

The Death Consciousness in *The Red Badge of Courage*

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Abstract

The *Red Badge of Courage*, considered as the first modern war novel, uncharacteristically tells the experience of war from the point of view of the common soldier and also sets up the main character as a coward. And the large portions of the article about death also make the reader face the issue of war death. Through Freud's Eros and Thanatos, this paper analyzes the three stages of the protagonist Fleming's changing consciousness of death, and discusses whether he finally becomes a so-called "hero".

Keywords

Psychological Processes, Thanatos, Death consciousness.

1. Introduction

Before the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage*, most writers pay little attention to the brutality of the war and the deaths it brings. They emphasize the qualities and acts of bravery of the soldiers, as well as their fortitude and endurance, and viewed the Civil War sympathetically, so that there is little in the literary works to revolt against the war itself. Besides, thirty years after the end of the American Civil War, veterans publish a large number of war memoirs in a romanticized tone, and they glorify the war period as a time of unity, a time of reason, and a time of dedication to the cause. Thus, in the early twentieth century, participating in the war is deified by writers as a noble cause, a symbol of honor and justice. Until the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1895 changes the critical assessment of Civil War fiction. Ernest Hemingway praises the work as "the only true literature of our Civil War period" (Cleanth 1641). 30 years after the Civil War, a young man who has never seen war before captures the confusion and chaos of the battlefield, but also finds a completely original way to describe the experiences of an infantryman. It is said that much of Crane's work is derived from a popular anthology of the time: *The Battles of the Civil War and Their Commanders*, which demonstrates his superior literary ability.

What's more, *The Red Badge of Courage* has been called the first modern war novel not only because of its unique narrative angle, but also because the author, contrary to the traditional heroic image in war novels, sets the main character as a coward. At the beginning of the story, Henry Fleming is eager to show his heroism in a glorious battle, so he enlists in the army despite his mother's opposition. But the real war is completely different from what he imagines, and the harsh reality brings Fleming a big blow. The battlefield makes Fleming feel the threat of death for the first time, and eventually Fleming could not bear the anxiety and choose to become a deserter. After the war, Fleming heard the news of the victory of the Northern Army, and begins to regret, at this time, he is hit in the head by another deserter by chance, and uses it as a "medal" to return to his own regiment. After that, his contemporaries, who do not know the truth, think he is a brave warrior based on the scar on his head. With the guilty conscience, Fleming decides to go to the front line to kill the enemy so that he could clear his shame. In the midst of a chaotic war, he excels, taking the initiative to carry the fallen flag, leading his comrades into battle, and his superior officers praise him for his performance, for which he receives the real "Medal of Courage". Such a unique way of narration has of course aroused a

lot of attention, and critics both at home and abroad have analyzed it from different perspectives.

Firstly, some critics have explored Stephen Crane's work in depth through the publication of his biographies. In 1923, Thomas Beer publishes the first biography of Crane, which reinterprets Crane's writing style and artistic accomplishments. While R.W. Stallman makes the most comprehensive overview of Crane's life and creative work in *Stephen Crane: A Biography* (1968), which sparks a second revival of scholarly inquiry into Crane, and Stanley Wertheim and Donald Pitzer have also provide biographical sketches of scholarly commentary on Crane over the years on the occasion of the centennial of his birth.

Secondly, there is a great deal of thematic discussion of the book at home and abroad. It mainly focuses on psychological structure, naturalism, and the growth and return of the main character. Emory Elliott, in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), points out that Crane always puts his characters under the control of nature; Harold Beever suggests that the novel questions everything: heroism, combat, trauma, self-esteem, and determination; Zhang Fangfang suggests that Fleming's history of the hero's growth is also the history of the combination of human nature and bestiality from the point of view of Lacan's structuralist psychoanalysis; and Jiang Tianping from the literary ethical perspective exposes Henry's transformation from ordinary man to hero and in the process enhances his own sense of morality and ethics. Zhang Hezhen concludes that the characters in *The Red Badge of Courage* are typically naturalistic in nature, and that they are at the mercy of human instincts, heredity, and external environmental factors, which have been predetermined from the very beginning.

Finally, the novel's writing style is one of the directions that critics of all kinds are happy to explore. Scholars have enjoyed exploring the novel by analyzing impressionism, symbolism, and philosophical irony, or explaining the novel's narrative style. With regard to impressionism, Joseph Conrad called Stephen "the leading impressionist of our time" (Weatherford 228); and R. W. Stallman, in *Stephen Crane: An Omnibus* (1952), suggests that the novel is full of symbols and imagery, and concludes that Crane is a symbolist. Jiang Xiao, on the other hand, analyzes the various types of objective imagery in the text and suggests that the book is meant to express the savagery and cruelty of war as well as the insignificance and incompetence of human beings, while Liu Shang explores the psychological stages of the protagonist and argues that Crane is able to skillfully use spatial narratives.

Although all kinds of studies have emerged, relatively few studies have been conducted on Fleming's changing consciousness of death. This paper begins with the process of Henry's psychological change towards death, analyzes Henry's three stages from unconsciousness to escape to facing up to it, and analyzes the connection between Henry's consciousness of death and his choices through the author Crane's view of death.

2. New-born calves make little of tigers

Everyone must die. But death is still out of mind for most people when they lead their common lives. Fear management theory suggests that the unique self-consciousness of human beings is always subconsciously reminded of death, and that this reminder of death brings deep fear and anxiety to human beings, and the management of these emotions has a profound effect on the individual's cognition and emotional behaviors. (Greenberg et al. 189) In 1920s, Freud firstly puts up death instinct (also named Thanatos) in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. At the same time, there is another one called Eros, which consists of three kinds of instincts, namely, ego-perserving instinct grounded in reality principle, affection and sexual love between opposite sexes, and aim-inhibited love-brotherhood-among community members. Thanatos is a conception derived from self-perserving instinct, that is, it used to coincide with self-perserving Eros. However, this originally innocuous instinct will degenerate into the death

instinct once it indulges in the pleasures principle and, consequently, comes under the sway of the ego's old wish for omnipotence. Freud believes that all humans will die and perish and quotes Schopenhauer asserting that the goal of all life is death. In his eyes, unconsciousness is controlled by the instinct of death and people have an unconsciousness impulse to embrace death. In addition to this, he proposes that people usually express this death impulse outwardly as an attack on others and inwardly as self-mutilation or suicide, which are instincts in the unconscious state of people.

In the first part of the novel, affected by the social environment, Henry regards war as romantic, as long as join the war can be successful, and then he will be able to become everyone's hero. In his minds, although the current battle stories can not be as heroic as the Homeric era, but also radiant. Therefore, he vows to join the army in spite of his mother's discouragement, enjoying the false beauty of the pre-war period. "On the way to Washington his spirit had soared. The regiment was fed and caressed at stationed until the youth had believed that he must be a hero... As he basked in the smile of the girls and was patted and complimented by the old men." (Stephen 8) But actually he had no idea what real war is, when he witness the real battlefield, he find that "The only foes he had seen were some pickets along the river bank" (9) His routine basically consists of sitting or repeatedly conducting military training, so he begins to feel bored and starts to think about what he would do if a war did start: whether he would charge forward with no regrets, or run away without looking back. But in fact, at this time, his heart has already begun to prepare for the escape. "It had suddenly appeared to him that perhaps in a battle he might run" (9) This is Fleming's instinct to live, everyone has a fear of death, and no one can survive this fear no matter what disguise they wear, it is a basic fear that affects other fears as well. Mellow (1992) refers to the fear of death as a "deep-seated worm" that lurks behind the façade of people's happiness. Davidson (1987) argues that because the fear of death rarely shows its true colors, most people do not perceive it that way. But in fact, the fear of death is universal. At the same time, fear of death is not a psychological state that occurs only when a person is dying or declining, but rather it varies with the level of life and the development of the mind. Thus out of fear of death, Fleming sets out to find a way out, but it is clear that he is a coward, both to life and to death, and he hopes that he can find companions and draw strength from their words.

From the processes of Fleming's upbringing, it is understandable for him to experience such a psychological change. From a young age he lived under his mother's love and care, and although his family is not very wealthy, he could stay on the farm and live a peaceful life for the rest of his life if he has not joined the army. When he left home, his mother, knowing Fleming's character, warns him not to make bad friends, as well as, more importantly, that he would rather die on the battlefield than be a deserter. With all of this, readers actually get a more preliminary picture of Fleming as a sheltered character with little responsibility and a tendency to be impulsive, which appeals to the majority of people who want to see him grow up.

3. The hesitation in the face of death

Davidson (1987) argues that out of fear of death people rarely show its true colors. Beneath all appearances, the fear of death is universal, and what really frightens us is the unknown depths of death, which deepens its own fear through our constant fantasizing through the distance between tangible material reality and what we become after death.

Gradually, Fleming begins to realize the hypocrisy of the government as he ponders whether to live or die. "He had not enlist of his free will. He had been dragged by the merciless government. And now they were taking him out to be slaughtered" (24) This further strengthen Fleming's determination to escape. Meanwhile, Henry meets the first corpse, "the ranks opened covertly to avoid the corpse... the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the

Question” (25) Fleming hopes to resolve his indecision from this corpse but gets nowhere, so he is disillusioned with the war and his passion all but dissipate. He realizes that he actually doesn't like this place at all, he even tries to convince his teammates to run away with him, or maybe it is not a runaway for him now but a journey back to recognize his own self. Whether it is the fear of death or the realization that he doesn't have to give his life for such a government, Fleming begins to hide during the fights and doesn't fight head on. Moreover, the loud-talking soldier here wants Fleming to pass something on to his family for him, deepening Fleming's inner despair that there is no escape from death, and that everyone will eventually go to their graves, all of these further prompting his escape.

Crane also has an ulterior motive in the depiction of the regiment. Fleming's regiment is a military maneuvering unit, with incompetent officers who only know how to take out their tempers on their subordinates, belittling the soldiers by calling them “mules” and so on. The fact that these officers are not named suggests that the author is referring to a similar group of men, criticizing them as well as satirizing them. In such an army, Fleming's first battle actually goes well, and in that moment he is free of anxiety. “He felt that he was a fine fellow. He saw himself even with those ideals which he had considered as far beyond him. He smiled in deep gratification” (44) But it is not to last long. A second battle comes the next moment, and this time it is evidently not so lucky, they could not withstand the enemy's fire, so the sense of a near-death crisis lay deep in Fleming's mind. “He lost the direction of safety. Destruction threatened him from all points. Directly he began to speed toward the rear in great leaps” (47) At this moment, Fleming is completely beaten down by the fear within him, and he fled, running headlong into the depths of the jungle. He wants to recover from nature, “He convinced Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy” (53) At the same time, he has to comfort his heart and begins to make excuses for running away. At this point in his life, Fleming is selfish and the “red badge of courage” that he aspires to is completely falling away.

However, in addition to the fear that death can bring, it can also accelerate human growth. Life is extremely fragile and unexpectedly strong, the resilience of which depends on the subject's mental capacity.

Fleming finds in his escape that nature has not embraced his vulnerability, much less comforted his wounds, instead, here he sees a body that will never be forgotten, “The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish... Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants”(54) Apparently, nature doesn't accept him and instead brings him an even bigger shock. So he randomly joins a new rank. Seeing the injuries all over the squad, Fleming is filled with shame and begins to question his decision to run away, so he doesn't dare to face the wounded soldiers who are eagerly pursuing him. It happens that he runs into Jim here and finds that he is badly injured, Fleming is heartbroken and guilty. He wants to take good care of Jim, but who knows that Jim's days are numbered and mentally ill, he fantasizes about an artilleryman running him down along the road, and when Fleming isn't looking, he runs off into the bushes himself and commits a religious suicide, “There was something rite-like in these movements of a doomed soldier. And there was a resemblance in him to a devotee of a mad religion” (65) Needless to say, Jim's death impacts Fleming a lot. Fleming is full of sadness, but also begins to face his own inner cowardice, and he decides to change himself. He starts to envy those warriors who died for the country, cause their deaths are full of high respect, which is what he dreamed of “Medal of courage”, so he returns to his own troops more and more determined, he also wants to have his own “medal”. Along the way, he tries to make amends for his escape, believing himself to be a man of vision, but in fact still not free from the image of a man with no responsibility.

4. The courage to face all

The shock on Fleming from his comrade's death is so great that after leaving Jim, Fleming begins to think about when he would get "the Badge of Courage". Under such a great psychological pressure, he feels that he needs to go back to the army with a good story to tell to deal with the ridicule and sarcasm that his teammates might give him. In the meantime, Fleming is not so much afraid of death as he is determined to be that kind of hero after witnessing the deaths of his several teammates, but does he actually become a selfless, heroic warrior against the enemy? Apparently not. The terror of the death plus the tension between the self-preserving and the impetus toward moral behaviors tortures Henry. He is ready to rebel.

It is necessary to mention Reaction Formation, one of Freud's original defense mechanisms. Reaction Formation occurs when a person feels an urge to do or say something and then actually does or says something opposite. Freud called the exaggerated compensation that can appear in Reaction Formation "over-beating" as the person is going overboard in one direction to distract from and cover up something unwanted in the other direction to distract from and cover up something unwanted in the other direction, such as a person who fears war becoming a pacifist. The Reaction Formation can be showed effectively by the animal images to express the wild courage and rage of the soldiers.

In fact, even now, Fleming still doesn't realize what the consequences of a real sword on the battlefield would be, it's just that on an existing level, he is more worried about the moral mockery of society than the fear of death. Unable to return to the army, it is equally unlikely that he will return home to relive his earlier days, so he cannot escape and has to devise so-called tales of brave to return to the battlefield. Fortunately, he does manage to get "wounded" - hit in the head with a rifle by a panicked deserter, and this "medal" allows him to be treated as a warrior when he returns to the rank, and he is well cared for and admired by his comrades, which he accepted naturally, but in his minds, he also develops a great deal of self-confidence. Furthermore, when he is addressed by his officers as a "mule drivers", this shame and anger combined to produce the highest degree of heroism. So when he faces the enemy again, he fires like a "mad horse", without regard for life or death. In the novel, Henry is rarely referred to by his first name, but mostly as "lad" or "young man". This shows that Henry represents not only his own personal, but also many ordinary American "young men" like him, who all join the army on impulse under the culture of the society, but when it comes to the battlefield, the sword is blind and they will be killed at any time, and they will make different choices in front of the death, just like Fleming.

The process of surpassing death is also that of surpassing himself. In Montaigne's eyes, people always think a lot of themselves. Exactly, humans believes that the world will be different more or less if they die. So when Henry later finds his own insignificance and learns to get rid of other's prejudice. He realizes that self-awareness is the source of all the worries, troubles and fears. He is becoming objective and sober. He is getting himself free gradually.

5. Conclusion

Death is not fear, not glory, courage or anything else. Death is death itself. It is a natural thing. What people fear is fear itself. Understanding it is the only way can people choose. Stephen Crane, who lived during the American Civil War, has many fears about life, and *The Red Badge of Courage* is able to fully reflect his pessimistic thoughts and the collapse of the spiritual world of the people of this era. John Berryman, Stephen Crane's biographer, is "convinced that Crane's motivation for writing was to use an anticlimactic technique to depict 'fear'" (Alfred 8). What's more, Crane regards war as a symbol of life. *The Red Badge of Courage* is not only about war, but what Crane observed modern society: with the bitter struggle for existence on the one hand

and for wealth and prestige on the other hand. Crane finds the social experience is a kind of war and frustration and failure a death. The Red Badge of Courage is an excellent study of the unregenerate mind as it perceives war not just against flesh and blood, but against all things noble and holy.

Whether it is the smoke-filled battlefield or man's own unmanageable physical and psychological weaknesses, the realities of Henry's existence drive him nearly "mad with fear". The two most common words used by Crane in the book are "experiment" and "episode", depicts the feelings of ordinary people, but not a specific person. Henry in this story has no personality, history, or definite occupation. He is, as Conrad claims, "a representative of all who have not yet been tried" (Magill 105), and the events that occur to him are merely an episode in the Civil War, which could happen at any time, anywhere, and to any ordinary person who is at the mercy of circumstance during the Civil War. Fleming himself is extremely fearful of death, but in the end he sees through the futility of nature and transforms his fear into the strength to move forward, realizing a further elevation of himself and forming a more complete personality.

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