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Stephen Crane's *A Dark-Brown Dog* and Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot*: Out of Adele Came Hoda,
Out of Stephen, Sorrow of the Nameless

Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* and Stephen Crane's *A Dark-Brown Dog* are worlds apart both in their geography and their placement on a timeline, offering two different but richly textured tales of children and their childhood of poverty in North America. Wiseman sets *Crackpot* in Winnipeg's North End Jewish neighbourhood, beginning the tale at the turn of the twentieth-century and ending it in the Post Holocaust era of the late nineteen-forties. Crane sets his tale of *A Dark-Brown Dog* some fifteen hundred miles away in New York's Bowery district sometime after the American Civil War and offers the barest glimpse of a timeline, unravelling the events of his tale in the space of perhaps a month. Despite the distance both in time and space Wiseman and Crane offer their readers a soul wrenching view of what it is to be small, powerless, and poor. The authors portray a dirty, depraved and terrifying view of the grime and grimness of each respective era. In *A Dark Brown Dog* and *Crackpot*, we encounter a sardonic narrator who employs dramatic irony. This use of dramatic irony provides the reader a bird's eye view of the cyclical nature of early childhood trauma and its origins in the family scene.

Wiseman introduces the protagonists, Holaleh's parents, Rahel and Danile, immigrants from Eastern Europe at the turn of the century. Both physically flawed, Rahel with a slight hunch and Danile, blind since childhood; these two exist on the fringe of their Eastern European Jewish society. However, it is these flaws that instigate their union into what becomes a very loving and quite beautiful family. During a time of plague, the flawless and proper members of the

Jewish village resort to an archaic ritual of joining two of the lesser-blessed members of their community in what could be described as a pagan ceremony held in the sacred final resting place of their ancestors. Out of this ceremony comes the union of Rahel and Danile, and out of that union comes the protagonist, little Hoda. The covenant the proper citizens of the Jewish community make with this archaic ceremony is reprieve from plague and pogrom; in exchange for this reprieve, they must support Rahel, Danile and their subsequent child, Hoda. But once plague and pogrom are averted, over time, the blessing of the covenant becomes a burden. The little family of lesser-blessed are craftily sent across the ocean to the land of prosperity, North America, specifically, Winnipeg. They are now dependant on the benevolence and the riches of relations who are not beholden by the covenant. It takes a quality of character to carry another's burden, unfortunately Danile's wealthy uncle lacks such quality, and so Rahel, Danile and Hoda are relegated to poverty and the fringe of North End Winnipeg's Jewish society.

What Uncle Nate lacks in character, Rahel more than makes up with her determination to provide for her family and her devotion to Danile and their little Hodaleh. Rahel takes on work as a charwoman scrubbing floors. Ironically, it is the floors of those who can hardly afford it because families of means from the Jewish community feel it is beneath a Jew to scrub floors, least of all a Jew with a wealthy relation. Little Hoda, unable to be properly cared for by her blind Daddy, accompanies her Mommy to the homes of the goyum willing to take on a Jewish char. At night when Hoda and Rahel return, Danile re-tells the story of their family heredity and his union with Rahel to an eager little Hodaleh who never tires of hearing the chronicle of her pedigree over and over. Rahel, despite her protestations, also secretly enjoys Danile's re-telling of their history and bathes in the satisfaction. Her backbreaking work and sacrifice facilitates these tender moments of familial closeness and love. In these tender moments Rahel accepts herself, flaws and all.

Wiseman writes: “Perhaps that was what her lump was for, to balance the world on. Rahel found herself laughing too. *If that’s what it’s for, I’m not complaining. Just let me lug my load around a little longer*”(28). Through the narrative Wiseman sets the traumatic tone that simmers through out the story. The little separate nation of three is cleaved apart. The child is left with her man-child father who is incapable of raising her. Through Wiseman’s ironic narrator we realize the magnitude of challenge and suffering this trauma will bear on both Hoda and Danile.

Like Wiseman’s *Crackpot*, Crane’s *A Dark-Brown Dog* is rich in character but without ever giving name to the inhabitants of his tale. The story revolves around a child, his father and family and a dark-brown dog that, for an ever so brief period, provides companionship, compassion, and a foil for the child to project his fury and frustration upon. Crane and Wiseman’s main protagonists, both suffer the loss of a loved one, which, despite the characters awareness destabilizes them.

Hoda’s home life is one of caring, love and tenderness. Crane’s young protagonist in *A Dark-Brown Dog* is not as lucky. The child lives in a house of drunken dysfunction as Crane so eloquently portrays with this passage: “One day, however, the father of the family got quite exceptionally drunk. He came home and held carnival with the cooking utensils, the furniture and his wife”(143). The child and the dark-brown dog are surrounded by violence from all factions of the family. Crane writes, “Once when the child had run, protesting loudly, with tears raining down his face and his arms outstretched, to protect his friend, he had been struck in the head with a very large saucepan from the hand of his father, . . .”(141). It is in this cacophony of violence that Crane shows the deep bond of kinship and alliance between the child and the dark-brown dog with the following passage: “He and the child were associated together at all times save when the child slept. The child became guardian and a friend. If the large folk kicked the dog or threw things at him, the child made loud and violent objections”(141).

Crackpot's Hoda never manages to fit into the society she and Danile skirt. In school when her classmates and bigoted British teacher ridicule Holaleh for sharing the miracle story of her parents union, she does not bear them any animosity. Instead she sets her resolve to never be as cruel. Wiseman writes: "That wasn't what she said at all. But she remembered and stopped herself in time. Nobody was going to get another chance to spoil it. Let them be as dumb as they couldn't help being anyway."(155). Ironically the boys in her class use Hoda's innocence and resolve to conduct herself with kindness to garner sexual favours from her. The local gossips rather than taking Hoda aside and offering kindly motherly direction and guidance, confront Danile at synagogue to inform the blind man-child his daughter "had been seen with bad company". Danile is blind to of his daughter's faults; his love for her will not let him ever admit Hoda could be anything but perfect. For Danile, the miracle of his union with Rahel will never let him see Hoda as anything but beautiful and pure, so he too like Hoda, forgives the gossips their transgressions and spite as Wiseman illustrates with: "Danile wished the woman outside the synagogue had heard that [Hoda's] reply. Wild! If there were more such children as his around there would be less wildness the whole world over" (133). The narration shows despite their relegation as flotsam and jetsam by the judgemental cruelty of the society they can never be part of, Hoda and Danile do not allow this to define them. They are immunized by their devotion and love for each other, responding to cruelty and rejection with kindness and understanding.

The Dark-Brown Dog's child cannot rely on human love and devotion to quell his sorrows. This duty is left to the realm of his faithful canine companion even when the child behaves abysmally as Crane illustrates with this passage:

When misfortune came upon the child and his troubles overwhelmed him, he would often crawl under the table and lay his small distressed head on the dog's back. The dog was ever sympathetic. It is not to be supposed that at such times he took occasion to refer to the unjust beatings his friend, when provoked, had administered to him. (142)

The dark brown dog can be viewed as a metaphor for the parental selflessness of a loving and caring parent the child is missing. Ironically the dark brown dog is loyal to a fault, despite the boy's beatings and cruelty towards him. Like Danile and Rahel's devotion to their daughter, Hoda, Crane shows the dark brown dog has similar parental qualities with this passage: "His devotion to the child grew until it was a sublime thing. He wagged at his approach; sank down in despair at his departure. He could detect the sound of the child's step among the noises of the neighbourhood. It was like a calling voice to him" (142). The little dog can also be read as a metaphor for the Christian passion play. Like the Christ, the dark brown dog suffers the indignities inflicted on him by the child as Crane shows with this passage: "The scene of their companionship was a kingdom governed by the terrible pontentate, the child; but neither criticism nor rebellion ever lived for an instant in the heart of the one subject. Down in the mystic, hidden fields of his little dog-soul bloomed flowers of love and fidelity and perfect faith"(142).

Both Wiseman and Crane establish a loving parental / child relationship in their respective stories only to horrify their readers by traumatizing the child protagonists with the death of their loved parent / surrogate parent. Crane traumatizes his protagonist before the child's very eyes, making him witness the event with vivid detail. He writes: "The head of the family saw him at this moment. He gave a huge howl of joy, and knocked the dog down with a heavy coffee pot" (143).

Crane continues with more violence towards the dog by the father, while the child watches in horror. The child tries boldly to come to the aid of his companion as Crane shows with this simile: “Here the child, uttering loud cries, came valiantly forth like a knight” (143). Despite the protestations of his child, the violence continues to build and Crane shows the father’s depravity with this passage “The father of the family paid no attention to these calls of the child, but advanced with glee upon the dog” (143). With the child’s trauma at its most feverish point Crane administers a final soul wrenching horror upon the helpless and bewildered poor child with this passage: “But the father was in a mood for having fun . . . it would be a fine thing to throw the dog out the window. So he reached down and grabbed the animal . . . swung him two or three times . . . about his head, and then flung him with great accuracy through the window” (143). Crane’s use of dramatic irony offers a poignant glimpse of late eighteenth century’s Bowery life. Through his narrative we experience the cycle of violence, from father to child to the dark brown dog.

Wiseman saves little Hoda from watching her mother die as the child in Crane’s tale. This is no less traumatic however, as Wiseman does not spare Hoda the aural terror of her dying mother’s delirium with this passage: “Once, she almost screwed up her courage to the point where she was ready to creep out of bed and stand by her bedroom door to try to hear why it had grown so frighteningly silent beyond, but the animal sounds broke out again to her terror and relief” (62) and “Once again her mother’s voice rose, riding high on a scream and toppling crazily off.” “It was the last scream she heard” (63). Little Hoda is left alone in her shack of a home forgotten in the frenzy of getting the dying Rahel and Danile to the hospital. Unlike the child in *A Dark-Brown Dog*, where the trauma is swift, Wiseman builds Hoda’s trauma in slow merciless stages. After the aural horror of her mother’s dying screams, Hoda is left in darkness, like her blind father.

The familiar becomes foreign and Hoda retreats from her terror, like most small children do, to the safety beneath her bed. But Wiseman offers her no sanctuary; instead Hoda becomes wedged halfway under her bed. Wiseman punctuates Hoda's trauma with the indignity of this passage: "Gradually, her sobs turned to whimpers, her whimpers faded to little moans and at last, with a sigh, she fell asleep. Blessedly, she remained that way though not long afterwards daylight cast its punctual gleam through the window, brightening cheerfully on a pair of plump legs, a rolled-up nightgown, and twin rounds of great soft, rosy vulnerable, innocent bum" (65). Finally Hoda is rescued when Danile returns but not before Wiseman inflicts one final heart wrenching moment as Danile comes to little Hoda's rescue only to trip over her prostrate form in his blindness. Wiseman paints Hoda's final anguish with this passage: "Somewhere below him she was screaming her newly awakened fear and pain. 'It hurts!' 'Don't jump on me!' 'I'll tell daddy!' and a further torrent of unintelligible words accompanied by a frantic kicking out of her feet"(66). Wiseman offers the irony that even in rescue little Hodaleh must first endure a final jab of pain unwittingly from her saviour, illustrating a dire destiny for their now nation of two. Despite the trauma of this final assault, Wiseman's narrative offers a glimmer of hope. Hoda and Danile may be ill equipped to fend for themselves, but their love and devotion is a mantle of protection from the harsh reality of life on the fringe of Winnipeg's Jewish North End.

Crackpot and *A Dark-Brown Dog* offer narratives of dramatic irony providing a bird's-eye view of the trauma of loss. The difference between the two, is unlike Crane's child, Wiseman's Hoda has the love of her remaining parent to comfort her. There is the tenderness of father and child working through the loss of their beloved mother and wife and a sense of hope the two can draw on their love for each other to see them through their anguish.

The child however has no one to turn to; his surrogate parent is gone and all Crane leaves the child are a broken carcass and memories. Where Wiseman leaves a glimpse of hope, Crane leaves nothing but rubble, emptiness and despair.

Work Cited

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