

The role of individualism versus conformity



Stephen Crane's pieces are written with the intent to establish individualism as an unfavorable quality. He establishes that group goals are more important than that of the individual and creates groups to which each character should conform. Crane supplies models for the individual to comply to and elucidates that adherence to the group would bring reward but deviation from said groups would be detrimental. Henry, in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, is created as a child in search of self worth and assurance. Crane establishes Henry as an individual by giving him the ability to think for himself but creates situations that stifle his individualism in order for him to stay within the group. Henry does the one thing that men ought not. He thinks. In his thoughts he sees past the glory and valor that comes with enlisting and comes to question what could happen to him on the battlefield. He acknowledges the presence of something that the other men dare not: death. The realization that lives are at stake, especially his own, cause Henry to question whether he will have to courage to stay and fight or whether he will run. Crane creates Henry as an individual in a mass society. He injects him into the army with aspirations of attaining a sense of identity. Crane establishes Henry as "the youth" to make it apparent that he was not like the other men of the 304th regiment. Henry stands out among the men and "muse[s] seriously upon the radical differences between himself and those men who were dodging implike around the tree"(P. 184). Not only Henry's eye catches his obvious detachment from the group. Upon seeing Henry, Wilson responds "What you doing here?"(P. 184), extending Henry's exclusivity and insinuating that he is out of place. Henry "continually tries to measure himself by his comrades"(P. 181). Consequently, he attempts to quell his lack of confidence

by seeking out others from whom he can find confidence. This search leads him to Jim Conklin. Jim states that his actions would be dictated by the surroundings “ but if everyone was a-standing and a-fighting, why, I’d stand and fight”(P. 180). Jim’s claim gave Henry confidence. “ He now was in a measure reassured”(P. 180). Though confident, Henry still lacks assurance. His fear of the consequences of battle make him feel strange in the presence of men who talked excitedly of the prospected combat. In an attempt to counter this indecisiveness Henry’s seeks the assurance of others. This confusion about his intrepidity leads him to question others. “ ÆHow do you know you won’t run when the time comes?’ asked the youth of the loud soldier. ÆRun?’ said the loud one; Ærun?–of course not!’ He laughed”(P. 185). Finding no persons that identify with his feelings of confusion leaves Henry with an extreme sense of solitude. “ He felt alone in spaceÖ”(P. 186). He feels disassociated from others “ He was a mental outcastÖill from the monotony of his suffering”(P. 186). Henry’s failure to discover persons with any mite of resemblance to his viewpoints leads to paranoia. “ The youth ensured himself that at any moment [the army] might be suddenly and fearfully assaulted”(P. 186). His fear was manifested as he awoke to the find himself retreating with the rest of his infantry. Crane had constructed a situation in which Henry’s individuality could not be utilized. “[Henry] ran with his comrades, strenuously [trying] to think, but all he knew was that if he fell down those coming behind would tread upon him. All his faculties seemed to be needed to guide him over and past obstructions. He felt carried along by a mob”(P. 188). Henry was no longer a person, he became like the other men of his regiment: indistinct. In the wake of danger, Henry realizes that rejection of the group is impossible. He attempts to follow

Crane's naturalistic instructions within the novel, conforming to the actions and ideas of the rest of the regiment around him. He accepts the underlying law that that adherence to the group would bring reward but deviation from said groups would be detrimental. With this acceptance, Henry " suddenly lost concern for himself [and] became not a man but a member... He was welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire"(P. 197)Henry runs not because of cowardice or insightful individualism. He does so because of a direct reaction to the group's actions. In his yearning to be a part of them, he mimics them. Henry became afraid because they were afraid." A man near him who up to this time had been working feverishly at his rifle suddenly dropped and ran with howls. A lad whose face had bore an expression of exalted courage, was at an instant abject: there was a revelation. He too threw down his gun and fled- he thought that all the regiment was fleeing"(P. 202-203.) Henry seeks to find something to measure himself to, in the absence of his fellow soldiers, who had won the battle without him. He finds this in the squirrel. After seeing the squirrel scurry away at the advance of his rock, he justifies his departure from the group by alleging that it was nature's will. The youth felt triumphant at this exhibition. There was the law, he said. Nature had given him a sign. Henry mingles into a regiment returning from battle but again feels like an outcast. He comes to realize that he is the only one among them that is not injured. Crane thereupon creates a situation that allows Henry to be assimilated into the group. Henry is once again consumed by a retreating infantry. And upon questioning a soldier he is " crushed upon the [his] head" with a rifle. Crane had given Henry a red badge of courage. He could now return to the ranks of his regiment acclimatized. Crane utilizes the general to

make Henry stay within the group. After overhearing that his infantry can be spared, Henry finally acknowledges that his actions alone will not have any deep impact on the war. Henry fights valiantly within the group, driven by a collective feeling of patriotism and insignificance. “[Henry] ran like a madman to reach the woods before a bullet could discover him. He ducked his head low, like a football player. In his haste his eyes almost closed, and the scene was a wild blur. Pulsating saliva stood at the corners of his mouth. Within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag which was near him”(P.). Henry stayed within the group and, in another battle, attained victory. Crane’s hindering of Henry’s individualism had allowed him to stay within the regiment, and eventually receive reward. In sacrificing his own individualism he had grown from the youth he once was. He now understood more of himself and his potential.