

Crane's red badge of courage: the flag



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Stephen Crane, in "The Red Badge of Courage", makes numerous references to flags, references that are all fraught with meaning. Flags themselves hold a great deal of symbolic value. They began as a way to distinguish tribes in battle, but came to symbolize "the hopes and aspirations, the joys and sorrows, the romance and chivalry, of the human race" (Moss 1). During the American Civil War, when "The Red Badge of Courage" takes place, flags gained a great deal of import. "The Civil War generation accorded their flags more importance than subsequent scholars have allowed. They recognized the powerful ways that these emblems... elicited military courage in battle" (Moss). Crane's flags, however, do not simply communicate valor; they are representations of the regiment's, as well as an individual's, spirit and pride, and are implicit symbols of power and control. Furthermore, they signify an untouchable glory and a potent god.

The dominant feature of a flag is its color. Crane rarely assigns the flags in his text specific colors, often referring to them simply as "the colors" - a common phrase during the Civil War. Because they are so rare, the moments that he does describe the color of a flag are given more weight. Though neither the war, the battles, nor the armies are named in the novel, it is based loosely on the events of the Civil War Battle of Chancellorsville (May 2-6, 1863)". Knowing the date tells us which flags Crane was working with. Henry's flag, the Union flag, was not unlike the flag we use today. It had thirteen stripes (seven red and six white) and thirty-four stars, arranged in five horizontal rows (the first, second, fourth and fifth rows having seven stars each, and the third, middle row having six stars) (Moss 25). The

Confederate flag - or the enemy flag in the text - was a newer development. It had changed from the "Bonnie Blue Flag" (a single white star on a royal blue field) to the "stars and bars" only two months prior to the events described in the text. Because of its similarity to the Union flag, there was considerable confusion on the battlefield (wildrebel.com). In fact Henry, at times, cannot distinguish between the two flags. In these moments, the war seems confusing and vast, a chaotic din of purposeless fighting.

When a specific flag is described, the effect is particularly powerful. The first reference to any individual flag describes the stripes, not the color. As a regiment flees the scene of a battle, the billowing smoke was filled with horizontal flashes. Men running swiftly emerged from it (Crane 79). This evokes the image of a giant field of stripes, presumably red and white, from which men are escaping. Red, in this book, often signifies blood; here, it refers to the blood of the losing Union regiment. This is one of only two references to the stripes; there are none to the stars, or even to the blue field on which the stars rest. This is because Crane wants to emphasize the bloodiness that the flag represents. When Crane refers to the stripes later, he says that they are "red and white, hating and loving" (Crane 179). This introduces the idea that red and white are contrasts, rather than complements.

The flag represents more than just positive emotions - it symbolizes a range of emotions that begin with love and end with hate. One point at which Henry becomes uncertain about flags occurs during a second charge: "The youth could not tell from the battle flags flying like crimson foam in many directions which color of cloth was winning" (Crane 197). The Union and

Confederate flags are mingled, and are described as " crimson foam". The word " foam" brings to mind water, or even the sea - here, a sea of blood. The closest association with blood occurs when Wilson, Henry's friend, has captured the enemy flag from the rival color bearer:

He pulled at it and, wrenching it free, swung up its red brilliancy with a mad cry of exultation even as the color bearer, gasping, lurched over in a final throe and, stiffening convulsively, turned his dead face to the ground. There was much blood upon the grass blades. (Crane 205)

The red brilliance of the flag is recalled by the red blood staining the blades of grass. In his fit of ecstasy, Wilson is immune to the grotesqueness of the horrible death scene he has just witnessed. The first sentence of the passage is quite complex: there are four commas, and it details the seizing of the flag as well as the complicated and drawn-out death of the bearer. The second sentence, however, is weighted with simplicity - it is made up of entirely monosyllabic words, and there are no commas or other punctuation. The war is bloody, but the men are blinded by this glorious symbol.

The glory of the flag is reflected in the recurring combination of the flag and the sun. Crane bathes the flag in sunlight, creating a splendid, warm effect. Just before Henry deserts his regiment, he sees the flag in the battle: it " was sometimes eaten and lost in this mass of vapor, but more often it projected, sun-touched, resplendent" (Crane, 92). Later, once Henry has joined a group of soldiers and sits watching another group of men eager to go to battle, he becomes extremely envious: " He felt that he was regarding a procession of chosen beings. The separation was as great to him as if they had marched

with weapons of flame and banners of sunlight" (Crane 123). Crane uses the flag in the sun to represent glory: glory in the majestic sense, glory that is far-reaching and unattainable. To Henry, the flag appears sun-touched because he will not be a part of the battle - he will flee, turning his back on the golden honor that the flag represents. When he sees others marching toward that honor, he imagines their flag as pure sunlight. Just as the sun is brilliant, so is the flag, and just as the sun will burn one who reaches for it, so will this flag burn Henry, because he has given it up.

The Union flag symbolizes what Henry has relinquished, and Crane conjures another flag to give this idea emphasis. He uses flags to show the spirit of Henry, the spirit of the regiments. When Henry is walking dejectedly with the procession of injured men, the tattered man tries to find out precisely where his wound is. Henry becomes irritated because, of course, he has no wound. He says that his companions "were ever upraising the ghost of shame on the stick of their curiosity" (Crane 120). This image of a flag waving Henry's translucent shame upon it is powerful: his shame becomes a tangible entity. Also, it is important to note that this is the only flag that is mentioned during Henry's time with the injured troops. This is because the flag represents the fighting spirit, and in this group, there is none. The presence of the flag, and even its physical position, reveal how Henry and the troops feel. When Henry grapples with the idea of being called a "mule driver", he decides to ignore the insult: "He presently wrapped his heart in the cloak of his pride and kept the flag erect" (Crane 183). Because he decides to remain unnerved, the flag remains standing. Several times, the tilt of the flag is mentioned when referring to battle charges: "a flag, tilted forward, sped near the front"

(Crane 83); he again saw the tilted flag speeding forward" (Crane 91). The flag's posture parallels the spirit of the troops. On a frenzied charge, the flag leads them forward with its tilt; it acts as the men do. When the men have a renewed burst of energy, the flag, obedient to these appeals, bended its glittering form and swept toward them" (179). It seems to not only stand for what the men feel, but to listen to their feelings, and act accordingly. When the youth, as the color bearer, gives up hope during a fight, the flag seems to channel his emotions. He watches the massacre of his regiment, and he did not know that he breathed; that the flag hung silently over him, so absorbed was he" (Crane 198). The flag remains as idle as he does, listless because the spirit of the regiment has waned.

In another sense, the flag embodies the spirit of brotherhood. At one point, Henry loses his sense of self, and " became not a man but a member. He felt that something of which he was a part a regiment, an army, a cause, or a country was in crisis" (Crane 84). Civil War flag expert Eric Bonner says that " As blood was not just quickened in the veins by these banners but spilled for them in conflict, Civil War flags became totems of a collective cause" (67). This is seen later, when the men begin to fight selflessly in battle, with no regard for themselves, thinking only of the spirit of the army and the brothers they have found in the men alongside whom they fight.

To further drive home the point that the flag embodies the spirit of the men, Crane often personifies it. While watching the men run from a terrible battle, Henry takes note of their flag: " The battle flag in the distance jerked about madly. It seemed to be struggling to free itself from an agony." Once the entire regiment begins to flee, the flag suddenly sank down as if dying. Its

motion as it fell was a gesture of despair (Crane 79). While the flag often reflects what the men are feeling, at other times it seems to control what they feel - to dictate the level of their spirit. At one point, though the battle seems hopeless, Henry "walked stolidly into the midst of the mob, and with his flag in his hands took a stand as if he expected an attempt to push him to the ground. He unconsciously assumed the attitude of the color bearer" (Crane 184). Here, the flag seems to control Henry's actions, though he does not realize it; it forces him to become the color bearer.

Because the flag is seen through Henry's eyes, the Union flag is described as wholly good. When he looks upon the enemy flag, however, it is inimical. Crane personifies it using very negative and intense adjectives and verbs, because this is how Henry views his opponents. An enemy flag "tosses in the smoke angrily" (Crane 78); it is "ruffled and fierce" (Crane 203) when Henry's men attack some color guards who refuse to give way during a charge. The fact that the flags are described to the reader through Henry's eyes is made clear during a scene when he views a battle from a distance: "The detached battle between the four regiments lasted for some time." This battle is only "detached" because Henry is not a part of it. "The youth could see the two flags shaking with laughter amid the smoke remnants" (Crane 196). The flags are neither glorious or inimical - Henry is too far distant for them to make an impression on him, and so they simply laugh at one another.

The subjectivity of the flag is underscored when Henry feels a burst of love toward it during a seemingly hopeless charge:

Within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag which was near him. It was a creation of beauty and invulnerability. It was a goddess, radiant, that bended its form with an imperious gesture to him. It was a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes. Because no harm could come to it he endowed it with power. He kept it near, as if it could be a saver of lives, and an imploring cry went from his mind. (Crane 179)

This passage reveals several things about the flag. First, it is associated the feminine. This was not uncommon during the war: Bonner says that one effect of giving flags such a feminine gloss was to elevate the importance of protecting them from the 'pollution' of enemy degradation or dishonor" (81). The importance of protecting the flag from the opposition is revealed when Henry's brigade comes upon the aforementioned enemies, who stand their ground with their flag. For Henry, the flag's

possession would be high pride...the rival color bearer was fighting a last struggle...Over his face was the bleach of death, but set upon it was the dark and hard lines of desperate purpose. With this terrible grin of resolution, he hugged his precious flag to him and was stumbling and staggering in his design to go the way that led to safety for it. (Crane 204)

Even in death, the protection of the flag is imperative; its safekeeping is more important than life. While it may be true that some assigned feminine qualities to the flag in order to indicate its purity, that does not seem to be entirely true here. This femininity is powerful - it is invulnerable, and because of this Henry gives it even more power. He is not the protector of

this flag; to the contrary, it is his protector. To Henry, as to many of the men, this flag is a god.

If the flag is a god to the men, then the army is a religion. Crane supports this idea in the text: the tattered soldier with whom Henry walks for a while has a face that is described as “ suffused with a light of love for the army which was to him all things beautiful and powerful” (Crane 108). This feeling remains with him even after he has been shot and is starved and exhausted, in a great deal of pain. The army hardly comes to mind when something is described as “ all things beautiful and powerful”, but this is exactly what this man thinks of the army, and it is not by chance that he feels this way. Like organized religion, the army teaches its members this doctrine. At one point, when Henry feels that the army may be defeated, he stops himself from thinking in this manner: “ His education had been that success for that mighty blue machine was certain...He presently discarded all his speculations in the other direction” (Crane 128). Just as religious devotees believe themselves to be unfailingly right, so does Henry. This philosophy leaves no room for question; like the devotee believes that he will certainly go to heaven if he follows his religion, Henry believes that he will be led to victory if he follows the army. Every religion is the “ right” one to its followers, and every army is on the “ right” side according to its soldiers. When Henry's brigade charges, the men reach a state of sublimity at the time of ultimate sacrifice. They rush forward, seemingly eager to give their lives for the cause. “ It is a temporary but sublime absence of selfishness” (Crane 176). The idea of charging fills the men with hopes of glory - martyrdom for the sake of the flag is a tremendous and wonderful thing. It is

far more noble than lying in wait, because it involves actively making a sacrifice for God. The most sublime of the men, the most valorous and willing to take a risk, carries the flag in the forefront, protector of God.

The idea of the flag as a representation of God is not uncommon: " In predynastic Egypt flags flew in front of temples...and the ancient hieroglyphic that represented the gods was a flag" (Corcoran 7). Later, during wartime, the use of flags as representations of gods and God caught on...the feeling that God...was personally with them on hand seemed to comfort a man, particularly when he stood poised to do battle (Corcoran 7). Indeed, the men seem to feel most reverence toward the flag when they are in the most danger, such as when Henry refers to it as a goddess. At this point, Henry is heading a charge in which he is likely to die. The " intimate act of dying for a flag placed it in a new, quasi-religious category of symbols" (Bonner 67) during the Civil War. When his fellow privates have taken a beating after an initial charge, yet must advance again in order to survive (though moving forward may kill them as well), the youth kept the bright colors to the front. He was waving his free arm in furious circles... urging on those that did not need to be urged, for it seemed that the mob of blue men...were again grown suddenly wild with an enthusiasm of unselfishness (Crane 202).

Here, we see again the sublime act of sacrifice, led by the flag, for the flag.

The Flag is a many-faceted character: it is many things, and yet it is nothing at all. Crane enforces his ideas without actually stating them directly. The flag is a bloodthirsty, pitiless creature; it is a mirror and creator of spirit; it is

a live, feminine embodiment; it is an unattainable glittering goal; it is a god.

Crane does a superb job of making all of these things both possible and real.