Henry Fleming: An Uncertain Boy’s Metamorphosis into a Definitive Man

by Michael P. Moran

Henry Fleming’s personal reflections in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* are those of uncertainty, of a naïve boy who through his cowardice, observations, and conflicts abandons his immature preconceived notions of war and glory and settles as a man, as immaterial as he may be, in the war machine.

From the novel’s opening chapter, gossip establishes the foundation for uncertainty. Jim, the tall soldier, returns to the regiment “with a tale he had heard from a reliable friend, who had heard it from a truthful calvaryman, who had heard it from his trustworthy brother” (5). The tale is no story to share around the campfire, no entertaining yarn to unravel at leisure with friends; Jim’s information concerns every soldier’s life in the regiment, including Henry Fleming’s. Fleming’s first personal reflection emerges from this gossip, and his meditations in that hut with “the cluttered floor” and “the smoke from the fire...[that] wreathed into the room” (7) further the uncertainty, the disbelief. He thinks “perhaps” he will enter a battle the next day, but “he could not accept with assurance an omen that he was about to mingle in one of those great affairs of the earth” (7). Since Jim’s information passed through three human filters before reaching the regiment and the setting in the hut is not conducive to lucid thought, Henry, an untested youth, cannot distinguish his emotions.

Henry Fleming’s conflict of conscience continues as the battle, ever-looming, delays further. The men march, dig into the earth, erect walls of stone and dirt to shield themselves from musket fire that seems to never come, then abandon their self-dug shallow graves to march
farther and repeat the process. After a third erection and abandonment, the narrator notes, “they were marched from place to place with apparent aimlessness” (33). Since Fleming knows so little about himself and his potential for courage or cowardice in battle, since to his leaders and himself he is “an unknown quantity” (13), Fleming needs combat to discover his nature, to determine if he is, when the time comes, “a man of traditional courage” (33). Until he engages in combat, Henry Fleming will remain uncertain of his capabilities, self-conscious of his decision to enlist, and impatient for his war-proven self-realization.

Part of Fleming’s uncertainty spawns from his father’s absence and his mother’s indifference to his adolescent patriotism. The narrator identifies the Fleming land as “his mother’s farm” (9), and Henry’s mother refers to her husband in the past tense as she cautions her son “to be a good boy” when he goes into battle (10). Fathered yet fatherless, Henry seeks the approval of military patriarchs and fears the veterans’ jibes. Attempting to construct an excuse, an acceptable version of his separation from the regiment that portrays him as a wise warrior rather than a scared boy, Henry admits, “he mortally feared these shafts [of derision]” (85). After rejoining his regiment and retreating from a sobering skirmish, the veterans mock the beaten youth, and “the youth’s tender flesh was deeply stung by these remarks” (147). He wants paternal praise, but to most of these soldiers, save a few who treat him with tenderness, Henry Fleming is a body to charge and fire at opposing forces. Before he even enters battle, his mother warns him of war’s reality. Henry imagined a grand send off, one where his mother, tears in her eyes, pride swelling her chest, would say something about “returning with his shield or on it” (9). But Henry’s mother robs him of that Spartan farewell and reminds her son that he, “one little feller,” equates to a speck, another, though smaller, body to fill the earth. Her actual response to Henry’s enlisting falls short of his expectations and serves as Henry’s first taste of bitter realities.
Perhaps if his father testified to the individual’s insignificance, Henry would have listened more attentively rather than disregard his mother’s cautions with impatient frustration.

The external uncertainties extend beyond characters’ gossips, unclear commands, and failed expectations. The clouded environment created by mankind’s destruction causes confusion and limits Henry’s reflections. In the blackness before dawn, Fleming “could occasionally see dark shadows that moved like monsters” (19). As soldiers march, “a dun-colored cloud of dust floated away to the right” (21). As battle ensues, “wild yells came from behind the walls of smoke” (39) and “across the smoke-infested fields came a brown swarm of running men who were giving shrill yells” (41). At one point, Fleming feels lost in the clouds, “buried in the smoke” where “swirling phantoms...[stuff] their smoke robes down his parched throat” (45). In the chaos of battle, Henry cannot distinguish his enemy. They become shadows and ghosts, dark figures roaming in the distance, haunting clouds of gunfire. Soldiers scurrying from enemy fire add to the chaos and uncertainty at dusk, a time that is neither night nor day, when men “gabbled insanely” and ran “hither and thither” and artillery causes a “jumble of ideas and direction” (88). Even in Henry’s zealous burst on the battlefield, when he reloads and fires, reloads and fires like a man possessed by his hatred, “he saw, under the lifted smoke, a deserted ground” (124). “His vision is obscured by smoke and dimmed by powder” (Wertheim 63). The smoke shrouds the enemy, palls the purpose, as the Civil War did. Are the enemies red-eyed demons seeking to satisfy the war god’s bloodlust, or are they haggard, gray-clad men, brothers, as vulnerable to death as the frightened Henry Fleming?

The contrast to man’s nebulous setting and his shadowed enemies rises and peers through the smoke, offering Henry Fleming momentary peace and opportunity for self-reflection. If darkness archetypically signifies ignorance, the absence of knowing, then the sun and its light
represent the knowledge gained. As battles wane and Henry experiences moments of quiet, “he has time for the luxury of indulging...lead[ing] him to several surprising, related conclusions...that, so far from fighting a private war, he has been a mere eddy in a huge current,” that “the current itself is of no importance...that one’s role in battle is neither noble nor ignoble” (Stone 324). As Henry must experience the conflicts of war to reach these conclusions, the sun’s rays must wend through the smoke to illuminate Henry’s epiphanies.

During battle, then, Henry Fleming cannot exist as the individual and can only react to the circumstances before him. In his first battle, Henry “lost concern for himself” and “could not flee, no more than a little finger can commit a revolution from a hand” (44). His thoughts, once a form of escape from the monotony of marching, evade him as the physical realities of war, “a blistering sweat, a sensation that his eyeballs were about to crack like hot stones, a burning roar [that] filled his ears” (44), overload his senses. Separation from direct conflict, with his life no longer at risk, grants Fleming the opportunity to reflect. When his regiment holds fire, Henry hears muskets exploding from every direction, growing aware for the first time that his personal battle did not encompass the scope of the war (48). When Fleming does flee battle, he justifies his decision to himself, claiming, “his actions had been sagacious things” since if the army were to survive and fight another day, its individual members had to survive first (56). He escapes with his life and, no longer in fear of his life, certain that he is alive, Fleming can analyze the diminutive battle he evaded and the insignificant men who fight and die. From the safety and silence of the woods, Fleming concludes “individuals must have supposed that they were cutting the letters of their names deep into everlasting tablets of brass, or enshrining their reputations forever in the hearts of their countrymen, while, as to fact, the affair would appear in printed reports under a meek and immaterial title” (62). Temporarily saved from the uncertainty of war,
aware of his own irrelevance, Henry returns to his regiment and battles for definitive proof of his character.

It is important to note, though, that Henry Fleming does not narrate *The Red Badge of Courage*. This narrative style offers a “vision of reality that is not the narrator’s own, but that of a fictional character, the so-called ‘vision avec’” (Cohn 500). In describing the novel’s events, the narrator “constructs similes with such words as ‘seemed,’ ‘appeared,’ ‘looked,’ and ‘as if’ to establish doubleness” (Albrecht 489). This doubleness conveys the uncertainty Fleming experiences. The narrative monologue, as Cohn coins the technique, “start[s] from a neutral and objective stance...and only gradually...narrow[s] their focus to the figural mind” (504). Henry Fleming may view skirmishes in the woods as “great affairs of the earth,” but the narrator asserts a different view of war, thus building on the uncertainty. Prior to enlisting, Fleming gleaned his doe-eyed vision of war from books; thus war, in general was “great,” “Homeric,” “large” and “extravagant” with the promise of “glory” for those who partook (8). Even after fleeing his first encounter, Fleming feels drawn to the war. “Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him” (62-3); he feels a “mothlike quality” within him (83), and like the fire to the moth, war attracts and scorches the youths involved.

The narrator’s grotesque descriptions of death illustrate the reality chiseling away Henry’s monolith of glorified war. “Crane does not attempt to hide his observer [the narrator]” and “the reader is convinced of the deceptiveness of reality” (Albrecht 487, 489). Jim’s death challenges the myth of noble deaths in battle. Jim, like a sick and dying dog, wanders away from the troops, repeating, “Leave me be.” Following a frenzy of twitching, kicking, heaving convulsions, upon Jim’s face, “the mouth was open and the teeth showed in a laugh” (73). The narrator’s description accentuates the uncertainty of such a scene, noting, “to the two watchers
there was a curious and profound dignity in the firm lines of his awful face” (72). “Awful” and “dignity” somehow coexist, as the narrator’s religious imagery attests in this scene and others.

Jim’s movements are described as “ritelike,” and he, the dying, as “a devotee of a mad religion,” with death referred to as a “ceremony at the place of meeting” (72-3). Jim’s life appears as one wasted, yet the religious imagery infuses meaning to his death. The narrator uses similar language to describe Henry’s first encounter with a corpse. While frolicking through the woods after he escapes battle, Henry finds himself at a place “where the high, arching boughs made a chapel...there was a religious half light” (59). Ostensibly, this place of peaceful piousness suits a youth running through the woods, yet in that chapel rots a yellow-mouthed, fish-eyed corpse, and “over the gray skin of the face ran little ants” (59). At a later battle, a sergeant receives a musket shot through the cheeks, while “bodies twisted into impossible shapes” (156). Death surprises Henry Fleming, consumes him with fear and rage, and while he struggles to comprehend his place in this battle and world, the narrator insists a religious experience. Life, in the ants on the corpse, in the fury Henry feels following Jim’s death, in the sun shining on and bloating corpses, does not stop for any death. Of that, Henry Fleming can feel certain.

Those who survive battle emerge reborn. Following Henry’s musket bludgeoning, he observes in his comrade Wilson a change. “He showed a quiet disbelief in his purpose and his abilities. And this inward confidence evidently enabled him to be indifferent to little words of other men aimed at him” (104). Wilson, the boisterous complainer, the boy from earlier chapters, died when opposing forces fired musket balls at him, and Wilson, the man who knew real danger and saw no harm in men’s words, survived. Nursing his “red badge of courage,” Henry’s personal symbol of shame but his outward representation of battle-tested manhood, Henry can reflect on Wilson’s change and comprehend his own necessary path toward growth. In the
closing paragraphs of the novel, the narrator reinstates the religious imagery with two words: “It rained” (171). Henry Fleming charges into battle, engages in a fire-fight, risks his life to perform the duties of standard bearer and wage patriotism in the face of danger, and while fire and heat contrast with his earlier cowardice, the rains christen Henry Fleming a man. He achieves manhood because of his final epiphany: “He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death” (171). No more will he fear shadows or ghouls or red-eyed spirits hollering behind walls of smoke. He looked into the eyes of soldiers, of friends and strangers, as death claimed them, and death, the only certainty, puts the child to bed despite its tantrums so the man could rise. Fleming’s closing thoughts in the novel reflect the clarity of a man emerging from chaos, a man in search of “tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace” (171). Death, as witnessed in Jim’s struggle, brings peace.

In the concluding chapter, Henry’s thoughts emerge as a single ray of sun breaks through the gray clouds, yet Albrecht claims “Fleming dreams of a peace he has no right to expect” (492). Henry, because he has certainties, obtains the right to expect that peace. He resolves his internal conflict resulting from his self-doubt when he holds his ground and advances into battle despite obvious dangers to himself. He sees in Wilson how the war-tempered man can achieve a calmness of character despite the possibility of death. He knows death will meet every man; therefore, he need not fear the inevitable. Ultimately, if Henry Fleming continues to find pockets of silence amidst musket and cannon fire, if he retreats into the woods or his mind, then his reflections will lift him above his bitterness against generals, lieutenants, enemies, and the injustice of war so he can glance the scope of these battles and accept his limited role in them.
Works Cited


