

An infatuation with the flag



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Henry Fleming, after receiving his red badge of courage ~~is~~ a blow to the head ~~it~~ takes over the role of color-bearer during a vicious combat. As he sees his comrade sink to the ground in pain, he fights with his friend Wilson for the esteemed position of flag-bearer and finally wrenches the Union colors from the grasp of the dying man. With the flag in hand, Henry feels immediately empowered; the ubiquitous symbol of freedom and courage invests him with his own power and valiancy as he rushes headlong towards the enemy lines. Stephen Crane's continuous reference to color in *The Red Badge of Courage*, manifests itself outright in his few descriptions of the flag. The flag, symbolic by its very nature, invests the warriors with violent emotion as well as acting as an impetus for action, in the case of the young soldier. Crane emphasizes descriptions of the colors, the flag-bearers and the enemy's own flag to further increase the depth of feeling in the novel. Since a flag often invokes deep sentiments of nationalism, patriotism and faith, Crane's very descriptions of the flag tend to be wrought with feeling and augment a description of character. As Henry Fleming's character shifts throughout the course of the novel, the symbol of the flag also has a changing effect on him. As he becomes empowered rather than terrified by the battle, the flag too impresses him in an equally more powerful manner. Before he attends his first battle, he sees the " flags, the red in the stripes dominating." Crane further describes them as splashing " bits of warm color upon the dark lines of the troops." This convivial description further effects Henry's countenance as he feels " the old thrill at the sight of the emblems. They were like beautiful birds strangely undaunted in a storm" (29). The flag as a " beautiful bird" strikes Henry prior to his first true experience of battle gore; he has fought, but not at the height of aggression as we observe later

in the novel. After this description of the flag and his affinity towards its symbolism, Henry runs away from the troops. Immediately before he scampers towards the back of the line and away from his regiment, Crane describes the flag as “ sometimes eaten and lost in this mass of vapor, but more often, it projected, sun-touched, resplendent” (31). The flag, throughout, is described as something holy and divine; however, Henry sees this and then “ into the youth’s eyes there came a look that one can see in the orbs of a jaded horse. His neck was quivering with nervous weakness and the muscles of his arms felt numb and bloodless” (31). Henry’s sudden feeling of fear and hatred for the war cause him to lose himself “ in this mass of vapor.” The flag, though described with glory, is the first symbol that drives Henry to distraction. As he berates himself for escaping the regiment, Henry again thinks of the flag and feels even more fear of battle. By observing his feelings about the symbolic colors, Crane markedly presents his awakening fear and then descending empowerment throughout the novel’s chronology. In this instance, Henry thinks of the flag and wishes for death. “ If the army had gone gloriously on he would be lost. If the din meant that now his army’s flags were tilted forward he was a condemned wretch. He would be compelled to doom himself to isolation. If the men were advancing, their indifferent feet were trampling upon his chances for a successful life” (50). The idea of the flags being tilted towards battle frightens Henry to distraction due to his desert of his party. He knows that if the flags were demonstrating a continuation into battle, he would forever be marked as a deserter, a pathetic soldier of abandoned manhood. The symbol of the flag leading the troops to war, invokes a fear and awe in him which is contrasted with his return to the regiment, where he struggles to redeem

himself through bearing the flag. Running like a football player, Henry approaches the flag of the enemy and sees his own colors and, within him, “ was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag...it was a creation of beauty and invulnerability. It was a goddess, radiant, that bended its form with an imperious gesture to him.” Crane continues to write, “ 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” (80). Henry’s changed war philosophy is reflected in his feelings about the flag. As he becomes nearly omnipotent in his battle tactics, he holds the flag and adopts its “ endowed power.” The flag called him “ with the voice of his hopes” and he pursued those hopes by taking the flag in hand and bearing the colors forward towards the front of the lines. His shift in understanding of battle is aided by his love for the flag and the very autonomy he feels while holding her colors. Even as he angrily thinks of the comments of the General against his regiment, “ he wrapped his heart in the cloak of his pride and kept the flag erect” (82). The symbol keeps Henry fighting with the might of many men; the very femininity of the flag keeps his manhood intact and strong. He is now the flag’s protector and he must wreak vengeance on the enemy even as their “ fierce-hued flag flashed before his vision” (82). As Henry moves towards the realm of heroism, the flag is his shield, his pride and his charge. While he was feeling frightened and mistrustful of the pursuits of war, the flag was still resplendent yet it invoked an unknown fear within him. By following Crane’s descriptions of the flag, Henry’s shift in character is apparent. He becomes fully empowered by the war as he holds the colors and charges the enemy lines. The flag, besides presenting the obvious characteristics of courage and patriotism, acts as Henry’s personal

impetus for battle. While bearing the colors, he becomes a heroic leader ~~is~~ a man embodying the symbolic meaning of the flag. Moreover, the colors of the enemy produce such a hatred, that Henry insists on holding his own flag higher and using her colors as a sign of his battle-worthy self.