

# The statue off its pedestal: stephen crane's notions of heroism



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The world of Stephen Crane's fiction is a cruel, lonely place. Man's environment shows no sympathy or concern for man; in the midst of a battle in *The Red Badge of Courage* " Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment" (89). Crane frequently anthropomorphizes the natural world and turns it into an agent actively working against the survival of man. From the beginning of " *The Open Boat*" the waves are seen as " wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall" (225) as if the waves themselves had murderous intent. During battle in *The Red Badge of Courage* the trees of the forest stretched out before Henry and " forbade him to pass. After its previous hostility this new resistance of the forest filled him with a fine bitterness" (104). More omnipresent than the mortal sense of opposition to nature, however, is the mortal sense of opposition to other men. Crane portrays the Darwinian struggle of men as forcing one man against another, not only for the preservation of one's life, but also the preservation of one's sense of self-worth. Henry finds hope for escape from this condition in the traditional notion that " man becomes another thing in a battle" ~~is~~ more selfless and connected to his comrades (73). But the few moments in Crane's stories where individuals rise above self-preservation are not the typically heroicized moments of battle. Crane revises the sense of the heroic by allowing selfishness to persist through battle. Only when his characters are faced with the absolute helplessness of another human do they rise above themselves. In these grim situations the characters are reminded of their more fundamental opposition to nature. Even before Henry enters the army his relationship with other humans is defined by antagonism. His mother asks him not to join the army and as a result he goes out and enlists. He announces his enlistment to his mother " <https://assignbuster.com/the-statue-off-its-pedestal-stephen-cranes-notions-of-heroism/>

diffidently," (47) suggesting a conscious desire to hurt her feelings by exaggerating the ease of his decision. The moments before he leaves are not marked by any tender communion, but instead by an estranged irritation. Quiet antagonism escalates as Henry reaches his camp. The relationship between the veterans and the new recruits is not explained in the language of pedagogy, instead as in so many naturalistic relationships, the veterans are predators and Henry is the "prey" (51). As the men enter battle, the reader expects this antagonism to subside, expects with Henry, that "man [will] become another thing in battle." At first the youth's fantasies seem to play out as he feels himself begin to weld "into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire" (84). But in the first moment that the troops are confronted with a viable enemy Henry "lost the direction of safety" (93). The threat to his self-preservation causes him to run from the battle, and as his own worse fear is borne out, his sense of antagonism returns with gusto. As he runs he calls his comrades "Methodical idiots! Machine-like fools" (95). It is evident that the understanding of his own weakness drives him to denigrate everyone around him, for psychological self-preservation. This particular sense of self-preservation creates an antagonism that runs throughout the rest of the battles; "he felt a great anger against his comrades" (99) because he senses they are always trying to crush his own sense of self-worth. The shared nature of this antagonism is evident from the nearly constant fights in the Union camps, even after successful campaigns. On the battlefield, when the enemy is supposed to be the men in gray, the anger is instead pointed "against his officer" (179), or in another situation, "riveted upon the man, who, not knowing him, had called him a mule driver" (183); the officers, rather than shouting

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encouragement, let fly blasphemous curses against the men. Even the most outwardly heroic moment ~~is~~ that where Henry clutches the flag from the falling color-guard ~~is~~ is defined by an antagonism, as both Henry and his friend “ jerked at it, stout and furious . . . the youth and his friend had a small scuffle over the flag” (181), in an effort to secure the glory of carrying the flag for himself. Crane chose war as his venue for exploring human nature, suggesting his fundamental belief in antagonism as the basic state of humanity. Yet there are moments where the humans do rise above this antagonism breeding self-preservation. These are not moments of battle where the sense of a communal hope and venture binds the men together. Instead, these moments come in the face of absolute hope- and helplessness. The most vivid such moment comes in the moments before the death of Jim Conklin. As Henry sees the hopelessness of Jim’s situation, “ he strove to express his loyalty, but could only make fantastic gestures” (112). In stark contrast to his antagonistic relationship with every other soldier up to this point, Henry is now eager to do anything for Jim. Henry never believes he can save Jim, he mourningly says “ I’ll take care of yeh! I swear t’ Gawd I will!” (112), but he never dares utter that common refrain of battlefield literature, “ you’re going to be all right.” He is silently cognizant of Jim’s inevitable death, and while never explained as such, it is just this understanding that sets this moment apart from all the other moments in which Henry retains his antagonistic sense of self-preservation. This interpretation is supported by the dearth of selflessness in Henry until the next time he confronts helplessness. Henry again transcends his solipsism when he comes upon a column of men that had burst “ from their coats and their equipments as from entanglements.” As they bear down upon Henry, <https://assignbuster.com/the-statue-off-its-pedestal-stephen-cranes-notions-of-heroism/>

he “ forgot that he was engaged in combating the universe” ~~he~~ forgot about the gripes with his comrades that he had returned to in the immediate aftermath of Jim’s death, and “ stared in agony” at the men. Henry’s ability to move outside of his selfish concerns again does not come from some sense of a shared hope between the men, but instead from his recognition of the army as “ helpless” (130). The men in “ The Open Boat” seem to have found a lasting sense of camaraderie in their own venture. The men consistently and cheerfully sacrifice sleep and comfort to give other men a break from rowing. But this sense of selflessness does not arise from a sense of collective venture, instead it arises from the omnipresent sense of hopelessness. Antagonism sneaks on to the boat only when they do come in contact with some source of hope. When they approach a tiny lighthouse ~~the~~ the first man-made structure they have seen ~~the~~ “ four scowling men sat in the dinghy, and surpassed records in the invention of epithets” (235). This moment of hope is said to sharpen their minds, and “ to their sharpened minds it was easy to conjure pictures of all kinds of incompetency and blindness and, indeed, cowardice”: (236). When they again see humans on the shore the men on the boat argue about the identity and thoughts of the people, “ no; he thinks we’re fishing,” “ no, that’s no boat” (240). It is the only moment of disagreement they have during their journey. Visions of hope conjure up feelings of self-preservation, and with them a sense of self-righteousness and anger. As they float out to sea again, away from possible help, the men find complete agreement again, and answer all requests of themselves with a docile “ sure.” Henry enters battle with the notion that an identifiable enemy or opposition will help bring coherence to the men, and deliver him into a selfless heroism. While this

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does not happen in the war between men, a different opposition seems to help bring about the moments of transcendence in Crane's works. An understanding of helplessness provides an opportunity for humans to bond together in the opposition to nature. Both Henry and the men on the open boat give a similar angry response to nature in the aftermath of their parallel experiences of bonding. While floating helplessly at sea, the men in the boat shed nary a negative word about the men on shore, but instead shout silent invectives at nature. At one hopeless moment Crane says that a man "wishes to throw bricks at the temple [of nature], and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers" (246). Crane purposely leaves the identity of the thinker of this thought anonymous, suggesting that any and all of the men could have had this thought. Henry feels a similar rage coupled with impotence in the aftermath of Jim's death: he "shook his fist. He seemed about to deliver a philippic. 🗑️Hell-🗑️ The red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer" (116). Henry cuts his philippic short as he sees just how uncaring, and unapproachable the red sun is. Hopelessness opens man up to his more shared fate and powerlessness within nature, and creates a more distinct and hateful enemy than any men in gray. In this larger battle, man is changed, but only for those moments in which he is forced to confront his own powerlessness. Crane does not necessarily view Henry's ability to transcend himself in the face of helplessness as heroic. But Crane definitely leaves behind any positive notion of war as eliciting self-less heroism; "there was a singular absence of heroic poses" (87). Even while recognizing that "it would not be handsome for him to freely condemn other men," as Henry does in battle, "the words upon his tongue were too bitter" (156). Battle

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only brings out a willful self-assertion as the self-worth of each man is tested. Those few moments where a “ subtle brotherhood of men” (231) is spied, are conspicuously away from the battle field, in settings where man is able to dwell on the larger opposition present in the world.