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How Can One Live Without a Face?: The Problem of Race, Identity, and Societal Roles as a
Performance in Stephan Crane's *The Monster*

Stephen Crane's novella *The Monster* explores the complexities of race in a post-Civil War, fictional town of Whilomville, New York. On the surface, the progression of the novella seems almost mundane until the climax—the plot follows an African American man named Henry, who works as a coachman for a white family, the Trescotts—and at the end, the reader is left with the tragic disfiguration of a man and how the family who takes him in is left to cope. However, upon further examination, it is clear that Crane has created a second level to this novella; the issue of identity and how a person falls into society is entirely dependent on the white citizens of his fictional town. This leaves the African Americans as a sort of “other” in the sense that they do not belong to the social norm, and yet they are not completely outcasts. Because they are not a part of the societal norm, nor will they ever be welcomed to be a part of this norm, they have been rendered into players simply performing what they think is demanded upon them by their white counterparts.

Henry Johnson is the main example Crane uses to illustrate the issues of race, identity, and social roles and he does so by eliminating what makes Henry human: his face. With the defacing of Henry, Crane explores the consequences of what life is like for a character that lacks a total sense of agency. Ultimately, through Henry's defacing, the reader sees that even with the abolition of slavery, the black community in a post-emancipated America are still rejected from

society and given no room to create their own identities, thus still figuratively trapped under the oppressive white man's hand.

As an African American, Henry Johnson does not have a place in society, but rather, he outskirts it due to his race. Though not completely inhuman in the beginning of the novella, Henry is treated as a sort of subhuman by the white people in the community. He has no sense of identity and only functions within the confines of the role given to him, and he is mocked at times for performing this role. Though slavery has already been abolished by the time this novella takes place, it is significant to note that Henry is still subservient to a white man, Doctor Trescott, in every sense. Henry is technically a free man, but this means nothing in a white dominated society because he is Doctor Trescott's servant, and at the end of the novella, it is Doctor Trescott who ultimately controls Henry's fate. Henry's oppression reflects the situation of many black people during Crane's time and today even, and it is not limited to just Henry's character. It is important to note that the African Americans in the novella do not have a true sense of identity because of their race, nor do they have a true understanding of the way society operates. The entirety of their community functions under the guise of how they think they should act because they have seen the white people of their town act similarly; they perform what they perceive to be traditional societal roles and are ridiculed for it. Crane emphasizes this concept through the repetition of performance. This idea of performance can be seen when Henry prepares to visit his fiancée, Bella Farragut. After work, Henry dresses himself with precision and care, only to be made into an object of amusement for the people of the town. As he passes a crowd, onlookers make comments and tease him. One onlooker even says, "Throw out your chest a little more," which indicates that Henry is putting on a show for the crowd, but this does not bother Henry, showing the reader that as a way to fit into his predominately white

community, he has become complacent with his role: “Henry was not ruffled in any way by these quiet admonitions and compliments. In reply he laughed, a supremely good-natured, chuckling laugh, which nevertheless expressed an underground complacency of superior metal” (195). As a means to cope with being othered by the society he so longs to be a part of, he must readily accept whatever role he can fill, even if it means being a thing of amusement.

The performance aspect to the novella is furthered when the text mocks the way in which Henry, Bella, and Mrs. Farragut interact with one another: “But to all these domesticities the three maintained an absolute dumbness. They bowed and smiled and ignored and imitated until a late hour, and if they had been the occupants of the most gorgeous salon in the world they could not have been more like three monkeys” (197). This moment in the text is significant because it further insists that this group of people (African Americans) do not belong to proper society because they do not understand how society works due to their race. Instead, they simply go through the motions of how they think they should interact by exchanging civilities of which they are not familiar, as presented in the scene. Specific words that Crane uses such as “dumbness,” “ignored,” “imitated,” and “monkeys” to maintain the trio’s otherness and highlight the ignorance and performance of their actions (197). Though Crane’s language is mocking, it is not Crane who is contemptuous toward the trio. The text’s tone reflects a disdain against the white society that has oppressed these people; because this white society does not accept African Americans, they [the African Americans] are mocked for making an attempt to inhabit whatever roles given to them—Crane does not condemn Henry and the others for their ignorance. In fact, the true monsters of the novella appear to be the white town that ostracizes and derides African Americans. Fundamentally, because of the unseen oppression against African Americans caused by a predominately white society, they are left without proper identities or social roles.

Crane has already established that Henry's lack of a true identity stems from his race, and the language he uses to describe Henry during different moments of the text demonstrate that Henry is not in charge of what little identity he owns—Henry is a product of the white society he lives in, and he only reflects what the people around him wish to see. Certainly, Crane uses words that indicate reflection, or mirrors, when describing Henry before the accident. An example of this is when Jimmie goes to Henry after being scolded by his father, seeking solace with Henry's wrongdoings, and Henry speaks to Jimmie: "He spoke with an air of great irritation, but he was not annoyed at all. The tone was merely a part of his importance." (193). Another example is when Henry goes to visit Bella, and the text describes his face as "like a reflector" (197). These instances can be interpreted as Henry's face being the mirror, projecting back whatever the viewer, or white society, wants to see when looking at him. Although this seems like an unpleasant way to live, Crane's text implicates that it is better to have a pseudo-role in society than to lack one completely. After the fire, Henry is left without a face and therefore, without a way to show those acting upon him what they want; thus the lack of a place in society: "As for the negro Henry Johnson, he could not live...His face had simply been burned away" (211). Essentially, after the accident, the white society Henry lives in no longer has a use for him, hence his transformation into a "monster."

Henry's lack of identity escalates from being caused by his race to being caused by his disfiguration. This can be seen through Henry's relationship with the Trescott family, specifically Jimmie and the doctor. In the beginning of the novella, Henry and Jimmie are considered friends; though, it is clear to the reader that Henry serves more as an object to conquer rather than a friend. By the end of the novella, this proves to have reached an entirely different level—Henry remains as an object to conquer, but the air of civility has disappeared

since it is no longer necessary because he is not seen as even remotely human—and he is no longer there for Jimmie to feel better about his own mistakes; instead, he is there for Jimmie to prove his bravery and manhood. Essentially, though still an object, Henry now openly exists for the sole purpose of exploitation, e.g. Jimmie's betterment, whereas previously, the text indicated they pair had some sort of mutual bond. Henry still fulfills the role given to him by his oppressors; it is just an openly exploitative role by this point in the novella. It is interesting that in order for Crane to express this, Henry had to lose the one thing that made him human (his face), and only then, did the monstrosity of the town reveal itself. Perhaps, by doing this, Crane calls into question what makes one human or even worthy to be a part of society? Is it just one's existence that creates a tie to humanity, or is it physical human qualities, such as a face?

It is important to note that Henry himself was lauded for his bravery after rescuing Jimmie from the fire. Before his death was even confirmed, newspapers had printed articles about his heroic death, and when it was clear that Henry was still alive, Henry's existence becomes an even bigger problem for the white society. Instead of giving Henry the option to decide what he wants to do with the rest of his life, the members of the town automatically give the decision to Doctor Trescott, who never consults Henry about what he wants. Doctor Trescott feels indebted to Henry since he saved his son's life, but subjects Henry into living a life of isolation and even more ridicule. By having a white man in control of a black man's fate, Crane is able to directly show the oppression of the African American community. Without a face, Henry is utterly stripped of any agency he could potentially have and has been reduced into a reminder of a white man's guilt: "He will be your creation, you understand. He is purely your creation. Nature has very evidently given him up. He is dead. You are restoring him to life. You are making him, and he will be a monster, and with no mind" (213). Even after his disfiguration

and dehumanization, he is not allowed any control over his life. As a way to further his isolation, even the community he was once a part of rejects him. Alek Williams, who is also black, is disgusted at the sight of Henry. Henry's isolation could be symbolic for the Civil War and Crane's way of saying that even after slaves were emancipated, they still were not truly free from the oppression of white society and still subjected to the whims of white society. As for Alek Williams, his character shows that if anyone were to decide to go against the roles provided by white society (such as Henry with his defacing), they would further be ostracized by the people who share the same race as them as a way to maintain a position in the outskirts of the dominate society. Essentially, Alek Williams shuns Henry as a way to remain a tool of white society because he knows based off of Henry's life at the end of the novella, it is better to have a place in society even if it has been forced upon him, rather than not having a place at all.

It seems that as a character, Henry is acted upon more than he acts, leaving the reader to question the validity of the true monster. It is clear from Crane's novella that the intended the monster of his work is the dominate white society that oppresses and rejects the African American community, a community that to this day continuously strives to find a place and role in mainstream society and are still rejected because of the color of their skin. Without a proper understanding of society, those who are not a part of the norm are left to simply act out what they think is accepted by those with power. By pointing out the racism, unfair objectification, and dehumanization that stems from this, Crane is able to draw parallels between the importance of identity and social roles, indicating that without either, a person has the potential of losing his or her connection to humanity, as presented in the case of Henry Johnson.