

Study on Naturalism in *The Red Badge of Courage*

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Abstract—Stephen Crane is the forerunner of American naturalism. In the novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, he established his fame in the American literary world by successfully expressing the statement of naturalism. This paper tries to analyze *The Red Badge of Courage* from the Naturalistic perspective about the theme, the visual, the auditory, language features, and environmental effect to human being and war's domination to the individual's fate and to show the style and character of the works of American naturalism.

Keywords—Stephen Crane; *The Red Badge of Courage*; naturalism

I. INTRODUCTION

New ideas about man and man's place in the universe began to take root in America after the war. Living in a cold, indifferent, and essentially godless world, man was no longer free in any sense of the world. He was completely thrown upon himself for survival. The world in which God was still good and warm and caring enough to redress the wrong of Hawthorne's condemned wizard was gone not to return, and the comfortable belief that man could hope to fall back on divine help and guidance was exploded and irretrievably lost. Life became a struggle for survival. The Darwinian concepts like "the survival of the fittest" and "the human beast" became popular catchwords and standards of moral reference in an amoral world. Darwin's ideas of evolution and especially those of Herbert Spencer and his vogue in America helped to change the outlook of many rising authors and intellectuals, and produced an attitude of gloom and despair which characterize American literature of this period.

The Red Badge of Courage, Crane's masterpiece, was published before he turned twenty-four. The basic theme of the animal man in a cold, manipulating world runs through the whole book. Here Crane is looking into man's primitive emotions and trying to tell the elemental truth about human life. War in *The Red Badge of Courage* is a plain slaughterhouse. There is nothing like valor or heroism on the battlefield, and if there is anything, it is the fear of death, cowardice, the natural instinct of man to run from danger. The corpses of the dead are seen without its traditional sheen of glory but quite literally rotting where they are left. By this de-romanticizing war and heroism, Crane initiated the modern tradition of telling the truth at all costs about the elemental human situation, and writing about war as a real human experience.

II. NATURALISM IN *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*

A. *The Description of Natural Environment in The Red Badge of Courage*

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane puts protagonist Henry and his military camp in the miserable natural environment, thus shows that human being are caught in nature and his helplessness. Initially, Henry's realization to war was innocent, he longed for war and getting honor. However, his innocence was quickly devoured by indifferent environment and reality. Nature was just as a maze, the scale of their troops was large, but it was smaller than primitive forest. When they met attack from the enemy, Henry was so frightened that he threw away his weapon. At last, he ran into a wood and saw, "The sun was suddenly apparent and blazed among the trees. The insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be grinding their teeth in unison. A woodpecker stuck his imprudent head around the side of a tree. A bird flew on lighthearted wing. (Crane, 1997: 44)"

Indeed, in the front of omnipotent and forcible nature, human being is so small. They try their best to struggle and want to escape from the nature maze, but they always come back. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane shows nature's indifference by means of describing nature's determination, thus contrasts human's difficult situation in the universe, which is consistent theme in naturalism literature.

Crane not only describes nature's indifference but also put protagonist in the special society setting. Under the domination of nature, human's will and quality show their weakness and individual's fate is mostly determined by unexpected chance. The chance easily results in individual's destruction, and also randomly facilitates individual's success.

However, Henry, as an army deserter, Henry became a fortunate person, a series of occasion and good luck facilitated his success. In an occasional incident, Henry's head was hit by wounded soldier, however, his scar was falsely considered as an honor, which won praise for him. The final results of loyal, kind, and dutiful Jim and the tatter soldier were miserable, while timid, passive and hesitated Henry consistently got advantage. Obviously, traditional morality doesn't work in the novel, good person doesn't get return. All the final results are controlled by chance. No matter he is good soldier or army deserter, his existence is occasional. Crane was uncertain about war; it could randomly manipulate tiny people.

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane denies war's brilliance. War is regarded as a special environment, human being has no choice in the front of it, and they only passively receive fate's arrangement. Literary color of fatalism and pessimism is exactly naturalism's main feature.

B. The Naturalistic Theme in *The Red Badge of Courage*

The novel puts protagonist's psychological background in the war to clearly express naturalism about coexisting state of conflict between human being and environment. At the beginning of novel, Henry was an honest adult who was eager to get honor in the battlefield. He had no conception on the war so that he thought that there was no way to be a true man except for test of blood and fire in the war. Henry's yearning for the war was his initial psychological state, which foreshadowed Henry's behavior in the battlefield. However, when he heard the news that the armed forces would go to the front, he was not excited, and on the contrary, he fell into an unexpected fear and panic. Henry faintly felt that he perhaps escaped, so he tried his best to control his fear and timidity. At the beginning of war, Henry's illusion of galloping across the battlefield disappeared quickly, the fear caught his heart, and his premonition eventually became true. Regardless of everything, he threw away weapon and ran into the forest in hope of getting temporary comfort and peace from nature. For example:

"He threw a pine core at a jovial squirrel, and it ran with chattering fear. It stopped in a treetop it stopped, and poked its head cautiously from behind a branch, and looked down with an air of trepidation. The youth felt triumphant at this exhibition. There was the law, he said. Nature had given it a sign. The squirrel, immediately upon recognizing danger, had taken to its legs without ado. It did not stand stolidly baring its furry belly to the missile, and die with an upward glance at the sympathetic heavens. On the contrary, it had fled as fast as its legs could carry it. (Crane, 1997: 97)"

Henry thought that squirrel had same mentality with him and they both escaped to make a living so he thought his behavior should not be blamed. When he came to "small church" where he should have got peace, a dead body made him struck dumb so that he crazily ran out of forest. The illusion of getting comfort was completely broken, nature gave Henry the invisibly forcible strength and miserable fate. Later, he met a crowd of wounded soldiers, the consultation of a soldier in shabby dress made him have no place to hide himself. The balance of mentality began to change. In the team of wounded soldiers, Henry began to feel uncomfortable, he even longed for being wounded. The death of his good friend made Henry feel ashamed, he decided to go back to the army force to wash his stigma. An occasional chance made Henry get a "red badge". Facing comrade's praise, Henry's vanity got satisfied, however, his inner heart couldn't be quiet. The sense of justice and conscience tortured him, he decided to overcome fear. In the following battle, regardless of danger, Henry, liking a crazy horse, continued strafing.

All in all, in *The Red Badge of Courage*, the author shows the conflict between natural environment and human

being and deeply studies problem on existing state and future state. Finally, the author got conclusion that in nature, it is difficult for human being to get rid of environment's invisible influence and to escape miserable fate.

C. Stephen Crane's Creative Techniques

1) The naturalistic language in *The Red Badge of Courage*

Language in *The Red Badge of Courage* is concise, clear and common. The obvious feature in the novel is the use of image. The color is widely used in *The Red Badge of Courage*, especially red color. "Red color" in English symbolizes restlessness, enthusiasm and danger; it makes people associate with blood, war, death and war's misery. "Red color" makes people realize war's misery and the war only brings human being blood and death. Besides, it is worthwhile to notice Crane's irony in language. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Henry joined the wounded soldiers, he longed for getting honor. By an occasional chance, Henry had got his wish. The origin of "Red Badge" has ironic meaning. In the eyes of people, "Red Badge" is an honor; however, it is a profound irony and stigma for Henry. It represents Henry's past timidity and helplessness. The use of Crane's irony makes people understand life and realize their truthful value in the environment. Also, the naturalistic works asks authors to abandon flowery language and the use of exaggerative terms. It focuses on objectively reflecting the fact by simple and plain language, which can be proved by Crane's description about Henry's mother; she addressed him as follows,

"You watch out, Henry, and take good care of yourself in this fighting business — you watch out, and take good care of yourself. Don't believe you can lick the hull rebel army at the start, because you can't. You just one little feller amongst a hull lot of others, and you've got to keep quiet and do what they tell you. (Crane, 1997: 32)"

2) The naturalistic visual perspective in *The Red Badge of Courage*

There are many descriptions of color in *The Red Badge of Courage*. According to statistics, the rate of the use of words about color in *The Red Badge of Courage* is up to six hundred times. Crane is influenced by American impressionists, and the obvious feature in his work is the use of a number of color words. For example, the first paragraph in *The Red Badge of Courage* stated:

"The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed that an army stretched out on the hills and had a rest. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened, and began to tremble with eagerness at the noise of rumors. It cast its eyes upon the roads which were growing from long troughs to proper thoroughfares. A river, amber-tinted in the shadow of its banks, purled at the army's feet; and at night, when the stream had become a sorrowful blackness, one could see the red, eyelike gleam of enemy's camp-fires set in the low brows of distant hills. (Crane, 1997: 3)"

In the short passage, Crane uses four color words; the rate of use of his color words can be confirmed. At the same time, the use of color words symbolizes war's cruelty and people's hard life. Besides, in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane referred to, "The fight was lost. The dragons were coming with invincible strides. The army was helpless in the matted thickets, and was going to be swallowed. War, the red beast, war, the blood — swollen god, would have been bloated. (Crane, 1997: 91)"

War is described as "red giant dragon", "red beast", and "red devil". A series of red color makes readers develop imagination on cruelty, violence and fight, which is naturalists' true description on human nature and living environment. The use of yellow sets a serious and melancholy tone in *The Red Badge of Courage* and foreshadows Henry's timidity. At the same time, it was stated in *The Red Badge of Courage* "The line swallowed by the blue smoke curled and writhed like a snake stepped upon. It swung its head and ends to and fro in an agony of fear and rage, (Crane, 1997: 123)" which conveys a worried and deserted feeling, and also symbolizes human's uncontrolled mind. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, it can be concluded that failure was the only result in the course of fight between human being and nature.

III. THE NATURALISTIC AUDITORY PERSPECTIVE IN *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*

The Red Badge of Courage is a war novel. If it is only described from the visual perspective, it will be a "dumb show". Furthermore, the number of conversations and description of sound consistently shocks our hearing. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, miserable war and quiet nature coexist simultaneously. As Crane stated:

"After a time, the sound of musketry grew faint and the boomed cannon disappeared in the distance. The sun was suddenly apparent and blazed among the trees. The insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be grinding their teeth in unison. A woodpecker stuck his imprudent head around the side of a tree. A bird flew on lighthearted wing. (Crane, 1997: 59)"

In the mentioned-above passage, one side is miserable battle and the other side is tranquil nature. The author puts human being in the miserable environment to check how they struggle with nature. Nature makes a joke of Henry so that he has no way to get compromise from nature.

Because of fear, Henry began escaping, in the course of escaping, nature fought with Henry by various sounds. Crane describes human's helplessness in the conflict between special environment and human's inner world. Under the control of nature, human being sinks into fear and despair. When describes sound, the author uses specific and vivid scene to stimulate reader's imagination of hearing besides sounds in nature. As the author stated in *The Red Badge of Courage*, "But at last, the guns stopped, and rumors, like birds, flew again among the men in the rifle pits, but the birds were now for the most part black creatures that flapped their wings drearily near to the ground and refused to rise on any wings of hope. (Crane, 1997: 115)"

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane makes his readers shift their feelings and develop their imagination to form a volumetric scene by means of transferring visible sound into vivid and direct scene.

IV. CONCLUSION

As a masterpiece, *The Red Badge of Courage* successfully describes the war. For this sake, Crane simultaneously uses visual and auditory perspectives to produce his work. So it is not difficult to find that *The Red Badge of Courage* is a work that is full of sound and color. According to some statistics, the rate of the use of color words is up to six hundred times in *The Red Badge of Courage* and besides a number of conversations; the description to sound is up to one hundred times. The appearance of sound constantly shocks reader's hearing. Besides, Crane's use of language also expresses his naturalistic style. The language in *The Red Badge of Courage* is concise and clear, lively rhythm and plain and easy to understand. The prominent feature in the work is the use of image and the description to vivid scene. Also, it is worthwhile to notice the Crane's ironic style. Crane's use of irony makes people understand the life in the irony and realize their dreams. Likewise, the second impressive point in *The Red Badge of Courage* is that Crane puts Henry and his military camp in the cruel natural environment, thus stresses the effect of natural environment to human being. The third important point is that war's romantic color is deprived in the novel. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, war is a machine that can produce death. Under the control of machine, individual's free will gives way to irrational and instinctive reaction. The individual's fate is determined by the uncertain chance.

As a naturalistic writer, Crane creates a lot of famous works. His works indicates the trend of naturalistic writings in the 20th century in America. Especially in his representative work *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane's descriptions to the visual and auditory perspectives are vivid. Moreover, language in his novel is plain, clever and concise. Besides, his views on environment and war in *The Red Badge of Courage* are far-reaching in American literature.

All in all, Crane successfully expresses naturalistic statement in *The Red Badge of Courage*. His bold innovation brings American literature a revolution. In Crane's novel, the characters are helpless in front of nature and have no way to get rid of invisible influence of nature. His naturalistic style has far-reaching and historic significance in American literature.

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