

## Harold Hart Crane 1899-1932

Harold Hart Crane was born, the only child, of Clarence and Grace (Hart) Crane on July 21, 1899 in Garrettsville, Ohio. Both of his parents' families were long-time merchants, and Hart's father made his fortune in manufacturing and selling chocolate candy. Clarence Crane's marriage to Grace Hart was miserable from the beginning. Although she was a beautiful woman she was plagued by severe neuroses that affected her marriage, and she was often suffering from a psychosomatic illness or was undergoing Christian Science therapy. She adored her son, putting him in the middle of her marriage problems and creating a bond of mutual dependence with him. This was a bond which would torment Hart Crane all his life, and from which he would never be free. His parents divorced in 1917, and Clarence Crane was never able to understand his homosexual poet son, although they did reach reconciliation before the elder Crane's death in 1931.

In 1914 Hart enrolled in Cleveland's East High School where his studies emphasized English literature and composition, mathematics, and languages. Crane was a good student, but in 1915 he took a long winter vacation and in 1916 toured the west. After this point most of his learning was done on his own. It was originally planned that he would have a tutor to help him pass the examination for entrance to Columbia University, but the only purpose that plan served was to get him to New York. He arrived there while his parents were filing for their divorce in December 1916, and upon his arrival immediately began his writing career. During this time Crane was influenced by two very different literary camps, that of the *Little Review* which Margaret Anderson had relocated to New York from Chicago in 1917, and that of the journal *Seven Arts* which was founded in 1916, inspired by the spirit of Walt Whitman. By 1923 Crane was working on *The Bridge* (1930), his longest work, and an enduring landmark in twentieth-century American poetry.

Crane's love life was no more satisfying than his family life. In April of 1924 he moved into an apartment in Brooklyn with a young man, Emil Opffer, with whom he believed he was deeply in love. Opffer was a ship's writer, sailing out for eight weeks at a time followed by a similar amount of time at home with Crane. The relationship cooled within a year, but offered material from which Crane wrote "Voyages." "O brilliant kids, frisk with your dog,/Fondle your shells and sticks, bleached/By time and the elements; but there is a line/You must not cross nor ever trust beyond it/Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses/Too lichen-faithful from too wide a breast./The bottom of the sea is cruel."

Even as Hart Crane's love life failed to bring him happiness, his mother continued to make her emotional demands on him. Although he put miles between them, she expected daily letters from him, and would send telegraphs such as this one if a letter was late. "So I am asking you to write me often Harold because your letters even though short are a stimulus to me, & surely you love me enough to do what you can to help me fight my way back to peace, happiness, & health.... Do not allow yourself to become an egotist & unmindful of others—But just remember that true happiness is largely due to service & and no matter how rich your day may have been in opportunities, it is not entirely complete unless you have done

or thought of someone else—Please write me often.” (DLB 48, p.82) Finally, in 1928, after his grandmother’s death, Crane and his mother had a permanent break; Crane took his small inheritance from his grandmother and sailed for France.

Hart Crane’s stay in France was shorter than that of most American writers, only from January to July 1929. He had hoped he would be able to complete *The Bridge* in an atmosphere free of interruptions. He would, however, come to describe Paris as “the most interesting madhouse in the world.” After his arrival Crane visited Eugene Jolas, who had been corresponding with him since 1927 and who had translated one of Crane’s poems into French for inclusion in one an anthology. Jolas introduced Crane to a circle that included Eva Gautier, Philippe Soupault, Laurence Vail, Kay Boyle, and Harry and Caresse Crosby. By March Harry Crosby had engaged Crane in a round of wild parties and other social engagements, and his work on *The Bridge* ended. In April and May Crane sought a respite from the pace of Paris with a visit to the south of France. He returned to Paris in late June. His return was marked by an entry in Harry Crosby’s diary. “Hart C. back from Marseilles where he slept with his thirty sailors and he began again to drink Cutty Sark...” (DLB 4, p.83) This entry foretold Crane’s final binge in Paris. After a fight in a café, he was arrested and beaten by police and incarcerated in La Sante for a week until Crosby paid his fine and gave him money for passage back to America. On July 18, 1929, just before his thirtieth birthday, Crane sailed for New York. Later in New York that year, while Crane was with Caresse Crosby, they received the news that Harry and his mistress had been found shot to death, apparently a double suicide. “To The Cloud Juggler” was written in memoriam to Harry Crosby. “You, the rum-giver to that slide-by-night,—/The moon’s best lover,— guide us by a sleight/Of quarts to faithfuls—surely smuggled home—/As you raise temples fresh from basking foam.”

The last years of Hart Crane’s life were filled with bitter disappointment over reaction to his poetry, which ranged from hostile to indifferent. He took these reactions personally, and when one reads his poetry that is understandable as one sees his struggle to connect on paper with life—with family, with lovers, with himself. “There are no stars tonight/But those of memory./Yet how much room for memory there is/In the loose girdle of soft rain./There is even room enough/For the letters of my mother’s mother,/Elizabeth,/That have been pressed so long/Into a corner of the roof/That they are brown and soft,/And liable to melt as snow.” (from “My Grandmother’s Love Letters”) 1931 found Hart Crane in Mexico on a Guggenheim fellowship, increasingly frustrated, depressed, always drunk and often in trouble with Mexican authorities. Returning to New York City on April 27, 1932, Hart Crane jumped from the deck of the ship and drowned.

*Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.  
O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,  
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until  
Is answered in the vortex of our grave  
The seal’s wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.*

Hart Crane from “Voyages”

**Sources Used:**

“Hart Crane,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1980 ed.), IV, 82-84.

Miller, Joseph. “Hart Crane,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1985 ed.), XLVIII, 78-95.