

The Blue Hotel



Stephen Crane

Stephen Crane: American Author and Poet



Although Crane achieved the pinnacle of his success with *The Red Badge of Courage*, many critics believe that he demonstrated his greatest strength as a short story writer. His major achievements in this genre are "The Open Boat," "The Blue Hotel," and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." Some critics maintain that these three are among the most skillfully crafted stories in American literature.

1871-1900

Place of Birth: Newark, New Jersey

Citizenship: U.S.

Genre: Short story, novel, poetry, journalism

Movement: Realism, Naturalism

Major Novels

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893)

The Red Badge of Courage (1895)

Active Service (1899)

Major Short Stories

"The Open Boat" (1898)

"The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898)

"The Blue Hotel" (1899)

Major Poetry

The Black Riders, and Other Lines (1895)

War Is Kind (1899)

"The Blue Hotel": Background Information

"The Blue Hotel" had its genesis in 1895, during a trip Crane made to Lincoln, Nebraska. There he interfered in a fight in a hotel bar, in which a tall man was beating a small one. Crane wrote to a friend: "Thus I offended a local custom. These men fought each other every night. Their friends expected it and I was a darned nuisance with my Eastern scruples.... So first everybody cursed me fully and then took me off to a judge who told me that I was an imbecile and let me go; it was very saddening."

Crane left Lincoln, and "while changing trains in... some desolate junction town, he saw an unforgettable hotel... painted a light blue." In England three years later, Crane found inspiration in this barroom brawl for "The Blue Hotel," and the building glimpsed briefly on the Nebraska plains became its setting.

Pierce, J.F. "Stephen Crane's Use of Figurative Language in "The Blue Hotel".

South Central Bulletin. 34.4 (1974): 161. Web. 5 Nov. 2011.

http://w3.uniroma1.it/LingueLetterature/images/stories/FileSU/Rubeo_Ossessioni/blue_hotel.pdf>.

"The Blue Hotel": Literary Context

Naturalism, an outgrowth of Realism, is a movement in literature that seeks to capture a believable everyday reality "warts and all" and in doing so often portrays the darker side of human nature.

Naturalism originated as a French movement in literature, the naturalistic writers being influenced by Darwinism and the ideas of Hippolyte Taine. They believed that one's heredity and social environment decide one's character. Whereas realism seeks only to describe subjects as they really are, naturalism also attempts to determine "scientifically" the underlying forces (i.e. the environment or heredity) influencing these subjects' actions. They are both opposed to romanticism, in which subjects may receive highly symbolic, idealistic, or even supernatural treatment.

Émile Zola wrote several texts considered today as the manifesto of naturalism. His works had a frankness about sexuality



along with a pervasive pessimism which exposed the dark harshness of life, including poverty, racism, prejudice, disease, prostitution, filth, etc. They were often very pessimistic and frequently criticized for being too blunt.

"The Blue Hotel": Historical Context

- 1890 Congress establishes the Oklahoma Territory on unoccupied lands in the Indian Territory, breaking a 60-year-old pledge to preserve this area exclusively for Native Americans forced from their lands in the east.
- 1890 Federal troops massacre the Lakota Chief Big Foot and his 350 followers at Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Reservation in a confrontation fueled by the government's determination to stop the spread of the Ghost Dance among the tribes. The incident stands in U.S. military history as the last armed engagement of the Indian Wars.
- 1890 Congress establishes Yosemite National Park at the urging of naturalist John Muir, who argues passionately for the preservation of its sequoia forests.
- 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner, a 31-year-old instructor at the University of Wisconsin, declares the closing of the Western frontier in his seminal lecture, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*.

"The Blue Hotel": Historical Context (cont.)

- 1893 Experts estimate that fewer than 2,000 buffalo remain of the more than 20 million that once roamed the Western plains.
- 1894 Nebraska Congressman William Jennings Bryan -- "The Great Commoner" -- gains national attention as the West's eloquent spokesman against the restrictive economic policies of east coast capitalists, emblemized by the gold standard.
- 1896 William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech against the restrictive gold standard makes him the Presidential candidate of the Democratic and Populist parties, but his appeal to rural voters in the West and South does not carry him to the White House.
- 1899 Robert Parker and his partner, Harry Longbaugh, better known as Butch Cassidy and "The Sundance Kid," lead their "Wild Bunch" in a series of bank and train robberies across the West. When they eventually flee to South America in 1901, the era of the outlaw band comes to an end.

"The Blue Hotel": Cultural Context

Beginning in the 1880s, U.S. naturalism saw a critical revival, as new theoretical developments led to a fresh perspective on the genre—and indeed, on the notion of genre itself. For traditional literary criticism, focused largely on concerns of aesthetic merit and often, if implicitly, moral value, naturalism had been somewhat of a problem: as a genre, U.S. naturalism privileges blunt artlessness and—like Zola—posits an essentially amoral universe. Critical works such as Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, a tour de force of New Historicism, and June Howard's *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, broadly informed by the theoretical developments of structuralism and poststructuralism, examine naturalism as a complex meditation on cultural contradictions faced by U.S. culture at a pivotal moment in its history. Michaels, for example, sees both literary naturalism and debates about the gold standard as part of an entire culture's struggle with the relationship between the material and the ideal—a struggle that, for Michaels, is constitutive of personhood itself. Howard, drawing on the French philosopher Louis Althusser's notion of ideology, argues that naturalism was one way for turn-of-the-twentieth-century U.S. culture to process threatening contradictions in the social order, such as contradictions between the egalitarian ideals of democracy and prominent social and political inequalities of the period. For Howard, the most notable of these are the dominance of industrial capitalism and the increasingly visible presence of groups—a largely immigrant urban working class, women, and African Americans—seeking to be included as agents in U.S. political life.

"The Blue Hotel": Setting

- Time – 12 hour span from the time that Scully picks up the Easterner and the Swede to the Swede's death
- Place – Fort Romper, Nebraska
- Weather conditions – Winter
- Mood – Fearful, confused
- Tone – Dark, tragic

"The Blue Hotel": Structure

1. Description of the hotel
2. Prediction of the Swede's death
3. Events that happen between Scully and the Swede upstairs
4. Fight between Johnnie and the Swede
5. Entrance of the women
6. The Swede leaves the hotel
7. The Swede goes to a barroom and is killed
8. Easterner's confession that "everyone is involved"

"The Blue Hotel": Structure (cont.)

- Power and control – Shifts from character to character
 1. Scully (opening)
 2. The Swede (p. 1803)
 3. Scully (p. 1806)
 4. The Swede (p. 1808)
 5. The gambler (p. 1813)
- Progression of storm
 1. Polar wind (p. 1804)
 2. Cry of the blizzard linked to tragedy/darkness (p. 1807)
 3. Blinding & pelting snow (p. 1809)
 4. More powerful than man (line 8, p. 1811)

"The Blue Hotel": Characters

Characters ' collaboration in the death of the Swede

1. Swede's character
2. Gambler's character
3. Easterner – Chooses to do nothing
4. Bartender – Listens but does not get involved
5. Cowboy – Does nothing but swagger around
6. Johnnie – Cheated and fought
7. Scully – Should have let Swede go after the first card game

"The Blue Hotel": Conflict

- Man vs. man
- Man vs. nature

"The Blue Hotel": Symbols

- The blizzard – Nature's harshness
- Colors – Moral statements
 1. Blue – Independent, profane free spirit (the West); alienation from and insignificance in the universe
 2. Brown-red and green – Morally strict (the East)
 3. Red – Danger, passion, death
 - A. Two crimson spots on the Swede's cheeks
 - B. Red snow
 - C. Red lamp

"The Blue Hotel": Imagery

- The Easterner says the gambler was “a kind of adverb” – Because the Gambler does not know the previous events (the prediction) before he kills the Swede, he can only be regarded as the adverb (which accelerates the actual movement of killing), and other people are the other factors (other part in the sentence) that triggers Swede’s death.

"The Blue Hotel": Themes

- Alienation
- Fate vs. moral choice
- Fragility of the human community