

From Man to Monster: The Politics of Black Masculinity in Stephen Crane's "The Monster"

Hana Noelani Fujimoto

Writer's comment: In this culminating essay for English 144 (Post-Civil War American Literature), Professor Freeman required each student to develop an argument on a work of late nineteenth-century American fiction—but in the context of a scholarly article. I've done this before, I thought—used literary critics to back up my own analyses—but this is precisely what Professor Freeman required that we *not* do. Instead, I was asked to treat my scholarly source as an “intellectual springboard,” a voice with which my own would engage in a critical dialogue. The essay “ ‘Birth of a Nation’hood” by Professor Richardson of UC Davis provided the intellectual springboard I needed to analyze Stephen Crane's “The Monster,” a haunting allegory on race relations during the American Jim Crow era. Even though she doesn't deal directly with Crane's story, Professor Richardson explores the very issues of race and masculinity that unfold in “The Monster,” thus providing me with just the right critical voice to help me develop my own in this paper.

– Hana Noelani Fujimoto

Instructor's comment: Hana Fujimoto's sophisticated paper combines good close reading using traditional literary-critical terms and tools, historically informed analysis, and supple work with literary criticism and critical race theory. Fujimoto draws from UC Davis Professor Richardson's work to explore the relations between African-Americans and whites in “The Monster,” and her methods are clearly modeled on Richardson's as well as upon methods learned in class. But this is no apprentice paper; she adds an original twist by examining the relations between the white men in the story and provides a fresh interpretation of a mysterious ending that has baffled many critics. Finally, Fujimoto treats writing as a conversation: between herself and Richardson, between herself and her readers, and between an earlier historical moment and our own.

– Elizabeth Freeman, English Department

In the naturalist short novel "The Monster" (1899), Stephen Crane engages in an impassioned argument on the politics of race and masculinity in post-Reconstruction America. Henry, a black man, undergoes a painful process of de-personification; he begins as a kind, proud father-figure to Jimmie Trescott, his white employer's son, only to become the faceless, pathetic "monster" to which the story's title refers. Henry's transformation from man to monster, owing to a severe face injury that results from a fire, functions as the dramatic focal point of "The Monster." But the ethics of Henry's devolution are complex. Does Crane reproduce an implicitly racist narrative that complies with prevailing race politics of his time, or is Henry's transformation a scathing critique of the white supremacy that prevailed in the 1890s, a decade marked by an increase in racial violence against blacks? What can we deduce about the ethical message of "The Monster" by examining the politics surrounding Henry's bodily injury, an image that recurs throughout the text?

RichŽ Richardson explores similar issues of the politics of race, gender, and the body in literary and cinematic representations in her article " 'The Birth of a Nation' hood': Lessons from Thomas Dixon and D.W.Griffith to William Bradford Huie and *The Klansman*, O.J. Simpson's First Movie." Richardson analyzes the cultural logic embedded in the film *The Klansman* (1974) and the novel on which it was based, also entitled *The Klansman* (1967). The film, Richardson writes, shifts the novel's "emphasis on black female identity and rape to a foregrounding of lynching and black masculinity" (14). Why does the film feature this thematic shift, she asks, and how does this shift affect the ethical standpoint of the film?

By focusing on the ways in which black masculinity is degraded through the lynching and castration of the character Henry, the film *The Klansman* counters a damaging stereotype that became embedded in the American South during the Reconstruction era: the myth of the black rapist, which refers to the notion that white women must be protected from the sexual abuse of black men, who were considered to be sexual predators by nature (19). The popular 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, for instance, "features the brutish Gus, one of many characters rendered in blackface, in pursuit of Little Sister [a white woman] with the implicit intention of raping her" (19). This portrayal of black men as sexual predators became deeply embedded in American culture in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras (19). The film *The Klansman* suggests, conversely, that lynching, a form of terror that was used for

“disciplining and annihilating the black male body,” was, in fact, more common than the frequent sexual assault of white women by black men (19). By depicting Henry’s black male body as the object of racial terror through lynching and castration, Richardson writes, the 1974 film produces an empowering counter-narrative that undermines damaging stereotypes of black men as rapists and social deviants, stereotypes that had infiltrated American culture far beyond the cultural boundaries of the South.

Similarly, through his portrayal of (another) Henry’s mutilated black body in “The Monster,” Stephen Crane produces a counter-discourse to the “wellsprings of racial propaganda” (Richardson 29) that persisted not only in Crane’s lifetime but also well into the 20th century, as Richardson suggests with her 1915 example, *Birth of a Nation*. While the Henry in *The Klansman* undergoes an overt emasculation through lynching and castration, the Henry in “The Monster” undergoes a more carefully coded one; he sacrifices his body by running into a burning house to save his white employer’s child, losing his face in the process and experiencing social ostracism as a result. But an allegorical commentary centering on race politics is nonetheless recognizable. By analyzing the trajectory of Henry’s fall from man to monster, we can see that Crane employs the plot device of Henry’s bodily mutilation and his subsequent ostracism from Whilomville society as a scathing critique of white supremacy in post-Reconstruction America.

Henry’s race is portrayed as a problem as soon as the narrator introduces him. He is immediately marked not as the *person*, but as the “negro who cared for the doctor’s horses” (Crane 382). In this short, seemingly innocent description, Crane codes an entire discourse on race politics; Henry’s being a “negro” clearly precludes other possible markers of identity, such as *person*, *man*, or *human being*. Already, before the narrator even describes Henry’s interior thoughts, the problem of Henry’s race is foregrounded. But Henry’s race isn’t the only problem—his conscious and proud masculinity is problematic as well. The narrator describes Henry’s careful grooming in ironic terms, claiming, “[n]o belle of a court circle could bestow more mind on a toilet than did [Henry]” (384). The narrator subtly emasculates Henry by comparing him with a dainty woman, foregrounding the combined problem of Henry’s race and gender. This discourse suggests that because he is an African American male, Henry shouldn’t aspire to be manly, or attractive, or anything other than servile. Additionally, by comparing Henry to a “belle of a court circle,” this discourse uses sexuality to foreshadow the impotent submission into which he will be forced by his later injury.

Henry's pride in his appearance represents a transgression of the post-Reconstruction social boundaries between white and black manhood; as such, it initiates the fateful chain of events that culminates in his emasculation. By dressing like a gentleman, for instance, Henry feels a powerful "interior" transformation (384): "[h]e was simply a quiet, well-bred gentleman of position, wealth, and other necessary achievements out for an evening stroll, and he had never washed a wagon in his life" (384). However, as a black hired man, he *had* washed wagons, and indeed was *not* a gentleman of position, wealth, and other necessary achievements. The narrator's fierce irony merely hints at the gravity of Henry's transgression, thereby foreshadowing a sense of impending doom.

This sense of doom only intensifies in the next scene, where the point of view shifts to a group of white men who observe Henry passing by. Restating the narrator's earlier foregrounding of Henry's problems—being not only African American but also consciously masculine—one man says to another, " 'you ought to see the coon that's coming!' " (385). In response, the barber and "his assistant instantly poised their razors high and turned toward the window" (385), where Henry, dressed in his finest clothing, walks by. These "razors," in combination with the men who wield them, are suggestive of lynching and castration, of an ominous threat to Henry's body. Although Henry understands that his proud masculine performance becomes an object of the public gaze, he fails to recognize the threatening way in which these men perceive him:

Henry was not at all oblivious of the wake of wondering ejaculation that streamed out behind him. On other occasions he had reaped this same joy, and he always had an eye for the demonstration. With a face beaming with happiness he turned away from the scene of his victories
.... (386)

By using clothing as means of transgressing social boundaries delineated by race and class, Henry has undermined the stability of white masculinity as a signifier of manhood in its highest, most essential form. Furthermore, his "absolute dumbness" (387) to the white men's true reactions seals his fate as the soon-to-be object of racialized, corrective violence.

White masculinity is unsettled even further through the narrative foregrounding of Jimmie's problematic relationship with his father, Dr. Trescott, which invites readers to compare Dr. Trescott with Henry. Henry's superiority as a father-figure in Jimmie's life is obvious, for Dr. Trescott lacks Henry's easy way of communicating with Jimmie. In the first scene of "The Monster," for instance, Jimmie has broken a peony

and tries to tell Dr. Trescott what he has done. Significantly, Jimmie must call out to his father four times before he figures out what Jimmie is struggling to communicate. Dr. Trescott, an empiricist, "could see nothing which explained to him" why Jimmie was so agitated (381). Henry, on the other hand, understands Jimmie's non-verbal communication intuitively: "these two would commune subtly and without words" concerning Dr. Trescott (383). Similarly, Dr. Trescott's "frowning" (381) in the first scene is replaced by Henry's "grin" (382) in the second scene. The ease with which Henry and Jimmie communicate subtly underscores that Henry's presence poses a threat to Dr. Trescott's paternal authority.

This reading of Henry's black masculinity as a threat to white masculinities corresponds to widespread notions of black male sexual deviance during Crane's own lifetime: late-nineteenth century America. Richardson argues that "the black rapist myth . . . emerged in the late 1860s with its main goal being to protect white womanhood in the South from black male sexual violation and the threat of miscegenation. This myth served as the primary rationale for lynching . . ." (19). Henry's closeness to Jimmie can be read as a possible allusion to miscegenation, for he assumes a paternal role by advising and listening to Jimmie. This closeness could therefore be perceived as a way in which black masculinity is feared and necessarily squashed by white men through bodily violence in "The Monster." I am not suggesting that Henry expresses an overt desire to overtake Dr. Trescott's role as Jimmie's father, but I am suggesting that the text invites us to read Henry's paternal closeness with Jimmie as a symbolic threat to Dr. Trescott's biological role as father. Given this reading, Henry's precarious role in Whilomville is even more ominous, owing to the two identities to which he has been reduced: his race and gender.

As if Dr. Trescott himself rises up in flames to consume Henry's manhood, the flames that ultimately deform Henry are located in the doctor's study. What's more, the chemical that intensifies the degree of Henry's facial burn is contained in a vial on the doctor's desk:

Suddenly the glass splintered, and a ruby-red snake-like thing poured its thick length out upon the top of the old desk. It coiled and hesitated, and then began to swim a languorous way down the mahogany slant. At the angle it waved its sizzling molten head to and fro over the closed eyes of the man beneath it. Then, in a moment, with a mystic impulse, it moved again, and the red snake flowed directly down into [Henry's] upturned face. (394)

This moment marks the end of Henry as we have known him. The strange personification of the chemical that burns Henry's face (the

“ruby-red snake-like thing”) is a metaphorical site of displacement for the hatred of a lynch-mob, motivated by the desire to enforce a politic of white supremacy. That Henry is mutilated in the doctor’s study symbolizes his losing power struggle with Dr. Trescott, not only in relation to Jimmie – due to his superiority as a father-figure in Jimmie’s life – but also, more generally, in relation to racialized notions of masculinity. As a black man, Henry doesn’t stand a chance in Dr. Trescott’s social world, in which he is the racial Other. He tries to negotiate his place in society by appropriating notions of masculine identity that are reserved for white men only, but he fails. His mutilation reveals that this is an inevitable conclusion for a black man in such an environment. In this way, Henry’s physical mutilation enables the rise of Dr. Trescott in the narrative, further suggesting that there is only room for one masculinity in “The Monster”: Dr. Trescott’s.

The problem of Henry’s masculinity, however, is represented beyond this accident in a more directly sexualized and grotesque way, for he becomes, in the scope of the Whilomville imagination, the feared black rapist, inherent violator of white womanhood. Crane stages this stereotype in the scene during which the little girls and boys are having a birthday party, which is signified as a space of middle class ideals by the presence of extravagant foods like “five cakes,” “lemonade,” and “ice cream” (411). But the “primness” (411) of this scene shatters when, on “[h]earing a noise behind her at the window, one little girl turned to face it. Instantly she screamed and sprang away, covering her face with her hands” (412). This little girl’s terror emphasizes her vulnerability in relation to the monster on the other side of the glass: Henry. That she is framed the object of his gaze further emphasizes his supposed sexual perversity, for what, Whilomvillers implore, is this monster capable of doing?

This perception of Henry as the material manifestation of the mythic black rapist is heavily ironic, for readers are aware that Henry has just escaped from his gloomy, grave-like boarding house – “a room six feet one way and six feet the other way” (410) – intentionally located (by Dr. Trescott) on the outside of town. Henry’s trespassing at the little girl’s party is merely an unfortunate consequence of his escape, but once again, a fundamental misrecognition centering on his race and gender is staged between him and his community, one that dooms him even further in the Whilomville imagination.

In the most painful, bitter moment in Henry’s fall from man to monster, Jimmie publicly ridicules and thereby rejects “the dark figure” (402), no longer referred to as Henry, in front of a gang of young white boys. Crane describes that amid this scene, “The monster was crooning a

weird line of negro melody that was scarcely more than a thread of sound, and it paid no heed to the boy" (418). Henry the *person* no longer exists; his mutilated body is now occupied by a thing, a pathetic, asexual "it." Jimmie, too, has undergone de-personification, having lost the humanity he displayed in the first scene through his guilty, childlike fear of his father. Through this painful exchange, Crane hauntingly uses a naturalist plot of decline to dramatize how narratives of white supremacy are reproduced from generation to generation.

This literary critique of post-Emancipation race relations couldn't have been more timely; indeed, it's no surprise that Crane wrote "The Monster" during the 1890s, a decade marked by Jim Crow—the codification of segregation laws in the American South—and a widespread increase in racial violence against blacks. On the issue of race relations, the novelist and social critic Toni Morrison has emphasized the need to interrogate the post-Emancipation binary opposition between white masculinity as normative and black masculinity as "rapacious and criminal," for in doing so, we can better understand contemporary American race relations (Richardson 30). Although he wrote nearly a century before Morrison, Crane seems to have understood just how damaging this binary opposition between black and white masculinities was in his own time. In "The Monster," this ideology of difference leads to the killing of a once-empowered black masculinity, figured through Henry's paternal closeness with Jimmie Trescott at the beginning, in exchange for the white masculinity figured through Dr. Trescott, who gains an authoritative space in the narrative *only after* Henry is disfigured and dehumanized.

Crane thus highlights a fundamental slippage between the prevailing identity politics in the end—the extreme passivity into which Henry is forced, which enables the rise of Dr. Trescott as the story's masculine figure—and the ethics of such politics. Crane uses dramatic irony to stage a barrier between readers, who are constantly encouraged to empathize with Henry, and the white men in the story who abuse him. This gap only widens as the story progresses toward its inevitable, fatalistic conclusion. By using this plot of decline—one of the deeply pessimistic conventions of naturalism as a genre—Crane suggests that white supremacy destroys everyone, including the Trescotts, whose discomfort at their own moral ambivalence in the politics of Henry's fall is made manifest in their "mechanically" counting tea cups at the story's end (428); this haunting final act suggests their ceaseless repetition of a pattern—a metaphor for white supremacy, perhaps—that has no end in sight.

Works Cited

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