

Hart Crane: A Romantic Poet of the Complex Genre of High Modernism

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For many decades Herold Hart Crane, an American poet, who played a very important role in the development of Modern American Literature in the early decades of 20th century, had been considered as a romantic poet by many critics for his romantic verses. His poetries are considered not only the reflection of the contemporary social phenomenon, ideology, and thoughts, rather they are prophetic. On the other hand, in the early decades of 20th century, in American society, modernism marked a simultaneous movement which tremendously affected the emergence of new values in field of politics, economy, lifestyle, literature, and literary thoughts. The influence of rapid industrializations and the First World War not only changed the philosophy of human life, but also changed the writing style of the contemporary American writers. The new crowded urban life, which is a result of rapid industrializations, and the fear of war made the human being selfish. Humans lost his romantic attitudes towards the literature. A complexity emerged. Hart Crane also could not avoid this complexity. If we study his life style, philosophy of life, and poetic diction, we will surely confine his intelligence not between romanticism and modernism separately. Rather, we can call him a Modernist Romantic poet. In short, Crane can be declared as a romantic poet of the complex genre of high modernism.

Keywords: contemporary, complexity, despair, disappointingly, experimentation, imagery, imitation industrialization, modernism, optimism, romanticism, rhythmic, heterosexual, homosexual, relationship, revolution, disappointingly, urban, vulgarism

Introduction

Crane's version of American Romanticism expanded from Walt Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his most ambitious work, *The Bridge*, he expressed the vision of the historical and spiritual significance of America in an elated way. He symbolized America's constructive future, and the unique identity in a Romantic way. In the book, *Essays of Four Decades*, Allen Tate wrote, "Crane was one of those men whom every age seems to select as the spokesman of its spiritual life; they give the age away" (1968, p. 296). The poems of Crane reveal his literary philosophy, thoughts, and interests in both tradition and experimentation, merging a rhyming structure with cacophonous contemporary imagery. Like the other modernists, he focused on social aspects involved in made sense in the context of the time period. The industrial revolution has changed the rural, pastoral, peaceful, and romantic life into technology-dependent different and difficult life. Cities were growing fast and larger. For

the sake of searching jobs and better life, the rural people started to shift from small towns to big cities. The streets of big cities became crowded. Crime pollution, etc., emerged and people started to face many problems in their city life. Naturally, the imagery which the contemporary poets used in their writings was a complete reflection of modern urban society and city life where Hart Crane took part.

His Life and Philosophy

Crane was born in Garrettsville, Ohio, on July 7, 1899, to a middle-class family. The name of his father is Clarence A. Crane and mother is Grace Edna Hart. Hart Crane lived with her grandmother in Cleveland most of his life. His grandmother had a large library where he got an extensive source of knowledge. There he found all kinds of books including different versions of literary works of featuring poets like Victorian Robert Browning, Ralph Waldo Emerson of America. Both poets have a great influence in Crane's poetry. At the age of 17-18, he studied the writings of philosopher Plato, novelist Balzac, and romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. He was often absent from the educational institutes because of family problems. He passed the Entrance in 1916 and went to New York City to study.

Due to his family reason, Hart's study did not go so well. He left college and began to study about fine arts specially paintings in order to introduce himself as a literary figure in the literary world of art, culture, and literature. He started to think literature as a profession. While living in Cleveland, he met a painter and got inspired by him. Later he came to New York and met many more artists. He learned from them about different genres of painting. He studied extensively on contemporary Irish poets, William Yates and James Joyce, as well as writers such as France's iconic poet Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud.

Crane was financially dependent on his parents. On the other hand, he used to selling and advertising *Little Review* magazines which promoted the works of modernist poets James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, as well as the traditional writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and Sherwood Anderson. After reading the reviews of these authors' books, he became angry with many of them. Crane was also involved with the selling of Robert Frost's famous review magazine *Seven Arts*. Both *Little Review* and *Seven Arts* influenced him very much and consequently he was inspired to produce his own literary writings. Within five years, he wrote many printable verses. At this time some of his writings were printed in a local journal called *Pagan*. From then on, he became interested in both traditional and experimental writing. He expressed contemporary imagery with jarringly rhythmic variations. Although many critics praised the early poems of his life, he did not elevate and reprint them.

Crane first saw New York City as lively and inspiring. At that time New York City was the center of cultural activities in American society. It was a great business hub as well as a popular entrance of immigrants from different part of the world too. His parents were divorced in 1917. His mother and grandmother lived with Crane. His mother had always tried to keep in touch of Crane to get relief from mental exhaustion and pain. But Crane became frustrated because of his financial insufficiency. On the other hand, his relationship with his father was not good. Due to family pressure and continuous financial problem, he tried to join the army. But due to his physical unfitness, he was not able to join the army. He then left New York and moved to Cleveland. There he got a job and started to work in an arms factory. It was the most vulnerable period of the history of the world. It was the 1st World War. In this period people saw the first time the greatest crisis in their lives which was totally man

made. The human philosophy has been changed. Like the other contemporary poets, Crane became astonished and also frustrated to see the cruelty and brutality of human civilization. After the war, Crane started working as a reporter in a newspaper called *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. By the influence of his father in 1919, Crane joined as a clerk in a shipping company. After a few months of his service there, he returned to Ohio to work at his father's company. But there was no compromise between him and his father because of their position with the mother. Crane declared, explicitly, that he would no longer cooperate with his father in any task, especially because of his father's attitude towards his mother. After leaving his father's company, he started working at an advertising company in Cleveland. Crane got same type of job in New York City too. But finally, due to his familial issues and personal problems, he left Cleveland.

Literary Review of His Works

Crane's poetry is dense, soaked in language, shot through with a burning eroticism, and governed by what he called "the logic of metaphor" (Hammer, 1997, p. 163). Often enigmatic, labyrinthine, or just plain opaque, his poetry is well worth the effort one may need to put in to appreciate it fully. And as with any great work of art, one can discover something new with every repeated reading. By 1922, Crane had already started writing a lot. Most of those poems were published in a collection called *White Building*. Among these, the poem *Chaplinesque* was very important (Simon, 1958). He produced this great piece of poem after watching Charlie Chaplin's famous comedy film *The Kids*. In this poem he depicted the chief character a fun-loving, mischievous tramp that represents Crane, the poet. The poet compares himself to the main character in the film, saying that even though the main character's imitation may seem insignificant, it is intriguing. According to Crane, the optimism and consciousness of the film match the poet's own plight. On the other hand, the vagabond seems to ignore, neglect, and distress at the sight of the man, but here he points to his innocence. So, the poet writes:

We will sidestep, and to the final smirk
Dally the doom of that inevitable thumb
That slowly chafes its puckered index toward us,
Facing the dull squint with what innocence
And what surprise! (*Chaplinesque*, Simon, 1986, p. 11)

In his poem *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen* in 1920, Crane expressed a kind of optimism mingled with romanticism. In this poem we see that during a contemporary wedding ceremony, Faust jumps into a car on the street and Helen arrives at a jazz club. Here Faust represents poet himself who is seeking for ideal beauty. Helen, on the other hand, has made a beautiful image. She embodies that *ideal beauty*. In the poem's conclusion Helen's beauty is depicted as a jubilee of the time. Cranes, in particular, recognized the inventiveness of the time, especially overcoming the frustrations of the then World War (Yannella, 1974).

The poem *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen* rarely expressed Crane's passion at that time. Shortly, after writing this poem, he returned to New York City and joined an advertising firm. He felt that the job was boring and ungrateful. In this desperate situation, he was disturbed by various kinds of riots, bustling of huge traffic of a metropolitan city, and many unforeseen incidents on the streets of New York. He found that he lost his mental peace in this busy city of buildings. At one time, his imagination and the power of attention began to weaken. Then he realized that this instability would lead him to emotional distress. So he fled to nearby

Woodstock. There he spent some days with his friends and relatives.

Immediately after passing some days in Woodstock, Crane received resurrection from his dumb life and philosophy and returned to New York. Soon afterwards, he fell in love with a sailor named Emil Opffer. The relationship between Emil and Crane was full of intense sexual passion and love even though it has some occasional turbulence. This deep passionate love affair led him to create *Voyages*, a poetic series of love (Simon, 1966). A critic named Quinn describes Crane's poem as a celebration of the transforming power of love. Moreover, he asserts that since the lover's dedication to the human being is variable, it can be beloved even after the change of time. Here he described love and passion as a servant of salvation for all of us by presenting the falling of rivers into the sea. The sea is symbolized here as resentment and calmness as love:

Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.
O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
Is answered in the vortex of our grave
The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise. (*Voyages*, Simon, 1986, p. 34)

It is often regarded as one of Crane's poems for his brilliant portrayal of the brilliant spirit and mysterious revival. Another famous critic, R. W. B Lewis in his book *The Poetry of Hart Crane* declared *Voyages* as a lyrical masterpiece (Lewis, 1967).

In 1924, he finished writing poetry *Voyage*. In the meantime, he created his most ambitious poem, *The Bridge*. Crane wanted to decorate this long poem to be an alternative verses to T. S. Elliott's masterpiece, *The West Land*. Through a poem about 15 paragraphs, 60 pages wide, Crane wanted to establish a scene of what he called "the American Experience". As a symbol of that poem, he embraced the Brooklyn Bridge and spread vividly to people of different places, especially from Christopher Columbus and the legendary Rip Van Winkle to contemporary New England's natural landscape and subway imagery on the East River. In his poem *The Bridge*, Crane tries to present America as a unity of construction. Moreover, he sought to transform American optimism and loyalty to patriotism into extraordinary realities as a source of encouragement. When Crane was working on *The Bridge* in 1926, his poem compilation *White Building* was published. Through this compilation of poems, he earned a genuine grandiose respect in the literary world. His works of art and imagery are reminiscent of French iconic romantic poets, Baudelaire and Rimbaud. But at the same time, there was a speculation that Crane was a very confused artist. His poems were a form of imprecise and indiscipline. In some of his poems, he sometimes uses sound instead of sense. For example, Edmund Wilson wrote in his *New Republic* article that though Crane could sometimes move us, the emotion was oddly vague. In another article, *The Shores of Light*, he says, Crane possessed "a style that is strikingly original—almost something like a great style, if there could be such a thing as a great style which was ... not ... applied to any subject at all" (Wilson, 1952, p. 200).

Furthermore, editor of *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe charges that his poetry is in harmony with the irrational genre. They come from assumptions. She declares,

that emotional dynamics are not to be confused with any absolute order of rationalized definitions; ergo, in poetry the *rationale* of metaphor belongs to another order of experience than science, and is not to be limited by a scientific and arbitrary code or relationships either in verbal inflections or concepts. (Hammer, 1997, pp. 281, 282)

His famous book, *The Building*, was published when Crane's relationship with his lover Emil Opffer began to fade. Crane again suffered from depression. In order to enlighten himself, he became intoxicated. During that time, his mother was often in conflict with Crane. He most likely wanted to get close to his father. But shortly after his father's death, he plunged himself into a deep frustrations and despair. Crane then left his mother and traveled to Europe. Eventually, Crane met an American expatriate community there. He tried to form a rapprochement with prominent American figure in the community in Paris. Notable, the contemporary famous publisher Harry Crosby was among them.

Crane did a little writing while he was in Europe. After staying in Europe for some time, he returned to the United States and became involved in self-destructive acts. His book *The Bridge*, on the other hand, was disappointingly presented to critics. Although some critics acknowledged his potential, he was unhappy with the success. It takes a lot to shake his confidence. Although critics have deemed his book a failure, they have praised Crane for his creative commitment. William Rose Benet, in his article the *Saturday Review of Literature*, stated that Crane had failed in creating what might have been a truly great poem. Nevertheless, *The Bridge* is regarded as a fascinating book. Moreover, he declares that the book *The Bridge* reveals potencies in the author that may make his next work even more remarkable.

During this creative slump period when he was sunk into a deep depression, while living in Europe, he applied to an institute for fellowship to study American poetic sensibility and European culture. His application was granted. Meanwhile he decided to travel to Mexico. There he was probably involved in heterosexual relationship with Peggy Baird, the wife of the famous contemporary literary giant Malcolm Cowley. Crane rarely used to write there. Once he realized that his writing ability was significantly reduced. On April 27, 1932, Crane jumped into the Gulf of Mexico in hopes of getting rid of all the frustrations that swallowed while traveling on a boat with his lover Baird. He was only 33 years old at the time of his death.

In the last decades, Crane has received some strong critical reevaluation by some major critics and literary figures. In the years immediately after his death, Crane's reputation was as a failed romantic poet. Allen Tate wrote in his famous book, *Essays of Four Decades*, that Crane's artistic achievement was admirable, but unavoidable. Tate also pointed out that Crane has solved his romanticism in his poetry, as in the earlier romantic, in solving the ultimate problem of emotional tendencies. He was driven to destruction just as he reflected his will and art as his own image. "Crane proved that it cannot be solved", said Tate (1999, p. 320).

Critic R. P. Blakmur in his book *Language as Gesture* (1936) and *The Lion and the Honeycomb* (1955), which have been out of print for some time, termed Crane's literary works as a production of inexperienced, failure and imperfections due to his incompleteness.

Around the 1970s and 1980s of the last century, the literary scholars had re-explored Crane's theory of life and romantic mood. They keenly discovered that like an outsider, he had vaguely and figuratively expressed the social and historical conditions of life. According to Tim Dean, Crane's sealed and confined language to sexual vulgarism is a complete reflection of the contemporary war affecting society and human psychology. Hart Crane just tried to express the reality. Dean and other critics showed that Crane's passion for complexity had paved the way for his poetry. Dean later on expressed, "potential of poetic forms to alter ostensibly hegemonic constructions of sexuality and subjectivity" (Dean, 1996, pp. 83-109).

In other way, Crane fuses rich Elizabethan diction with the scientific and popular language of modernity, rejuvenating the former and ennobling the latter, and with both evoking the mysticism of his 19th-century forebears, Whitman and Melville. But he achieves this only sparingly.

In fact, Hart crane, according to his philosophy of life and literary works, was a born poet, totally devoted to his art; Crane suffered his warring parents as well as long periods of a hand-to-mouth existence. Moreover, he also suffered a lot from his honesty as a homosexual poet and lover during a period of his American life which was totally unsympathetic and cruel to his sexual orientation in his verses. Despite much critical misunderstanding and neglect, in his own time and in ours, Crane achieved a unique poetic style yet unparallel to American tradition.

Conclusion

Although many critics treated Crane as the last romantic poet, he was one the most influential modernist poets in the beginning decades of 20th century. Like other modernist poets he rejected all traditional forms and themes of life and poetry. Rather, these poets adopted to write their literary works often without rhyme or meter. They preferred to use imagery which was correlated with the contemporary city life, modern civilization, and society's immense hassles and problems instead of nature. They tried to present the extreme reality which was often governed by frustrations and despair with a pessimistic view than the romantic poets that came before them. Here, at this point, Crane followed a different view. Although, there is no way to deny that he suffered from depression and despair a lot in his life in America and out of America, Crane accepted and welcomed heartily the advancement of the society. He found out that hope plays an important role in literature, his poems were very optimistic in style. In other words, we can refer him as a Modernist Romantic whose style was Modernist but his optimistic view in his poetries was Romantic.

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