

The Black Crepe Veil: The Significance of Stephen Crane's *The Monster*

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Although Stephen Crane saw his short novel *The Monster*¹ as a companion piece to his famous story of violence and terror, "The Blue Hotel,"² the novel has been singularly neglected by Crane's critics and only Edwin Cady suggests that *The Monster* "cries out for a more adequate criticism than it has received."³

Perhaps the reason for this neglect lies in the novel's setting, Crane's normally placid, pastoral Whilomville. But even at a first reading *The Monster* seems much more than a typical Whilomville story. At the very least it deals with the cruel and nearly murderous fickleness of the townspeople.

On the surface the novel deals with a fire that breaks out in the home of Dr. Ned Trescott and the consequences of that fire. In rescuing the doctor's only child, Jimmie, the family's black servant, Henry Johnson, is nearly burned to death by a spilled bottle of acid in the doctor's laboratory. Only Trescott's painstaking care prevents Johnson's death, and the town rejoices on learning that Johnson will live.

However, Johnson's face is horribly disfigured and some feel he has suffered grave psychic scars as well. To spare the town the sight of Johnson, Dr. Trescott boards him at the lonely country shack of Alexander Williams, another black, but a rather shiftless and grasping one.

Then one night Johnson escapes from the shack, making his way to Whilomville, where he calls on the young lady whom he had courted before the fire. She and her family are horrified, as is the whole town, until horror turned to rage and Johnson is pursued through the streets and alleys until the police catch him and lock him in jail for his own protection. The mob that once had rejoiced that Johnson would live, now bay their rage outside his jail.

Finally Dr. Trescott agrees to take Johnson home with him, to live in his old room over the stable. Johnson spends his days sitting on a box outside, his head swathed in a black crepe veil, moaning wordless dirges. The novel ends with Dr. Trescott attempting to comfort his wife, whose tea-party has been ruined, as indeed has her whole social life, by Johnson's return.

A closer reading of *The Monster*, however, suggests a richness of symbolism that would make it one of Crane's most forceful and experimental works. As Cady says, Crane "remained an experimenter, a seeker of rare, wonderful gifts. . . . He was any kind of an '-ist' available to him . . ."⁴ So it seems that in *The Monster* Crane has tried a new mode, allegory, nothing less than an allegory of the black man in America in the nineteenth century, and an angry condemnation of white America—Whilomville—including above all its weak-willed and compromising meliorists such as Dr. Trescott.

As the novel opens Crane depicts Henry Johnson as Jimmie Trescott's equal, his companion in an idyllic world of lawn and garden, stables and tricycles. "In regard to almost everything in life," Crane says, "they seemed

to have minds precisely alike" (p. 27). Next Crane gives us a picture of Johnson as comic ladies' man, cock of the walk of Watermelon Alley in lavender trousers and bright-banded straw hat, courting Miss Bella Farragut, who says of him, "Oh, ma, isn't he divine?" (p. 35). So Crane initially makes Johnson fit two stereotypes: the benign and almost child-like Nigger Jim or Uncle Remus, and the cake-walking minstrel-show comic dandy.

Things change abruptly when that evening, while the band plays a concert in the park and Johnson is returning from Bella Farragut, a fire breaks out in the Trescott home. Crane describes the fire in a striking manner: "After a moment the window brightened as if the four panes of it had been stained with blood, and a quick ear might have been led to imagine the fire-imps calling and calling, clan joining clan, gathering to the colours . . . Suddenly the panes of the red window tinkled and crashed to the ground, and at other windows there suddenly reared other flames, like bloody spectres at the apertures of a haunted house. This outbreak had been well planned, as if by professional revolutionists" (p. 40). So the fire is described in terms of conspiracy, insurrection and war. Even more to the point is the following: "In the hall a lick of flame had found the cord that supported 'Signing the Declaration.' The engraving slumped suddenly down at one end, and then dropped to the floor, where it burst with the sound of a bomb" (p. 41).

The combination of the general description of the fire as "an outbreak that had been well planned, as if by professional revolutionists," and the singling out of that one item, the engraving which depicts the signing of the American Declaration of Independence, and which "slumped suddenly down at one end, and then . . . burst with the sound of a bomb," are strong hints that this is no usual fire. The burst of mortar bombs at Fort Sumpter signaled the attempt to destroy the Union, and at the time of that attack, throughout the South troops had been "gathering to the colours" in an "outbreak" that "had been well planned, as if by professional revolutionists"; for indeed, President Pierce's Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis had stockpiled arms throughout the South in anticipation of secession. Every item of the fire which Crane chooses to describe, fits into the Civil War framework, down to the description of the fire chief, the stolid, cigar-chewing John Shipley, who bears such a strong resemblance to General Grant (p. 50).

On reaching the house, Johnson dashes through the flames and up the stairs to Jimmie's room, where he wraps the boy in a blanket. Seeing his means of retreat blocked by flames, Johnson descends a second flight of stairs, leading to Dr. Trescott's laboratory, where he collapses from the smoke. Jimmie falls from his arms to lie beneath a window where he can easily be found and saved.

Learning of the fire, Trescott races home and finds Jimmie lying by the window and carries him to safety. An unnamed railway brakeman brings out Johnson, who, after collapsing, lay at the foot of the laboratory table while an overturned bottle dripped acid on his face. Burned, nearly asphyxiated, disfigured by the acid, Johnson hovers on the edge of death.

Meanwhile the rumor spreads that Johnson is to blame for the fire and Whilomville is outraged, much as parts of the North blamed the Negro for precipitating the Civil War, which led to such savage reprisals as the New York Draft Riots of July, 1863, when blacks were beaten and murdered in the streets.

The Trescotts and Johnson are taken across the street to the home of Judge Denning Hagenthorpe. The Trescotts quickly recover and the doctor begins his long vigil over Johnson, whose life he feels he must save. When the townspeople learn that Johnson rescued Jimmie and is not expected to live, their attitude shifts abruptly and they laud Johnson as a hero. While Johnson's life hangs in the balance, Judge Hagenthorpe makes an insidious suggestion to Trescott: "No one wants to advance such ideas, but somehow I think that that poor fellow ought to die" (p. 55). Trescott replies in a surprisingly noncommittal way and the judge presses harder with his proposal until Trescott finally cries out, "He will be what you like, judge" (p. 56).

Crane published *The Monster* in 1897; it seems more than coincidental that just a year before the justices of the United States Supreme Court had decided a parallel question. Their *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling determined the fate of black America: it was to be segregated, subordinate, and powerless. It seems incredible that a doctor should say to a judge of his patient, "He will be what you like," unless the situation is seen in this historical context. This is no ordinary case, no ordinary patient.

Of Johnson, Crane says, "His body was frightfully seared, but more than that, he had no face. His face had simply been burned away" (p. 53). Johnson is a horror, a monster robbed of external human identity, and has become a thing, to be molded and manipulated by the white world. Trescott's solution to the problem is to hide Johnson away in the back shed of Alexander Williams's shack, paying Williams five dollars a week for his keep.

Despite Judge Hagenthorpe's prediction that Johnson will have "an affected brain" (p. 56), Johnson seems surprisingly rational as Trescott takes him to the Williams place, suffering only from a trauma-induced amnesia that has erased the fire and everything since from his memory. So while Johnson may be a monster externally, behind the mask there remains a man. It is the degradation he undergoes at the Williams shack and afterwards that unbalances Johnson's mind. Trescott has not defied Hagenthorpe; he has relegated Johnson to a limbo between life and death, and in some ways worse than death, to demonstrate his "gratitude." As for Trescott's promises to Johnson that he will visit him regularly, they are empty and false. Never does Trescott come again. Even in seeing to Johnson's purely material wants, Trescott treats Johnson shabbily, for they are a windowless six-by-six cell furnished only with a straw pallet on the floor, and slops to eat, conditions fit only for an animal.

On a metaphorical level, Johnson's facelessness and imprisonment suggest the general dehumanization of black people in the United States after the Compromise of 1876 (Trescott's solution is, after all, a compromise between treating Johnson as human and letting him die), and the relegation of black America to the Southern rural ghetto thereafter. The United States paid off its black citizens, including veterans of the Civil War, with promises as empty as those Trescott makes Johnson.

On the night Johnson breaks out of his prison and returns to Whilomville, a birthday party is being given for Theresa Page, where the Winter girl hears a noise behind her, turns, and seems to glimpse a horror at the window. She screams, but is unable to articulate what she saw. The boys of the party go to scout the Pages' yard but find nothing, although one boy "told a great lie. He described a grim figure, bending low and slinking off along the fence. He gave a number of details, rendering his lie more splendid

by a repetition of certain forms which he recalled from romances" (p. 76). Twice Crane calls the boy's story a lie. He also establishes that the Winter girl never describes who—or what—she saw at the window, and makes it clear that the girl, high-strung, imaginative and over-stimulated by the party, may have seen nothing at all. The fact that the townspeople become convinced she saw Johnson at the window parallels the general role of the black as scapegoat for all manner of thefts, rapes, and other crimes during this period of American history.

The following day the chief of police talks with Trescott of the mob's pursuit of Johnson. The doctor asks if Johnson was hurt in any way and the chief replies: "Guess there isn't much of him to hurt any more, is there? Guess he's been hurt up to the limit. No. They never touched him. Of course nobody really wanted to hit him, but you know how a crowd gets. It's like—it's like . . ." (p. 79). Obviously the term the chief searches for is "a monster." It is the mob, not Johnson, which is the true monster. As Crane makes clear, the mob includes most of Whilomville, this pleasant little town modeled on Port Jarvis, New York. For all of the dehumanization of Johnson in his windowless sty of a cell, it is the whites who are depicted as inhuman, as witness the case of Jake Winter, father of the hysterical girl at the party. Winter is depicted, once Trescott has brought Johnson home to live over the stable, as "Barking in fiery rage from a respectable distance. As Trescott imperturbably turned the mare's head down the road, Winter stood on the porch, still yelping. He was like a little dog" (p. 93).

However, the whole series of traumas and degradations has mastered Johnson, who now sits on a box by the stable, finally turned into an almost inanimate object that the town's boys dare one another to touch as a feat of bravado, just as they might dare each other to enter a graveyard. Even Jimmie Trescott, the boy whose life Johnson saved, joins in the game of baiting this thing with its "heavy crepe veil . . . swathed about its head" (p. 85).

The novel ends on such an oozingly sentimental note that Crane can only have meant it to be ironic. It is the scene of Trescott trying to comfort his wife, whose tea party has been boycotted, now that Johnson is back. It seems obvious that, weighing his duties towards Johnson as against those to his wife, Trescott will allow her needs to win out. For Trescott simply is not strong enough to hold out against his wife's tears and the chill wind that "was whining around the house, and the snow [that] beat aslant upon the windows" (p. 102), as an obvious reminder of the town's iciness, of Judge Hagenthorpe's cold and relentless logic, of Jake Winter's hatred. It is all too much for Trescott.

As for Henry Johnson, he seems to know he is doomed. The last glimpse we have of him, as he sits surrounded by the mocking boys (a kind of anti-Uncle Remus), is this: "The monster on the box had turned its black crepe countenance toward the sky, and was waving its arms in time to a religious chant. . . . The wail of the melody was mournful and slow. They [the boys] drew back. It seemed to spellbind them with the power of a funeral" (p. 90).

Small wonder that Johnson sings his own funeral dirges; no one else will mourn him when he is buried away in some state institution. Johnson is like the rest of black America at this time in history: the only things left him are the old hymns of slavery and the hope for release from the hideousness of this life on earth.