

The dynamics of egotism and naturalism in the red badge of courage



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Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* follows the enlistment of the protagonist Henry and his struggle to mature from a youthful vanity that drives most of his actions through the novel to a final acceptance of the uncaring reality of war and society and the inevitability of death. Though the novel ends on an optimistic note that Henry has at last become a "heroic" man, I argue that Henry's change from naiveté and vanity to selflessness and maturity is not a simple and thorough shift, but subtle and largely an incomplete thought at best that leaves readers to question where to draw the line whereupon Henry's egotism ends and naturalism takes over. This "gray" area Henry is in between selfishness and a recognition of death's inevitability despite human intervention ultimately shows the two concepts more entangled than it appears at face-value. Henry's shift, then, is illustrated as a complicated process with no exact "endpoint" in which readers must extricate which "side" Henry falls on at the end of the novel. From the onset of the novel, readers can immediately note Henry's youthful naiveté and romantic conception of military life and war. Despite his mother's ominous words, "I know how you are... you are jest one little feller amongst a hull lot of others," (8) Henry takes a self-centered attitude into his military duties. Imagining a military lifestyle of the Greek heroes of ancient times, Henry considers himself worthy of attention and praise before his first battle even begins. "...There seemed to be much glory in [battle]" the narrator notes, "His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds" (7). At the beginning of the novel it appears as if to Henry, his tenure in the military is not a means to an end (victory in the Civil War), but an end in itself. Henry is not portrayed as mature enough to grasp the cold reality of what a career in war entails.

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Fearing actual duty and instead going out of his way to not appear cowardly to other soldiers, Henry is fully encompassed in his reputation and appearance to others: duty is not as important as the self-imagined glory and revelry that comes with simply being called a soldier. However, at a crucial point in the novel Henry comes face to face with a microcosmic image of the inescapable reality not simply of the military, but of life in general when he sees the corpse of a soldier in his regiment lying on the ground in the midst of a battle. This harsh image of the fleeting nature of life and negligence of nature works to undermine the theme of Henry's own delusional sense of importance that he has held thus far. Henry makes a connection to the cold indifference of nature to human beings as he notes after a battle, " It was surprising that nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment" (52). In this larger sense, the soldier's corpse, like nature's sun, was simply a feature in the landscape; no human intervention could stop him from this inevitable death, and it appeared as if Henry had recognized this. This brief moment of recognition illuminates the opposite of Henry's mindset in that his physical illusions and appearances of glory may not matter, as he too will experience the inevitable fate of the dead soldier, and the rest of the world will continue, completely undisturbed by the event. In spite of this moment of brief epiphany, though Henry does actively participate in more military duties and battles, he continues to lie to those around him and keep his sense of vanity rather than accepting this naturalistic reality. This sense of egotism is highlighted in Henry's statement that he is " doomed to greatness" and his unwillingness to accept that he can indeed be killed in battle. Even after military experience and exposure, Henry is still certain that fate, God or the

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universe will keep him alive and successful, in spite of the looming reality of the dead soldier from earlier in the novel. Henry is quite obviously becoming a veteran soldier, yet this sense of vanity cannot be shaken off. For example, in one of the final battle scenes Henry highlights this inability to let go of his egotistical flaw when he overhears an officer saying that his regiment will probably be lost in the upcoming battle. Henry then imagines that if this officer were to see his corpse it would serve as the ultimate form of revenge. The narrator adds, "It was his idea, vaguely formed, that his corpse would be for those eyes as great salt reproach" (172). This passage is clearly indicative of Henry's static mindset: he still foresees his death as significant, believing it would have a profound impact on this officer—not realizing that it would more than likely go largely unnoticed. By the conclusion of the novel, it is undoubtedly clear that Henry has established himself as a successful military veteran, risking his life and capturing the flag and prisoners of war from the enemy (something he feared and tried to avoid at beginning of novel). Finally, on the surface, it looks as though Henry had made the transformation from egotistical youth to selfless military veteran and courageous hero. "His mind was undergoing a subtle change... Gradually his brain emerged to more closely comprehend himself and circumstance" (183), the narrator states. Though Henry had indeed changed, this passage alone hints at the lingering effects of his narcissism, as his thoughts are still preoccupied with himself. Later, the narrator notes "for in [his memory] his public deeds were paraded in great shining prominence" (183). Again, this focus on his self shows that perhaps Henry's youthful egotism hasn't been completely erased. As the narrator states, his change was a "quiet... non-assertive manhood" rather than a ground-breaking (perhaps unrealistic) type

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of reaction. Henry is undoubtedly changed at the novel's conclusion, but the narrator's note suggests more of an optimism at the concept of change, rather than the concrete change itself that is present. Henry's process of change and maturity was not complete; however, what is significant for readers is that the change was possible. Though a sense of egotism and the elements of naturalism intertwine in the novel, Henry's complicated shift shows the "black-and-white" dynamics of the two are at work collaterally, and that perhaps a much larger "gray area" exists between the two than it appears on the surface. By the novel's conclusion, readers cannot define Henry's change one dimensionally, knowing only that he falls somewhere on the thin gray line.