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THE POWER OF SOCIETY IN *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

King Saud University

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submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTERS OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

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This thesis has been approved  
for the Department of ENGLISH  
and the College of Graduate Studies by

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## DEDICATION

To my family.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Adam Sonstegard, who worked with me step by step, until this thesis was completed. I will never forget his advice, patience, and exquisite help that brought this thesis to its final draft. Dr. John Gerlach introduced me to American literature and because of the vast knowledge he shared with me, I have selected this novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, to be the focus of my thesis. Dr. Frederic J. Karem helped me to take my philosophical ideas to their highest level. I will not forget Jane Dugan who assisted me in completing this thesis in a timely manner. A special thanks to my family and friends for constant help and patience. And above all, thanks to God, who makes things happen.

# THE POWER OF SOCIETY IN *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*

HMOUD ALOTAIBI

## ABSTRACT

Stephen Crane's work *The Red Badge of Courage* has often been cited by literary critics as an example of the author's philosophy. The main debate around this philosophy often surrounds the question of Crane's naturalism. Critics not only argue over the individual beliefs that make up Crane's supposedly naturalistic philosophy, but many also argue simply over whether or not he is a naturalist. In this thesis, we step away from the back-and-forth argument that deals only with Crane's fitment into the general label of "naturalist." Rather, we look at aspects that connect Crane to traditional understandings of naturalism – such as a human's helplessness in the face of his environment. We show how Crane offers a unique worldview that identifies the two main forces that determine human destinies – the forces of nature and the forces of human collectives. Ultimately, we show that Crane's pessimism and his lack of faith in human agency was a result of a scientific understanding of the universe. Crane suggests a scientific determinism in the universe and in all human actions. This determinism could override even the political and nationalist movements and ideologies that are traditionally attributed to war and great changes in society. We also resolve a sticking point of Crane scholarship – where the naturalism arguments encounter a seeming contradiction as Crane shows the immense power of collectives to determine individual human lives. This phenomenon comes about through the destructive social forces created by "mobs" of people, acquiring great power by embracing ideologies and other values with no compromise. Finally, we extend this analysis to make some conclusions on the implications of humanity's collective power.

Most importantly, we show the dangerous nature of mobs in their difficulty to be controlled and the irrationality and even destructiveness of their force.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.   THE POWER OF NATURE.....	14
III.  THE POWER OF SOCIETY AND IDIOLOGY.....	26
IV.  THE POWER OF THE MOB.....	38
V.   CONCLUSION.....	52
WORKS CITED.....	55



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In 1895, Stephen Crane published *The Red Badge of Courage* and the novel was instantly a success. Since its first publication, critics have continually tried to classify the novel and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they have accepted that Crane's work reflected a naturalistic philosophy in that he shows how helpless man is to control his destiny. Literary Naturalists believed that humans were like animals in that they are guided only by their relationship with nature or their environment. In the naturalistic tradition, Crane clearly shows that men are influenced by forces beyond their control and destinies are not self-determined. However, Crane uses his novel to scientifically examine the different forces that guide a human being to his destiny. As a part of his investigation, Crane questions the authority or truth of existing institutions that he shows have a powerful influence on modern man and he ultimately interrogates the force of human beings acting collectively, showing these groups of men to be even more detrimental to human agency than any other environmental forces identified by other naturalists.

Crane adapted the American Naturalist philosophy to his own place in history. Naturalism originated in France with authors such as Emile Zola in the mid to late

19<sup>th</sup> century who wished to view the “human character in a pragmatic light, and social environment as it actually existed” (Geismar 197). Stephen Crane has been considered one of the first of the school of naturalists in America, occupying the years around 1900. These authors wrote in a period which was marked by an expansion in “the freedom to discuss human character and human relationship in terms of those primary needs and drives which actually do determine our success or failure in life...” (Geismar 197). Naturalism, even the American variety, evades specific definition, but one helpful definition comes from Sterling Lamprecht’s *Metaphysics of Naturalism*,

a philosophical position, empirical in method, that regards everything that exists or occurs to be conditioned in its existence or occurrence by causal factors within one all-encompassing system of nature, however ‘spiritual’ or purposeful or rational some of these things and events may in their functions and values prove to be. (160)

Charles Walcutt also offers a relevant definition of naturalism that helps to understand the deterministic aspects of Crane’s work. He suggests that one aspect of naturalism is “the approach to Nature through science, plung[ing] into the dark canyon of mechanistic determinism” (Walcutt 271). Here, Walcutt identifies how the scientific understanding of the universe in Crane’s time (through Darwinism and other advances) led to an outlook that saw human decisions as dictated by environmental influences and not man’s free will. Crane took the naturalist’s general philosophy of a helpless human existence and successfully drew new and insightful conclusions to explain human behavior by collectives or mobs. Specifically, he looked at the changing face of his society to try to understand how individual men can be so helpless and how the powers of human collectives can overcome individual agency. Furthermore, his theories on such

irrational groups of people could be extended to broader hierarchies of people such as governments and religious organizations to help explain how easily people are influenced by collective ideologies.

*The Red Badge of Courage* chronicles an era in which the Civil War and the ideologies surrounding the sectionalist conflict dominated the mindset of all Americans. Informed by this societal outlook, Crane formed an understanding of the overwhelming forces in the ideas formed by people. The “mob mentality” among groups of people is shown to be an all-powerful force that can rival the deterministic powers of nature.

At its core, we may define Crane’s mob mentality as: the irrational and blind influence of mass groups of humans, superseding any individual human agency beyond the mere lack of agency defined by naturalists. This mob mentality embraces the ideologies found in society (governments, religious hierarchies, etc) but often infuses these aims with blind, irrational passion. Unlike the more organized hierarchies in “society” as a whole, mobs force individuals to leave rational thought behind in pursuit of one goal. With this working definition we can identify the new element – the influence of collectives – that Crane identified as an extension of naturalist theories on deterministic forces.

Thus, Crane recognized the ability of mobs to shape destinies en masse beyond the control of any individual human agency. He saw that his world had concentrated populations and ideas to the point that these groups could influence men just as the forces of nature did. Such insight can lead to a greater understanding of Crane’s darker, more pessimistic version of naturalism. Walcutt argues that Crane’s naturalism is to be found in his way “of showing that the traditional concepts of our social morality are

shams and the motivations presumably controlled by them are pretenses” (Walcott 271-72). Here, Walcott hints at the social and collective forces that helped define Crane’s philosophy.

While it is important to draw a line between the powers wielded by obviously irrational “mobs” and the seemingly more rational powers of large ideological collectives such as government, both groupings should be considered in relation to *Red Badge*. In reading the novel, we may more readily see the effects of small groups of people – most specifically the protagonist’s close military comrades. However, the conclusions drawn in this thesis about Crane’s philosophy on collectives should certainly be considered in regards to the more established societal institutions in America at this time. As noted above, the increasing industrialization and migration towards American cities strengthened the national political traditions of “majority rule” and this entire system as well as the recent war that it had spawned would have raised concerns with Crane about how Americans determined their destinies. Could the uniquely American system of relatively low-level democratic rule have made Crane speculate about the efficacy of this system? While it was designed to empower individual free will, Crane seems to question whether American representative democracy actually could lead to the formation of mob mentalities on massive, permanent, and deceptively legitimate scales.

By considering these questions, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of the “naturalism” that Crane espoused. This was a naturalism that grappled with existing concepts of man’s individual impotency and extended such hopelessness to consider the force of collectives over the individual. This study builds off

the work of existing critics who have identified Crane's naturalism and takes these ideas further to examine Crane's unique take on masses of people and their influence.

Existing work that considers Crane's philosophy in *Red Badge* is too often rooted only in a general version of "naturalism" that is applied to Crane's work without exploring his unique ideas on collectives and the triumph of human forces over the assumed rational forces of human societies. For example, while Walcutt argues that Crane's naturalism in *Red Badge* is "descriptive" and thus "[t]he writer does not have to argue that he has proved anything about causation and determination," this study can in fact identify forces of collective society in Crane's descriptions (Crane 272). Therefore, the key distinction between our reading of Crane and other understandings of his work is that we can highlight his identification of the power of human collectives. This raises a new understanding of Crane as he applied his scientific determinism to all aspects of human life and suggested that people were entirely helpless even in their human interactions. Possibly influenced by the trauma of the Civil War, Crane suggests that science determined human destinies beyond any other forces, including those of politics and nationalism.

In sum, while Crane agrees with the naturalists who suggest that man is out of control of his destiny and is only influenced by the forces of his environment, Crane's naturalism embraces a hopelessness that goes beyond the mere lack of free will of the individual human. While he clearly agrees that humans cannot determine their destinies no matter how hard they try, Crane's naturalism is more specific and pessimistic in regards to human capacity to act. He sees man's lack of self determination as being exacerbated by the tendency of men to form and be influenced by collective groups of

men. This thesis clarifies Crane's unique form of naturalism to illustrate Crane's belief that it is the force of "the mob" that makes individual agency even more of a hopeless proposition than it already is for the individual

To embark on a study of Crane's philosophy, we must look at the critical works that have situated Crane in the literary and philosophical tradition of naturalism. Two of the most important studies in this regard were undertaken by the academics Charles C. Walcutt and Donald Pizer. Walcutt's most important work was published in 1956 in the work *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* as "Stephen Crane: Naturalist". Walcutt first attempts to define naturalism as containing two streams of philosophy. He suggests that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American naturalists promoted "the approach to Spirit" through progressivism and idealism, believing in the will and power of man. Meanwhile, another school approached "Nature through science" and pessimistically believed in "mechanistic determinism" (Walcutt 271). Walcutt concludes his introduction by arguing that naturalism could be understood as "partly defying Nature and partly submitting to it" (271). Walcutt believes that Crane is the only major example of deterministic (and thus pessimistic) American naturalism and he cites Crane's early novel, *Maggie* as well as *Red Badge* to prove this.

Yet, as he considers Crane's ideology, Walcutt looks through a traditional scope that lumps all deterministic naturalism and he fails to mention a palpable force that Crane has described throughout the whole novel—the force of the mob. In this work, Crane's philosophy will be read for its uniqueness rather than for its similarities with a naturalist tradition. We can build off Walcutt's identification of Crane's determinism while identifying the unique and specific human forces acting to determine a man's fate.

Another seminal work for the study of Crane's philosophy in *The Red Badge of Courage* is Donald Pizer's "The Red Badge of Courage: Text, Theme, and Form" from *South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1985. Pizer also outlined important information about Crane's naturalism in his 1965 work, "Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism: An Essay in Definition." Pizer saw *Red Badge* as a work that showed humans as both capable of "insight and understanding" but also "self-delusion." (Pizer 316). Pizer's understanding of Crane's philosophy seems to agree with Walcutt's belief that Crane's naturalism embodied two strains of thought. However, while Walcutt saw this as an intentional, philosophical choice, Pizer saw this lack of commitment as Crane's personal ambivalence to truly deterministic naturalism. Yet, Pizer's work misunderstands Crane as Pizer does not recognize Crane's very serious commitment to determinism. Even if Crane did in fact *seem* to demonstrate in some humans a capacity for such "insight and understanding," Pizer neglects the pessimism and warnings Crane expresses about humans who delude themselves into believing that they have such capacities.

Following from Pizer's ideas, if the existing concepts of deterministic naturalism in literature do not "stick" to Crane, perhaps Crane should be considered with a blank slate that does not rely on any tradition of naturalist writing. In fact, the new reading presented in this thesis enables an expansion of both Pizer and Walcutt's interpretations of Crane's relationship to deterministic naturalism. While Walcutt's work assumes that Crane merely wished to describe the hopeless human condition, this study shows that he does identify more specific forces at play. Walcutt believed that Crane's approach to the hopelessness of humans was "descriptive" and that "the writer does not

have to argue that he has proved anything about causation of determinism: he has absolutely shown that men's wills do not control their destinies." (Walcott, 272)

Pizer's work is still important because it considers Crane's ideology in context of the times in which he lived. Pizer suggests that,

*The Red Badge of Courage* also reflects a major moment in transition in the history of American belief – that of a period in American thought when...there was a movement from nineteenth-century certainties to modern doubts, from a willingness to affirm large-scale notions about the human enterprise to an unwillingness to do more than represent the immediacies of experience itself. (316)

As Pizer outlines the reasons for this shifting mindset, he exposes many of the contemporary influences that led to Crane's naturalistic and scientifically deterministic ideology in *Red Badge*. Pizer identifies a declining faith in human nature as Darwinian thought and other scientific ideas reinterpreted humanity. He also saw a belief in the "animal degradation of society" and "America as jungle" (Pizer 317). These doubts invigorated idea of man as an animal: existing in and influenced by nature with no special treatment. Pizer correctly sees Crane influenced by a scientific pessimism in the human capacity as humans are related more and more to the natural, animal world.

Pizer's final argument rests on a combination of this pessimism with the belief that Crane did not entirely abandon the belief in self-determination in man. Pizer believes that Crane moved from pessimism to a more positive belief in man's capacity throughout his career and he shows that *Red Badge* "affirms an earlier nineteenth-century faith in man's ability to mature while offering as well a modernistic critique of man's fatuous belief in his own ability..." (318). This conclusion is extremely important for building the



ideas of this thesis. First, it repeats the idea that Crane's ideas do not fit perfectly in the supposed tradition of literary naturalism. Secondly, the idea that Crane maintains some belief in a human capacity leads to new ideas about human society. Pizer seems to hint at a belief that in some way, Crane does believe humans (individually or otherwise) wield a force that is not acknowledged in the tradition of many critics. While this thesis sees such force as a negative influence on individual agency, it is interesting that Pizer saw *something* more to Crane's philosophy.

Still, like Walcutt, Pizer only questions the power of human individuals and fails to define the forces in action. By considering the social and collective forces that Crane describes, we may achieve a much more nuanced understanding of Crane's philosophy on humanity and perhaps even situate our new reading in the contemporary cultural ideologies that Pizer studies.

Several other critics will be considered to support this thesis. These critics do not necessarily consider Crane's tendencies toward naturalism but they are important for other reasons. We look to Charles Johanningsmeier's work in a 2008 edition of *American Literary Realism*, entitled, "The 1894 Syndicated Newspaper Appearances of *The Red Badge of Courage*." This work focuses on the first publications of Crane's work in serialized form in newspapers throughout 1894. Johanningsmeier studies the contemporary reception and analyzes the reasons behind the popularity of the story. Important to this thesis' argument are his ideas on what made this work so popular in its time. One theory is that *Red Badge* offered a solution to a contemporary crisis of masculinity.

Johanningsmeier is important in studying Crane's approach to human society and also for contextualizing the novel. Johanningsmeier did excellent work in pointing out the issue of masculinity but by failing to consider how masculinity is forced on individuals, Johanningsmeier's understanding of Crane is incomplete. Johanningsmeier does consider some of the direct ways that the larger society dealt with masculinity and transferred its beliefs to individuals through print and consumer advertising. However, we will strive to investigate in greater depth the mechanics of mob ideology and the ways in which individuals respond to such collective mentalities. For example, while some mobs might be considered as sites of hyper-masculinity or their actions could at least be understood as an expression of masculinity, this thesis will not focus so much on specific ideologies. Rather, Johanningsmeier's identification of masculinity as an important contemporary ideology can exemplify the ability of an ideology to take root in a society and ultimately to become a perverted and irrational motivating force for the mob.

Another crucial source to understand *Red Badge* in its time and place is Perry Lentz's *Private Fleming at Chancellorsville: The Red Badge of Courage and the Civil War*. Like Johanningsmeier, Lentz looks at the late 19<sup>th</sup> century publication of *Red Badge* and delves into historical aspects of the novel. He considers Crane's research and the historical connections between the real-life events of the American Civil War and the events that transpire in the novel. He also questions why Crane kept his work relatively ambiguous in terms of historical references.

One more critical source in this study is Donald B. Gibson's *The Red Badge of Courage: Redefining the Hero*. This book offers a very general but comprehensive overview of different themes and questions raised by *Red Badge*. Gibson's work will help

fill in gaps in criticism as he studies an array of topics that range from contemporary context and importance to critical reception to specific themes such as irony, heroism, and nature. Yet, while the work is helpful for supporting the following ideas, Gibson does not even attempt to explore Crane in the context of his purported naturalism.

Despite the vast amounts of criticism that exist concerning Stephen Crane and *The Red Badge of Courage*, a true understanding of the contemporary ideologies and exact forces involved in his deterministic philosophy are still unclear. Instead of relying on literary precedents to attempt to place Crane in a naturalist tradition, this work will identify a much more complex Crane. The Crane of our reading had specific and well-developed ideas about the forces that exacerbated this deterministic outlook so many critics have identified in him.

Unlike the critics, this thesis does not just ask whether or not Crane was a naturalist but it breaks free of the attempt to simply place Crane in an existing naturalist tradition. The end result of this examination is a more nuanced understanding of Crane's philosophy as an even more pessimistic strain of Naturalism. Crane uses *Red Badge* to present his belief that an overwhelming scientific determinism in the universe overrides any other human intentions. As he attempts to reconcile America's Civil War as well as the troubles and conflicts of his contemporary world, he suggests that universal scientific forces override human, national, and political intentions. Crane pessimistically disavows any human agency. This scientifically deterministic Crane should be understood to trump any understandings of a political Stephen Crane.

Without disputing the definition of "naturalism," we reach for a more comprehensive definition of Crane's philosophy. Naturalism remains an ambiguous term

in literary criticism and thus a study of Crane should not attempt to fit a reading of the author to the school of naturalism. If one still desires to consider Crane alongside American naturalism, it is perhaps better to use the term's ambiguity to fit a unique definition of naturalism to the author – to define the term by Crane himself.

Thus, the following work will be structured in three main parts. The first chapter will examine Crane's protagonist, Henry Fleming as he struggles against the natural world. In part, this will affirm some of the points made by critics who see Crane in the naturalist tradition. By looking at Crane's characters' relationship with nature, we can show that he understood that an individual man was powerless against external forces. Furthermore, that these external forces are so often depicted as natural forces shows that Crane worked with contemporary ideas of Darwinism and a scientific understanding of humankind that could objectively consider man in his environment.

The second chapter will move away from the core of critical analysis of naturalist philosophy as we identify the importance that Crane placed on Henry's relationship with human society. Additionally, we will consider stylistic and content-related choices made by Crane to help convey his philosophy. This section will consider the importance of societal institutions as destiny-shaping influences that appear as powerful as nature. Yet, we must be clear that while Crane saw mobs as great powers, his intent in identifying these powers was to show the helplessness of individual man in the face of collectives. This section will relate to the turn-of-the-century questioning of human nature through scientific thought and the contemporary conditions that led naturalists like Stephen Crane to question existing understandings of human agency.

While other critics have identified the abandonment of these forces as typical of naturalist authors, this section will show how Crane explains their very real power over people.

Finally, the third chapter will move beyond any existing understanding of naturalism in *The Red Badge of Courage* as we consider the “mob mentality” that is so prevalent in *Red Badge*. Again, Crane’s vision of mob mentality can be defined as the irrational power of large groups of people that deters man from shaping his fate. This chapter will look beyond “society” as an influential force and consider the devastating effects of mobs and their ideologies on human agency.

In conclusion, this thesis goes beyond a traditional reading of Crane's naturalism to identify his philosophy as especially pessimistic in regards to humanity’s free will. It explores new ideas to further define Crane’s pessimistic outlook on human agency not only by describing the natural forces but also by pointing out the importance of ideologies and ultimately a “mob mentality.” These are clearly strong, destructive forces that deter man from shaping his own destiny. These new components to Crane’s philosophy are a valuable addition to Crane scholarship and thus American literary scholarship overall. As a key author in the American literary tradition and in the history of American ideologies, Crane is not merely another aspect of a naturalist tradition. The difficulty of critics to generalize Crane as a “naturalist” is indicative of the need for the deeper study offered here and this thesis does illustrate the nuances of his philosophy. Crane should be understood as nothing less than a scientific determinist and from this conclusion we study his beliefs on humanity’s inability to determine any course of events.

## CHAPTER II

### THE POWER OF NATURE

Critic Harry Hartwick argues that “Crane’s fiction plainly reflects the naturalistic concept of man as a helpless animal, driven by instinct and imprisoned in a web of forces entirely deaf to the hopes or purposes of humanity” (Hartwick 221). Crane sees his characters as hopelessly alienated from any ability to determine their own destinies. Whether by the forces of nature or the forces of humanity, the protagonist Henry is unable to create his own path in life. In support of Crane-as-naturalist, he certainly does seem to see humans as inescapably bound by environmental forces that push them one way or the other. Before one considers the ways in which *Red Badge* shows how Crane’s work is inconsistent with the naturalist reading, it is important to establish that he did hold some core beliefs that fit the naturalist paradigm of Hartwick. Crane saw a bleak and hopeless fate for any human who wished to control his own destiny. *Red Badge* can ultimately prove that Crane took contemporary ideas (some of which are defined by naturalism) to more complex levels that accounted for human societies and their power over the behavior of their people. However, the novel also

offers many examples of simple natural forces and instincts triumphing over man's desires or beliefs that he may determine his own destiny.

Crane's story continuously shows the influence of nature and natural instincts on Henry. When Henry flees from battle out of fear, he finds comfort in nature and recognizes that his desire to flee is a natural instinct. He throws a pinecone at a squirrel and watches as it runs away to save its life. The voice of the narrator then highlights Henry's thoughts,

[t]here was the law, he said. Nature had given him a sign. The squirrel, immediately upon recognizing danger, had taken to his legs without ado...The youth wended, feeling that Nature was of his mind. She reinforced his argument... (Crane 41)

In this example, Crane makes use of his unique point-of-view and its ability to look inward.

Here the narrator serves several purposes as it allows the reader a somewhat less-biased outlook on Henry's actions and thoughts. Both the specific thoughts that the narrator chooses to relay and the way in which they are juxtaposed with actions and other thoughts allows Crane to highlight certain contradictions throughout the novel. By showing Henry's thought process and other aspects of the character from a third-person point of view, the narrator helps to convey humanity's lack of free will.

Ultimately, Henry argues that his desire to flee was a natural instinct and he does not even attempt to attribute it to any sort of free will. As the squirrel naturally responded to the pine cone, Henry responded to the danger of battle. This example, bolstered by the narrator's explanation of Henry's shifting justifications, suggests that

man's free will is trumped by the influences of his natural environment. Understanding Henry's willingness to justify his actions as the will of Nature shows how man is even sometimes willing to give up his pretensions of free will.

Furthermore, the third-person viewpoint crucially highlights this example as it brings to light changes in Henry's evaluation of events that he may have ignored in a first-person account. The narrator describes Henry's ability to reach a conclusion and convince himself that he had made a rational decision when in fact the reader knows that Henry's thought process did not include any real rational evaluation of his situation. The narrator's presentation of events avoids being swayed by Henry's shifting emotions and shows how Henry justifies such cowardice with an inconsequential "sign" offered by the actions of a squirrel. As Henry abandons his free will to the will of nature, the audience (assisted by the narrator) surely compares Henry to the squirrel, not only exemplifying Henry's flawed thought process but also suggesting that his powers to determine actions are no more refined than those held by a simple squirrel.

Another interesting aspect of Crane's writing that can be mentioned here is his consistency in capitalizing the word "Nature." This may attribute some divine force to nature as the capitalization of God suggests otherworldly control over man. Crane sees nature as one of the universe's scientific forces that determine destinies (the other being the scientifically explicable forces of human collectives). Even if this force is not "divine," Nature can represent an impersonal but ultimately powerful force that affects man's actions. This also shows how Crane's beliefs agreed with some contemporary philosophies that rejected God and religion for a more scientific understanding of man. Certainly, Crane's determinism could not exist alongside traditional Christian



understandings of how man's destiny is shaped. While religion allows for mysteries in the way a human life is destined, Crane believed that there was an explanation for all of man's actions.

On the subject of divine forces, it is also important to note here the dissenting critics who would argue that *Red Badge* embraces Christianity instead of natural forces. Christianity is somewhat of a foil to naturalist beliefs in deterministic environmental forces as such monotheistic religion suggests that man holds a special relationship with nature that allows him to follow a more rational path than animals that may only be influenced by environment. Robert Wooster Stallman supports the idea of Christian symbolism in *Red Badge* as he writes (in regard to the character Jim Conklin) that "there are unmistakable hints – in such descriptive details about him as his wound in the side, his torn body and his gory hand, and even in the initials of his name, Jim Conklin – that he is intended to represent Jesus Christ..." (Stallman 253). While ideas of Christian symbolism have worked their way into some readings of *Red Badge*, support for such symbolism is easily refuted and has been the subject of academic literary debate especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Stanley B. Greenfield provides a concise and targeted refutation of Stallman, who was a major force to introduce these ideas to *Red Badge* readers. This refutation is important to prove this thesis' ideas about Crane's determinism. First of all, Greenfield identifies blatant errors in the evidence Stallman has presented. He shows several examples where Stallman has paraphrased certain events that are used as evidence of Jim Conklin's ties to Christianity. One of the most important of these distortions comes when Henry watches Conklin die. Stallman says that upon his death, Crane writes that "the red

sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer” (253). Supposedly, this draws on the Christian tradition of communion as a “symbol of salvation through death” (253). Stallman even links this description of the sun to the phrase “nature had given him a sign” (Crane 37). However, Greenfield realizes Stallman’s fallacy as he notes that,

the Crane quotation about Nature giving Henry a sign is not from this part of the novel at all: it is from chapter vii, and is Henry’s reaction to the squirrel’s running when he threw a pine cone at him – a phrase, in other words, that is to be construed ironically in its proper context! (301)

Another important indictment of Stallman’s arguments concerns his statement that Conklin is a Christ-figure because Crane writes that he bears a “resemblance in him to a devotee of a mad religion” (Stallman 253). The logical counterargument to this is that Christ himself would represent Christianity itself. Christ would never be considered the “devotee of a mad religion” but rather the originator of his own religion. While some may argue that the narrator in fact was suggesting that Christianity itself was a “mad” religion, this seems unlikely even for a progressive thinker of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as Crane. Crane’s ideas may have embraced certain anti-religious theories, but he had little motivation to completely indict all forms of Christian faith.

Greenfield offers several other logical critiques of Stallman, ultimately discrediting much of what Stallman argues. These examples are presented here to show that even though some readers claim to identify traditional Christian symbols in the novel, Crane’s intent was at best to offer some ambiguous symbolism to appeal to a potentially religious audience. However, as we consider his philosophy, progressive

beliefs in his era, and the broader tenets of naturalism, it is fair to say that Crane's true philosophical intent was probably not to promote the traditional Christian faith. Instead, we should consider alternate sources of spiritual power. In the above consideration of Crane's capitalization of "Nature" we may replace Christian spirituality with the spiritual or deterministic power of nature. By extension, in the absence of a Christian reading of *Red Badge*, we may consider Crane's potential faith in the scientifically-explicable forces that determine man's destiny.

Ultimately, religion may be considered as an institution that appeals to humans to rationalize their difficulties to determine their own destinies and to suggest that some higher power "works in mysterious ways." Religion should also be noted as a potential institution that furthers the ideologies that mobs cling to. While religion itself may be too well-organized to be considered a traditional "mob," it certainly demonstrates an extension of Crane's philosophy in which human interaction is guided not by individual free will, but by collectively-held ideologies.

For now, we can offer an alternate reading of the Jim Conklin character. Instead of a rational, Christian figure as espoused by Stallman, Conklin should be read as an animalistic figure, linked more to nature than to rationality and Western religion. In the same description of Conklin's death that Stallman used to prove he symbolized Jesus Christ, Crane also writes that,

the chest of the doomed soldier began to heave with a strained motion. It increased in violence until it was as if an animal was within and was kicking and tumbling furiously to be free (46)

This passage clearly associates Conklin's death not with a beautiful, mystical transition to heaven but to an organic and painful departure from man's world. As an animal has no hope to ascend to heaven, Conklin died a simple and conclusive death.

This description works to reject Christian traditions and embrace naturalistic ideas in two ways. First, on the surface, the comparison of Conklin to an animal should preclude any notion that Conklin is Jesus Christ. Christ would never be compared to an animal in death as Christ is thought to have possessed great rational skills of the mind and a great philosophical mindset. These are traits that would never be shared with animals.

Secondly, the comparison to an animal works on a deeper level. As mentioned above, the idea of an animalistic death is very different from the beauty of Christ's sacrifice. As an animal has no conception of heaven, sacrifice, and any spiritual meaning of death, Conklin's death is shown to be similarly devoid of Christian beliefs on God's deterministic power. Conklin's death illustrates the animalistic determinism that leads to death in the Darwinian model of humanity that we hold to have influenced Crane's thought. For both these reasons, the Christian reading of Jim Conklin should be rejected and Crane's embrace of nature and animal irrationality should be noted. Clearly, Crane was more interested in the natural forces of pain and death than he was interested in the spiritual forces of a meaningful, sacrificial ascension to heaven.

Returning to Henry's sudden conclusion that his flight from battle was a natural instinct also exposes a human fault that leads Henry to attribute power to natural forces. This follows in line with Crane's emphasis on the deterministic force of nature as a basis for his naturalism. A continuing trend throughout the novel is for Henry to revise his memories of personal experiences. The incident with the squirrel shows that Henry

has trouble understanding even his most recent actions. The confidence with which the narrator explains Henry's sudden justification of flight seems to suggest irony and misconception on Henry's part, showing the fallibility of humans in their attempt to direct their destinies and understand how they came to their current states.

Perhaps this theme of indecisiveness and justification after-the-fact reflect certain ideas about human nature as a metaphor for the way human society has rationalized a true lack of individual agency. It seems that man tries to convince himself that he possesses self-determination by suggesting that his actions are right even when he doesn't understand them. For example, humans have argued that unlike animals, they have the capability for rational thought and they separate themselves from the animal world by arguing that they have a special connection to spiritual forces (God) that animals do not have. However, when irrational or destructive events occur that cannot be explained, such explanations as "God works in mysterious ways" are offered. Similarly, Henry tries to explain his actions when in fact he could not control them. He is simply trying to make sense of why he acted as he did, unwilling to accept that he was not in control of his fate.

An important theme that Crane works with to show the environment and nature's force over human destiny is the ever-present animal imagery that places humans on the same Darwinian plane as animals. Crane shows throughout *Red Badge* that despite humans' supposed ability to understand nature, they give away their free-will because they are influenced by their own environments and socially constructed ideologies. *Red Badge* contains over ninety references to animals (Gibson 74) and they often serve to compare a human or a human's qualities to an animal.

Crane used the example of a squirrel running from a projectile in order to save its life to show that humans, animals and nature act on an instinct of self-preservation forced on them by their environments. Thus, by comparing humans to animals, he suggests that humans may have no more free-will than any animal. Even though humans may believe that they possess the capability for more rational thought than an animal, they are in fact robbed of their free will by other forces that they do not understand. Perhaps additional forces exist that may influence humans beyond the mere forces of nature that influence animals. However, by showing that both human and animal can be controlled by natural forces and instincts, Crane shows the Darwinian belief that nature is powerful enough to control the destiny of any species. A great example that shows how Henry's instinctual needs can be such a powerful and inexplicable force can be seen when he finds himself lost in battle and he realizes suddenly that "his body was calling for food. It was more powerful than a direct hunger..." (Crane 52). Crane describes Henry's basic needs in the same way an animal would interpret these desires. Henry is clearly an animal like all others.

Furthermore, Crane frequently compares humans to animals to show that humans lack self-determination just as an animal lacks self-determination. When Henry is in battle and he is confused and worried, Crane writes that,

into the youth's eyes there came a look that one can see in the orbs of a jaded horse. His neck was quivering...His hands, too seemed large and awkward...And there was a great uncertainty about his knee joints. (32)

In this particular example, Henry is completely unsure of what the outcome of this battle will be. He is uncertain about his physical capabilities and he has lost even the flawed belief that he would be capable to determine his future. Crane has shown that without any belief in free-will or knowledge of the future, Henry has returned to the outlook of a fearful horse. The comparison is even more effective because of the repeated symbolism of the horse as a beast that man controls. In this situation, however, Henry is the one under control.

Crane's comparisons between humans and animals typically allude to the similarity of these species as they act without free-will. Often, they reinforce the solidarity of masses of men as they refer to groups of men as one animal. These groups display a collective power but the individual human members never acquire or harness this power that the mob wields as a whole. For instance, Henry once sees his enemies on the battlefield as a "red and green monster" (Crane 33). By changing man into animal, it removes the idea of human self-determination that had historically made people feel they were superior to animals. While Crane offers some examples of animals to show how humans are distinct from nature, he more frequently uses animal imagery to argue that neither human nor animal can control their destinies.

In consideration of the influences that shaped Crane's philosophy (such as Darwinism and questioning of religious traditions), we must consider the very important scientific theories and philosophies that were emerging at this time. Crane was especially influenced by contemporary ideas about Darwinism and he questioned society's faith in a man's free will and control over destiny. Donald B. Gibson believes that "the meaning of the novel itself is inseparable from Crane's interpretation of the meaning of Darwinism

insofar as it bears upon human values". Indeed, Darwinism and new ideas about science were changing the way people understood the world and Crane's writing appealed to this changing philosophy. However, even as his contemporaries may have embraced some tenets of Darwinism, Crane expands his pessimistic, scientific understanding of humanity even further as he shows that humans are not only controlled by natural impulses, but their societal and collective behaviors and interactions could also be explained scientifically.

In the discussion of animal imagery and natural influences, Darwinism is completely applicable to *Red Badge*. Darwin explains the fates of all humans and animals via his unsympathetic belief in "the survival of the fittest." Gibson is more specific about Crane's influence from Darwin as he writes that,

Crane did not entertain the notion that any kind of sympathetic bond exists between humankind and nature. In fact, he writes in such a way as to suggest a firm and direct opposition to such a view (Gibson 69)

This idea supports the point that nature is a controlling force that does not need to comply with any morality or rationality. This is certainly a Darwinistic approach to man's relationship with nature.

Again, Crane capitalizes "Nature" to show that it has a power that is comparable to that of the religious powers that humans use to explain inconsistencies in their assumed free will despite evidence that contradicts the idea of human agency. Again, we consider the commonly held idea that when human agency is lacking, God is looking after human actions with some rational plan. Yet, Crane shows the reality that unlike religious justifications, nature offers no explanation for its actions. All the disorder



and turmoil that Henry undergoes in *Red Badge* can be attributed to the indifferent forces of the world – both natural and human.

## CHAPTER 111

### THE POWER OF SOCIETY AND IDIOLOGY

Crane doubtlessly saw humans and animals as both controlled by natural forces in their environments. This understanding that all species are under the influence of their environments fits well within the critics' traditional understandings of literary naturalism. However, Crane lived in a quickly-changing America where ideas like Darwinism made humans question their societal tendencies and environment as well. These ideas were especially appealing in the aftermath of a devastating war that without any doubt made people skeptical of human nature. Now, instead of explaining human traits as particular to any superior species, thinkers began to investigate the scientific motivations for human actions. Gibson also writes that,

[Darwinism's] result was...to undermine the authority of all other institutions depending upon religion for support. Crane knew that the basis of all knowledge had been challenged and stood on the brink of a radical alteration of thought in his time...He understood the problems attendant upon simple acceptance of authority. (Gibson 97-98)

Crane realized that Darwinism and other more scientific ways of understanding the universe were making people question authority. As Crane replaces God with

“Nature”, he was led to question central authorities such as the church and other human institutions for the ideologies that they promulgated.

In agreement with other thinkers of his time, Crane presented these authorities as deterministic forces on the lives of his characters. While naturalists understood that man’s destiny was determined by his environment and heredity, Crane would show that a man’s environment is very strongly influenced by his society’s beliefs. *Red Badge* presents the naturalistic idea that man is powerless to determine his destiny but while this powerlessness against nature and environment was understood by the naturalist literary movement, Crane’s approach was unique. He considered not only the inability of the individual human to determine destiny, but he questioned the human forces that precluded individual agency.

These ideas were again brought on by his environment. Cities were growing rapidly in America as the economy moved from agriculture to commerce and industry. Science and technology were becoming more important in peoples’ lives. Technology and the institutions that controlled scientific thought and development were replacing the church and scripture as legitimate authorities. Furthermore, America was getting involved in new foreign conflicts that were at their core not based on moral concerns but on economic motivations. All of these changes were rapid and Americans were forced to adapt to new lifestyles and new philosophies.

Johanningsmeier identifies the results of such change as he writes that “*Red Badge*...interrogates the notion of individual agency in a complex, capitalistic, industrial world symbolized by the military “machine” (Johanningsmeier 241). However, *Red Badge* should also be examined as it identifies the devastating deterministic forces of the

man-made institutions in contrast to the natural environment's forces over a man's destiny. As Johanningsmeier rightly identifies, war was a major factor in the lives of contemporary Americans. If traditional authorities could not explain the wanton killing of citizens of the same national tradition, perhaps science could provide an answer, leading to such deterministic outlooks as those of Crane in *Red Badge*.

In this sense, an abandonment of traditional faith in human agency may have been appealing to readers who could not explain certain destructive human actions. Even those who had already formed firm beliefs as to what and who caused the War would have been able to transfer blame away from such specific individuals or motivations by acknowledging the pessimism that Crane puts forth. Thus, Crane's philosophy would help reconciliation even if it did not entirely move people away from their existing understanding of history. By acknowledging a lack of power of humans to make rational decisions, war could be blamed on the scientific idea that man "could not help himself." Rather than blaming any individual's rational decision-making for the carnage, humans could escape their shame by admitting they were powerless to make rational decisions to shape their destiny.

Even if readers were reluctant to abandon the American tradition of self-determination, they could sympathize with the feeling of helplessness in the face of government and other large institutions. Johanningsmeier notes that, "in the outpour of nonfiction and fiction in the 1880s, writers consistently avoided referring to political conflicts over slavery or secession in favor of the theme of national reconciliation" (Johanningsmeier 237). For a country desperate for such reconciliation, the idea that large, authoritarian forces had been the cause of the war was an appealing explanation.

Another connection with contemporary American beliefs surrounds not the memories of the past Civil War but the current building entanglements in the Philippines and the Spanish American War of 1898. In fact, Crane's success with *Red Badge* would catapult his career in journalism and he traveled to Cuba to report on the conflict in 1896. Crane's personal interest in these types of conflicts likely arose in the years during which he worked on and released *Red Badge*. As governments increasingly fought wars in the service of "spheres of influence" and industrial and economic goals, Crane's hypotheses may have appealed to people who could not understand any tangible, moral reasons to fight. While the Civil War was at least fought on grounds that people had come to accept, these new battles took place far away and were not connected to any easily-understood motives.

In his attempt to explain the author's intention of writing the novel, Gibson writes,

*The Red Badge* reflects its time in an obverse way. When the American nation at large had its eyes focused on the world and on the profit it might bring, focused on the seemingly endless supply of natural resources and on the technology and man-power (from immigration) to exploit them; when the American nation was beginning to feel like the powerful giant among nations that it would become, Stephen Crane turned his focus inward, away from the world at large and toward the effect of those gigantic and complex forces on the individual person and the human psyche. (3)

Here, Gibson supports the idea that *The Red Badge of Courage* was influenced by a contemporary sense of isolation and alienation in post-Civil War society, again easily tied in to the alienation of motives to fight emerging conflicts abroad. Crane's work was no doubt a unique product of a unique time and the story offers a new critique of mankind that appreciates the forces of human society. By drawing on contemporary

events, recent history, and the new scientific tradition seen in Darwinism, Crane was inspired to extend his belief in a deterministic environment to include the environment that humans created for themselves.

We consider above Walcutt's description of Crane's philosophy that asserted a rejection of contemporary social morality and this morality's impact on man. Such an interpretation of society as having no inherent, moral value corresponds with the scientific analysis of institutions and conflicts in this age and the spread of Darwinism. Walcutt agrees that "Crane makes us see Henry Fleming as an emotional puppet controlled by whatever sight he sees at the moment" (Walcutt 276). However, while Walcutt suggests Crane's distrust of human authority by suggesting that Henry is influenced by more than just nature, he fails to thoroughly discuss how societal influences compare to man's traditional struggle against natural influences.

Ultimately, *Red Badge* shows Crane's belief that man has an antagonistic relationship with mobs and the ideologies that blindly guide them. Crane makes this clear as he examines the struggle of one man who is influenced by his society through mobs. He shows that both nature and collective men are powerful deterministic forces – more powerful than an individual free will. Therefore, Crane is questioning humanity when he proves that man cannot determine his own destiny against these powers.

Here, Crane extends the ideas of naturalism with the new deterministic factor of "mobs" or human collectives. Crane tells the story of a young man who is influenced by his peers to make decisions that are often not in his best interest. The reader sees this as Crane shows Henry to question his decision to go to war: "From his home his youthful eyes had looked upon the war in his own country with distrust" (Crane 7). Despite his

instinctual distrust, Henry was influenced by his society's and his peer's fascinations with war. Crane will show that Henry's motivation to enlist was not based on a rational, personal decision, but he makes it clear that Henry goes to war to fulfill a desire that he cannot logically explain (and that can only be explained by external forces trumping free will).

Crane writes that Henry "had burned several times to enlist. Tales of great movements shook the land. They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them" (7). Crane's narrator connects the ancient and the still-loved stories of Homer. Homer glorified warfare thousands of years ago and 19<sup>th</sup> century human society also continued this tradition and glorified war. Crane wishes to show humanity's lengthy tradition of pushing individuals to make decisions that may not be in the individual's self-interest. Again we must note that society is an organized, more permanent institution than the blind or irrational mob which is generally seen on a smaller scale. In society, however, we do see the source of many of the ideologies that mobs could espouse to push individuals to action. Even when a society attempts to promote values that it thinks have come about through rational thought, these values can become over-emphasized or distorted by group-think, sometimes at the societal level and very often at the level of the mob.

Thus, Crane shows that a young man may be convinced to go to the horrible and awful fate of war because of what his society has taught him and the people who influence him through mobs. A young man has no experience with the reality of war and in *Red Badge*, Crane offers Henry as an example of this. Crane intentionally uses a young soldier to show how important the influence of societal ideologies is on the man. These

ideologies can even lead man to very irrational decisions – such as joining an army with the desire to achieve “glory.”

Crane even contrasts the youth and lack of development in Henry to older soldiers. Of course, the soldiers in the army represent the mainstream of society as they tell him tales of war. However, Crane hints at his peers’ failings as he quotes the more experienced soldiers to show a more negative understanding of their supposedly glorious service. These comrades give Henry another outlook on war when they speak of “tattered and eternally hungry men who fired despondent powders” (Crane 8). This last impression of war conveys the horror and pain of war and again shows another segment of society presenting a different view. This view was influenced not by the legends and expectations of societal ideologies but by the experience of veterans. The negative responses of these veterans suggest that mob glorifications may not reflect the truth of war.

To further support the idea that the ideological forces of society are somehow determining the fates of young men, Crane fills his protagonist with values that come from the mainstream of society. For example, the values of masculinity, heroism, and glorious warfare reflect biblical stories, Greek myths, and traditional teachings of history. The bible and traditional patriarchal society supports masculinity as a “good” trait. Young men and women are taught both by “mobs” of peers and by educational and religious institutions that men must display certain traits such as fortitude and confidence in contrast to feminine domestic traits. The Greco-Roman tradition of Western civilization holds onto similar myths along with grand stories of war and heroism. Furthermore, the traditional means by which history is taught in Western schools glorifies battle and the heroic winners in writing. In the contemporary press, Henry had “read of



marches, sieges, conflicts...” (Crane 5). Even in camp, Henry's comrades “talked of gray, bewhiskered hordes who were advancing with relentless curses...tremendous bodies of fierce soldiery who were sweeping along like the Huns...” (8). While these stories scare Henry, they also enforce the idea of mythical scenes of war, convincing Henry to fight when he otherwise may not have chosen to risk his life.

Stylistically, Crane's choice of characterization in *Red Badge* emphasizes the powerful influence that ideologies have on Henry. Gibson suggested that Crane shows the naturalistic philosophy by “turning inward” and looking at one individual's thoughts. Thus, Crane offers a third-person, limited omniscient point of view that focuses on the thoughts and actions of Henry Fleming, a young and inexperienced soldier in the Union Army of the American Civil War. This focus on the individual as opposed to larger groups of people in society enables Crane to bring out the psychological conflict that is going on within Henry. Furthermore, the fact that Henry is young and has not yet found his place in society allows more dramatic extremes as Henry sometimes tries to comply with society's expectations and sometimes tries to follow his “natural” instincts.

This characterization of Henry certainly helps to show how humans can be influenced by external forces. Crane's writing style is very important in helping to show the influences that assault Henry from every direction. Crane uses a third-person narrator who is not fully omniscient, but only has access to Henry's mind. Thus, Crane can focus his story on Henry's personal experience while injecting important ideas. By speaking from outside of the character, the narrative voice can also expose shortcomings and flaws in Henry's thoughts and actions by removing the biases of first-person narration. At the

same time, this external voice highlights and reflects on the biases of Henry himself.

Gibson argues that,

*The Red Badge* demonstrated what a twentieth century consciousness 'feels' like in its depiction of two minds, two consciousnesses focused upon experience – the one Henry Fleming's, the other the narrator's, both struggling to make some sense out of things. (5)

Gibson mentions this point of view as an important tool to see how naturalists questioned human interpretations of life. However, this choice not only reflects the contemporary philosophies of Crane's time but – more importantly – it allows the reader to reflect on a philosophy stated by the narrator.

The narrator is an important character in *Red Badge* as it is his judgments that counter the naiveté of Henry. While the narrator may not always be objective, this voice certainly seems to be less biased than Henry. Crane offers ideas about the overwhelming force of society not only through Henry's actions and statements, but through the narrator's descriptions of Henry's thoughts. As the narrator juxtaposes certain ideas, this voice often grants the reader a clearer understanding of the irony in some of Henry's statements. Especially towards the end of the novel when Henry reflects back on his experiences with pride, the narrator is an important foil to Henry's biased account of events

Crane's method of depicting a soldier's experience in the American Civil War helps emphasize the psychological troubles that Henry faces. Specifically, by offering very general descriptions of the historical events in the novel, Crane further confuses the reader's impression. Even though critics seem to agree that most of the fighting in *Red*

*Badge* takes place at the battle that would become known as “Chancellorsville,” Crane is purposefully vague. He does name a few real-life formations, brigades, and locations but he keeps hidden any historical background and most explicit identifiers. Perry Lentz argues that if Crane had specified historical moments and figures, this “would risk causing offense, or worse, deflecting a reader’s attention from fiction to the historical fact” (Lentz 16). Lentz identifies two practical reasons that Crane may have left his story unspecific. He is correct to note that specificity may have led to a distraction from the fictional story. He also makes the fascinating point that a more historical account may have “offended” some readers.

Considering the publication date of *Red Badge*, Crane certainly was wise to write a novel that conveys the feel of the war for both North and South without raising old tensions about winners and losers. The idea that these feelings would still be so strong again proves that Crane’s novel was written from and intended for a specific historical era that evaluated human society in new, scientific ways. Crane moved away from nationalist and sectionalist ideologies to attempt to explain more general truths about the actions of humankind. Only by breaking free of past differences could he put forth his philosophy without offense and in a more universal way.

Another important reason for Crane to remain vague about his setting was to create a mood of claustrophobia in the reader that more accurately conveyed the feeling of battle, especially in the American Civil War. In regards to Henry’s own mind, James Nagel argues that “Henry’s view of things is limited, unreliable, and distorted, and yet a projection of the working of his mind becomes a dramatically realistic depiction of how the war might appear to an ordinary private engaged in...the American Civil War”

(Nagel 292). As Crane's narration style kept the reader viewing the story through the mindset of a naïve, young man, his choice to include very little history enhances this experience. Lentz argues that this makes sense because "private soldiers engaged in a battle would be altogether ignorant of the name by which it eventually would be known" (Lentz 16). However, Crane made his choice not just to relay the soldier's experience accurately but he uses this to exaggerate Henry's lack of understanding of his surroundings and even the competing philosophies behind the Civil War. While confusion may be typical of the experience of a low-ranking soldier, Crane emphasizes this feeling to show the force of human mobs. Henry is clearly caught up in a struggle that he cannot understand.

Crane does explain that Henry is fighting for the Union and the "enemy" is the Confederate forces. The narrator often refers to Henry's comrades as "blue men" while the confederates are identified by their gray uniforms (Crane 100). While it is generally unspoken, the ideological conflict that created the Civil War supports Crane's idea that even American society is divided into different "societies." As Lentz mentions above, too much historical background or ideology could have turned off readers who still clung to bitterness about the recent war. Crane's use of colors to represent competing forces helps avoid tension and makes the story more universal.

Additionally, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ideological differences between North and South would have been much more obvious and could have served as a clear indicator that beliefs held in any society – not just Henry's Northern society – could force men to act. By making a war of competing ideas into a simple conflict between two neutral colors, Crane is able to place any society of humans under his lens to inspect.

While this may have been an important consideration, in practice any sectionalist considerations were of little import as Johanningsmeier notes that initial syndication of *Red Badge* was “geographically widespread (except perhaps for the South)...” (Johanningsmeier 233).

Finally, taking the idea of Crane’s intentional lack of specificity one step further, we can return to the complete naivety of Henry’s mindset and realize that Crane’s philosophy is applicable possibly beyond even American society. Instead of just blending the experiences of Northern and Southern American soldiers, Crane makes a poignant statement about the common experience of any soldiers from any of the Westernized nations during Crane’s time in history.

CHAPTER IV  
THE POWER OF THE MOB

*The Red Badge of Courage* is very effective in portraying the isolation and confusion that Henry feels as he decides to fight in the American Civil War. His decisions seem to be based not on rational, self-examination or his own best interest. Rather, Henry decides to enlist as a result of external forces determining his fate. Thus, Crane cannot be considered simply in the naturalist tradition. Rather, his naturalism should be seen as wholly pessimistic in regards to the capabilities of humans to shape their own destinies and furthermore he shows that when mobs and collectives come into play, human agency is even more of a hopeless proposition.

*The Red Badge* shows the power of society's ideologies as it shows such traditions and ideologies manifested in the mob mentality of smaller collectives of humans. When many men form large collectives, they can even resist or compete with the deterministic elements of nature. The mob effectively becomes a "natural" force capable of changing lives. This is a key element to understand Crane's naturalism. For example, Henry can ignore the natural force of self-preservation when he is whipped into a fury by a mob of soldiers. Crane's protagonist is swept along and unable to escape from the army

(the mainstream of his society) as they advance because it "enclosed him" as if he is in "a moving box" (Crane 19). Also, Crane's description that Henry "became not a man but a member" emphasizes the absence of any individual human significance as we are dominated by the uncontrollable and potentially irrational values of the mob (Crane 27). Social values absorbed by many members of society thus forced Henry to join the army and ignore natural instincts.

This mob mentality approach to influencing a man's destiny always works perfectly with Crane's descriptions of armies and battles in the Civil War. While military units may cultivate a certain mob mentality to help mobilize errant soldiers, this is nonetheless an example of the way human collectives act on the individual. While this specific mob may be somewhat intentionally created, its effect on individuals still works against rational, personal choices. For example, as Henry marches with his army into battle, the narrator describes the power that the group of his comrades had on him. Crane writes that, "[h]e was bewildered. As he ran with his comrades he strenuously tried to think, but all he knew was that if he fell down those coming behind would tread upon him...He felt carried along by a mob" (Crane 18). This passage reflects Crane's sentiment that a mob can urge men to go along with out individual decision-making. Furthermore, these situations prevent man from thinking and thus controlling his own destiny.

Crane's concept of the mob and its clear support in his depiction of warfare shows yet again why *Red Badge* is such a clear product of a post-Civil War era as well as a time when new wars were beginning. As Americans attempted to explain their bitter internal divide as well as new conflicts arising abroad, a scientific approach to human

irrationality was understood and even acceptable. Americans could not reconcile their country while blaming either North or South so they no doubt liked an explanation that removed any individual human from feeling responsibility

While Crane shows that individual humans lack real power to change the world or even their own destinies, his acknowledgment of mass ideologies and their power shows that a “mob mentality” can be formed by groups of humans. We have already defined this general concept as an often-irrational and uncontrollable dominating force of groups of human beings, transcending any individual agency and even competing with deterministic forces of nature. This power to move people against their instinct and “rationality” is evident through Crane’s telling of Henry’s story. Using dramatic irony, he shows the arbitrary nature of society’s expectations for a man like Henry.

As noted above, Henry dreams of glory and heroism when he enlists to go to war and at the end of the novel, his society of peers calls Henry as a hero. However, the narrator’s omniscience allows the reader to understand the irony here. In fact, Henry had been as much of a coward as he had been a hero but his comrades only knew of his heroism. This irony is the most obvious: While only some of Henry’s actions were “heroic,” he was considered a hero by other soldiers even though much of what he did was cowardly. When the mob considers heroism, or even false heroism to be good, this is considered to be the final word. This example shows the flaws of the mob despite its great power to overcome individual initiative and reinforces the irrationality of such human institutions.



This final judgment of the mob also confirms the absence of human agency:

Henry was unable to use his powers to make himself a hero and in many instances he had fled from dangers that a “hero” would have faced head on. Thus, he was unable to determine his own destiny as he intended. Yet, just as Henry’s actions seemed to cast him as a coward, Crane shows that even this direction of events would not rationally define Henry as “coward” or “hero.” In fact, the humans (Henry’s comrades and others) who thought they were lauding Henry of their own free will were in fact deceived by their own mistaken perception of events.

The misapplication of the term “hero” to Henry shows that even when people believe that they are making rational judgments based on their own free will, they still may be deceiving themselves. More importantly, this event shows the helplessness of Henry to achieve true “heroism.” He is deceived three times in his pursuit: First cannot avoid cowardly actions despite a personal determinism to be a hero. Then, when he feels resigned to be a coward, he finds that he is in fact seen as a hero.

In one final twist, Crane writes that despite Henry remembering his errors, “gradually he mustered force to put the sin at a distance... With this conviction came a store of assurance. He felt a quiet manhood, nonassertive but of sturdy and strong blood” (Crane 103). In this third deception, Henry takes on the mantle of “hero” and convinces himself that his actions were heroic. The irony of this chain of events shows how helpless people really are to determine their own destinies. Crane again uses his omniscient narrator throughout this progression to show the arbitrary nature of society’s decisions of who to consider a “hero.” The event also works to criticize the basic nature of “heroism”

as defined by society. If Henry can convince himself that he is a hero (when he may as easily have been a “coward) then the term “hero” is meaningless.

Gibson notes that “Henry does not wish to be a hero for heroism’s sake but because he does not want his fellows to regard him scornfully” (Gibson 46). Gibson shows that society’s values can be especially destructive and irrational because they are not based in any absolute morality or rational understanding of good and bad qualities for a human being. Rational decision making never enters the thought process of a human who is subjugated by a collective as he must accept the values and follow them or else face shame from his peers. Even if one considers Henry’s deception to be a subversion of the collective, we must remember that these ideologies are arbitrary and unless he wished to incur their wrath, Henry would have been foolish to admit his deception. Crane’s conclusively pessimistic outlook on human agency is exemplified as the individual faces the collective.

The final scenes of *Red Badge* have provoked much controversy among critics as they seem to show Henry legitimately capturing some sort of heroism as he bears his army’s flag and charges towards the enemy. However, despite Henry’s apparent role as leader of the mob of soldiers charging towards danger, Crane’s writing makes it plainly clear that Henry is in no way acting outside of the collective. Crane’s language repeatedly emphasizes the lack of free will and the influence of peers which motivates this final drive. Even though Henry is at the front of the advance, Crane describes the army in a way that suggests that the movement was uncontrolled by any individual.

Crane never describes individuals within the collective besides the protagonist who he has been following throughout the novel. He even refers to the Union soldiers

again by color as a “mob of blue men...suddenly wild with an enthusiasm...” (Crane 98). This language that suggests an uncontrolled and unreasoned decision to move forward continues throughout the description as Henry – not thinking but “feeling” – “felt the daring spirit of a savage, religion-mad. He had not time for dissections, but he knew that he thought of the bullets only as things that could prevent him from reading the place of his endeavor” (Crane 98). In this passage, Henry is compared to someone consumed by religion – by its definition a pursuit of faith and not reason. He had no time for “dissection.” In other words, he had no time to make decisions of his own free will. While religions certainly include great, rational methods of organization and dogmas, they are at the same time popularized by their ability to somehow explain things that cannot be explained by humans. When Henry is compared to someone consumed by such faith, it suggests the mystical and inexplicable connections a believer may feel with a higher power. Even if Henry realized that he was abandoning his own self-interest in deference to the mob, he submitted to this greater power as a religious mystic would submit to the awesome spiritual power of their faith.

Henry’s actions were so irrational that they even trumped his instincts toward self-preservation. Whereas Crane agrees with naturalists who show environmental forces (such as self-preservation) to drive people and not rational thought, Crane takes this philosophy even further when Henry ignores even the deterministic forces of natural instinct to follow the force of the mob behind him. Even as Henry seems to lead and push the mob on, it is the power of this collective that is driving his actions and not any personal agency. Thus, this culminating event does not show Henry to have gone from a

follower of the collective to a leader, but it shows that Henry has followed a trajectory that has allowed him to be completely consumed by the collective.

The irony of man's inability to make his own rational decisions in the face of the collective is seen in many of Henry's decisions throughout the story. As noted in the example above, even when Henry doubted the merit of war that was going on in his country, he was convinced by the tales that his society had told him of the greatness of war. Also, even when the competing force of natural self-preservation moves Henry to do something that contradicts his society (like flee from battle), society – or rather the shame that collective ideological values have instilled in Henry – is the only force that can bring him back to such danger.

For example, after Henry's experience watching the squirrel, he is suddenly driven to go back to fight. He recognizes that,

it was an ironical thing for him to be running thus toward that which he had been at such pains to avoid. But he said, in substance, to himself that if the earth and the moon were about to clash, many persons would doubtless plan to get upon the roofs to witness the collision. (Crane 43)

Henry tried to understand his desire to go back and fight by looking to nature, but ultimately he more greatly desires to be seen as heroic by other humans who would be watching and judging him. This striking example contrasts Henry's meager ability to briefly recognize a more rational personal choice with the overpowering force of society's expectations and shows Crane's philosophy on the impotence of human agency. Certainly, Henry's conception of heroism links glory to masculinity. For example, Henry had to leave his mother and disobey her initial advice so that he could join the

army. Likewise, when Henry leaves his hometown to go fight the war, he imagines that he sees a “girl whom he had gazed at steadfastly, and he thought she grew demure and sad at sight of his blue and brass” (Crane 7). Therefore, masculinity and heroism can be linked and Crane’s examination of heroism in *Red Badge* should be understood to reflect the contemporary questioning of masculinity as another societal value that supersedes individual free will. *Red Badge* would have appealed to the reader who felt unsure about his own masculinity as he compared it to society’s expectations. As another example of the collective power subjugating individual free will, the text also helps to explain how a society could push men towards an arbitrarily created understanding of masculinity. Therefore, in the same way that Crane’s treatment of heroism shows an arbitrary and often uncontrollable label dictated by society, Johanningsmeier’s criticism focuses heavily on the “masculinity crisis” in late nineteenth century America (Johanningsmeier 241). He argues that contemporaries linked Crane’s text to these problems of masculinity. He evidences this statement by looking at the newspapers that *Red Badge* was printed in and identifying advertisements for products that would restore manhood. He notes that these products (as well as articles on “manhood”) were placed near Crane’s text. The “crisis of masculinity” and its origins again support the irrational and dominating forces of human mobs to create expectations and force members to follow these demands at all costs.

Crane’s *Red Badge* shows something much more unique than a traditional understanding of naturalistic determinism because it identifies the major competing forces that affect man and prevent true self-determination. Gibson offers one example of a competing collective force as he argues that “Henry’s sense of heroism is a false sense

because, having its roots in myth and fairy tale, it does not derive from experience, but from knowledge transmitted through tradition” (Gibson 46). Thus, heroism is false because it is created by societal tradition.

Furthermore, this shows Crane’s belief that only experience can relay truth – not tradition. In other words, despite society’s best efforts to think and plan rationally, only personal experience can truly allow rational decision-making in the face of mistaken traditions and blindly irrational mobs. This is a criticism of socially-constructed values and stories. The mob clearly acts in the interest of no single individual and even if individual components were aware of its own destructive power, the mob could not adapt. While individual soldiers may be able to realize the fallacy in the mob’s conception of war, the mob itself will never change towards a moral or rational end. Clearly the mob possesses a power that trumps the individual in every way possible. Furthermore, when human components of the mob realize the fallacy of their collective, they often still seem to want to remain a part of it and even promote it as Henry seems to do in the final scenes of *Red Badge*. This is not to say that individuals never can escape a mob that they realize is on the wrong path, but it is easy to become caught up in the mob mentality.

Returning to the idea of society’s flawed values, Crane argues that human society is not a reliable source for any sort of truth and again original experience is the only way to make good, truly rational decisions. This is identified by both the narrator and Henry from the outset of the novel. When his comrades tell the boy war-stories, Henry “could not put a whole faith in veterans’ tales, for recruits were their prey” (Crane 8). Yet, while Henry realizes that he cannot trust these men, his inexperience means that

he still does not question other societal ideas of heroism and glory. The mob's force triumphs over the blank slate that is Henry. This example is also important because it shows the importance of the point of view chosen by Crane. The narrator uses the irony and the obvious inexperience of Henry to show that his belief in war as glorious may be flawed. Meanwhile, Henry is also questioning society but failing to connect his questioning to a larger criticism of his values because of his inexperience.

Throughout *Red Badge*, Henry is carried along by an environment made up of a mass of men. Crane writes of Henry's position in the Army that, "[i]t enclosed him. And there were iron laws of tradition and law on four sides. He was in a moving box" (Crane 19). This again supports the idea that as a result of society, Henry was moving against what his theoretical free will would suggest. It is especially important that Crane suggests "iron laws of tradition and law" surround Henry. These words support the argument that Crane saw societal and especially mob values as inflexible and unrelated to the desires and experienced understandings of the individual. Society is centered on ideas of "tradition" that promote the ideas that Henry had understood about war. These traditions support Homeric myths of war and the appeal of a heroic outcome to war.

Crane also notes "law" as another aspect of the box that encloses Henry. Law is a reflection of society's constructed traditions and it also represents the authoritarian institutions that are the real forces behind wars. Furthermore, it is important to note that the law of a democratic government can often reflect "mob mentality." As a society votes to enact legislation, their collective power now influences people on an individual level by applying the ideas of the mob to individual cases. Even though Henry did not understand the origins or much of the ideology behind the Civil War, he was convinced

by democratically-elected governmental institutions to neglect his own destiny and fight for them. The narrator again agrees with this interpretation as he writes that “[Henry] had not enlisted of his free will. He had been dragged by the merciless government. And now they were taking him out to be slaughtered” (Crane 19). The government could only have come about by the influence of a human mob.

Indeed, the ideologies of a government are incredibly forceful and capable of subjugating the free will of individuals. While a democratic regime is intended to protect the individual from small, deterministic groups of people, Crane shows that the subjugation of human agency is impossible to escape. Perhaps especially in a democracy, society’s “mob” values are enacted in policy as masses of people campaign and vote in large blocks.

While the application of Crane’s theories on mob mentality to democratic government could warrant an entirely separate examination, it should be noted here that democracy certainly does not guarantee the expression of free will. Collectives of people still promote values and individuals are still overpowered by these collectives, likely even more so as these collectives see a tangible outlet (in the campaigning and voting process) for their ideologies in their mass membership.

In the examples noted above, Stephen Crane shows that Henry’s destiny is shaped not by truly “natural” forces of a natural environment, but by the forces of groups of men. As the mob of humanity formed a society of rules and traditions, this society created an expectation that a young man like Henry should go to war. On a smaller and even more chaotic level, the force of a mob can be seen in the way an army behaves. Henry may not have realized humanity’s influence when he felt consumed by a desire to



go to war, but he does realize the great influence that his surrounding mob has on him as his comrades force him to advance unthinkingly into battle.

While we have so far analyzed “society” as one mob-like force that perpetuates traditions of mythological war and heroism, it should be noted that Henry’s influence is not so much a monolithic “society” but he also is influenced by the traditions and values that he has collected from many different parts of his society. Even if Crane’s work in *Red Badge* attempts to show the great power of a human society to influence a man’s values and thus his actions, the individual still has to construct his own set of values. Henry’s values are influenced by many different factors but they are certainly not determined by Henry himself. Crane has made it clear that larger forces such as the mob will triumph to determine a man’s destiny.

For example, even though Crane seems to work to present Henry as an “everyman” by giving him a common name and providing the reader with very little background information, it should still be noted that Henry is a white man living in the North. It is likely that Crane was influenced by both his readership and by his own upbringing as a white man in New England to make this decision. Crane uses mythical stories of Greek heroism to exemplify a typical path that a young white man could have made use of to fulfill his traditional expectations to be a hero. Just one of many counterpoints to this conception can be seen in the African-American experience during this era. It is unlikely that a Southern black slave would have been raised with the same conceptions of heroism and masculinity that Henry has found in the Greek myths.

Crane's specific choice of this character helps his unique philosophy of an individual’s helplessness in the face of his collective society. These white societies

believe that Greek stories are a part of their history, and by exalting the Greek examples, white societies keep their history remembered. Intentionally or not, Crane's reliance on a Western European tradition of glorifying warfare exhibits the racial and gender traditions that exist in human society's expectations. One could even say that society promotes race and gender as tradition. By glorifying racial pride or masculinity as ancient and unquestionable values, Henry is further convinced that he must go to war to satisfy his legacy.

In fact, Crane writes of Henry's allegiance to such a legacy many times in the initial pages of the novel. Besides the quotes about "Homeric" and "Greek-like" struggles that evoke the Caucasian, Western tradition, Crane includes many other European historical references. Henry (by virtue of his American upbringing) associates war with "heavy crowns and high castles" (Crane 5). Ultimately, all of these images that Henry's society had attached to battle came out of a tradition that would not be so readily embraced by a non-white American. It is also important to note that none of Henry's aspirations to fight had anything to do with the liberation of African-American slaves, the maintenance of a national union, or any other universal moral values but were rather a part of a cultural and likely racial tradition.

Crane also presents other influences that represent different segments of society. For example, Henry's mother contrasts the mythical ideas that Henry has formed of war. She is apprehensive about Henry joining the army and to Henry's surprise, she does not agree with Henry's ingrained ideas about war and heroism. When Henry first reveals to his mother that he is leaving home to fight, Crane writes that Henry's mother "disappointed him by saying nothing whatever about returning with his shield or on it"

(Crane 6). Henry had hoped that his mother would see the glory in the Greek mythical tradition of returning with one's shield (in glorious victory) or on one's shield (in glorious death). Here, Henry's mother contradicts his understanding of war by presenting a different vision. She narrowed his visions of heroism as she warns him that he is "jest one little feller amongst a hull lot of others...I know how you are, Henry" (Crane 6). The mother has not been raised to fulfill the masculine tradition of war in Western society and thus she does not sympathize with her society's expectation for Henry to fight. Unfortunately for mankind, individual counterpoints – based on experience or alternate sets of morals – seem to never overshadow the force of collectives.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION

This thesis has aimed to highlight a new aspect of Crane's philosophy in the *Red Badge of Courage*. While other critics have simply attempted to place Crane in a framework of naturalism, we have shown that Crane's philosophy transcends such definition and it should be read on its own as a unique extension of the naturalist tradition. Crane uniquely proves that human forces can work side by side with natural forces in foiling free will, but the human forces may be even more powerful than the forces identified by other naturalists. This new reading combines natural forces along with societal forces in one philosophy. Thus, while previous critics have worked hard to fit this author into their definitions of a tradition of literary naturalism, our reading, if named, might better be called "social naturalism." Instead of trying to fit Crane purely into a naturalist tradition, we recognize the great importance that society and the human capacity plays in his beliefs about the destiny of human individuals. Crane believed that his scientific determinism could explain all aspects of human destinies. Importantly, this was clearly a time when great changes were taking place in the way people saw the

human species. Crane certainly considered the new ideologies developing in modern society as he expressed his philosophy on humanity's helplessness.

In his novel, Crane shows that despite the great influences of natural forces, human forces hold the final say on men's destinies in modern society. Societal forces might, on the surface, be grouped together by critics with the natural forces of a man's environment or their origin might even be completely ignored but Crane was astute to identify them as superior. Critics often consider only Crane's take on a human's "environment" and they fail to notice the special attention and criticism he pays to man-made forces. Yet, these forces are not static like the instinctual, natural desires shared by humans and animals but humans create and modify this force. This is an extremely important distinction as these forces can be recognized as the product – albeit uncontrolled – of men.

Unfortunately for the destiny of people, even though humans create the force, they seem incapable of controlling it. For example, even though the ideologies of a mob may derive from one man's opinion, a mob that adopts such an ideology maintains little to no control and even a mentality based in rationality can become a meaningless and emotional force. Thus, in the new reading of Crane and his understanding of humanity, the mob can be considered irrational in its intentions and unresponsive to any human desire. It was this irrationality and lack of control that may have led to a bitter, internal war in America and Crane's portrayal of this aspect of humanity is one comforting explanation for such a terrible event.

Without a doubt, *Red Badge's* success and the origins of Crane's philosophy should be understood in the context of the recent civil war and an aggressive and rapidly

industrializing and modernizing America. Not only does our “social naturalist” reading of Crane show his determination to remove agency from the individual, but the fact that he interrogated this idea in a novel that is arguably critical of the civil war shows that he was thinking about this event. It is difficult to make any conclusions about motivations for the authorship of *Red Badge* – whether it was to remove blame for the war, consciously or unconsciously or just to express a revelation in naturalist philosophy.

Ultimately, as Crane built his novel on the realities that he saw in his country, this reading should help us ground our own conceptions of society. By recognizing the lack of rhyme or reason to the “mob”, we see that our shared beliefs and traditions are but uncontrollable forces that eternally draw a bleak and hopelessly winding path for humanity. Crane did not just remove agency from human beings to escape blame for transgressions. He combined this idea with an acknowledgment that men do exert a force that shapes their world. However, he concluded that this was an irrational and uncontrollable power.

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