Crane, Stephen (1871 – 1900)

Summary Article: Crane, Stephen
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1871–1900, American novelist, poet, and short-story writer, b. Newark, N.J. Often designated the first modern American writer, Crane is ranked among the authors who introduced realism into American literature. The ninth child of a Methodist minister, he grew up in Port Jervis, N.Y., and briefly attended Lafayette College and Syracuse Univ. He moved to New York City in 1890 and for five years lived in poverty as a freelance journalist.

His first novel, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893), a grimly realistic story of slum life, was unpopular but gained the young writer the friendship of Hamlin Garland and William Dean Howells. Crane’s next novel, The Red Badge of Courage (serialized in newspapers in 1894, pub. 1895, restored ed. 1982), brought him wide and deserved fame. Set during the Civil War, the novel traces the development of a young recruit, Henry Fleming, through fear, illusion, panic, and cowardice, to a quiet, humble heroism. This remarkable account of the emotions of a soldier under fire is all the more amazing since Crane had never been in battle. On the strength of the novel he served as a foreign correspondent in Cuba and in Greece.

Around 1897 Crane married Cora Taylor, who ran a brothel in Florida. His marriage, coupled with his unorthodox personality, aroused scandalous rumors, including those that he was a drug addict and a satanist. Because of this slander Crane spent his last years abroad; he died of tuberculosis in Germany at the age of 28.

Crane was a superb literary stylist who emphasized irony and paradox and made innovative use of imagery and symbolism. Thus, although realistic, his novels are highly individual. Crane also wrote superb short stories and poems. The title stories of The Open Boat and Other Tales (1898) and The Monster and Other Stories (1899) are considered among the finest stories in English. His two books of epigrammatic free verse, The Black Rider (1895) and War Is Kind (1899), anticipated several strains of 20th-century poetry.

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