when the loud soldier, Wilson, prophecies his own

death, telling Henry to take a little packet of personal things to his parents. Henry can only gaze incredulously at Wilson and utter: "Why, what the devil--" (26).

Disorder and chaos increase as the battle closes in on Henry's company, and the men react with absurd little nervous efforts of handkerchief adjustments and belt tightening, as if their main concern was how presentable they were. Now pounded by enemy artillery, Henry feels an unstoppable impotency well up inside himself. Men drop all around him in death struggles, the description of their positions at once naturalistic and fantastic:

Under foot there were . . . ghastly forms, motionless. They lay twisted in fantastic contortions. Arms were bent and heads were turned in incredible ways. . . . They looked to be dumped out upon the ground from the sky. (33)

The weapons are personified; the big guns are squatting in a row "like savage chiefs." Chaos is everywhere. Yet through all this man-made disorder "Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process" (34). Nature is indeed indifferent to the insanity of man and his puny little wars. The insignificance of his best efforts at destruction is thereby emphasized.

The battle ends, for the time being, and Henry finds that he has survived. His self-deception increases as he "felt himself a fine fellow" for such an impressive display

of manhood. His belief in his previous ideals of war returns, but these "old thrills" do not last long, for the battle starts again as quickly as it had ended, and he still has not come to terms with his existential contingency.¹³ His beliefs are mere foolishness of course, because he did little or no fighting, keeping out of the action for all intents and purposes until the battle was over.

When the battle commences, Henry is flabbergasted. He cannot understand why reinforcements have not been sent to help him out of his predicament. Henry still expects others to come to his aid in his fight against the contingent nature of existence, here personified as "the hull damn rebel army" (36). Aid is not forthcoming, however, and some of the men flee in their despair. Henry follows suit, unsure which way he should run, knowing only that he must. Curiously, his fears do not lessen as he moves further away from the battle, but increase dramatically:

Death about to thrust him between the shoulder blades was far more dreadful than death about to smite him between the eyes. When he thought of it later, he conceived . . . that it was better to view the appalling than to merely be within hearing. (37)

For the time being, however, Henry's only concern is to run for his life, but for some reason he is never able to get completely away from the action. He hears officers barking

out orders and finally discovers that his company had held out and repulsed the enemy attack. Henry "cringed as if discovered in a crime" (39). This feeling of guilt is one of the first signs that Henry has begun to break through his self-deception, and it sets the stage for his existential confrontation with death in Chapter 7. At this point he merely attempts to rationalize his desertion by claiming his act to be that of a master strategist. It is a short lived thought, and he moves from the fields into a forest resolved, we are told, "as if . . . to bury himself" (40).

In The Red Badge the forest--a metaphor of the psyche--takes on a structure of two dimensions, one of the dark, or evil part of the psyche and one of the light, or good. Since evil or good can only exist individually through the existence of the other, the recognition of the existence of both are necessary for an individual to authenticate his existence. This notion serves to further demonstrate Crane's existential aesthetics, since existence is what we choose it will be: good or evil or both.

According to Cirlot, the forest symbol possesses several complex yet connected meanings, but most importantly it is recognized as a symbol of the earth because of its thriving vegetable life, and as such it is in opposition to the sun.¹⁴ It harbours all kinds of enemies, dangers and diseases, and young Henry will be confronted with enemies as his forest journey continues. Obviously connected with this

metaphor is the inner journey in quest of the true self, which also contains all kinds of dangers for the unwary traveler.

The threatening aspect of the forest is apparent when Henry initially enters the forest, for it is "cluttered with vines and bushes", and he must force his way through in order to make progress. It is personified to draw attention to Henry's guilty state of mind as it "attempts to make his presence known to the world. . . . always calling out protestations" of his guilt (40). Recognizing this guilt, Henry moves further and further into his psyche, since we are told that he pressed on "seeking dark and intricate places" (40). This glimpse into the forest of the psyche foreshadows Henry's ongoing confrontation with death, and is one of three which will ultimately lead him to authentication. His first encounter with the dead man in the middle of the road who "forced a way for himself" did not affect him greatly since he moved as a member of the company, his self-identity absorbed, as we recall, into the "vast blue demonstration." Moreover, the body was in the middle of the road--which is to say it was a matter of public knowledge--and not in the forest, which is the domain of the individual psyche in Henry's case. In the forest Henry will have no choice but to see death from a very personal and shocking viewpoint.

As he moves further and further away from the sound of

musketry, the forest appears to become more hospitable, a church-like sanctuary filled with a "religious half-light" (41). Ironically, it is in this sanctuary that he comes across a profoundly disturbing scene:

He was being looked at by a dead man. . . . The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the grey skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip. (41)

An excellent example of Crane's naturalistic description, this passage again shows the irony, absurdity and contingency of man's existence. Here Henry comes face to face with the very thing that he has been trying to escape, namely death. Thus in the forest as psyche, Crane shows that there is no "safe" place for one to exist outside the contingent nature of life. Isolation is everywhere, in the inner realm as well as the outer. Thus the dead soldier symbolizes Henry's confrontation with his own immanent death which has important implications in his quest for an authentic life through existential courage. It also marks the beginning of his upward journey away from self-deception, which is necessary if his self-identity, his spiritual self, is to survive. As Rollo May writes:

Creativity is born in the courageous confronting

of death, not the denying of it. As an ancient Chinese poet put it: "We poets struggle with Non-being to force it to yield Being."¹⁵

Here "creativity" means not only creativity in art, but also creativity in daily life. Love of biological life alone demonstrates a lack of self-awareness on the part of the individual because he is afraid of non-being, which is highly ironic as this fear of non-being is a death in itself. It is also death in the form of conformity because western culture has repressed death for centuries, refusing to acknowledge it for what it really is, namely a contingency of life. Here Crane uses it metaphorically to show the surrendering of one's consciousness to the group in order to fit in, in this case public codes of manhood as manifested in the art of soldiering. In the recognition of death for what it really is, life can therefore take on an immediacy and authenticity which results in a firm self-identity due to the eradication of the Laingian "primary ontological uncertainty" as we saw here in Chapter 1.

Henry, in the beginning of his journey out of his existential despair, starts to see the absurdity of his existence, which will eventually lead him to the authenticity that he so desperately needs:

Reflecting, he saw a sort of humour in the point of view of himself and his fellows in the late encounter. They had taken themselves and the enemy

very seriously and had imagined that they were deciding the war. . . . their reputations forever in the hearts of their countrymen, while, as to fact, the affair would appear in printed reports under a weak and immaterial title. (43)

In this recognition, Henry finds himself finally "at the edge of the forest."

The second confrontation with death occurs when he sees a long line of his injured comrades returning from the battle. Joining Henry on the road is the "tattered soldier," who tells him of the battle while constantly inquiring as to the nature of the youth's own wound. Henry can only stutter and stammer, for the tattered man is a symbol of his guilt-ridden conscience. As such Henry attempts to get away from "him" but is unsuccessful, and together they witness the final death throes of the tall soldier, Jim Conklin, whose grotesque body movements would be almost humorous if the circumstance was not so desperate. The chapter ends with one of the most famous images in American literature: "The red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer" (50).

The wafer image here has been hotly contested by literary critics over the years as to its meaning, since it is the primary symbol that is evoked by Christian moralist interpreters. Stallman, for example, insists that it represents the Eucharist as found in most liturgical churches, surmising that Crane sees Conklin's death as

sacrificial, making the way clear for Henry's redemption. This leads him to believe that Conklin is therefore a Christ-figure, substantiating his claim by drawing our attention to his initials, "J.C.," and the wound in his side. Edwin H. Cady counters Stallman's argument successfully, I believe, by demonstrating that Crane had no redemption in mind for Henry, which is in agreement with Stein as we saw earlier.¹⁶ Crane's emphasis is on authenticity rather than redemption, since in a deterministic universe, redemption, like any other value, is ultimately devoid of meaning. Moreover, it is not Conklin's death that disturbs Henry's conscience, but rather the impending death of the tattered soldier, who by his continuous questioning of the location and extent of Henry's non-existent physical wound emphasizes his feelings of guilt for his desertion, which is, in other words, a spiritual wound:

The simple questions of the tattered man had been knife thrusts to him. They asserted a society that probes pitilessly at secrets until all is apparent. His late companion's chance persistency made him feel that he could not keep his crime concealed in his bosom. (53)

At another time Henry will realize the importance of the tattered soldier, but for now he makes every effort to get away from him. And so he does by jumping over a fence into a

field, constantly looking back only to see the tattered soldier wandering aimlessly, about to die. Thus the third confrontation passes by.

Henry realizes that the battle is drawing closer to him by this time: "He forgot that he was engaged in combating the universe. He threw aside his mental pamphlets on the philosophy of the retreated and rules for the guidance of the damned" (58). The infantry was retreating in chaos, and in the fray he receives a crushing blow from a comrade's rifle butt to the head, sending him to ground unconscious. Upon his awakening, a "cheery-voiced" man takes him firmly by the arm and through what appeared to be magic escorts him back to the company he had deserted earlier. Ironically, it occurred to Henry that despite the man's help, he had not seen his face.

Henry is enthusiastically welcomed back by his comrades, but lies to them saying he was separated and had been shot in the head, not able to admit that he had deserted. He finds that many had run in fact, and were beginning to return giving the same reasons as himself for their separation. Henry finds that he was alone and yet not alone, for others had experienced the same existential fears as he did.

The novel progresses quickly now towards its conclusion, and it is in Chapter 15 that Henry, upon coming across the Loud soldier Wilson--who as we recall earlier

insisted providentially that his death was immanent--finds his self-pride restored:

. . . he declared to himself that it was only the doomed and the damned who roared with sincerity at circumstance. Few but they ever did it. A man with a full stomach and the respect of his fellows had no business to scold about anything that he might think to be wrong with the ways of the universe. . . . He did not give a great deal of thought to the battles that lay directly before him. . . . He could leave much to chance. . . . He had been out among the dragons . . . and he assured himself that they were not so hideous as he had imagined. . . . they did not sting with precision. A stout heart often defied, and defying, escaped. (72-73)

This is the moment of Henry's conscious recognition of the contingent nature of existence. He sees that all he can do is act, and having acted, the cards will fall where they may. This process is continuous and eternal, the end product not important. He now fights like a devil possessed, the lieutenant calling out: "By heavens, if I had ten thousand wild cats like you I could tear th' stomach outa this war in less'n a week." Indeed, Henry "had slept, and, awakening, found himself a knight" (81).

The battle continues, Henry's "vision being unmolested" by the fight. He felt a "serene confidence" in his

existence, and that he was capable of a "tremendous death": "There were subtle flashes of joy within him that thus should be his mind" (103).

In the final engagement, Henry seizes the regimental colors--a red and white "woman," a "saver of lives"--and leads a cadre to the enemy lines, the rest of the company following. Reaching the enemy flag he tears it down to the cheers of the other men, and the battle sounds grow weaker as the enemy retreats. Finally Henry reflects on the events:

Gradually his brain emerged from the clogged clouds, and at last he was able to more closely comprehend himself and circumstance.

He understood then that the existence of shot and counter-shot was in the past. . . .

He saw that he was good. (107)

The last line in this passage, a paraphrase of Genesis I:25, stresses the god-like nature of the individual in this deterministic universe, for it is the individual, not a god, who decides what his world will consist of.

Here also Henry reflects one last time on the tattered soldier, and it occurs to him that this man, torn to bits by bullets, was concerned not for his own life, but for the "imagined wound in another"; he that gave his last bit of strength for the dying "tall soldier," Jim Conklin, had been deserted by Henry in the field.¹⁷ This was how the tattered soldier authenticated his own life, by the unselfish

dedication of himself to the succour of others. Henry recognizes this, prompting a truthful acknowledgement of his errors in the past. With this acknowledgement came a store of assurance, since now that he could look at himself without self-deception he knew that he could consider himself a man:

He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death.

The youth smiled, for he saw that the world was a world for him, though many discovered it to be made of oaths and walking sticks. . . . He now turned with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks--an existence of soft and eternal peace. (109)

Thus Henry Fleming, through an existential awareness of his contingency, comes to authenticate his own life. There is no magic, no blinding light of illumination, no redemption in religious terms. There is only a recognition that man exists. What he does from there is what makes his life authentic or meaningless.

I have reiterated several times that the act of choosing is the larger issue from the existential point of view, to which it might be replied that Henry makes a choice initially by choosing self-deception, and so therefore an authentic life can be based upon self-deception. Obviously this kind of reasoning is fallacious, since we recall that

by making a choice that choice must be made in good faith. A choice of self-deception by its very nature cannot be part of the number of choices since it does not meet this criteria. Moreover, Henry's life does not become authentic until he chooses to forego his self-deception. Only then is his choice legitimate.

Henry Fleming, therefore, possessed courage, since in his existential recognition of the absurdity and contingency of his life, in the recognition of his isolation in an indifferent and valueless world, he is able to "turn with a lover's thirst" to other, equally contingent aspects of existence, such as nature, and still be joyful at his mere existence. If Henry committed suicide, as Maggie did, he would have done so for all the wrong reasons. He could not have done so in good faith, since he was full of guilt for his desertion of his comrades. His death would have been insignificant and meaningless. Do we mean that Maggie, then, in choosing death for herself chooses death for all mankind? Perhaps yes, since she seems to have done so in good faith. However, we must remember that Maggie's act was metaphorical and highly poetic, and her act can therefore be justified more on a personal level than on the collective level. Moreover, while there is no firm textual evidence to suggest that she does make her choice for mankind, neither is there evidence to suggest that her act was utterly self-serving. We can therefore discuss Maggie's philosophical

decision from a poetic/aesthetic standpoint only. From this point of view it is obviously more efficacious to see her suicide as courageous, yet no more nor less courageous an act than Henry's fighting like a war devil. As we see in The Red Badge, Henry's action could just as easily have resulted in his death. To rush the enemy is to a certain degree a form of attempted suicide, at least in the state of mind Henry found himself at the time: "It was clear to him that his final and absolute revenge was to be achieved by his dead body lying, torn and glittering, upon the field" (101). Here "revenge" is used impressionistically to imply retaliation against the absurdity of existence rather than against an individual or group. It is his equivalent act of "taking a stand" and as such is also a suitable method of authentication. Yet Henry does not die, and he takes another approach in order to find meaning for his existence.

What this means for the individual today is, as Fallico notes, an imperative awareness that no public codes of values or morals can change the absurdity of our existence. The fact is that we are and always will be "condemned to be free."¹⁸ Moreover, as these public codes have their basis in social institutions, at times a debilitating conformity is required of the individual which conflicts with the responsibility implied by freedom. One of Henry's major difficulties was his initial inability to reconcile his existential responsibilities with the creative "death" he

experienced as part of the "vast blue demonstration." His self-identity is established only when he becomes able to cope with the almost unbearable weight of his "freedom," which is to say he was able to find a meaning for his existence. In Henry's case, this meaning arises by his confrontation with the thing that he most feared: death. In his realization that he could have been killed just as quickly and easily as the next man, he comes face to face with the contingency of his existence. Having accepted the indifferent and deterministic aspects of the universe, he is able to carry on, at peace with himself and his place in nature. He has succeeded in putting a stop to his self-deception and finds the path to his true self.

Maggie, on the other hand, was not terribly concerned with physical death, but, in an impressionistic sense, with "spiritual" death. Her fear of isolation was highly poetic, and her rejection by almost every social institution and class meant "death" to her in no uncertain terms. Like Henry, Maggie also confronts her contingency and takes action in order to give meaning to her existence. As we have seen, her primary difficulty lay in her inability to reconcile the hypocrisy of the Bowery's public codes of values with existence in the Bowery itself. This is why we are told that she was only "in" the Bowery, not "of" it. Her language, as a result, was metaphorically that of silence, and since language shapes one's definition of one's self,

only through her silence could the Bowery be rejected. This is how she established her true self-identity. Her death was highly metaphoric and therefore highly appropriate. She gives meaning to her life through her death, which is a very courageous act indeed.

Thus in the end, both Maggie and Henry, one through death and one through life, authenticate their existence, thereby giving their respective lives more meaning and value than most could ever hope to attain. Yet as Henry finds in The Red Badge, the contingent nature of existence means that man cannot always expect a journey to his liking. As with the ending of Maggie, the ending of The Red Badge leaves the reader to come to his decision about the meaning of existence, since the final scene is one of weary soldiers trudging through rain and mud. Only a single ray of light comes through the leaden clouds, telling us what we already know: this will not be Henry's last "battle." What Crane wants us to see therefore, is that existence itself presents man with a neither/nor circumstance. Existence is relative only psychologically. Existentially it merely "is." We should therefore not be surprised if our feelings are ambivalent even if we have completed some great task. The four castaways in "The Open Boat" will have to come to terms with their own contingency without the scope for action that was allowed Maggie and Henry. As such it is a severely disturbing story, showing how we are all "in the same boat"

by the nature of our contingency. How the four castaways deal with their individual existential dilemmas will be dealt with in the following chapter.

NOTES

Chapter 2.

- 1 Stallman, A Biography, 168.
- 2 Stallman, A Biography, 185.
- 3 Stallman, A Biography, 169.
- 4 Bruce Catton, The American Heritage History of the Civil War (New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1981) 130-32.
- 5 Stallman, A Biography, 176.
- 6 William Bysshe Stein, "Stephen Crane's Homo Absurdus" in The Bucknell Review 8:3 (May, 1959) 168.
- 7 Stein, 170.
- 8 Stephen Crane, The Red Badge of Courage (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976) 7. Further references to this edition will be given in parentheses by page number only in the text of the thesis.
- 9 Sartre, "Humanism," 43-44.
- 10 Stein, 175-6.
- 11 Stein, 175.
- 12 Stephen Crane, "The Open Boat" in Stephen Crane: An Omnibus (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957) 439.
- 13 At this point, Henry is exactly half way through his initiation into the absurdity of existence. Crane devotes precisely one-half of the novel, twelve chapters of the

twenty-four, to this initiation.

¹⁴ Cirlot, 112.

¹⁵ Rollo May, Existential Psychotherapy (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967) 54.

¹⁶ Cady notes that it was improbable that the anti-clerical Crane, being raised in an anti-liturgical church, would use the "wafer" as a Eucharistic image, although it cannot definitely be ruled out. Moreover, if it was indeed meant to be a sacramental symbol, why would it be red, and why would it be "pasted" in the sky? More likely, Crane was probably thinking of the red gummed wafers sold by stationers and druggists which were commonly used at the time as substitutes for messy sealing wax. As for the stigmata, Conklin's side was not cleanly pierced as was Christ's, but looked as if it had been "chewed by wolves". In short, there is no solid evidence in the text for Conklin to be considered as a Christ-figure.

¹⁷ Frankl, Psychotherapy and Existentialism, 106-107.

¹⁸ Fallico, The Quest For Authentic Existence, 57.

Chapter III

"The Open Boat"

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

Stephen Crane, #96, "War Is Kind"

By the fall of 1896 The Red Badge of Courage was in its ninth edition, and Crane's book of poetry The Black Riders had gone into its sixth. Crane was enjoying success as an author but still had to fill the financial gaps in his life since he was not one to be considered as thrifty by any stretch of the imagination. Utilizing his skills as a reporter, he wrote articles for several east coast newspapers, but primarily for the New York Press.¹ It was on one of his expeditions as a journalist where he acquired a substantial amount of material for his major sea tale "The Open Boat."

During 1896 Cuba was rapidly becoming the centre of attention in the western world due to its ongoing political struggle against Spain, which in 1895 had suspended the constitutional guarantees it had made after the Ten Years War had ended in 1878. At the same time, the United States

had repealed its tariff act in favour of Cuban sugar imports because of its own economic problems. Without the huge American market for its cane sugar and the downturning economy because of the civil war, Cuba was rapidly falling into disarray.

The United States offered to mediate the dispute between Spain and Cuba with one non-negotiable proviso, namely that Cuba had to be given full independence. Spain declined the offer, believing that the U.S. would only mediate to its own advantage. In February of 1898 the situation was exacerbated when the U.S.S. Maine exploded in Havana harbour, taking almost all of her hands to the bottom. Even though the U.S. could not establish culpability, the public demanded war. Spain, moreover, would not cede any meaningful form of autonomy as it had previously promised. She declared war on the U.S. April 24th of 1898, insisting that Spain itself was the object of U.S. hostilities, to which the U.S. issued an ultimatum of Cuban independence, followed by a declaration of war shortly after. The Spanish American war was, for all intents and purposes, over before it began, since Spain could not hope to match the U.S. Navy in strength or moral purpose.²

In the two years prior to Spain's declaration of war, rebels allied to the Cuban insurrectionists were busy raising money and buying arms in the U.S., sending filibustering expeditions to Cuba by ship from Florida. It

was Crane's experience as a reporter on one of these expeditions which resulted in "The Open Boat" as well as one of his most famous poems "A man adrift on a slim spar."³ Sailing on the filibustering ship Commodore, which was really a large sea-going tug, Crane intended to report the war for the New York Journal. His plans went quickly awry, however, for on January 2nd, 1897 the Commodore took water after ramming into a sand bar and eventually sank some twenty miles off the east coast of Florida.

By all reports Crane did an excellent job of assisting in the orderly evacuation of the vessel under the most desperate conditions. The ship's Steward, C.M. Montgomery, had nothing but praise for him:

That newspaper feller was a nervy man. He didn't seem to know what fear was. He was down on the ship's papers as an able seaman at \$20 a month. . . he insisted upon doing a seaman's work, and he did it well.⁴

Striding from deck to engine room, from bridge to the "yards," Crane bailed water, manned the sea-pumps, kept a Cuban rebel from igniting the ship's thousand pound load of dynamite, and kept the crew and passengers as calm as could be reasonably expected. When the time to abandon ship finally came, he oversaw the launching of the life boats, and unselfishly boarded the last available craft--a ten foot dinghy--with the Captain, Edward Murphy, the Steward C.M.

Montgomery, and an engine oiler by the name of William Higgins. For over thirty hours--of which eighteen hours were spent tacking northward within a mile of shore to avoid almost certain death in the surf--the four men battled through high seas and gale force winds towards the lighthouse some five nautical miles north of Smyrna Beach. In their final attempt to breach the surf running up Daytona Beach, Murphy, Montgomery and Crane made their way through, the dinghy having overturned at sea. The engine oiler Higgins died.

Thus "The Open Boat" was written by Crane as a brief yet sincere effort to capture through fiction the physical and psychological turmoil of men in despair, and, unlike The Red Badge, Crane writes with first-hand knowledge of the absurdity and contingency of his existence. His newspaper accounts included all aspects of the Commodore's sinking, but nothing of the events that transpired in the dinghy. Only his art could relay the fear, anxiety, and despair of such an experience, and this is exactly what we find in the short story.

Written largely at waterfront cafes and the Hotel de Dream in Jacksonville, his mistress Cora Taylor's brothel, Crane strived for the naturalistic detail and the psychological realism which was his mark in preceding stories, and as such the story is the epitome of Crane's existential aesthetics. In it Crane uses a "double vision"

technique which is manifested by the juxtaposition of similar points of view, one from a first person narrator, Crane, and the other from the protagonist correspondent. This technique lends a dream-like quality to the work in which the reader seems to move in and out of the concrete world, reminiscent of works such as Sartre's Nausea. The story is singularly devoid of dialogue which does not concern itself with the business of keeping the dinghy afloat, just as there is nothing superfluous in the way of flowery prose which might obstruct its ultimate purpose: an expression of the absurd, arbitrary and contingent nature of human life in an indifferent universe. At the same time it is completely amoral in content.⁵ The story is, in short, very spartan, very workman-like, yet highly poetic.

"None of them knew the color of the sky."⁶ This is the famous opening line of "The Open Boat," and it serves well to set the tone for the balance of the story, since Crane's aesthetics is directed toward the men's perception of the absurd circumstance that they find themselves inextricably caught in. The men are too involved with keeping their small craft from foundering in the "barbariously abrupt" waves, each one being "a problem in small boat navigation," to be able to notice anything other than the immediate task of brute survival (421). We are not told how long they have been there, and the scene reminds us of Henry's thoughts

upon seeing men lying on the battlefield. It is as if they had been dropped from the sky into the middle of nowhere.

We begin then with the turbulent sea as a metaphor for human existence, one in which man is condemned to ride along with a universe seemingly intent upon his destruction at any moment. It is representative of the individual's path through life, since "after successfully mounting one wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious" to disrupt life again (422). The contingent nature of man's existence is at once apparent here, demonstrated by a tenuous barrier between being and non-being:

The oiler, steering with one of the two oars in the boat, sometimes raised himself to keep clear of water. . . . It was a thin little oar, and it seemed often ready to snap.

The correspondent . . . watched the waves and wondered why he was there. (421)

The thin little oar is the one item which keeps the boat on a course for land, with its implied physical and psychological safety. With the oar they have a slim chance of survival. Without it the men would drift and probably capsize on their ocean prison, condemned to death by drowning. Here we become aware of how thin a thread man's connection is with life, and, as we shall see, how futile are man's attempts to shape his life in the overall cosmic

scheme.

The first third of the story is devoted to the boat's environment, where we find the men defending themselves psychologically against the onslaught of almost certain death. Here the "subtle brotherhood of men" is formed, as we saw in The Red Badge, yet only the captain as a kind of father-figure is aware and in tune with the horrible indifference of the sea and, by extension, all of nature:

"Bully good thing it's an on-shore wind," said the cook. "If not, where would we be? Wouldn't have a show."

"That's right," said the correspondent.

The busy oiler nodded his assent.

Then the captain...chuckled in a way that expressed humour, contempt, tragedy, all in one.

"Do you think we've got much of a show now, boys?" said he. (424)

The captain at this time is the only one who appreciates the absurdity of their situation. He is the only one with wisdom to understand the voice of the sea. His dialogue is kept to a minimum, uttering commands and words of encouragement only when necessary. He is almost as indifferent as nature itself, his commands and conversation generally taking the form of "Bail her, cook" (426) or "Did you ever like to row, Billy?" (432). The captain understands and accepts his situation.

In very short order, the men see land on the horizon, "a long black shadow on the sea which was "certainly thinner than paper" (427). Here time is telescoped inward in order to bring us quickly to the crux of the story, which is emphasized by the irony of being in more danger when close to land than out at sea. This crux is, as we shall see, the existential recognition of the absurd. At the same time, the psychological realism is brought into play to emphasize the despair that the men are suffering. Birds hover effortlessly over the craft; one even comically attempts to land on the captain's head. At night sharks circle the craft, symbols of the dark side of nature, eventually becoming bored with waiting and leaving before dawn. This is indeed absurd, comedy and tragedy side by side. It is life.

"Shipwrecks are apropos of nothing," the narrator tells us, giving an initial glimpse into the recognition of the absurdity of the whole situation (428). Believing their rescue is immanent, the men are pleased with their apparent defeat of nature. They each smoke a cigar and take a drink of fresh water, expecting the island inhabitants to spot them at any time. Nobody sees them, however, and with the roar of the surf coming to their ears they realize that they are still in grave danger.

This danger is of a different kind, however. Their dinghy is only a mile or so from shore, but because of the surf and its undertow they are in more danger than when they

were twenty miles out to sea. Ironically, the land which they all crave to stand upon could now easily become the major factor in their demise. Existence is therefore relative. Depending upon where one is psychologically situated, it can be good, bad or indifferent. From the point of view of the men in the open boat it is bad, since they have no other choice but to confront their mere existence and contingency. They must confront death.

The unwillingness of the men in the dinghy to confront non-being until this point in the story dramatizes man's efforts to avoid his contingency at all costs until he simply has no other option. Only then will he force himself to make a choice. As we saw earlier, both Maggie and Henry had to experience the same awareness of contingency before their own decisions could be made on a course of action. As in Maggie and The Red Badge, this is how the men in the open boat will eventually demonstrate their own "courage."

But nobody on the land has yet seen them: "There was the shore of the populous land, and it was bitter and bitter to them that from it came no sign" (430). We are told that there was a great deal of rage in the men for this "injustice," which the narrator informs us might be articulated in the following way:

If I am going to be drowned--if I am going to be drowned--if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I

allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life? If . . . Fate cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. She is an old hen who knows not her intention. . . . The whole affair is absurd. (431)

As noted earlier this is the great existential Question which we saw in The Red Badge when Henry is confronted by the dead man in the road. In "The Open Boat" it is perhaps the most significant passage in the entire work, being repeated three times throughout the story. It is a capsule version of Crane's existential aesthetics, since, as Stein correctly points out, we see that man cannot form a rational picture of his existence under such circumstances. In Crane's eyes man is nothing more than a mouse under these conditions, because existence simply defies any understanding in terms of concrete experience. This is what Crane refers to when he speaks of man being aware of the "pathos of his situation," a phrase which bears similarity to the existential lamentation "the pathos of existence"⁷: "A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she [nature] says to him" (439). This is, in other words, the existential feeling of insignificance and therefore isolation. And why should man not feel

insignificant and isolated? Nature was not cruel or treacherous, the narrator tells us, at least not in relation to the wind-mill the men see on the shore, because there at least she has a purpose. She is simply "indifferent, flatly indifferent." Man is supposed to be more important than anything else in the universe. He deserves respect. But as Crane correctly perceived in Poem #17, the fact has not created in the universe any sense of obligation:

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. (439)

There is, in effect, no one to blame, nothing for the individual to lash out at for the absurd circumstance he finds himself in. Yet he must do something, anything, than resort to mere acquiescence of his plight, as long as he does not "indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands suppliant, saying, Yes, but I love myself" (439). As we saw in The Red Badge, Henry also came to this realization upon his confrontation with death. All the individual is sure of is that when he confronts non-being, nothingness, he must suffer a despair which is somehow unjustified and unfair. Crane also parodies the moralist retributive

interpretation in this awareness:

It is . . . plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws of his life . . . and wish for another chance. A distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him . . . in this new ignorance of the grave-edge, and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and . . . be better and brighter during an introduction or at tea. (443)

This is precisely what Crane takes issue with in Maggie and The Red Badge, namely the public code of morals which serve no purpose and mean absolutely nothing in the overall cosmic scheme. We perpetuate them simply out of arbitrary assignments of good and bad, what Crane calls "being schooled in the minor formulae" (447). Of course what Crane points to here is the uselessness of reflecting on the past in such a situation, contrary to the admonishments of the church, since nothing could have changed the process of that "old ninny-woman Fate." The individual, isolated from nature, from himself and from God sees death, for all the wrong reasons, as a "comfortable arrangement" and a way out.

Yet when the dinghy finally capsizes, all the correspondent can think about is the coldness of the water, a fact that seemed "almost a proper reason for tears" (445).

The existential lamentation is far more tragic than death. What this means is that this sense of the absurd is a product of the psyche, and the only way the individual can live is to adjust to or come to terms with his mere existence.

The men each make their own way to shore, only to find that the oiler, the strongest swimmer and "wily surfman," lies dead upon the sand. He of all the ship's company should have survived, and yet he dies. There is no reason for it, only the indifference of nature and fate. At night, after the others have been attended to, the story concludes:

"the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could be interpreters" (447). This corresponds exactly to the scene at the end of The Red Badge, where Henry sees that the indifferent world is the reality, even though it is made of "oaths and walking sticks." The great death was only that, the great death. Thus the fate of the oiler is as inexplicable as the death of the soldier in the forest; to die is simply to die. Thus the survivors are interpreters of nature, of fate, of existence, and of what Sartre calls the "triumph of the absurd," "that everything is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance."⁸ To live is to participate in the absurd, just as the comical image of the rescuer, stripping off his clothes as he runs toward the men, indicates the absurd: "He was

naked--naked as a tree in winter; but a halo was about his head, and he shone like a saint."⁹ This is typical Crane, giving a visible manifestation of a deity in utterly foolish circumstances, thereby showing his dissatisfaction with any who might consider the story to be one of moral regeneration. Yet curiously many outstanding critics seem to disregard Crane's vision of authenticity. Stein incorrectly holds Billy the oiler to be the one naked as a tree and surrounded with a halo, when in fact it was the man who pulled them all from the surf. Cady makes the same mistake and goes so far as to consider Billy as a Christ-figure in a blatantly illogical construction of character perspective.¹⁰ The net result of their analysis is that Crane failed to resolve the polarity between heroism and the absurdity of existence. Existentialism is apparently still a dirty word in some circles.

The fact of the matter is that there are no unresolved tensions, no ambiguities. The "courage" of the survivors lay not in any physical act of heroism, but in their act of being "interpreters" of their existence and carrying on from there. This is where their authenticity manifests itself, not by manufacturing a moral message in order to rationalize an alleged ambiguity. In Maggie there is little ambiguity. She knows precisely what she must do in order to authenticate her existence, and she does so in no uncertain terms. In The Red Badge Henry realizes his own contingency

and absurdity and goes on to authenticate his existence. The key here is to see that "courage" is not necessarily a physical act of one kind or another according to codes of public values. Courage lies in the ability of the individual to recognize his mere existence, his contingent nature, and then go forward in this recognition. The coldness of the water, by extension the coldness of life, is what seemed a "proper reason for tears." Yet after the tears the men carry on, insisting each in their own way to make at least a try for Being. The oiler makes the same try as the others, but he is unsuccessful. The church might rationalize this as the will of God, but Crane makes no attempt to rationalize anything. Existence is what it is: absurd. The only way that we give meaning to our lives, the only way we can authenticate our existence, is to take some form of action in the face of this absurdity. Why? Because by taking action, even under the most hopeless conditions, we refuse to let our lives be determined by chance, by something or someone other than ourselves. The men in the open boat can do little but try to survive, but they do find time to curse the sea, the wind, fate and anything else when they are faced with non-being. We merely exist just as a stone or a tree merely exists, but a stone or a tree cannot take action. Action is what separates us from a stone or a tree, and we must continue to take action and to make choices even when it seems ridiculous to do so. This is the only way to

become human, to become interpreters of the meaning of existence. It is an entirely humanistic stance which is precisely the stance of Crane's aesthetics. If there is any message to "The Open Boat" this is it: action in the face of absurdity is a manifestation of courage.

NOTES

Chapter III

1 Stallman, A Biography, 238.

2 "Cuba." Encyclopaedia Britannica. 1973 ed.

3 Even though "A man adrift on a slim spar" was composed in late January or early February of 1897, it was left unpublished for some unknown reason until April of 1929.

4 R.W. Stallman Stephen Crane: An Omnibus (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957) 453. Further references to "The Open Boat" in this edition will be given in parentheses by page number in the text of the thesis.

5 In one of his last major short stories "The Blue Hotel," Crane appears to break his artistic code of amorality by inserting a moralistic message after the Swede has been killed. Most critics today feel that the artistic merit of the work has, as a result, been compromised. Yet a case can easily be made to show that Crane was attempting to demonstrate the deterministic aspect of the universe by showing that through a series of seemingly unconnected events an individual can come to an untimely and violent death. There is sufficient textual evidence to show that the Swede knew he would be killed if he placed himself in a

certain circumstance, and did so willingly.

⁶ An Omnibus, 421.

⁷ William Bysshe Stein "'The Open Boat' and The Absurd" in Stephen Crane A Collection of Critical Essays ed. Maurice Bassan (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967) 150.

⁸ Stein, 153.

⁹ Stein makes a significant error in his reading of this passage, insisting that Billy Higgins is the one naked but with a halo and who shone like a saint. Stein holds that this is evidence of a Kierkegaardian leap of faith over the absurd which could give credibility to moralist readings. Yet the text is perfectly clear in indicating that it was the rescuer who pulled them from the surf who "Shone like a saint", and so he should in the eyes of a man who was so near death. Newspaper accounts support this stance, indicating that a John Kitchell of Daytona was the rescuer involved. There are several accounts of his actions, including the stripping off of his own clothes so that he could swim more easily. It was he who was naked as a tree in winter.

¹⁰ Edwin H. Cady "After The Red Badge of Courage" in Stephen Crane (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 153. Cady agrees that Crane says that nature is indifferent, then immediately says that "indifferent" implies contemptuousness and hostility. By the time Crane wrote "The Open Boat" I submit that he knew the difference between "indifferent" and

"hostile." Cady appears to be manufacturing evidence to support his notion that Billy can be interpreted as a Christ-figure. He insists that Billy was the catalyst for creating the "subtle brotherhood of men" in the dinghy and feels that through this solidarity the capacity for pity and disinterested love of Being makes man's existence "anything but absurd." He also compares Billy Higgins to Melville's Billy Budd, but gives no reason for his comparison. There is in fact no evidence in the text for his conclusions.

CONCLUSION

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round [he] sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
"It is futile," I said,
"You can never--"

"You lie," he cried,
And ran on.

Stephen Crane, #24, "The Black Riders"

This analysis of some of Crane's major works has as its goal two important tenets. First, to show that, contrary to many modern critical interpretations, Crane utilized what we consider today to be aspects of modern existentialism in his art, and second, that his work, as a result of his existential aesthetics, is highly contemporaneous to man in the present day. Here in my concluding remarks I will develop the notion of this contemporaneity in Crane's work.

Throughout I have made continuous reference to Sartre with regard to Crane's existential aesthetics. In order to see how the philosophy of Sartre is actually efficacious in terms of Crane's protagonists, it will be useful to look briefly but in more detail again to the existential psychotherapist Viktor Frankl. Frankl, discussed earlier in regard to logotherapy, has had a significant effect upon the

field of psychotherapy, and his therapeutic doctrine has helped to explain and cure many of the neuroses and psychoses suffered by contemporary man. Existential psychotherapy is particularly useful in this regard, since, like Crane, it de-emphasizes supernatural or occult explanations to allow the patient to comfortably exist in the concrete world. Frankl was once asked if he could explain the difference between Freudian psychoanalysis and his own logotherapy in one sentence. He replied that he would if the person asking for the explanation would tell him what he thought the essence of psychoanalysis was:

This was his answer: "During psychoanalysis, the patient must lie down on a couch and tell you things which sometimes are very disagreeable to tell." Whereupon I immediately retorted . . . : "Now, in logotherapy the patient may remain sitting erect but he must hear things which are sometimes very disagreeable to hear."¹

The implications of this are important, since it shows that logotherapy is concerned more with the meanings the patient will face in the future as compared to the retrospective and introspective aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis. By being confronted with the meaning of his life, the patient's self-centeredness is broken down and his "nöogenic," or "spiritual," neuroses are removed. Logotherapy is therefore efficacious in cases where conflicts have arisen from value

or moral causes rather than conflicts, for example, between sexual drives and instincts.

It must be noted here that Frankl does not mean to imply religion when he talks of spiritual matters, but rather matters of the mind; the human dimension. People require some kind of meaning in their lives in order to truly live. Thus the root term "logos" in logotherapy indicates meaning of existence through confrontation, as well as "spirit." The goal of this therapy, then, is to help the individual through the existential need to find meaning in one's life.

It was meaning that Maggie was searching for. Her drab and meaningless existence in the Bowery had to be given meaning in order for her to have a reason to live. She lived, like Henry and the Correspondent, in what Frankl calls the "Existential Vacuum" which has its analogue in the Laingian "Primary Ontological Uncertainty." In order for the individual to authenticate his life, this vacuum must be filled with meaning, and this is where the concepts of existentialism come into play.

Frankl tells us that the most common question he hears from his patients is "What is the meaning of life?" It is the same question that Henry asked in The Red Badge, the same question that the correspondent asked in "The Open Boat." This question simply cannot be answered by any conventional means, obviously. As such it contains no

meaning. It can, however, be put in another way:

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who asked. . . . each man is questioned by life. . . . and to life he can only respond by being responsible. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.²

We are not wrong if we see a certain amount of Sartrean philosophy here. Frankl, in emphasizing the importance of responsibility, does so within the context of what it means to be free to choose how one will confront the seemingly deterministic world. This is also the stance of Sartre, where the notion of values and morals is important. In the case of all of the protagonists in this analysis, public codes of values or morals are the main feature of conflict with the individual's spiritual authenticity. The key here is to note that man is not morally driven as in the case of basic instincts, such as eating. Man chooses to behave "morally" in order to satisfy certain public codes of behaviour, even if these codes may be inherently wrong. This is the basis of the existential despair and frustration that the protagonists experience.

Now Sartre and Frankl seem to differ in one important aspect, and while this difference does not affect an analysis of Crane's literature, it should nevertheless be

mentioned. As we saw earlier, Sartre insists that man, in making his choices, must also choose for all mankind. If the individual chooses to go to war for a worthy cause, he does so for all of mankind. If he chooses to commit suicide for a worthy cause, he does so for all mankind. Frankl does not fully subscribe to this notion, except in the context of what he calls the "Paradoxical Intention," which defines authentic human action to be that of an individual's service to humanity without any self-serving motivation. Mohandas Gandhi and Mother Teresa are the most ideal examples, for they are truly constitutive of "collective man" at his or her best. This kind of intention represents the supremely ideal situation, however, and therein lies the fundamental difference, I suppose, between philosopher and scientist. In concrete terms it is obvious that one cannot make choices for all men. In terms of treating neuroses, or even daily living in general, this philosophical proviso is highly unrealistic. Sartre, however, included this proviso, I believe, for one important reason. From a purely philosophical point of view, to "do" existential philosophy rigorously, some kind of assurance has to be built in in order to insure that any choice made by man is made in the utmost "good faith." I know of no better way to do this than by making the action accountable to all mankind. In this way Sartre avoids any possibility of another Stalin or Hitler making a choice which is not conducive to the benefit of

man. In short, this is the most difficult hurdle to clear in Sartre's existential method of philosophy within the context of humanism. Since this particular feature is an ideal rarely found in concrete reality, it really belongs in the domain of pure philosophy, and it is perhaps best to let the pure philosophers fret over its implications. Nevertheless, Crane was above everything else a humanist, and it is readily apparent that choice for all mankind is hardly relevant to the Bowery tenement slum resident, the private soldier on the battlefield or a man about to be drowned at sea.

The central aspects of existential philosophy have complete relevance to these protagonists, just as they do for the individual today. More and more man is governed not by what he thinks he should do, but by what others want him to do, pressuring him into a conformism that is damaging to the self. It results quite simply in a loss of self-identity, the "de-personalization" of Laingian terminology and the isolation motif found in Crane's literature. We saw in The Red Badge how conformity is in itself a kind of death, since it stifles creativity in life. It is the surrendering of one's consciousness to the group in return for some form of approval. Instead of gaining individual self-identity, however, one only gains group identity. The individual self is subordinated, which results ironically in isolation.

Maggie strives for recognition from Pete because she has not found meaning in her life from any other source. Her enlightenment is not direct but impressionistic, just as her intellectual awareness of her existence is conveyed by Crane in his impressionistic writing. Maggie makes a clear and powerful statement of her rejection of the physical and spiritual filth that is the Bowery through her death. She is the ultimate victor because she refused to let her life be determined by something other than herself. Maggie suffered, yes. But her suffering ended as soon as it held some kind of meaning for her, which was the sacrifice of her self to non-being. Death is Crane's metaphor for ultimate isolation and in Maggie the metaphor holds the same meaning. In Maggie's case, however, death was her sacrifice for authenticity. She had no other way, in view of her spiritual nature, of authenticating, of giving meaning, to her life. As Frankl tells us:

Whenever one is confronted with an inescapable, unavoidable situation, whenever one has to face a fate which cannot be changed . . . just then one is given a last chance to . . . fulfill the deepest meaning of suffering. For what matters above all is the attitude we take towards suffering, the attitude in which we take suffering upon ourselves.³

This is exactly what Maggie's death represented: the deepest

fulfillment of meaning. She had at last, by one courageous act, authenticated her existence.

Henry Fleming was also caught in an "existential vacuum" created by public codes of values and morals. His enlistment in the army, initially for romantic reasons, is exemplar of this pressure of conformity. His spiritual conflict reflects this vacuum through a manifestation of self-rationalization from fear of death, and his life is one of self-deception. Yet it is only through a confrontation with death that he manages to ask the Question, just as the Correspondent did in "The Open Boat." In order for Henry to find meaning for his existence, he had to first be confronted with non-existence, since life is strictly contingent upon death. One simply cannot be understood without reference to the other. This does not mean we must all run out and attempt to place ourselves in some splendid little war somewhere in order to authenticate our existence. This was merely the catalyst for Henry's eventual recognition of his existence. Henry's task was to find the self and place it in the context of war, his personal "inescapable and unavoidable situation." War is for Crane a comprehensive symbol of destruction in general terms, and destruction is what everyone from the soldier to the cleric to the office worker is faced with every moment of every day. These individuals suffer the despair of the existential vacuum just as much as Henry. How they choose to

act in the face of it is the deciding factor in the goal of an authentic existence. Henry is concerned that he might run from battle, which would be a contravention of public morality. What is more important, however, is that by asking himself if he would run, he was forced to admit that he really knew nothing of himself. He does run, yet once he has done so he has now answered himself, and he is able to return to the battlefield. His reason for doing so is no longer romantic, but rather because he has found the self in the recognition that the "great death" was after all only the "great death." His act of courage is not rushing toward the enemy lines with the flag held high, even though this is what we would like to think, since there is nothing romantic or glamorous about finding one's self. Yet it is by far the more difficult task. For Henry it consisted of finding meaning to his existence within the context of war. Henry survives, others do not. He was not any different than most of the other men who died. The old ninny-woman Fate merely played a bad joke on the others.

Fate played the same bad joke on the oiler in "The Open Boat." The Correspondent's recognition that Fate is going to pull him away from the "sacred cheese of life" just as he is about to nibble is apt, for that is exactly what happens to Billy. In their case, all the choices of action in the world will not get them closer to shore or help them swim through the surf. Again we must view the situation from the vantage-

point of suffering. For the crew in the dinghy, all they can do is to suffer bravely, for only in this way will their suffering have meaning, and their existence authenticity. When they are safely upon shore they will then have the luxury of reflecting upon the nature of their contingency and the absurdity of their circumstance. "In other words," as Frankl writes, "life's meaning is an unconditional one for it even includes the potential meaning of suffering."⁴

We have seen, then, that Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, The Red Badge of Courage and "The Open Boat" are primarily existential in nature, where the internal flow of absurdity and despair is followed by free will and courage, ultimately leading to the protagonist's realization of authenticity through a knowledge of self-identity. To this end, all of the stories explore the nature of existence with its concomitant features of isolation and the place of the individual in the overall cosmic scheme. The works are based upon Crane's humanistic stance which emphasizes action even in the recognition of the contingency and absurdity of existence, and for this reason they are unique in 19th Century American fiction.

Crane, I believe, was far ahead of his time with regard to his aesthetics, and we have seen how he seemed to anticipate his counterparts in the Modern European movements. He is more than that, however. His work is as

relevant for us today as is the work of contemporary artists. Perhaps even more so, for his vision and understanding of the human condition seems more profound than many of the authors writing today. He possessed an uncanny ability to see through some of life's most difficult questions, yet he still retained a delightful naivete in his personal life--particularly on matters of women and money. Not all of his work was good, as is usually the case with all artists at one time or another, but considering the short span of his life one might only dream of the greatness he might have achieved. Then again, he may very well have died in a drunken brawl in some saloon in Kansas. We may be sure of one thing, however, and that is that Stephen Crane made every attempt to give authenticity to his existence.

NOTES

Conclusion

1 Viktor E. Frankl Man's Search For Meaning trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) 97-98.

2 Frankl, 111.

3 Frankl, 114.

4 Frankl, 116.

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