Stephen Crane Essay, Research Paper

Stephen Crane was the youngest of fourteen children. His father was a strict

Methodist minister, who died in 1880, leaving his devout, strong mother to raise

the rest of the family. Crane lasted through preparatory school, but spent less

than two years in college, excelling at Syracuse in baseball and partying far

more than academics. After leaving school, he went to live in New York, doing

freelance writing and working on his first book Maggie, A Girl of the Streets.

His times in New York City were split between his apartment in the Bowery slum

in Manhattan and well-off family in the nearby town of Port Jervis. Crane

published Maggie, a study of an innocent slum girl and her downfall in a world

of prostitution and abuse, in 1893 at his own expense. It was especially

scandalous for the times, and sold few copies. It did attract the attention of

other critics and writers, most notably William Dean Howells, who helped Crane

receive backing for his next project, The Red Badge of Courage. Published in

1895, The Red Badge was quite different from Maggie in style and approach, and

brought Crane international fame and quite a bit of money. Rather than plod

through moral tropes, the book is subtle and imagistic, while still being firmly

entrenched in the realism of the late 1890’s in America. Crane’s rich portrayal

of Henry Fleming’s growth through the trials and terrors of a Civil War battle

betray the fact that he himself had not yet seen any fighting or battles when he

wrote the book. Many veterans of the Civil War (only thirty years had gone by

since its end) praised the book for capturing the feelings and pictures of

actual combat. Bolstered by the success of The Red Badge and his book of poetry

The Black Riders, Crane became subsumed with ideas of war. He was hired to go to

Cuba as a journalist to report on the rebellion there against the Spanish. On

the way to the island, Crane was in a shipwreck, from which he was originally

reported dead. He rowed to shore in a dinghy, along with three other men, having

to swim to shore and drop his money in the sea to prevent from drowning. This

experience directly led to his most famous short story "The Open Boat"

(1897). For various reasons, Crane stopped writing novels during this time and

moved primarily to short stories?probably because they could sell in magazines

better but also because he was constantly moving. When staying in Jacksonville,

Florida, he met the owner of a brothel, Cora Taylor. She accompanied him to

Greece as he reported on the Greco-Turkish War for New York newspapers; and

stayed with him until the end of his life. At this point, rumors abounded about

Crane, few of them good. There was talk of drug addiction, rampant promiscuity,

and even Satanism, none of them true. Crane was disgusted with them and

eventually relocated to England. After reporting on the Spanish-American War and

Theodore Roosevelt’s famed Rough Riders, Crane returned home to England. He then

drove himself deeply into debt by throwing huge, expensive parties, reportedly

at Cora Taylor’s insistence. While he could now count Joseph Conrad, H. G.

Wells, and other authors in his circle, most people sponged off of Crane and his

lavishness. He worked on a novel about the Greek War and continued writing short

stories and poetry, at this point to pay off his large debts. The stress of this

life, compounded by an almost blatant disregard for his own health, led to his

contracting tuberculosis. He died while in Baden, Germany, trying to recover

from this illness. He was not yet 29 years old.