

## The Character Transformation of Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*

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### Abstract

*The Red Badge of Courage*, written by Stephen Crane, is one of the representative works of American naturalism. It describes and evaluates the American Civil War through the eyes of the protagonist, Henry Fleming. This thesis mainly focuses on the character transformation of the protagonist, and it also briefly analyzes the reasons for his transformation.

**Key words:** *The Red Badge of Courage*; Henry Fleming; Character transformation

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### INTRODUCTION

As a naturalistic novelist, Stephen Crane is well-known all over the world, and his masterpiece *The Red Badge of Courage* is one of the major literary achievements of the modern age. Henry Fleming, the hero of the novel, is an ordinary farm boy who is determined to become a brave soldier, and the story is a realistic description of Henry Fleming's voyage from a young coward to a brave man.

Stephen Crane finishes the novel in a quite unique way. It mainly focuses on the psychological development of a new soldier during the American Civil War. This kind of psychological development is also a presentation of

the character transformation of the protagonist. Henry's character transformation mainly consists of three stages

### 1. AN INNOCENT FARM BOY

As an unsophisticated countryside boy in the beginning, Henry does not know anything true about the war at all. His hasty action to enlist in the Union is stimulated not by an explicit purpose but by his romantic illusions about war which are learnt from the historical books.

Romantic illusions about war have always been occupying Henry's mind. On considering war, the word like Homeric or Greek-like rushes into his mind. He has always felt sorry for his not having a chance to witness a real Greek-like war with his own eyes. He has been dreaming of experiencing a true war and taking part in all kinds of amazing scenes such as advancing, surrendering and fighting. And he is eager to become a hero revered by everybody. Finally, Henry enrolls in the army regardless of his mother's opposition.

Henry's seminary is also a trigger for his eagerness to enlist in the military service. Almost all the other books about the American Civil War which are stored in Henry's seminary share the same theme of reconciliation. Scenes of war are usually decorated with romantic features, so a romantic story between a hero and a beauty can be seen everywhere. If a soldier fights bravely in the battlefield, he can win the heart of a pretty young woman. Due to the influence of the conventional patterns, he feels proud in the school. Driven by these illusions, he thinks he is such a charming boy that girls might admire him openly or secretly. Therefore, his childish vanity is greatly satisfied after his enlistment in the Union Army.

All these illusions about war before Henry's leaving home for the battlefield constitute the first stage of his transformation. Henry's romantic illusions foreshadow his subsequent immature behavior in the coming battles.

## 2. A NEW RECRUIT

As a new recruit, Henry has experienced many psychological transformations during this period of time. His romantic illusions are gradually shattered, and he begins to fear for the coming battles.

### 2.1 An Untried Solider

As an untried regiment, Henry's regiment has done nothing but days of waiting for the order to move, so for many days he has been thinking of himself as merely a part of "vast demonstration". Henry's romantic illusions about war begin to shatter.

Then the order that the regiment is going to the front line finally comes, which of course has greatly excited Henry, who has been dreaming of battles all the time. On the contrary, however, Henry is not so eager to go to the battlefield as he has expected, and he becomes anxious about what he will have to do in the coming battles, because he is just a new recruit, having no experience in the war at all and having no opinion about what a real war is like. From this moment on, Henry's mind is obsessed with uncontrollable fear toward the coming fights.

When the real war is coming, Henry senses more fear than excitement. And his mind is filled with the question, whether he will or will not run from a battle. He does not know, neither can he. "Gradually a little panic-fear grew in his mind... He jumps up and questions himself loudly, "Good Lord, what's the matter with me" (Crane, 2003, pp.9-10). The great dilemma that Henry is in at that moment is more a matter of knowing himself and judging himself than that of war.

Although Henry's mind is obsessed with the romantic illusions of going to the battles and becoming an admirable hero, once he is confronted with a real battle, he is so afraid that almost all his romantic illusions about war leave him. He begins to realize that war is not just a joke, but it is cruel and ruthless, and it is always associated with death. Nobody can predict whether he can survive the battle or not. He tries to explore what the other soldiers' opinions about war are, but all his effort brings no answer to him. Nobody is able to offer him help. Trapped in such a mental predicament, he begins to think that "He had never wished to join the war. He had not enlisted out of his free will. He had been dragged by the merciless government" (Crane, 2003, p.26). After a fierce mental struggle, he draws a conclusion that "it would be better to get killed directly and ends his trouble" (Crane, 2003, p.32). Henry's innermost fear hints that he may escape from the battle when his life is threatened by death.

### 2.2 A Shameful Deserter

Despite all these anxieties, Henry has to face the real fighting together with his fellow soldiers. With all these psychological burdens, he moves to the front line with his fellow soldiers in the regiment. In the first small-scale engagement, his side defeats the enemy and wins

the battle. However, when Henry and his comrades are cheering over their temporary victory, the enemy starts a second attack, which is much fiercer than the previous one. Henry is so frightened that he throws down his gun and flees in a flurry. At a time, he rejoices over his wisdom, but on hearing his regiment's success in defeating the enemy's attack, he has a guilty conscience at once.

In order to compensate his shameful behavior in the previous battle, he decides to return to his regiment and his comrades. On his way to his regiment, he has to join the wounded soldiers because he does not know where his own regiment is now. Those wounded soldiers make friends with him, supposing him to be wounded too. It seems that everything goes on well until a tattered man asks him about his regiment and his opinion about the battle. The unintentional question makes Henry embarrassed immediately because of his shameful escape from the battlefield. During the time when he stays with the wounded men, he feels very uncomfortable because he has not got any wounds at all. This can be proved by the following quoted passage. "At time he regards the wounded soldier in an envious way. He conceived those persons with torn bodies to be peculiarly happy. He wished that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage" (Crane, 2003, p.66). From time to time, he is tortured by the shame of being a deserter. Moreover, Henry meets his friend Jim Conklin in the army of the wounded. Jim Conklin is so badly wounded that he finally dies miserably in front of Henry. This fact intensifies Henry's self-accusation to a deeper degree. All these facts make Henry long for a fight to eliminate his psychological burdens. He is determined to return to his regiment and get rid of his shame caused by his escape from the battlefield by fighting bravely.

### 2.3 An Anxious Liar

Even when Henry has made up his mind to return to his regiment, he does not come to a peaceful mind. He thinks of himself as a deserter, a coward in others' eyes. He keeps on thinking the question, how will he face his comrades' sneer? It is certain that his comrades will look down upon him because of his cowardice and timidity. Driving by these anxieties and his unpredictable wound, he becomes a liar at this stage of his transformation.

At the previous stages, Henry has no opinion about what action he will take when he is in face of danger. He is clear that his evasion will make him a laughing stock in his fellow men's eyes and "he would be compelled to doom himself to isolation" (Crane, 2003, p.82). All these considerations make him feel anxious and regret for his cowardice and timidity.

The fear and the shame mentioned above are overcome gradually by the inner conflicts of Henry, and moreover, an incident helps him a lot. He is relieved from the torture by a retreating soldier. When he asks the retreating soldier how things are going on the battlefield, he gets a wound

on the head, because the retreating soldier who is in a panic mood caused by the cruelty of war, hits him on the head with his rifle. For a long time, Henry wishes to be among the wounded and the dead in order to demonstrate his contribution to the war, and finally he gets “the red badge of courage” accidentally. It is until this time that he realizes the cruelty of war and cherishes the peaceful and happy domestic life together with his mother on the countryside which has seemed extremely unbearable to him in the past. When he returns to his regiment, he tells lies that he gets separated from his regiment in the fight, so he has to fight with the soldiers of another regiment, and unfortunately, he is shot on the head. Without any doubts, his fellow men admire him for his courage and look upon him as a hero. This successful lie puts Henry’s anxiety to an end. He also becomes a liar at this stage of his transformation.

### 3. A TRUSTWORTHY SOLDIER

Henry’s experience of escape from the battlefield and return to his regiment causes him to become mature. Henry seems to become a trustworthy and brave soldier.

When he returns to his regiment, Henry receives warm treatment from Wilson. Wilson, who was once a proud and self-centered youth, has turned into a humble and considerate man after only one fight or two. The image of a proud Wilson in the past and the character of a humble person at present leave a deep impression on the youth. He has become mature to some degree. However, evaluated by these standards which are set up by most of the psychologists to access a true mature person, Henry is far from a qualified mature person. Although he regards himself as “a man of experience”, he is still an immature and unsophisticated soldier. There is still a long way for Henry to go in order to achieve his goal of maturity.

Then he faces another battle. Although the soldiers fight bravely, his regiment has always been frustrated in the previous battles, and the advancing battle might be a crueler one. To prove his bravery, Henry fights bravely in the coming battles. He fights out of his hatred toward the enemy whose constant attacks make him become angry and fight like a wild animal, developing teeth and claws to wage a life and death struggle with them. Henry fights like a war machine; he does not stop firing until his comrades remind him of the retreat of the enemy. This fight serves as a significant point of Henry’s progress to maturity.

It is known to the reader that flag is the symbol of a regiment, under whose direction the soldiers move forward. A flag in a battlefield represents beauty and invulnerability, and it gives strength to the soldiers to fight bravely. Therefore, the banner-bearer is a prominent and significant position in a fight, and it needs great courage

and a sense of responsibility to take this role, because it is important as well as dangerous. When the banner-bearer of his regiment gets shot and falls down to the ground, Henry moves forward without fear and takes over the flag to encourage his fellow men to fight courageously. Through these processes, Henry has developed into a man of honor and courage, and he reaches maturity in the end.

### CONCLUSION

Having the American Civil War as its setting, the novel portrays the two days’ battles of a young recruit. During these two days’ fights, the protagonist has experienced many psychological activities and inner conflicts, through which he has developed from an ordinary and innocent farm boy to an experienced soldier, and he achieves his maturity at the end of the novel. After reading the novel, the readers could be able to draw a vivid picture of war and its influence on a common soldier.

As a naturalistic novelist, Stephen Crane questions the accepted values of heroism, patriotism and the image of man by writing *The Red Badge of Courage*. After reading this novel, the reader can sense how indifferent and hostile the universe is to human beings, how painfully the inner force drives human beings, and how helpless and miserable human beings are because they can find no other choices. Henry, the protagonist of this novel, finally becomes a hero, but his way to heroism is not due to his free will, but the result of blind courage. Henry is different from traditional heroes whose images are always noble, brave and courageous. In conclusion, Henry’s development from an ordinary farm boy to a reverend hero is the product of human instinct and the influences of natural and social environment. He is a man with blood and fresh more than a glorious hero.

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