CHAPTER II

THEMES OF HIS NOVELS WITH A NOTE ON THE THEMES
OF HIS SHORT STORIES
The theme of a work is what it is about. It is this which determines, on the one hand, the author's choice and organization of material, and, on the other, partly at least, the readers' response or appreciation.

Stephen Crane wrote on different aspects of life. He selected his themes from the vast panorama of experience. Though his life was short in years, it was rich and varied in experience. There are some themes which recur in the same form or with a little change in shade or colour.

Assertion of manhood is one of the most important themes in the novels of Stephen Crane as some of his most important works centre round it. The Red Badge of Courage is the story of Henry Fleming's assertion of manhood. The theme is that, through suffering, through immersion in experience, man achieves understanding; he attains spiritual insight, and regeneration takes place. The way is to immerse oneself in the destructive element of experience. This element has been represented by the battlefield as it is by the sea in the story The Open Boat.

The Red Badge of Courage deals with the 'self-combat'
of a youth who fears and stubbornly resists change and spiritual growth. It probes his state of mind and analyses the gradual transformation of his psychological being under the incessant pin-pricks as well as the bombardments of life as a soldier, till his regeneration takes place. Years later, we find Ernest Hemingway doing almost the same thing in one way or another. Almost all of the Hemingway heroes are put under great mental and physical pressure, to prove the importance of the way one conducts oneself while facing the greatest crises of life. They are alone. There is no possibility of outside help. They are not even certain of the result and, sometimes, the adversary is far more powerful and strong. Some of them die or lose something precious. But all of them fight courageously. This is the Hemingway code and, from Robert Jordan to the Old Man Santiago, everyone tries to prove it through suffering or death bravely confronted.

Spiritual change is Henry's 'Red Badge'. His red-badge is his conscience reborn and purified - the purification is through fear and self-realization. Jim Conklin's red badge of courage is the literal one - the wound, of which he dies. But Henry's is the psychological, the wound of the conscience.

"It might be inside mostly, and them plays thunder. Where is it located?", asks the tattered soldier when he sees Henry.

Just as Jim Conklin runs into the field to hide his wound
from Henry, so Henry runs into the field to hide his from the
tattered soldier who had been asking him about the location of
the wound. The words have obviously a double meaning: "Yeh
might have some queer kind a' hurt yerself. Yeh can't never
tell where is your'n located?".

Henry has no reply, and his shame becomes deeper till
he is obsessed with the idea that people can read it on his
face. It is here that he wishes that he too had a wound,
'a red badge of courage'.

He had been troubled by the doubt that he would run away
from the battle. He put the question to the loud soldier also.
The doubt troubles him till he faces firing on the battlefield,
and actually runs away. Before he is conscious of his own
behaviour, he had thrown away the rifle and left the line.
When he comes to himself he is ashamed of his behaviour because
he has been disappointed by his own act of cowardice, his
betrayal of his hope of figuring in great 'Greeklike' battles.
He tries to rationalize his flight. But, ironically enough,
he is also conscious of the fact that his guilt cannot be
hidden. The weight of the guilt is too much for him. And
then comes the 'tattered man'. He seems to be Henry's other self
come to reproach him. The inward combat has taken physical
shape. Even if he is able to hide his guilt from others, what
answer could he give to his own otherself? It will never
forgive him. He will become a low creature in his own eyes - a
fallen man. He would never be able to absolve himself to himself.

This is a bigger crime than Wilson's. Wilson was ashamed of the fact that he had given Henry a packet of letters to be sent to his relatives in case he died in the war. But he did not die and, shamefacedly, had to ask for the return of the packet. Henry hands it over to Wilson, and notices that Wilson has changed completely. He had been the loud soldier till then but, now, he has become an humble one.

"The youth wondered where had been born these new eyes when his comrade had made the great discovery that there were many who would refuse to be subjected by him." (p. 102).

He wondered where Wilson had achieved that knowledge of self, and how he was able to shed his illusions of himself.

"Apparently, the other had now climbed a peak of wisdom from which he could perceive himself as a very wee thing." (p. 103).

Henry noticed that the change had brought about the regeneration of Wilson who had been shorn of all vainglorious illusions about himself. He learns the lesson of humility from Wilson's experience. But he needed greater retribution, his crime being bigger.

"The youth had been taught that a man became another
thing in a battle. He saw his salvation in such a change." (p.28).

Redemption begins in confession, and absolution in change of heart. Henry's wounded conscience does not heal up until he confesses the truth to himself. The process of spiritual change in Henry is prolonged till he fearlessly plunges into the battle. As a certain modicum of selflessness is achieved, he feels 'capable of profound sacrifices'. The brave new Henry, 'the new bearer of colors', triumphs over the former one. Henry's regeneration is given a final shape by the sacrificial death of Jim Conklin. Thus, the process of initiation, immersion and emergence is complete, bringing out Henry as a real, full man. His manhood is achieved and asserted.

R.W. Stallman says: "It is only by immersion in the flux of experience that man becomes disciplined and develops in character, conscience or soul. From the start, Henry recognizes the necessity for change but was against it." ¹

_The Open Boat_ also has the same theme, that is, of initiation, attainment of insight through suffering or loss. This involves initiation into the experiences of life. For this, the first essential step is isolation, then a series of nerveshattering stresses, pain and pressures. These four

¹ R.W. Stallman: "Introduction"
The Red Badge of Courage
people are separated from their companions, and are removed from a comparatively safe place like the ship. They are cut off from the land. They are alone with little possibility of outside help. They have to face this new challenge with their own resources and to fight the threatening external forces with the weapons of courage and endurance.

Peter Buitenhuis makes an apt observation: "The Open Boat, like The Red Badge of Courage, is the story of initiation. Unlike Henry Fleming, however, the correspondent, the protagonist of The Open Boat, is no stripling. He is represented as an experienced, cynical, somewhat dogmatic individual. His initiation is not into manhood, as is Fleming's, but into a new attitude towards nature and his fellows."

As Henry awakens to a new morning with a love for the tranquil sky, and his manhood is achieved after the process of suffering (and the death of Jim Conklin), in the same way these three men get a new understanding after the ordeal of great pain and suffering and the loss in the form of death of a mate, the oiler. Then only do they become able interpreters of life, as Henry did in The Red Badge of Courage.

As Crane puts it; "So it came to pass that as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath his soul changed....

........ He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle. The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks - an existence of soft and eternal peace." (p. 156).

And in The Open Boat, Crane describes the change as follows: "When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters." (p. 164).

In the process of learning, Henry discovers a shocking thing. The four men in The Open Boat also discover the same thing during their suffering. It is that nature, which is supposed to be kind to man, is indifferent to the suffering and pain of men in their moments of crisis. Crane takes up this theme in some of his novels and stories. He also sometimes varies this theme, and puts society in place of nature. In Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and George's Mother, we find that society, as such, is indifferent to the sufferings of man. Not only does it remain indifferent, but becomes hostile. Crane has taken up this theme in the later long short story, The Monster.
The Monster poses certain moral problems. Crane shows through the contrast between the action of Dr. Tresscott and the attitudes of the others, that people in general lack moral sensitivity, and that an individual has to believe in his own vision. The questions raised by the story are about the moral responsibility for saving the life of a man who has become a monster, while saving another human being, about the price of virtue, about the justification of social ostracism of a man who stands by his own conviction of thought and principle. The question is put by a neighbour in whose house Dr. Tresscott and Henry take shelter after the fire. He is a judge and a close friend of the Treshotts. He says: "But I am induced to say that you are performing a questionable charity in preserving this Negro's life. As near as I can understand, he will, hereafter be a monster, perfect monster, and probably with an affected brain. No man can observe you as I have observed you and not know that it was a matter of conscience with you, but I am afraid, my friend, that it is one of the blemishes of virtue." (pp. 97-98).

Dr. Tresscott refuses to be swayed from his decision to serve and nurse Henry under his own personal supervision. He simply repeats the same thing: "He saved my boy's life."

Crane probes deep into the mind of people and poses some questions like a challenge. A very serious effort is made by him to find some answers as, in the story, The Monster, a
moral question is raised and a hint of the answer is given. The question Crane asks is as to what a man is supposed to do in such circumstances. There is no easy answer. Ultimately even the judge, who was the first to pose the question, says: "Well, it is hard for a man to know what to do."

But, surprisingly, Dr. Trescott knows what he is to do and he does it. He keeps Henry with him. The whole town, including the police officer, is against such an action, and slowly the doctor is boycotted.

James Hafley says: "Dr. Trescott stands midway between the poles of Henry, who became gradually symbolic of 'God' and the townspeople. The story ends with Trescott's own ostracism after he chooses to side with Henry rather than with his fellow citizens."

Crane's view is obviously that, in such cases, society behaves insanely. The way people talk about Henry, attack him and are scared of him show how mad they have become.

The theme of the indifference of nature has thus been given another shade of meaning by making it the theme of indifference of society in this short story. But in either case, it is the environment that is indifferent to the point of hostility.

1. James Hafley
   "The Monster and The Art of Stephen Crane"
Crane was primarily interested in showing the struggle of a man in society. Dr. Trescott, though misunderstood, neglected and ostracized by society, still retains his integrity. He is ultimately the winner. He asserts his manhood. But society fails to recognize his success. In Crane's view, this hardly matters. Dr. Trescott, in his own way, with the conviction of his own thoughts challenges society and proves that he is a man. Dr. Trescott simply pursues his noble ideal as Henry did, and tries to absolve himself to himself. Crane proves through the action of his characters what Emerson has declared as the ideal of manhood.

"Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."

His fiction is full of protagonists who declare their independence by acts of which they are truly and sincerely convinced. His heroes have to learn through experience and hold to what they have learnt. Though, in the process, they find themselves alone, the end is a vision of values, an assertion of the worth of man.

James Hafley says: "Crane's fiction is filled with protagonists who declare independence by social acts of no social consequence whatsoever; "You can't teach them anything, you know," the judge tells Trescott. Like the reporter in 'The Open Boat' - and notoriously, like Crane himself - Crane's heroes have to learn through experience only; yet the end of that experience is always a vision of themselves alone, themselves
as unique, never a vision of others, or one that is communicable to others."

As Crane says in *The Red Badge of Courage*: "With the conviction came a store of assurance. He felt a quiet manhood, non-assertive but of sturdy and strong blood. . . . . . . He was a man. So it came to pass that as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath his soul changed." (p. 156).

Crane is aware of the ironical disparity between what imagination and tradition suggest, and what, in fact, is seen. Everything turns out in an unexpected way. The youth who thought of great Greeklike battles and Homeric poses has his petty illusions jolted as soon as he announces his enlistment to his mother, who says, with the voice of commonsense: "I've knet yeh eight pair of socks, Henry."

His mother is totally unaware of what he has been thinking. She 'disappointed him by saying nothing whatever about returning with a shield or on it.' He had imagined some great farewell scene but his mother only reminded him not to think that he could 'lick the bul rebel army.' This disappointment is intensified when, later, he finds that 'Greeklike battle was no more'. His ideal is shattered when

1. James Hafley
   "The Monster and The Art of Stephen Crane",
he finds out that the 'real war was not a series of death struggles with small time for sleep and meals', but a thing where soldiers have to do 'little but sit still and try to keep warm'.

The correspondent, in *The Open Boat*, along with others, in the course of their trial, learns that nature is indifferent to them in their moments of crisis. He also learns that a great feeling of close-linked brotherhood develops among them during the moments of danger. All of them get confused, and are disturbed, and have become sceptical about many things. Somehow they manage to concentrate on their main target. Thus the theme of initiation and learning through experience of life is undoubtedly at the centre of the story. To begin with, these four characters do not even know the color of the sky. They are able sea-men but faced with the crises, they discover that they still have things to learn about nature.

The correspondent gains new knowledge and his sympathy widens. Almost like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, the correspondent feels the sadness of a soldier dying in Algeria. He had known the song since his childhood but then he had never considered the death of the soldier in the song important or meaningful. He had never felt any sympathy for the soldier's plight because he himself had then been through a very superficial suffering.

"It was less to him than the breaking of a pencil point."
But now, after undergoing this harrowing experience of being adrift in a small boat in the vast ocean in a state of total physical exhaustion, a new knowledge has come to him. He can now realize the pain and suffering of other persons. It is a great and noble lesson. The distinction between right and wrong seems to have become absolutely clear to him.

Crane seems to be saying that, along with its nobility, it has value as a means to the realization of the full meaning of life.

Crane says: "This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of individuals - nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of man. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise, but she was indifferent, flatly indifferent." (pp. 159-160).

As J.C. Levenson says: "Crane's vision of an enormous, indifferent universe underlies his early stories and late but it comes to crucial expression in 'The Open Boat!'"

Nature does not help them in any way to lessen the burden of their suffering and pain. It pays no heed to their

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tragedy. It continues functioning serenely as before as if nothing has happened.

Crane says: "When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers." (p. 156).

The correspondent feels: "...... a high cold-star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of the situation." (p. 156).

Richard P. Adams comments on this: "A feeling of extreme coldness and remoteness embodied in the metaphor is a logical concomitant of naturalism. Hyatt Waggoner has shown how characteristic it is of our recent literature, describing it, in a term aptly borrowed from John Burrough's, as Waggoner says, by the conviction that the material world is alien to the desires, emotions and aesthetic sense of the human spirit." 1

In The Red Badge of Courage Henry also learnt that

1. Richard P. Adams
"Naturalistic Fiction; The Open Boat"
nature was indifferent.

"Off was the rumble of death. It seemed now that
nature had no ears." (p. 53).

And again:

"It was surprising that nature had gone tranquilly
on with her golden process in the midst of so much
devilment." (p. 42).

In the case of Henry, it was shocking for him to find
that nature betrayed him when he tried to hide himself in the
bushes.

"The ......... saplings tried to make known his
presence to the world. He could not conciliate the forest." (p. 52).

The theme of 'illusion versus reality' has been taken
up by Crane in three of his novels, The Red Badge of Courage,
Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and George's Mother.

George Kelsey, the hero of George's Mother, a simple,
devoted young man has illusions about his own place in the
world. When he meets some hoodlums in a bar, he feels that
till then he had not found the right sort of people: "Presently
he began to believe that he was a most remarkably fine fellow,
who had at last found his place in a crowd of most remarkably
fine fellows." (p. 104).
Jones, one of the hoodlums, expresses his appreciation of Flecker, another hoodlum. It is nothing but a drunk's jovial babble, but George began finding meaning in that too.

Jones says: "I tell yeh, Flecker's an ol' - timer. He was a husky guy in his day, yeh can bet. He was one a' th' best known men in N'York once. Yeh ought to hear him tell about...." (p. 104).

George listened intently and was profoundly impressed.

Another man in the group is described thus: "That O'Connor's a damn fine fellah. He's one of the best fellahs I ever knowed. He's always on th' dead level. An he's always jest th' same as yeh see him now - good natured and grinning." (p. 104).

George was completely under the influence of such great persons. He began having new ideas. He believed that he truly belonged there.

"They began to fraternize in jovial fashion. It was understood that they were true and tender spirits. They had come away from a grinding world filled with men who were harsh." (p. 105).

"When one of them chose to divulge some place where the world had pierced him, there was a chorus of violent sympathy. They rejoiced at their temporary isolation and safety." (p. 105).
George felt that all of them had been misunderstood and wronged by the world. They were superior and, as such, separate, and the world did not realize their importance. The world was, simply, not worthy of them.

"Each man explained in his way, that he was totally out of place in the before mentioned world. They were possessed of various virtues which were unappreciated by those with whom they were commonly obliged to mingle; they were fitted for a tree-shaded land where everything was peace." (p. 106).

Their dream world is no different from the dream world of Maggie. The opening sentence of Maggie: A Girl of the Streets conveys ironically the theme of illusion versus reality.

"A very small boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honour of Rum Alley." (p. 1).

Crane here suggests clearly that the idea of honour is inappropriate to the reality of Rum Alley.

When Pete visits Maggie, she feels thus about him: "His mannerisms stamped him as a man who had a correct sense of his personal superiority. There were valour and contempt for circumstances in the glance of his eye. He waved his hands like a man of the world." (p. 30).

Maggie was impressed by his way of talking and his
general appearance and that air of superiority which Pete had cultivated for such occasions: "Maggie perceived that here was the ideal man. Her dim thoughts were often searching for far away lands where the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream-garden there has always walked a lover." (p. 32).

R.W. Stallman says thus about Maggie: A Girl of the Streets: "...... illusion and reality as exemplified by every person in the novel and as summarized in Crane's phrase 'transcendental-realism'; every one of these Bowery characters transcends reality in self-deluding dreams. The crossed identity of the characters and the evoked confusion of every scene in Maggie reflects the moral confusion of the Bowery world."

George and Maggie both live in a dream world, full of illusions about themselves and others, and which is far removed from their real world. Not only Maggie but almost all the other characters of the novel, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, entertain false images of their selves, which leads them into moral errors. Pete, the villainous bartender, sees himself as a gallant of most dazzling excellence. Maggie's brother, the

1. R.W. Stallman
"Crane's Maggie : A Reassessment"
Modern Fiction Studies
brawling Jimmie, though he can take to heels in a fight, is convinced that his courage is of heroic proportions. The yearning Maggie herself hopes that the poor little tinsel world of the music hall can be for her a real world. The brutal Mrs. Johnson believes that she is one of the most sacrificing of mothers. These illusions are so far removed from reality that they become the cause of a moral outrage, which drives Maggie to despair and death. Maggie lost herself in sympathy with the 'wanderers swooning in a snow-storm, beneath happy-hued church windows', while a choir within sang 'Joy to the World'. The audience, including Maggie and Pete, identifies with innocent virtue which has been wronged in spite of the fact that these roles are inapplicable to their own lives. Crane describes their ideas thus:

"Shady persons in the audience revolted from the pictured villainy of the drama. With untiring zeal they hissed vice and applauded virtue. Unmistakably bad men evinced an apparently sincere admiration for virtue." (p. 44).

At such places, we feel that the theme is more than that of illusions about the world or of self-delusion but positively one of hypocrisy, which is constantly touched upon by Crane.

The smug complacency of people in general, their rationalizing and justification of their own weakness or selfishness, the air of virtue they cultivate without being virtuous—these are often featured in his stories.
Maggie wonders and tries to escape from the realities of life and to go to the wonderland of refinement and culture. George Kelsey finds escape in the company of hoodlums and wine. Maggie becomes the victim of the reality of her environment.

Maggie is judged by her mother, her brother, her lover and the neighbours by a moral code which is not only unreal but which does not even apply to them. In fact, it is totally inapplicable to the Bowery world which is one of hunger, poverty, sex, wine, selfishness and violence.

It is completely bereft of the virtues of life like love, kindness cooperation and brotherhood. All of them believe in that code to judge others. They have a different morality for themselves.

Donald Pizer says: "Crane suggests that the Johnson's world is one of fear, fury and darkness, that it is a world in which no moral laws are applicable, since the Johnson's fundamental guide to conduct is an instinctive amorality, a need to feed and to protect themselves."

She dies not so much because of the Bowery environment but because of the moral standing of these Bowery people. With the help of food, animal and war images, Crane suggests this.

1. Donald Pizer
Donald Pizer says: "This same ability to project oneself into a virtuous role is present in most of the novel's characters. Each crisis in the Johnsons' family is viewed by the neighbourhood who comprises of an audience which encourages the Johnsons to adopt moral poses."

Maggie's mother refuses to have anything to do with Maggie, without being aware of the realities of life. Her life is one long process of pretensions and illusions far removed from reality. She believes that her life, her home, her family and the atmosphere are the ideal conditions for bringing up children in the most virtuous manner. She is of the firm conviction that Maggie had no cause to become bad in the circumstances. She says: "She is d' devil's own chil', Jimmie. Ah, who would t'ink such a bad girl could grow up in our fambly, Jimmie, me son. ........... An' after all her bringin' up an' what I tol' her and talked wid her she goes teh d' bad." (p. 63).

Jimmie, Maggie's brother, has one code for his sister and another for himself. He also thinks that other girls could do with little or no morality. The neighbours have many pretensions. One of them is again an artificial morality which

1. Donald Pizer
applies only to others. They judge the Johnsons, and
especially Maggie, only by that moral standard. When Maggie
is leaving the house finally, "the crowd at the door fell back
perceptibly. A baby falling down in front of the door Wrenched
a scream like that of a wounded animal from its mother. Another
woman sprang forward and picked it up with a chivalrous air, as
if rescuing a human being from an oncoming train." (p. 74).

The only person who shows any sympathy for Maggie is the
guarled old woman who owned the music box, and who herself was
not considered virtuous by other neighbours. She invites
Maggie to come to her.

"So 'ere yeh are back again, are yehs? An' deny're
kicked yeh out? Well; come in an' stay wid me t'night. I
ain' got no moral stanin." (p. 74).

Crane was obviously no pessimist in spite of his
unflattering convictions about nature and society or people
in general. In the midst of all the indifference and hostility,
selfishness and smug self-righteousness, he finds sometimes a
shining goodness like that of Dr. Trescoet, and at other times,
a no less admirable simple goodness like that of the
disreputable old woman in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets.
No one who believes in the existence of this saving grace can
become an unalloyed pessimist. The latter example becomes,
however, an especially scathing comment on so-called respectable
society. It is not among the 'good' people that goodness is to be found but in those who have been declared 'bad' because of one transgression or the other of conventional morality. (One may recall here the 'low' characters in Bret Harte's stories—gangsters and prostitutes who turn out in the end capable of a heroism and sacrifice that are beyond the capacity of the respectable citizen).

Crane's simple stories revolve around the idea that man is an insignificant creature in a diminishing universe and nature is indifferent to the plight of man. Society plays a particular role in judging a man by its own moral standards which are at variance with reality. The indifference of nature and the interference of society give man a modicum of freedom for action but this freedom finally depends on the will and decision of fate. As a result of this, man is faced with a sense of frustration and disillusionment. When man begins to entertain hopes of escape from cosmic determinism, he finds himself caught in the mesh of social forces. Man is placed in a society dominated by a set of taboos and traditions. There are some codes also. Man is always alone in his struggle. When he breaks these restrictions, he has to face the consequences of such a violation of the social norms. Again he is overpowered by a sense of insignificance and frustration. What ultimately saves him is his own honesty of personal vision, the virtue of humanity and the feeling of brotherhood. He faces disillusionment because his ideas do not conform to reality.
Accepting the reality of life is one of the ways in which man can come to terms with life. His success will not make any great change in the society but he will prove to himself that he is man.

Robert W. Schneider says: "Man in society is subject to illusions that are at variance with reality and that human conduct is sometimes directed by a moral code which has little applicability to the lives of the participants. Man can break the code, he can depart from the social norm; and to this extent he has free will; but if he does so he must expect defeat at the hands of social prejudices."