

Military romanticism in the red badge of courage



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The Red Badge of Courage is a novel written by Stephen Crane which explores a youth's struggles in his first experiences with war. Prior to the novel's beginning, Henry Fleming, a teenage boy raised on a farm, enlists to go to war despite his lack of knowledge on the subject aside from glamorized tales. During Henry's trip to the military camp, a number of his peers, especially maidenly girls, extol him for his enlisting. However, this period of praise and glorification only lasts a short time before Henry is thrown into the monotonous daily grind of military training. At the camp, Henry finds himself losing sight of his ideal expectations of the glory of war. This loss of beliefs Henry experiences only further progresses as he begins to learn the personalities of his fellow soldiers, who he thinks the majority of to be much less intelligent and noble than he had initially expected. After Henry's regiment wins a minor battle, they find themselves under attack by the enemy, causing Henry to break his vow to himself and run away out of fear. During his short time away from the regiment, he wanders through the woods and finds a sense of calmness. Henry's tranquility is broken when he stumbles upon a decaying corpse of a soldier, an event which deeply shakes him. All of these events affect Henry so that when he returns to his regiment and is again immersed in battle, he undergoes a great change of character in which he loses some of his selfishness and accepts that his ideologies concerning war are not entirely accurate. Despite this eventual positive change, Henry initially feels many negative emotions upon his discovering that his expectations are false. Throughout the novel, Crane illustrates how the romanticism of war only serves to harm those people actually in war upon discovering the true nature of these ideologies. This concept is

expressed through Henry's reactions to the failing of his expectation of the natural world during war, of other soldiers, and of true courage.

The first area in which Henry is proven wrong in his beliefs is his fellow soldiers. Before experiencing real war, Henry believes the other soldiers must all be courageous, morally righteous heroes. During his time in the camp, he thinks to himself that "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. (70)" Henry is surprised when Jim tells him he himself would run from battle if everyone else did, having originally thought that "all of the untried men possessed a great and correct confidence" (73). He is even prone to sometimes being "inclined to believing [the other soldiers] all heroes" (75). However, he soon begins to believe quite the opposite; he starts to think the majority of the other soldiers to be fools who simply cannot understand his own intelligence. He especially despises figures of authority. He is surprised when he is physically punished for lagging behind by the lieutenant of his company and decides, "... he hated the lieutenant, who had no appreciation of fine minds. He was a mere brute. (85)" When Henry later stumbles upon a general of a different regiment, he feels a similar outrage at what he thinks to be poor decisions on the general's part, although Henry has very little knowledge of the situation compared to the general. Henry even goes so far as to feeling that "he would like to thrash the general, or at least approach him and tell him in plain words exactly what he thought him to be. (101)" Henry's reoccurring anger at figures of authority for making decisions that are logical to everyone but Henry is due to Henry's initial beliefs that all other soldiers,

especially those in higher positions, would always be the shining picture of heroism.

The next reality that surprises Henry is the natural world during wartime: specifically, the way in which nature tends to carry on with no regard for the loss of human life. Although the text does not explicitly state the original thoughts Henry has towards nature before war, Henry is shown to be thoroughly angered upon seeing how the natural world is unfazed by the deaths of his companions. His realization of this concept begins after his regiment forces the enemy to retreat and feels “ a flash of astonishment at the blue, pure sky and the sun gleamings on the trees and fields. It was surprising that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment. (96)” This strange reality only further manifests itself to Henry when he fearfully flees from a battle into the woods. His first experience with nature on his trip away from the war is a positive one: “ Off was the rumble of death. It seemed now that Nature had no ears. This landscape gave him assurance. A fair field holding life. It was the religion of peace. (103)” Henry’s positive outlook on the natural world does not last for long, though. He soon encounters a “ corpse dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green... Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip. (104)” The corpse, although still wearing traces of its former uniform, holds none of the glory that Henry so desperately seeks. Nature, as is shown by the ants crawling around on the corpse’s face, does not have any regard for who the human was when they were alive. This new concept greatly startles Henry, as opposed to the idea that the whole

universe revolved around human life that Henry likely subconsciously believed prior to this event.

The last false ideology Henry believes in before going to war is the true meaning of courage. Henry originally believes courage to be unrelenting braveness, even in situations in which it may be wise to retreat. Right before he even leaves for war, he is already finding his ideal picture of courage challenged when his mother has “ disappointed him by saying nothing whatever about returning with his shield or on it. (68)” However, his lack of drama does not stop Henry from constantly obsessing over the idea that to be courageous is to never flee once he does get to the war, show in the way he says to have “ saw visions of a thousand-tongued fear that would babble at his back and cause him to flee... (80)” This obsessed-over concept causes Henry great internal conflict when he does eventually follow his natural instinct to flee from battle and starts to believe fleeing was the better decision and all those who stayed put are fools: “ He shambled along with bowed head, his brain in a tumult of agony and despair. When he looked loweringly up, quivering at each sound, his eyes had the expression of those of a criminal who thinks his guilt little and his punishment great, and knows that he can find no words. (102)” Despite this growth, when Henry has a chance to prove himself courageous and care for a fellow soldier, he is shown to still be immature in his glorified morals. The ‘ tattered soldier’, a soldier of Henry’s military but not his specific regiment who was brutally wounded in battle, can obviously not survive without someone to assist him, but when he attaches himself to Henry, Henry instead abandons the man, even as the tattered soldier can still be heard “ bleating plaintively” and is

later seen “wandering about helplessly in the field.” (116) Henry’s skewed idea of courage causes him to experience unnecessary internal conflict and to make morally poor decisions.

All of these ideals originally believed to be reality by Henry have toxic long term effects on his behavior. Henry’s beliefs that all soldiers are noble heroes that the natural world is deeply affected by human life or death, and that courage is synonymous to blind, unfaltering bravery all have detrimental effects on him when he actually experiences the struggle of war. Henry does emerge as a truly, subtly courageous man by the end of the novel, but many of his internal and external struggles that take place throughout the novel could have been avoided if Henry had not romanticized the war prior to enlisting. Although glamorization of war can make it appeal to the masses, this painted picture of something so morbid in nature can only serve to harm those people actually experiencing the chaos.