Stephen Crane and Robert Frost

Crane, 1871-1900

Frost, 1874-1963
Stephen Crane

- Wrote *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (published 1893) when he was only 21
- His masterpiece, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) published before he was 24
- Worked as a war correspondent in Greece, Cuba, and Mexico
- Died at age 28 in 1900 from tuberculosis

Crane posing in Greece during Greco-Turkish War in 1897
Maggie and Naturalism

- Crane (largely through *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*) associated with Literary Naturalism

**Naturalism:**
- Literary movement starting in the late 19th C, influential on first half of 20th C
- Sub-set of Realism
- Realism interested in ordinary; Naturalism in extraordinary
- Fringes of society: the criminal, the fallen, the down-and-out
- Scientific determinism
- Fate = Environment + Chance
- Realists as observers; Naturalists as experimental scientists
- Characters as representative of social groups
- Symbols used to express social messages
Crane as Impressionist

- Known for brilliant, innovative style
- Learned from realist writers (Howells, Kipling, Tolstoy especially)
- Sometimes called an Impressionist writer
  - Reality not simply out there, unchanging, eternal
  - Reality depends on observer, point-of-view
  - Concerned with mood, sensations
19th Century Realism: verisimilitude

Gustave Corbet, “The Stone Breakers, 1849-1850
Impressionist Painting

Claude Monet’s Paintings of Rouen Cathedral
“NONE of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colors of the sea. The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose, and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks” (603).
In the wan light, the faces of the men must have been gray. Their eyes must have glinted in strange ways as they gazed steadily astern. Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtlessly have been weirdly picturesque. But the men in the boat had no time to see it, and if they had had leisure there were other things to occupy their minds. The sun swung steadily up the sky, and they knew it was broad day because the color of the sea changed from slate to emerald-green, streaked with amber lights, and the foam was like tumbling snow. The process of the breaking day was unknown to them. They were aware only of this effect upon the color of the waves that rolled toward them (604).
Reality as Interpreted

- Men in the boat see people on shore
- They interpret what they see in terms of their own situation
  - Initially, they think a man is waving to them, then hauling a lifeboat on wheels
  - Finally, they have to realize the people on shore have nothing to do with them
- An indifferent universe, in which humans themselves supply order, meaning?
When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers.

Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands supplicant, saying: "Yes, but I love myself.

A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation (614).
So, what are we left with?

- If, ultimately, nature and God are indifferent to man, how do we get along in the world?
- Does the story leave us with any hope?
Robert Frost

- Popular image of Frost as gentle nature poet
- Yet critic Lionel Trilling, at 1958 birthday dinner calls Frost a “poet of adrenaline,” of “terror”
“Nature is Cruel”

- **“Design”**
  - William James and the argument from design

- **“Desert Places”**
  - 1887: Michelson-Morley experiment in ether
  - 1929: Edwin Hubble and receding galaxies

Birch Trees in the White Mountains of New Hampshire
Order/Disorder

- Like Crane, Frost sees order imposed on universe by human beings
  - “Mending Wall”
  - “The Wood-Pile”
  - “The Road not Taken”
Organized Violence

- Poems themselves little pieces of order in a disorderly universe
- “Poetry is organized violence upon language”
- “I’d as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down.”
- Liked formal conventions: sonnets, blank verse, etc.
The Sound of Sense

- The sound of common speech
- The rhythm of a sentence from voices behind a door when you can’t make out the words.
- “Home Burial”

Robert Frost Farm in Vermont
“Home Burial” Questions

- How do the husband and wife grieve differently?
- Do you think Frost builds more sympathy for one or the other of the two main characters?
- How do the characters’ physical positions on the staircase seem important?
- Look for a repeated motif of blindness/seeing. A poem about perspective?