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Author(s): Kirk M. Reynolds

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The Red Badge of Courage: *Private Henry's Mind as Sole Point of View*

KIRK M. REYNOLDS

SINCE ITS FIRST PUBLICATION in book form in 1895, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, now available in the authoritative edition by Bradley and others, has elicited a spectrum of interpretations that invariably are seeking a coherent structure that will adequately account for the ending of the novel.¹ When we read in the last paragraphs that Henry Fleming has become a man, "his soul changed," can we believe it? When we reach the last sentence of the novel, whose observation about the appearance of sunshine on that rainy day do we read? And what does such a final sentence indicate about the meaning of the novel? The critics have argued inconclusively that the ending is affirmative, ironic, ambiguous, or, because the problems seem irresolvable, that Crane's work is flawed.² Robert Rechnitz concludes that "it is impossible to take the final four paragraphs as either intentionally straight-forward or ironic in tone" (86). Henry Binder agrees that the published text, the Appleton text, "does not make sense" and that this text "terminates on an inappropriate note." Binder argues, therefore, that "the ambiguity in the final Appleton paragraphs ... exists for one reason: because things are missing" (24-25).

Rejecting Binder's reconstruction that too neatly supplies the so-called missing emendations,³ I offer here an alternative interpretation that finds coherent sense in the published novel and in its ending, simply by reexamining its point of view. Heretofore, all criticisms suggest that Crane's novel has a dual point of view: the reader sees through both Henry Fleming's eyes and those of an outside observer-narrator; in other words, the novel has a limited omniscient viewpoint. I will demonstrate that instead Crane has created a piece of fiction in which the observer-narrator is actually an illusion.

James Nagel's recent study (1980) provides the most thorough analysis of Crane's uses of the limited omniscient viewpoint—"the natural expression of Literary Impressionism"—really a dual viewpoint that Nagel defines as follows:

The point of view Crane employed in *The Red Badge* is basically that of a limited third-person narrator whose access to data is restricted to the mind of the protagonist, Henry Fleming. . . . Although there are a few passages with an intrusive narrative presence, and a few other complicating devices involving temporal dislocations, the central device of the novel is the rendering of action and thought as they occur in Henry's mind, revealing not the whole of the battle, nor even the broad significance of it, but rather the meaning of this experience to him. (52-53)

With this view of the narrator, Nagel points to Henry's "epiphany" in chapter 18, and, by finding that after Henry's epiphany "narrative irony ceases" (61), he represents those critics who find the ending of the novel straightforward and indicative of moral growth in the young soldier. However, such a subtle narrative method as that described above by Nagel offers no clear explanation of just how one determines which sentences one will read as only accurate renderings of thoughts in Henry's mind and which sentences as including narrative commentary. For example, when Nagel reads in chapter 18, "New eyes were given to him," and in chapter 24, "And at last his eyes seemed to open to some new ways," how does Nagel know to read these sentences (or any sentence in all twenty-four chapters) as both Henry's thought and narrative observation instead of as only the narrator's comment or as only the boy's thought? Why should we readers be more inclined to read these sentences as epiphany rather than irony, or as irony rather than ambiguity, or as ambiguity rather than a flaw? The dual viewpoint promoted by Nagel and all other critics of *Red Badge* leads us either to rather arbitrary decisions about meaning or to observations similar to Rechnitz's puzzlement about the ending.

Because all previous interpretations, all of which suggest the dual viewpoint, fail to resolve the problems of the ending, I propose that, before we write off the work as flawed, we reevaluate Crane's novel as one in which the reader sees *only* through Henry's eyes and mind. There is not someone else watching. The novel merely seems to have an outside narrator until the subjective ending surprisingly redefines

the previous point of view to be only Henry's. The ending indicates not the novel's ambiguity but its point of view. *Red Badge* is an interior monologue.

To define the prose technique that I suggest Crane employed, let us look at a more recognizable example of the same technique, which may be found in Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," a story that has three distinct sections.

In his first section, Bierce presents through an objective third-person point of view the last-minute preparations for the military hanging of a planter, Peyton Farquhar, from a railroad bridge. Towards the end of this section, the point of view shifts subtly into the mind of the man who, with noose already around his neck, awaits hanging and looks at the stream beneath his feet, and the movement into his thoughts is evident. But at the end of the section, the point of view becomes objective again: "As these thoughts . . . were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it the captain nodded to the sergeant. The sergeant stepped aside." Because the sergeant's weight is all that prevents the plank upon which the planter stands from falling, this last sentence indicates sure death. Clearly, in section one Bierce has established a distinct dual point of view.

In section two, Bierce presents an entirely objective flashback to the incident that causes the planter to be in the predicament of execution. It would seem at the end of section two that little remains for discussion or observation except a dead planter.

Bierce provides, however, a third section that begins with the following:

As Peyton Farquhar fell straight downward through the bridge he lost consciousness and was as one already dead. From this state he was awakened—ages later, it seemed to him—by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation. . . . These sensations were unaccompanied by thought. . . . Then all at once, with a terrible suddenness, the light about him shot upward with the noise of a loud splash; a frightful roaring was in his ears, and all was cold and dark. The power of thought was restored; he knew that the rope had broken and he had fallen into the stream. (13)

In this paragraph, after the first objective observation, Bierce seduces the reader into reentering the mind of the man who, by all rights, should be dead at this point, and Bierce seduces the reader into

assuming that the man's perceptions of the actual situation are reliable. In this section, Bierce seems to use the subtle dual point of view that Nagel ascribes to *Red Badge*.

Bierce maintains this apparent duality in describing Farquhar's successful escape and return to his home, and the reader believes the distorted, blurred details and confusion of action to be a logical result of Farquhar's traumatic experience. The subtle dual point of view seems to remain intact as it continues to provide narrative of this dreamlike journey which eventually leads Farquhar to his home and wife.

At the end, however, Bierce shocks the reader with his last two sentences. The first of the two is apparently a continuation of the action and the dual point of view: "As he is about to clasp her [his wife] he feels a stunning blow upon the back of his neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence!" Abruptly, the next sentence resumes the objective viewpoint seen in sections one and two: "Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge" (18). The effect of this last sentence is to startle the reader into realizing that he has been duped. All of the third section of the story between the first sentence and the last is an expression of the mind of Peyton Farquhar as he dies—there is not objective reality behind any action in this dream. Suddenly, we recognize that what we thought was actually happening was instead a projection of what Farquhar desires most in his last brief moment. Bierce creates the illusion of the dual viewpoint and then uses his last sentence to reveal the true point of view in the preceding narrative.

I propose that Crane's technique in *Red Badge* is similar to Farquhar's dream in the last section of Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"; however, unlike Bierce, Crane provides no objective outside framework to enclose this interior point of view. All of Crane's story from beginning to end comes from Henry's mind and perception, but Crane uses a trick similar in effect to Bierce's in order to clarify his technique: his ending, with ironic surprise, redefines the point of view in the preceding story.

To test this interpretation, we must see if the subjectivity of the last few paragraphs of *Red Badge* can redefine the point of view to be that of the boy Henry alone—an uncomfortable consideration for the reader. In such a case, upon reaching the novel's ending and supposing himself at comfortable objective distance, the reader, who has been amused watching the immature youth be victimized by dra-

matic irony, becomes also the victim of irony: he has been seduced into misreading the novel.

Let us look at the story before Crane's ending. Because many sentences throughout the novel include guide-verbs, such as "seemed," "thought," "felt," and "wished," that clearly indicate the subjective view of Henry, other passages that do not contain such guides must also be interpretable as purely subjective—or else the dual point of view exists.

The opening paragraph of the novel provides a combination of apparently objective details and subjective impressions:

The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened, and began to tremble with eagerness at the noise of rumors. It cast its eyes upon the roads, which were growing from long troughs of liquid mud to proper thoroughfares. A river, amber-tinted in the shadow of its banks, purled at the army's feet; and at night, when the stream had become of a sorrowful blackness, one could see across it the red, eyelike gleam of hostile camp-fires set in the low brows of distant hills. (5)

At first glance, the reader assumes the final metaphor, which expresses a demon in the dark, is the impression of the observer-narrator. A few paragraphs later this narrator seems to display omniscience into Henry's mind: "He [Henry] wished to be alone with some new thoughts that had lately come to him" (6). However, among the thoughts that the boy considers is the troubling sentence: "He could not accept with assurance an omen that he was about to mingle in one of those great affairs of the earth" (7). In seeking the referent for "omen," the reader must admit three possibilities. One ready possibility is that Henry refers to Jim Conklin's "rumor" of imminent troop movement. But the presentation of this rumor, discussed by the men, seems an unlikely omen even for a naive boy, because we assume from the early paragraphs that such a rumor is typical of the many buzzing through the camp. Another possible referent for "omen" is the apparent bad luck of a corporal whose new "costly board floor" (6) will be useless if the camp moves. But this detail seems to be nothing more than an indication of the extreme length of time the men have been encamped.

For a member of this long-positioned, impatient, and rumor-filled

camp, a more likely “omen” would be something of larger significance, and prior to the point of reference, the only paragraph offering promise of change for the entire scene is the first paragraph, cited above. The seasons are changing, fruition is becoming evident, and vision is clearing. If this sense of change is the “omen,” then the indication in this first chapter is that the outside narrator’s “objective” commentary merges with Henry’s later subjective thought to suggest that only one mind presents both.

This view of the first paragraph of chapter 1 is further supported in two paragraphs in the next chapter, before the regiment leaves the camp and moves off to battle. The eleventh paragraph in chapter 2 repeats the “red eyes” metaphor from the beginning of chapter 1: “One morning, however, he found himself in the ranks of his prepared regiment. The men were whispering speculations and recounting the old rumors. In the gloom before the break of the day their uniforms glowed a deep purple hue. From across the river the red eyes were still peering” (15). Taken alone, the sentence containing the “red eyes” metaphor might seem to be entirely from the outside narrator’s viewpoint. However, examining the context, one will note that, after an initial topic sentence, this paragraph enumerates what Henry is observing. And the word “still” connects this observation with the only previous “red eyes” metaphor in the first paragraph of chapter 1. Two paragraphs later, another use of the “red eyes” metaphor occurs: “As he looked all about him and pondered upon the mystic gloom, he began to believe that at any moment the ominous distance might be aflame, and the rolling crashes of an engagement come to his ears. Staring once at the red eyes across the river, he conceived them to be growing larger, as the orbs of a row of dragons advancing” (15). Because in the second sentence “red eyes” best fills the role of antecedent for “them,” we notice again that Henry’s metaphorical view here is the same one that is presented in the first paragraph of chapter 1. If we assume an omniscient separate voice, a dual point of view, then we must wonder when a character expresses impressions that are identical to those expressed earlier by the supposed “outside” viewpoint. Because in such a case the character is looking into the narrator’s mind instead of vice versa, nothing separates Henry’s view from that of the apparent omniscient narrator. Without separation, the dual view is no more; only Henry’s view remains.

If the point of view is entirely from Henry’s mind, each sentence need not blatantly remind the reader of this viewpoint. Subtlety cannot exist otherwise. Many sentences exist in this story that, if

taken out of context, do seem entirely objective. An example of such sentences is the first mentioning of Henry in the early paragraphs of chapter 1: "There was a youthful private who listened with eager ears to the words of the tall soldier and to the varied comments of his comrades" (6). Even in its immediate context such a sentence seems an objective comment by an outside observer. But taken in context of the few subtle indicators in chapters 1 and 2 mentioned above, this sentence could also represent a subjective mind observing its own persona, in this case a mildly egotistical and, for all we know, accurate perception.

To further this argument, I suggest that we consider scenes in the novel from a position that Edwin H. Cady defines: "He [Crane] handles point of view more like a movie camera than perhaps any predecessor had done. The reader stands to see somewhere back of Fleming's eyes. Sometimes the reader gets the long 'panning' shot, sometimes the view only Henry could see, sometimes an interior view ..." (120). Although Cady is trying to define a dual point of view, he hits upon exactly the right explanation of the single view-point. Just as any one mind has moments of external "panning" for action and details, moments of internal reflection, and other moments of mixed detail and interpretation, so does the mind of Henry Fleming.

Most important to this argument for a single point of view is evidence that Henry's mind and physical presence coexist reasonably with all "objective" observations in each scene. Otherwise, his perception could not be the only point of view. Two examples of the relationship of cameralike views to Henry's presence can be found in the extremes of the novel. At the beginning, when "a youthful private" is first mentioned, the point of view follows him as "he went to his hut. ... He wished to be alone ..." (6). Once inside the hut, the boy lies on his cot, and the reader receives apparently "objective" descriptions of details. But the arrangement of the details is in an order that might be best seen by the boy's eyes "panning" the room from his position on the cot at one end of the room.

Turning to the crucial last chapter, we find that another example of this relationship between viewpoint and Henry's presence also ends the novel. In the last two sentences of the novel, we learn: "He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace. Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds" (109). Taken out of context, the last sentence could be an objective observation. "Golden" and "leaden" could be descriptions of color.

However, the preceding sentence is clearly a subjective view through Henry's imaginings, and the movement from the one sentence to the other suggests that the last sentence is also subjective: either entirely a metaphor for the boy's perspective or a subjective view of the literal sky in front of Henry as he looks up—subjective in the sense that the primary emphasis is on “a golden ray of sun” instead of the subordinated “leaden rain clouds,” a priority of detail that matches perfectly the idealized view of nature in the preceding sentence. Upon reaching the ending, we realize these examples indicate that, in spite of the apparent dual perspective throughout, the viewpoint is Henry's from beginning to end. This indication holds true for every sentence of apparent objectivity in the novel because we see only when Henry sees. When Henry sleeps and his perception and mind are inactive at the end of chapters 1 and 13, the action and commentary break off and do not resume until he is awake at the beginning of the next chapter. Because of so many apparent objective observations throughout, the reader tends to disregard the subtle clues suggesting a single viewpoint and assumes the presence of the observer-narrator. However, by ironically confirming Henry's viewpoint, the final sentences force the surprised reader to reconsider the preceding tale.

What kind of mind presents or dreams this tale of soldiering? As other critics have accurately noted,⁴ the tale indicates that Henry is childish and does not change. He is an egotistical brat whose thoughts and actions move in circles and only mimic the behavior of any nearby group. When confronted with any situation requiring personal integrity or individual responsibility, Henry escapes by becoming involved in a group and forgetting the troubling previous situation.

Because all comes from Henry's mind and because such a novel depends on the reader's mature perceptions to make distinct Henry's immaturity by providing an external frame of reference, Henry's perception is the theme of the novel. We have no way of clearly defining anything else through Henry's distorted vision except Henry's perception. Nature and other themes exist in this novel much like the “rumors” in chapter 1. Possibly, there is no objective reality behind any of this story; it may all be a dream. Therefore, the novel is not naturalistic in any sense and only realistic in a psychological sense. The whole work consists of impressions of a childish consciousness that cannot perceive its own lack of maturity. But from this journey inside Henry's mind, the reader infers a clear message: any individual or group must overcome egotistical perception to some extent, to any extent, in order to mature and coexist with the rest of

the universe. Otherwise, the mind ironically imprisons itself, as does Henry's mind. His military rank is appropriate but eerie: "Private" Henry Fleming. The ironic ending is even more horrifying than that in Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."

Finally, as additional but secondary support for my suggestion of a connection between the Crane and the Bierce stories, biographical information reveals the possibility that Crane specifically used "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" as a model for his technique in *Red Badge*. Bierce's tale first appeared in serial form in the *San Francisco Examiner* of 13 July 1890 (12) and in 1892 in *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (Grenander 175), that is, more than two years before *Red Badge* was published as a novel. In the context of this chronology, the following anecdote, related by Robert H. Davis, could be significant. In 1896, while working for the *New York Journal*, Davis, who had known Bierce when he worked in San Francisco before coming to New York, sought an introduction to Stephen Crane in order that Davis might relay to Crane Bierce's favorable reaction to *Red Badge*. After failing to gain an interview, Davis happened to see Crane late at night on the street in New York and invited Crane to accompany him to the nearby bar of the Imperial Hotel. About this encounter Davis writes:

It was there, jostled by all sorts and conditions of laymen, that I told Crane what Bierce had said of him. He made no comment whatever but seemed content to slide his glass of whisky up and down a wet spot that glistened on the walnut bar.

In one corner of the room there was a group of rubber plants in tubs.

"If we were in Cuba now," observed Crane, "there would be five murderers with drawn machetes behind those Brooklyn palms. Two of them would be candidates for office."

His glass continued to glide up and down the bar while his mind shifted back to an earlier subject.

"Read Bierce's 'Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge!'"

I informed him that I had.

"Nothing better exists. That story contains everything."

(xix-xx)

In light of the present study of *Red Badge*, we must wonder if, with these words, Crane was offering Davis a clue.

Francis Marion College

NOTES

¹For impressionistic views, see Overland and Wyndham; for naturalistic views, see Walcutt 75-82 and Pizer, "Late"; for a psychological view, see Vanderbilt; for symbolic views, see Hart and Stallman; for structural views, see Solomon, LaFrance, Klotz, and Free.

²For interpretations that find affirmation, see Hart, Stallman, Solomon, LaFrance, Fraser, and Colvert, "Structure"; for one that finds irony, see Walcutt 75-82; for those that find ambiguity, see Marcus and Berryman; for one that finds flaws, see Colvert, "Magic."

³See Binder's edition of *Red Badge*; for a rejection of Binder's text and argument see Pizer, "Rejoinder."

⁴See Walcutt 81-82, Rechnitz 76-87, and Lorch 229.

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