More than a Family Resemblance? Agnes Crane’s “A Victorious Defeat” and Stephen Crane’s The Third Violet

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Like his younger contemporary Jack London, who famously claimed to have had “no mentor but myself,” Stephen Crane acknowledged few influences on his writing. Established authors such as W. D. Howells and contemporaries such as his friends Hamlin Garland and Harold Frederic read Crane’s fiction and encouraged him, but encouragement rather than influence formed the basis for these relationships. That Crane based “The Open Boat” on his survival after the wreck of the Commodore off the coast of Florida is well known. But The Third Violet has not received the same sort of scrutiny, in part because, as Donald Pizer put it in Fifteen Modern American Authors before 1900, “Most Crane critics would not be too much disturbed if The Third Violet, Active Service, and The O’Ruddy disappeared from the face of the earth, and this sentiment is reflected in the extent of the criticism of the three novels” (178). Not quite a decade later, Patrick Dooley’s Stephen Crane: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Scholarship surveyed the work done on the novel and came to a similar, if less bluntly expressed, conclusion on its critical reception: that aside from its biographical interest it is at best a potboiler and a decidedly unworthy successor to The Red Badge of Courage and Maggie; and that some of the weakness resides in Crane’s inability to portray female characters. Other critics have found strengths in the book: for William Andrews, the novel is Crane’s meditation on “the meaning of artistic success and failure in America” (80); and, drawing on the novel’s grounding in Howells’s critical statements on realism, Paul Sorrentino suggests that Crane’s response is more complex than the simple parody of plot elements described by Eric Solomon. For Sorrentino, the systematic use of language and allusion, such as the multiple meanings of words such as “frame” or “true” or the references to Verdi’s La Traviata, allows Crane to “blur the distinction between fact and fiction” (“Stephen Crane’s Struggle with Romance in the Third Violet” 283) in ways that call into question the “truth status of art itself” (279).

Crane himself had high hopes for the work at first, telling his editor Ripley Hitchcock during the writing of it that his draft was “working out fine” and that his first seven chapters had given him “the proper enormous interest in the theme” (Correspondence 128). But
his judgment of the work that seemed to him “clever sometimes and sometimes ... nonsensical” (Correspondence 140) while he was writing it shifted once the novel was complete. In a December 31, 1895 letter to Curtis Brown, written four days after sending the manuscript to Hitchcock, Crane expressed doubts as to whether Appleton would accept it, for, he said, “it’s pretty rotten work. I used myself up in the accursed ‘Red Badge’” (Correspondence 161). A month later Crane defended the book in a letter to Hitchcock, calling it a “quiet little story [and] serious work” and arguing that “[p]eople may just as well discover now that the high dramatic key of The Red Badge cannot be sustained” (Correspondence 191). He added, “I think I will be capable of doing work that will dwarf both books,” a comment that Lillian Gilkes suggests is Crane’s way of “trying to put the best face on it” (Gilkes 108). Although the British reviews generally praised Crane’s experiments in dialogue, only a few American reviewers, such as the one for Munsey’s Magazine, appreciated them; most derided his use of language and also his characterization with the sole exception of Stanley, the orange and white setter that one reviewer declared was “the only ... interesting creature in the book” (qtd. in Stallman 134).

But The Third Violet is interesting for reasons other than the exuberant Stanley. As Crane himself suggested, it is an experiment in working in another key, and what has received insufficient attention is the extent to which Crane bases this work, with its peculiarly divided settings of the rural vacation resort and a thinly disguised version of the Art Students League, on two kinds of literary models. The first is the Bohemian artists’ novel, particularly George du Maurier’s Trilby, to which the second half of the novel owes an obvious debt; the second, and more surprising, model is what may be termed the “vacation novel” or “vacation story” as popularized by W. D. Howells in The Coast of Bohemia and An Open-Eyed Conspiracy. In fact, the “vacation story” sections of Crane’s novel bear a surprising resemblance to the work of a less-than-famous author: his sister Agnes Crane. Reading Crane’s novel in juxtaposition with Agnes’s “A Victorious Defeat” illustrates the ways in which he was attempting not only to strike out in a new direction from The Red Badge of Courage but also to satirize and improve upon fashionable models of fiction current at the time: those that use the emerging leisure spaces of Bohemia and the resort hotel as sites for cross-class romance.

The Third Violet is the story of William Hawker, a poor but promising artist visiting his parents’ farm for the summer. He is accompanied by his cynical friend George Hollanden, a writer who has
become “a trained bear of the magazines” (294) and delivers lengthy commentary on the frailties of women. As critics have noted, the two characters represent the two sides of Crane, or what he believed that he was and feared that he might become: the poverty-stricken genuine artist, prickly with integrity, and the artist who cynically sells out to become a commercial success. The action of the first half of the story comprises the vacation courtship plot. Hawker falls in love with Grace Fanhall,3 an heiress staying at the nearby resort hotel. As is customary in the vacation romance, the two become attracted to one another despite their differences in class, with the rural paths and forests surrounding the Hemlock Inn providing the classic green world in which class difference is erased. It is at the resort that Hawker gathers the first two of the violets that give the novel its title: the first he picks up from a tennis court where she has been playing, and the second Grace gives Hawker as she walks away from him on the arm of another suitor, the wealthy Jem Oglethorpe. What should be a green world idyll is spoiled, however, by the contentious and irrelevant conversations of the two; unwilling to let the class difference go, Hawker insistently calls attention to Grace’s status as an heiress. In their final conversation at the end of the novel, Hawker tells Grace he is going away, and Grace tosses the third violet at him; after he picks it up, she tells him that she wants him to leave. Instead, he reads the “defiance” in her face with “an explosion of delight and amazement” (287), and instead takes two steps toward her, an ambiguous rather than wholly happy ending. Thus instead of the positive symbolism usually associated with the giving and receiving of flowers, the three violets signify the reverse—missed, dropped, or otherwise failed communication between Grace and Hawker.

Replacing this conventional symbolism of the flowers, however, is Crane’s focus on language and space as signifiers. Crane’s heavy reliance on “short, terse sentences” (Weatherford 213), which was much remarked on by contemporary reviewers, prunes away, or, to put it another way, wrings dry the excesses of the forms he follows, a strategy that conceptually looks ahead to modernist ideas despite the limitations it imposes on Crane’s characterization. When Hawker and Grace return to the city, their spaces and lives diverge as she lives in a house with a “colossal chandelier” (375) and he occupies an artist’s studio and eats, when he can afford it, at a cheerfully noisy “Bohemian resort” (370). A few chapters before the end of the novel, Grace begins to break down this spatial and class-based barrier between herself and Hawker by asking about his studio and his world. Fascinated by Bohemian life, with its “charming” studio teas, its artists who “remark how badly all
the other men painted” (The Third Violet 375), and the “great deal of freedom” that it promises, she coaxes Hawker to tell her his true story. The true story, he tells her, is that living in Bohemia does not signify artistic genius. Haltingly, for it is one of the few times when Hawker truly confronts the social gap between them instead of obnoxiously calling Grace “the heiress,” he tells her that when he hears “people talk as if that was the whole life it makes my hair rise, you know” because it is not; he tells her that he really “can paint, you know” (376). His repeated use of “you know,” a stylized verbal tic, drops out of his speech as he tells her what he is really ashamed of in his story: “The poverty.” In a subtle shift in language, Grace begins to comfort him by adopting his term in a half-serious, half-teasing manner, repeating his “you know” three times in the next exchange as she tells him that she finds his behavior “brave, you know” (376). Grace drops the verbal sparring that has been their standard form of communication and accepts, even transforms, his language, an exchange that foreshadows her proffering of the third violet to him.

In addition to such subtle techniques as these shifts in dialogue, Crane uses other means such as the language of nature and setting to contrast with the misleadingly articulate but artificial courtship conversations of Grace and Hawker. While the two are still in the country, Hawker spins a stylized and conventional tale of an Indian maiden who throws herself from a cliff: “And she was, of course, beloved by a youth from another tribe who was very handsome and stalwart and a mighty hunter, of course” (299). Hawker’s repetitions of “of course,” which undercut the tale of romance that he tells, annoy Grace, and he falls silent, afterward bewailing that in conversation with her he is “as interesting as an iron dog” (301); as if in a natural reproach to his unnatural speech, the dark pines overhead, “swaying over the narrow road [.] made talk sibilantly to the wind” (301) and “could be heard in their weird monotone as they softly smote branch and branch as if moving in some solemn and sorrowful dance” (304). When Grace and Hawker move back to the city and go their separate ways, Crane again provides an alliterative, natural perspective on their relationship: “When the snow fell upon the clashing life of the city, the exiled stones, beaten by myriad strange feet, were told of the dark silent forests where the flakes swept through the hemlocks and swished softly against the boulders” (383). Crane also uses tropes of the natural world and of movement to signify their relationship and to sharpen the contrast between them. Much of their courtship is spent walking, often with Stanley, and in two key scenes they pause behind a waterfall with red-stained crags
across the stream; Grace even stands at the edge of the cliff and watches a hemlock branch caught and moved by the force of “each swirling mad wave” (298). Clearly emblematic of their emotions, the turbulent force of the water, the red-stained crags, and the impulsively natural Stanley all sharpen the contrast between what Hawker and Grace feel and what they can express, constrained as they are by the artificial language of courtship.

A sense of just how consciously Crane uses these materials can be seen by comparing this first part of The Third Violet with “A Victorious Defeat,” a story published by his sister Agnes in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper on January 13, 1883. Nearly sixteen years Stephen’s senior, Agnes Crane acted as a surrogate mother to Stephen, the youngest of the Reverend Jonathan Townley and Mary Helen Peck Crane’s fourteen children. She was by all accounts his favorite sister, and the two were close until her death of meningitis in 1884 at the age of 28 when Stephen was twelve. Trained as a schoolteacher, Agnes, like the rest of her family, had intellectual interests of her own: she had attended Centenary Collegiate Institute, now Centenary College; had won a prize for her excellence in German and “the Coit Prize for the best English essay” (Gullason 181); and had been named class valedictorian. As Thomas Gullason explains, “It was Agnes who directed Stephen’s early writing . . . [and] reading” (Gullason 13), and Paul Sorrentino agrees: “A brilliant student who described herself in her diary as having a burning passion ‘to write’, she introduced Crane to literature and encouraged him to write” (“Newly Discovered Writings” 105). In his essay accompanying the reprinting of Agnes’s diary, Sorrentino notes that Agnes enjoyed reading popular and sentimental fiction, such as the popular Hartford writer Julia P. Smith’s Chris and Otho and The Widower; also, a True Account of Some Brave Frolics at Cragenvels. Another reference also suggests Agnes’s taste for popular works; a diary entry for Thursday, August 27, 1874 reads as follows:

Have come to the conclusion that the “Doctor’s Daughter” although fascinating is not a good criterion for me. Am going to be a “D. D.” of another type but just as good if I can’t be pretty or preternaturally smart. Sounds audacious, don’t it, Samantha? Don’t mention it to any one. (Sorrentino “Newly Discovered Writings of Mary Helen Peck Crane and Agnes Elizabeth Crane”)

Published in 1873, The Doctor’s Daughter was the latest in a series of books by Maine author Rebecca Sophia Clarke, whose popular stories
in the "Dotty Dimple" and "Little Prudy" series appeared under her pen name, Sophia May. More interesting is the tantalizing possibility that "Samantha," the imaginary friend to whom Agnes wrote in her diary, might owe at least her name to Marietta Holley's wildly popular Samantha Allen or "Josiah Allen's Wife," a humorous character who audaciously spoke her mind about subjects from women's rights and tourism to revivalist preachers and the race question. The first book in the Samantha series, My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's, appeared in 1873, and the book's dialect, often rendered as comic misspellings—"What could I du?" Samantha's friend Betsy Bobbet asks at one point (Holley 11)—recalls Agnes's similar spelling in an entry of June 7: "How du you like Bound Brook by this time?" (121). If Agnes indeed read any of Holley's books, one of their principal themes could not have escaped her: Samantha's consistent deflation of romantic ideas about woman's place, from Josiah's reference to his wife as a "little angel"—"I weigh two hundred and four pounds," she retorts (4)—to the spinster Betsey Bobbet's sentimental view of courtship.

Nor was Agnes's burning passion to write entirely thwarted, for she published three stories during her lifetime. Of her four extant stories—"How it Happened," "A Victorious Defeat," "The Result of an Experiment," and "Laurel Camp"—only "Laurel Camp" and a poem, "Content," appeared posthumously. None shows the genius of her brother Stephen, but all exhibit an understanding of contemporary tastes that explains their appearance in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper and in other popular venues. Significantly, three of the stories feature a romance plot with a spirited, intelligent, but not conventionally attractive heroine, and the stories are set in the spaces of middle-class leisure, a setting they share with The Third Violet. "The Result of an Experiment" takes place on and around the veranda of the boarding house at a summer resort; "Laurel Camp," in an idyllic camp in the woods in the same locale; and "A Victorious Defeat," at a farmhouse where the heroine has chosen to vacation. Of the stories published during her lifetime, "A Victorious Defeat" bears the strongest parallels to The Third Violet.

"A Victorious Defeat" follows Miss Leslie Gordon, a vacationing girl from the city, as she is left at the railway station and asks a rough-looking but handsome stranger with "a shocking straw hat and . . . a brown, sunburned, manly face" (198) how far it is to Metler Farm. Saying that he is working at the place, he offers her a ride in his wagon, and she agrees. Agnes Crane emphasizes the elements of class in the situation, as Leslie reflects that she, "the latest rage," is "riding
in a dirty farm wagon, alone with the hired man”—but she notices nonetheless that he is “real handsome, only for his clothes” (199). Her class-based expectations are upset when he is revealed to be the son of the house, John Metler, and she watches him closely as she swings back and forth in the hammock in the twilight. Memorably used in Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s portrait of the imaginary Marjorie Daw, the hammock figures prominently in several of Agnes’s stories and in The Third Violet as well, an emblem not only of leisure but of space in which the heroine’s natural impulses are less guarded than on the stiff chairs of a hotel veranda. Her encounters with John reveal his true status as an educated man: he quotes Milton to her as they stand in the moonlight and later asks her about Tennyson. But the charms of his literary allusions pale in comparison to the physical attraction that Leslie feels toward him, especially when John’s “strong arms” surround her and swing her away from a rattlesnake. After the two take a quiet boat ride at dusk, John picks a bouquet of violets for her—“the flower of modesty,” he says. Not content with this offering, as she is not content with the humble status of the mere farmer’s son she believes John to be, and feeling “more rebellious than usual” one morning, Leslie steps out on a log to gather some “extremely brilliant wild flowers” (204). She defies John’s warning—“What business has he to order me about?” (204)—and plunges into the stream above the mill dam. John jumps in, rescues her from being crushed by a millwheel, and, as he carries her from the stream, “presses his warm kisses upon her face” (205). When she finds out that he is not a simple farmer but the editor of a New York paper, the Beacon, she gives herself permission to love him. A hesitating heroine like Grace Fanhall, Leslie cannot resist toying with him the next day before she goes away by naming everything on the farm she will miss—except himself—before making an “unmaidenly avowal” that she will miss him most of all. But then, as she explains, “they belong on the farm and your home is at the Beacon office, New York City. . . . You surely never supposed for a moment that I fell in love with a simple farmer, did you, John?” (206). Of course she did; her recasting of this physical attraction as an intellectual one with someone whom she unconsciously recognized as being on her social level reinforces the prince-in-disguise motif necessary to the vacation romance. At the end of the story, however, a “strangely silent” John stares into the distance and seems to contemplate this obvious rewriting of history, but whether to give her the lie or to commend her natural ability to discern class is left ambiguous.

The parallels with Crane’s work are striking. The setting is close
to that in *The Third Violet*, as are several of the incidents and themes, including an evening boat ride and a more general emphasis on water as an uncontrollable natural force propelling the couple toward romance. Most significant in each work is the crucial ride in a farm wagon that both evokes a crisis of class consciousness and brings the couple together. For example, at the beginning of *The Third Violet* both Hawker and Grace travel on the same stage from the train station, but his plans to remain on her social level and to be taken for just another summer visitor fail when the driver recognizes him as “ol’ Jim Hawker’s son” (283), a recognition that demotes him in class as John is elevated in class when he is revealed as Metler’s son in “A Victorious Defeat.” This episode in *The Third Violet* foreshadows the defining episode of the novel, another ride that the two share. While out walking with Grace Fanhall one day, Hawker sees his father driving an ox wagon and, after a moment of hesitation, introduces the two, after which Grace accepts Mr. Hawker’s invitation to ride in the ox wagon. A true aristocrat who knows that class is a function of self-perception rather than the judgments of others, she is not bothered by gossip. What she has discovered is what Leslie Gordon has discovered: that a rough exterior may fall away to reveal an educated, artistic man—a prince—suitable for marriage. In Stephen Crane’s wry take on the vacation romance and prince-in-disguise idea, however, Hawker persists in his awkwardness and remains partly a frog to the last; instead of bringing a bouquet of violets (the “flower of modesty”) to Grace as John does for Leslie, Grace must instead give him, or pelt him with, violets to get the courtship off the ground.

Crane’s perspective eliminates some elements of the story and satirizes others; the multiple rescues and the stilted dialogue disappear from his version, but, less effectively, so does the insistent physicality of “A Victorious Defeat.” From the start Agnes places her characters in contact with each other, or with water, or more commonly with both. After wiping the perspiration from his brow at the train station during their first meeting, John lifts her into the wagon with “strong and somewhat audacious arms” (198), afterwards catching “the astonished girl in his strong arms” when rescuing her from the snake. He orders her to put her arms around his neck when he draws her out of the water just before the millwheel crushes her. By contrast, Crane’s characters Hawker and Grace stand on the brink of the stream but never get wet. They talk instead of act; and they grasp pipes, violets, parasols, and paintbrushes but rarely each other. It is as if Crane avoided the sentimental dampness associated with Agnes’s story or stories like hers, substituting instead a more cerebral, dry, inarticulate, and ironic—in
short, more modern—view of courtship.

Thus if The Third Violet lacks the mastery of The Red Badge of Courage, it nonetheless exposes something of Crane’s experimentation with transforming conventional genres, and it is clearly more daring than a traditional vacation romance like “A Victorious Defeat.” Amid the stereotypical women in The Third Violet—the “old mother,” as Hawker’s mother is always called, or the hypocritical gossips on the porch—Grace stands out by contrast. Like Leslie, she attracts the hero with her spirited behavior, and she understands the quality of the man hiding behind a physically rough exterior, or, in Crane’s retelling, a socially awkward manner. But Crane refuses the conventions of the courtship romance and frustrates the reader at every turn: The Third Violet has no heroes sweeping heroines away in their strong arms or rescuing them from danger, nor does it give more than a cursory nod toward physical attraction between the two. Indeed, Hawker’s pursuit of Grace is so inept that it is she who must spell out her feelings through the medium, or weapon, of flowers. In short, Crane experiments with conventions in language and character in the courtship novel in ways that are subtly satirical, perhaps too much so for his first audiences; his vacation romance moves beyond the formula that Agnes employs, but at the cost of irritating audiences who failed to see the irony of his approach. The Third Violet is, as he wrote to Ripley Hitchcock, simply “a quiet little story and serious work.” In short, it is not The Red Badge and was not meant to be, but when considered in context The Third Violet provides an interesting look at the progress of Crane’s artistry and the possible source for one part of its development.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Kathleen Manwaring and other librarians of the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University for their assistance with this article.

2 For an intriguing suggestion that the character “Grace Fanhall” may have connections to Ernest Hemingway’s mother, Grace Hall, see John Clendenning’s “Crane and Hemingway: A Possible Biographical Connection” (Stephen Crane Studies 5.2 [1996]: 2-6).

3 In Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s popular short story “Marjorie Daw” (1873), Ned Delaney, on vacation in New Hampshire, tries to help his friend John Flemming recover from a broken leg by writing him letters about a beautiful girl, Marjorie Daw. Infatuated with the image of Marjorie swinging in a hammock, Flemming travels to see the girl in person but discovers that Delaney has invented the character to keep him entertained.
Works Cited


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