The Blue Hotel Study Guide

The Blue Hotel by Stephen Crane

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Stephen Crane is known for his creation of stories about regular people, who experience extraordinary events for a brief time in their lives. The Blue Hotel is an excellent example of this. One of the reasons his audience is so varied (from learned scholars to more common folk who enjoy pulp fiction) is that his characters themselves are so varied. If one picks up almost any of his stories, there is at least one character with whom he or she can identify.

The book traces the fears of five men during a winter in the late 1800's and takes place in a small Nebraska town in a space of less than twenty-four hours. Sometimes called a study in fear, it is full of the harshness of the old west, and will appeal to anyone who enjoys rough-hewn excitement. Being accused of cheating at cards, a young man must defend his personal identity. His father must give up some protection of his son, and a Swede must prove his worth. The tensions created by this scenario come to a head, when the two must fight to prove they are worthy of the reputations of the West. After the battle is decided, the final duel with fear proves to be the most significant of them all.

The Palace Hotel in Fort Romper, Nebraska, is known by most people as the Blue Hotel, owing to the fact that its proprietor, Pat Scully, painted it a color much like that of a blue heron.

Pat meets the train as it arrives twice daily, luring its passengers to his establishment. One day he gets and Easterner, a Swede, and a cowboy to follow him back to the hotel as potential guests. Arriving on a very cold, snowy, winter day, they are met in the front room of the hotel by Scully's son, Johnnie, and a grey whiskered local farmer who are playing cards around a large wood stove.

Soon Scully and his three new guests join them around the bright yellow glow of the fire. The Swede has been very quiet most of the time until he suddenly asks the unusual question of how many men have been killed in the room. Scully's son, Johnnie, is somewhat amazed by that, as he has no idea what the Swede is talking about.

The Swede becomes uncomfortable with the people and the atmosphere at the hotel, thinking in his own mind that the people are banding together to kill him. Deciding to leave, he begins packing his things when Scully finds him in his room. Not wanting to lose a paying guest, Scully gives him a drink of whiskey that he has hidden, and the Swede has a change in attitude and decides to stay. After drinking the alcohol, his personality changes drastically, and he becomes boisterous as he returns to the fire to join the others.

After the evening dinner, the card game resumes with Johnnie and the Easterner teamed as partners against the Swede and the cowboy. After a short time, the Swede accuses Johnnie of cheating, a very serious accusation during the late 1800's. They are unable to settle their differences, and finally decide to go out into the blizzard and fight it out with their fists.

At first the battle is close, however, eventually the Swede defeats Johnnie rather soundly. Scully, who acted as referee during the scuffle, helps his son back into the hotel as the Swede is in his room packing to leave.

Working his way into town through a snowstorm, the Swede arrives at a saloon and enters. There are few people inside, just a bartender, and four men talking quietly at a table in towards the back of the room. They consist of two businessmen, the local District Attorney, and a local, professional gambler who has proven to be reputable.

The Swede begins to drink whiskey, and finally tells the bartender that his facial wounds are from a fight with the Blue Hotel proprietor's son, and that he beat Johnnie up pretty badly. The others try to ignore him, which causes the Swede to get mad and begin to demand that they drink with him. Everyone quietly refuses.

Finally, he walks to the table where the four men are talking amongst themselves and puts his hand on the gambler's shoulder. The gambler politely asks the Swede to remove his hand, but the Swede grabs him around his neck. With that, the gambler quickly pulls out a knife and stabs the Swede. Everyone leaves the saloon, and the Swede is left alone and dead on the floor.

Several months pass, and the cowboy is in Dakota Territory, when the Easterner arrives with some mail and a newspaper. He announces that the gambler got three years in jail for the killing. The two argue briefly as to the justice in that, and finally the Easterner tells the cowboy that Johnnie was in fact, cheating just as the Swede accused him. The cowboy blames the bartender in part because he did not stop the altercation before it got out of hand. However, the Easterner says that blame should be put on all the people involved in the events of the day, as they did not pay attention to what was coming and didn't try to stop the fight. With that, the cowboy laments, "Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?"

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Stephen Crane is known for his creation of stories about regular people who experience extraordinary events for a brief time in their lives, and the Blue Hotel is an excellent example of this. One of the reasons his audience is so varied (from learned scholars to more common folk who enjoy pulp fiction) is that his characters themselves are so varied. If one picks up almost any of his stories, there is at least one character with whom they can identify.

The book traces the fears of five men during a winter in the late 1800's and takes place in a small Nebraska town in a space of less than twenty-four hours. Sometimes called a study in fear, it is full of the harshness of the old west, and will appeal to anyone who enjoys rough-hewn excitement. Being accused of cheating at cards, a young man must defend his personal identity. His father must give up some protection of his son, and a Swede must prove his worth. The tensions created by this scenario come to a head when the two must fight to prove they are worthy of the reputations of the West. After the battle is decided, the final duel with fear proves to be the most significant of them all.

The Palace Hotel in Fort Romper, Nebraska, is painted a bright blue. As a result, it is know as the Blue Hotel. It's owner, Pat Scully, is an Irishman with a flair for sales, and meets the train each morning and afternoon to lure potential guests to his establishment. One cold winter day he meets a Swede, a cowboy, and a retired tailor from the East. With boisterous hospitality he leads them to the Blue Hotel, the first structure one passes on leaving the train station for the two hundred yard walk into the town.

Going inside, they pass a yellow wood-burning stove where Scully's son is playing cards with an old farmer who has a sandy-grey moustache. After quickly rinsing off with ice-cold water, the three guests return to the stove for a few minutes before going to the noon day meal which is called, "dinner."

Scully's daughters serve the meal, and afterward they return to the stove. The Swede continually eyes each of the men in the room very carefully, and, laughingly, says that some of these Western towns can be dangerous.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first scene is set at a hotel in a Nebraska town in the winter. The weather outside is cold, but the group by the fire is comfortable and warm. Several characters are introduced and are described as totally different from each other. The proprietor of the hotel is a somewhat boisterous individual with a flare for selling his rooms to visitors who arrive at the train station. He is also somewhat of a mediator, solving problems of his guests and others that arise.

The reader meets one guest, a quick-eyed Swede, who immediately becomes suspicious by his sly looks at the other guests and his unusual high pitched laugh.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

As a blizzard begins outside the Hotel, the farmer and Scully's son begin playing another game of High Five. After a brief quarrel, the farmer leaves the game and that causes the Swede to break into his high pitched, somewhat nervous, laugh,

A new card game is formed with the Swede and the Easterner as partners, while Johnnie, Scully's son, and the cowboy are paired. The cowboy turns out to be a raucous player who is very animated and this thrills Johnny, while the other two at the table are somewhat sullen. During a lull in the game, the Swede suddenly says to Johnny, "I suppose there have been a good many men killed in this room." This outbreak causes the others in the room some surprise.

The boy asks what he means by that, and the Swede answers that he is certain the boy knows what he means. Johnnie assures him he does not. The Swede gives him a wink and says that he is no tenderfoot. He knows what goes on in places like this in the West. With that, the cowboy also asks what the Swede meant by that statement. The Swede replies that the cowboy knows too, and that everyone there is against him.

The cowboy is astonished by this statement and says so. Backing away in a great show of fear, the Swede all of a sudden tells them that he knows they are going to kill him. While the others are astonished by his outburst, the Swede continues to say over and over that he knows they are going to kill him. When Scully enters the room, the Swede continues the tirade, saying over and over that he will leave the hotel, and he knows they are going to kill him.

Astonished by this unusual person, Scully tells him he will not go anywhere, and begins to blame his son for some wrongdoing that he is certain must have been committed.

Chapter 2 Analysis

A new and relaxed card game among the three guests and Johnnie sets the mood for the second chapter, but changes almost immediately when the Swede begins an outpouring which results in the others thinking what he has said about himself must be true, that he is crazy. The reader gets a sense that something is definitely wrong with him, and there is a slight concern that he may be dangerous.

It is not known what problems the Swede has, but it is obvious that something is wrong. The words used towards the end of the chapter have a chilling tone, such as "killed," "troublin'," "crazy," and "loon."

While Scully becomes the mediator in the unusual encounter that takes place, he doesn't have any idea what actually happened, so he blames his son who is as shocked as the adults.

The specific language used by the characters creates a high degree of excitement, and the slang becomes more obvious as the level of excitement increases.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Scully goes to the Swede's room to try to figure out what is going on. Asking if he really thinks the others are out to kill him, the Swede answers that he does, and, with a very shaky countenance, begins to pick his bag as if to leave. Scully tries to change the subject, and mentions how the town is growing and will have an electric streetcar, a new railroad, churches and a big factory, but the Swede doesn't pay much attention, instead asking how much he owes Scully. He is told nothing, but the Swede tries to leave seventy-five cents anyway which is refused.

Trying to keep him from leaving, Scully gets an idea, and asks the Swede to follow him. Terribly frightened by that, the Swede trembles, but finally follows him into the hall where he is shown some pictures of Scully's two children. One was named Carrie, but she died. The other is Michael, his oldest boy, who is now a lawyer in Lincoln. The Swede is more concerned with the dark shadows down the hallway until, with a friendly gesture, Scully pats him on the back in a familiar sort of way, and gets the Swede to smile slightly.

With that small success, Scully begins wildly looking around the room and under the bed for something. He finally pulls out an old coat that is wrapped around a bottle of yellow-brown whiskey. Offering it to the frightened Swede, he backs away and looks horrified, but he finally takes it to the encouraging shouts of, "Drink!" Soon, laughing wildly but with hateful eyes, the Swede tips the bottle and begins to drink in quick gulps.

Chapter 3 Analysis

An unusual scene is created when the reader sees, very vividly, an encounter between the guests of the hotel and Scully's son, Johnnie. The Swede is characterized as a crazed individual assuming the others are going to kill him. When Scully enters, he takes control of the situation, however it gets even more bizarre as the two go to the Swede's room. Trying to get the Swede distracted from his apparent fear of getting killed, Scully first takes him to view pictures of two of his children, one of which died. Seeing that isn't helping much, Scully tries a new tactic by offering the crazed man whiskey. Whatever the Swede's problems are, they seem to be magnified by alcohol.

The mood of the story changes completely after the Swede drinks the whiskey, but it still continues to be eerie, and the author uses the hotel proprietor as an unsuccessful moderator who switches his method of controlling the situation from being a conciliator to one who uses his sales skills to calm the confused Swede.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Johnnie, the cowboy, and the Easterner remain by the stove and discuss the situation. While the Easterner offers little opinion other than that the Swede is terribly frightened,

Johnnie thinks he is the "doddangedest Swede" he's ever seen. With that the cowboy says that he doesn't think the man is a Swede, but is actually a Dutchman.

The Easterner is more thoughtful and thinks maybe the Swede has read too many dime novels and has put himself into one of them. The cowboy is more concerned that he they might get snowed in and could have to be around him longer.

After a while, Scully and the Swede enter the room, laughing uproariously and asking for a place near the stove. The Easterner and the cowboy give way, but the boy remains sullen and remains where he is, so his father yells for him to move. With that, the Swede bravely tells him it is all right, and not to make him move.

The Easterner and the cowboy exchange glances, wondering what has caused this change in the two men so quickly. Around the fire, the Swede dominates the conversation with all kinds of creative profanity. Finally saying he is thirsty, and declining Scully's offer to get him water, he walks off with an air of dignity, as an executive might to get it himself.

After he leaves, the others question why Scully is putting up with him, to which Scully replies that he runs a hotel, and that all guests deserve to be treated with great respect and that no guest should ever leave his hotel to be a guest somewhere else, because he was afraid.

Chapter 4 Analysis

There appears, on the surface, to be a change in the characters of Scully and the Swede. When the Swede leaves the room, however, Scully becomes his old self again, and appears to have been doing his job as a hotel manager in keeping a guest from leaving.

The Easterner, while the quiet one, is portrayed as one who thinks a great deal before speaking. His assumption that the Swede has put himself into a situation from a dime novel is met with some agreement from the cowboy and Johnnie.

A drastic change has come over the Swede. His fear seems to be gone, and is replaced with aggressiveness. When the chapter ends, he is seen differently. However, whatever change has occurred, he still appears to have a complex personality that is not yet fully understood by the other characters.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The six-o'clock supper is served, and the Swede continues his domination of the conversation. While Johnnie eats without interruption, the Cowboy is extremely amazed at this outpouring, and the Easterner remains quiet and observing. Through all this Scully almost encourages the Swede in his continual madness, while his daughters, who must serve and replenish their food, shy away in fright whenever possible.

Moving from the supper table to the warmth of the stove, they decide on another game of High Fives. Since Scully has to go to meet the evening train, the Swede asks Johnnie to play. Initially, they stare at each other with some hate, but finally, Johnnie agrees to play and the Swede and the Easterner are paired against Johnnie and the cowboy.

When Scully gets back from meeting the train, he sits and quietly reads his newspaper while the card game continues. All at once he hears the dreaded words, "You are cheatin'!"

While only seconds elapse, all four card players rise at once and Scully arrives at the table at almost the same instant. Pushing the Swede back, the cowboy and all the others begin to yell with rage and confusion. The Easterner and Scully hold his son back, while the cowboy continues to struggle with the Swede. After a great deal of pushing and shoving and continued threats and counter-threats, the room becomes quiet, and Johnnie says that no man is allowed to say he cheats. The Swede continues to say that he did, over and over again, and with that, they decide they must go outside in the snow to settle the argument.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The characters are all, at a minimum, uncomfortable being around the Swede who finally blows up at Johnnie and he says cheated. The characters react in some anticipated manor depending on their background. The cowboy is described as dropping his jaw in the manner of a cow, the Easterner becomes pale, as one would expect a shy man might do, and talks in calm, guarded terms. The two combatants glare mercilessly at one another and yell threats.

Crane has created a very tense situation with an almost second-by-second account of the events that lead up to the altercation. At one point he stops the story to talk directly to the reader by noting that any room can take on any character depending upon its occupants and their mood.

As with the others, Chapter 5 ends with a sense of tension, and the reader expects to get a quick closure to the incident at the beginning of the next one.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

As the men prepare to go outside, the Easterner and the cowboy are very nervous, but Scully and Johnnie are resolute and, with the Swede following, they go into the cold, windy, and very dark night that has just a hint of blue over the entire area. Initially, the wind is so strong they cannot hear each other talk, so the go around to the side of the building away from the wind.

The Swede bawls out that he doesn't have much chance against all of them, but Scully assures him that no one will interfere. Even with that, the Swede is not convinced he won't be fighting everyone. However, the arrangements are made and the two men square off. The Easterner feels like he is freezing to death, but the cowboy stands rigid, eagerly waiting for the start. Continuing his role Scully becomes the referee.

"Now!" Scully shouts, and it begins. As they leap toward each other, the Easterner lets out his pent-up breath while the cowboy jumps up in the air with a yell. It has started! At first, their struggles in the deep snow are but a haze in the darkness, but gradually, a bloodied face appears clearly out of the ruckus. As the fight progresses, the cowboy becomes agitated and yells for Johnnie to, "Kill him, Johnnie! Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!" and his face is contorted like an agony mask seen at Halloween.

Still the referee, Scully tells him to keep still. All of a sudden Johnnie's body flies away from the Swede and falls to the ground. Before the Swede can jump on him, the cowboy interferes and tells him, "No you don't. Wait a second." The Swede momentarily backs off while Scully bends over his son and asks him if he can continue. With a shaky and unsure voice Johnnie says that he can.

The Easterner by now is pleading for them to quit, saying that they have done enough and they should let it go at this. Scully, ignoring him, tells the Cowboy to let the Swede go and slowly, this time, the combatants go at it again. After Johnnie deftly dodges a tremendous blow, he knocks the Swede down. The Swede quickly gets up, and suddenly Johnnie's body again flies through the air, landing in a bundle on the ground. With that, the Swede walks away by himself and stands by a scraggly tree to wait the outcome as the others console Johnnie.

Answering his father's question, "Are you any good yet, Johnnie?" Johnnie answers that he is not. He can't go on; the Swede was ... "too - too - too heavy for me."

Scully tells the Swede that he won. The fight is over. With that, the Easterner realizes how cold he really is, and is surprised he's not frozen to death. The cowboy is thinking of new curses to yell at the Swede, but the victor simply walks into the hotel by himself without a word.

Johnnie asks his father in a rather strong voice if he hurt the Swede at all, to which his father assures him that he did. Walking back inside, the Easterner can think of nothing but the hot stove and almost huddles against it. The men, other than the Swede who is heard packing his things in his room above them, sit quietly around the stove. Then, the door to the kitchen bangs open, and the two daughters and Scully's wife clamber into the room saying, "Shame be on you, Patrick Scully." Then, they take the aching Johnnie into the kitchen to be cared for. With that, the remaining three men are left to their own contemplations.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The stereotypes of the characters are again noticeable. The Easterner continues to act frightened and nervous, wanting it to end quickly. The cowboy is nervous but in a more agitated sense, and Scully maintains the role of a parallel between the hotel manager, referee, and concerned father. Johnnie and the Swede both concentrate on the duty they have agreed to. After the action, the women play the roles expected of them, shedding shame on the father for having allowed this to happen, concern for the beaten son, and the need to mend the wounds of the victim.

The scene is pictured vividly with freezing, blowing snow, darkness with a trace of blue, the far off pinpoint of light from the railway station, and the sounds, or lack of them, due to the howling wind.

Once again the tension of the prelude to and the fight itself is conveyed to the reader in an extremely detailed and accurate fashion. The emotions of each character observing the action are different, and the reader understands these differences based upon the personalities carefully built to this point. Johnnie cries at being beaten, but wants some assurance that he made some showing of himself by asking if he hurt the Swede at all.

After the action, the characters who return seek the comfort the stove symbolizes, and the Swede continues to be alone in his own world.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

As the men reflect on the results of the conflict, the cowboy says he would like a chance to fight the Swede, where upon Scully continues with his role of referee and tells him that it would not be right. As the Swede enters the room from upstairs, he maintains his swagger, and asks how much he owes. The cowboy asks him why he is so happy, and as Scully immediately sees problems coming, he raises his hand for them both to stop. With that the cowboy spits carelessly into the cardboard box. Scully tells the Swede he doesn't owe him anything, and the Swede returns with the statement that maybe Scully is the one who owes him. As the Swede opens the hotel door to leave, he mimics the cowboy, saying, "Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!" with an ironical humor.

After he is gone, the cowboy and Scully jump up furiously and both relate how they would like to fight the Swede. The more agitated they get, the more Scully slips into his Irish brogue, describing how he would like to get back at the Swede. Each takes a turn at describing what he would do, almost like blows of the fight.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The scene remains at the stove, which now represents a safe place in an otherwise confused setting, and the cowboy once mores uses the cardboard box as a receptacle for his disgust toward the Swede. Scully must again maintain his role of referee and hotel manager, but manages to relate his displeasure at the Swede for his actions against his son through imaginary blows into the air.

As he gets more excited, Scully releases the Irishman in himself as he slips into the Irish slang more and more. Ironically, the Swede suggests that Scully owes him something for thrashing his son, and reestablishes his superiority and masking his fear by mocking the cowboy as he leaves the hotel.

Here it may be noted that of the four main characters, Scully, his son, the Easterner, and the cowboy, the two who seem most isolated are the Easterner and the Swede and both remain nameless.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

As chapter eight opens, the lonely Swede is stumbling through the snowstorm toward town, battling the gusting winds, and he finally finds an open saloon in the otherwise quiet town. The Swede enters, and, glancing over the occupants, notices the bartender and the only other four men in the saloon who are quietly drinking toward the back. He orders a whiskey and finishes it almost immediately. The bartender, true to his trade, pretends not to notice the bloodstained face of the Swede, instead commenting on the nasty weather. The Swede replies that it suits him just fine, and pours himself another whiskey from the bottle. Soon after, the Swede pours himself still another glass of whiskey and asks the bartender to join him. The bartender declines, but does ask about the Swede's face. He says he's been in a fight, and when asked who it was with, says it was Johnnie Scully at the hotel.

The men drinking are quietly curious, but they also decline to drink with the Swede, who pours himself more whiskey. As he drinks more, he becomes more boisterous, almost demanding that the others in the saloon drink with him, but they still politely decline. Through years of experience, the bartender does his best to defuse the situation by agreeing with everything the Swede says, but without encouraging him even more.

Finally the Swede walks to the men at the table and demands that they drink with him. When he puts his hand roughly on the gambler, the bartender yells for him to quit. The gambler also asks the Swede politely to take his hand off his shoulder, and the result is that the Swede grabs the gambler's throat. Immediately there is a flash of steel that shoots forward, and the Swede falls in astonishment to the floor and dies.

All the men leave the bar, including the bartender who leaves in search of help and companionship. The Swede is left alone on the floor of the saloon, staring blankly at the cash register that shows, "This registers the amount of your purchase."

Chapter 8 Analysis

The significance of the exchange of monetary debt that took place between the Swede and Scully is made more prominent as the Swede stares in death at the cash register that reads, "This registers the amount of your purchase." Initially the Swede owed Scully money for his stay at the hotel, but when the stay is cut short, it appears that he doesn't owe anything. Upon leaving the hotel, the Swede announces that he doesn't owe anything, and that Scully may even owe him something. The last exchange is the final, ultimate purchase made by the Swede in paying with his life.

The gambler is an ironic character in the final paragraphs of the story. While he has the least acceptable occupation of all the people in the tale, he appears to be the most

respected, however, still pictured as somewhat of a loner due to his trade. This reflects the fate of the lonely Swede.

The fact that the District Attorney is at the table provides a staunch witness, and represents the formal justice of the actions that happen there. The two townspeople are not described, representing those of the community who do not get involved in acts such as what happens in the saloon, and the banker, as one would expect, tries to get away from the scene and its implications.

For the last time, alcohol has directed the Swede's personality away from inner fear to exterior fear which is very real.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Several months have passed, and the cowboy is on a ranch in Dakota. Interestingly, the Easterner rides up on a horse and appears even to possibly be the mailman. He carries news of the results of the trial of the gambler in the newspaper and tells the cowboy the gambler got three years for the crime. At first it seems like a light sentence, but as they continue to discuss it, the cowboy puts part of the blame on the bartender, saying that he could have stopped the killing before it got out of hand. The Easterner becomes somewhat outraged, saying that the whole event was the fault of all five men: Johnnie, Scully, the cowboy, the gambler, and himself. Everyone who took part encouraged the tragedy by his lack of action, but the gambler is the least to blame as he only finished what had been started before the final stage in the saloon. The Easterner points out that any of them could have helped to avoid the death.

With that, the cowboy says innocently, "Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?"

Chapter 9 Analysis

The final irony is presented with the fact being stated that Johnnie was, after all, cheating. Even though there appeared to be nothing at stake, the Swede put his life at stake by confronting Johnnie, and, ironically, lost it.

Fear has gone full circle. What started as inner fear in the Swede has affected the lives of all the characters, but, of course, none more than that of the Swede.

Characters

Pat Scully

Pat Scully is the proprietor of the Blue Hotel, and the one who chose the bright color that makes it stand out from all the other structures in its area. He is an older man, somewhat of a salesman, and he likes to greet the passengers departing from the train to entice them to stay at his establishment. He often wears a fur cap pushed down on his head causing his ears to stick out from his head.

His speech is that of an uneducated man who sometimes uses words that are more sophisticated than his normal vocabulary. He often mispronounces these words, giving him an almost comical speech.

Pat must play the real role of a service person, satisfying individuals who have special wishes and needs, while at the same time taking care not to offend any one else.

Johnnie

Scully's son is named Johnnie. He plays cards with locals and some hotel guests, and, other than that, the reader has little information about him. He is quick to act when called a "cheat," but it is evidently true, he does cheat at cards. Therefore, he may react more violently than he might when innocent of the accusations if he feels embarrassed or threatened by them. His fear is that of being labeled a "cheat." And of not being brave enough to stand up to the Swede.

The Old Farmer

The farmer has sandy-grey whiskers, and maintains the warmest place by the fire, enjoying playing cards with anyone.

The Swede

The Swede is a guest brought to the hotel by its proprietor, Scully. He is traveling with a cheap suitcase from New York where says he was a tailor for ten years. A complex man, he constantly looks with some concern at the others in his presence.

He harbors inner fears about the West, and doesn't understand reality from make-believe. Some of his own fears are within himself and self-created, while others are real, but generally ones he causes himself. The Swede tends to confront some of his fears by overreacting to them, and this action tends to be what causes his inner fears to become real ones and the dominant factors in his life.

The Cowboy

A cowboy, bronzed from being outside in the elements, is one of the guests at the Blue Hotel. He is on his way to Dakota, and his name is Bill. Bill is quick to form opinions and also to share them with other people.

The Easterner

Mr. Blanc is a small, silent man from the East who has a demeanor that says little about him. He is referred to as the Easterner, and is somewhat shy but intelligent, and tends to think before he speaks. He is unsuccessful in his attempts to change the course of events.

Bartender

The bartender is a typical bartender who tries to stay out of other people's affairs unless he is invited to comment about something of interest. He is slow to act, but generally understands the situations as they form. His role in the service industry makes him the most like Scully of any other character in the story.

The Professional Gambler

One of the men drinking quietly in the saloon is a professional gambler. He is well respected in the town, and known as, "square." He is a dignified man whom the townspeople would stand up for, and has a wife and two children so he is not unlike most of the other men in the community. He is described as a small, thin man.

Two Prominent Businessmen

There are two businessmen at the table in the saloon who are not described in any other way than as "prominent." They represent the majority of men who do not want to be involved with anything which would be scrutinized negatively.

The District Attorney

A reliable witness of the stabbing, the District Attorney lends credibility to the act of the gambler, and, in the final chapter, of justice.

The Banker

The banker who plays cards in the saloon leaves as quickly as possible when there is trouble, not wanting to be associated with any action that may be seen as unprofessional.

Objects/Places

The Train Station

The train station is home to a long line of freight cars, and generally, one passenger car. It stands about two hundred yards from the town itself, and at night it's pinpoint of light from the window is the lonely light visible in that direction.

The Blue Hotel

The actual name of the Blue Hotel is the Palace Hotel, and it is located at Fort Romper, Nebraska. It is painted a relatively bright blue, certainly an unusual sight to Easterners as they leave the train station, and a stark contrast to the earth tones of the other buildings in the area. It stands somewhat alone on the prairie, about two hundred yards from the town itself. In some ways it parallels the Swede, being alone, but also standing out from others. It is a complex place, bright on the outside but dark and shadowy on the inside.

The main area where guests congregate centers around a large wood burning stove which glows yellow when quite hot. There are but two small windows in the entire room. The hallway is seemingly dark, with little light from windows making it somewhat gloomy.

The Hotel Stove

In the central room of the Blue Hotel stands an enormous wood stove that is the center of attraction for the guests. When it becomes very hot it glows a bright yellow. Besides being the center of the room it stands for warmth, security, and generally, comfort.

Cardboard Box

A cardboard box is filled with sawdust that has turned brown from tobacco juice spit into it. It is often used to punctuate a statement or activity and often represents contempt.

Basins of Water

When Scully takes the three new guests to their rooms, they are presented with three bows of icy water to wash their faces in. This act is followed by the sharing of one towel.

The Swede's Room

The Swede's room at the Blue Hotel is upstairs, and dark with casting shadows, and is across from Scully's room. It appears to be foreboding and nightmarish in its description.

Yellow-Brown Whiskey

Scully pulls a coat covering a bottle of brownish-yellow whiskey from under his bed, and gives it to the Swede and encourages him to drink it.

Card Table

The card table used at the Blue Hotel is a small board that is supported on four sides by the players' knees, and is unstable and unsupported.

Scene of the Fight

The fight takes place outside the hotel on the side most protected from the icy wind. No snow falls as the fight takes place, but great swirls of wind and blown snow make visibility difficult at times. There is a darkness tinged with blue from a faint moon, and the colors are almost monochromatic. A small patch of grass appears where the wind has blown the snow clear of the frozen grass.

The Saloon

An open saloon stands alone in an otherwise silent town. Inside, a bar runs down one side with scrolls in the shape of birds drawn on the mirror behind it. There is a bright cash register that shows the final amount of each purchase.

The saloon represents activities of the town that are not made public nor are particularly desirable. It appears to be slightly dark and foreboding.

Social Sensitivity

The primary social concern in Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel," set in a very small Nebraska prairie town called Fort Romper (probably Omaha), is the plight of the stranger in the midst of a seemingly threatening group of "insiders" whose ways and attitude toward the stranger are difficult to understand, even though there is no language problem.

The story shows how easily such a stranger's failure to understand "the lay of the land" may lead to personal exasperation and then to some act of violence—by, or upon the person of, the stranger. Under such conditions of social tension, something as seemingly innocent as a card game played for fun may turn ugly and cause a life-threatening situation.

Another social concern is the easy morality of small towns on the Western frontier in the late nineteenth century.

There was, first, the proneness to physical violence among men in public places such as bars and hotels, and as a corollary the carrying, and ready use, of deadly weapons (here, a knife figures significantly in the plot). This is hardly surprising, given the difficulty of maintaining law and order, and the added difficulty of protecting oneself under changing social conditions and the gradual settlement of the American West (Nebraska gained statehood in 1867). A second feature of the easy morality of a Western frontier town, Fort Romper for example, is illustrated by the attitude of the residents toward a familiar figure: the gambler, described in the present story as a "thieving card-player" who occasionally bilked a careless and mentally incompetent farmer, to the contemptuous amusement of the important men of Fort Romper.

Oddly, this gambler was "known as 'square,'" as "a thoroughbred"; he was a gentle family man (with a wife and two children) of quiet dignity living an exemplary life that was generous, just, and moral to an extent that would shame the consciences of most of Fort Romper's citizens.

Yet another social concern, articulated in various ways by the temperance movement of the nineteenth century, is the danger (and implied evil) of drinking. The protagonist, known only as the Swede, becomes drunk on raw whiskey, acts increasingly irresponsibly, and sets in motion a calamitous series of events.

Techniques

"The Blue Hotel" has generated a seemingly endless amount of literary criticism. Almost thirty-five pages, exclusive of bibliography, in Michael W. Schaefer's A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Stephen Crane (1996) are devoted to editorial summarization of the dozens of critical studies alone, covering a plethora of philosophical, psychological, theological, and ordinary literary aspects of the story. Critics have argued over such matters as the nature of the strangers, the Swede's character and significance, the cause of the events leading to the Swede's death, Crane's imagery and symbolism, his structuring of the story (particularly the last section, with its philosophy about how many people were really involved in the Swede's death), his aesthetics, and his own psychology that led him to write the story the way he did.

It is not enough to lump this story with ordinary, well-written Westerns of his day or our own. Crane seems to have had a personal agenda in mind, based on his own experiences. Among the autobiographical elements that are directly or indirectly reflected in his stories, included: breaking with the moral code and lifestyle of his conservative parents and family (his father was a Methodist minister) to take as his consort a woman who operated a bawdy house; his journalistic endeavors as a war correspondent during the Spanish-American War and other battle actions; his involvement with the slums, taverns, and vaudeville theaters in New York; his travels in the U.S. and Mexico; and his great desire to be close to action, even at the risk of his life. One example of autobiographical embeddings is in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898), whose underlying pattern is a vaudeville program. In "The Blue Hotel" some of the possibly autobiographical "embeddings" are: Scully's insistence on showing his dead daughter's picture to the Swede; the last scene, in which the Easterner sermonizes about group guilt, saying such things as that the gambler isn't "even a noun," but rather "kind of an adverb," and that usually between a dozen and forty women are actually "involved in every murder;" the unexplained reason for the Easterner being in Fort Romper at all; and the Easterner bringing papers and letters to the cowboy near the Dakota border.

The occasionally jerky, spasmodic narrative style of "The Blue Hotel" has been noted in the literary criticism, but that tendency is also found elsewhere in Crane's fiction. It suggests a motionpicture camera sweeping over a dramatic scene, pausing now and then to record a particularly telling event or human response to something said or done by others. This gives the effect of a series of brief "takes" by the camera that does not linger on any one scene but provides the "feel" of the events. An almost dreamlike quality may be found here, as elsewhere in Crane's work, suggesting through seemingly out-of-place story elements that his characters and scenes are embodiments of ideas emerging sometimes haphazardly from some deep pocket of his imagination, rather than fictive puzzle pieces fitting together to make a discernible picture.

For all its conventional narrative style of the third-person limited-omniscient observer, "The Blue Hotel" is remarkably modernist in that it reveals, through the character of the Swede, alienation, dis continuity with the past, motivational elements rooted in the

unconscious (the dreamlike quality), and in sum: the individual within a private world of experience and sensation, and within an outer world of some semblance of order.

An additional feature of Crane's narrative process is his occasional affected or extremely awkward language, stemming possibly from a number of sources, including his readings in cowboy and Western fiction. Crane himself wrote, "Scully's speech was always a combination of Irish brogue and idiom, Western twang and idiom, and scraps of curiously formal diction taken from the story-books and newspapers." Random examples of his uncomfortable, strangely suggestive diction follow: "Probably the silence was while a second elapsed"; "The barkeeper took his coin and maneuvered it through its reception by the highly-nickeled cash-machine"; ". . . although the room was still lighted with the anger of 'men . . . .'"

Themes

Themes

By far the most important theme in the story is alienation and its dangerous consequences to the individual who feels estranged from the surrounding group, becoming vulnerable to the point of paranoia and self-destructive behavior.

The oddly-behaving Swede, one of three strangers in town (the others being the Easterner and the cowboy), is such a person. However, only he feels so different from the others around him that he fears for his life; in fact he continues to draw unfavorable attention to himself by his emotional instability.

Another theme concerns honesty or lack of it, in one's dealings with others.

Crane reveals the town's curious double standard when judging the acceptability of an individual's behavior. A professional gambler in Fort Romper, though a recognized "thieving card player," is considered to be the type of person labeled "square." He is described as generous, just, and a moral family man. That he preys on "an occasional unwary traveler" coming in on the train, or "reckless and senile farmers," proud and overly self-confident, is not considered a character flaw; they know "he would never dare think of attacking their wisdom and courage." But he is not regarded as respectable by the elite of Fort Romper, and is not even permitted as a spectator in the rooms of a prominent new social club.

However, he accepts his rejection so straightforwardly and gently that his standing in the community is enhanced.

On the other hand, Johnnie, son of Pat Scully, who runs the hotel, seemingly cheats at cards. There is a suggestion of his cheating early in the story when he upsets an old farmer who is playing cards with him. The farmer cuts the game short, and at the end of the story the Easterner insists that Johnnie was cheating. However, the Easterner earlier told Johnnie's father (after some thought) that he hadn't seen anything wrong in the card game, and at the story's end regretted that statement. In a crucial passage, the Swede directly accuses Johnnie of cheating, which the boy steadfastly denies, and a fierce fight breaks out between the accuser and the accused. At the end of the story the other two strangers (cowboy and Easterner) meet and discuss the events of the game. When the Easterner says that the Swede might have escaped killing "if everything had been square," the cowboy (a staunch defender of Johnnie) takes umbrage and browbeats the Easterner with arguments about everything not having been square: the Swede's claiming that the boy was cheating, the Swede's behaving ridiculously, and after that the Swede's going into the saloon and practically asking to be wounded. But the Easterner insists that the boy was cheating. He had actually witnessed the deed.

A third theme is that of guilt. The climax of the story is a saloon episode in which the gambler fatally stabs the Swede, who has been physically attempting to coerce him into having a drink.

Sometime later the cowboy and the Easterner meet, and discuss the news about the murder trial, from newspaper reports.

The gambler received a three-year sentence, which they agree was light, but they feel sorry for him; the cowboy, who has hated the Swede (whom he took to be a Dutchman) all along, and who blames the bartender for not stopping the fight, now indicates to the Easterner that the gambler did not deserve any sentence, and that the Swede should not have said that Johnnie was cheating in what was, after all, a game played not for money but for fun. They discuss the matter of whether everything was square, prior to the killing, and the Easterner suddenly launches into a philosophical mini-sermon on guilt. "We are all in it!"

he exclaims, and then argues that the two of them, and Johnnie, Scully, and the gambler played a part in the Swede's murder; he does not believe that the gambler should get all the punishment. In the very last line of the story the cowboy, bothered by the Easterner's lesson about the group guilt of those who had known the Swede, cries out, "Well, I didn't do anything', did I?" This seems an echo of Johnnie's earlier expostulation when his father accuses him of having cheated the Swede at cards, thereby making him want to leave the Palace Hotel, "Well, what have I done?" These two disclaimers show the all-too-human tendency of people involved in a situation, however indirectly, to deny any liability whatsoever.

Fear

Probably the most over riding theme in the Blue Hotel is fear. It appears in all the characters who have any role in the story at all. Patrick Scully is at first fearful of losing any of his guests that might otherwise be attracted to his hotel, and also of losing any existing guest to a competitor. However, his fears heighten as he becomes concerned with the possibility that the actions and words of the Swede might offend his existing guests, therefore he tries to address both. His fear takes on a more personal note as he becomes afraid that his son might be coerced into actually fighting the Swede, and when it is inevitable, he is fearful for his son's safety. Finally, Scully is fearful that his son is hurt seriously. His fears are generally real, and escalate as the story unfolds.

The next character introduced that exhibits fear is Johnnie. His fear is that of being embarrassed by the thought of being caught cheating at cards. His reaction to that accusation is one of immediate denial followed by a threat of violence. Johnnie appears to have less fear of actual battle than he does of the consequences of accusations relating to his dishonest actions.

The Swede obviously has the most complex fears. He has both inner fears and those born of actual situations he may get involved with. His initial fear is evidently of the "wild west" and its actual dangers. Not wanting to be looked upon as a "tenderfoot," he tries to get the people at the hotel to discuss what may have happened there locally, saying, "I suppose there have been a good many men killed in this room." This is the first sign of the inner fears with which he is struggling. After Scully settles him down with liquor, he overreacts to balance this fear, and becomes aggressive, allowing his inner fears to override his normal good sense. After eating, he settles back into the grasp of his original inner fear and becomes concerned that Johnnie may be cheating, even though there is no money at stake, something drives him to feel he must prove the "West" cannot get the best of him. Being driven to avenge himself by proving his masculinity, he appears surprisingly unafraid of the actual fight, only showing concern that he will be fighting more that Johnnie.

A short burst of fear is dealt with as he insists on making Scully stand up and face him regarding the money issue, then, as he departs the hotel, he feels he must prove his fearlessness by showing he is unafraid of the cowboy when he repeats the words, "Kill him, Johnnie. Kill him," to the cowboy's face. Reaching the saloon he must once again deal with his inner fears as he faces his need to prove to the bartender and the occupants that he can stand up for himself and must be reckoned with when insisting that others drink with him.

The Easterner's fears are the most obvious, but, perhaps the most straightforward and easy to deal with. His fears are all real, not inner as are most of those of the Swede. Most of all the Easterner's fears are those of physical violence, a real fear in this situation. He deals with them outwardly and realistically with speech, his physical shaking, and the redirection of his fear of the cold, which returns once the fear of physical violence passes.

The Wild West

Other than the setting of the location itself which, may be considered somewhat in that category, the first reference to the Wild West is made by the Swede when he assures the group he is not a "tenderfoot." This reference brings immediately to the minds of many readers the stories of cowboys, Indians, buffalo, stagecoach robberies, and villains in black hats. The term is to be avoided at all costs if one wants to be accepted in the West. The next reference to what has become a tradition of the Wild West is made by the Easterner when he supposes the Swede has read too many "dime novels." Soon afterward, in response to Johnnie's request that his father throw out the Swede, Scully says, "Why, he's all right now," ... "It was only that he was from the East, and he thought this was a tough place. That's all."

Some of the nuances of speech also reflect the West, such as when the Swede says, "Gimme some whiskey, will you?" The actual saloon with its long bar, sanded wood floors, and the appearance of the cash register that notes in its window, "This registers the amount of your purchase," are additional stereotypes of the West.

Personal Integrity

The personal integrity of several of the characters is attacked in the story. The first may be toward Johnnie who responds in a defensive way to the Swede when he insists that the occupants of the room at the hotel know what he means by asking if many people have been killed here. It is continued when the Swede tells them that he is not a tenderfoot. Not wanting to be seen as anything but an equal, he makes the assumption that if he doesn't force his bravery on them, he will be looked on as a naive eastern dude.

Scully touches on this unexpectedly by referring to how well his son is doing as a respected attorney in Lincoln. This gives him some respect as a father who has successfully raised a person who has a prominent, professional career.

At no point is personal integrity so obvious, however, as when Johnnie reacts to being accused of cheating at cards. This is something most people know was a death threat in the old West. A person's very bearing depended upon his being "square," or honest in his associate's eyes, and thus protecting his own personal integrity. Of course, when Johnnie accuses the Swede of lying about his actions, the Swede must protect his integrity in the only way he knows how, which is with physical violence designed to protect his fears.

A great deal is said about the integrity of the professional gambler. It is described in detail with references to his wife, two daughters, the men of the local organizations, and by the company he is keeping in the saloon. This, then, outlines one more reason why the Swede feels he must follow through with his demands that the men in the saloon drink with him. After he has asked several times and been ignored, he must defend his integrity by forcing the issue. This time his actions have a drastic affect, again the result of his fears.

Style

Points of View

Crane writes the Blue Hotel exclusively from the third person point of view. The reader sees the story unfold from a subjective point of view, feeling a desire to help Scully, a feeling of sympathy for Johnnie, and a feeling of repulsiveness towards the Swede (at least initially). The only departure from the third point of view occurs in Chapter Six when the author talks directly to the reader about how any room can become a place of fear. Crane explains that a room's present occupants create the mood of any room at any one specific time, in this case, the "lobby" is generally a place of fear. This is in contrast to the environment itself setting the mood of its inhabitants.

Using his usual dark and pessimistic style, Crane gives little reason for hope or good will throughout the action. Instead, the settings are cold, dark, and at times, eerie. This follows the naturalistic style that he was one of the first to utilize effectively. There is some pleasant interaction between the characters, but it is overshadowed a great deal by the physical and mental tension throughout, which is one of Crane's stylistic signatures. His dialogue and rough, western slang also attribute to the general style of the writing.

Scully's viewpoints change continually throughout the novel. Initially he looks for possible guests for his hotel, and plays the gracious host and salesman. Later he plays the role of conciliator, and the reader sees that Scully wants to keep his guests happy. This is also the role of a businessman. He is seen as a referee, and the reader understands his concern to make the fight fair, favoring neither the Swede nor his son. After the fight, Johnnie is seen through the eyes of Scully, as his father, and there is a sense of sorrow as he tries to continue the fight but cannot due to his injuries.

Setting

There are four important settings in the action: the hotel "lobby," the room of the Swede and its hallway, the snowy grass outside the hotel, and, the saloon.

The lobby centers around a large wood burning stove that is the center of its social life. Pictured as relatively dark with only two small windows, it is a mixture of a variety of human voices, wind whistling from an outside blizzard, the popping of wood burning in the stove, and the smells of raw wood, smoke and of cold drafts blasting in every time the door is opened. Definitely western in its motif, it is anything but light and airy.

The Swede's room and adjacent hallway are also dark, and seen as unfriendly. While there is no actual description of the furniture, the reader gets the feeling, again, of raw wood and dark, somber tones. Not really unfriendly, but anything but inviting, it can be imagined to be very quiet with long, dark shadows.

The snowy grass where the fight takes place outside the hotel reflects the colors associated with the other settings. It is dark, cold, uncomfortable, and in general, does not give off a welcome feeling. Colors other than black are dark blue with only the tiniest dot of bright light from the distant train station. The natural sound consists of the whistling and groaning of the icy wind

The saloon, while it has a brightly colored bar, appears as foreboding, long, with most of its occupants at the far end, and unnaturally quiet. While it has a western flavor, it isn't the boisterous bar of the roaring twenties.

Language and Meaning

The language is a mixture of Irish brogue, western twang, eastern etiquette, and uneducated musings. The language, as with the other aspects of the story, is not one of happiness or celebration, but, instead, of roughness and brutal honesty. The one theme that runs through everyone's speech except the Easterner's, is of a raw directness, giving the sense that these characters are, indeed, a reflection of the roughness of the uncivilized West.

Through this rapid flow of events the story's plot has very few pauses, and there is a sense of urgency to, as Johnnie says, "Well, let's get at it. Come on now!"

One common thread is the accentuation of whatever variation each character has when he gets excited or motivated. "I know what will happen. Yes, I'm crazy. Yes - But I know one thing."... "I know I won't get out of here alive!" is typical of the Swede's excited speech. Scully regains his Irish brogue when he states, "I'd bate 'im until he - "

The language in the bar has three distinct variations. That of the Swede is a continuation of his efforts to try to cover up his fear and lack of knowledge of the West. The bar tender, however, is noncommittal, and speaks is short, non-descriptive sentences. The professional gambler has a method of speaking that is slow, and rather formal, and seems to be almost soothing in the way he delivers his comments.

Structure

The story is told in nine chapters, each designated by a Roman numeral, as was often the case in the late 1800's. The story has very few flashbacks or interruptions in its movement, making it an extremely straightforward tale, and is totally chronological in its sequence of events. The structure lends itself to the quick action of the tale, there being a feeling of excitement and tension that moves quickly.

The method Crane uses to set the moods in the Blue Hotel are accomplished by first introducing a scene, and following it with the introduction of the characters that will populate that portion of the story. He then allows the reader to subconsciously create a mood from the descriptions. His use of colors and symbolism give the characters, which are introduced only after the settings, a preliminary recognition. His use of the old west

is reflected later in the characters, and they are almost stereotypes of what one would expect to see at that time and at that place.

As with most of Crane's stories, the Blue Hotel ends with irony. As a person who is afraid of his lack of knowledge of the West, the Swede tries to cover it up with a brash appearance of bravery and experience. His ultimate death, however, is caused by his efforts to hide his fear and his lack of experience and etiquette of the time and the place.

Quotes

"I suppose there have been a good many men killed in this room." Chapter 2, p. 290

"Oh, I see you are all against me. I see -" Chapter 2, p. 291

"Never mind, Mr. Scully; never mind. I will leave this house. I will go away, because I do not wish to be killed. Yes, of course, I am crazy - yes. But I know one thing! I will go away. I will leave this house. Never mind, Mr. Scully; never mind. I will go away." Chapter 2, p.292

"Yes," said the cowboy. "This is a queer game. I hope we don't get snowed in, because then we'd have to stand this here man bein' around with us all the time. That wouldn't be no good." Chapter 4, p. 297

"I keep a hotel," he shouted. "A hotel, do you mind? A guest under my roof has sacred privileges. He is to be intimidated by none. Not one word shall he hear that would prijudice him in favour of goin'away. I'll not have it. There's no place in this town where they can say they iver took in a guest of mine because he was afraid to stay here."

Chapter 4, p. 299

"Yes, fight!" I'll show you what kind of a man I am! I'll show you who you want to fight! Maybe you think I can't fight! Maybe you think I can't! I'll show you, you skin, you card-sharp! Yes, you cheated! You cheated! You cheated! You cheated!" Chapter 5, p. 303

"Kill him, Johnnie! Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!" Chapter 6, p. 306

"Johnnie! Can you go on with it?" Chapter 6, p. 306

""No - I ain't - any good - any - more." Chapter 6, p 307

"Shame be upon you, Patrick Scully!" she cried. "Your own son, too. Shame be upon you!" Chapter 6, p.308

"I'd loike to take that Swede," he wailed, "and hould 'im down on a stone flure and bate 'im to a jelly wid a shtick!" Chapter 7, p. 310

"Say," snarled the Swede, "don't you try to shut me up. I won't have it. I'm a gentleman, and I want people to drink with me. And I want 'em to drink with me now. *Now* - do you understand?" Chapter 8, p.314

"Now, my boy," advised the gambler, kindly, "take your hand off my shoulder and go 'way and mind your own business." Chapter 8, p. 314

"You're a fool!" cried the Easterner, viciously. "You're a bigger jackass than the Swede by a million majority. Now let me tell you one thing. Let me tell you something. Listen! Johnnie *was* cheating!" Chapter 9 p. 316

"Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?" Chapter 9, p.317

Adaptations

"The Blue Hotel" was adapted as an American Short Story Theater teleplay, a product of the National Endowment for the Humanities, in 1974. It was directed by Jan Kadar and the original Crane story was adapted for television by Harry Mark Petrakis. David Warner played the Swede, Rex Everhart was Scully, and James Keach was Johnnie.

While generally faithful to the original storyline, the teleplay did not project Crane's subtle mood of repressed violence and intensifying danger. Lacking Crane's subtlety in blending action with philosophical discourse, the teleplay seemed disjointed and flat. In addition, Warner's attempted enactment of the provocative and unstable Swede seemed to lack conviction and produced an effect far short of the way Crane's protagonist comes across to the reader.

Key Questions

On a superficial level, this story is about communication, or failure in communication, which here opens up a cluster of more specific issues. Among them: (a) a stranger's misinterpretation of the "insiders'" language and customs, with harmful results; (b) the basic human problem of weaknesses in personality, character, and ability to cope under extremely trying conditions when the odds of success are also unfavorable; (c) Crane's peculiar diction.

1. What elements or events in his own experience, actual or at second hand, might have led the Swede to believe he was going to be killed in Fort Romper, when he had chosen to go there himself?

2. What are your best reasons for believing or not believing that Johnnie Scully was cheating at cards?

3. Why do you think Pat Scully showed the disturbed Swede a picture of his deceased daughter?

4. Despite what Crane wrote about the town gambler's good standing in Fort Romper, what seems left out of Crane's argument? Did Crane seem convincing?

5. In your opinion, did Crane have a hidden agenda when he wrote this story?

What unassimilated elements in the story as it stands leave you dissatisfied? Explain.

6. Discuss and interpret Crane's use of colors and other symbolic features of the story.

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the use of colors to create the mood at the hotel and at the site of the fight.

Explain the methods used by Crane to make the story move smoothly and quickly.

Discuss the reasons why the Swede's personality can be described as "complex."

How does the temperature in the three following scenes lend itself to the mood: the area around the hotel by the fire; the area outside the hotel where the fight takes place; and the street where the Swede walks to get to the saloon?

The story is said to have psychotic implications. Relate how the color the hotel is painted reflects this theory.

Discuss three different roles the character of Scully plays in the story.

Give several examples of how Crane uses the speech of his characters to reflect their personalities.

Literary Precedents

Crane's story seems to grow out of the "dime novel" tradition of cheap, readily available pulp thrillers, many of them set in the wild West, the huge crossroads of the nineteenth-century-American imagination, where desperadoes, settlers, strangers, Indians, Mexicans, and only a few law and order types met, and anything could happen. The hugely popular paperbacks such as Seth Jones by Edward S. Ellis (1860) and Deadmod Dick by Edward L. Wheeler (1877) helped shape readers' tastes, not necessarily for the worse. They even provided a genre-pattern for serious writers like Crane to use far more intelligently than the hack writers and literary drudges were using it, just as those commercial popularizers were influenced by James Fenimore Cooper's elegant Leatherstocking Tales (see separate entries) and other frontier sagas, written in the early part of the century.

Related Titles

Although many of Crane's stories, even Maggie (1893, revised 1896; see separate entry), have been linked by the critics with "The Blue Hotel," on the basis of some aspects of plot, symbol, and narrative perspective, only "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" seems to have the most in its favor for drawing a comparison. Both stories are interpreted to signify "the passing of the old West," i.e., the taming of that ever-receding raw and dangerous frontier area, at that time being settled by ever larger numbers of people, thereby being made an ever more attractive region to live in. Both include an individual who is not sufficiently aware of those cultural changes taking place (the Swede in "The Blue Hotel" and Scratchy Wilson, the town badman, in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky"). The two stories also complement one another, according to some commentators: The impending fight does not come off, in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," but it does come off, in "The Blue Hotel." Thus "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" is a comic treatment of a subject treated tragically in "The Blue Hotel."

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