

PATRICIA I. HEILMAN

STEPHEN CRANE'S IMAGES OF WAR IN FICTION AND NONFICTION



Two seemingly disparate fields of critical inquiry into Stephen Crane's narrative structures, particularly in *The Red Badge of Courage*, when examined together, may allow some insight into Crane's thinking about the nature of fact and fiction. These two fields of inquiry—the relationship between journalism and fiction and the historical basis for the battle scenes in *Red Badge*—reveal, I believe, Crane's reliance on different narrative modes to “report” his assessment of the nature of war. The images of war Crane employed in *Red Badge*, in his war journalism, and in his later war fiction, such as “Death and the Child,” demonstrate an interesting and complex realignment of his use of fictional images and reportage. Examining these war images in *Red Badge*, in Crane's war journalism, and in “Death and the Child” sheds light on Crane's changing vision of war from the heroism of *Red Badge* to the despair and futility of “Death and the Child.”

Four works on the connections between journalism and fiction writing illustrate critics' dilemmas in assessing the value or impact of the former on the latter. In *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy*, Ronald Weber separates journalism from fiction writing by defining the involvement, or lack thereof, of the writer in each of the two genres. He says, “The journalist should subordinate himself to his material and render it in its terms, not his own. An account of reality itself, not the journalist's private version of it, is what's required . . .”¹ In his 1980 work, *The Literature of Fact*, Weber states that rather than abandon realism, American writers “continued it within the forms of nonfiction or a factual fiction—retaining many of the technical devices and effects of realism while directly recording or reporting on the world rather than recreating it as fiction.”² John

Hollowell's *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* acknowledges that there is a relationship between journalism and fiction writing in American literature, but views the writing of the nonfiction (read journalism) only as a prelude to the writing of fiction. "In America," Hollowell writes, "a reciprocal relationship has always existed between our literary and journalistic traditions. The best American novelists and short story writers have used their narrative gifts to create 'sketches' and local-color stories, often as a prelude to fiction."³ Shelley Fisher Fishkin's *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* contends that there is a much closer relationship between journalism and fiction writing than prior studies had shown. Fishkin writes:

By glossing over the continuities between journalism and the fiction . . . they [critics and scholars] have missed an important aspect of American literary history and biography. By failing to focus on the discontinuities between their journalism and their fiction they have lost an opportunity to gain special insight into the limits and potential of different narrative forms.⁴

Crane's body of work both confirms and refutes the statements of these scholars. In addition, studies by Stanley Wertheim and M. Thomas Inge, among others, on the historical basis for the battles and skirmishes as well as possible identities of the officers depicted in *Red Badge* add another dimension to Crane's creative processes: the fictionalizing of historical data and memoirs into distinctive war images, which I will show, reappear in his war reportage. Wertheim's "*The Red Badge of Courage and Personal Narratives of the Civil War*" contends that Crane may have had access to dozens of examples of Civil War narratives during his youth and that Crane's passion for soldiers and battles suggests he may have immersed himself in a number of these narratives.⁵ Inge suggests that the work of Sam Watkins, who fought for the Confederate Army, was wounded three times, and, after the war, had his recollections printed in the *Columbia (Tennessee) Herald*, his hometown newspaper, from which they were collected and issued in book form, may have been another

source for Crane. The parallels between Watkins' experiences and those of Henry Fleming are striking. "Like the fictional Henry Fleming in Crane's novel, the as yet uninitiated Sam Watkins also feels 'envy' for those who have already encountered⁶ 'war, the blood-swollen god.'"⁷

An examination of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge* alongside his later war journalism and war-related fiction and in relation to the Civil War narratives and memoirs of veterans raises some interesting and, perhaps, some unanswerable questions, about Crane's creative processes and about his shift in viewpoint towards war.

Did Crane separate his fictional writing process from his journalistic writing process?

That his journalism influenced some of his subsequent fiction has been illustrated in Crane studies such as Milne Holton's *Cylinder of Vision: The Fiction and Journalistic Writing of Stephen Crane* (1972) and Thomas A. Gullason's "The 'Lost' Newspaper Writings of Stephen Crane" (1986), but, is there evidence that his earlier fiction influenced his later journalism?

And, if this be shown, what doubt may this cast on the accuracy of Crane's journalism?

Did Crane's experiences in war as a correspondent alter his viewpoint towards war?

If so, what was the shift, and how is that shift reflected in his later war fiction?

Is there a discernible pattern of war images visible in the bulk of Crane's fictional and journalistic war writings? Do any of those images mirror those of the historical accounts of the Civil War?

Do the war images remain constant, or did they change after Crane's firsthand experiences as a war reporter?

And, perhaps, the question at the heart of this study: Should Crane's journalism be read and studied along with his fiction?

Stephen Crane's *Red Badge*, written in 1893 after his intensive reading of Civil War memoirs, fictionalizes the exploits of military men (actual men or composites based on his readings depending on which critical study one embraces). It is reasonable to assume that those battle deeds in those memoirs became more heroic and significant in the retelling and recording of them as Henry Fleming's "war" wound did in Chapter 13. The characters in *Red Badge* reflect that braggadocio in glorifying and embellishing their deeds of a few hours ago. As the memoirs glorified the war effort as a crusade-like struggle to save a fledgling nation, Crane's novel mirrors that moral purpose: War is necessary . . . War builds character . . . War is good.

Crane's journalistic writings on the Greco-Turkish and Spanish-American Wars were immediate—devoid of postwar reflection and placement of deeds in the context of the end result. For example, generals in a battle later deemed to be a turning point in a war effort reflect on their role and the actions of their soldiers from that viewpoint of significance. The events, which may have seemed less important while occurring, are now viewed through their contribution to the war's denouement. Crane's war correspondence had no such frame of reference; he reported what he observed without knowing whether those events would prove significant. And, although the war literature of the Greco-Turkish War in 1897 did not generate the wealth of memoirs and fictional works that the American Civil War did, Crane's work in capturing that war in both writing forms appears significant to an understanding of the universality of war images.

As a reporter for the mass circulation newspapers of his day—Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, as well as the McClure and Bachelier syndicates—Crane followed the journalistic practices of his day, which favored the reliance on fact and keen observation, but

were a far cry from the “objectivity” practiced by American journalists of the mid-20th century onward. “Reporters in the 1890s saw themselves,” Michael Schudson points out in his history of news practices, “in part, as scientists uncovering the economic and political facts of industrial life more boldly, more clearly, and more ‘realistically’ than anyone had done before.”⁸ The key words in Schudson’s statement are “than anyone had done before”—this was the infancy of the journalistic concept of objectivity. Not only did reporters veer from this adherence on a regular basis, they were often encouraged to do so to increase readership. This was, by the way, the beginnings of Yellow Journalism—that period in American journalism history where the competition for newspaper circulation frequently led to stories of questionable truthfulness. Crane himself bore the label “Yellow Kid” and was not unaware of the dubious distinction of writing for newspapers that would opt for sensationalism over fact. Joyce Milton in *The Yellow Kids: Foreign Correspondents in the Heyday of Yellow Journalism* deftly defines the label, and Crane:

The typical yellow kid was the agnostic son of a Protestant minister, a drop-out from the genteel tradition who put his faith in science, social progress, and the superiority of American know-how, not necessarily in that order. Impetuous, daring, and resourceful, he was seldom content merely to cover the news; he set out to make it, solving murders, cracking burglary rings, going undercover to investigate conditions in prisons and insane asylums, joining the stampede to the Klondike to prospect for gold, or taking part in illegal expeditions to smuggle arms to the anti-Spanish rebels in Cuba.⁹

A reexamination of the myths of this period indicates that the journalism was not as far removed from truth as the myths might suggest. For example, the classic story that Hearst started the Spanish-American War as a way to sell newspapers is frequently called upon to illustrate the extent to which news of that day would be concocted. The story goes that Hearst had sent Richard Harding Davis and pictorial historian Frederic Reming-

ton to Cuba in the winter of 1896-97 to report on the rebellion. Remington supposedly found himself in Havana with nothing much to do and wired Hearst. " 'Everything quiet. No trouble here. There will be no war. I wish to return.' And the reply from the publisher . . . Please remain. You furnish the pictures and I will furnish the war' " ¹⁰ was to illustrate how far publishers would go to include sensational stories in their newspapers. No proof exists of either telegram, although most would not have doubted the story's veracity given Hearst's business-over-journalism credo. In Crane's newspaper account of the sinking of the cargo ship, the *Commodore*, en route to Cuba on January 1, 1897, called "Stephen Crane's Own Story" which later became the short story, "The Open Boat," he openly relates the cargo of the *Commodore* (guns and ammo) and its true mission (help arm the insurrectionists). The openness with which Crane reveals his involvement in the story he was sent to cover both supports the subjectivity of journalistic accounts and the accepted involvement of reporters in the actions they would recount in their reports. While Crane's journalism may sometimes have deviated from precise adherence to the facts and may have included significant insertion of his own persona in the accounts, he was definitely in the mainstream of his profession which allowed for first-person narratives, personal reflections and, indeed, at times, military advice. Schudson states that this drive toward realism in journalism, matched by the same move in literature, allowed Crane the freedom and ease to move from one genre to the other. The budding concept of journalistic objectivity, important to the reportage of the 1890s, complemented American literary realism.

Crane covered the Greco-Turkish War in 1897 for Hearst and the McClure syndicate, producing eight journalistic pieces that preceded the writing of "Death and the Child," his short story based on these experiences. These journalistic accounts show the novice's first impressions of a war-torn country. For example, Crane's first journalistic piece on the war, "An Impression of the 'Concert,' " presents Crane's impressions of the battleground as he approaches on the ship. He is, in part, amazed that the environment, nature, does not reflect the death and destruction happening all around it. The mountains, skies, seas are none the worse for the war. This perception mirrors that of Henry Fleming in Chapter V of *Red Badge* who is amazed that

nature appears the same "under so much devilment." And, this image of nature undisturbed by war can be found in one of Sam Watkins' descriptions in his Civil War remembrances:

The tale is told. The world moves on, the sun shines as brightly as before, the flowers bloom as beautifully, the birds sing their carols as sweetly, the trees nod and bow their leafy tops as if slumbering in the breeze . . . and the scene melts and gradually disappears forever.¹¹

Crane's perceptions on the Concert in the beginning of "Death and the Child," become those of the lead character, Peza, an Italian war correspondent. The people on the Concert are newcomers to the war just as Peza is when he first views the battle from the mountaintop. The people exhibit a sense of excitement, frivolity, when the battle is seen from a distance. Henry Fleming exhibits that same sense of exhilaration at the start of the novel where he envisions his courageous exploits to come and the jubilant and adoring reactions of his mother and the young girl from his school when they hear of his heroism.

The description in the Concert article of the flags of all the countries on the ships in part emphasizes this patriotism (or nationalism) Peza feels in the short story when he first wants to fight, rather than report, on the war because he is Greek and feels an allegiance to his ancestry. The flag imagery is an important symbol in *Red Badge* as well, again signifying patriotism and, perhaps, the game-like nature of war where capturing a flag is comparable to capturing an opponent's Rook or Bishop in chess. The peripheral parts of war, which can be viewed from a ship temporarily obstruct the magnitude and gore of battle. Peza's distant view of war is also idealistic. As he approaches the intimacies of war, his vision changes, as did Crane's vision from *Red Badge* to "Death and the Child."

The next piece of correspondence emanates from the actual battle and Greek retreat Crane witnessed. He begins "Crane at Velestino" with, "from a distance it was like a *game*. There was no blood, no expression, no horror to be seen."¹² Part II of "Death and the Child" picks up the game imagery. "A child was playing on a mountain," Crane writes, "and disregarding a

battle that was waging on the plain" (949). His short story mimics his own awakening to the horrors of war. It looks like a game. Crane's depiction here of war as a game could be a carryover of that image from *Red Badge*. Perhaps while writing the journalism and the subsequent short story, he realized the accuracy of his 1893 image or decided to borrow from his early war images.

In the same article, Crane describes the removal of the wounded from the area. What struck him was their silence: "By the red flashes I saw the wounded taken to Volo. There was very little outcry among them. They were mostly silent."¹³ Again, in "Stephen Crane Tells of War's Horrors," he describes two soldiers shot through the jaw and mouth and, again, the silence of the wounded. He says, "Yet the wounded soldiers themselves retained that marvelous composure [silence], indifference, or whatever else you choose to call it."¹⁴ In the short story, Crane expands his imagery. The wounded soldier he describes has had his jaw shot half away. He is unable to speak, to describe, perhaps, the horrors of the battle. Crane writes, "Peza watches two soldiers dragging a third, whose jaw had been half shot away," and the man was silent, spectrelike (957). This imagery of the wounded in both journalism and fiction was foreshadowed in *Red Badge* where Henry, returning after his initial flight, sees his silent, wounded comrades; and, of course, the image of Henry's orderly sergeant in Chapter XXII whose jaw has been shattered, and he is unable to make a sound. What must Crane have thought when he witnessed in war the ghastly image he created in *Red Badge*—the jaw shot away and the soldier silenced by his wound! Or, did Crane not witness this as a reporter, but thought the image from *Red Badge* significantly striking and chose to incorporate it as "fact," given the leeway with that concept reporters of his day were afforded?

To many unfamiliar with the realities of war, the amount of time the soldiers in the short story have to talk to each other, smoke cigarettes, and drink, may seem unrealistic. The Civil War narratives, which Wertheim suggests Crane would have read, are also filled with the recollections of soldiers with lots of time between battles. Crane's actual battle experience, which he describes in "At Velestino," is included in "Death and the Child" and supports the recollections of the Civil War soldiers on the

amount of non-battle time. Crane adds a twist to this, though, again to juxtapose normal human functions with the vagaries of war. The soldiers in the short story ask for cigarettes while removing ammunition from corpses (960).

In "Stephen Crane at Velestino," he writes, "The artillery fire upon them was almost eternal; it continued even when the musketry lulled, but nobody minded anything."¹⁵ All seven parts of the short story contain reference to the sounds of muskets and shells. The soldiers seem almost oblivious to the noise and conduct normal conversations amongst it. As Peza progresses in his awareness of war, his cognizance of the noise decreases. This apparent disregard of the noise of war does not happen in *Red Badge*. Throughout, the characters, Henry, in particular, are always cognizant of battle sounds. Once Crane had experienced the monotony of battle sounds in covering the Greco-Turkish conflict, he became aware of how even deafening, frightening noises can become commonplace and so he radically changes that war imagery in his later fiction.

In "Death and the Child," the main character's occupation as a correspondent reflects Crane's own position in the war as well as his observation on the great number of reporters assigned to cover wars. In "Greek War Correspondents," Crane writes that war correspondents sometimes seriously interfere with the movements of the two armies.¹⁶ The interchange in the short story between an officer and Peza takes on added significance. The officer immediately assumed Peza was a correspondent since the vast numbers of them were a reality to those fighting the war. A particular correspondent Crane describes in his article may be the genesis for Peza. This correspondent was

an American . . . who has crossed Armenia in the midst of the troubles, who has lived in Crete with the insurgents and been in all the bombardments and fights there and who is now going to Arta in the hope of joining the wild band of volunteers who are about to raid into the troop-covered provinces of Turkey.¹⁷

While concrete references in Crane's journalism can be found for Peza and the battle scenes in "Death and the Child," a

journalistic basis for the child imagery is not as concrete. In "The Dogs of War," Crane writes of a little puppy he adopted while on correspondence duty and about which he wrote for the Hearst newspapers. He found it astonishing that this puppy could live, undisturbed, by the chaos around him. This puppy had been abandoned when his owners fled the village, much the same as the child on the mountain in "Death and the Child" had been abandoned when his parents fled the town. Crane makes two references in the short story to the fear of the parents that caused them to forget their first-born. The pup, like the child, played in the stones, and the repetition of this particular play imagery indicates a link, although admittedly, a tenuous one.

The images of the wounded in the short story, including the description of the soldier with a bandage tied around his head, come from "A Fragment of Velestino." Crane writes:

Behind him was the noise of the battle, the roar and rumble of an enormous factory. This was the product. This was the product, not so well finished as some, but sufficient to express the plan of the machine. This wounded soldier explained the distant roar. He defined it. This—this and worse—was what was going on. This explained the meaning of all that racket.¹⁸

Henry's wound from the rifle butt of his comrade also resulted in a bandage tied around his head, another foreshadowing of later writings—or another instance of Crane borrowing from his fiction for his journalism.

In the eight journalistic pieces which preceded "Death and the Child," Crane analyzed the novice's first impressions of a war-torn country, the initiate's awareness of the game-like nature of war, the witness' shock at the silence of the wounded and the nonchalant attitude toward the dead exhibited by the other soldiers, the noncombatant's uneasiness with the constant noise of war, and the innocents' confusion about war's purpose. The resulting short story melded these impressions, generalized them, and effectively presented them to the reader as a universal statement on the horrors of war—and this universal statement is a 180-degree shift from that of *Red Badge*.

Crane's actual war experiences, coupled with his writing of newspaper accounts of what he saw, enabled him to write realistic short stories on war. In "Death and the Child," there is none of the glamour or heroism of war, only the pain, futility, and death of it. Crane's shift in perception from *Red Badge* to this short story demonstrates the impact his witnessing of actual battles had on his knowledge of the realities of war.

In tracking Henry's range of emotions from the time of his initial flight from the battle, the reader finds fear followed by despair, shame, humiliation, and self-reproach. Henry then engages in deceit when he regains contact with his comrades, transforming the injury he received from a fellow soldier to a battle wound and bragging about his heroism. He shifts to a rationalization of his flight as being the wiser course of action. As he prepares to do battle for real, he exhibits intense hatred for the enemy who had caused him to run in fear, followed by seething anger demonstrated by his fierce battle activity. Henry, moreover, shows valor and patriotism (by recovering the flag), and takes pride in the battle and self-satisfaction in his own performance. When the story of the colonel's praise of himself and Wilson reaches him, Henry takes great pleasure in the officer's assessment of his battle heroics. This causes a leap in self-confidence, a resolve to exceed his previous achievements, and a pride in the resultant victory. "Death and the Child" has no upbeat, gallant ending. Peza lies face up staring at a child who wonders if he is a man. There is no attempt at heroism, no badge of courage—simply defeat and despair for both Peza and the child.

From this analysis of *Red Badge* and its possible referents in Civil War memoirs, Crane's war journalism and "Death and the Child," it appears that Crane did not always separate his fictional writing from his journalistic writing. His fiction benefited from the journalistic observations; and his journalism was not seriously compromised by the license he may have taken with the facts. Certainly *Red Badge* influenced Crane's war correspondence in the images Crane chose to emphasize and embellish, which may cast doubt on Crane's journalistic integrity, but only if he is judged by today's journalistic standards instead of the practices of his day.

Crane's viewpoints towards war did shift from *Red Badge* to "Death and the Child," an inevitable shift, perhaps, since experience becomes the greater teacher. His stint as a war correspondent provided the experience; Crane himself had worried that *Red Badge* suffered because of his lack of first-hand experience with that war effort. His later fiction's shift in viewpoint supports Crane's uneasiness with *Red Badge's* authenticity of viewpoint. However, the correlations among the war memoirs, *Red Badge*, Crane's journalism and later fiction in the consistency of war images suggest that Crane's reading and research prior to writing *Red Badge* provided him the basis to write an accurate, true, universal picture of war.

The similar war images that thread through all Crane's war works—the environment, the wounded, the noise, the plight of the innocent—represent a reportorial exactness. In *Red Badge*, these elements suggest an ambiguity: Are they good or evil? What did Crane intend for the reader to see and feel? How much are these depictions tinged with irony? In the novel, it is as if the author is exploring the meaning of the images himself, is trying to imagine what it would have been like for those Civil War soldiers in battle. After Crane's first-hand experience with war, these particular images in his journalism and later fiction lose their ambiguity. They are painted, instead, with a surer brush, a more confident authorial judgment. What is seen in Crane's shift from reportage to fiction in the later works is a distinct and undeniable negativity attached to the images of war.

According to John Hellman in *Fables of Fact*, Northrup Frye, Robert Scholes, and Ernest Hemingway all indicate there is no strict difference between "fact" and "fiction" as found in the popular connotations of "truth" and "falsehood." "Rather, they involve two distinct activities that can be left separate or merged."¹⁹ In paraphrasing Hayden V. White's study on the techniques of history and fiction, author David L. Eason conjectures that "White's analysis suggests that narrative techniques are neither fictional or factual but are formal methods used in making sense of all kinds of situations."²⁰

It appears that Stephen Crane ascribed to this theory of the interchangeability of fact and fiction in the writing process, at times choosing to keep his fiction separate from his journalism, and at other times choosing to merge the two when expedient for

the explication of themes. Crane's journalism influenced his fiction; his fiction influenced his journalism. At times the distinction between the two is so slight as to be indiscernible. This tight connection merits closer examination and, perhaps, an approach to the teaching of Crane's works that would incorporate a study of his journalistic writings. ☞

NOTES

1. Ronald Weber, *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism Controversy* (New York: Hastings House, 1974), 22.
2. Weber, *The Literature of Fact* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980), 13.
3. John W. Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hills: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 34.
4. Shelly Fisher Fishkin, *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 3.
5. Stanley Wertheim, "The Red Badge of Courage and Personal Narratives of the Civil War," *American Literary Realism* 6 (Winter 1973): 61.
6. Thomas M. Inge, "Sam Watkins: Another Source for Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*," *Stephen Crane Studies* 3 (Spring 1994): 13.
7. Stephen Crane, *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry*, J.C. Levenson, ed. (New York: Library of America, 1984), 103. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
8. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 71.
9. Joyce Milton, *The Yellow Kids: Foreign Correspondents in the Heyday of Yellow Journalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), xiv.
10. Nathaniel Lande, *Dispatches From the Front: News Accounts of American Wars, 1776-1991* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 127.
11. Inge, 14-15.
12. Stephen Crane, *Reports of War*, Vol. IX, The University of Virginia Edition of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, 10 vols. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1971), 20.
13. Crane, *Works*, 20.
14. Crane, *Works*, 54.
15. Crane, *Works*, 25.
16. Crane, *Works*, 15-16.
17. Crane, *Works*, 18.
18. Crane, *Works*, 29.

19. John Hellman, *Fables of Fact* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 18.
20. David L. Eason, "New Journalism, Metaphor and Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 15. 4 (1982): 143.