

**Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel":
Opposing Ideologies in its Characters**

Stephen Crane is one of the most widely read, widely interpreted, and it is my contention, most widely misunderstood of all American authors. And perhaps it is with good reason; as Stephens describes, Crane has "uneasy control over the [. . .] transient nature of the vision which his art creates" (3). As such, he offered little assistance to the literary world interpreting his works. This, of course, has led to as many interpretations of Crane—"The Blue Hotel" in particular—as there are clouds in the blue sky (Gibson 106). Two general interpretations of the work stand out: the view that the story's thematic intent is about the individual self-sufficiency, self responsibility, or the Darwinistic approach and the view that the story is about social and moral responsibility. Both of these interpretations are equally valid, depending on one's understanding of the ending. It is this struggle to interpret the ending as meaning one thing or meaning another that creates the misunderstanding of what Crane was attempting to do.

One interpretation offered for "The Blue Hotel", and its ending, is summed up nicely by James Edward Nagel, who says, "the theme of the story is the failure of human responsibility" (268). He says that each character is responsible for the death of the Swede: "the role of each character can be examined to determine the extent to which his actions, or failure to act, contribute to the Swede's death"(266). Though it primarily rests on the Easterner he concedes, "whose timidity and cowardice forced him to conceal the vital information which determined a series of actions leading to his death" (267), the view is further joined by the argument that "'The Blue Hotel' [. . .] [demonstrates] how society, by its failure to understand individuals within it, can [. . .]

destroy a man.” (Satterwhite 447). Further, Gibson contends that the theme of the story, despite flaws he points out within the work and other works of Crane’s, is about brotherhood (106). The indication is that Crane was arguing in favor of a more communal society with less emphasis on individualism through the attachment the characters put on their own importance in nature, which Gary Ralph Stephens describes as the “conceit” of the characters (140).

Yet, and as some of the critics who argue this stance point out (and some ignore), there are holes in this interpretation. Throughout the story, we are given a presentation of the Swede which would lead us, as readers, to be generally in disfavor of the Swede—leading us to “believe that the responsibility for his death rests with the Swede alone” (Gibson 111). At one point, in fact, Crane says of the Swede that he “was like a demoniac” (778). And, indeed, when the Swede dies the legend on the cash-register seems to indicate that he was solely responsible for his death or that the “responsibility [. . .] rests within himself” (Edward, 264). Yet, Gibson would have us believe that Crane was, in a sense, setting us up to hold this opinion of the Swede and then at the end, we are shown “the other side of the coin” (111). The idea that the story is about equal, almost community responsibility for each other’s actions is problematic also because of Crane’s own literary backgrounds and beliefs. Russel B. Nye writes, that Crane “seems to feel that man in the aggregate, after his individuality has been lost in the crowd, is cruel, or rather, needlessly inhumane and unintelligent” (225).

Obviously, according to Nye, Crane was not a proponent of a Socialistic society, which is interpretation of the story some suggest. Yet, it is obvious that Stephen Crane did read Tolstoy, a Russian author who would certainly approve of the Socialistic interpretation of “The Blue Hotel.” Two critics, for an example, who were not entirely in agreement with each other, both concur. Gibson writes that “Berryman makes the greatest claims in stating as a fact that Crane knew Tolstoy” (25), and as well, Stephens suggests that the

idea for the Easterner believing that everyone was responsible for the Swede's death was "found [. . .] no doubt in Howell's elucidation of Tolstoy" (147).

Yet, it was evident that Crane was also not entirely in the dark about such thinkers as Charles Darwin, whose views are on the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum of Tolstoy's. Tolstoy, in fact, was not only on the opposite side of thinking of Darwin, he "[had] no patience with philosophers like [. . .] Darwin [. . .] who [sought] to justify the inequities of the existing social order on the basis of natural laws" (Mittal 73). Despite the two different extremes presented by Darwin and Tolstoy, as mentioned, Crane was influenced by Darwin as well. Says Spiller, "A direct influence of Darwin [. . .] cannot be established. Rather he seems to have absorbed these influences at second hand from Russian and French writers" (qtd Colvert 170). Gibson as well, wrote, "We will be on fairly sure ground if we infer that Crane indeed did not read Darwin" (25) and later goes on to explain that he seemed to have "absorbed it passively" (26). If such is the case, then the other interpretation—that the story's theme is about self-responsibility and individualism—is able to become a possible critical approach.

The Darwinistic, survival-of-the fittest interpretation of "The Blue Hotel" is evident in many ways including a similarity to Jack London's "To Build a Fire" in which the eldest member of the tribe is left behind to die. The Swede, numerous times, continues to claim that he is going to be ousted from the group:

"Oh, I know," burst out the Swede. "I know what will happen. Yes, I'm crazy—yes. Yes, of course, I'm crazy—yes. But I know one thing—"
There was a sort of sweat of misery and terror on his face. "I know I won't get out of here alive." (771)

In many ways, the two groups in "The Blue Hotel" represent packs or clans: those in the hotel and those in the tavern. At one point, Scully attempts to admit the Swede into their 'pack', offering him a drink:

“Drink,” said the old man affectionately. He had arisen to his feet and now stood facing the Swede.

There was a silence. Then again Scully said: “Drink!”

The Swede laughed wildly. He grabbed the bottle . . . (774)

Later, in the tavern, the Swede tries to initiate his new companions into a pack, after—in a very animalistic fashion—he proves his “prowess” by describing how he beat up Scully’s son (Stephens 144). But, he fails miserably; ultimately dying after attempting to force his way into the new ‘pack’: “What? You won’t drink with me, you little dude! I’ll make you then” (786). At one point, even, as Stephens points out, the gambler is described as a wolf (145) and that the Easterner sensed “animalism, a desperate daily competition to live” (142). Stephens himself says, in fact, that the idea for the ending was, as mentioned before, garnered from Tolstoy, yet he goes on to say, “the idea is not wholly adequate. It is an attempt to propose a humane solution” (147). Still, as with the former interpretation of “The Blue Hotel”, the Darwinistic interpretation offered above is not without its faults, either.

According to Nye, who describes Crane as thinking a loss of individuality would reduce a person to being inhumane and unintelligent, as mentioned before, goes on to say that nor “did he not let a naturalistic view of the universe lend him into an amoral social philosophy of survival of the fittest” (224). Indeed, in order to take the Darwinistic approach to the story, Gibson points out that many ignore the ending which, he says, is an “error [that] comes about as a result of our too great willingness to see a kind of consistency in Crane’s work which really isn’t there” (109). The final scene, aside from being important for the simple fact that it is the final scene, cannot be ignored for its obvious contradiction with an earlier scene. The cash-register scene is often used to prove the Darwinistic approach in that it represents the thought that you ‘get what you deserve’. Yet, its message is undermined and “is ultimately an unreliable simplification

of the history of causality, as the final section of the story illustrates” (Edward 264). This conflict between ideas within the story often leads to “troubled commentary” (Stephens 148). Stephen’s explanation for this “trouble” was a fairly simple one; too simple, in fact, to be the answer: “Crane’s [artistic] vision was not quite clear” (148).

How, then, should “The Blue Hotel” be interpreted? The answer, I believe, lies within the work the various critics have done with the story; they simply have not reached the proper conclusion. “Vision”, perhaps, is a term we should more associate Crane with having, not a lack thereof. Before his remarks about Crane’s lack of vision, Stephens noted that Crane took “the Sophisticated East versus the Wild West [. . .] and us[ed] it as the basis for the split in the mind of his psychotic protagonist, the Swede” (138). I believe that this application of East versus West can be expanded, especially if one takes into account the presence of Darwinistic thought—wide spread in Crane’s time in Western philosophy and the presence of Tolstonistic thought—wide spread during Crane’s time in Russian or Eastern philosophy.

Let us study for a moment the characters of the Westerner, the Easterner, and the Swede. Nagel describes the Westerner as “the least important of the five major characters” (252). Yet, it is the Westerner and the Easterner who are found at the end of the story representing two different schools of thought. The Easterner tries to convince him that “every sin is the result of a collaboration” (787). The Westerner responds, dumbfounded, “Well, I didn’t do anythin’, did I?” And, earlier, he says, “[the gambler] don’t deserve none of it for killin’ who he did” (786). The difference in opinion shown here indicates the Easterner’s belief in social responsibility and the Westerner’s belief in personal responsibility. And as another example of how they represent two schools of thought, the cowboy—the Westerner—is there during the fight, shouting, “Kill him, Johnnie! Kill him! Kill him!” (780). While, on the opposite spectrum, the Easterner “scrambled hastily backward” during the fight and viewed the fighting as an

“abomination” (780). The Westerner encouraged the fight, while the Easterner opposed it. These two examples make up two of the basic principles of Darwin and Tolstoy: Survival of the fittest and individual responsibility on one side, and “universal love and brotherhood” (Mittal 57) and social equality and cooperation on the other. Besides representing ideas of Darwin and Tolstoy through their actions in the story, the characters might also be suggestive of the two ideas by the geography the nicknames Crane gives them suggests. Obviously, the Westerner suggests west Europe while the Easterner represents east Europe and Russia. But the Swede might be representative of something as well. As it has already been shown, the Swede is the alien to the group. He is the one trying to gain acceptance—first to those within the blue hotel and then to those within the tavern. He is foreign to the state, foreign to the city, foreign to the people, and foreign to the country, itself. He finds himself in the middle of a conflict between the beliefs of the Easterner, who wishes the fight to stop, and the beliefs of the Westerner, who encourages the fight. There is a reason the three most important characters in the story all have geographical nicknames: not only is the Swede caught between their conflict within the story, his country would be caught in the conflict between the East and the West which began in the period “The Blue Hotel” was written and continued through the Cold War.

This concept is all well and good—if it stands to reason that there was strife between Darwinistic ideas of the West and Tolstonistic ideas of the East. Certainly there was strife between the East and West after the Second World War, but that was some fifty years after the “The Blue Hotel” was published. The answer is that, yes, there was a conflict between the ideas; not only between the ideas, but also between the followers of the ideas.

Tolstoy, who “no reformer before him has influenced the political and social scene as he has” (Mittal 181), had a great impact on the society of his country.

Likewise, in America, Darwin had a great influence on the country. It was his ideas, it goes without saying, that helped give birth to the concept of “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps” that, still today, is a common motto. The ideas of Tolstoy on one hand, who advocated “merging the self with the ‘selves’ of others [through] universal love” (Mittal 56) were so out of step with those Darwinistic ideologies in America on the other hand, that it prompted many articles to be published against Tolstoy. Said Robert G. Ingersoll, “he seems to forget the great fact of “natural selection”, and that the choice of one in preference to others is the result of forces beyond [. . .] control” (291). He went on to write, in the same article, that “[Tolstoy] is unconsciously the enemy of mankind” (294). A member of the British Parliament, Henry Fawcett, wrote, “No one who watches events which are now happening can doubt that, if socialism,” something Tolstoy pushed for, “should continue to advance [. . .] the day is not distant when the Socialists will be able to control the legislation [of the United States and Germany]” (qtd. German Socialism 372). Again on socialism, Dean Plumtre wrote, “Socialism, in the form which is now dominant, [regards] moral improvement as a means [. . .] and not as an end in itself” (648). And merely as more evidence on Tolstoy, Edmund M. Vittum wrote, “We find fatal breaks in his chain of reasoning” (62), which is innocent enough, but he went on to say that all good Christians “should be interested in this movement—should be prepared to strengthen the true and destroy the false” (65).

“Vision” was not something Stephen Crane lacked, regardless on how his stories are interpreted, and regardless of what certain shortsighted critics might say. The fact that his stories are still being studied today suggests that his writings have transcended, and will continue to transcend, generations. Beyond that, if one can accept the interpretation provided here, then, it goes without saying vision is something he *certainly* had. Not only is “The Blue Hotel” a work very deep and very complex in its presentation of two opposing ideologies, it is also *visionary*. It can only be speculation, but perhaps

Crane could see the growing tension between the East and West—tension that would become very Cold indeed.

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