

STEPHEN CRANE ON FILM: JAMES AGEE'S  
ADAPTATION OF "THE BLUE HOTEL"

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<sup>1</sup>James Agee, *Agee on Film: Five Film Profiles*  
(Salted States: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 5.  
<sup>2</sup>James Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Five*  
(New York City: George Braziller, Inc., 1962), p. 1.  
<sup>3</sup>James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (New York: Avon,  
1957), p. 2.

## INTRODUCTION

In speaking of James Agee's writing, John Huston, the film director, says, "In a sense it was all poetry."<sup>1</sup> This is the refrain of those familiar with Agee's short fiction, novels, poetry, letters, film criticism, or film scripts themselves. The beauty and sensitivity of Agee's work has such attraction for his readers that a cult has virtually formed around him and the legend of his life since 1955, the year of his fatal heart attack. As Robert Phelps says, Agee is "a born, sovereign prince of the English language."<sup>2</sup> In discussing Agee's talents, the student of his work is left therefore in a paradoxical situation--that of needing to be another Agee in order to convey an impression of the complexity and naked beauty of his best writing.

Alfred Kazin regards A Death in the Family, which won Agee the Pulitzer Prize in 1958, as "the work of a writer whose power with English words can make you gasp."<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the same work, Dwight MacDonald says, "It

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<sup>1</sup>James Agee, Agee on Film: Five Film Scripts (United States: Beacon Press, 1964), p.IX.

<sup>2</sup>James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye (New York city: George Braziller, Inc., 1962), p.1.

<sup>3</sup>James Agee, A Death in the Family (New York: Avon, 1957), p.2.

shows that Agee had the technical, intellectual, and moral equipment to do major writing."<sup>4</sup> The Morning Watch is cited by Nash K. Burger as "a lyrical and beautifully written short novel reflecting his [Agee's] adolescent years at St. Andrews."<sup>5</sup> Not only do Agee's published letters to his long-time friend Father Flye furnish insight into his fiction, but they also make stimulating reading. Agee's film reviews and comments are good enough to be published in a collected volume. W.H. Auden, in a letter to the editors of The Nation, remarks that they belong "in that very select class--the music critiques of Berlioz and Shaw are the only other members I know--of newspaper work which has permanent literary value."<sup>6</sup> Penelope Houston and Paul Rotha, in their respective works on the cinema,<sup>7</sup> list Agee among the best in film critics.

Beginning with Fortune magazine, Agee spent the most productive years of his career with the Luce syndicate. Through most of the 1940's he was movie reviewer for Time and writer of the movie column for The Nation. Because writing was his occupation and only means of financial support,

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<sup>4</sup>Dwight MacDonald, "James Agee," Encounter, XIX (December), 74.

<sup>5</sup>Nash K. Burger, "A Story to Tell: Agee, Wolfe, Faulkner," South Atlantic Quarterly, LXII, 35.

<sup>6</sup>Cited in the foreword to James Agee, Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments (United States: Beacon Press, 1958).

<sup>7</sup>Penelope Houston, The Contemporary Cinema (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p.46 and Paul Rotha, The Film Till Now: A Survey of World Cinema (London: Vision Press Limited, 1960), p.771.

Agee also wrote articles on modern furniture, the orchid market, and Europe in Autumn.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the assignment, every factual or fictional work of James Agee's reflects his sensitivity and moral perspective. Explicitly his ambitions and feelings are expressed in his letters to Father Flye.

I'd do anything on earth to become a really great writer. That's as sincere a thing as I've every [sic] said. Do you see, though, where it leads me? In the first place I have no faith to speak of in my native ability to become more than a very minor writer. My intellectual pelvic girdle simply is not Miltonically wide. So, I have, pretty much, to keep same on a stretcher, or more properly a rack, day and night. I've got to make my mind as broad and deep and rich as possible; abnormally sympathetic and yet perfectly balanced. At the same time, I've got to strengthen those segments of my talent which are naturally weak and must work out for myself a way of expressing what I want to write. You see, I should like to parallel, foolish as it sounds, what Shakespeare did. That is, in general--to write primarily about people--giving their emotions and dramas the expression that, because of its beauty and power, will be most likely to last. But--worse than that: I'd like, in a sense, to combine what Chekhov did with what Shakespeare did--that is, to move from the dim rather eventless beauty of C. to huge geometric plots such as Lear. And to make this transition without its seeming ridiculous. And to do the whole so that it flows naturally, and yet, so that the whole--words, emotion, characters, situation, etc.--has a discernible symmetry and a very definite musical quality--inaccurately speaking--I want to write symphonies. That is, characters introduced quietly (as are themes in a symphony, say) will recur in new lights, with new verbal orchestration,

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<sup>8</sup>These articles are respectively "What D'you Mean Modern?," Fortune, XII (November, 1935), 97 and 100-101, 103 164; "The U.S. Commercial Orchid," Fortune, XII (December, 1935), 108-114 and 126, 129; "Europe: Autumn Story," Time, October 15, 1945, pp. 24-25.

will work into counterpoint and get a sort of grinding beauty--and so on.<sup>9</sup>

Implicitly James Agee's aesthetics are imbued in anything he attempts. His writings bear the mark of his personality and being.

Agee was attracted to the cinema. Partially this can be related to his love of music and rhythm, for in visual images he saw the opportunity to construct rhythmical patterns. He had already worked with Helen Levitt on The Quiet One, a documentary film on Harlem life<sup>10</sup> when John Huston requested that he write a script of Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel." Although never filmed as a motion picture, this first feature length scenario was adapted to television. He and Huston next collaborated to adapt C.S.Forester's novel The African Queen. In 1952 the film received an Academy Award for Best Actor. A second short story of Stephen Crane's, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," is the basis of another Agee scenario. Written in 1951-1952, it was released with another short picture under the title Face to Face. Dwight MacDonald notes that Noa Noa, based on the life of Paul Gauguin, has the reputation of being Agee's most remarkable script.<sup>11</sup> It has never been filmed. The Night of the Hunter, adapted from

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<sup>9</sup>James Agee, Letters, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup>James Agee and Helen Levitt also collaborated on A Way of Seeing, a book featuring photographs by Miss Levitt with accompanying captions and essays by Agee.

<sup>11</sup>Dwight MacDonald, Encounter, XIX, 74.

Davis Grubb's novel by that name, is a suspense picture directed by Charles Laughton. Because it was released in 1955, Agee never saw the film. In addition he wrote a four-part series about Abraham Lincoln which appeared on Omnibus. Later it was edited and shown complete in Abraham Lincoln--The Early Years, a ninety-minute program.

Agee is versatile. Because he was forced to maintain employment, he was never able to concentrate his energies totally in creative writing. Perhaps this partially explains why that which he did is varied and lacks a focal point. At forty-five while working on A Death in the Family, Agee was also writing film scripts which continued to excite his imagination. Such a work is his scenario The Blue Hotel.

The scenario The Blue Hotel is a curious combination of Crane and Agee. On the one hand Agee is critic interpreting Crane and on the other creative artist demonstrating his own imagination and talents. As an adaptation, the scenario is unsuccessful because it is not a faithful rendition of Crane's story. In the written script Agee's shot and scene instructions show that as critic he comes to a valid reading of Crane's "The Blue Hotel"; however, cinematically, i.e. in the actual visual image on the screen, he does not represent Crane's naturalistic viewpoint to the extent indicated in the story. Agee fails in consistently incorporating this naturalistic viewpoint because aesthetically his own



works are diametrically opposed to Crane's. Both writers frequently use religious symbolism and imagery, treat themes of death and the inner nature and emotions of man, but they differ in attitude. Agee has a reverence for the created world which Crane does not share in his sardonic outlook.

In "The Blue Hotel" it is ultimately shown by Crane that guilt is an empty concept in a naturalistic universe. On the contrary, Agee lifts the guilt out of context and emphasizes it unduly, thereby nullifying Crane's irony. At the very end of the scenario, the naturalistic viewpoint is introduced, but not on a visual scale impressive enough to be grasped by the audience. When the script is read, it is evident that Agee interprets Crane as a symbolic naturalist, but artistically, in the film per se, Agee sustains neither the irony nor naturalism in "The Blue Hotel."

This paper will examine James Agee's cinematic adaptation of Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel" and indicate the successes and failures of Agee's treatment. It will show Agee as a master of cinematic technique, sensitive to Crane's imagery and impressionism, but unable to sustain his detachment and naturalistic viewpoint.

## STEPHEN CRANE AND CRITICS OF THE "BLUE HOTEL"

Born into a Methodist clergyman's home in Newark, New Jersey, November 1, 1871, Stephen Crane did the major part of his writing in the 1890's. Numbered among his contemporaries and friends were Hamlin Garland, William Dean Howells, Harold Frederic, and Richard Harding Davis. Because his writing is strongly naturalistic, the young writer met with personal and critical abuse in his native America. Consequently, he went to England where his work, especially The Red Badge of Courage (1895), met with success. There men of literary genius, Henry James and Joseph Conrad, recognized his talents.

Robert Wooster Stallman, a major critic of Crane, points to his work as the beginning of "two main technical movements of modern fiction--realism and symbolism."<sup>12</sup> Crane's naturalism is frequently associated by critics of his work with his journalism. He wanted to get at the real thing, to experience life and test it before he interpreted it in writing. Thomas A. Gullason attributes Crane's naturalistic philosophy to his New York education, the "close

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<sup>12</sup>Stephen Crane, Stephen Crane: An Omnibus, ed. Robert Wooster Stallman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. xix.

observation of the violent and subhuman life of the slum dwellers."<sup>13</sup> Although Crane immersed himself in life in Mexico, Cuba, and Greece, his reporting was rarely straight and factual and was more apropos to fiction than journalism. On one occasion he was advised by the day editor of the Tribune to give up journalism and use his "'subtle rhetorical tricks in writing fiction.'"<sup>14</sup> This he never wholly did. Crane courted journalism and experience his entire life and is said by Stallman to have thus "wasted his genius."<sup>15</sup> The Red Badge of Courage was written before Crane ever witnessed battle as a war correspondent. He had to go to war to prove the validity of his vision. Even The Open Boat, written immediately after Crane experienced the disaster of a shipwreck, is cited by Stallman to be

personal experience transformed into an impersonal and symbolic representation of life--the plight of mankind tossed upon an indifferent sea. The calculated design and significance of the story can be explained by no source other than the conceiving imagination of the artist. Crane excels in the portrayal of mental turmoil, and for this psychological realism his creative imagination required no first-hand experience.<sup>16</sup>

Searching for personal experience was a part of Crane's make-up, yet the experience itself did not satisfy him. His imagination transformed it into literature with symbolic

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<sup>13</sup>Stephen Crane, The Complete Short Stories and Sketches of Stephen Crane, ed. Thomas A. Gullason (New York: Doubleday & Son, 1963), p. 21.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>15</sup>Crane, An Omnibus, p. xxv.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. xxviii.

and impressionistic overtones. It was not in Crane to record facts; he had to create. Charles Child Walcutt notes that his naturalism is coupled with impressionism.<sup>17</sup>

Crane's writing shows that he is a detached stylist--sardonic, ironic, objective, never sentimental. His mind operates on a high level of irony and paradox. Even in his less serious stories, such as "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," Crane, with a delicate yet firm hand, guides his reader to the final ironic moment. In analyzing Crane's works, Stallman stresses the nature and importance of his irony.

Irony is Crane's chief technical instrument. It is the key to our understanding of the man and of his works. He wrote with the intensity of a poet's emotion, the compressed emotion that bursts into symbol and paradox.<sup>18</sup>

Every Crane short story worth mentioning is designed upon a single ironic incident, a crucial paradox, or an irony of opposites; all of them are built out of anecdotal material, and all are concerned with the same subject--the moral problem of conduct. Crane's method of construction is similar to the method that Chekhov employs. He constructs his stories by building up to a crucial moment of impasse of their situation, they are caught and boxed in by fate, and then--the moment of spiritual collapse--'nothing happens,' and they are left with a sense of loss, insignificance or defeat, futility or disillusionment.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Charles Child Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1956), pp. 74-86.

<sup>18</sup>Crane, An Omnibus, p. xxv.

<sup>19</sup>Robert Wooster Stallman, "Stephen Crane: A Reevaluation," Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction: 1920-1951, ed. John W. Aldridge (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1952), p. 257.

Crane's ironic style and sardonic attitude so inform his work that they are inseparable from content.

Fort Romper, a bleak, snow-encrusted prairie town in Nebraska in the 1890's, is the setting of "The Blue Hotel." A cowboy, an Easterner, and "a shaky and quick-eyed Swede,"<sup>20</sup> stopping at the train station, are enticed by the proprietor Pat Scully to stay at the Palace Hotel. At the hotel the conversation among the strangers at first sounds a cautious note. Because the Swede is engaged in furtively estimating each man, he says nothing until dinner. Then he volunteers he has come from New York where he was a tailor. Casting about the table, he jokingly remarks that the West is dangerous. Throughout the day he alternates from fright to boldness. Scully's son Johnnie and the three strangers pass the time playing cards by the enormous glowing stove. The cowboy's board-whacking intensifies the game. Suddenly the Swede turns to Johnnie saying, "I suppose there have been a good many men killed in this room." Shocked, Johnnie responds with profanity and disbelief. Obviously frightened to the extreme, the Swede quavers, "I suppose I am going to be killed before I can leave this house." Whiskey, offered by Scully to the Swede

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<sup>20</sup>Sculley Bradley, Richard Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long (ed.) The American Tradition in Literature (vol. 2 rev.; New York: W.W.Norton & Company, Inc., 1962), p. 823. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be incorporated into the text of this paper.

as an appeaser, serves as a catalyst. He accuses Johnnie of cheating. Inevitably a fight ensues between Johnnie and the Swede. As the men leave the hotel for the fight, they plunge "into the tempest as into a sea." The cowboy and Scully, who favor Johnnie, eagerly watch the fight while the Easterner views it as disgusting. The Swede thoroughly whips his opponent, and heads toward town.

In describing the Swede's walk, Crane shows his naturalistic view of the world.

He might have been in a deserted village. We picture the world as thick with conquering and elate humanity, but here, with the bugles of the tempest pealing, it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamor of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smitten, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb. The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life. One was a coxcomb not to die in it. However, the Swede found a saloon.

At the bar he requests a select group of Romper citizens, one a genteel, professional gambler, to drink with him. The Swede is ignored. No one wishes to share his exhilaration in celebrating his conquest. Finally the Swede approaches the table and demands attention by bodily lifting the gambler from his chair. From the hand of the gambler a long blade suddenly flashes into the Swede's body. The saloon is quickly deserted. Only the corpse of the Swede remains with its eyes frozen on the cash-register legend:

"This registers the amount of your purchase."<sup>21</sup>

Months later, during a conversation with the cowboy, the Easterner says Johnnie was cheating. He admits his guilt and accuses the others:

We are all in it! This poor gambler isn't even a noun. He is kind of an adverb. Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede. Usually there are from a dozen to forty women really involved in every murder, but in this case it seems to be only five men--you, I, Johnnie, old Scully; and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement, and gets all the punishment."

The cowboy, injured and rebellious, cried out blindly into this fog of mysterious theory: "Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?"

Because there is no pat interpretation of the ending, readers of "The Blue Hotel" have often disputed the ultimate meaning of the story. Begun by Crane in early 1898 and now listed among his best works, "The Blue Hotel" was rejected by Scribner's and the Atlantic Monthly before Collier's bought it for \$300. Readers of this Crane story are always impressed. Hemingway says "The Blue Hotel" is his favorite.<sup>22</sup> John Berryman, Crane's biographer, cites it as one of the most brilliant stories ever written by an

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<sup>21</sup>This episode is a prime example of Crane's naturalism. Although the Swede, not a fatalist, attempts to shape his destiny, there are forces of destruction against which he cannot compete. His death is demonstrative of the hostile forces, pointed up by the fury of the storm, prevalent in the universe.

<sup>22</sup>Stephen Crane, An Omnibus, p. 482.

American.<sup>23</sup> Critically it is a controversial story. One critic emphasizes the naturalism, another the symbolism. It has been called a tragedy, a satire, and a burlesque of naturalism.<sup>24</sup>

Critics of "The Blue Hotel" have commented on these various aspects: symbolism, will or volition of the characters, theme, and the end as related to the theme. Interpretations of the story vary. Because Crane's theme is naturalistic and implies destructive forces in the universe which operate against man, the social and personal responsibilities of the characters present an area of inquiry for the critic. Involved in this is the Swede's death and the Easterner's theory of social responsibility.

Crane, according to Walcutt, portrays "his characters baffled and harried in a crazy world, where they do not function well enough to control their own destinies, or even to understand them well: it is a world which the author's larger view does not make any more reasonable, for what his view particularly adds is a fuller sense of the protagonist's limitations."<sup>25</sup> If the characters cannot "function well enough" because of their limited understandings, then neither

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<sup>23</sup>Stephen Crane, p. 219.

<sup>24</sup>Marvin Klotz, "Stephen Crane: Tragedian or Comedian: 'The Blue Hotel'," The University of Kansas City Review, pp. 170-74, maintains that critics miss the humor in "The Blue Hotel."

<sup>25</sup>Walcutt, p. 85.



can they be held accountable for actions stemming from those insufficient understandings. If their capacities enable them to do better and they simply will not exercise them, then responsibility and guilt are valid concepts. Guilt and atonement presuppose free will.<sup>26</sup> Although Walcutt maintains that the characters in "The Blue Hotel" have volition, it seems a negligible quality if it is so overpowered by other forces. Walcutt writes:

the characters have volition and ethical judgment--they are not driven by overwhelming forces--and they use these powers everywhere in the story. Their reactions are controlled by what they are as people, with humor, passion, and weakness in reasonable proportions. Yet their 'choices' entangle them in nets of circumstance from which they cannot be extricated. The conventional notion of a moral order presided over by the forms of public morality is made indefensibly ludicrous by the action. Everybody in this story is conscious, has ideas about fairness and decency which are with him constantly, and tries to act in a way that he can justify. But the outcome is beyond anyone's control, and the social verdict of the gambler's conviction is a gross fraud.<sup>27</sup>

In a story constructed within a deterministic framework, the concepts of freedom of choice and accountability for those choices become meaningless. "The Blue Hotel" has men making decisions and judgments, but in the

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<sup>26</sup>Joseph N. Satterwhite, "Stephen Crane's 'The Blue Hotel': The Failure of Understanding," Modern Fiction Studies, II, No. 4 (Winter 1956-1957), 238, says that the characters are responsible beings whose guilt is that of omission. They are blinded by selfish or emotional concerns.

<sup>27</sup>Walcutt, p. 74.

final analysis it is not what the characters will to happen which takes place but what the hostile universe determines will happen.<sup>28</sup> Crane shows the Swede, a fear-stricken man, finally triumphing over Johnnie and conquering his cowardice. In exhilaration he enters the saloon only to find death at the end of a long blade. "It shot forward, and a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon." The Swede fancied he had conquered the "profligate fury" of the storm, but he had no real power over anything of consequence--certainly not his fate.

Critics disagree as to whether the ending (the Easterner's encounter with the cowboy) of "The Blue Hotel" is acceptable as an inherent part of the story. Their various interpretations of theme, symbolism, and responsibility of the characters converge on this point. Crane's symbolism shows that his characters, who are basically animalistic and can be easily prompted to violence, anger, or fear, function in a hostile world which is indifferent to their choices.<sup>29</sup> If the Easterner's conclusion is accepted as that of the

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<sup>28</sup>James Trammell Cox, "Stephen Crane as Symbolic Naturalist: An Analysis of 'The Blue Hotel,'" Modern Fiction Studies, III, N.2 (Summer, 1957), 158, maintains "none of the characters of the story rather than all, may be said to be responsible."

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 147-58, Cox emphasizes a substructure of symbolism in his analysis, putting the stove at the center of man's nature and the tempest as his environment.

author, then the ending does not cohere with the rest of the story. The Easterner's theories presuppose that man is a free, responsible being capable of rational decisions. Crane has nowhere implied that man is such a creature. A careful reading shows the Easterner does not escape Crane's irony. He too is violent, subject to rage, and no more capable of dealing with a world which will inevitably destroy him than the others.

Satterwhite agrees that it is the environment which destroys the Swede, but he interprets that environment as a society which fails to understand. Therefore, he supports the theory of social complicity voiced in the conclusion.

The Cowboy's last denial of complicity, in which he 'cried out blindly' to the Easterner, 'Well I didn't do anythin' did I' is a fitting conclusion to a story which illustrates the negative power of society to destroy those it cannot or will not understand.<sup>30</sup>

The ending, according to Satterwhite, is consistent with the theme of failure to understand and is "ironically climaxed"<sup>31</sup> by the cowboy's last words. In his reading, the Easterner must be accepted as spokesman for Crane.

Stallman, in contrast to Satterwhite, insists the ending is non-ironical. He reads the Easterner's statement as the author's intrusion. In evaluating "The Blue Hotel" Stallman has in mind Crane's letter: "Preaching is fatal

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<sup>30</sup>Modern Fiction Studies, II, 239. <sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.238.

to art in literature. I try to give to readers a slice out of life, and if there is any moral lesson in it, I do not try to point it out. I let the reader find it for himself."<sup>32</sup> Stallman writes:

But consider the story critically, and you see at once that Crane has here violated his own artistic canon. He intrudes to preach a deliberate moral. The story ends with the grotesque image of the murdered Swede whose eyes stare "upon a dreadful legend that dwelt atop of the cash-machine: 'This registers the amount of your purchase.'" This point marks the legitimate end of the story. Crane spoiled the whole thing by tacking on a moralizing appendix. The off-key tone is at odds with the tone of the preceding part, and the theme that his beginning prepared for stands at odds with the trumped-up theme announced in the totally irrelevant and non-ironic conclusion.<sup>33</sup>

The ending of "The Blue Hotel" can be objected to only if the Easterner's argument is understood as the theme. To support such a theme Crane need not have included the tempest and written, "the conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life." It is the absurdity of man's "conceit," believing in his own significance, which serves as a theme for Crane in "The Blue Hotel." The Easterner's theories and subsequent rage only show him to be one of the most conceited.

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<sup>32</sup>A letter to John N. Hilliard (1897) included in Stephen Crane, An Omnibus, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup>Stephen Crane, An Omnibus, pp. 482-83.

## JAMES AGEE'S READING OF "THE BLUE HOTEL"

In "The Blue Hotel" Agee has a short story which readily lends itself to cinematic adaptation, for it requires no major expansion, i.e. the additions of characters and scenes not implied in the story itself. Agee's familiarity with both cinematic and written techniques makes him an adept translator. Because "showing" takes longer than "telling" a story, many of his additions are mechanical and basic to the cinematic medium. The first card game in "The Blue Hotel" serves as a good example of cinematic elaboration of the written statement. Crane devotes one paragraph to the events and nature of the game whereas the script needs five pages to indicate the action.

Crane writes, "The cowboy was a board-whacker. . . . A game with a board-whacker in it is sure to become intense." In the script each successive "wham" of the Cowboy's cards is accompanied by noticeable alterations in the expressions and attires of the men. The Easterner unbuttons his vest; the Swede perspires; Johnnie opens his shirt to his waist. One camera shot of the men intensely absorbed in the game would not have impressed on the spectator the tenseness of the situation. The Swede's statement, "I suppose there have been a good many men killed in this room," would have lost its emotional impact for the

audience had they not been prepared by previous expansion. Therefore the scenario deals with this game in much detail. With numerous shots from various angles and distances, the scene is rendered visually. If the effectiveness of the original scene is to be maintained in the film, the written statement must be supplemented with details.<sup>34</sup>

Agee's abilities to exploit the cinematic medium to advantage and to create independently of Crane's imagination are evident when he deals with visual images which are not implied in the story. He takes the Swede's death scene from Crane and adds to it a series of shots which are purely of his own invention. The script indicates swift flashes from the Swede's past, both real and imaginary. Crane discloses very little of the Swede's past life--only a reference to his job as a New York tailor. Another addition of Agee which exploits the cinematic medium is the blurring of the Swede's image in the bar mirror followed by a shot of the Swede heavy with the whiskey and the events of the night.

Other shots are implicit in the story itself, and as scenarist, Agee selects the shots which will best portray Crane's scenes and descriptions. To picture Johnnie's

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<sup>34</sup>Cinematic narration takes longer than written narration. While a short story usually expands in adaptation, a novel will contract because of its bulk of narration. Agee's The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky introduces characters which are not in any way implied in Crane's story. On the other hand paragraphs of description in the novel and story are usually reduced to a few shots in cinematic treatment.

defeat most vividly, the camera shoots his face from an angle which foreshortens it while at the same time showing its swelling, bloodiness, and cuts. Agee's sensitivity to Crane's artistry and his grasp of the story determine in part the shots he selects, emphasizes, and adds.

Although Agee's viewpoint does not remain naturalistic throughout the film, he successfully incorporates Crane's impressionistic and expressionistic writing into the script and even adds instances of his own invention. When Agee seeks to picture the Palace Hotel as Crane has described it, he uses dramatic expressionism:

Even in the darkness the hotel gives off something odd and curdled.<sup>35</sup>

The Hotel, of a disturbing shade even in darkness, gives off under the changing light an always more and more sinister and unearthly fish-belly glare.

Crane's description of the Swede's walk into town after the fight is one of the strong points of the story. Agee handles this scene skillfully with purely cinematic expressionism.

The CAMERA PANS as he passes closer, and centers on him as he plods down the middle of the snow-founded lightless street. (A NOTE ON THIS SHOT): It is to be heightened above realism, during the Swede's advance up the boardwalk. When he is still in the deepest distance, we use only every third frame; then every second; then cut every third frame; then every fourth; meanwhile slurring the CAMERA speed a

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<sup>35</sup>James Agee, Agee on Film: Five Film Scripts (United States: Beacon, 1964), p. 463. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be incorporated into the text of this paper.

little, fewer frames per second, so that his speed of approach is at all times superhuman and grotesque, but becomes smoother as he approaches. By the time his features become distinct no frames are skipped but the motion, though regular, is fast and dry rather than silky; it is at this time and pace that the train is run through. As he comes into full close up, shade back to normal speed, omitting no frames. The SOUND runs smooth, not clipped; it is not recorded on the spot.

The spectator is thus left expecting some unknown thing great enough to meet the Swede's grotesqueness.

While Crane's treatment of sound is largely realistic, Agee's is highly impressionistic. Because Agee is dealing with synchronization of sound and image, he naturally gives more attention to sound than Crane. Always fascinated with rhythm and sound effects, Agee adds an audio dimension to the script not indicated in the story--that of a supersonic sound.

FULL SOUND of a very strong wind, but more compelling than any other noise, a pure electric or electronic SOUND, without timbre, either so low it is just at the limit of audibility or so high it is just beyond that limit and works purely on the nervous system (experiment will determine which is better used in this context).

Crane's only impressionistic sounds are in references to the "bugles of the tempest peeling" and a "spirit tapping." Agee's impressionistic sound is introduced into the film at relevant points to recall more than the fury of the storm. The sound, over and above all ordinary events, is representative of fate. When, in the latter part of the film, Agee superimposes this sound on realistic sounds, the effect is one of powerful discord. The sound then serves



as a reminder of fate and discredits the false images flashing on the screen. In this manner Agee uses impressionism to accentuate Crane's naturalism.

In dehumanizing his characters, Crane further couples impressionism with naturalism. In the fight scene between Johnnie and the Swede, Crane so uses animal imagery that the reader feels two animals are clashing. Throughout most of the scenario, character directions, dialogue, and visual images demonstrate Agee's ability to handle Crane's imagery. In a close up of the cowboy, the script describes him as having "impersonal light eyes, a little bit bovine." In the fight between the Swede and Johnnie, the scenario carries out the impression of fighting animals by having the Swede make a "wild animal snarl, (roughly, Arghrgh)." Scully turns on the Swede "'panther fashion.'" These are merely noted in character directions, but use of the phrases demonstrates Agee's awareness of Crane's imagery. "Panther-fashion," "leoine cruelty," "bullocks," and "teeth," appear in Crane's account of the fight. In dialogue the script has Mrs. Scully and her daughter saying, "Crazy men! Blood-thirsty brutes."

The insertion of the steel engraving "'The Stag at Bay'" is Agee's most graphic example of his grasp on Crane's animal imagery. Nowhere represented in the story, the episode is a cinematic reinforcement of Crane's naturalism. The Swede is unmistakably associated with animal fear.

During the course of the mid-day meal, the Swede glances toward the wall and sees the engraving. He is immediately identified with the stag through camera action.

CLOSE SHOT--THE SWEDE

Very deeply bothered, he rakes his glance at each man in turn, sharply up at the wall above Scully.

INSERT: WALL ABOVE SCULLY FROM SWEDE'S ANGLE  
A SOMBER STEEL ENGRAVING OF "THE STAG AT BAY"

CLOSE SHOT--THE SWEDE

The Swede's eyes leave the engraving, quick glances all around again; he is sweating.

The physical act of sweating shows the Swede's raw animal fear.

Crane also uses fire and metallic imagery to dehumanize his characters. In the story the guests enter a room of the hotel which seems:

to be merely a proper temple for an enormous stove, which, in the center, was humming with godlike violence. At various points on its surface the iron had become luminous and glowed yellow from the heat.

Throughout the story Crane shows a parallel between the fire and stove and the raging passions of his characters. Agee does not place an emphasis upon the stove at the first entrance of his characters into the hotel. Later, however, he shows that he is receptive to what Crane is doing. The sound to accompany the open door is the fierce roar of the stove. Following the fight and prior to the Swede's departure, the camera includes the stove in a shot accompanied by the Swede's footsteps overhead. On the Swede's re-entry

Agee indicates a shot not included in the story but which emphasizes the stove as a center of violence. The men continue to stare at the stove throughout the Swede's convulsive, triumphant laughter. Most significant are the camera directions preceeding the Easterner's decision to confront Scully and the cowboy:

MEDIUM CLOSE SHOT--THE EASTERNER

He is staring at the stove, hands slack on his knees; he is listening keenly. As contempt and self-contempt increase in his face beyond silence, CREEP CAMERA INTO CLOSE UP.

EASTERNER (quiet but piercing) Oh, stop it!

Also the scenario points out that in the bar the Swede glows "like a stove." Agee incorporates Crane's descriptions when he writes that Scully might "flame-out" or that the Swede has "blazing orbs."

The cinematic medium limits Agee in carrying out Crane's metallic imagery. In a description of Scully, Crane writes that his cap causes "his two red ears to stick out stiffly, as if they were made of tin." The film could not give its viewer a similar impression without appearing ridiculous. Although Agee notes that the picture of Scully's little girl is to be the hue of lead, the spectator needs the actual words to make him notice the metallic imagery. Agee's awareness of Crane's metallic imagery is restricted to character and scene description. He approximates Crane's vocabulary in writing "polished" and "metal."

Crane obviously meant that his story should indicate man's nature from all time and in all places and not to be just a story of the wild West. The Easterner is from a different culture, but he too has much in common with these men, namely his capacity to be reduced to rage. In the scenario the Swede compares Scully's belch to that of a Chinaman, and Scully reads aloud an article of empty facts concerning far-away places. The train's "place-names, emblems and names of lines, swinging by, suggest the whole nation and continent in geography and history." Crane connects all his imagery to stress the baseness of man in a naturalistic universe. While Agee uses imagery to show that his characters have much in common, he drives toward their basic guilt or sinfulness.

The beginning of Agee's break with Crane's naturalism is evident when he overemphasizes the religious symbolism in the story. He loses sympathy with Crane's work, and so lifts the religious symbolism out of context that the story's theme is obscured. Agee's changes cease to be merely for cinematic effect. When he meets a suggestion of a motif dominant in his own writing, the translator becomes transformer. At first he is merely effectively stressing Crane's references to the religious side of man's nature. The episode involving three coins is an example. On first attempting to leave the hotel, the Swede tries to pay Scully.

(The Swede) took seventy-five cents from his pocket and tendered it to Scully; but the latter snapped his fingers in disdainful refusal. However, it happened that they both stood gazing in a strange fashion at three silver pieces on the Swede's open palm.

In the story and script the two men stare significantly at the coins, but in the latter the cinematic insert is used to advantage.

INSERT:

The open palm, very heavy and alive, tailors' marks and callouses on it, trembling faintly; three quarters on it.

MEDIUM SHOT--SCULLY R.S.--SWEDE STANDING L.S.  
Their eyes lift from the open palm and meet strangely in silence.

Agee introduces another episode involving three coins and adds dialogue to make certain the symbolism is not missed. When the Easterner leaves to redeem himself with the Swede, he is unable to persuade Scully to accept his money since he has not stayed the night.

He quietly lays the coins on the floor at Scully's feet. Then he wipes the coin-sweat from his palms onto his coat and picks up his bag.

EASTERNER (on a queer, wild impulse) I'm sorry it isn't thirty pieces of silver.

Crane's religious symbolism is unmistakable but not pronounced. There is a duality in Scully's role as host--that of priest-fallen angel figure.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Agee's symbolism is out of proportion to Crane's references. It

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<sup>36</sup>In complimenting Scully on the evening meal, the Swede strikes him on the shoulder. Johnnie expects his father to react because he knows the shoulder is "tender from an old fall."

does not fit into a naturalistic framework. The Easterner in the scenario is finally completely identified with the religious element of man's nature and is never restored to his proper role. Agee almost puts the Swede in the same category when he adds a dimension to his character not found in Crane's story--that of the Christ figure. The Easterner and Scully are both represented as betrayers of the Swede. Two cinematic episodes portray the Swede as having potential and actual power. At dinner a "broad perforated mechanical-music disc" is behind the Swede's head, and as it turns, it serves as a "phony halo." After the fight, his exhilaration and magnificence is cinematically shown in the walk toward town. During the Swede's walk, the Easterner warns the others the Swede will not know what to do with his new power. In the death scene the Swede's power is related to the naturalistic theme when that power is seen as futile. Although religious symbolism is present in Crane's story, it does not distort the theme as in the script.

Agee expresses his awareness of Crane's naturalistic viewpoint and ironic attitude throughout a large part of the scenario in his emphasis on aspects of the theme and in his treatment of the characters. In the scenario the Swede voices to Scully his certainty that nothing can stop the other men from harming him: "you can't stop them. Nobody can stop them, not God Himself." Character directions

even show that the Easterner's inability to act is not what he wills but what is fated. Agee describes him as accepting his cowardice with the "fatal look of a piece of foam snapping over the lip of a waterfall." In the film per se this does not adequately link the Easterner to naturalism. Involved in Crane's deterministic theme are the essential isolation and fear of the characters, especially of the Swede. The scenario indicates that his eyes register "a glitter of fear" and that "he is transfixed by the profound fright which unexpected noises cause in some men."

But these are smaller parts of a greater theme-- the irony of the human situation. This is not lost on Agee, for he vividly expresses Crane's ironic attitude toward the Swede in the Swede's death scene. Agee's imagination and creative sensibilities come into play here as nowhere else in the script. Throughout this scene, he indicates a curious blend of pathos and fate. Nowhere in the script are cinematic techniques used to such advantage to drive home a point. The reality of man's situation in a hostile world is pitted against his illusions and pipe dreams.

Agee echoes Crane when he emphasizes the easy plunge of the knife into the taut coat over the Swede's swollen belly. Crane writes that the long blade "shot forward, and a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was

pierced as easily as if it had been a melon." In the film the bar lights strike the leather and heighten the effect. Next comes the sound ("not too easily") of the knife's extraction. The Swede:

utters the Swedish word for "no," which is "nej" . . . in a tone almost beyond sorrow and wonder but partaking of both. . . his chin trembles a little, the staring eyes alter, one tear runs out of each. . . .

Then begins the sound which is representative of fate:

The supersonic tone used pianissimo at first and steadily increasing to ultimate unbearable intensity, behind all shots: likewise a subsonic tone, same intensification.

During these sounds the Swede's visions of what might have been his life are Agee's prime examples of what Crane calls "the conceit of man." The images flash on the screen:

- (1) Dinner music is added as gambler and he toast.
- (2) "Over brass disc of supertime, very faint, Scully, Easterner, cowboy rush to congratulate him by his tree just after the fight."
- (3) Same music. Johnnie, grinning, concedes Swede is victor.
- (4) Same Music. Scully offers Johnnie and Swede, both beaten up, whiskey bottle.
- (5) Sound of transcontinental express and blonde woman "smiles up at him promisingly."
- (6) Train and disc music. Floozies in negligie swarm around advancing camera.
- (7) Sound of child crying and whipping. Father glares then smiles.
- (8) Sound of woman half-humming a lullaby in foreign language tenderly gazing into camera lens.

The images return to reality. "'The Stag at Bay'" is again inserted as the highsound increases in intensity. A child's crying is again heard. A lullaby begins. As the supersonic sound reaches its height, the Swede's shout from his recent exhilaration, the boy's crying, and the "huge vague



maternal face" are added to the complex of image and sound. Finally his eyes "freeze into an expression of unutterable horror." It is not until the occupants of the bar have departed that the camera dwells exclusively on the Swede's left eye and then on the flourishing message on the cash register on which the eye is focused--"THIS REGISTERS THE AMOUNT OF YOUR PURCHASE." Here Agee manages to both identify with and remain ironically detached from the Swede. In the death scene he displays his sensitivity to Crane's irony and his own creative ability.

Crane's theme is more than the insignificance of man in a naturalistic universe--it is the absurdity of human conceit. It is man believing himself to be the most significant creature without realizing that his freedom to act is an inconsequential thing; that nothing, not his courage, his power, or his virtue can ever amount to anything of moment. Crane makes this explicit:

We picture the world as thick with conquering and elate humanity, but here, with the bugles of the tempest pealing, it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamor of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smitten, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb. The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life. One was a coxcomb not to die in it.

In the universe of Crane's creation one is a fool not to die. Although Agee's description, "The sky is emblazoned with a freezing virulence of patterned stars," echoes

Crane's "fire-smitten" and "ice-locked," it is a verbal and not a cinematic application of the hostility of the universe. The last shot of the film is also naturalistic. "The cold stars sharpen and very slowly, like a prodigious wheel, the whole sky begins to turn."

Agee reads and interprets Crane as a symbolic naturalist in "The Blue Hotel." Cinematically, in accord with the story, he points up the irony involved in the Swede's situation. Although he portrays the Swede's new power and subsequent death more graphically than Crane, Agee treats the Easterner in such a sympathetic manner that the absurdity and irony of his life are totally lost. Agee becomes tender toward the Easterner almost to the point of identification. Crane, however, is the sardonic, objective narrator making the Easterner, the man first of thought and then of action, the greatest fool of all, for he is most caught up in the irony of the human situation. In the story, the guilt ridden Easterner is on the verge of provoking another fight when the cowboy reduces him "to rage." The Easterner's fate could easily be that of the Swede's. He, too, is a "coxcomb" not to die in such a universe. Pitted against the fury of their environment, neither the Easterner nor the Swede can triumph. Each episode in the story, including those which involve the Easterner, relates to the central irony--that of man's believing in meaningful action in an amoral and deterministic universe. In dealing with

Crane's central irony, Agee cinematically distorts the original story.

The film, The Blue Hotel, does not leave its spectator with an impression that the Easterner might share the Swede's fate. Quite opposite from being a fool, the Easterner assumes almost tragic proportions in the scenario. When Agee sympathizes with the Easterner, he temporarily loses sight of the core of Crane's theme and overemphasizes nuances of that theme. In basic plot, except for necessary additions of details, Agee remains true to "The Blue Hotel" through the first seven sections. A fusing and changing of the remaining two sections is obvious:

## SHORT STORY

## VIII

Swede leaves the hotel.  
Scully and cowboy speculate how they could have whipped Swede.

Swede walks into town.

## SCENARIO

Swede leaves the hotel.  
Scully and cowboy speculate how they could have whipped Swede.

Easterner reaches the limits of his cowardice.  
E. says he is going to find Swede and "make up for what we've done to him."

Swede is shown walking into town.

Easterner attempts to leave the hotel.  
Scully and cowboy are angry.  
They become angrier as E. proves their unfairness.

## Short Story

## Scenario

Swede enters saloon and is  
stabbed by gambler.

## IX

Months later near Dakota line.

Easterner informs cowboy of gambler's three year sentence and says the Swede "might not have been killed if everything had been square."

Cowboy retorts that the Swede was a "jackass."

E. and C. argue until C. reduces E. "to rage."

E. says Johnnie was cheating.

E. voices theory of social complicity: "Every sin is the result of a collaboration.

We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede. Usually there are from a dozen to forty women really involved in every murder, but in this case it seems to be only five men--you, I, Johnnie, old Scully; and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement, and gets all the punishment."

Scully and C. accuse E. of being "Tarred with the same brush...."

E. affixes responsibility: "we're all cowards; that's the root of the trouble. Johnnie is behind us; You're afraid to face the truth about him and your own unfairness; I'm just the worst of a bad bunch."

Scully is threatening.

E. says of Swede, "he's my conscience. Yours too if you only knew it."

Swede enters saloon and is  
stabbed by gambler.

Easterner enters saloon.

"A freezing anguish of guilt enters his still face."

Scully and cowboy enter. Easterner tells them to leave him alone and also says, "Every sin is a collaboration. Everybody is responsible for everything."

The Easterner's face reflects hopelessness of expiation.

Long shot: The Blue Hotel. Lights flicker out. "The sky is emblazoned with a freezing virulence of patterned stars...the cold stars sharpen; and very slowly, like a prodigious wheel, the whole sky begins to turn."

## Short Story

## Scenario

"The cowboy, injured and rebellious cried out blindly into this fog of mysterious theory: 'Well, I didn't do anythin', did I?'"

Both story and script emphasize the Easterner's reaction to his guilt. In the first he is bitter and violent; in the last he is a man without hope. The scenario is both similar to and different from the short story.

The script shows that Agee possesses a valid interpretation of Crane's theme down to the final line which indicates that the cold stars are to slowly turn "like a prodigious wheel." Given his interpretation of the theme and his subsequent treatment throughout most of the scenario, why does Agee alter the role of the Easterner? First he must have felt the story as it stands would have lacked unity in a cinematic adaptation. Crane's ninth section differs in locale and time from the preceding parts. It is when Agee lifts the theories of the Easterner out of context and introduces them earlier in the action that he first begins to distort "The Blue Hotel." At this point he identifies with the Easterner, the betrayer of the Swede, the Judas with thirty coins. The Easterner's sin becomes the sin of all mankind. There is no equivalent of an objective narrator pointing up the irony involved in the situation.

Essentially the Easterner in the scenario confronts the cowboy and Scully with the same theories voiced by

Crane's Easterner. But guilt is a major theme of Agee in his own work, and in the script he gives an unfounded emphasis to this aspect of Crane's theme. After the spectator has heard the Easterner say that the Swede is "my conscience. Yours too if you only knew it," heard him marvel at the new power of the Swede, and seen "a freezing anguish of guilt enter his still face," he has no alternative but to think the import of the film is the sinfulness and depravity of man. Agee describes the last shot of the Easterner:

With the absolute silence an even more fierce and living quiet intensifies in the Easterner's face and becomes, as well, sorrow, pity, tenderness, a passionate desire for, and hopelessness of, expiation. The face rises on a high wave of realization, almost transfigured, on the verge, even of mysticism, yet iron, virile, tragic--as, very slowly, his eyes still fixed toward the Swede, he walks into extreme CLOSE UP and PAST THE CAMERA out of the shot.

There is no "rage" in this interpretation of the Easterner, no irony involved. His final experience seems almost religious. What realization comes from the hopelessness of his ever atoning for betraying the Swede? It is not an awareness of the insignificance of man. A long shot picks up Scully, the cowboy, and the Easterner as they make their way home. Lights are shown being turned on and then off after the men enter the blue hotel. This emphasizes the futility of the situation. The audience has seen that the courage and guilt of the Easterner are

in vain. Nothing came of his heroism. The implication is only that the Easterner prepared for action and did not arrive in time. Nothing emphasizes that his efforts are thwarted by a hostile universe. Agee has identified too closely with the Easterner. His Easterner is not a "cox-comb" not to die in such a universe. The story leaves the Easterner bitter: the film, hopeless. Crane's story is a movement from seeming order or peace to chaos.<sup>37</sup> The scenario moves from the realm of chaos into hopelessness.

The "prodigious wheel" of stars, the last shot of the film, is introduced too late to relate significantly to the Easterner's role. It is at odds with the preceding material. Even if Agee had objected to Crane's ending on the basis of unity, he might have placed its essential content earlier in the action without a distortion of theme. Had he brought the Easterner, Scully, and the cowboy into the saloon and had them violently confront each other there, he might have retained Crane's irony. Although the Easterner arrives at the saloon too late to help the Swede, Agee does not give a clear reason for this lateness. If Agee had shown that fate determined the lateness, then the treatment would have been naturalistic. The irony of man's situation, the absurdity of the human condition, is central to Stephen Crane's theme, and this is what Agee loses in his

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<sup>37</sup>Gullason, p. 44.

adaptation of "The Blue Hotel." Once he begins to deal with guilt and expiation motifs, James Agee departs from Crane's story in theme and tone.

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