

“Magnificent Pathos of the Dead:” Crane and 19th Century U.S. War Culture

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Since its establishment as a sovereign nation in 1776, the United States of America has been almost perpetually at war, both across oceans and within its own borders. One’s decision to join the military is then considered the surest way to prove loyalty to one’s country, *sans pareil*, and this is due in large part to the propaganda which is placed into the American consciousness nearly from the moment of birth. From G.I. Joe and little green army men to gorgeous Hollywood actors playing soldiers returning home from war after their tours, there is no icon more sacred to Americans than a man in uniform. However, this chauvinism is not unique to the 20th and 21st centuries and I therefore intend to examine in this paper Stephen Crane’s desire within his 1895 novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, to elucidate the differences between empirical knowledge and propagandized illusion, specifically through the protagonist’s experiences surrounding the Civil War. Through his impressionistic prose, Crane deconstructs the “glorious burden” (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 2) of the Civil War veteran, including the tension that existed between generations and the place of white, middle-class men within the expanding bureaucratic machinery of America.

While those who fought in the Revolutionary War were considered true patriots who helped free the United States from English tyranny, the fetishization of the military really developed after the Civil War. John A. Casey, Jr. (2011) explains that veterans claimed they had “fought the last ‘real’ war in American history” and as a result, the nation and subsequent generations were indebted to them for their sacrifices. However, due to pension problems and increasing social tensions, Civil War veterans had “fears that their identity would be

'amalgamated' with that of the general population and [that they would] gradually become lost" (p. 2). This provides a reason behind the prevalence of military-style tents which were erected across the eastern half of the country after the war so the aging men could come together to share their stories with the public and compare battle scars. Veterans were worried that "the imminent transfer of power that loomed between generations" would mean they would vanish into historical obscurity, thus losing the "privileged social status" awarded to them by society (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 2). In writing *Red Badge*, Stephen Crane worked to excavate the battlefields of the Civil War in order to dethrone the veterans and reclaim male identity for his generation.

Crane understood that publishing in syndication would mean reaching an extensive readership and that it would also be his surest route to success and financial security. He submitted *Red Badge* to the most profitable syndicator at the time, S.S. McClure, but after waiting six months without so much as a word from the publisher, he "lost his patience and asked for the manuscript back." He then took his manuscript to McClure's rival, Irving Bacheller, who "promptly accepted the work for distribution by his syndicate (Johanningsmeier, 2008, p. 226). The novel employed "an already successful narrative strategy" surrounding war stories and Casey, Jr. (2011) notes that the syndicated version of *The Red Badge of Courage* was "in fact, close to the 'Battles and Leaders' tales Crane had once criticized for their prescribed focus on valor and heroism instead of the political causes of the war or the personal feelings of the soldiers themselves" (p. 14). It is possible, however, that the majority of the editing done to Crane's manuscript might have been out of his control, as newspapers would have preferred to publish stories more patriotic in nature which explains the most significant difference between

the 1894 syndication and the 1895 novel: the camaraderie felt between Fleming and Wilson. The two soldiers become friends in the syndicated story and “together they experience the exhilaration of battle ... they become men together, and the consequence is a narrative that is far more conventional and considerably less critical of Civil War veterans than the one that the author initially envisioned” (Casey Jr., 2011, p. 14). As his publishers had promised, the text was celebrated by journalists as a great war story that would stay with Crane his whole life through, a truthful prediction which he later resented.

He also did quickly rise in society to the position of prominent literary and public figure after *Red Badge* was syndicated. When he later decided to have the manuscript republished, this time in novel form, Donald Pizer explains that Crane apparently had three versions with which to craft the story he wanted: “portions of a discarded draft; an almost complete manuscript; and the 1895 Appleton edition” (as cited in Johanningsmeier, 2008, p. 227). The syndicated editions of *Red Badge* focused on Fleming’s actions and external environment rather than his “thoughts and emotions,” but even after significant changes, the novelized form was unable to instill in most readers the sense of Crane’s intended naturalist, critical gaze being applied to the narrative.

Charles Johanningsmeier (2008) asserts that the serialization of *Red Badge* thus provides “important insights into how the publishing industry at this time shaped literary texts; these were decidedly not the work of one individual, but were instead collaborative efforts, influenced and molded by many hands and forces” (p. 227). Consequently, even after Crane was able to make his desired changes, the Appleton printing, which is the first novel edition, was “understood as a fairly straightforward encomium to the Civil War veteran by a youth who

knew nothing of war [and] Crane's publishers encouraged this interpretation and used the author's status as something of a prodigy to market the book." Casey, Jr. (2011) explains that this is because "Crane was negotiating not simply with a book publisher or editor but with his cultural milieu." Due to the idolism surrounding Civil War veterans in the late 19th century, Crane would have been battling not only the "aging warriors" who were worried about the status of their "legacy" (p. 13), but men from his own generation and the younger boys who had been raised to believe in the superiority of those veterans.

This means that although some people did condemn the novel, most found it to be a pleasing and efficacious portrayal of the experience of the Civil War, and war in general. By borrowing a tactic employed by journalists during this time period, Crane wrote *Red Badge* in such a manner as to "criticize the cultural monopoly of the Civil War and its veterans without appearing unduly critical." This "double-voiced" language meant that Crane's intentions were, in effect, lost on the public, but that was by no means unpropitious (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 8). If Crane had been outright satiric in his telling of Fleming's experiences in war, it is possible readers would not have reacted kindly, even if the author was popular and widely printed. This might also be why Crane resisted any explicit mention of the political issues which had acted as catalysts for the war. After all, the Gilded Age had presented veterans and the younger generation with their own paradoxical problems: the manhood necessary to obtain "full citizenship" was no longer available since the last "real war" had already been fought and the veterans' manhood was being challenged by the threats against white middle-class privilege and dominance by "black men, immigrants (often considered ... alongside the working class), and white women" (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 2). If so much turmoil existed within these embattled

generations why, then, did Crane ostensibly neglect to mention social, political, or economic affairs within his novel?

Lindsay Reckson (2012) suggests that *Red Badge* is “itself an 1895 post-mortem of the American Civil War that it obliquely reproduces” (p. 55). She argues that political commentary does appear to seep through the narrative at certain points throughout the novel, particularly within the scene where Fleming’s fellow soldier, Jim Conklin, dies. In examining minstrelsy, the Tattered Soldier’s renaming Conklin “A reg’lar jim dandy” (Reckson, 2012, p. 63) appears to locate the novel “within the discursive and geographic parameters of southern slavery... [even though] mid-century blackface ‘dandy’ performances largely served to reinforce stereotypes of free black men in the urban North,” in addition to serving as Fleming’s foil and “intimate double” who must meet his end “so that Henry might learn, mimetically, how to die” (Reckson, 2012, p. 66). The former speaks directly to the loss of power white men feared was happening at this time and means “the dandy figure ‘literally embodied the amalgamationist threat of abolitionism, and allegorically represented the class threat of those who were advocating it” (Reckson, 2012, p. 60). In addition to immigrants and women, middle class white men were also consistently warned by the older generation that “the exclusively mental labor of their office environments would lead to a decline in the physical and even moral strength and prowess of manliness which rose in the 1890s” (Pizer, 2006, p. 195). Crane thus uses *Red Badge* to take a critical stance against these “warrior” fraternal groups which were becoming widespread in cities across the nation.

Even though he was from the north eastern coast of the United States, Crane was from a small town and therefore never experienced the crowded and industrialized atmosphere of

new American cities. His scathing descriptions of life away from the farm for Henry Fleming can then be viewed as a response to his experiences travelling the country, witnessing the expansive industrialization and chauvinism of America. Fleming's constant drifting into dream space represents his mind's inability to accept a world which is rapidly transforming and which appears to be heading towards ruination, for although "his education had been that success for that mighty blue machine was certain" (Crane, 2005, p. 71), winning a war did not mean the future was guaranteed to be anything he desired or that life would return to the way it was before he left home. A great deal of plants, mills, and factories had been transformed and retrofitted into arms manufacturing facilities in the South in order to make a valiant effort at mechanizing itself to rival the industrial powerhouse that was the North. This eleventh-hour decision to join the Industrial Revolution would prove to be insufficient in terms of matching the North's production rates, but the South certainly didn't fail for a lack of trying. In his biographical article about one of the most prominent arms-makers, historian Chris E. Fonvielle, Jr. (2007) reveals that approximately "seventy companies manufactured firearms [in the South]. North Carolina boasted at least ten known factories, not including the state-run arsenal at Fayetteville" (p. 305). Soldiers like Fleming would have been met with these newly-established and numerous manufacturing facilities as they marched across Virginia and North Carolina.

It is therefore possible that part of the mechanization of war imagery by Crane is intended to invoke the same feelings within the reader as his usage of "the iconography of Hell to characterize manifestations of modern industrialism" does in an article he wrote for *McClure's Magazine* in 1894 regarding a coal mine outside of Scranton, Pennsylvania entitled, "In the Depths of a Coal Mine" (Pizer, 2006, p. 194). In *Red Badge*, Fleming's regiment makes its

way through smoke and haze to their first encounter with Confederate forces. Bullets are described as whistling through the trees while shells screamed and shrieked like banshees over their heads, exploding the ground around them (Crane, 2005, p. 30-3). Repeatedly, the opposing force is referred to as a beast, a monster, and later, “the red animal... the blood-swollen god” who desired “bloated fill” (Crane, 2005, p. 72). Personifying the war in such a way is Crane’s attempt to achieve two things; first, the desire to share his emotions after experiencing the “worlds of pain, anguish, and despair which [he] didn’t know existed in America” (Pizer, 2007, p. 192) prior to visiting the coal mine and second, to use the deaths of the soldiers as a symbolic devouring of human life for the sake of the “logic of consumption and expenditure” (Reckson, 2012, p. 66). Conklin’s death is a prime representation of the ultimate sacrifice which could be made by an American male: he is bestowed a literal and figurative “red badge,” but at the expense of his life.

The final point to consider when scrutinizing the external factors of warfare represented in *Red Badge* is Private Henry Fleming himself. No explicit reason for his enlistment is provided within the novel. He acknowledges that he “dreamed of battles all his life—of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire,” and that, during his recurrent daydreams, “he had seen himself in many struggles,” but Fleming resists dwelling on what led him to actually join the army (Crane, 2005, p. 5). While it could be that he doesn’t want to admit that he is responsible for his situation, there is also the distinct possibility that he does not realize the primary reason behind his enlistment. Publishing mogul and former Union general Alexander McClurg was incensed by Fleming’s inability to understand why he enlisted and voiced his disapproval of *Red Badge* and its protagonist. He described Henry Fleming as “an

ignorant and stupid country lad, who, without a spark of patriotic feeling, or even of soldierly ambition, has enlisted in the army from no definite motive that the reader can discover, unless it be that other boys are doing so" (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 14). Whether or not Fleming's naiveté is intentional is uncertain, but it did provide Crane with the long-awaited reaction he most desired for his novel.

Crane also employs the young soldier's incognizance to take a jab at yellow journalism within his own time: "he had made firm rebellion against this yellow light thrown upon the color of his ambitions. The newspapers, the gossip of the village, his own picturings, had aroused him to an uncheckable degree. Almost every day the newspapers printed accounts of a decisive victory" (Crane, 2005, p. 6). In making Fleming so impressionable and subject to Homeric fantasizing printed in the papers, Crane is able to analyze "the transformative power of war on male identity" (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 7) which inevitably allowed his personal frustrations with his society to seep through the text. Fleming, in wishing to obtain the glory promised to him in newspapers, effectively permits his author textual space to air the animosity felt towards Civil War veterans. This "blending of voices" is Crane exploring "the conflicted relationship between himself and Henry Fleming," which allows him "to express his own frustrations through the words of his protagonist" (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 11). Before his first battle, the young soldier asseverates the non-existence of real warfare in his time because "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" (Crane, 2005, p. 5). This is not an internal thought of Fleming, at least not completely; it is rather an amalgamation of the author's narrative voice and the disconcerted youth. Both men had been told throughout their

lives that real war was a thing of the past and they would never achieve the sort of manhood which their previous generations had respectively. Crane therefore allows Fleming to protest on his behalf and to make the point that each generation believes their war to be the last real war.

In challenging these societal viewpoints, Crane firmly rooted himself in the naturalist and realist literary movements. As Pizer (2006) explains, “naturalism in its own day was often viewed as a threat to the established order because it boldly and vividly depicted the inadequacies of the industrial system which was the foundation of that order” (p. 201). This means that reading anything in Crane’s work, including *Red Badge*, as acquiescence to the status quo would mean disregarding the historical context surrounding the author and his time period. However, this knowledge has not prevented the over-simplification of the imagery, metaphor, and characterization implemented in Crane’s oeuvre.

The ending of *Red Badge*, especially, has been debated since its publication. The general consensus of most critics appears to be the belief that the imagery and color represent Crane’s failure in keeping with his original intentions, that he instead “surrender[ed] to the marketplace” to avoid an “unsuitable ending.” Readers should, however, avoid projecting their own feelings of optimism onto the pages, for while it is true that the “imagery separates a primal element into river and cloud and then encodes the two resulting parts with the blue and gray—just as the Union had been sundered” (Hattenhauer, 1992, p. 160), there is no subversion of the sun or implied happy ending for Fleming. In order to understand the supposed optimistic ending of *Red Badge*, one should turn to Crane’s (1894) article about the Scranton coal mine:

Of a sudden the fleeting walls became flecked with light. It increased to a downpour of sunbeams. The high sun was afloat in a splendor of spotless blue. The distant hills were arrayed

in purple and stood like monarchs. A glory of gold was upon the near-by earth. The cool fresh air was wine (p. 209).

While there is no implied rain in the article, Crane uses the term “downpour” to describe the sun’s rays. This scene describes his emergence from within the coal mine and it reads like a man taking a deep breath after being submerged beneath water for an extended period of time. The “glory of gold” is an apt description for the haloed effect that occurs when a person’s eyes must suddenly adjust to light after being accustomed to darkness. Now compare the vivid imagery and the tone in this paragraph with the ending of *Red Badge*:

He turned now with a lover’s thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace. Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds (Crane, 2005, p. 140).

The only optimism which can be drawn from these final lines for certain is the relief felt by both men at no longer being in darkness. Hattenhauer (1992) believes these lines to present “an optimistic surface that is undercut by the irony exhibited through the text” (p. 160), but when it is placed alongside Crane’s own experience with being over a thousand feet below ground in a mine, there doesn’t seem to be any optimism which irony need undercut. If the hellish world described by Crane to exist beneath states like Pennsylvania exists at all, his returning to the surface doesn’t make that hell disappear. In comparing the two endings, one is then able to understand that an anxiety of uncertainty is being expressed by the narrator in *Red Badge*. The war was over, but the machines and the world that war created still stood.

That world included the cultural milieu of patriotism and veteran worship which impeded the next generation's ascent into actualized maturity. Crane's disappointment with the reception of his novel, then, represents his perceived failure in "displac[ing] veterans from their position of social authority" (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 7), although the suggestion that he wished to claim the position for himself rather simplifies the social criticism at work within the text. Throughout the entire story it is true that Fleming does not grow as a character, but it is not because of boyish fatuousness; rather, Henry Fleming does not grow emotionally because America had not grown as a nation since the end of its civil war. This premise is realized in the novel's sequel, a short story published in 1896 titled, "The Veteran." While the aged Fleming is able to admit to his listeners that he was scared and ran from battle, he risks nothing by making this confession in his local grocery. This is because "his heroism was fixed" (Crane, 2005, p. 143) so far as society was concerned; he had fought in the last real war. In regaling his stories of battle, Fleming does nothing but bolster the belief that his grandson's generation will be unable to participate in that transformative rite. Ironically, as the barn burns and Fleming charges in to save the colts trapped inside, he is killed. His body will be reduced to ashes, much like the "god of ashes" he had so vehemently protested against as a young man. This is Crane's avowal of "the consequences of the older generation's stranglehold on the life of its 'colts.'" (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 16): if the one did not ease its grip on the other, both would ultimately perish. In reading "The Veteran," the generation which so monopolized and coveted manhood during the late 19th century is revealed to be fallible and mortal. The yearly marches of Civil War soldiers which took place during Crane's time were meant to commemorate the dead, but they also served as a means of embittering the youngsters towards the "withered old men" who held back their

chances of reaching adulthood (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 9). On one hand, the mortality of the veterans was “an instance of wishful thinking” (Casey Jr., 2011, p. 6) as the debts the one claimed to be owed by the other would eventually be irrelevant, but the ethos which came to dominate post-war America was still firmly rooted in culture and prescribed ideals of manhood. Crane, though he does criticize the veterans for their abuses of social position and power, cannot escape being a reflector “of the dominant belief of [his] time” (Pizer, 2006, p. 190). This is because he still believed, at the time of his novel’s publication, “that war made men” and “actual participation in the experience of war was the initiation needed to belong to the warrior’s fraternity” (Casey, Jr., 2011, p. 15). Crane would later rectify his own inadequacies and inability to enlist by becoming a war correspondent, thus perpetuating the belief that some sacrament must be paid in order to pass into adulthood.

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