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Kaylee Weatherspoon

Born in Newark, New Jersey to a well-established New England family, Stephen Crane grew up surrounded by relatives with a strong sense of heritage and belonging.

He descended from a long line of farmers, sheriffs, judges, ministers, and others who served integral and respected roles in their community (Cazemajou 6). Eventually forsaking much of the tradition of his family, Crane regularly found himself isolated, ideologically, at least. As the youngest of fourteen children, Crane received little attention from his mother, a vocal activist in the Temperance Movement, or his father, a devout Methodist minister who died when Crane was nine years old. His unconventional upbringing was later reflected in a peculiar personality; Crane was remembered as being a hurried, anxious man who, feeling inescapably compelled to write, often agonized over his work (Berryman, "Crane's Art" 32). He traveled widely, especially in the years following the success of his 1895 novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, reaching destinations including New York, Nebraska, Mexico, Greece, England, and Cuba (Berryman, *Stephen Crane*).¹

Crane set much of his early work in the urban slums of New England and the battlefields of the Civil War. Consequently, his 1898 Western story "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" stands out against the backdrop of

¹ The author would like to thank Dr. Diya Abdo of Guilford College, in whose class this paper was first drafted.

his previous work. Yet, the themes underlying his portrayal of the urban Northeast and that of the “wild” West are strikingly similar. Both are in keeping with Crane’s commitment to writing honestly and authentically, even when telling stories outside of his own personal experience, as he famously did in *The Red Badge of Courage*. To Crane, as for many others, the West was a reservoir of simple American authenticity. It follows then, that the shift of the American West from an untamed, unfragmented “honest frontier” to a mimicker of the East would disturb him. He witnessed the culmination of the settlement of the West in his lifetime, as the U.S. Census Bureau declared the frontier officially closed in 1890 (“Following the Frontier Line”). In his short story “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” Crane communicates his anxiety over what he saw as the loss of the ideal American West through his depiction of Western ideals, Jack Potter’s personal transformation, and imagery of death and decay.

To Crane, the Western lifestyle was a more ideal, enlightened, pure experience. Many of his own personal ideals were tied to the values he associated with the American West. Crane’s contemporary Frederick Jackson Turner even lauded the Western frontier as the wellspring of the individualist zeal so central to American identity (Turner). Above all, Crane saw the West as authentic. He often wistfully compared the “honesty” of the West with the pretentiousness and falsehood of his own native New England. Sending his book *George’s Mother* to fellow writer Hamlin Garland, Crane inscribed it “To Hamlin Garland of the great honest West/From Stephen Crane of the false East” (Collins 146). Crane, though he recognized its

imperfections, saw something uniquely honest in the West that he had not found in the East. As observed by Michael Collins, “[though] the world of the Western story...is clearly not a perfect world...it is, in its simplicity, a pure world, an ideal world” (139). Crane acknowledges that the rugged hardship of life on the frontier is far from Edenic, yet he idealizes its unstained simplicity.

Another indicator that Crane’s own ideals were heavily influenced by Western culture (or at least his perception of it) is that he forsakes the patriarchs/folk heroes of his own native culture in favor of Western heroes; he pays homage to Western legends rather than to those of his native New Jersey. The actual Jack Potter, Crane’s main character’s (likely) namesake, was a legendary cowboy responsible for driving and establishing the Potter-Bacon Trail through northeast Texas in 1883 (Thalacker 180). Interestingly, the legendary Jack Potter’s father was a Methodist circuit preacher like Crane’s own father (Sorrentino, “Stephen Crane’s Sources” 53). Jack Potter would have been locally well known in Texas, though he was by no means a folk hero recognized as far as New Jersey (Thalacker 180). Crane could have chosen a different name for his protagonist without affecting the Western quality of “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky.” The saloon was necessary. The sheriff was necessary. The notorious town drunk was necessary. But the sheriff’s name could have been nearly anything; Crane could have taken the process of naming his characters as an opportunity to pay tribute to influential Easterners or to thank individuals responsible for shaping his own early experience in the East. Yet Crane chose Jack Potter, providing his main character with the Western heritage that he himself lacked.

The Jack Potter of Crane's creation is immensely dynamic, undergoing a fundamental change from frontier hero to domesticated husband as the story progresses. Returning to town as a married man after many years as a bachelor, Potter is understandably nervous: "As a matter of truth, Jack Potter was beginning to find the shadow of a deed weigh upon him like a leaden slab" (535). Potter's anxiety over his new role and identity mirrors Crane's own concern over the changing role and identity of the West in the wider American context. Crane continues his description: "[Potter], the town marshal of Yellow Sky, a man known, liked, and feared in his own corner...had gone and...actually induced [the girl] to marry him" (535). Potter is in many ways the Western hero—a focused, able leader of the frontier community—before his marriage, at least. The structure of Crane's description gently implies that Potter was no longer the same popular, lauded, respected man he was before his marriage since he had been softened by his bride. Critics argue that the bride is the embodiment of domesticity itself as she grounds Potter, making him into a family man. Her presence alone is enough to tame the fighting streak in Potter and in his rival Scratchy Wilson, as well, in the final confrontation scene. In the same way that the "West Cure" (the male counterpart to the "rest cure" prescribed to anxious women of the time) promised renewed vigor, health, and competence for overworked Eastern men of the time, Potter's removal from "the West" through his marriage is framed as detrimental to his health and ability to function (Will 296). He is no longer an ideal Westerner. Crane seems to suggest that a hero is not a hero without the West.

Through his marriage, Potter's formerly simple, archetypal character

is so entangled with domesticity, obligation, and the “Eastern” experiences he had on the train that he no longer meets the expectations of the Yellow Sky community by fighting Scratchy. Potter has changed so that, in a broader sense, he no longer fits the mold of the Western hero who uses a pistol to establish order. The Western hero is not “furtive and shy” as Potter was on the train; he is confident, commanding, and charismatic. The Western hero is definitely not married; “[Potter’s marriage] makes him as much of an anomaly in a Western story as he is on the Pullman” (Collins). He is no longer the lone, untameable cowboy he once was. Jack Potter through his marriage becomes a mundane, subdued, even Easternized family man. Jules Zanger observes that “[Potter’s] bourgeois transformation involves a loss of grace, confidence, and potency, precisely those attributes of manliness so central to [Theodore] Roosevelt’s and [Owen] Wister’s image of the heroic Westerner” (162). By marrying, Potter forfeits the very qualities that he shared with the Western hero, and he is no longer extraordinary or exotic to the Eastern reader. If a character as classically Western as the sheriff/marshal of a frontier Texas town can be so easily tamed, then the survival of Western culture itself is brought into question. Even to the Eastern consumer—especially to the Eastern consumer—who has never experienced any of the “true” West, the contamination of that romanticized Western culture is the demise of hundreds of childhood daydreams and bedtime stories, and thus the death of an ideal.

Emphasizing the immediacy of the decline of the West, Crane weaves allusions to death and decay into “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky.” Behind each moment that qualifies the story as a Western is an allusion

to death or decay. For example, in the *Weary Gentlemen Saloon* there are six men: a salesman, three Texans, and two Mexicans. A typical group of pallbearers also includes six men (Burns 37). Symbolically, at least, the town appears to be preparing for a funeral when Potter returns with his bride. Potter's name, likewise, is a potential allusion to Potter's Field, the tract of land Judas Iscariot bought with the money he received for betraying Jesus (Burns 38). The land, also known as the Field of Blood, was a graveyard for foreigners ("Potter's Field"). Jack Potter possesses the dormant remnants of the fleeting Wild West (a concept foreign and exotic to many Easterners) as Potter's field held the foreigners who had died in Jerusalem.

Also injecting imagery of death into the story, another dimension of meaning in Potter's name is its association with Reuben Marmaduke Potter, a soldier in both the Texas Revolution and the Mexican-American War (Sorrentino, "Stephen Crane's Sources" 52). Reuben Potter won his own fame and contributed to that of San Antonio, Texas by writing the "Hymn of the Alamo" (53). The allusion to a famous veteran of wars of Western conquest contributes to the collection of allusions to death, and this war reference also supplies an element of conflict. Crane could be referring to his own conflict between his New Jersey upbringing and the Western ideals which he came to hold so dear. Reuben M. Potter, coincidentally, was also born in New Jersey (Karras 55).

By dramatizing the Easternization of the West, Crane implies that the West was not simply being domesticated, but destroyed at its core. Marriage serves as a symbol of this doom. When the train is about to stop near Yellow Sky, for example, Crane describes Potter as having a "tight throat and

face, as one announcing death” (Crane 536). As he brings his bride nearer to the town where he was once the hero, Potter becomes increasingly anxious. He is rendered helpless by his own decision to marry—to abandon his identity as the Western hero—and dreads the moment when he must announce the death of his “Western” element to his town.

Furthermore, when Scratchy begins his rampage, the “surrounding stillness” exacerbated by his opponent’s absence seemed to “form the arch of a tomb over him” (Crane 539). Not only is Potter killing the Western culture he carries within himself, but he is also entombing the Western spirit that Scratchy carries within himself. As the story reaches its climax and Potter finds himself unarmed with a gun pointed at his chest, “Potter’s mouth seemed to be merely a grave for his tongue” (540). This description bears similarity to a passage in the Christian New Testament with which Crane, having been raised in a devout Methodist family, would likely have been familiar. In explaining that everyone—both Jew and Greek—is sinful, the author of Romans quotes multiple Old Testament scriptures: “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips” (*The Bible* Rom. 3:13). The Biblical image of the mouth or throat as a grave adds complexity to Crane’s original description. Is Crane saying that Potter is deceptive? Not necessarily, but Potter’s guilt over bringing home his Bride is partially derived from his feeling that he betrayed or deceived the people of Yellow Sky by not considering them in his marriage. The image of poisonous snakes also lends immensity and complexity to the theme of the death of the West. Snakes are often associated with the “Wild West”; Potter has the venom of the West in his mouth, and as he speaks he

is spreading that venom. By marrying without the consultation of his town, Potter is poisoning himself and his community. Through his betrayal, he has destroyed the “Westernity” of his town, poisoning himself, his town’s hero.

Crane also imbues his story with a sense of impending decay, again highlighting his concern that the West was being irreversibly contaminated. Crane’s writing indicated that the deterioration of the West’s authenticity and frankness deeply distressed him. It reveals that he sensed that the truth once held by the West was quickly, fleetingly, irreversibly decaying. Again and again appears the image of an hourglass—a concrete representation of time running out and a symbolic representation of Western values slipping through Crane’s hand as unrestrainedly as grains of sand (Tietz 90). In the final scene, for example, Scratchy Wilson holsters his guns and walks away, “his feet [making] funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand” (Crane 541). Crane affords a place as paramount as his final sentence to the description of tracks in the sand which resemble funnels: he describes an hourglass (Tietz 90).

Crane also includes more delicately woven references to funnels, hourglasses, and time running out, infusing the story with a deep sense of powerlessness in the face of immediate loss. As Potter and his bride approach Yellow Sky, Crane includes the seemingly unimportant detail that “The train was approaching it [The Rio Grande] at an angle, and the apex was Yellow Sky” (Crane 535). Again, the reader finds the hourglass/funnel shape with Yellow Sky at the narrowest point (Tietz 90). The narrowest point in an hourglass is also the point where the sand is moving most quickly, where it is departing from the top bulb of the hourglass at

the fastest rate. If the reader extends this principle to Crane's own linkage of the funnel shape and pivotal moments in the story, *Yellow Sky* is departing from its tradition more quickly and completely than it ever has before. Because Potter married, *Yellow Sky* can never return to the simple frontier town it once was, just as the sand that has slipped through to the bottom of the hourglass cannot return to the bulb where it once was unless the entire system is overturned.

Exploring the sense of rapid decay and destruction in "The Bride Comes to *Yellow Sky*," critic Chester L. Wolford proposes that the central elements of Crane's story are also those informing Homer's *Iliad*: "In both a man returns from a journey bringing a 'bride,' both to avoid confrontations, and both in doing so fail to live up to their positions in the community" (129). In the *Iliad*, Helen's presence catalyzes war and the demise of Troy. Likewise, Potter's bride "precipitates a fall of the old order of *Yellow Sky*" (129). However, there are critical differences between Potter's and Paris' actions. Paris precipitates war by kidnapping Helen, allowing the launching of "a thousand ships," while Potter defuses the conflict that arises when he brings his bride into the community. Another central difference between the two tales is the presence or absence of actual physical conflict. The *Iliad* features explicit war scenes in a social situation so complex that implicit, internal conflict among the characters would have sufficed to create suspense. "The Bride Comes to *Yellow Sky*," on the other hand, though its setting is so conducive to outright, explicit, physical violence, involves only implicit, subtle, allusive conflict.

This absence of conventional conflict is striking. Western stories

generally have two distinguishing features: a gunfight and a “focus on external rather than internal action” (Collins 139). Crane’s tale lacks both. Every moment leading up to the climax (or lack thereof) prepares the reader for a traditional “Wild West” gunfight; however, Crane supplies no gunfight. At the conclusion, it is evident that Potter has stepped out of his role as the Western hero and no longer meets the expectations of his town or, more importantly, of the Western genre.

Though Stephen Crane was fully capable of constructing a story that perfectly met each of the standards of a Western, he didn’t. In 1898, the year Crane published this story, he was ostracized by his family, overwhelmed with insurmountable debt, and plagued with tuberculosis. He had succumbed to the stress of a writer’s life (Bassan, “True West” 16). As his career seemed to progress, Crane himself drifted further and further from the hopeful pursuit of the authentic that he had begun so enthusiastically as a young, impoverished writer. By the time he died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-eight, Crane was no longer the youthful, experimental writer who would even “sleep in Bowery flophouses and stand in blinding snowdrifts with the unemployed” just to find “the real thing” (Bassan, “Introduction” 1). Crane’s friends noted that as his career progressed, Crane fashioned himself into a more of a distant, isolated enigma than a man, and the image he projected of himself became much brighter than the truth of his identity. He was “just making a biography for himself,” one friend joked (Sorrentino 6). In effect, Crane had married the writing profession, taking on all the obligations to publishers and editors and readers to make an alluring identity for himself and write marketable stories. Like Potter, he took his bride

and lost his former authenticity.

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