

## Study on Human Weaknesses in Henry in *The Red Badge of Courage*

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As one of Crane's most representative works, *The Red Badge of Courage* has been paid much attention to and studied by scholars at home and abroad from different perspectives since its publication. As for me, I'd like to study on human weaknesses in Henry in *The Red Badge of Courage* to give an analysis of the three main human weaknesses existing in Henry and explore the underlying causes. It will be of great benefit to promote our understanding of the novel from this angle, thus bringing us much practical significance.

*Keywords:* *The Red Badge of Courage*, human weaknesses, Henry

Stephen Crane, one of the best renowned writers in the United States, has created plenty of excellent works, among which the novel *The Red Badge of Courage* has established his unshakable position in the American literary field. *The Red Badge of Courage* has aroused strong repercussions from all walks of life once published. And I'd like to study on the protagonist Henry from the perspective of Human Weaknesses in *The Red Badge of Courage*.

It's the common nature of humankind that is generally called human nature. Human nature has many advantages and at the same time inevitably carries all kinds of weaknesses. As one of the most complex rational animals in the world, the inherent weaknesses of fear, anxiety, self-abasement, cowardice and so forth are the innate nature of us.

There are various human weaknesses which include fear and anxiety, escapism and cowardice, self-abasement existing in Henry.

### Fear and Anxiety

Henry's fear broadly embodies in two levels: external and internal. The former is the fear towards war while the latter the fear to himself. Being imbued with expectation for the war, Henry has imagined for numerous times a scene where he would fight bravely on the battlefield so as to protect the people of his country with his great power. Eventually, inspired by the reports about the march and battle, the sense of heroism deep in Henry's heart is becoming increasingly intense. As a consequence, he firmly makes up his mind to join in the army regardless of the persuasion and opposition of his mother. However, contrary to his original thought of fighting with the enemy bravely and fearlessly on the battlefield, Henry gradually discovers that what swells in his heart is not the surging

passion or endless yearning for the battle but the deep sense of fear which is increasingly intense when the war is drawing near. It is the real combat where cold-blooded fighting and endless deaths are constantly brought about that arouses a deep fear in Henry's heart to make him shiver all over though not cold. As a result of such sense of fear, Henry becomes a deserter in the second battle. The fierce conflict and gap between fantasy and reality leads to Henry's fear to himself for he is afraid that he would become a deserter. However, this kind of psychological conflict cannot be solved or even alleviated for a while, which inevitably leads to the fact that the deep sense of fear can only always accompany him. Until he really becomes a deserter in the second battle, his fear to himself becomes deeper as he is fearful that the fact that he has escaped in the battle would be known by his comrades then he would become a joke in others' mouth and be pointed and laughed at all day long, which is awfully unbearable to him and would arouse a great sense of guilt from his heart. It is inevitable that fear will lead to anxiety. As the war continues to advance, Henry's fear of two levels including both the external and the internal becomes increasingly severe. Nevertheless, there is no way of solution could be uncovered, so Henry's anxiety is increasingly serious. It can be seen from the description of Henry's constant inquiries about the thought towards war of the people around him on account of his uncertainty about whether he would become a deserter.

### **Escapism and Cowardice**

The human weakness of escapism has always been existing in Henry. One of the most obvious embodiment in the novel is the fact that Henry becomes a deserter in the second battle, which is his escape both from the cruel war and himself. As the fear towards war and himself becomes more and more serious but no way could be found to solve this problem, Henry makes the choice of escape, which is, in fact, the choice he is most likely to make under the influence of the weakness of human nature of escapism that is deeply rooted in him as well as the severe environment of war. There is an segment in this novel in which the psychology of escapism of Henry could be apparently revealed. The fact that the squirrel immediately runs away after Henry has thrown a branch at it becomes a powerful excuse for Henry's behavior of escape which arouses a sense of gratification in him: "The youth felt victorious at this display. This was the law, he said. Nature had given him a sign. The squirrel had fled as soon as it had recognized danger. It did not stand stupidly and wait to be struck, and then die with its head in the air. On the contrary, it had escaped as fast as it could; and this was just an ordinary squirrel, too—probably not a philosopher of the race of squirrels. The youth felt that Nature, at least, was sympathetic. She had given strength to his argument with proofs that lived where the sun shone" (Crane, 2006, p. 112). In a way, the underlying cause for Henry's escape is his cowardice. It is the inner cowardice and incapability that ineluctably leads to Henry's act of always escaping.

### **Self-abasement**

Self-abasement is the human weakness existing in Henry that cannot be ignored, which can be deeply excavated and explored respectively from Henry's specific performance in the three periods of the second battle. First and foremost, before the second battle, Henry holds a deep sense of doubt and uncertainty about whether he would escape from the upcoming war. Therefore, he makes endless attempts to resort to the people around him, trying and hoping to find a certain answer or to discover the same thought of escaping which could be a great comfort for him. It is a kind of compensation for self-abasement from the perspective of human weaknesses.

Secondly, during the second battle, Henry chooses to run away when his regiment is at a distinct disadvantage. Henry's escape is due to lacking faith in that he would have enough courage and ability to overcome the deep sense of fear in heart to fight bravely on the battlefield as he has always hoped, the underlying cause of which is the inherent human weakness of self-abasement. Finally, after the second battle, Henry has always been afflicted with the sense of fear and guilt out of worrying that the fact he is a deserter would be known by his comrades. Therefore, when asked about relevant matters by other soldiers, Henry tends to make an ambiguous statement, afraid to give a positive answer, even burst with anger and shame. Later, after being accidentally hit in the head by a soldier's gun, the satirical "Red Badge of Courage" becomes the biggest lie and a powerful excuse for his "candid" return to the Corps. The act of covering up matters that one is in no mood or is afraid to be known by others is actually due to the self-abasement deep in the heart.

### **Influencing Factors**

It is known to us that the weaknesses of human nature are the result of the joint action of internal and external factors with the former dominant and the latter playing an essential role. The formation of various weaknesses in the process of one's growth is inevitable, which is the result of the work of inherent internal mechanism of human nature. However, it should be noted that the external environment has a great impact on them either help people gradually overcome the weaknesses of human nature or make them deteriorate.

The external influencing factors of such human weaknesses of Henry mainly include three aspects: society, family and interpersonal relationships.

Firstly, social environment. The novel is set in the American Civil War, in which the bloody and cruel war tends to exert a great sense of oppression and uneasiness on people, leading to the chaos of spiritual world of them in such environment. And the sense of confusion, loneliness as well as helplessness and so forth are the true portrayal of people's inner world. Such a severe environment plays a great role in promoting the formation of Henry's human weaknesses. Moreover, It is influenced by the great gap between fantasy and reality after Henry joins in the army that his human weaknesses of fear and anxiety, escapism and cowardice, self-abasement expose rapidly and become increasingly serious.

Secondly, family environment. It is universally acknowledged that family environment plays an essential and irreplaceable role in the process of growth of every person. It is not difficult to find from the novel that the family environment Henry is in has exerted a great influence upon the formation of his human weaknesses which should not be neglected. In the process of growth of Henry, his mother has not paid much attention to or concerned about his psychology, which can be obviously felt from the description of her scornful attitude towards Henry's thought to join in the army and her admonition that Henry should not do anything disgraceful. To some extent, lack in timely and correct guidance on Henry's psychology from the family results in the human weaknesses having formed in the process of growth of him inevitably constantly deteriorating.

Finally, interpersonal relationships, which could be mainly reflected in two aspects. On the one hand, the relationship between Henry and his comrades. Henry has not form a deep relationship with his comrades and what existing in them is merely daily communication that stay on surface although they live and die together in the same regiment. As a consequence, Henry's attempts to turn to the comrades around him when all kinds of negative moods in the inner world severely perturb and torment him are doomed to be in vain and Henry's several

human weaknesses can only be worsened gradually. On the other hand, the relationship between Henry and the officers in the army. The officers in the army regard the soldiers only as combat machine without real care or respect. And it should be noted that even the officers themselves have not owned the correct self-awareness and what in their spiritual world is nothing but a chaos, which could be revealed in the description of their awfully weird and funny acts in the novel.

### Conclusion

The study of Henry, the protagonist in *The Red Badge of Courage* from the perspective of human weaknesses is beneficial for us not only to deeply explore Henry's inner world but also to form a more comprehensive understanding of human weaknesses. It is ineluctable that a variety of human weaknesses will be formed in each person's growth process, and they are closely related with both internal and external factors. Only through the joint efforts of individual, society, schools and families can we protect the growth of everyone.

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