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Theatricality, Melodrama and Irony in Stephen Crane’s Short Fiction

Martin Scofield

1 The writing of Stephen Crane has been frequently discussed in terms of the idea of ‘realism’. Crane himself gave credibility to the use of the term in relation to his own writing, as when he spoke of his admiration for Tolstoy.1 His use of the term here probably suggests above all ‘anti-idealism’ (or perhaps ‘anti-romanticism’). Understood like this, the aim of realism can easily be attributed to stories like Maggie: a Girl of the Streets, or ‘The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky’. But ‘realism’ also usually connotes a certain style: plain, descriptive prose, aiming at a kind of photographic fidelity to the surface of things; a preoccupation with the historical and the everyday; a medium which claims (at any rate) to reflect life directly and without distortion, like Stendhal’s idea of a ‘mirror journeying down the highroad’2, reflecting everything it sees with as little interference of the medium as possible. Of course, ‘realism’ has its conventions and its special means of achieving ‘effect’. But in relation to the common understanding of the phrase in relation to style (an understanding that applies well enough to, say, the novels of George Moore or of Tolstoy), Crane’s style seems very far from realist. This article will begin from the premise that it would be better to abandon the notion of realism in relation to Crane, and focus instead on his use of theatricality and melodrama as a way of highlighting his distinctively heightened and bravura style, particularly in connection with his preoccupation with heroism. Rather than theorizing the notion of theatricality in relation to realism, it will try to draw attention to Crane’s theatrical mode of imagination in the tropes of his style and his sense of structure.

2 Alan L. Ackerman’s book The Portable Theatre: American Literature and the Nineteenth Century American Stage (1999) is mainly about American drama, but it also looks at the relations between theatricality on the stage and theatricality in the novel, picking up on William Dean Howells’ suggestive phrase about the novel as a ‘portable theatre’. In a review of Ackerman’s study, Patricia Lee Yongue regretted the absence of any discussion of ‘such germane texts as Stephen Crane’s Maggie.”3This paper, then, is an attempt to fill that gap;
and to suggest that for Crane, as for other writers of the late 19th century and later, drama, melodrama and theatricality, are even more successfully deployed on the page than on the stage. (Writers as diverse as Melville, Dickens, Henry James and T. S. Eliot come to mind).

Let me begin, then, with the opening of *Maggie*:

A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil’s Row who were circling madly about the heap and pelting him. His infantile countenance was livid with fury. His small body was writhing in the delivery of great crimson oaths.

[...] Tattered gamins made a furious assault on the gravel heap. On their small, convulsed faces there shone the grins of true assassins. As they charged, they threw stones and cursed in shrill chorus.

From the first paragraph there is the suggestion of a *mise-en-scène*, a spectacle akin to a bear-baiting perhaps. The ‘delivery’ of the ‘great crimson oaths’ suggests a histrionic mode and the ‘grins of true assassins’ are clearly feigned not real. The little boys curse ‘in shrill chorus’ – either like the chorus of a Greek tragedy or the chorus of an opera or musical. In chapter II Jimmie’s baby brother ‘made heroic endeavors to keep on his legs, denounce his sister and consume a bit of orange peeling which he chewed between the times of his infantile orations.’ (6, my italics), and a page or so later, he watches the violent scene of the mother’s berating of Jimmie, ‘his face in contortions like that of a woman at a tragedy’ (7). The mode is theatrical and burlesque, a kind of mock heroic which, like the mock-heroic of Alexander Pope, both ironizes the scene of conflict and yet suggests, paradoxically, that the passions which gripped the protagonists are, despite the pettiness of the struggle, as humanly intense as the passions of the great heroes of old. This technique goes beyond the possibilities of most 19c ‘realism’ (as in, say, the stories of Hamlin Garland) because it makes the impoverished working-class characters more than just victims and figures of conventional pathos: it gives them status by suggesting the force of the human energy which they contain, a force so pitifully wasted in the petty and self-destructive struggles of their lives. The mode is also akin to melodrama, in that feelings and language are rhetorically exaggerated and there is seemingly a stark contrast between good and evil. (This division is the crux of the story’s tragedy: once Maggie is ‘fallen’ sexually she is regarded as wholly vicious by her family, and beyond redemption).

The presence of theatricality and melodrama in the style is counterpointed ironically by the description of the melodramas which Pete takes Maggie to see in the New York theatres in chapter VIII:

Evenings during the week he took her to see plays in which the brain-clutching heroine was rescued from the palatial home of her guardian, who is cruelly after her bonds, by the hero with the beautiful sentiments. The latter spent most of his time out at soak in pale-green snow storms, busy with a nickel-plated revolver, rescuing aged strangers from villains.

Maggie lost herself in sympathy with the wanderers swooning in snow-storms beneath happy-hued church windows. And a choir within singing ‘Joy to the World.’ To Maggie and the rest of the audience this was transcendental realism. Joy always within, and they, like the actor, inevitably without. Viewing it, they hugged themselves in ecstatic pity at their imagined or real condition. (27)

This melodrama is seen ironically but the irony is complex. The inevitable happy ending (the hero is always noble and always wins) falsifies life, but the desire for the triumph of good is real. The idea that others (‘within’) are always happy is false, as is the belief that those ‘outside’ are always innocently unhappy. But the audience’s pity is not only or
always factitious or deceived: they hug themselves in ecstatic pity of their imagined or real condition.’ (my italics). Melodrama in the popular theatre can be at least half true, and console the audience with the hope of something better. The trouble is that its element of falsity also deceives fatally, and is doubtless one of the things that leads Maggie to identify Pete as ‘her beau ideal of a man’ (19) and ‘a knight’ (20).

My general point is that Crane uses the techniques and language of theatricality and melodrama both to bring home to the reader the plight of Maggie and the nature of her world, and to comment ironically on the distortions of popular melodrama which confuse the heroine’s perception of reality. At the same time the verve and panache of popular melodrama is carried over into Crane’s own descriptions which depict the realities of New York squalor in the bold primary colours and exaggerated lines of caricature. The performance of the small, fat vaudeville singer in the theatre ('He made his face into fantastic grimaces, until he looked like a painted devil on a Japanese kite') is scarcely less exaggerated than Crane’s own description of the ‘huge fat man in torn and greasy garments’ who follows Maggie to the riverside just before her death.

His small, bleared eyes, sparkling from amid great rolls of red fat, swept eagerly over the girl’s upturned face. He laughed, his brown disordered teeth gleaming under a grey, grizzled moustache from which beerdrops dripped. His whole body gently quivered and shook like that of a dead jelly fish. Chuckling and swearing, he followed the girl from the crimson legions. (53)

(That ‘girl from the crimson legions’ is itself a phrase that might have come from a popular melodrama or ‘penny dreadful’).

But perhaps the most powerful and ambivalent combination of melodrama and tragedy comes at the end of the novella, when a chorus of neighbours surrounds the grieving mother of Maggie. There is an excruciating moment of combined sentimentality and genuine pain (on the mother’s part) when she finds a pair of Maggie’s baby shoes and insists that Jimmy bring Maggie’s body and put them on her feet. Then a neighbour comes forward and insists, in a gesture that is for the reader supremely ironic given Mary’s monstrous neglect of Maggie, that she forgive her daughter. And the story ends in a climax of theatricall call and response and a veritable ‘curtain line’ that anticipates the combined pathos and farce of the endings of some of Sean O’ Casey’s plays, where a woman’s genuine lamentations are counterpointed with the drunken dialogue of two soldiers (Juno and the Paycock) or with their sentimental songs (The Plough and the Stars). And as in some sentimental painting, or one of those plays Maggie used to watch, a character will ‘raise her eyes to the sunbeams’ to underscore a pious exclamation:

‘Yeh’ll forgive her, Mary! Yeh’ll forgive her bad, bad chil’! Her life was a curse an’ her days were black an’ yeh’ll forgive yer bad girl? She’s gone where her sins will be judged.’

‘She’s gone where her sins will be judged,’ cried the other women, like a choir at a funeral.

‘Deh Lord gives and deh Lord takes away,’ said the woman in black, raising her eyes to the sunbeams.

‘Deh Lord gives and deh Lord takes away,’ responded the others.

‘Yeh’ll forgive her, Mary!’ pleaded the woman in black. The mourner essayed to speak but her voice gave way. She shook her great shoulders frantically in an agony of grief. Hot tears seemed to scald her quivering face. Finally her voice came and arose like a scream of pain.

‘Oh, yes. I’ll forgive her! I’ll forgive her!’ (58)
The distinctive difference from O’Casey, however, (and this is a mark of the power of Crane’s prose) is that ultimately the drunken farce and the tragic pain are focused in the same character, Mary, and the power comes from our inability to separate the two elements of self-deception and sincerity, the character’s own theatricality from her sense of reality.

In ‘The Bride comes to Yellow Sky’ and ‘The Blue Hotel’ Crane’s deployment of theatricality takes different but no less significant forms, and in both stories it is associated above all with Crane’s analysis of true and false heroism. The former story is first of all an almost copy-book tragi-comedy, in four acts. It begins with a marriage in the first act, brings the threat of death and of the dissolution of the social order in the second and third, and ends in the fourth with the overcoming of both threats and the reconfirming of the new dispensation of marriage. Secondly, the mise-en-scène in each part is calculated to maximize the sense of theatrical spectacle. And thirdly the mixture of tragedy and comedy, violence and humour corresponds to these elements in the theatrical genre. In the second story, the blue hotel itself stands as a symbol for the theatrical (and proleptically, indeed, for the cinematic) – that heightened and unreal idea of the Wild West that leads the Swede to his death in downtown Romper.

In ‘The Bride Come to Yellow Sky’ the opening scene from the train window, as the train moves from west to east, has been rightly seen as a classic instance of Crane’s ‘impressionism’: ‘The Great Pullman was whirling onward with such dignity of motion that a glance from the window seemed simply to prove that the plains of Texas were pouring eastward’ But it could also be seen as theatrical, since a screen, moving from left to right behind a stage-set window, would be the way of conveying the movement of a train from right to left in a stage scene. The fittings of the Pullman have all the lavishness and ornateness of an opulent stage-set: ‘the sea-green figured velvet, the shining brass, silver and glass, the wood that gleamed as darkly brilliant as a pool of oil. At one end a bronze figure sturdily held a support for a separated chamber, and at a convenient place on the ceiling were frescoes in olive and silver.’ (80) In the second act the scene in front of the Weary Gentleman saloon in Yellow Sky explicitly suggests an altogether tattier and more amateurish stage-set:

Across the sandy street were some vivid green grass-plots, so wonderful in appearance, amid the sand that burned near them in the blazing sun, that they caused a doubt in the mind. They exactly resembled the grass mats used to represent lawns on the stage. (83)

These grass-mat lawns do not so much contrast with the lavish Pullman car setting of the ‘new estate’ of Sheriff Jack Potter and his bride (80) in a relation of artifice to reality as in a relation of tawdry artifice to splendid artifice. The whole of the story is theatrical because theatricality here is not only a matter of unreality: Jack Potter and his bride could be seen as simply taking part in a different and more convincing kind of drama. Scratchy Wilson wears a costume that is pathetically and cheaply artificial, a ‘maroon-coloured flannel shirt which had been purchased for the purposes of decoration, and made principally by some Jewish women on the East Side of New York’, and boots which suggest not a cowboy but a boy playing a cowboy: ‘And his boots had red tops with gilded imprints, of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England’. (85). And in Act 4, the great showdown between Scratchy and Jack (which might have turned out an exact foretaste of Gary Cooper’s High Noon), evaporates into comedy. Scratchy is ‘like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world’ — or another genre or
play — and finally stammers ‘I s’ppose it’s all off now.’ (88) The tragic play has indeed been ‘called off’ and another play put on it its place, a play that can distinguish between the true heroism of Potter and the flashy heroics of Scratchy.

In ‘The Blue Hotel’ the genre is perhaps even more cinematic than theatrical, but the two do overlap (and chime in turn with the ‘dime novels’ which the Easterner says the doomed Swede has been reading (97). The bright blue of the hotel, which makes it ‘declare its position against any background’ stands, I suggest, for a music-hall or technicolour world of the cowboy stage-play or film: everything in it is heightened and unreal, a fantasy version of the ‘wild west’ that leads the Swede to his doom. Nothing is quite real: the Swede ‘resembles a badly frightened man’ (90, my italics); the cowboy acts the part of a ferocious gambler, ‘board-whacking’ his cards on the table ‘with a glowing air of prowess and pride.’ (ibid., my italics). It is histrionic heroism rather than true heroism – though one of Crane’s points here, and even more in Maggie or ‘The Bride Comes To Yellow Sky’, is that the two are not always so easy to separate: the hero, as in Shakespeare, may often seem to indulge in a kind of Senecan posturing. Scully the proprietor, his face lit from below by a small lamp (the effect is that of footlights) ‘resembled a murderer’ (95, my italics). And on the Swede’s deathly-pale cheeks were ‘two spots brightly crimsoned and sharply edged, as if they had been carefully painted’ – like a clown’s make-up. When the challenge “You are cheatin’ comes from the Swede to Johnny, ‘Such scenes often prove there can be little of dramatic import in environment. Any room can present a tragic front; any room can be comic.’(100) Filmic associations are also present, suggesting an impartial cinematic detachment. ‘The Easterner’s mind, like a film, took in lasting impressions of the three men’(104); in this case the metaphor may suggest his culpable neutrality and detachment. At the end the final ‘shot’ of the cash-register provides an impersonal comment on the Swede’s death which is irresistibly filmic: ‘The corpse of the Swede, alone in the saloon, had its eyes fixed upon a dreadful legend atop of the cash-machine: “This registers the amount of your purchase.”’(112) The irony of the story comes from the fact that the Swede is betrayed by his theatrical sense of the dangerous wild west, whereas his fate actually comes from a very modern, untheatrical and un-stereotypical gambler. At the same time there is the sense of a modern tragedy of fate, where the death of the Swede is simply ‘the apex of a human movement.’ (113) There is a double irony in theatricality, whereby it can both suggest the fantastic, the artificial and the unreal, and also the structures of a real-life tragedy.

Crane saw the world in theatrical terms which enabled him both to ironize heroism (and sometimes to celebrate it at the same time). But I would like to end with one small, curious example where Crane himself explicitly saw one of his strangest short sketches in terms of the actual theatre. In ‘The Upturned Face’ the whole piece turns on the uncanny process of the burial of a dead man during a battle. The man, with no coffin of course, has been laid face up in the grave, and as the soldier shovelling in the soil approaches the completion of his task, he realizes with horror that he is going to have to shovel a load of dirt on the upturned face.

Soon there was nothing to be seen but the chalk-blue face. Lean filled the shovel ...
‘Good God,’ he cried to the adjutant. ‘Why didn’t you turn him somehow when you put him in. This ---.’ Then Lean began to stutter.

The adjutant understood. He was pale to the lips. ‘Go on, man,’ He cried, beseechingly, almost in a shout... Lean swung back the shovel; it went forward in a pendulum curve. When the earth landed it made a sound -- plop.
Crane had a particular liking for this four-page short sketch ('I am wonderfully keen on this small bit of 1500 words')¹⁶, and saw it very much in theatrical terms. He wrote in the same letter:

[...] I am sending a copy to Forbes Robertson [the famous English actor-manager] in an attempt to make him see that in a thirty minute sketch on the stage he could so curdle the blood of the British public that it would be the sensation of the year, of the time.¹⁷

But if he ever sent it to Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, the great man must have thought differently, for it was a stage-sketch which the British public was never to see, and perhaps it was just as well, for it is difficult to see how it could ever have worked on the stage. On the page, however, it has the chilling force of deliberate melodrama, a mode which can achieve that frisson of combined horror and farce (that 'plop' is deliberately strip-cartoonlike, deflating and anti-heroic) which brings home to us not only a very modern sense of the inextricability of tragedy from farce in contemporary experience (and Crane must have appreciated King Lear, too) but also a fact of great psychological importance: our sense of the peculiar vulnerability and sanctity of the face. What Crane’s style ironizes here is not so much heroism as pathos – the way pathos and the grotesque are intermingled. And he does it through his theatricality, a theatricality of that curious kind that works on a reader rather than a theatre audience, and that is at its best on the page, in ‘the portable theatre.’

NOTES

1. Quoted in John Berryman, Stephen Crane (Cleveland: Meridian, 1962,) 54.
5. See e.g. R. A. Brower, Alexander Pope: the Poetry of Allusion (Oxford University Press, 1986) on the nature of the mock-heroic mode.
6. The first Kinetoscope Parlour opened on Broadway in 1894, and by 1899 the American Mutascope and Biograph Company was making about 500 films a year; but, perhaps surprisingly, there is no record, in the letters or biographies, of Crane having attended a film.
7. ‘The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky’, The Open Boat and Other Stories (New York: Dover Publication Inc., 1993) 79. All subsequent references are to this edition.
8. See for example T. S. Eliot in ‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’, Selected Essays (Faber and Faber, 1932).
11. Ibid., 239.
L’écriture de Crane semble inviter tout particulièrement le lecteur à examiner contes et nouvelles sur le plan de la théâtralité et du mélodrame. Son style se caractérise par une rhétorique souvent grandiloquente, et par ailleurs, sa prédilection pour les contrastes marqués entre le bien et le mal (comme dans Maggie) ou entre la vie ordinaire et les expressions diverses d’héroïsme, se prête aux techniques du mélodrame. Stephen Crane se moque cependant des excès des romans populaires et du théâtre mélodramatique de New York qui plaisent bien, par exemple, à Maggie elle-même. Ce qu’il semble vouloir atteindre, c’est une sorte de théâtralité ironique qui mette les actions humaines nettement en relief et qui souligne leur nature symbolique et héroïque afin de se moquer des attitudes prétentieuses et confuses dans lesquelles tombent les personnages dès qu’ils se considèrent comme des héros.

MARTIN SCOFIELD