Crane, Hart (1899-1932)

Definition: **Crane, (Harold) Hart (1899–1932)** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

US poet. His long mystical poem *The Bridge* (1930) uses the Brooklyn Bridge as a symbolic key to the harmonizing myth of modern America, seeking to link humanity's present with its past in an epic continuum. His work, which was influenced by T S Eliot, is notable for its exotic diction and dramatic rhetoric.

He committed suicide by jumping overboard from a steamer bringing him back to the USA after a visit to Mexico.

**quotation**

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**Summary Article:** **Crane, Hart (1899-1932)**

*From Encyclopedia of the Environment in American Literature*

From Hart Crane's early lyric poems to his final epic, *The Bridge* (1930), Crane inscribed the landscape — mediated by architecture — with desire. Geography is experienced through, and merges with, the body; the built environment offers to extend and complete America's promise of liberty and connection. His poems convey a sense of motion, of hallucinatory journeying through fragmented cities and landscapes — gulfs, valleys, gorges, meadows and shorelines — in search of an elusive stable place. The ocean also makes its presence felt: tides and waves splash through most of his poems. But if seas and the vastness of outer space compel and inspire, they also terrify. So it is the structures that link voids to our concealing crevices and shorelines — the liminal spaces — that are the sites Crane's work typically probes and explores. The Brooklyn Bridge is the central trope for telling America's story, emerging from the same locus that Walt Whitman evoked in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": a nexus of movement of people and bodies of water.

Harold Hart Crane, the only child of Grace and Clarence Arthur Crane, was born in 1899 and died in the sea off the coast of Florida in 1932. He grew up in Warren, Ohio, where his father's maple syrup business grew into a candy empire. When his parents separated, Crane went to live with his maternal grandparents in Cleveland, inhabiting a tower room in their home, a setting which provided him with a sense of power and security. Crane's high school attendance was sporadic, interrupted by trips with his mother, including one to a family plantation off the coast of Cuba, where he made two suicide attempts. An early poem, “C33” (1916) was named after the cell Oscar Wilde inhabited, the perfect symbol of Crane's sense of entrapment as a gay man in the Midwest. In the winter of 1916, Crane succeeded in escaping to the promised land of creative and sexual freedom, New York City. He began to sign himself Hart Crane, leaving behind the name Harold, though his parents continued to use it. His escape, however, was not permanent; financial struggles kept him returning to Ohio, attempting to work for his father but failing to satisfy his demands. The final visit ended disastrously, when his father publicly raged at him for eating with African American employees. Like “C33,” Crane’s “Black Tambourine” (1921) reveals the nightmare of entrapment, the dilemma of the “black man, forlorn in the cellar,” as he identified himself with the oppressed and outcast. Though Crane found work writing advertising copy, the job sapped his spirit and increased his taste for alcohol.

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In 1923, Crane returned to New York City, eventually renting an apartment in Brooklyn at 110 Columbia Heights, with a view of the Brooklyn Bridge. It was fortuitous that Crane rented the same apartment from which the son of the bridge’s designer, Washington Roebling, crippled by the process of building the bridge, watched his father’s work completed. The bridge would eventually become the unifying symbol of Crane’s modernist epic. Crane’s New York era was marked by periodic excursions to the countryside upstate, where he would recover from his excesses and be rejuvenated. Uprooted by the sale of his childhood home, he purchased land near his friends in Connecticut, but never managed to build on it. Always the need to earn money would drive him back to the city, with all its temptations, ecstasies and debilitating. But even if For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen (1923) began by evoking the perennial poetic lament about the city’s intrusions on the soul, ultimately this urban island itself, laced with bridges, dark alleys and watery edges, is the landscape that compels Crane most and best expresses humankind’s aspiration.

His first book, White Buildings, published in 1926, expresses his vision of the ideal city, as Manhattan seemed to be from across the river, and attempts to reconcile the mystical ideal with the modern world. Crane had read Eliot’s The Waste Land and found it too grim; he wanted to leave room for joy and laughter (which does not lacerate) in his vision of the human condition in the industrializing world during and after the Great War. Charlie Chaplin had achieved this in his film, The Kid, which inspired Crane’s “Chaplinesque” (1922) with its “grail of laughter of an empty ash can” and “a kitten in the wilderness” of the city, suggesting the possibility of kindness and rescue amidst the stern gaze of the social order. The book contained the first poem that had earned him money (10 dollars from The Dial): “My Grandmother’s Love Letters” (1919). The poem describes crumbling letters, found in an attic, where they had merged into the very substance of the structure. It concludes,

Yet I would lead my grandmother by the hand
Through much of what she would not understand;
And so I stumble. And the rain continues on the roof
With such a sound of gently pitying laughter [lines 23-27].

The narrator’s love has more to do with the rain than with the shelter, which cannot protect him. Crane must continue to take readers by hand, leading them from “A land of leaning ice” (“North Labrador”), through “Bleecker Street, still trenchant in a void” (“Possessions”), to “New thresholds, new anatomies!” (“Wine Menagerie”). The liminal space of a threshold offers the promise of a freedom prevented by gender codes.

The sea appears briefly in most of the shorter lyrics, finally taking the main stage in the three-part poem “Voyages” (1924), inspired by Crane’s love affair with Emil Opffer, a sailor. The sea’s erotic promise sings through lines such as these: “Star kissing star through wave on wave unto / Your body rocking!”(III: 13-14). After the completion of this sequence, and “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen” (the 1923 poem which attempted to recreate the experience of awe that Helen evoked for the ancients, in the modern cityscape), Crane began to conceive of a still longer poem centering on the symbol of the Brooklyn Bridge. In Whitman’s day, the river could only be crossed by the ferry he extols in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” a poem which delighted in the human parade and sought connection between the poet and future readers. Now the Brooklyn Bridge connected Brooklyn and Manhattan across the East River.

From conception to publication, The Bridge was eight years of agony: drunken bouts and despair followed by inspired bursts of writing. The opening inscription from the Book of Job seems innocuous:

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“From going to and fro in the earth / and from walking up and down in it” could describe the human condition — certainly Crane's condition. But this was actually the original exile, Satan's, account of himself. The poem places Crane in this long line of walkers, beginning with the first rebel, and passing through Whitman, who walked through his *Song of Myself*. Whitman spoke through the voice of another voyager, Christopher Columbus, in one of his last poems, and Columbus and his discovery comprise the subject of *The Bridge*’s first section, “Ave Maria.” Here, earth's “rondure” (line 43) is for Crane, as it was for Whitman, a necessary concept, suggesting the connectedness of past and present; reconciliation, rather than conflict. The poem takes an historical trip through time, grounding the stories in the “macadam” (“Van Winkle,” line 1) — the pavement itself. Columbus, Pocahontas (John Smith), Rip Van Winkle (Washington Irving), and others, time travel, trying to make sense of the present landscape by means of the past. In “Cape Hatteras,” Crane sees “our native clay” as the “eternal flesh of Pocahontas” (*The Bridge*, “Cape Hatteras,” lines 17-18) and directly invokes Whitman, asking “if infinity / Be still the same as when you walked the beach” (lines 47-48). The sense of motion that Crane's rhythm conveys far exceeds the pace of Whitman's walking as the poem gathers force. Columbus's ships become the Wright Brothers’ planes (their first flight, when Crane was just four, had a deep impact on him). Whitman's vision of Manifest Destiny's westward expansion takes to the sky as “taut motors surge, space-gnawing, into flight” (line 102). The sequence concludes with “Atlantis,” a poem written much earlier, which required the preceding sequence to justify its hopeful vision. The poem weaves together elements of the American landscape, though its ending suggests that only a mythic island could “hold thy floating singer” (line 88). The Brooklyn Bridge is Atlantis, the lost island whose existence offers hope of redemption for the colonizers’ sins upon the continent. It suggests that the violated, feminized body of America, identified with Pocahontas, can, through Whitman's song translated into the modern idiom, be “reclaimed” (*The Bridge*, “Cape Hatteras,” line 221).

After the completion of *The Bridge*, Crane received a Guggenheim fellowship, which enabled him to live in Mexico, where he believed he could experience a deeper, more primitive connection to the land's mythic origins than he could find north of the border. His drinking, however, got in the way of any significant output except for his final poem, “The Broken Tower.” It was on his voyage home that he leapt to his death. Critical opinions on Crane's achievement have improved since his death. The poems are dense and draw on experiments made by both symbolists and imagists, transformed into what Crane would make his own “logic of metaphor.” They reward repeated readings, with a dizzying tour through landscapes wherein the “Promised Land” becomes “Hollywood's new love-nest” and “volcanoes roar” (*The Bridge*, “Quaker Hill,” lines 33-38). Crane's greatest works pulsate with the freedom and energy of the urban landscape while the sea laps at the edges of his poems, both as threat and promise. The compelling places are not stable sites, but transitions between places — bridges, railway tracks — even rivers lead somewhere else. The Brooklyn Bridge unites, prayerfully, fragments of American life littered throughout the continent, from the vulgar screams of advertisements to the soothing whispers of hidden coves, and offers hope that these can ultimately be redeemed.

**Bibliography**


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