



Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi
The Journal of Social Sciences Institute
Yıl/Year: 2019 – Yaz / Summer Sayı/Issue: 44
Sayfa / Page:53-61

ISSN: 1302-6879 VAN/TURKEY

Makale Bilgisi / Article Info - Geliş/Received: 13.03.2019
Kabul/Accepted: 28.05.2019 - Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

**A COWARD HERO IN
STEPHEN CRANES
THE RED BADGE OF
COURAGE (1895)**

**STEPHEN CRANE'İN
CESARETİN KIRMIZI
ROZETİ (1895) ROMANINDAKİ
KORKAK KAHRAMAN**

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Abstract

Heroism, primarily in wars, has always been one of the focal points in the world literature. In this regard, lots of authors have produced works tackling this issue. Authors either produced their works which were based on true observations or narrations. The most important figures are the war heroes. When Stephen Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*, a very well-known novel of American Literature, he was a fairly young guy with no war experience. Looking at the usual war novels, it is expected to draw the flawless portrait of a hero. In those plots, all the ideal heroes are to leave their family back, willingly committed and ready enough to die, perpetually suffer for their country, and never complain no matter what. This portrait has been drawn for a hero all through the course of time in our collective history of the human kind.

Though quite many critics argue that out of a farm boy Crane creates a real hero at the end of the novel, named Henry Fleming, he proves to be a coward instead of a hero. The diversion of Crane is very clear in that unlike all the other war novels, he flawlessly draws the psychological portrait of a hero in questioning himself and his glorified deeds. This article presents, with all the drawbacks and upheavals of Henry's being too much preoccupied with the idea of battle in his inner self. You are supposed to find the innovation of Crane by creating a fully human being in front of the heroic deeds either to accept or defy them unlike all the other usual war novels.

Keywords: heroism, Stephen Crane, war, drawback, courage.

Öz

Kahramanlık kavramı özellikle de savaşta gösterilmiş kahramanlık kavramı tüm dünya edebiyatlarında en önemli odak noktalarından biri olmuştur. Bu



bağlamda birçok yazar bu kavramla ilgili eserler üretmişlerdir. Yazarlar çoğunlukla ya savaşlara şahit olup eserlerini gözlemlerine dayalı olarak yazmışlar ya da anlatım tekniğine dayalı olarak çalışmışlardır. Eserlerin en önemli figürleri olarak savaş kahramanları göze çarpmaktadır. Stephen Crane Amerikan edebiyatında çok iyi bilinen *Cesaretin Kırmızı Rozeti* adlı eserini yazdığında savaşla ilgili hiçbir tecrübesi olmayan genç bir çocuktur. Sıradan savaş romanlarına baktığımızda kusursuz bir kahraman imgesi çizilmesini bekleriz. Bu bağlamda kusursuz bir kahramandan beklenen ailesini geride bırakması gönüllü olarak ölüme hazır olması, sürekli olarak ülkesi için acı çekmesine rağmen şartlar ne olursa olsun şikâyet etmemesidir. Bu tür bir tablo insanlık tarihi boyunca tüm zamanlarda çizilmiş olan bir kavramdır. Birçok eleştirmen Crane'in romanının sonunda bir çiftlik gencinden Henry Fleming adında bir kahraman yarattığına inansa da, kahraman değil, bir korkak olduğu ispatlanmıştır. Bilindik savaş romanlarının aksine Crane'in kusursuz bir şekilde kendisini ve göz kamaştırıcı başarılarını sorgulayan bir kahraman figure çizmiş olması gayet açıktır. Bu makalede, tüm yetersizlikleri ve başarılarıyla birlikte Henry'nin içsel çatışmanın etkisi altında kalmasıyla, sıradan savaş romanlarından farklı olarak Crane'in kahramanca başarıları Kabul ya da reddederek oluşturduğu sıradan bir insane figure sunulmaktadır.

AnahtarKelimeler: kahramanlık, Stephen Crane, savaş, yetersizlik, cesaret.

Introduction

Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is considered a milestone novel by many literary critics. It has been analyzed in detail from various perspectives. One of these perspectives is a commonly shared idea that the novel is a story of heroism whereas this article argues the opposite. The novel covers a few weeks of the army camping, marching and fighting. And in such a short time, Henry displays quite fluctuating attitudes in contrast to a hero's deeds. It is his busy mind which had drawn for him large pictures "extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds" (Crane, 1962: 32). At the beginning, Henry attempts to run away from the fight but towards the end he chooses the most risky job a man ever can perform; a flag bearer. Despite the fact that enemies were not allowed to shoot at the flag bearers, they had the risk of being shot at any time as the weapons used in the war were inaccurate. There happened some times when the protagonist wanted to escape from the battlefield but he gave up in order to compensate the cowardly things he did. He did not escape from acquiring the flag from the man who was almost dead. Henry is at the age of eighteen and does look for glory and fame in life. He reads from the newspaper on the brave soldiers fighting in the army. He is passionate on one hand and impressed by what he read;

From his home his youthful eyes had looked upon the war in his own country with distrust. It must be some sort of a play affair.

He had long despaired of witnessing a Greek- like struggle. Such would be no more, he had said. Men were better, or, more timid. Secular and religious education had effaced the throat –grappling instinct, or else, firm finance held in check the passions. He had burned several times to enlist. Tales of great movements shook the land. They may not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them. He had read marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures, extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds. (Crane, 1962: 3)

On the other hand, his enthusiasm is hindered by his mother; she discouraged him by claiming many reasons in order to prevent him from attending the war to be considered the best way for him to prove his patriotism. But one thing he does not possess is the strong will and courage for such deeds. And the only thing which compels him is his busy mind. At the very beginning of the novel he wants to obtain glory from the war by experiencing it. As he escapes from the battlefield, he tries to rationalize his tendency by claiming that nature itself requires such an act by exemplifying the escape of a squirrel after being frightened. His justification of the coward attempt from the battlefield leads him to envy his friends and compare himself with the others. Seeing a tattered man who is trying to survive for his children makes him mimic that soldier.

A Coward Hero

Crane calls Henry the youth all through the novel, thus he does not idealize him. He uses the full name Henry Fleming only a few times. The youth stands for, as Alfred Kazin suggested, “Everyman-or at least every man who has the potentiality for courage” (1956: 50). The main target of the novel is to objectify the nature of heroism through Henry Fleming and indicate that pure hero exists in the world. Crane divides the novel into 2 parts, 12 chapters in each. As Dillingham puts forward “the first part of the book deals with the anatomy of cowardice, which is in Henry the result of an active imagination and a disposition to think too much” (1962:195). It is all in this part that Henry escapes after a small encounter with the enemy, “until he receives the head wound in Chapter 12, he is characterized by a romantic and thoughtful self-consciousness. In his anxiety about how he will conduct himself in combat, he speculates constantly about himself and the nature of battle” (Dillingham, 1963: 195). “He tried mathematically to prove himself that he would not run from a battle” (Crane,1962: 35). He is through many ceaseless calculations and does never make his mind for what is right and wrong. He is always uneasy and preoccupied. “The

episode in which Henry is struck by a retreating Union soldier occurs at the center of the novel both physically and thematically. The incident has frequently been called the ironic peak of the story” (Albrecht, 1966:488).

Henry is hit by a soldier at the time of fleeing. Ironically enough, ‘the red badge’ is not given by the enemy, but by a comrade who is, too, deserting his regiment, this is totally against the norms of the traditional heroism. Hence the badge would be not of courage but of cowardice twice. Crane has his hero have the wound in the head, not in the chest or arm. To elaborate on it, it is not too difficult to conceive that Henry has been thinking too much of the battle and thus emerged an endless uneasiness in his mind which misleads him. The mind is of at utmost importance for human beings and people cannot live without. But in *The Red Badge*, the mind happens to be a problem.

The mind is to lead the human beings to the reasonable and sensible but here it causes the psychological downfall of him. It is also essential to mention that he was wounded with the butt of the gun, not with a bullet. That normally soldiers are supposed to be shot, but Henry is not shot, instead only being hit visualized that Crane has brought a hero in all his flesh and blood standing in front of us, rather than an ideal godlike heroic figure placed on the pedestal miles and miles away from us. Therefore, it is not so difficult to identify ourselves with Henry.

During enlisting, Henry is only after the valor and the reputation of becoming a hero. As J. Cutler Andrews notes in his study *The North Reports the Civil War*, due to “the excited state of the public mind . . . both press and government felt that it was neither wise nor safe to reveal the exact truth of a disgraceful episode” (2015: 77). He doesn’t even think about the country’s situation, “He 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. He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all” (2015: 77). Symbolically, after being shut by the gun, as though he has been mentally injured, he does not think too much anymore. Waking up the next morning after his head got wounded, he had the consciousness that he had slept for thousands years and was in another world which he was not familiar with. Also it is worth making a small digression that it is the mind of Henry which turns out to be an obstacle for growing into a hero. And for Henry, most probably, Crane deliberately chooses the head as the organ to get wounded. And now that the head has an injury, it is time for Henry to take action in the war. Bravery is a level which you can only reach through violence and such violence can only be obtained through an empty mind. Never should you think if you

are to fight. As Wood attempts to establish, “there is a conflict within Red Badge between what amounts to violence devoid of coherent meaning and the (later) imposition of meaning—of history—onto that violence” (54). Henry does not call it violence but considers it something falling apart in the hands of the hero. It is exactly what happens to Henry. The only cause compelling Henry is too much preoccupation of his mind. It is not before his head injury that he begins to fight in the battle. Besides it is only after the wound that he starts fighting like a real warrior: shoot at the battle in a frenzied manner, grasping and holding the flag immediately after the color bearer is dead, and the like. The search of the protagonist to prove his masculinity and manhood progresses through the novel. At first, the superficial vision of unthinking brave man is visible which paves the way for an ideal and more mature acceptance. The maturation from unthinking mode of manhood to composed bold man is also a sign of the meaning given to the uniforms by the soldiers.

According to Hoffman, (1957:20) there were many ways via which man can achieve magnificence and it was one these terrific ways. Nevertheless, he considered courage “the product of a complex of nonrational drives”. The difference between the act of external courage and the internal process leading to this movement was created for Crane, one of the highest ironies of life. The novel is full of the imaginary visions of Henry. For example, when he escapes from the battlefield, he walks through the glade and envisions as if he is in a cathedral. Henry thinks that “it was not essential that he should plan his ways in regard to them. He had been taught that many obligations of a life were easily avoided” (Crane, 1962: 47). Similarly, he presumes that the battle is one of them. As Dillingham suggests “in contrast to the thoughtful and romantic boy of the first part of the book, the young warrior of the last twelve chapters is capable of unreason, even self-abandon” (1963:196). At the first sight of the enemy, he “forgot many personal matters and became greatly enraged” (Crane, 1962: 54). He becomes a prideful animal, seeking the throat of the enemy with self-forgetfulness. Being a soldier that was once considered a complete heroism is labelled as an insanity.

Suspending all thought, he fights as a “barbarian, a beast... a pagan” (Crane, 1962: 62). His actions are frequently described as wild. He is unconsciously out in front of the other troops, looking to be an insane soldier: “There was the delirium that encounters despair and death, and is heedless and blind to the odds. It is a temporary but sublime absence of selfishness” (Crane, 1962: 65). As Henry becomes more accustomed to battle and the sight of death, he no longer thinks about the implication of these overwhelming experiences. He sinks into a sub-human dullness and

is thereby able to act courageously. He does not learn to know himself, as one critic asserts,” but to escape himself-to make his mind blank, to become a ‘spectator’ (Dillingham, 1963: 197).

Crane does mention the heroic features of Homer’s time for comparing the ordinary man features to those of the supernatural beings. As widely known, Homer’s era was a time of glory of the warrior and the art of war even Gods were to interfere and intrude into such clashes. As Warren D. Anderson locates the source in the Homeric myth-structure and Arthurian legends, similarly, the effect is quite clear: while Henry does see blood in these struggles, it is always vague and absent. Actual violence and injury are surpassed by the Greek-like struggle: “They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them” (Johnson, 1887: 87). No human psyche is observed or studied in those times, but in Crane, the hero is not a Godlike figure anymore, instead a gray character, with all his good and bad features and flaws. However, in our time, no kind of matchless brevity is witnessed. The man is to think and question himself just like Henry. But in order to leave such hesitations behind, he has to give up thinking that much. For instance, Henry continually asks his comrades if they would run at the time of the battle, trying to get the positive reply for himself to prove himself right. Finally, in the middle of the novel he escapes from his army. On the way, all the snarling possibilities come to his mind and choking him in the darkness of such a big crowd of thoughts. After escaping, Henry strives to find reasons for making himself believe in that he has done the right thing. He even thinks about his comrades who fight as fighting for nothing. He finds a tattered soldier lying in the forest while he is escaping. Though he tries to help him at first, he cannot bear the tattered soldier’s continually asking Henry about his wound. Conversely, he does not have one, and this overwhelming questioning himself leads Henry to abandon him die with no company. It would not be a mistake to call Henry both a coward and an inhumane person. He is so much taken away by the idea of becoming a hero that he leaves the man unaccompanied just with a clean conscience. It would not be a mistake to interpret that too much of insensibility has captured his mind along with his heart. Henry is afraid of many things: He is afraid that his comrades will call him a coward if they find out that he has indeed deserted the regiment, that he will not gain the glory of a hero and of death. He is even afraid of the tattered soldier who is in a pretty bad condition, about to die in a short time. Henry is torn in between his desires and the actual life itself. To reach the glory he craves he has to take the path of facing the enemy.

Twisting the situation, we can note that he has to face himself first so as to face the enemy in the trenches. Such a confrontation would be of

great importance for him, but the only thing he is able to is playing the melody of the song, without any of the lyrics. Thus, he is a man of thoughts, not of action. Therefore, it is clear that Henry remains essentially unchanged during the course of the novel. It is a mistake to think of him as having become rejuvenated through humility or in any way changed into a better person morally. At the final stage, the main figure of the novel can be contended that he got used to adapting to a new environment. To illustrate it with an example, after the last battle is over, he boasts about the deeds of valor he receives. No modesty would happen to emerge in his case in that sense. Henry gets his wound in the middle of the novel and afterwards he is just taken back to his regiment by chance. Henry's heroism emerges after seeing him seizing the flag although he is terribly injured. Knowing how important the flag is Henry does not repeat the small type of cowardice which he showed at the beginning of the book. A marching group passes by, and one of the soldiers gives him a hand. It should be remembered that it is only after he is wounded and very tired, hungry and thirsty when he goes back to his regiment. Crane shows us that the little youth is not a big help to the army, but the thing he needs for turns out to be his regiment itself from which he craved to be away. It is the regiment where he finds some warm sleep, food, company and at last himself. He envisions himself an experienced soldier after witnessing the death wandering hither and thither all through his escape. He sees many dead bodies lying all alone out there. Being unable to turn a blind eye upon them, he ponders on the idea of death. "The Nature would not care if he is dead or not" (Crane, 1962: 74). So he is far from possessing the characteristics of a hero and showing a courageous acts in a real battlefield.

When he goes back to the regiment, he makes everyone believe that the wound on his head is from the battlefield, of course, he does not tell the true story when one of his friends enquiries about where he has been. After his friend cares for his wound, he sleeps and it is only in this sleep that he grows into a man ready to fight. Just like a mother, the regiment gives him a very peaceful hug, a mother always there and always merciful and forgiving. After all, he gets the first aid to his wound in his regiment by one of his comrades. Looking at the novel from a Christian perspective, Henry's salvation is also another matter of suspicion. As Weisbarger argues the Christian references, which have so frequently been a subject of controversy, do not point to rebirth or salvation for Henry (1958:105). The survivor is his body, not his spirit. In Christian doctrine, one should find the salvation through the heart. However, Henry shows us the mind, not his heart. His salvation through the mind is serving a controversy with Christian doctrine in that term.

Conclusion

Thus, without his heart Henry can never lead to salvation. The author is far from naming his protagonist a hero and intentionally does not idealize him. In short, Crane creates Henry so as to draw a prima panorama of an ideal hero who can never live in our contemporary time. Reasoning and questioning along with themselves bring passivity. What Henry does is thinking deeply about everything and this brings about his failure in achieving his aim, gaining valor and glory of a hero. With such a character analysis, Crane introduces the new kind of hero along with all his manly and psychological features. Just like everything in nature, human beings are supposed to reflect their true self. As a human being, Henry acts in accordance with his nature. He questions the notion such as death and the life. The features within him are all inborn, thus he cannot get away from them. The inner self precedes him in Crane- type of hero. The traditional concept of heroism is not reflected through Crane work, on the contrary the frailties, shortcomings and almost all the features prone to human beings are presented so as to reflect the hero as an ordinary being. *The Red Badge of Courage* is the story of the desire of a young soldier to prove his courage in the face of his fear and deficiency. The novel explores various perspectives on the idea of self-preservation or survival instinct. While it is not natural to put someone's life at risk for something like war, so even though it is a way to prove one's manhood, the main character is aware that Henry Fleming cannot be a real man without proving his courage and heroism. Crane makes his readers witness the four-day war via the young Fleming's lenses and he employs him to present the readers with the psychological battles experienced by an individual. It may be contended on one hand that Crane has an anti-war perspective since he did not spare us the tragic dimensions of the war such as death, bloodshed and fighting on the other he tackles what a war means for an individual. The transformational process of the individual is successfully presented in the novel and the protagonist undergoes some changes covering his alteration from selfish and scared personality to a self-confident and strong man in the end. The transformation starts in mind since Henry fights the battles there and then the battlefield becomes the arena where he changes from cowardice to bravery. His motto to be a brave individual and patriot is finally achieved and presented through the writer's lenses.

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