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### HUMOR AND INSIGHT THROUGH FALLACY IN STEPHEN CRANE'S *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*



Stephen Crane's multifaceted approach to reality departs from the naturalistic credo of straightforward objectivity. His premises are essentially the same as most realists' and naturalists', but his technique is distinctive, indirect, and humorous, requiring more perceptiveness on the reader's part to understand the complexities and implications of the novel. While his brilliant use of fallacious reasoning, one of the most complex forms of humor in the novel, is superficially unnaturalistic, it nevertheless makes a strong social comment by implication, which falls well within the mandate of the naturalistic novel. Indeed, it exposes not only human nature through Henry's self-serving hypocrisy in rationalizing his own behavior but also the fallacy of received ideas concerning war, education, religion, and civilization, as well as the shallowness of socially accepted abstractions, such as courage, cowardice, and man's place in nature. Henry's fallacious reasoning evidences both modern society's pious illusions about itself and the confusion its denial of basic human instincts creates for the individual who is attempting to understand his own conflicting desires and perceptions.

About to face his first battle, Henry rebels against the whole world, regrets his having enlisted, and switches the blame over to the government to exonerate himself from personal responsibility: "He had not enlisted of his free will. He had been dragged by the merciless government. And now they were taking him out to be slaughtered."<sup>1</sup> On the superficial level, this is blatantly untrue since he very much wanted to enlist, even doing so against the expressed wishes of his mother. Nevertheless, he unknowingly voices a naturalistic truth: the fact that both body

and mind are largely controlled by heredity and the milieu. Henry has indeed been dragged, psychologically rather than physically, into the war, not so much by the merciless government but by a society which glorified war and courage for centuries, and made them a test of manhood, and of both social and self-acceptance—that is, society manipulated Henry into wanting to go to war to prove his manhood. However, the fault is not society's alone, for the various human communities the world has known since the stone age would not have been so successful in ensuring their own survival through the idealization of war and courage if fighting was not an atavistic need in man, and if the protection of self, family, and territory was not a deeply rooted instinct, inevitably linking man to the rest of the animal world. Indeed, it is not only the government, society, and his collective unconscious, but also his own human nature which has dragged Henry into the war. Thus, as we peel off the layers of fallacy in Henry's reasoning, we are brought back to Henry himself and his instinctive desire to fight and prove his worth as a man.

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane focuses on the contrast between modern Western society, which, in peace time, frustrates the aggressiveness of young males by castigating the trait as primitive and immoral, and earlier societies which rewarded male aggressiveness and exalted it continually through literary works. In that respect, *Red Badge* is remarkably contemporary since our late twentieth-century society has gone much further than Crane's in denying or repressing the fighting instinct. Henry's ambivalent perception of the war at the beginning of the novel evidences clearly his confusion:

He had, of course, dreamed of battles all his life—of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire. In visions he had seen himself in many struggles. He had imagined people secure in the shadow of his eagle-eyed prowess. But awake he had regarded battles as crimson blotches on the pages of the past. He had put them as things of the bygone with his thought-images of heavy crowns and high castles. . . .

. . . He had long despaired of witnessing a Greeklike struggle. Such would be no more, he had

said. Men were better or more timid. Secular and religious education had effaced the throat-grappling instinct, or else firm finance held in check the passions. (83)

Many conflicts are dramatized in this passage, the most important one summarized by the sentence: "Men were better or more timid." "Men are better," if one is to believe that fighting and the enjoyment of it was barbarous and that the fighting instinct has been erased by civilization. But "better" is equated with "more timid," suggesting the instinctive contempt which Henry feels towards those who will not fight.

That Henry should be confused regarding this basic issue is hardly surprising since he has received two conflicting messages from society. Every instinct makes him equate morality with timidity and regret a past, more simple in psychological terms, when the aggressiveness of youth was glorified and channelled through "those great affairs of the earth." Having read some of the epics of literature and history has reinforced and sublimated those instincts, leading him, naturally, to visualize himself in heroic terms. However, his education has taught him that civilization has erased "the throat-grappling instinct"—a fallacy if there is one, but one which Henry does not know as such. He believes in the concept, but it does not correspond to an inner reality, either physical or psychological. It is an intellectual conviction which has no echo in the self. As he will discover through combat, the throat-grappling instinct is alive and well, and living in every individual with the will to live and a reluctance to being "badgered of his life, like a kitten chased by boys." Henry's mixed feelings toward war clearly reflect the duality of human nature.

Moreover, the archetypal myth of the hero is far too deeply ingrained in our unconscious to disappear so easily. Courage on the battlefield has been glorified for thousands of years, reaching its perfect justification in the concept of knighthood, which Crane refers to sarcastically as the people whom Henry imagines "secure in the shadow of his 'eagle-eyed prowess.'" While Crane is gently mocking the young country boy's dream of embodying the concept of knighthood, his implied criticism of a society which teaches its youth to regard knight-

hood as "crimson blotches on the pages of the past" is perhaps sharper, since knighthood allowed for the sublimation of physical force into an instrument of protection of the weak and the helpless. However, Henry is not only attracted by the nobility of the chivalric ideal but also by its pageantry and its gentlemanly concept of fair play. When the second enemy charge follows hard on the heels of the first, Henry "waited as if he expected the enemy to suddenly stop, apologize, and retire, bowing," as though it were still the eighteenth century, when warring generals bowed to each other before attacking, giving the adversary the opportunity to fire first—as Count d'Auteroche did, for instance, at the battle of Fontenoy in 1745 where the Maréchal de Saxe defeated both the British and the Dutch. Auteroche was commanding the French Guards, and his phrase, "*Messieurs les Anglais, tirez les premiers*" became famous.

On the other hand, Henry has also been taught to believe that education, religion, and finance improved human nature and erased wars. The irony here is bitter, and made even more so because of Henry's complete lack of awareness that religion and finance have in fact been the two basic motivations for wars. The name of God has been used since the beginnings of religion to justify, and even sanctify, man's selfish, greed, lust for power over others, and aggressiveness. The very war in which Henry enlists is itself an instance of economic and political motivation camouflaged as ideology. Historically, passions have been stirred rather than held in check by religion and finance, and Henry's naivete is a device used by Crane to hold society up to the reader's scrutiny, in a way which recalls *Huckleberry Finn*. Indeed, it exposes the social manipulation of human psychology; and Henry's acceptance merely mirrors the uncritical conformism of the majority.

Henry's biding farewell to his mother is also revealing:

Still, she had disappointed him by saying nothing whatever about returning with his shield or on it. He had privately primed himself for a beautiful scene. He had prepared certain sentences which he thought could be used with touching effect. But her words destroyed his plans. . . . "If so be a time comes when yeh have to be kilt or do a mean thing,

why, Henry, don't think of anything 'cept what's right, because there's many a woman has to bear up 'ginst sech things these times, and the Lord'll take keer of us all." (85)

Here, Crane is making fun of Henry's self-image as a Greek warrior. However, there is more. Appearances are what attracts Henry throughout—heroic poses and the coveted red badge of courage—and his fascination for appearance prevents him from seeing reality. His mother, in fact, does tell him to come back with his shield or on it; but she does so in her own way devoid of grandiose images, and he does not hear her. Throughout the novella, Crane mocks Henry's penchant for the theatrical, always reminding us that our self-image is formed through the models which have been flaunted before our eyes and imagination by society.

Henry's mother's belief that concern for her might cause Henry to be cowardly ironically foreshadows Henry's running like a rabbit. However, concern for her will be the last thing on Henry's mind at that time, self-concern and self-preservation being his only thoughts. While a cause may be the initial reason for fighting, the actual combat is intensely personal, tapping into primitive emotions and instincts which belong to our shadow and collective unconscious, and has little to do with causes or loved ones, unless their physical presence becomes a factor in the confrontation.

Courage and cowardice, the two notions which obsess Henry and his concept of self, are reduced by Crane to the two basic emotions of anger and terror. This deflation of two major concepts is furthered by his allowing the same individual to be both cowardly and courageous in situations which are almost identical.

Just as the youth has barely finished congratulating himself on his courage during his first battle, convinced that he is now the man he always hoped to be—"So it was all over at last! The supreme trial had been passed. The red, formidable difficulties of war had been vanquished. . . . He perceived that the man who has fought thus was magnificent" (117)—the enemy attacks anew, and he runs. However, it is less the new attack which

makes Henry run than the turn he allows his thoughts to take, exaggerating

the endurance, the skill, and the valor of those who were coming. . . . They must be machines of steel. It was very gloomy struggling against such affairs, wound up perhaps to fight until sundown. . . .

To the youth it was the onslaught of redoubtable dragons. He became like the man who lost his legs at the approach of the red and green monster. . . . He seemed to shut his eyes and wait to be gobbled. (119)

Indeed, the workings of his imagination terrify him far more, in that he allows it to transform the enemy into something they are not, perhaps unconsciously justifying his wish to run. His later rationalization of his behavior by comparing himself to a squirrel follows the same pattern, but is deliberately sophistic:

The squirrel, immediately upon recognizing danger, had taken to his legs without ado. He did not stand solidly baring his furry belly to the missile, and die with an upward glance at the sympathetic heavens. (126)

Clearly Henry is not a squirrel, as Marston Lafrance points out,<sup>2</sup> nor are soldiers expected to stand stolidly, passively awaiting oncoming missiles. More importantly, though, the comparison of the two situations is entirely sophistic, for the squirrel is not confronting another aggressive squirrel, but an actual formidable dragon (given his and Henry's respective sizes), while Henry is merely fighting other men with equal weapons. Because it serves his self-justification, he now tramples the theatrical and romantic poses he has admired so far and coveted for himself. His comparison of a fighting and dying soldier with a squirrel baring his furry belly and dying with an upward glance at the sympathetic heaven is funny and cute, but bitter when one parallels it with the death of the tall soldier. It is also an amusing parody of Henry himself, who keeps expecting nature to sympathize with him and

is amazed that it should go "tranquilly on with its golden process" despite the horror of the battlefield.

The situation is sensibly the same at the beginning of the next battle, once Henry has rejoined his regiment after his desertion. Again Henry feels that he has earned the opportunity for contemplation and repose, and again he exaggerates the power of the enemy and his own helplessness, feeling chased around like a rat, and vulnerable like a kitten in a bag. This time, however, his mental processes turn to anger rather than terror:

He had a wild hate for the relentless foe. . . . He was not going to be badgered of his life, like a kitten chased by boys, he said. It was not well to drive men into final corners; at those moments they could all develop teeth and claws. . . . The tormentors were flies sucking insolently at his blood, and he thought that he would have given his life for a revenge of seeing their faces in pitiful plights. (172)

Thus, two similar situations may bring about dramatically different results in the same individual, depending on his initial psychological reaction to the stimuli. In both cases, Henry has a strong feeling of impotence brought about by a momentary belief that his rifle is useless—not loaded (111) or an impotent stick (173). However, in one case, the feeling of helplessness leads to fear and desertion, while, in the other, it leads to rage and aggression. Indeed, it is not so much what the situation is as the emotional reaction to it which controls the outcome.

Crane is making the point that courage and cowardice are abstract and moral concepts which have no objective reality. The same individual may be both courageous and cowardly, depending on the direction in which his imagination directs his surge of adrenaline under stress. Henry, of course, does not understand this, and keeps dreaming of himself in heroic terms: "he had been a barbarian, a beast. He had fought like a pagan who defends his religion. . . . And he had not been aware of the process. He had slept and, awakening, found himself a knight" (175). He is unaware that, in closely linking the animal and human worlds, he removes the concept of courage from its moral pedestal and brings it down to the physical level. The equation between

barbarian, beast, pagan, and knight reveals that they are effectively based on the same premise. Indeed, the paradox is that, in order to be a knight and protect others as well as oneself, one must allow the beast in oneself to surface and take over.

Crane is also indicating that both running and fighting, being prey and predator, are part of the animal world, and that man is basically an animal despite his inflated opinion of himself. It is not accidental that animal imagery is consistently used to describe Henry's behavior and emotions: he is a "pestered animal, a well-meaning cow worried by dogs (113)" at the beginning of the first battle; he runs like a rabbit and is like the proverbial chicken during the second battle; during the third, he is a wild cat. The running soldiers are like terrified buffaloes, while the fighting soldiers have teeth and claws, and are like "animals tossed for a death struggle into a dark pit" (173). Both prey and predator, dominant and subservient members within each breed, belong to nature and within society. Man belongs to the animal world, and it is somehow his choice to be either prey or predator.

While the reasoning mind has very little to do with actual combat, it plays a major role before and after the action. Before the first engagement, Henry realizes that he is "an unknown quantity" and would again have "to experiment as he had in early youth":

For days he made ceaseless calculations, but they were all wondrously unsatisfactory. He found that he could establish nothing. He finally concluded that the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze, and then figuratively to watch his legs to discover their merits and faults. He reluctantly admitted that he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer. To gain it, he must have blaze, blood, and danger, even as a chemist requires this, that and the other. (91)

Henry discovers the obvious here: that it is only through actualization that one can verify one's self-image; and that it is only through battle that he will find what manner of a soldier he is. However, the fallacy of the argument is rather humorous, for Crane attributes a naturalistic viewpoint to Henry, which is

entirely negated by the personal stake he has in the experiment—i.e., the chemist cannot be both the dispassionate observer carrying out the experiment and the experiment itself. In dissociating his legs from his mind, Henry appears to be objective—the mind analyzing the body—but instead foreshadows ironically the fact that his mind will not only have little control over what his body does but will be unable to assess the situation with any objectivity because of its emotional involvement in it. Indeed, Henry's body will act and his mind will be reduced to watching the action and attempt a pathetic rationalization of the fait accompli afterwards.

Henry's courage in the first and third battles is largely the result of two things: his surge of adrenaline directed toward aggressiveness rather than blind terror, and his loss of personal identity. When the fighting begins, he takes leave of his reasoning mind and stops thinking altogether. In "his battle sleep" he does not know the direction of the ground, nor that he is standing up or has fallen, nor even that a lull has taken place. He loses "sense of everything but his hate, his desire to smash into pulp the glittering smile of victory which he could feel upon the faces of his enemies" (173). Crane's description of courage as a reflex action, which is not controlled by the will, calls into question the concept of courage as a moral virtue but not its effectiveness.

This animal instinct is also dramatized by Crane as a "temporary but sublime absence of selfishness" (183): "He suddenly lost concern for himself, and forgot to look at a menacing fate. He became not a man but a member" (26). The loss of identity is therefore double: man becomes both a raging animal and a selfless component whose identity is submerged into "a common personality which [is] dominated by a single desire" (112). While the two concepts are in ironic contrast, their result is the same: the individual mind gives control over to something powerful which takes over, the immediate reward being a strong feeling of brotherhood which is more potent than either cause or self.

The reasoning mind, however, need not be entirely absent. It can indirectly control the body, once it has recognized that the body will not consult it in life-threatening emergencies. That is, one may manipulate one's own mind into forcing the chosen animal instinct to surface and block out the unwanted

one. It seems that, by the end, Henry intuitively learns that focusing on a physical thing, such as the adversary's flag, or taking his foe's resistance as a personal insult will allow him to summon a desperate purpose, and, therefore, eradicate fear. Then, bullets and shells are no longer instruments of death "with rows of cruel teeth that grinned at him (120)," but merely things that can prevent him from reaching his goal:

The youth had centered the gaze of his soul upon that other flag. Its possession would be high pride. It would express bloody minglings, near blows. He had a gigantic hatred for those who made great difficulties and complications. They caused it to be a craved treasure of mythology, hung amid tasks and contrivances of danger. (206)

Amusingly, though, Henry's single-minded determination remains wrapped up with mythological and archetypal tests of manhood, suggesting that he has not really learned much about his own human nature from the experience.

Henry can never relinquish his heroic self-image, and, once combat is over and his rational mind is in control again, he is even able to rationalize cowardice:

He had done a good part in saving himself, who was a little piece of the army. He had considered the time, he said, to be one in which it was the duty of every little piece to rescue itself if possible. Later the officers could fit the little pieces together again, and make a battle front. If none of the little pieces were wise enough to save themselves from the flurry of death at such a time, why, then, where would be the army. His actions . . . were the work of a master's legs. (124)

The sophism of this reasoning is extremely funny, for Henry has considered nothing before running, merely reacting in blind terror. There has been no sagacity or strategy in the work of his legs, as he would have himself believe. Indeed, he keeps jumping back and forth on both sides of his own argument to convince

himself that his actions were not really what they were. Since he has set himself up to be judged by the work of his legs, his legs, then, cannot possibly have done anything wrong. Moreover, his rationale for an efficient army is in fact a rationale for a parody of an army—one which breaks up and runs any time there is combat. It might make for great comedy, but not for winning battles.

Actually, Henry's desperate desire to justify himself entails horror as much as comedy:

He had been overturned and crushed by their lack of sense in holding the position, when intelligent deliberation would have convinced them that it was impossible. . . . He felt a great anger against his comrades. He knew it could be proved that they had been fools. (124)

Again, while the reasoning appears logical, it is faulty because based on false premises. The proof being in the result, the impossibility of a task can only be determined by trying it with all possible effort, not by deliberating about it. Ironically, in his desperate attempt to make theory the proof of fact, Henry reverses his earlier realization that his behavior would establish his identity. Here, the facts must be wrong since they do not fit his theory. Much of Henry's rationalizing follows the same pattern, and the "hateful" facts always prove him wrong, making him project his self-hatred onto the world and others. This is where the seed of the horror resides. In order to be vindicated, Henry wishes his own side defeated—that is, by implication, his comrades and many others dead. While this is only a temporary emotion for Henry, it nevertheless illustrates the motivating pattern for fanaticism, which involves the need of proving oneself right by forcing others to do or believe as one does. The overwhelming need to be right entails that those who do not believe or act as one does are wrong and must be persuaded to change. If they are changed, they verify one's own beliefs and justify one's right to convert them, even by force if necessary. If they resist, then they deserve to die because they are wrong.

Clearly, Henry is no dictator, murdering maniac, or religious fanatic, but he is representative of humanity at large. Not

only a young man undergoing his first tests of manhood, he is also representative of what may happen to the mind as a result of self-hatred and the resulting psychological isolation. Crane makes it clear throughout the novel that Henry's self-loathing breeds a hatred of his own comrades because he believes that they can perceive his guilt—in Jean Paul Sartre's words: "*l'enfer, c'est les autres.*" He, therefore, wishes them dead. However, when his hatred is directed at the enemy, it brings about acts of valor, self-love, and love for his comrades. Paradoxically, Henry's hatred is not so much directed at other men in a different uniform as against those who interfere with his wishes and well-being—that enemy's flag bearer, for instance, who will not relinquish the flag Henry desires as a symbol of his own pride and greatness, or his own officers who called him and his comrades "mule drivers" and "mud diggers."

Ironically, despite his experiences, Henry does not seem to learn much about himself or to become conscious of those assumptions which prevail in his society and which he takes for granted—those very assumptions which Crane's humorous viewpoint challenges indirectly. To the end, Henry remains a conformist, one who has a limited knowledge of himself but who is still self-deluded in his belief that he knows all. He has proven objectively that he is both a coward and a courageous man, but he has not figured out how he can be both at the same time, and what mental processes brought about dramatically different outcomes to identical situations. Crane's original ending to the story—"He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, [it] was for others"—makes it clear that Henry remains a rather silly young man who has merely derived a feeling of invulnerability from his accidental survival. Appleton's ending—"He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death" (212), on the other hand, brings a further dimension to Henry's psychology, but one which is not really warranted by what we see of his mental processes. Appleton's ending essentially suggests that Henry has learned what Francis Macomber realizes in Ernest Hemingway's short story, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber": that "a man can die but once; we owe God a death . . . and he that dies this year is quit for the next."<sup>3</sup> Nothing in *Red Badge* suggests that

Henry has reflected about his own mortality and has understood that it is how we live that counts, and not how long.

*The Red Badge of Courage* is a complex work in its revelation of human nature and of the illusions and delusions bred by society. In associating closely the positive concept of courage with the negative emotion of hatred, the idealized concepts of heroism and knighthood with the killer instinct, Crane dramatizes the relativity of social beliefs, and the fact that, when one is actually fighting for one's life, morals and ideals yield the stage to the unconscious, going back into the primitive—what Jack London calls “the womb of Time.” The will to live takes second place to the will to kill—the latter being, paradoxically, far more effective in the protection of life than the former. Through his ironical use of fallacious reasoning, Crane also calls into question both society's glorification of heroism and courage and its denial of man's primitive nature. Ironically, glorification makes for sublimation and control of a primitive instinct, while denial leads to denigration, confusion, and even chaos. ☞

## NOTES

1. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, in *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 101. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
2. Marston LaFrance, *A Reading of Stephen Crane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 112.
3. Ernest Hemingway, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 32.