

**Deglorification of War: A Critical Study of Stephen Crane's *The Red
Badge of Courage***

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Abstract

It is propounded to initiate in this paper through the study of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* deglorification of war as it has catastrophic consequences to humanity. The term "war" as used in this paper implies not only the actual military conflicts but also its effects on the psychological and social life of the characters directly or indirectly involved with wars. The critical analysis of the war-fiction of Crane establishes that their plots consist of exciting interactions between violent external forces and their protagonists between ruthless machines and men. This novel is extensively preoccupied with the portrayal of the collective and individual suffering, variegated emotional reactions and material and moral turmoil following the violent war encounters. The central structuring principle in this novel is to expose the absurdity in the life of the protagonist and to accentuate the destructive, irrational nature of life and the universe.

Keywords: War, Life, Violence, Absurdity, War-Fiction, Suffering

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Courage***

Stephen Crane, an American novelist, poet, journalist, and short-story writer, is honoured by contemporary critics as the most influential and innovative writer of his era. He gained international recognition for his Civil-War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which he wrote without any war experience. Even though he was born more than six years after the end of the American Civil War, his novel depicts war so vividly, and rendered the fears of men in battle so intensely, that many veterans who read the book are convinced that he is one of them. In a literary career of less than a decade, Crane created a creative output that helps to set the tone for American novel in the twentieth-century. The American Civil War had proved to be a source of inspiration to creative writers of generation preceding Crane. A perusal of Crane's works, which is based on the Civil War and his dissatisfaction with them, led him to the writing of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Crane's avowed intention behind writing this novel is to emphasize the element of feelings rather than cold facts.

The sub-title, *An Episode of the American Civil War of The Red Badge of Courage* is suggestive of a historical account of Civil War. Indeed, it is not so. The Civil War only provides an authentic framework for his fiction. In 1893, Crane visits Fredericksburg, Virginia, only to present a genuine structure to his novel and to make details to lend it verisimilitude. In outline, the novel apparently is based on the battle of Chancellorsville but that is all. By not creating history, and striking the basic chords of human existence, Crane is able to cross the boundaries of time and space, and today his novel is universally applicable

to all people and to all places at all times. The proposition of the novel seems to be the deglorification of the age-old institution of war.

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, there is absence of any such intention. He seems to have intentionally opted an episode from the civil war, in which no patriotism is involved and no glorification is possible. Neither is he concerned, whether his novel would serve the purpose of recruiting men or would serve the end of the pacifists. The right and wrong of the war is also not discussed. He only wants to depict the real picture of the war, palatable or unpalatable, as he imaginatively experienced it, and as he had recaptured it from the war-veterans, in his childhood.

To drive home his point, Crane limited his scope by not describing a whole war, not even a whole campaign. He only concentrated on describing the experiences of a young private in the war. Wars in earlier fiction were fought by officers, generals, having troops behind them. Troops existed only in the background. But, here, generals and officers themselves formed, only, a part of the scenery. Then he did away with the romantic note. There were no female character to be more specific, no urban people, no houses, and no farms. Only a few characters were named, the central character is mostly referred to as “the young man” the Union and the Confederate armies are distinguished only by ‘Blue’ and ‘Grey’ lines. In his novel, one looked for something else. The novelty lay in the story being narrated from a private’s point-of-view. The constant threat of the unknown, the inhibition of personality and self-doubts, which forms a part and parcel of the war-situation were all there. In the end, one came to know, how one would behave when one had to discard the illusions of war and would be required to face the reality.

The novel opens with an army stretched out, resting on the hills beside a river. The army has been camping for quite some time and then it seems to be tired of waiting. While

washing a shirt, “A certain tall soldier” (Jim Conklin) heard from a good friend about their moving soon. This news scattered the whole army into small arguing troops. A youthful private, Henry Fleming, after listening to the news and different remarks of his comrades, went inside his hut to engage himself in his thoughts that has lately swarmed him. So, finally Henry thinks, they all are going to fight. He cannot assure himself and is finding himself incompetent to participate in the fight. He has been dreaming of battles all his life which thrilled him. He has perceived himself in many struggles, but awake he thinks of those wars as things of bygone with his thought - images of heavy crowns and high castles. There is a portion of the world’s history which he has considered as the time of wars, but it, he thinks, has been long gone over the horizon and has vanished forever. Here, Crane in the first chapter made it evident that the traditional type of warfare having honour in its trail existed no more. Henry has long despaired of seeing a Greek-like war. And thought, it might not be Homeric, he still expects some glory in it, and he burnt several times to enlist. His mother, who understands the real-picture of the war, tries to dissuade him and gives him many reasons that his presence on the farm is more important than on the battle-field. But, he did not care for her words and got enlisted in a company that is forming in a town near his mother’s farm, “The Lord’s will be done, Henry, she had finally replied” (194).

Besides deglorifying war, there is a second element in the novel. Crane also wants to depict that one learned by one’s own experiences by making mistakes. This is Henry’s own private battle. His mother telling him about the futility of the war carried no weight. He has to come to his own conclusions by living the experiences himself. And so, Henry’s mother does not say anything further. Rather, she made preparations for him and told him as to how he has to remain good and away from the bad company. He has to do no shirking and to always do the right thing, even if, he has to lay down his life, and to have faith in God, who

alone would care of all. Her silent tears, on his departure, made him feel suddenly ashamed of his purposes. But, now, lying on his bed, one question is troubling his mind. It dawns on him that he knew nothing of war, and so unable to anticipate his behaviour in advance, it appeared to him that perhaps in a battle, he might run. But Jim Conklin's saying that no one could anticipate one's behaviour in advance and who knew, he might also run away, assured him, in a measure. It is here where; Henry met his friend, the tall soldier, Jim Conklin, who is fatally wounded. He witnesses his progress to death. One of the most poignant scenes ever drawn,

As the flap of the blue jacket fell away from the body, he (Henry) could see that the side looked as if it had been chewed by wolves.

The Youth turned, with sudden livid rage, towards the battlefield. He shook his fist. He seemed about to deliver a philippic.

'Hell' The red sun is pasted in the sky like a wafer.' (246)

Crane here wanted to say that war had nothing in it to be proud of and that it is an unintelligible, absurd affair where no one knew what would happen the next moment, as a result, no one could say, how he would behave under the fire, and secondly Crane wants, all to possess a positive attitude towards life and to face the world courageously in whatsoever trying situations. The absurdity of war is depicted all through by small incidents. As the army first started moving in the first chapter, Crane shows that one is concerned of himself alone and not bothered for others.

A few days passed in just moving from one place to another, facing the problems of sore feet and short rations, when one morning Henry found himself running. He felt carried along by a mob. Henry had been remembering the comforts of his home, the happiness that surrounded everywhere and now Crane made Henry feel as if, he himself, did not want to

come to the war, rather it is the government who dragged him and made him enlist. The first onslaught is fought back successfully. The wounded men are depicted realistically, so as to show the real picture of the war.

The men dropped here and there like bundles ...The babbling man is grazed by ... down his face. He clapped both hands to his head. ‘Oh” he said and ran. Another grunted suddenly, as if, he had been struck by a club in the stomach. ...Farther up the line a man, standing behind a tree, had his knee joint ... had dropped his rifle and gripped ... that he might withdraw his hold upon the tree. (220)

During the momentary lull, the youth saw under his feet. “A few ghastly forms motionless. They lay twisted in ... turned in incredible ways ...They looked to be dumped out upon the ground from the sky” (225). The badly wounded men were drearly walking towards the rear. Henry thought it to be all over. He thought himself to be a fine fellow, who stood the ordeal gallantly. He is happy and warmly is shaking hands with his fellow-men, that, of a sudden, the cries of the enemy approaching again ended the atmosphere. The shells which has stopped to irk the cadre for a time, came swirling again like strange war flowers bursting into fierce bloom.

Henry is stunned, and reeling under exhaustion, he started marvelling at the valour and persistence of the enemy. He and others had hardly any respite and now they had to plunge in the fire again. Henry thought the to be “machines of steel,” “redoubtable dragons,” “The red and green monster”. His inexperienced wonder terrorized him beyond measure. A man near Henry stopped suddenly and ran with howls. This, further scared Henry and he, too, throws down his gun, and fled. He ran blindly, hurting himself in the bargain, He reached a place where shells were screaming at him, blocking his onward route.

Henry is a bit relieved when he came within the view of a battery in action. There, he learned that his side is able to hold the enemy back. It appeared to him as if he is discovered in a crime. But he consoled himself that he is wiser and more enlightened than his fellow men in running away, as to save himself from the approaching annihilation. Nature also gave him signs that he is right, when he saw a squirrel taking to his legs on his throwing at him a pine cone. Soon, he reached a place from where he could see the battle lines. The wounded were returning and the field is littered with clothes and guns. He thought the battle to be an immense and terrible grinding machine which churned out dead.

A dead body lay with its face hidden in its arms. Four or five corpses lay together a bit further. The wounded men were coming in numbers, and were wailing, groaning and cursing. They had a shovelful of blood and were laughing hysterically. One is shot in the arm very badly. A tattered man stained all over with blood and dust, came near Henry and started talking to him, that how every soldier stood the fight bravely. The tattered man's plain asking of Henry, where he had been hit, made him panic and he turned abruptly and slid through the mass. His forehead is flushed and he is terribly nervous. In his heart of hearts, he started wishing for a wound, a red badge of courage. This part of the novel is beyond comparison. The dramatic scenes, Crane knew of the wounded were just superb. All these portraits had given the book its place in the literature of war.

After having wrenched the flag from the enemy and emerging victors, Henry pondered over his deeds, failures, and achievement. thought it is time for exultation, yet Henry's mind is in turmoil. He is reeling under the pressure of his guilt of running away and deserting the tattered soldier. He had a fear of getting detected somehow. This fear darkened his "deeds in purple and gold" (317). But the realization that being human, a man, meant taking both merits and demerits together, gave him strength to put the sin at a distance. His

old notions of imagining “people secure in the shadow of his eagle-eyed prowess” (192) all wore away. He finds that he can look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and perceive them really. Henry comes to know that while the mind expected decisive and simple answers, reality is very complex. And Crane has portrayed this complexity.

Henry has learnt to “put the sin at a distance,” and now he is not ashamed in saying the truth “I thought every man in the other army is aiming at me in particular, and only me” (325). There is no mention of the forest chapel or Jim Conklin’s death. He has become a veteran. Thus when he is informed of the fire in the barn, he behaved bravely, instantly, efficiently and courageously to save the horses, the cows, the mare, except himself. Instead of accepting the absurd, hard true fact of the destruction of the colts, which remained in the box stalls at the back of the barn, Henry again plunged into the fire and perished in the attempt. The courage that he earned at Chancellorsville is seen here, but Crane hinted at the utter uselessness of this courage. He ended this with an ironic note, “When the roof fell in a great funnel... The smoke is tinted rose-hue from the flames and perhaps the unutterable ... no power to daunt the colour of this soul” (328).

This is the modern attitude towards war in literature. With Henry first, it is the battle-mad fear, then it is battle-mad courage, now it is headless, dare-devil courage, which came of no use in the end. Henry had achieved courage, but his courage is of reckless type. It is this recklessness that is needed in dealing with war and war-like situations, and its nature is man’s mortality. This hard fact is seen in Jim Conklin’s death and now in Henry’s death. It is a befitting conclusion to the *Red Badge of Courage*; for it clearly established the point that Crane wants to emphasize of the absurdity and deglorification of war.

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