

VISIONS OF WAR AND VERSIONS OF MANHOOD



Always the ironist, Stephen Crane cannot be pinpointed, defined, or categorized. If once he seems to take a position, affirm a belief, express a philosophy, he will soon reverse it, confound it, deny it. Patrick Dooley argues that Crane is a pluralist, who—like his contemporary, William James—presents truths, not Truth, realities, not Reality.¹ Nothing illustrates Crane's pluralism better than his tendency to revisit scenes, themes, and characters, and to revoke them. There is no closure in Crane: each story provokes another story, each vision a revision. "The Open Boat" ends as nature seems to endow the survivors with hermeneutic powers: "the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters" (5:92).² Perhaps, and yet when read with its companion piece, "Stephen Crane's Own Story," "The Open Boat" may seem, as indeed it seems to Benfey, "evasive" and "overdone." The "grandiloquence" of Crane's famous tale of survival is called into question by the stark journalistic account of shipwreck and death. As Benfey astutely observes, one is the story of "the saved," the other of "the lost."³ Which one is the truer interpretation? In a third treatment of essentially the same material, "Flanagan and His Short Filibustering Adventure," Crane burlesques and confounds the "splendid manhood" and the "subtle brotherhood" that seem to be basic values in his earlier versions.

In his war fiction Crane is continually revising, reinterpreting, and dialectically challenging his visions of reality. Reviewers who saw no difference between *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Little Regiment*, or between either of these and *Wounds in the Rain*, were mistaken. Nor is there, as Thomas

Gullason simplistically maintained, a “formula” by which Crane generated this material.⁴ Young Henry Fleming gloats over having successfully concealed his cowardice and dreams of telling war stories at home where he will be “the central figure in blazing scenes.” Thirty years later old Henry Fleming in “The Veteran” does tell a war story, but one that confesses his cowardice. Finally a true hero, *malgré lui*, he sacrifices himself and dies—at last literally a central figure in a blazing scene—while trying to rescue animals in a burning barn. The heroes of *Red Badge* disdain “mule drivers” and “mud diggers”—teamsters and other non-combatant soldiers who provide essential support service. Henry is irate when he overhears an officer referring to his unit in these derogatory terms. Real soldiers fight, they “fight like the devil . . . fight like hell-roosters” (2:91). By contrast “The Price of the Harness” begins as a working party of twenty-five soldiers is building a road. Digging and smoothing they work “like gardeners”; they seem “indifferent, almost stolid,” and silent except for a few jokes they exchange as they straggle along (6:97). They show “no impatience” and seem instead “to feel a kind of awe of the situation” (6:98). Their main concern is food: “Wonder if we’ll git anythin’ to eat.” The next day they join a battalion to attack a fortified house. Being “in harness” (“packing, strapping and buckling”) they are worse than mule drivers: they are more like the mules themselves (6:97-99). War turns Henry Fleming into a maniac, a barbarian, a beast. In “The Price of the Harness,” Jimmie Nolan, as he charges up a hill, feels “something fine, soft, gentle”; he loves his comrades, the regiment, the army; it’s his whole life. Minutes before a bullet rips into his stomach, like Henry Fleming, he dreams of being a hero in a famous battle. Instead it’s only a no-name skirmish, but it costs Nolan his life. He dies in a pool of blood, not even aware that he is mortally wounded (6:110-12).

What lies behind these contrasting visions of war is a shifting appraisal of what constitutes manhood. The causes of conflict, the issues at stake, and the larger social and moral ramifications seldom arise. Instead, Crane’s interest is fixed on psychological concerns, including the question of gender role identification. In much of Crane’s work, war and manhood are linked. War is the arena where males strive to become men, where they hope to attain the mysterious essence of masculinity.

In this paper I will explore this theme in *The Red Badge of Courage* and "Death and the Child." As James Colvert has observed, the two works are versions of identical plot lines: "the incident of cowardly desertion, . . . involvement of nature in the drama of self-discovery, and . . . attribution of motive and conduct to faulty perception in the hero."⁵ Benfey notes that the short story "repeats the plot of [the novel] . . . recapitulates Crane's obsession with wounds, corpses, and cowardice."⁶ In my comparison of these works I will attempt to show how the two texts may be used help to interpret and clarify each other. A story based on the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, "Death and the Child," can be read as a retrospective commentary on *Red Badge*. Joseph Conrad directed a telling observation to Crane when they first met in October 1897: ". . . to my remark that he had seen no war before he went to Greece Crane made answer: 'No. But the *Red Badge* is all right.' "⁷ Typical of the laconic, ironic Stephen Crane, the evasive and understated "all right" was not his final comment.

A still unresolved point of contention among readers of *Red Badge* is the meaning of the youth's claim to manhood at the end of the novel. "He felt a quiet manhood. . . . He was a man" (2:135). Today most of us, I gather, read these words ironically and dismiss Henry's mental state as merely another instance of his many youthful delusions. And yet Henry does change during his second day of battle: he learns to control his fear; he gains self-confidence and self-esteem; he acts decisively and with initiative; he obeys orders without cringing. In short, he becomes a good soldier, a brave warrior. But is this manhood? The question recurs in "Death and the Child" when Peza struggles to the top of a hill and panting, collapses. An inquiring child stands over this "heaving form" and after a silence asks: "Are you a man?" And again, "Are you a man?" (5:141)

Women's Studies in the last twenty-five years have developed an impressive body of scholarship pertaining to the natural and social states of womanhood, and especially to the area of the psychology of gender role identification. We are only now beginning to develop a parallel understanding of the vicissitudes of manhood.

In Freud's discussions of masculinity, male gender identification is linked to the Oedipus complex and is transmitted through the oedipal father. According to classical psychoanalytic

theory, once the male child has accepted the fact that his mother cannot, in reality, be the object of his sexual desire, the Oedipus complex is dissolved through the precipitation of the super ego, and at the same time the boy's primary and most important identification with his father normally intensifies. He loves his father, his former rival, and wishes in every way to emulate him. Thus the father comes to embody the social meaning and value of manhood; it is he who sets the rules, defines the limits, and shows his son how to become a man.

Without at all abandoning this scenario, recent psychoanalytic discussions of gender identification have focused on an earlier period of development and have emphasized the role of the pre-oedipal mother. According to this theory and observation, all neonates—male and female—identify with the mother: her body, her whole being is experienced as an extension of their own. Mother, originally, is cosmos, the total reality. However, unlike daughters whose gender identities with their mothers flow more continuously and with less disruption, infant sons undergo a profound reorientation. For a boy, the male/female polarity is experienced traumatically, for to be male, he must renounce his original symbiotic identification with his mother. With his masculinity at stake, the pre-oedipal boy must escape his mother's grasp, and therefore forfeit part of her comforting, supportive love, a love that he will need and demand so intensely later when he enters the oedipal phase. Being a man is, therefore, from this perspective, more problematic than being a woman. Men must constantly and continually strive to attain their manhood in opposition to that first, always repressed, female identification. According to psychoanalyst Ralph R. Greenson, masculinity is a dis-identification, a denial of identity; accompanied by a fear of engulfment, envy, and a defense against an unconscious wish to retrieve the primal unity with woman—a version perhaps of the all-encompassing “oceanic feeling” that Freud describes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. This defensive posture may also help to explain why “machismo” is so often expressed through devaluation, hatred, and abuse of women.⁸

Furthermore, the relative inaccessibility of fathers as role models may further frustrate the boy's efforts to secure his masculinity. In modern, eurocentric societies, because the father's work takes him away from home and because his role as

caretaker is secondary to the mother's, the father has become, according to analyst and social theorist, Alexander Mitscherlich, "invisible."⁹ As a result, sons tend to develop "positional" as opposed to "personal" identifications; that is, they identify with limited aspects of the father's male role, rather than with the father as a whole person. When the father is dead, absent, or otherwise unavailable, sons tend to develop a sense of manhood based on fantasy.¹⁰

The scenes involving the boy in "Death and the Child" capture these vicissitudes of gender identification. Isolated, forgotten, and abandoned by his parents, who have fled their cobbled hut in terror while a battle between Greeks and Turks is raging, the boy is absorbed in make-believe. Oblivious to the danger around him, he plays with sticks and pebbles to create a menagerie of farm animals, turning sticks into ponies, cows, and dogs, pebbles into sheep. Initially he is playing "shepherd," imitating his father's work. Then he noticed the battle on the plain below, and "it struck him immediately that it was a manly thing which he would incorporate in his game" (5:128). He takes cues from the soldiers, tries to duplicate their movements and reconcile the battle scene with "his theory of sheep-herding, the business of men, the traditional and exalted living of his father" (5:127-28). Here we have a paradigm of a child creating a fantasy of manhood. Separated from his father and with only a pearl-colored cow as substitute for his absent mother, the child must cope as best he can and rely upon his own meager resources. Having little idea of what a "man" is, he creates a positional fiction, equating soldiers in battle with manhood. Discovering the collapsed, exhausted body of Peza the child innocently asks the unanswered—perhaps unanswerable—question. With this, manhood itself seems to be called into question.

The attempt to obtain the essence of masculinity through fantasy is a recurring motif in Crane's work, and two instances of it—*George's Mother* and *Red Badge*—involve almost identical family situations: young men who have no surviving siblings, whose idealized fathers are dead, and who live at home with pious, invasive mothers. George Kelcey and Henry Fleming, in their attempts to free themselves from grasping maternal relationships, entertain elaborate romantic dreams of heroic triumph and power. George has "a vision of himself greater, finer, more

terrible" (1:137). He would be "icy, self-possessed"; he would own "castle-like houses, wide lands, servants, horses, clothes" (1:137). This fantasy of phallic acquisition complements an earlier military variant: he would be "a stern general pointing a sword at the nervous and abashed horizon . . ." (1:137). To validate his manhood, George's fantasy includes a "dream-girl" who is "consumed by wild, torrential passion" for him. He would rescue her and she would become his pet, beseeching his affection (1:137). Henry Fleming has similar fantasies, but his are even more focused on scenes of martial heroism:

He had, of course, dreamed of battles all of 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 peoples secure in the shadow of his eagle-eyed prowess. (2:5)

Henry has been reading the histories of war, enhanced by ancient epic and chivalric legends. His fantasies have also been fueled by newspapers and village gossip that glorify masculine triumph, and he has believed their untrue, exaggerated accounts of union victories. Like George, Henry also has his male-validating "dream-girl": a dark, demure young lady whom he detects watching his departure and whom he later envisions as a member of the audience listening to his tales of valor (2:8, 88).

Like George and Henry, the protagonist of "Death and the Child," the war correspondent Peza has prefigured his manhood in terms of warlike fantasies mixed with erotic arousal:

It was war. Edified, aghast, triumphant, he paused suddenly, his lips apart. He remembered the pageants of carnage that had marched through the dreams of his childhood. Love he knew that he had confronted, alone, isolated, wondering, an individual, an atom taking the hand of a titanic principle. (5:125)

"Edified" derives from the Latin verb *aedificare*, to build, to erect. War is ghastly, a pageant of mangled flesh, and yet it signifies the

essence of manly power, the Titan, it signifies triumph and erection. This sadistic autoerotic component in Peza's dream—a little man confronting "love" alone—corresponds to some of Henry's fantasies:

The newspapers, the gossip of the village, his own picturings, had aroused him to an uncheckable degree. . . . One night, as he lay in bed, the winds had carried to him the clanging of the church bell as some enthusiast jerked the rope frantically to tell the twisted news of a great battle. The voice of the people rejoicing in the night had made him shiver in a prolonged ecstasy of excitement. (2:6)

For Henry, like Peza, the mental pictures of combat, bloody conflict, and conquest produce uncontrollable arousal, shivering nocturnal excitement, masturbatory fantasies displaced in frantic rope jerking.

In exploring the similarities between *Red Badge* and "Death and the Child," the reader will find it helpful to pinpoint the similarities in the protagonists of the two works, for Henry Fleming and Peza are variants within the same class of characters. Colvert has observed that "the prototype of the Crane Hero" is "the little man" with an "overweening ego" who appeared first in the Sullivan County sketches.¹¹ There are of course, important differences. Peza is no farm boy. He is an Italian journalist who has been to the university; he is tastefully attired, has elegant manners, speaks French, appreciates art, plays the piano, writes sonnets. And yet, at the core, the two stand out in Crane's work because of the utter seriousness with which they confront war and life in general. For them, lacking all sense of humor, nothing can be taken lightly. "I know how you are, Henry," says the youth's mother, and surely she speaks the truth (2:7). They are driven by fervent, irrational patriotism. Peza repeatedly claims to be Greek on his father's side: ". . . he wished above everything to battle for the fatherland" (5:138). By volunteering to fight for Greece, he hopes to find his "invisible" father on the battlefield, and through the magic of war, to attain his masculine essence.

Crane centers Henry and Peza in the texts and subordinates the other soldiers, who, acting as foils, are indifferent to the

heroes' agonized obsessions. As prototypes of this contrasting unheroic character, consider Jimmie Johnson and Pete in *Maggie*, men who are smugly confident of their manhood, who consider themselves inherently superior to their surroundings, casually violent, irreverent men. What sort of soldiers, war heroes, might they have become?

[Pete] waved his hands like a man of the world, who dismisses religion and philosophy, and says "Rats!" He had certainly seen everything and with each curl of his lip, he declared that it amounted to nothing. (1:25)

We encounter variants of this character in the tattered man in *Red Badge* and the bearded man in "Death and the Child": "Fat, greasy, squat," chewing like an animal on a piece of hard bread—a veritable precursor of T.S. Eliot's Apeneck Sweeney (5:139).

In the typical protagonist of Crane's fiction, with his oscillations between delusional grandiosity and actual insignificance, we can foresee the narcissistic antihero of the twentieth century. Besides Peza and the younger Henry Fleming of *Red Badge*, this prototype is recognizable in Billie Hawker in *The Third Violet*, Doctor Trescott in *The Monster*, the correspondent in "The Open Boat," Jack Potter in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," and the Swede in "The Blue Hotel." Such characters may appear to be present and active in the world, and even connected in relationships to others, but in fact their world is fantasy. They are self-absorbed and emotionally withdrawn; they are intense, humorless, highly defensive and vulnerable.

As antiheroes they often suffer from gender anxiety. Henry Fleming goes to war partly to escape the feminizing grasp of his mother, and he feels most a man ("he was now what he called a hero") when he participates in the soldiers' arrogant and gratuitous misogyny:

'A dog, a woman, an' a walnut tree,
Th' more yeh beat 'em, th' better they be' (2:97-98).

Yet Henry never fully leaves his mother; he repeatedly returns to her in fantasy and in displacements with nature and the flag. The

woman in Henry's fantasies supports, talismanically protects, and nourishes. "He conceived nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy" (2:46). The flag suggests a mystic trace of primal unity: it "was a goddess, radiant It was a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes" (2:108).

He bethought him of certain meals his mother had cooked at home, in which those dishes of which he was particularly fond had occupied prominent positions. He saw the spread table. The pine walls of the kitchen were glowing in the warm light from the stove. (2:72)

Henry is proud when his lieutenant calls him a "wild-cat," but sometimes he feels like "a damn' kitten in a bag," "a kitten chased by boys" (2:92-97). Instead of fighting like "hell-roosters," Henry and his comrades are found "jawin' like a lot a' old hens" (2:93). His fear of impotence, akin to his recoiling from feminizing identifications, surfaces in a dream (or possibly a daydream) and with it a fit of reactive aggression:

When, in a dream, it occurred to the youth that his rifle was an impotent stick, he lost 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. (2:95)

Henry's shameful cowardice, his archaic dependence on motherly solicitation, the specter of a primitive female identification—his fear, in short, that he is not a real man and that others know it, turns to furious hatred. Henry now wants to destroy the enemy whom he perceives as somehow to be blamed for his impotence. He goes beserk and becomes "a war devil." His rage—or what self psychologist Heinz Kohut calls "narcissistic rage"¹²—is his revenge against everyone and everything that insults his grandiose, exhibitionist self.

"Death and the Child," like *Red Badge*, assesses manhood in terms of size. The putative hero, Peza—his odd name, which is definitely not Greek, seems faintly diminutive with a feminine

ending—initially offers what the text characterizes as “an active definition of his own dimension, his personal relation to men, geography, life” (5:123). This grandiosity, however, is offset by a trace of femininity: “His eyes glistened from that soft overflow which comes on occasion to the glance of a young woman” (5:122-23). The presence of the child in the story has the effect of mirroring Peza, reducing his heroism to a game with sticks and pebbles. Peza listens to the boom of continuous artillery and rattling muskets:

Instantly, for some reason of cadence, the noise was irritating, silly, infantile. This uproar was childish. It forced the nerves to object, to protest against this racket which was as idle as the din of a lad with a drum. (5:123-24)

As Peza runs, exposed to enemy gunfire, he “was like a lad induced by playmates to commit some indiscretion in a cathedral. He was abashed; perhaps he even blushed as he ran” (5:138). Sometimes Peza seems both feminine and childish: “he cared for the implacable misery of these soldiers only as he would have cared for the harms of broken dolls” (5:130). Foppishly attired and punctiliously mannered, Peza is an anomaly on the battlefield. His second attempt at definition is applied to a group of wounded soldiers—“gunless wanderers”—whom he tries to define in terms of a panic attack he had once suffered in an art museum (5:129). When he runs, he runs, not like Henry Fleming who ran from real bullets, but like a child in a nightmare, gripped and choked by a dead man’s bandoleer, holding another dead man’s slithering rifle, listening to dead men’s whispering voices, staring into the liquid eyes of a corpse. Finally he is reduced to a “heaving form . . . palsied, windless, abject,” and over him stands a child who by contrast seems “sovereign,” and at last Peza submits to his true dimension: “he knew that the definition of his misery could be written on a wee grass-blade” (5:141).

The Red Badge of Courage and “Death and the Child” are both studies in the irrationality of war. In these texts Crane has silently elided all of the logic of war as the characters are swept away by passion—by patriotism, panic, rage, pomposity, and despair. Although he never complained about the Appleton

version of *Red Badge*, Crane may well have regretted, particularly after he had witnessed actual warfare in Greece, giving the impression that Henry Fleming had really attained his manhood on the battlefield. As Conrad remembered Crane's modest and ambiguous self-appraisal, *Red Badge* was merely "all right." So we may read "Death and the Child" as a Crane's return to the theme of war and manhood, a revisionist account, a further problematizing of the issues, a questioning of what manhood means. In one of his war sketches, "Crane at Velestino," he seems to clarify, at least on this one occasion, his thinking about these issues. Denouncing the German officers who were serving as military advisors to the Turks, Crane wrote: "I think these officers are the normal results of German civilization, which teaches that a man should first of all be a soldier; ultimately he becomes simply a soldier, not a man at all" (9:20-21). Something of this sort might serve as an appropriate epigraph for Crane's war fiction. ☞

NOTES

1. Patrick K. Dooley, *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), xxi.
2. Stephen Crane, The University of Virginia Edition of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, 10 Vols., Fredson Bowers, ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1969-1976). Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical by volume and page number.
3. Christopher Benfey, *The Double Life of Stephen Crane* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 194-96.
4. Thomas A. Gullason, "The Significance of *Wounds in the Rain*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 5 (1959): 235.
5. James B. Colvert, *Stephen Crane* (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 11.
6. Benfey, 213-19.
7. Joseph Conrad, Introduction, *Stephen Crane: A Study in Letters* by Thomas Beer (New York: Knopf, 1923), 11.
8. Ralph R. Greenson, *Explorations in Psychoanalysis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1968), 305-12.
9. Alexander Mitscherlich, *Society without the Father* (New York: Harcourt, 1969), 137-64.
10. Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 47-54.
11. James B. Colvert, "Structure and Theme in Stephen Crane's Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 5 (1959): 202ff.

12. Heinz Kohut, *Self Psychology and the Humanities*, Charles B. Stormier, ed. (New York: Norton, 1985), 141-49.