821.111(73).09 Crane S.
https://doi.org/10.18485/bells.2022.14.9

Ksenija Kondali*
Faculty of Philosophy
University of Sarajevo
Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE AND THE AMERICAN WEST IN STEPHEN CRANE'S "ONE DASH – HORSES"

Abstract
Although widely known and celebrated as a novelist, the late nineteenth-century US author Stephen Crane wrote a considerable number of short stories, including those inspired by his tour of the American West and Mexico. His personal insight into this region – associated with the celebration of ruthless outlaws at the high point of the dime novel popularity – influenced his critical approach to American mythologized codes of violence. This paper discusses the representation of violence in Crane's short story "One Dash – Horses" as an example of Crane's portrayal of the West and his original narrativization of violence in Gilded Age culture, through which he debunks the clichés of the region and its people.

Key words: short story, Gilded Age America, Western, violence, irony

1. Introduction

Born over 150 years ago and of a brief but intense life, the American author Stephen Crane (1871–1900) continues to draw the interest of readers and critics alike, evident also in the most recent and nearly eight-hundred-page

* ksenija.kondali@ff.unsa.ba

long biography by Paul Auster *Burning Boy: The Life and Work of Stephen Crane* (2021). Among the numerous adventures that Crane undertook in his short but productive career as writer is also his 1895 tour of the US West and Mexico.[1] Then a promising writer, mainly thanks to the success of the newspaper printing of his recent novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane was hired by the newly established syndicate Bacheller, Johnson, and Bacheller to travel to the West and South, followed by Mexico, "on what Crane called 'a very long and circuitous newspaper trip' to write feature articles" (Sorrentino 2014: 150). Crane left New York for the West and the significance of this travel for his creative output is recognized by many of Crane's scholars for rarely any other issue as the West seems to have endowed the young author with a new impetus that resulted in innovative fiction, testifying to "his fervent, phantasmagorical powers of literary imagination" (Cain 2005: 568). Crane's literary chronicles of these experiences indicate narrative strategies in depicting violence that, combined with his viewpoint, tone, use of tropes and color, have become his short fiction's trademark and recognition as "master of the short-story form" (Cain 2005: 566). To a great degree, Crane's original exploration of violence is evident also in his stories of the US West and Mexico, some less widely known, especially when compared to the frequently anthologized stories "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and "The Blue Hotel". This paper aims to examine Crane's representation of violence in late-nineteenth century American literary and cultural production related to the West, that had largely been shaped by dominant stereotyping of the region with the help of popular dime novels.[2] To this end, the focus will be on Crane's short story "One Dash—Horses"[3], following an overview of Crane's and the

[1] As Paul Sorrentino points out in his 2014 biography entitled *Stephen Crane: A Life of Fire*, Crane's assignments and tours were of a considerable scale and at times enshrouded in an air of mystery: "Within five years he traveled to the American West, Mexico, Cuba, the British Isles, Greece, and the Continent, at times disappearing for weeks from a biographer's view" (2014: 5).

[2] For more details on the popular narrativization of the US frontier story and related violence, see Bold (2005).

[3] The story belongs to Crane's prolific literary production of the time, that includes other noteworthy stories of similar stylistic and thematic approaches, such as "The Wise Men", "A Man and Some Others, and "The Five White Mice". The limitation of scope of this journal's article precludes a more comprehensive (or comparative) analysis of several pieces of Crane's Western writing.

prevailing ideas of the West that will serve as a framework for the analysis of the narrative features in representing violence.

2. Stephen Crane and the West(ern)

Crane wrote most of his Western and Mexican short stories in 1897 when he moved to England after a stint as a war correspondent in Cuba and Greece. Within less than two years he became not only more than an emerging author but a mature writer whose experiences of Western life proved that the romanticized understanding and portrayals of the West were disingenuous, aimed at attracting tourists and investments, and false because the Old West was no more due to modernization. As a reminder, Crane visited these parts of the American continent in the years after the U.S. Census Bureau declared that the frontier was closed, i.e., that the line imposed by white settlers since the earliest days of colonization had disappeared since no land beyond it was categorized as unsettled. The disappearing of the frontier inspired historian Frederick Jackson Turner to present his theory on the formative function of the frontier, entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). The so-called "Turner Thesis" constructs the history of the United States as equivalent to the course of Western colonization, with the West and its frontier foundational to the American democratic and national spirit:

> American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the great West. (Turner 1893: n. p.)

As much as Turner's thesis proclaims the Eurocentric success in the transformation of the Western territories where the frontier enacts the Americanization of the European settler, it also establishes the West and the frontier as metanarratives of American distinctiveness. At the same time, the American West functions as a markedly gendered environment, with masculine performativity in *fin de siècle* US culture, since "masculinity is a

site where aesthetic concerns become social, and the American West offers an ideal setting" (Worden 2011: 2). Both as a historical process and a social construct, the settling and imaginary of the West spawned broad interest for varied categories of writers, including Stephen Crane. The West had a great imaginative potential for Crane because it provided new, authentic insight and material to his epic thematization of the individual faced with grave dangers and challenges. Also, it gave Crane another perspective in the changing dynamics between the individual and the community, "in what Crane himself once called 'this terrible century'" (qtd. in Bergon 1979: 8). However, Crane's attitude to the West is fundamentally ambivalent: on the one hand, he criticizes the conventions of popular Western fiction and its romanticized narratives about that region; on the other hand, he withholds no admiration for the genuine and straightforward behavior and character of the region's inhabitants, evident in his letter to his friend Willis Hawkins written in November 1895:

> I have always believed the western people to be much truer than the eastern people. We in the east are overcome a good deal by a detestable superficial culture which I think is the real barbarism. Culture in it's [sic] true sense, I take it, is a comprehension of the man at one's shoulder. It has nothing to do with an adoration for effete jugs and old kettles. This latter is merely an amusement and we live for amusement in the east. Damn the east! I fell in love with the straight out-and-out, sometimes-hideous, often-braggart westerners because I thought them to be the truer men and, by the living piper, we will see in the next fifty years what the west will do. They are serious, those fellows. When they are born they take one big gulp of wind and then they live. [...] But what I contend for is the atmosphere of the west which really is frank and honest and is bound to make eleven honest men for one pessimistic thief. More glory be with them. (Crane 1960: 69–70)

The above statement illustrates the conflicting and ambivalent sentiments which the West often enacts: the genuine straightforwardness of the people in the West shaped by the stark landscape and violence, but also its reflection upon the non-Westerners as their effete contrast.[4] This set

[4] As Deborah Madsen underscores, the casting of the US West into categories of East and West is embedded in a larger framework of colonization and its discourse, and thus "we

of differences is summed up by a critic as follows: "Unlike Easterners, with their distorted values and artificial social conventions, Westerners embraced self-reliance and rugged individualism" (Sorrentino 2014: 155). Against the background of these social and cultural interpretations, Crane's fiction signifies, and frequently also ironically deflates, the earlier literary production inspired by "the Wild West", rife with melodrama and cliché about the Eastern-Western differences in the perception of the West. As Michael Kowalewski writes, Crane's attitude "to previous literature, especially writing that he reacts against, is both complex and ambiguous. His scorn for sentimentality is equaled only by his verbal appetite for stiff, unwieldy literary formulas and stock vocabularies" (1993: 123). This critical estimate indicates Crane's particular literary expression, especially evident in his stories, with the theme and imagery of violence among the central characteristics, that "mirror, in a larger way, the embattled imaginative conditions he preferred, moment by moment, in his fiction" (Kowalewski 1993: 112).

Crane's conceptualization and representation of violence in his Western and Mexican short stories fundamentally aim to demystify the hegemonic myth of the West, perhaps also arising from his personal experience in the area. The US industrial order had affected the West in astonishing defiance of the preconceived idea of Western wilderness. According to Richard Etulain, when Crane "swung west across the Great Plains and Texas in 1895, he was surprised to find a West less divergent from the East than he had been led to believe". Crane encountered a genuine incursion of the West by the industrial and urban East, stating that in Nebraska, "'yellow trolley-cars with clanging gongs,' […] were 'an almost universal condition,' convincing him that 'travellers tumbling over each other in their haste to trumpet the radical differences between Eastern and Western life' had 'created a generally wrong opinion'" (qtd. in Etulain 1996: xvii). Such reality clashes with the (stereo)typical vision of the East, in which the West connoted the open frontier and, in a related manner, a nostalgic urge to leave behind the ruthless realities of Eastern industrialization through the liberating push toward the open frontier. However, in the westward drive, violence was inexorable, primarily directed against the indigenous population with horrifying consequences of their dispossession and

must keep in mind the wider global context within which the idea of the West operates. The very notion of the continental US as organized into East and West is a European conceptual imposition" (2010: 370).

annihilation. Simultaneously, the process of forceful, even brutal shove of white settlers contributed to the development of the grand narrative of US mainstream society, one which Crane's lifestyle and literary vision seem eager to challenge.

3. Violence, the West and Crane's Ironic Vision

Throughout US history, violence has occupied a principal place in the process of nationhood, "in helping Americans to build a sense of state and nation. Places that have been touched by this violence and tragedy are celebrated in the American landscape as visible emblems of identity and tradition" (Foote 2003: 334). The westward expansion simultaneously buttressed the territorial drive and hegemonic practices, fueled by Manifest Destiny, all constituting "the reasons for expansion and the ideological justification of conquest [that] largely did not change over time and in fact appear to have solidified into a national mythology" (Madsen 2010: 371).

Violence infuses the representation of the West, its nation-building and homogenizing processes, as elaborated by Jane Tompkins' seminal 1992 study *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* about the centrality of male-centered codes and practices of behavior that this genre celebrated, including the tough drawn to pain and violence. Tompkins recognizes that in the American literary production, in addition to the nostalgic idealization of the Western "knight", the cowboy, the national myth of the West was generated with the genre of the Western. It fused nation and violence, in which "their taciturn heroes want to dominate the land, and sometimes to merge with it completely—they are trying to get away from other people and themselves" (Tompkins 1993: 6–7). In Crane's short stories, the code of behavior described in the Western serves as a background for a new, (predominantly) ironic reevaluation of the fictional conventions while also illuminating the individuals' spirit. Jamie Robertson argues (1978: 245) that Crane's "Western heroes participate in the convention of popular Western fiction that individual courage gives meaning to life, but that convention is always ironic for them". He further points out that Crane employs the Western myth to illustrate "that the courageous confrontation of the unknown – [...] that for him [...] is often death – can lead to an insight into what he believes is the key feature of any person's individual development: a humble awareness of one's own insignificance" (1978:

245). This narrative trait marks also Crane's short stories about the West in which the characters show that previously held beliefs and depictions about the West were (tragically) misrepresented.

In Crane's *oeuvre*, ironic deflating of prevailing norms and beliefs in society, including notions of the Civil War and the related romanticization of valor and glory, constitutes a major feature of his literary approach.[5] Crane differs from "the neo-romantic Easterners in the West" because he did not exploit "the myth of the West as an end in itself, but as an artistic convention to be used for serious artistic ends" (Robertson 1978: 245). Crane's short fiction selected for this analysis exemplifies this specific method he employed in his Western stories which present typical themes for that genre, including stand-offs between white Americans, specifically Easterners, on the one side, and Mexicans and "Wild West" Americans, on the other. Along with ironic debunking of the code and its inherent violence, Crane thematizes also the tensions between the Eastern profit-driven entrepreneurship and social norms, and the Western understanding of freedom and integrity, while engaging what George Monteiro categorizes as "the Old White West and the New White West" (2010: 69). At the same time, Crane's Western prose incorporates episodes of violence as an inherent element of staple Western portrayals indicative of what Michael Kowalewski labels "an epistemology of violence". While recognizing "the disturbing power that scenes of violence have for us", Kowalewski directs us to "the imaginative sources and consequences of that power", and focuses on "considering not only the question of what we know about or can 'make' of violence in fiction but the more reflexive matter of how we know what we know about it".[6] Since Crane's Western stories are not

[5] According to Adam Wood, Crane's fiction was an aberration (or opposition to) the popular accounts of the war as it seeks "predominantly to debunk such overly romantic notions of chivalry and glory" and "to reintroduce—to reanimate—the horror, the violence, and the injury of the Civil War" and to expose the representation of the war "as a closed system, an historically isolated system, a system without the bodies and minds of the individuals—and the violence they enact and is enacted upon them—without which war itself would be an impossibility" (2009: 4). This character of Crane's writing is traceable not only in Crane's novel The Red Badge of Courage, but also in his other short stories, for example "A Mystery of Heroism", "The Little Regiment" and "An Episode of War".

[6] In keeping with Kowalewski's argument that what an author describes through violent scenes is of a lesser interest to him "than in what his depictions of it reveal about him as a writer, about his powers of sympathy and generosity, and about whom and what we are asked to be as readers when engaged with his work" (1993: 8), Crane's short stories

exclusively narrated around violence as the key element, they seem to be concerned "not with the critical uses of violence as a theme but with […] the ways in which it exists not as an isolated element or subject but as the conformation, at a given moment, of a larger stylistic field of force" (Kowalewski 1993: 8). The next section of the paper examines the range of narrative and stylistic devices Crane employs in depicting violence (or its intimation) in the American West as a feature of his moral and literary ethos.

4. Violent Confrontations and Crane's Stylistic Mark

Violence was ubiquitous in the tumultuous last third of nineteenth-century Gilded Age United States, especially in the West, and Crane's experiences of it are likely motivated by his disposition to engage in adventures and to write about it in his particular style. Critical reviews seem to agree on the interaction between his personal traits and literary expression resulting in a remarkable energy and literary output: "In his life and writing, Crane was curious about and eager for extreme sensations" (Cain 2005: 557). Similarly, Paul Sorrentino, one of the leading biographers and critics on Crane, also underscores the convincing link between the writer's character and literary approach: "Crane's distinctive prose style reflected his own personality. Just as his fiction is often disruptive, elliptical, and episodic" (2014: 5). Crane's literary achievements have captivated scholars for their complexity and unprecedented literary expression, in which they identified "[t]he character of the deliberate" (Berryman 1950: 287) as conspicuous in Crane's fiction, adding that Crane's writing is "flexible, swift, abrupt, and nervous," but also endowed with "an unexampled capacity for stasis" (Berryman 1950: 284). Already in earliest scholarship on Crane, his idiosyncratic style was acknowledged as contesting the prevailing literary norms of his time; as an integral element of such resistance, frequently, critics singled out his reliance on color. For example, John Berryman contends: "Color is high, but we observe the blank absence of the orotund, the moulded, which is Crane's most powerful response to the prose tradition he declined to inherit" (1950: 284). Eschewing long-winded sentences

should be reexamined for their previously understated or even unrepresented affective dimension.

with the help of "curt and telegraphic grammar" (Kowalewski 1993: 109) in his fiction generally, and scenes of violence specifically, his style was also described as having "[t]he tone of taciturn minimalism" (Gopnik 2021: n. p.), and thus seems to precede the reserved, terse and hard-edged narrative approach to depicting violence that became evident and popular decades later, most notably with Ernest Hemingway.[7] The effect of "nervousness" seems an apt label for Crane's fictional style that relies on short sentences, and, as Michael Kowalewski states, "its rhythm tends to be choppy and abrupt". Among the various elements of "Crane's writing that resists critical labeling", the crux seems to be his specific "realistic imagining" that reveals "a very different kind of verbal temperament, one that inclines to stiff abstractions, visual blockages, dead metaphors, and explicitly contorted syntax" (Kowalewski 1993: 106). These tropes, coupled with other literary devices in Crane's prose, circumscribe and enhance the depiction of violence, frequently added to the author's manipulation of viewpoints. Typically, Crane's strategy relies on the intricate switching between two conflicting viewpoints, or interactions that "are both complex and ephemeral" (Kowalewski 1993: 108). In this context, Michael Kowalewski argues that previous Crane criticism failed to detect "the way in which these narrative shifts rhetorically register in his work crucially effects the fluctuating vantages the stories offer". Adding that Crane's irony "springs not simply from the interactions of two narrative viewpoints but from the 'languages' by which those viewpoints are entertained", this critic warns that "[a] narrative voice in his writing does not always constitute a viewpoint (a stabilized vantage from which a view might be had or from which a self might be imagined)" (Kowalewski 1993: 108), thus enhancing Crane's layered and untypical style. As will be demonstrated in the selected short story "One Dash – Horses", in addition to this narrative specificity, Crane tends to taunt individuals that embrace general and often misleading conceptions about other regions and people, also of the West. Many of his characters suffer disillusionment (in some instances also tragic awakening) in terms of their self-important or gullible sense of their environment and often, the protagonist "has never discovered

[7] Another element relevant for this development in the American literary canon is the influence of writing for newspapers and different foci in presenting themes and ideas, arising "[...] only after the Great War—with its roots in newspaper reporting, its deliberate amputation of overt editorializing, its belief that sensual detail is itself sufficient to make all the moral points worth making" (Gopnik 2021: n. p.).

Crane's lesson in humility" (Robertson 1978: 245). This paper analyzes "One Dash – Horses" which is the first "of the Western stories in the order of their writing" and one that narrates a rather stock "confrontation with death that results when the Anglo outsider meets the Mexican" (Robertson 1978: 248). Using the common plot of the dime novels, Crane recasts the the West and violence as a study of human behavior in intense situations with the purpose of debunking the conventional (and deluding) notions of the frontier and its code.

5. "One Dash – Horses": Another Type of Western Story

One of the earliest short stories of this period is "One Dash – Horses" (1896), an adventure narrative reportedly based on Crane's own familiarity with the pristine and unaffected West and his appreciation of horses.[8] From the opening of the story, Crane's staple stylistic features come to the fore by using limited point of view and focalization, as well as colors, to portray the main character called Richardson as he pauses on his horse to observe the landscape in the distance: "The hills in the west were carved into peaks, and were painted the most profound blue. Above them, the sky was of that marvelous tone of green – like still, sun-shot water – which people denounce in pictures" (*ODH* 732).[9] From the inception, Crane's characteristic scoffing at generally held beliefs (and those who are guided by them) becomes evident, specifically, Crane's derision is directed at the standard representation of the West or, rather, people's expectations of it. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Richardson is a white American outsider, whose point of view (limited, even narrow-minded) dominates as Crane's strategy of mocking self-absorbed and boastful behavior of people who shape their response to circumstances in the West according to the genre of the Western.

The menacing atmosphere is established from the earliest paragraphs, with Richardson's servant José described as wearing a "crimson serape" and a person "muffled deep in his blanket," (with Crane's idiosyncratic

[8] This influence is documented in a letter Crane that wrote to Nellie Crouse of January 26, 1896: "The story 'One Dash – Horses,' which I sent you celebrates in a measure my affection for a little horse I owned in Mexico" (Crane 1960: 103).

[9] All page references in the paper to Crane's story will be cited parenthetically, preceded with "*ODH*".

predilection for the use of "crimson"), "and his great toppling sombrero was drawn low over his brow. He shadowed his master along the dimming trail in the fashion of an assassin" (*ODH* 732). Their search for food and lodging is loaded with foreboding as even Richardson needs to calm his horse by speaking "tenderly as if he were addressing a frightened woman" while the landscape seems an endless and murky vastness: "The sky had faded to white over the mountains and the plain was a vast pointless ocean of black" (*ODH* 732). The scenery presented at the opening of the story testifies to Crane's ability of intense and compelling tone, in addition to "a powerful kind of concentration" (Cain 2005: 566). At the same time, this scene introduces his tendency to ridicule how mistaken individuals are in deeming themselves capable of effecting any major change through their action "in the midst of large, implacable nature" (Cain 2005: 566). The ominous atmosphere is further accented with the use of alliteration, such as "sombre sundown sky" and quirky similes, e.g. when the village houses are described against the horizon leaving the impression "to sink like boats in the sea of shadow" (*ODH* 732). While José argues with a villager over the price of bed and board, the focalization of the environment through Richardson additionally foreshadows violence since he only hears "a mere voice in the gloom" and "[t]he houses about him were for the most part like tombs in their whiteness and silence" and entering the house it did not greet or welcome him, but "confronted him" (*ODH* 732). The woman tending to their meal locks her gaze on the white American's "enormous silver spurs, his large and impressive revolver, with the interest and admiration of the highly privileged cat of the adage" (*ODH* 733). An intimation of danger is also evident in the depiction of José's manner of draping his blanket about him so that he can "free his fighting arm in a beautifully brisk way, merely shrugging his shoulder as he grabs for the weapon at his belt" (*ODH* 733). Richardson overhears from across the plain an alarming "trample of the hoofs of hurried horses" (*ODH* 733) and hears of a possible attack being planned on him, on "this American beast" (*ODH* 734). Richardson braces for the attack while sitting up: "This stiff and mechanical movement, accomplished entirely by the muscles of the waist, must have looked like the rising of a corpse in the wan moonlight, which gave everything a hue of the grave" (*ODH* 734). Crane introduces a narrative interpellation, repeated also later in the story, for the purpose and effect of an ironic authorial comment: "My friend, take my advice and never be executed by a hangman who doesn't talk the English language"

(*ODH* 734). The above quotations illustrate narrative alterations and the resulting shifting perspectives identified by Kowalewski (1993:180), but they also show the interplay of distinctive rhetorical expressions that generate these viewpoints to ironic effect, as in the following example: "The tumultuous emotions of Richardson's terror destroyed that slow and careful process of thought by means of which he understood Mexican" (*ODH* 734). The rising tension in the portrayal of violence is supported by the immediacy of description and seemingly impersonal commentary: "Then he used his instinctive comprehension of the first and universal language, which is tone. Still it is disheartening not to be able to understand the detail of threats against the blood of your body" (*ODH* 735). The varying stylistic methods within a relatively limited scene constitute a common feature of many writings by Crane, in what is characterized as "verbal interweaving" creating "imaginative gaps in his writing, so that reading his work resembles jumping from stone to stone in crossing a stream" (Kowalewski 1993: 128).

The shift of viewpoints, continued in the next paragraph, additionally enhances the feeling of dramatic violence, with the attacker alike a Satanic figure with "little snake-like moustache was as black as his eyes, and whose eyes were black as jet. He was insane with the wild rage of a man whose liquor is dully burning at his brain" (*ODH* 735). A whole gang of men joined this Mexican, and what follows seems a typical Western stand-off scene, with the opposed parties glaring at each other and reaching for their belts. Crane's style in this narrative increasingly draws on ironic inflation of valor and other traits glorified in the Western in such tense and violent scenes. The story becomes a minute representation of fear through the use of strong similes: "A 44-caliber revolver can make a hole large enough for little boys to shoot marbles through" (*ODH* 736). The attackers turn on José while, from under his blanket, "Richardson looked on impassively" (*ODH* 736). The glowering Mexicans' violent incursion is interrupted by prostitutes, whose arrival lures the attackers away, enabling Richardson and José to wait out the night's brawling and sneak away at dawn. Although the menacing atmosphere and tense wait are depicted with rising engagement, Crane creates his specific narrative approach, laced with irony, by employing different perspectives, a strategy that Kowalewski (1993: 120–121) deems characteristic of Crane's scenes of violence, as evident in the next quote: "Richardson longed to run. But in this vibrating and threatening gloom his terror convinced him that a

move on his part would be a signal for the pounce of death" (*ODH* 737). In their attempt to sneak out and leave unnoticed, the rider's spurs, the protagonist's standard riding equipment, become a deadly give-away, and the additional comparison with the Eastern technology of the telegraph enhance the ironic effect, also echoing "the New Wild West" (cf. Monteiro 2000): "Walking in spurs – notably Mexican spurs – you remind yourself vaguely of a telegraphic lineman. Richardson was inexpressibly shocked when he came to walk. He sounded to himself like a pair of cymbals" (*ODH* 738). Crane's interplay of rhetorical devices and overestimated perceptions or attitudes of his characters of themselves and their significance is a staple of his style, in particular "[t]he fluctuations between self-diminishing and self-aggrandizing verbal postures form a stylistic signature" (Kowalewski 1993: 108).

The emphasis and focalization in the story are turned to Robinson's horse, his trusted companion, a customary feature of the Western genre and of the Wild West canon eulogizing the faithful companion, the cowboy's horse, much like the Western incarnation of legendary medieval knights, intimated also in the semantic choices of "steed" and "dragon": "[T]he horse in his happiness at the appearance of his friends whinnied with enthusiasm. The American felt at this time that he could have strangled his well-beloved steed. Upon the threshold of safety, he was being betrayed by his horse, his friend. He felt the same hate for the horse that he would have felt for a dragon" (*ODH* 738–39). But the horses are dependable and galloping across the prairie, making Richardson feel reassured, while the confidence and relief for getting away unscathed get translated into appreciation that belies the Easterners' fascination with technology: "Richardson, looking down, saw the long, fine reach of forelimb, as steady as steel machinery" (*ODH* 740). The threat of violence and the related fear causes a shift in Richardson's selfishness and fright impel him to thoughts which ironically reflect the myth of the West. Additionally, it recalls Western portrayals of chases as "badly written", Crane's obvious sneer at the Western genre, evident in the following quotation:

> Crimson serapes in the distance resembled drops of blood on the great cloth of plain. Richardson began to dream of all possible chances. Although quite a humane man, he did not once think of his servant. José being a Mexican, it was natural that he should be killed in Mexico; but for himself, a New Yorker—He remembered

> all the tales of such races for life, and he thought them badly written. (*ODH* 741)

The conventions of popular dime novels contributed to the conceptualization of conduct when faced with violence, but the very standards set by these fictional representations create an ironic twist for them. Crane's approach to the West(ern) resists its idealistic portrayal largely because "[a]s a poetic convention, it was developed by Easterners for consumption by audiences in the East, and Crane's awareness of this fact encouraged an ironic use of the myth in his Western stories" (Robertson 1978: 245). Crane's rejection of the myth of the West and its dominant representation of violence from a prejudiced viewpoint is most vividly demonstrated in the collapse of the Western clichés at times when danger, even death, becomes imminent. To this end and effect, the story is interlaced with curious expressions, many of which rely on alliteration, for example "hopeless horror" (*ODH* 738), and "fumbling furiously" (*ODH* 739). At the same time, the idealized frontier heroes of the Western genre offer a model of masculinity that Crane's protagonists strive for, even when Richardson in "One Dash – Horses" is clearly frightened and longs for rescue that comes in the form of the Mexican cavalry, the rurales, who intervene to save them. But the lure of the West(ern) linger long after the Mexicans are gone, because Richardson is duped by the Western myth, his desire to dominate the land (cf. Tomkins 1993), and imagines himself as some other personality, perhaps even styled after a fictional character, chased by a posse, evident in the description during the chase: "He tried to imagine the brief tumult of his capture – the flurry of dust from the hoofs of horses pulled suddenly to their haunches, the shrill, biting curses of the men, the ring of the shots, his own last contortion" (*ODH* 742).

In this story, Richardson is Crane's archetypical personality whose confrontation with violence and death offers little or no sense of reality or grasp of their situation, more often than not resulting in misjudging the powers of human action, with an unavoidable ironic tone. Moreover, his sense of what has happened to him is shaped by the conventions of the popular representation of the West in preconceived, WASP-centered notions promulgated by dime novels, as seen in the following excerpt: "Richardson again gulped in expectation of a volley for – it is said – this is one of the favorite methods of the rurales for disposing of objectionable people" (743–744). Merging the ridiculing of the standard Western elements with

distorted visions of reality, the characters' vision of themselves and their situation with multiple narrative perspectives, Crane portrays violent episodes with a rhetoric idiosyncrasy, a "mock-judiciousness [that] stiffens and affectedly heightens its verbal effect" (Kowalewski 1993: 107). The narrative exaggeration often encountered in Crane's writing verges on slapstick, with similes that are both baffling and amusing, indicative of Crane's unconventional style and creative energy.

6. Conclusion

Since the inception of colonization in America, the idea(l) of the West has drawn Americans of diverse backgrounds and motivations, to settle, explore, or to be used as a source of inspiration, symbolizing the American sense of mobility, opportunity, enterprise, and transformation. Thus it is hardly surprising that lure of the West represented a driving force for many Americans, individually and collectively, to cast themselves as part of its code of violence, but also to disengage the myth from reality. The concept of the frontier and the West came to a changed reality with the end of the nineteenth century as an outcome of heightened industrial transformation and intense settlement in the Western territories. Consequently, the last third of the nineteenth century in the United States was a period of intense and bewildering changes across the country, captured also in its lively and substantial literary production. Among the American authors who gave their creative contribution towards a more diversified approach to literary Realism is also Stephen Crane, whose life and writing embody the era's restless and ambivalent dynamic. Although Crane did not live even into his thirties, and thus had only a brief writing career, he left a body of work that due to its scope, diversity, and stylistic traits, is both extensive and engaging. This analysis draws on critical issues in representing fictional violence in the American West since, on the one hand, the American West and Mexico were popularized by the myth of the West and the genre of the Western, typically dime novels brimming with platitudes. But, on the other, Crane's personal experience of the region and literary strategies played an important role in understanding and exposing the stereotypes of how violence in the West(ern) is depicted. In a twofold manner, as part of the course of history and an imaginary, the West offered Crane the possibility of exploring the human condition, especially given the inherent violence

associated with US westward expansion, the tragic fate of the indigenous population, brutally violated in the whites' drive for profit across the open frontier, based on the mainstream ideology of Manifest Destiny.

For this paper, Crane's short story "One Dash – Horses" has served as a case in point to examine his literary approach to the West and violence, in particular how his writing satirizes the construction of the region in popular Western fiction. While the West has the potential to offer a new, genuine awareness of the authentic dangers and tensions it poses to the individual, it also suffers misleading aestheticization by conventional fiction, echoed also in Crane's ironic gibe of the mainstream's limited perspectives. His literary approach, exemplified in his story "One Dash – Horses", typically constitutes an interplay of perspectives, tone, use of tropes and color, to depict violent confrontations, frequently with bold and curious descriptions. In "One Dash – Horses", Crane's ironic jab is generated thanks to shifts between viewpoints and narrative variations that contribute to the dramatic tension in depicting violence, but saved from melodrama through impersonal comments and exposure of the protagonist's fear and self-aggrandizement. Crane's narrative strategy relies on the dime novels' standard plot line, including the confrontation of a white cowboy (or an Easterner visiting the West) with Mexican outlaws. Intent on debunking the misconceptions about the West as a region and an imaginary, Crane ridicules the formulaic narratives in the Western genre. Through the depiction of tension and violence in such episodes specifically, and generally in this conceptualization of the West as a mainstream myth, Crane interlaces several rhetorical means, especially irony, to expose these platitudes and explore the human condition in extreme situations. The protagonist in "One Dash – Horses", confronted with danger that verges on violence, embodies characters who overestimate themselves and thus are deluded in terms of their significance because the dominant conventions about the West cloud their thoughts and actions. Crane employs a range of literary devices, such as referencing the Western genre plot lines as guidelines for the character's response to violence, to reinterpret the myth of the West in a sharp, and frequently ironic manner. In addition, Crane's masterful characterization and use of imagery, often with unusual similes, insistence on colors and alliteration, merge with his ability to create menacing scenes and dramatic action as canvases for the purpose of an ironic study of the human fate. Although Stephen Crane wrote his Western short stories, including "One Dash – Horses", over a hundred and twenty

years ago, his unique narrative approaches in representing violence and the West continue to captivate readers and critics to this day.

References

Auster, P. (2021). *Burning Boy: The Life and Work of Stephen Crane*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

Bergon, F. (1979). Introduction. In: F. Bergon (ed.), *The Western Writings of Stephen Crane*. New York: NAL, 5–13.

Berryman, J. (1950). *Stephen Crane*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.

Bold, C. (2005). "The Frontier Story": The Violence of Literary History. In: R. P. Lamb and G. R. Thompson (eds.), *A Companion to American Fiction 1865-1914*: Blackwell Publishing, 201–221.

Cain, W. E. (2005). Sensations of Style: The Literary Realism of Stephen Crane. In: R. P. Lamb and G. R. Thompson (eds.), *A Companion to American Fiction 1865–1914*: Blackwell Publishing, 557–571.

Crane, S. (1984). In J. C. Levenson (ed.), *Stephen Crane*, *Prose and Poetry: Maggie, A Girl of the Streets / The Red Badge of Courage / Stories, Sketches and Journalism / The Black Riders and War is Kind.* New York: The Library of America.

------ (1960). *Stephen Crane: Letters*. R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes (eds.). New York: New York University Press.

Etulain, R. W. (1996). *Re-Imagining the Modern American West. A Century of Fiction, History, and Art*, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

Foote, K. E. (2003). *Shadowed Ground. America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Gopnik, A. (2021). The Miracle of Stephen Crane. New Yorker. (18 October 2021) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/25/the-miracle-of-stephen-crane-red-badge-of-courage-burning-boy<.

Kowalewski, M. (1993). *Deadly Musings. Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Madsen, D. L. (2010). The West and Manifest Destiny. In: John Carlos Rowe (ed.), *A Concise Companion to American Studies*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 369–386.

Monteiro, G. (2000). *Stephen Crane's Blue Badge of Courage*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Robertson, J. (1978). Stephen Crane, Eastern Outsider in the West and Mexico. *Western American Literature,* 13–3, 243–257. JSTOR. (23 March 2022) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43020034>.

Sorrentino, P. (2014). *Stephen Crane: A Life of Fire*. Cambridge, MA/ London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Tompkins, J. P. (1993). *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Turner, F. J. (1893). The Significance of the Frontier in American History.

American Historical Association. The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893) | AHA (historians.org). (3 March 2022).

Wood, A. H. (2009). War, Literature & the Arts*: An International Journal of the* Humanities 21, 1/2, 38–57, Academic Search Ultimate (23 March 2022).

Worden, D. (2011). *Masculine Style: The American West and Literary Modernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Received: 15 August 2022
Accepted for publication: 12 October 2022