



Adelaide Crapsey

(1878—1914)

Poet, scholar, and teacher, Adelaide Crapsey came to Rochester as an infant, when her father accepted the pastorate of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in 1879. Dr. Algernon S. Crapsey (1847-1927) angered orthodox Christians with his refusal to accept literal interpretation of Scripture. He was found guilty of heresy and defrocked by Episcopal authorities in 1906, after a trial which commanded national attention.

Young Adelaide developed her literary talents at Kemper Hall (an Episcopal boarding school in Wisconsin) and at Vassar College. She later taught at Kemper and at Smith College. Her wide-ranging interests and activities—including poetry, basketball, theology, and travel—were curtailed after 1903 due to chronic tuberculosis. The disease took her life in 1914.

There was every reason to expect that Adelaide Crapsey (1878—1914) would have a long and rewarding life. When at the age of thirty-five she knew she was dying, she might well have become bitter or cynical, but she battled bravely against death. Forced to give up the intensive study she loved, she transmuted her suffering into poetry of enduring worth. Tragic irony marked her life.

Adelaide Crapsey grew up to be a gifted and joyful young woman. She came to Rochester as a baby when her father, the Rev. Algernon Crapsey, became rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. The family, which grew to include nine children, lived comfortably in an atmosphere of intellectual discussion. Adelaide was especially close to her father, then a popular member of the city's clergy who worked for the reform efforts of the Social Gospel movement.

After attending local schools, Adelaide went to Kemper Hall, a private girls' school in Wisconsin, and then to Vassar College. Besides managing several basketball teams, acting in plays and editing the college yearbook, she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and graduated with honors. Petite and pretty, she was known for what a classmate called "her delightful camaraderie" and "quick, bubbling humor." Her college years were saddened, however, by the deaths of one sister of undulant fever and of another from appendicitis. Following two years of teaching literature and history at Kemper Hall, Adelaide attended the School of Classical Studies of the American Academy in Rome. There she worked long hours at her chief enthusiasm, prosody, the study of technical aspects of poetry, such as meter, rhyme and stanza forms. ("Don't be disturbed if you don't know much what prosody is," she once wrote her parents. "Hardly anyone does.")





This happy interlude ended when, back in Rochester, she lived through the unfortunate events culminating in her father's being tried for heresy and, by the end of 1906, deposed from the ministry of the Episcopal Church. Adelaide stood by her father throughout this harrowing (and shamefully unwarranted) experience. It was she, rather than his wife, who accompanied the besieged minister to sessions of the ecclesiastical court in Batavia, New York.

Such mistreatment of Algernon Crapsey must have distressed his loyal daughter, but she was so controlled and private a person that no such emotion is evident in her letters or poetry. Her sister-in-law, Mrs. Arthur Crapsey, was later to say of the family as a group, "I was surprised there was no bitterness. I never heard one of them say one bitter word about the trial. They all stayed in the church.

Another sorrow at this time was the death of Adelaide's oldest brother, Philip, from malaria which he had contracted during the Spanish-American War. In a letter to her parents, Adelaide once wrote ruefully about a minor disappointment, "Oh dear! Isn't it all funny! It's what comes of being born a Crapsey."

Again teaching literature and history, Adelaide spent the next two school years at Miss Lowe's School in Stamford, Connecticut. During the intervening summer she accompanied her father to the Hague Peace Conference and on a walking tour in Wales. Periods of fatigue, which had been attributed to her general 'frail health,' gradually increased, often forcing her to spend whole weekends in bed. By the end of 1908 her illness, not as yet diagnosed, caused her to give up teaching.

Miss Crapsey returned to Europe to take advantage of its lower cost of living. In Rome and later in London and Kent, she worked day and night on what would eventually be published as *A Study in English Metrics*. An analysis of the relations of monosyllabic and polysyllabic words, it involved counting the syllables of Milton's "Paradise Lost" and "Samson Agonistes," poems of Tennyson, Swinburne and Francis Thompson and of nursery rhymes.

Her pleasure in this scholarship was dampened by lack of funds and energy. Chafing at having to depend on her parents' limited means, she lived meagerly. She became increasingly exhausted, at one time having to be hospitalized. In letters to her parents, she made light of her money problems, and, to both them and herself, she practiced denial about her poor health. "What a bother health is," she wrote in one letter, to be followed in the next with, "I hope what I said of my health didn't worry you. It was only to explain why I don't undertake more [paid] work right away."





In February 1911, Smith College appointed the scholar an instructor in poetics, that is, literary criticism of poetry. Because she was small, quiet and had taken to dressing at all times from head to toe in gray, she has been recalled by colleagues and students as a rather mouse-like figure, but also as a perfectionist and a great intellect.

That summer the sky fell in on Adelaide Crapsey. A doctor informed her that she had tuberculin meningitis, tuberculosis of the brain lining. She did not tell her family.

At the end of the spring semester two years later, Miss Crapsey vacationed in the Massachusetts Berkshires, the guest of her Vassar roommate, the novelist, Jean Webster. Suddenly one day Adelaide collapsed and was taken to a hospital. She described the incident in a letter to a colleague as “nothing at all serious,” but it was only a few weeks afterward that Jean Webster wrote her fiancée, “. . . she has tuberculosis in rather an aggravated form. She has had it for three or four years in a lurking, hard to diagnose, way, but it has suddenly burst out into a well-developed, unmistakable case. She must give up Smith and go to Saranac immediately.”

Miss Crapsey was taken to the Trudeau Sanitarium at Saranac Lake, New York, in September 1913. There she was obliged to lie perfectly still, with work on her beloved metrics forbidden and letters limited to one a day. Those she wrote to her Smith professor friend, Esther Lowenthal, are a testament of courage: “. . . The days, truth to tell, are rather long ...I’m getting on well ...cough better and at least a little sleep o’ nights. I always feel like an idiot when I talk about symptoms.” Interspersed among reactions to tidbits of Smith faculty gossip appear the words, “Pain not as bad as this writing looks and getting better,” which in reality referred to paralysis of her right side. She once admitted to having an unfathomable exhaustion (which) got itself mixed with an unfathomable restlessness,” but consideration for others and cheerful optimism predominate.

Her disease raged through the winter months when she had to spend much time on an outdoor porch. After a long, severely painful and eventually unsuccessful attempt to collapse one of her lungs, she wrote Esther Lowenthal, “It isn’t awfully bad, you know, though not what one would choose for a diversion.” Unfortunately, her “I’ll be back at work next ear—see if I’m not” was followed by the depressing knowledge that, without consulting her, her parents had informed Smith College that she would not return to teaching. Yet several weeks later, she could write, “If it’s chronic tuberculosis, why that’s what it is, and I’m just going to go ahead, find a way of living that’s as little invalidish as possible, get what I can out of things and let it go at that.”





Such confidences were reserved for Dr. Lowenthal and Miss Webster alone. Her letters on the whole portray a reserved, even diffident, person, one unfailingly courteous and considerate of others. Particularly was she careful to spare her parents any sad news of her condition.

Although she had previously written some verse, it was evidently after she knew she was fatally ill that Miss Crapsey invented the poetic form for which she is best known, the cinquain (pronounced "sing-cane"). The cinquain is a five-line unrhymed iambic stanza containing, successively, two, four, six, eight and two syllables per line. More importantly, it is, as the critic, Susan Smith has explained, "built on stresses, one for the first line, two for the second, three for the third, four for the fourth, with a drop back to one for the fifth line, . . . in the poet's opinion . . . the most condensed metrical form in English that would hold together as a complete unit." Two examples are: -

In Rachel Salisbury's estimation, "Brief, stark, concise, yet smoothly lucid and penetrating, the cinquain was the ideal form for the expression of the delicacy and poise of her gentle personality, as well as of the strength and force of her resistance to the prospect of life cut short too soon." Obviously the cinquain expressed the poet's interest in metrics and stress. There is, as well, a deeper way in which this form suited Adelaide Crapsey's inner needs. It matched the tremendous control she showed outwardly, coupled with her inward rebellion and rage at her fate. Moreover, these poems show that the pretenses she maintained in all other writing were not a true denial of reality but a means of sparing pain to others. Witness – for example:

Such cries from the heart were shared only with her two friends; Mrs. Crapsey, for one, never knew until after Adelaide's death that her daughter wrote poetry. But Adelaide did choose certain of her poems for a collection which she planned to submit for publication.

In August 1914, Miss Crapsey determined to move to a sanitarium less expensive and "less arctic" and went to stay with her family, as she expected, for only a week. There she was cared for by three nurses, one of whom was later to marry her brother, Arthur. Adelaide contracted pneumonia, and Mrs. Arthur Crapsey, Sr., has remarked on how concerned her patient was that a nurse might catch either tuberculosis or pneumonia from her. In a last letter to Miss Webster, the invalid referred to her illness as "sort of tiresome." Jean, on her part, after visiting Adelaide, wrote her fiancé, "She is wasted away until she is just like a little child."

Adelaide Crapsey died in October, 1914; the poetry born of her suffering still lives.

