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**IDENTITY AND INITIATION – A STRUGGLE  
A COMPARITIVE STUDY OF STEPHEN CRANES'S *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE* AND  
THEODORE DREISER'S *AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY***

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**ABSTRACT**

Struggle and Survival are inseparable phases of every civilization and every human life. Civil War, Evolutionary Sciences have deeply influenced American society. The struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest pushed the new generation from its roseate dream into harsh reality. The conflict between the religious creeds, social situations and the impact of the American Dream of Success have caused the writers to present their characters engaged in a struggle to fit in and survive. Against this backdrop, comes a literary movement, Naturalism questioning the divine nature of man and shattering the idealism of transcendentalism. It aims to present life as it is. To this genre belongs Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser who themselves are the products of intellectual and spiritual unrest.

The re-reading of the works of Crane and Dreiser highlights their identity and initiation crises experienced by the young generation, holding the mirror to the never fading many faces of struggle. This article attempts to focus on the quest for identity and the struggle to get initiated, the survival and self-destruction of the protagonists of Crane and Dreiser set in war backdrop and glamour and glitz of the materialistic American society.

**Key Words:** identity, initiation, struggle, survival, battling community, materialism

Struggle and survival are inseparable phases of every civilization and every human life. During the decades that followed the civil war, swiftly moving changes have reshaped America. The impact of theories of evolutionary sciences, especially Darwinism and Spencerian concept, on American society and culture is tremendous. These theories have given a new impetus to Naturalism, a literary movement aimed at presenting life as it is. The divine nature of man is questioned and romanticism and idealism of transcendentalists are forgotten.

The intellectual climate of America with its post-war problems, industrial and agrarian issues

and evolutionary doctrine have favoured a realistic outlook. To this new generation life is no roseate dream but hard every day struggle for existence and survival of the fittest.

Stephen Crane (1871-1900) and Theodore Dreiser (1872-1945) are the products of intellectual and spiritual unrest. The conflict between their religious creeds, social situations and their human values is reflected in their works.

The re-reading of the works of Crane and Dreiser highlights the Gramscian Hegemony in their social circles which defend Patriarchal family and Protestant fundamentalism. Crane's *The Red Badge*

of Courage and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* incorporate "Hegemonic Masculinity".

Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, is a literary triumph in Naturalism. It contains various struggles both within the man and around him. Man in his struggle for identity has the most formidable foe – fear. The quest for identity and initiation in the society are shadowed by the inner struggle of man. Hence, Crane calls this novel 'Psychological Portrayal of Fear'. The protagonist is controlled by the determined forces beyond his control.

Henry Fleming joins the army despite his mother's discouragement in the hope of fighting Homeric battles and Titanic troubles. His dreams of the glories of the war are shattered by the realities he faces in the actual battle field. When his regiment marches into battle, Henry sees that he is trapped and feels that the situation is beyond his control. He thinks that 'iron laws of tradition' and 'law on four sides' got him into such a predicament. His masculinity and self-esteem are under threat as he requires exhibiting aggressiveness and strength, the characteristics of American hegemonic masculinity.

Initially he fights the enemy with great valour but when they strike for the second time he flees the battle field. It is an instinctive act, but as soon as he is out of the immediate danger he begins to rationalize his actions. He undergoes masculine gender role stress when he breaks the war code. His unconsciousness act of throwing a pine cone at a squirrel which flees for its life makes him feel that it is a sign from Nature asserting his moves. The animal side of Henry's nature to protect himself instead of being a man to face the crisis wins. The conflict between his instincts and set standards dominate the opening chapters of the novel.

Henry justifies his moves and joins the regiment. He encounters a fellow soldier Jim Conklin who sustains till the end in the battle. Though he is afraid he remains at his post. The author seems to portray that all men are basically afraid. Some he feels run like rabbits and squirrels and some stand like men. Instinct need not always predominate.

The death of Jim Conklin, the wound that he receives on his head from a soldier of his own regiment changes Henry remarkably. He fights with

a new vigour and becomes a hero. The struggle he undergoes both internally and externally makes him a man. The heart of *The Red Badge of Courage* is again the heart of Crane's concept of man".<sup>1</sup>

Henry Fleming is an insignificant pawn in totality of war but his insignificance does not deprive him of his free will and moral responsibility. He possesses the capacity to fulfill his humanness by conquering his instinctive fears with a feeling of involvement with his fellow soldiers and achieves manhood. His identity is established and his homogenous masculinity over fellow soldiers is exercised.

Crane insists that to be a man means willed involvement in human struggle and further stresses that man should be engaged in the "Promethean Struggle" without the hope of either victory or reward. Crane's conviction about man, universe and forces that dictate the events in the life of man is clearly understood in this comment.

'The Central factor in Crane's concept of man is his conviction that man is an insignificant isolate in a universe that does not regard him as important. Alone in this neutral universe man can act freely but the success or failure of that action is dependent upon the operation of fate'.<sup>2</sup>

His philosophy is not only the result of determinism: but also modification of religious orientation through his perception of the realities of life. The past, the changing world with new scientific advancements and his own code of conduct have created a conflict and it is reflected in all his works. This conflict in his mind had made him the rebel of his day. He revolts not only against the social conditions of his time but also against the smug complacency of genteel tradition and the conventional standard of American literature. He wants 'art straight', a nearness to life and personal honesty. Like Keats, he voices belief that the work of art is born out of pain. Of *The Red Badge of Courage* he writes:

"It was an effort born out of pain- despair, almost; and I believe that this made it a better piece of literature than it otherwise would have been. It seems a pity that art should be a child of pain and yet I think

it is. Of course, we have fine writers who are prosperous and contented but in my opinion their work would be greater if this were not so. It lacks sting it would have if written under the spur of a great need".<sup>3</sup>

Out of his pain and conflict is born the protagonist of this novel who has no identity, being a mere soldier, dominated by his instinct and assailed by fear. He struggles against his initial fears, flees from the battlefield and ultimately emerges as a victor and is initiated into the battling community. The novel is the psychological evolution and transition of a foot soldier from adolescence to manhood.

Henry Fleming is the central character and through his eyes the readers see the roar of booming guns, the pictures of men dominated by instincts, the sinuous movement of army and the din of the battle scenes of American Civil War. The protagonist feels that he is pawn governed by forces that are beyond his control. His fellow soldiers feel that the army is the instrument of fate which trapped them. The ordeal of an illusion filled youth who dreams of being a hero but faced the actual terror of battle and the aimless wanderings of the soldiers without any rule or pattern dominated by confusion, terror and anxiety and even nature's external peace and internal disquietude are projected in the very opening lines as follows:

"The cold passed reluctantly from the earth and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on hills, resting. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened and began to tremble with eagerness at the noise of rumour. It casts its eyes upon the road, which were growing from the long troughs of liquid mud to proper thorough fares. A river amber tinted in the shadow of its banks, purred at the army's fee; and at night, when the stream had become of a sorrowful blackness, one could see across at the re, eye like gleam of hostile camp fires set in the low brows of distant hills"<sup>4</sup>

He will have to

"... go into blaze, and then figuratively to watch his legs to discover their merits and faults" (TRC. p.10).

Until now he has never known the real danger. Crane's youth wants to shine in the war and to measure himself against the courage of others. He aims at hegemonic masculinity in the battle field and gain control over his peers. The conflict between the desire for heroism and the possibility of cowardice takes on such proportions that he finds himself in a terrible irresolution. Like a swinging pendulum he veers from one extreme to another blaming the unbearable slowness of it all for his unhappiness. Time passes and the regiment is finally called upon to march. No action, however, is encountered. During rest period he ponders over his enlistment and wallows in self-pity.

"He lay down in the grass. The blades pressed tenderly against his cheek. The moon had been lighted and was hung in a tree top. The liquid stillness of the night enveloping made him feel vast pity for himself. There was a caress in the soft winds and the whole mood of the darkness, he thought was one of sympathy for himself in his distress". (TRC, p.14).

As the youth walks along with his regiment, he encounters a dead soldier and is traumatized at the sight. He shudders as he looks at the mass of inert flesh. He feels lonely and isolated. Solitude and dissociation make sharp inroads deep into the youth's psyche. The enemy is surely ready to strike him. Fear imposes itself once again and with it is a sense of entrapment. The inevitability and compelling movement of the battle are perceived by Henry.

"But he instantly saw that it would be impossible for him to escape from the regiment. It enclosed him. And there were iron laws of tradition and law on four side; he was in a moving box". (TRC, p.19).

As the battle proceeds Crane describes the youth's regiment under constant gunfire loaded with rifles, blood soaked faces, the soldiers fight in the smoke infested area. Henry also participates and fires a wild shot. He no longer feels menaced or alienated. On the contrary he feels a bond to them. His concern is to win the war. An inner flame has ushered in mysterious feelings of fraternity as 'subtle battle brotherhood' is born of smoke and

danger. As the din slackens, the youth's frenzy diminishes and his reason returns, convinced of final victory he smiles in deep gratification and this ecstasy is short lived. The piercing cry of the attacking enemy grips him and panic-stricken, he runs like a rabbit. He leaps across the open fields and volleys of exploding shells and only when he stops running does he learn regiment has held. He cringes in shame, masculine gender role stress occurs and he regrets his unmanly act. Even these feelings of guilt are short lived. He instantaneously tries to rationalize his fright.

He runs deep into the forest and nature appears to the youth in the guise of "a woman with deep aversion towards tragedy" inspiring him with religion of peace. Nature takes the personality of his mother trying to help him out of the quandary. Although he cannot face his act of cowardice, he feels comforted by what he sees as nature's approval of his fright. He justifies his protective instinct. He feels that even a rodent recognizes that one must escape from danger. With these thoughts of self-justification he feels freer and convinced. His encounter with a corpse and his yearning to find peace in the chapel like woods fill him with new faith. He once again joins his fellow soldiers and in the chaos that follows, one of the soldiers of his regiment hurts him with his rifle. With the gaping wound on his head, he feels the sense of identity. On his way to his regiment, Henry meets the blood soaked tattered soldier. Each time the tattered man asked questions about the wounds, the youth feels as if a knife had been thrust into him but it does have a clinical effect on him.

He finally reaches his regiment. He is helped by his fellow soldiers who are unaware of his ignoble flight. In spite of the guilt he feels accepted and realizes that he is neither better nor worse than other men in the regiment. They all are made of same fabric, possessing both courage and cowardice.

After these incidents Henry passes initiation. He experiences a kind of revelation. Nature instills in him sense of life and vigour. When the youth hears the sound of hollow drums and raw tones of bugle, he knows that he is entering new world.

During the course of battle that follows later, he fights with fury and rage. His comrades in arms look at him admiringly; they have now become the spectators he once was. He is driven into frenzy of action and 'like a madman' pushes forward and wrenches the flag out of the clenched fist of the dead standard bearer. Together with loud soldier, he carries it through the thick and thin of the battle. The flag flying in his hands, he stands in the battle field towering over his peers as an epitome of hegemonic masculinity.

As the fighting subsides, the youth thinks of his failures and achievements. He realizes that he is a complex of opposites. He knows he is a man now. A man of identity and a man initiated into the society. When youth's days of battle for identity come to a close, he feels regenerated and longs for peace.

An American Tragedy published in 1925 is another triumph of Dreiser in the genre of Naturalism. It is set on a murder trial inspired by the prevalence of crime in materialistic American society. About 1894 Dreiser became interested in a type of crime which the American Dream seemed to generate. A young man, struggling to rise out of poverty, murders a working girl whose prior claim on him, blocks his marriage to a rich girl. His earlier title *Mirage* is replaced by *An American Tragedy* which dramatically exemplifies pervasive social reality. Dreiser explores facts in the fifteen typical murder cases and Chester Gillette – Grace Brown case forms the basis for this novel. Dreiser too as a youth has felt oppressed by his poverty-stricken background as he daydreams of better life, sexual fulfillment and hope of marrying well. *An American Tragedy* is pre-eminently a recreation of American experience into which Dreiser pours the anguish and frustration of his own life.

*An American Tragedy* has three sections; the first describing Clyde's childhood, early youth in Kansas City; the second recounting his later struggle in search of identity and initiation into moneyed circles which ends up in murder; and the third telling of his trial and execution.

The book opens in the commercial heart of an American City where a drab family of street preacher is preaching to a crowd of onlookers. Their

son Clyde Griffiths is very restive and wants his parents to be like other people. He wants his share of material comforts and an identity in the society. Even though, he thinks constantly about how he may better himself, Clyde has much of his father's impractical make up. Clyde's dilemma is even more acutely felt by his older sister, Esta, who is seduced and abandoned when she becomes pregnant. Like Clyde, Esta is lured by the material world. She becomes the victim of gender biased society.

Clyde's first step toward realizing his ambitions is to take a job in a drug store patronized by actors and theatergoers. The first encounter with the material world creates an identity crisis. He wants more than he has. He wants to be a part of this dream world. He takes a job as a bell hop boy at Green- Davidson, the principal hotel in Kansas City. To spend money on clothes, he deceives his mother about his earnings. With his new found identity, he pursues Hortense Briggs. Hortense's willingness to sell her sexual favours in exchange of a fur jacket reinforces his conviction in the power which clothes have to open the way of good fortune. Clyde and Hortense and several of their friends go on an auto trip in a borrowed vehicle. An accident occurs; the car strikes and kills a young girl. The instinct which Clyde shows is to run away. Though he is not the driver, he is gripped by fear and tries to flee. His masculine role gender undergoes stress and fear operates and he refuses to shoulder his responsibilities manfully. He leaves Kansas City in an attempt to flee the police. His flight is well described in the following words.

"Clyde....began crawling upon his hands and knees at first in the snow South, South and West always\ toward some of those distant streets which, lamp lit and faintly glowing, he saw to the South-West of him and among which presently, if he were not captured, he hoped to hide- to lose himself and so escape- if the facts were only kind- the misery and the punishment and the unending dissatisfaction and disappointment which now, most definitely it all represented to him".<sup>5</sup>

Book-II begins with Clyde in Chicago under a concealed identity, following the death of the child

in Kansas City. He limits his options by adopting his fugitive existence. Everything he says and does must protect his secret. But his chance encounter with his uncle Samuel Griffiths opens a new door to him. Clyde perceives a sharp contrast between his uncle's lavish home and shoddy surrounding in his home town, Kansas City. He feels that his struggle to find an identity is going to end. This encounter presents him with a promise and possibility to be initiated into his dream world. His uncle, Samuel Griffiths a well known businessman in New York City, a picture of hegemonic masculinity becomes his role model. Clyde joins his uncle's collar factory. His quest for identity begins. He is over awed in the presence of his superiors at the factory, but when confronting those under his authority, he tries to exercise his hegemonic masculinity. He holds his head higher and speaks with assurance.

He recognizes the appalling gap between economic groups in America. He watches a parade in Lyncurgus, New York, replete with floats on which are perched the rich, beautiful and happy society girls he dreams of. He is a spectator and a lonely one hovering between the two worlds- his impoverished world of struggle and his uncle's world of pomp. High society is a revelation of Clyde. It is limited world where the state of one's purse dictates the social connections. Into this society, he craves and struggles to be initiated. Clyde learns that to attain identity in this world one has to get into something and be somebody. Clyde writes to his mother: "I want to do something in this world I want to be successful...I got to get on in this world" (AAT, p.162).

Clyde resolves to work steadily, make right connections and conduct himself well so that remarkable men might take fancy to him and offer him with a connection something important, somewhere. They might lift him up into a world such as he had never known his plan is one which animated every rags-to-riches novel. His uncle a natural survivor and a symbol of success, in spite of his deceptive nature of exploiting his employees including Clyde, his nephew, is emulated. Social Darwinism of survivor ousting the weakling is seen. Those born with natural ability will manage to rise from the bottom while the lazy and the unintelligent

will be weeded out. The irony of it as Dreiser portrays is that not everyone who struggles can survive. According to Dreiser it is a paradox. The rich justify their success as the result of their untiring labour and present themselves as worthy. Their hegemonic masculinity daunts the poor who feel inferior to the rich and treat them as superior in strength and intelligence. They feel the world around them as over powering and intimidating and their natural initiatives are thwarted by fear and cowardice. Clyde is lured into this web of material success, vaguely aware of its destructive consequences. He wants more money and higher social status. He appears more polished and assured than what he was at Kansas City.

Clyde's dream paradise includes the flesh of sex as well as the spirit of wealth and position. He initially flirts with Rita an acquaintance of his friend Dillard. Then Roberta enters his life. From the moment Clyde and Roberta begin their courtship Clyde views Roberta as a factory girl, as someone he might win and love and be happy with but is someone he would never marry, whereas Roberta views Clyde as one who can initiate her into the world of materialism giving her social security she so desires. In this relationship Clyde's hegemonic masculinity is at its heights and Roberta gets trapped and becomes the victim. Roberta succumbs to Clyde and she instinctively falls into the role which her patriarchal background had prepared for her, that of a submissive and dutiful woman who looks to her Lord for support and direction.

Clyde, in spite of his attraction towards Roberta, plans to marry Sondra Finchley because she "materialized and magnified for him the meaning of the upper class itself". When Clyde learns that Roberta is pregnant he is filled with fear and anger. He resents her claim upon him. It is ironic that Clyde and Roberta are now mirror images of each other's social hopes and fears. Each of them struggles to extricate themselves from the situation. She struggles to hold on to Clyde and he struggles to escape.

Now Clyde wants to run away for the second time. It is Sondra, a dream of his life, which prevents him from running away. Clyde's dilemma, his anxiety and fear become a psychological frenzy.

He is filled with inner turmoil close to mental derangement. "A nervous and almost deranged look-never so definite or powerful at any time before in his life – the borderline look between nervous and unreason" (AAT, p.35).

Weeks preceding Roberta's death Clyde undergoes a violent struggle between fear and hesitation. He has overwhelming desire to solve his problem at all costs. He hallucinates the voice of a genie which is only Clyde's own suppressed unconsciousness. He allows his second personality to take command. He makes a trip to North woods merely to plead with her to release him. A strain of ambiguity to the problem of Clyde's guilt is seen as he is impelled by a kind of insanity. It raises Clyde from his usual mediocrity of hesitation and fear to the momentary height of a man. His hegemonic masculinity is active and is controlled by dark impulses.

He rents a boat at Lake Big Bittern and helps Roberta get in. the lure of entry into a world of the rich and the famed blinds him and he divorces himself from reality. His imaginary 'Giant Efril' advises him to ignore Roberta's cry for help and to let her drown. Alone with Roberta in secluded reach of the lake Clyde faces a dilemma to act or not to act. Roberta notices his contorted appearance. She screams for help, listening to his hallucinatory voices he gives an accidental blow with the camera. As she reels, he tries to offer her help suddenly feeling pity for fear.

In this ensuing confusion, the boat capsizes and Roberta falls into the water. She screams for help but the genie reappears and whispers exonerating words. Roberta sinks. Clyde swims to the shore, hides the camera tripod and heads towards South through woods. Though he encounters woodmen, his escape is uneventful until he joins Sondra's family friends, the Crane Stones. In spite of the guilt of the murder he falls back into the round of tennis, picnic, canoeing and even love making.

In the opening of Book-III camera tripod is found and traced to Clyde. Even Roberta's possessions link her to Clyde. A warrant is obtained to enter his room in Lycurgus and there the pleading letter Roberta had written concerning her

pregnancy is discovered. A warrant is issued for Clyde's arrest. He is arrested at Sondra's friends' house and taken to Cataraugus County Jail to await his trial. He is no longer a poor boy; he is identified as a rich society boy who has slain a poor working girl. So the newspapers categorize him. His initiation into the desired society ends up in self-destruction. Now he is a murderer awaiting trial and punishment. Clyde is bewildered. He thinks of the man who seduced his sister and who is free. His crime is the desire to move up the social ladder and he is now thrown into the hopeless pit. His obsession with social identity leaves him afraid of his past and unsure of his future. Ironically just at the moment where he thinks he is initiated into the community, free of all shackles, he is arrested. At this point of initiation his self-destruction begins.

The concluding book deals with Clyde's capture, trial and execution. Through the speeches of his defense lawyer and the proceedings of the trial Dreiser tries to show how Clyde is not only a murderer but himself a victim and the mockery of the elaborate machinery of justice which has different standards for the rich and the poor. Even the District Attorney Orville W. Mason seizes upon Clyde's plight as a means to further his own ambitions. As Clyde sought to destroy Roberta to realize his material ambitions, Mason now seeks to destroy Clyde to gain the same goal. Not a single member of the Jury can help. Clyde is convicted and sentenced to death by electric chair.

Dreiser's concern is not with crime or an advocacy on behalf of the criminal but with a society which is really responsible for such tragedies. The last thoughts of Clyde reinforce the same conviction of Dreiser. "He really was not guilty- was he, since at the last moment he had experienced change of heart?" (AAT, p.800).

His conviction and his final moments are overshadowed by ambiguity. The young preacher, McMillan, prepares him for repentance and salvation. He tells his mother that God has heard his prayers but he is asking himself "Had He?" Clyde goes to death not knowing what he really knows or feels or what he has done. The theme of ambiguity runs throughout. Clyde lives in ambiguous dreams

and most important thing shrouded from his sight is his own identity.

Crane and Dreiser set their male protagonists in a society where struggle is inevitable. Whether for identity or initiation, Henry Fleming struggles to survive in the battlefield and towards the end conquers his fear. He is identified as a warring hero and is initiated into the battling community. Clyde Griffiths also struggles to survive in the materialistic society. His identity and initiation are short lived for he makes an irrevocable error which destroys him completely. The world may see him as an ambitious man set on a journey of self-destruction but as Dreiser points out that he is the victim of the forces beyond his control. Henry Fleming and Clyde Griffiths are small town boys, naïve, aspiring to be somebody. Though the setting is different, their quest for identity and their ambition to be initiated into the communities of their desire make them literary brothers.

If fear is the stumbling block to Henry, it is poverty and mirage like wealthy society to Clyde. Both Henry and Clyde in the hour of adversity flee. Their masculinity is under stress. They experience shame and guilt. Henry's cowardly fleeing from the battlefield to protect himself can be compared to Clyde's flight to Kansas City when his car kills a young girl accidentally.

Henry's retreat into forest causes a cleansing effect. He justifies his protective instinct taking a clue from a jovial squirrel. He rejoins the regiment with renewed vigour and fights the battle and establishes his hegemonic masculinity over his peers. He wins the admiration of his fellow soldiers. His wounds caused by his own regimental private turns out to be the red badge of courage which initiates him into the battling brotherhood. It is no longer a symbol of shame but a symbol of triumph, whereas, Clyde's fleeing continues. First he flees from Kansas City from the scene of accident and New York City from the scene of murder. In the first flight he is controlled by fear and in the second by moneyed circles. Unlike Henry he experiences neither soothing voice of Nature nor a sign from Nature. He emerges out of the woods with guilt and hears only hallucinatory voice of an imaginary genie. At the end he recognizes the truth that he has fled

from responsibility and self. His tragedy is that of namelessness and it is the story of individual without identity. Henry's flight to Nature results in discovery of his identity and Clyde's flight and return from the woods begin his loss of identity and destruction.

The flight into the forest kindles surviving instinct in Henry, whereas, the same forest where murder is committed causes Clyde's downfall and he gets snuffed out in the race of life as a moral transgressor.

Clyde is not a villain and Henry is not a giant hero. The choices made by them, influenced by the society and standards set by hegemonic masculinity decide them to be winners or losers. Crane and Dreiser attack the social institutions. Crane moves further in support of 'Promethean Struggle', struggle without hope of success. He believes in human dignity which arises from the attempt whether the outcome is success or failure. He sums upon his own words his conviction about struggle to be normally courageous and honest.

"I merely say that as nearly honest as weak mental machinery will allow. This aim in life struck me as being the only thing worthwhile. A man is sure to fail at it, but there is something in the failure".<sup>6</sup>

#### End Notes:

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4. Crane Stephen: The Red Badge of Courage and related reading by Greene and Bertrand (Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, p.1966). Hereafter the references of this book are in parenthesis.
5. An American Tragedy; New York; Liver light Publishing Corporation, 1925, p.7.

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6. Stallman, R.W. Ed: Stephen Crane: An Omnibus, New York, Alfred D. Knof, 1961, 52, p.680.

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