

# A Comparative Study of the Escape Motif in *The Red Badge of Courage* and *A Farewell to Arms*

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**Abstract.** Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway expose the survival dilemma faced by the ordinary people, through focusing on real experiences and feelings of the ordinary. With the same setting of war, the plot of escape in both novels reveals not only human instincts to get rid of disasters, but also humans' psychological changes. The essay analyses reasons and results of protagonists' escape, followed by social meanings of authors' description of escapism. Regarding reasons for escape, two Henrys both experience the disillusionment of individual dream. As for the two protagonists' reasons respectively, Fleming's determination is worn down by the boring camping and hesitation of other soldiers, which lead to his final escape; Frederic's escape is the accumulation of constant disillusionment, coupled with his desire for survival. Considering the differences in escape results between the two Henrys, for Henry Fleming, escape is more like a process to realize his insufficiency of sense of responsibility, stimulating his steps towards maturity on personality and recognition; While for Frederic Henry, escape is the inevitable result of his final emotional outburst, plunging him into the bitter tribulation where he suffers the pain of losing Catherine forever. The social meanings of escapism can be discussed from three aspects: characters' resistance to the vicious social reality, cognitive and ideological construction of humans, and people's desire to seek belonging in society. Exploring the escape motif in *The Red Badge of Courage* and *A Farewell to Arms* is important for establishing the relationship and discussing the differences of them.

**Keywords:** Stephen Crane; Ernest Hemingway; Escape motif; Personality construction; Social meaning.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Red Badge of Courage and A Farewell to Arms

Stephen Crane is one of the most prestigious naturalist writers in American history, whose masterpiece *The Red Badge of Courage* seals his status as a pioneer of American naturalism (Michaels 47). Crane's exposure to the war and meticulous psychological portrait of common people shatter humans' romantic fantasy about the Homeric war, starting the modernist tradition of "telling the truth about the elemental human situation at all costs and describing the war according to real human experience" (Dillingham 194).

In addition to Crane, there is another writer who deals with both war depiction and escapism, Ernest Hemingway. As the spokesman of the Lost Generation, Ernest Hemingway explores a specific kind of people throughout his life, which is summed up in the term "Code Hero" (also called "Hemingway Hero"), who wages a losing fight against indifferent nature (Malone 16). Frederic Henry, the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms*, is a typical code hero, who is disillusioned by the cruel war and the caprice of fates and suffers the spiritual trauma silently.

### 1.2 Escapism

The escape motif, which appeared early in the history of human literary creation, reflects human dissatisfaction and rebellion against reality and spirituality. In the origin and development of human civilization, the act of escape has always existed. The act of escape reflects the dissatisfaction and rebellion of human beings against the current situation as well as a means to resist the absurdity of life (Young 379). In Meyer's book *Escapism*, by systematically summarizing the objects of escape, the causes of escape, and the ways of escape, he points out that the environment and culture are the main objects of human escape (24). The word "escape" may seem derogatory, but it also allows

characters in literature to escape from the difficulties of real life and take an important step to seek a new beginning.

In literature history, escapism is one of the basic themes in literary creation. It has its roots in Roman and Greek myths and legends, and is found in western mythology, epic, and drama. For example, Oedipus the King tells Oedipus' difficulty in escaping the oracle of killing his father and marrying his mother. In Genesis and Exodus of Old Testament, the stories of Noah's ark and Moses leading the escape of all the creatures are told respectively. In the subsequent works of western writers, the theme of escape has been given a richer and deeper connotation. Through the description in detail, new spiritual dilemmas of human beings, such as wandering, exile, and no sense of belonging, were expressed. Writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Charlotte Brontë have written a lot about the theme of escape in their works (Young 378).

Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that "escape" is a common motif of American literature. Although a considerable body of researches has been carried out on psychoanalysis and the impact of social atmosphere on humans' spiritual state, escape motif in the two books needs further exploring. In addition, many researchers have tended to use the mode of initiation stories in the epiphany of Henry Fleming, and have limited the study of Frederic Henry to his anti-war ideas.

To bridge the gaps described above, it is necessary to establish links between these two novels and discuss their differences in the escape motif.

### 1.3 Research Ideas

The analysis of the two books is divided into two parts totally, and three chapters: the reasons for escape, the results of escape and the significance of escapism in the two books. The reasons for the protagonist's escape are mainly narrated from three perspectives of characterization, environment and social background. The outcomes of two protagonists' escape is different: Fleming chooses to return and fight, while Frederic suffers more and experiences bitter disillusionment. The significance of the escape motif is mainly reflected from three aspects: humans' resistance, ideological construction and the desire for belonging.

Based on the research ideas above, this study of escapism will answer the following two questions:

- (1) How is the escape motif represented in *The Red Badge of Courage* and *A Farewell to Arms*?
- (2) Through describing the plot of escape, what do the authors want to reflect?

### 1.4 The significance of exploring escapism

The significance of exploring escapism in the two books are as follows:

The study of personality construction and the authors' intentions of both novels might be supplemented by making an insight into escapism, which is a theme that has not been addressed in previous studies of the two novels. Exploring the two books comparatively can promote the formation of a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological and cognitive changes of the novel's protagonists. Meanwhile, considering the fact that the two novels are masterpieces of naturalism and the "Lost Generation" respectively, building a connection between the two novels through escapism helps to explore the authors' thoughts about war and society more deeply.

Through the study of the escape motif, the perception of society and human nature are deepened. Americans in time of war often choose to escape both physically and spiritually when their own fixed cognition is broken by social cruelty including bureaucratism, corruption, etc. Based on the statement above, the fantasy of war and the shattering of personal dreams depicted in the books become the main reasons why two men to flee, alluding to the social background of Americans losing their faith at that time.

## 2. Reasons for Escape

This section will focus on the reasons why the protagonists flee in both novels, and will be explained by text analysis. Henry Fleming and Frederic Henry "escape" from the Army for different

but similar reasons. Henry Fleming is scared by the cruelty of wars and tortured by the fear of death, while Frederic Henry is disappointed at the nature of the war and the apathy of society. But the culprits are the same: the disillusionment and the loss of faith.

## 2.1 Henry Fleming's Escape

Henry Fleming's escape can be attributed to his personal character, environmental influence and social factors. As for the personal character, Henry's naively romantic character is revealed at the beginning of the novel. He glorifies war by instinct and dreams of becoming a Homeric Hero who is invincible and estimable, "His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds (Crane 5-6)." Based on the description above, Fleming's romantic personality is illusory and unpractical, which determines his disillusionment.

Initially, Henry Fleming believes that fighting is the only way to achieve the glory he craves, so he revels in the courage and honor of romantic heroes, and places his wildest dreams in fantasy. Although to his mother, the war is bureaucratic rather than heroic, which makes Fleming feel the gap between ideal and reality for the first time, he disagrees with her and instinctively romanticizes the cruelty of death and war. Ironically, when rumors of the coming war spread everywhere, Fleming's heroic dream disappears instantly and is replaced by the fear of death and the instinct to escape.

In addition to the instinct to escape, the living condition and interpersonal environment of the barracks before the battle also disillusion Fleming. He begins to doubt the truth of the heroism depicted in the Iliad, for his military life consists of no more than drills, reviews and waiting. The hardship and boredom of the army life give Fleming a natural sense of cowardice, and the attitude of the soldiers around him further aggravates his fear of war, which indirectly justifies his desertion behavior later. Facing the possible battle, Henry does not know whether he will fight courageously, or run away. So he asks Jim if he was ever considered running. Jim replies that he would run if everyone else did, but if they stood firm and fought, so would he (Crane 32). Henry feels reassured because he realizes that even the bravest of men feel an instinctive fear of death. Because of such an interpersonal environment where everyone is coward in the face of war, Fleming seeks pretext for his own timidity.

Another matter that severely weakens Fleming's determination to continue fighting is the corpse he encounters before the battle. "... The youth looked keenly at the ashen face... He vaguely desired to walk around and around the body and stare; The impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the question (Crane 24)." Based on the plot, as he gazes at the body, he is filled with wonder, doubt, and fear because it is only then that he gradually realizes that he has been surrounded by danger and death -- that if he does not run, he might end up like this dead soldier. However, Henry's view of war is still immature, because he is still thinking about what it would be like to "die" in addition to his fear. In the fifth chapter, Henry fully understands the horrors of war when he confronts the corpses of his comrades: war is not an opportunity for glory; In contrast, a soldier who dies in battle is a nameless corpse, not different from any other.

Considering social factors, Henry represents countless confused youth during and after the Civil War, who seem to be under the control of unknown forces and are unable to resist. It is a society in which the fate of mankind seems preordained. Although the novel is a classic describing the Civil War, the whole work does not talk much about that war. Crane isolates the Civil War from its background, condensing the historical context of the story to a minimum, because "history is nothing more than a big crimson blob on the pages of history (Crane 13)." Based on the author's intention above, the analysis of the historical background should be related to the analysis of the era in which Crane lived.

In fact, the whole book is a reflection of Crane's naturalism, which is the dominant thought in literature at that time. For example, it seems that Henry joins the army of his own free will, but actually he is influenced by the general social atmosphere. Living in the world dominated by machine, people lost their own will and faced the loss of faith. The Darwinian concepts like "The Survival of the Fittest" and "the human beast" (e.g. McTeague) attacked bitterly the traditional ethics in that era.

In such a world filled with alienation and disillusionment, people could only seek their own values through creating a new dream (Morgan 231). Thus, Fleming's dream of heroism is based on a desire to prove his value, while such a "belief" is not secure. After disillusionment, faith ceases to exist.

## 2.2 Frederic Henry's Escape

If Fleming's escape is the result from his instinct and the influence of society, Frederic's escape is caused by his total disillusionment and desire of survival, which will be highlighted in the following sections.

A Farewell to Arms is full of tragedy and confusion, which not only fully reflects the emotional and spiritual destruction brought by war at that time, but also reveals the cruelty and absurdity of the war. In this book, Hemingway clearly reflects his anti-war thoughts. In his opinion, war is the most cruel and evil, and it has no other meaning except to bring death and destruction to human beings. Considering the autobiographical property of A Farewell to Arms, Frederic Henry's escape is actually the result of seeing war for what it is.

Hemingway's confusion about the war is mainly reflected by Frederic's ideological change during the war. Like most patriotic young men, Frederic fights with a spirit of self-dedication. But the long, boring army life has been wearing down his enthusiasm. No doubt their life consists of playing cards, drinking and laughing at the chaplain in the camp. Like Henry Fleming, Frederic is aware of how quickly personal ideals can be lost when one is faced with cruel and absurd combat -- for example, when Frederic is crippled by a cannonball while eating macaroni and cheese. "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred. Glorious and Sacrifice and the expression in vain (Hemingway 161)." Frederic believes that his experience in the war can only be described as "vain" and that people like him have no place in reality. There is nothing noble about their sacrifice -- their death is like the slaughter of a cow. War cuts through the illusory meaning of abstract words such as glory and sacred, and it makes Frederic feel that the idea of using these words to associate soldiers with the purpose of war is hollow and outdated.

Unlike Henry Fleming, Frederic Henry's escape is divided into two different forms: spiritual escape and physical escape. Spiritual escape is reflected in his love with Catherine. While Frederic is recovering in hospital, Catherine arrives in Milan to care for him. Her beauty shines like a light into Frederic's faithless heart. Falling in love with Catherine allows Frederic to temporarily forget the suffering of the war, and Catherine becomes Frederic's refuge from the war. As one of the most common form of escapism in literature, seeking spiritual consolation on the one hand relieves Frederic's pessimism, but also intensifies his reluctance to return to the suffering (Cain 117).

In regard to his physical escape, it occurs after Frederic returns to the war, when he witnesses the sluggish morale and crazy behavior of the allies. The Italian army has lost an important battle, and his once high-spirited comrades grow tired, numb, and desperate (Herndl 46). Frederic's dreams are shattered when he finds that the Italian army has lost its courage and hope. But he still has a sense of mission as an officer, which hinders his escape and forces him to carry out obligations. This plot coincides with the development of escapism, in which the protagonist will be shackled by all sorts of duties and obligations until he or she no longer bears the overwhelming burden.

Ironically, the Italian army has already lost its mind under the pressure, firing wildly at the allies. The army captures Frederic and other soldiers, mistakes Frederic for an enemy and wants to execute him. Frederic, desperate for war, now sees its absurd nature. To avoid being shot, Frederic jumps into the icy river. "Anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation (Hemingway 200)." It can be concluded that the instinct of survival stimulates him to jump into the river, but the root cause is the accumulation of disappointment and fatigue about the war.

To sum up, this section explores the display of the escape motif in the two books through analyzing the protagonists' reasons for escape. Fleming's escape is pushed by his own personality, environment and social cruelty; And Frederic is forced by absolute disillusionment and desire for survival.

### 3. Results of Escape

This section will analyze their psychological changes as the plots progresses through focusing two Henrys' results of escape. Fleming realizes that the real courage has nothing to do with the collective glory but is related to oneself, with which he returns to the war and gains his true "red badge of courage"; While Frederic cannot get rid of his tragedy after escaping, tortured by the death of Catherine and becoming nihilistic.

#### 3.1 Henry Fleming's Results of Escape

Henry Fleming's escape is not only the instinct of human beings to avoid disaster, but also the process of reshaping his character and cognition (Shaw 10). In the process of escape, Henry experiences mental struggle and physical exhaustion. After deserting the army, Henry feels confused and bitter. He runs into the woods and takes them as a refuge for his soul. There Henry throws a pine cone at an escaped squirrel, and he interprets it as a sign that nature sympathizes with and forgives his escape, since escaping from danger is the law of nature, which contributes to the conclusion that Fleming still remains the idea before the "invasion" of Darwinism, namely nature loves and saves humans.

Although Fleming gains solace from nature, his ideology that nature sympathizes with man is shocked after experiencing a list of events. Along the way he comes across the corpse of a soldier covered with ants, which walk all over the bodies with no respect, which shows nature's indifference to human beings. Nature cannot solve Henry's puzzle, so he returns to the battlefield to find out: is it honorable to be wounded or even killed on the battlefield (Crane 53)? The numbness and pain in his comrade's eyes give him the negative answer. This plot reveals an element of escapism: loss of faith. According to Emerson's Transcendentalism which prevailed before the Civil War, nature is the link between God and man, cleansing and deifying humans (Windolph 3), but Henry's initial inquiry from nature is nonsense for "God is dead" at that time.

Apart from the corpse Henry sees on the way to war, his reactions to the dead bodies of soldiers at different stages reflect the change of Henry's thinking: from curiosity and fear when he just joins the army, to confusion when he sees ants eating the dead bodies after escaping from the battlefield, then to shock and panic when he sees Jim's corpse. In addition, Jim's sudden rush into the woods waiting for death is one of the most shocking and bizarre moments for Fleming as he has always regarded Jim's wounds as a badge of courage. But after witnessing Jim's death, Fleming has an epiphany that courage and compassion have no place on the battlefield because only the wounded know their own pain and suffering. Both on the battlefield and as he flees, Henry feels himself less and less like a human being: being manipulated like a machine in a society gripped by industrialization. "He became not a man but a member.... He was welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire (Crane 35)." War is more of a slaughterhouse for him.

In addition to understanding the nature of war, Henry also has a clearer understanding of courage. When he returns to the battlefield, he sees his comrades wounded and considers their wounds a mark of valor. In order to fit in with his fellow soldiers, he also wants to be wounded. He sees in Jim and Wilson not only the hesitation and timidity of ordinary people in the face of death, but also their more tenacious, complex courage. Because of his idea that only wounds demonstrate one's courage, after being hit on the forehead by a soldier, Henry lies about being wounded in battle. He is honored for his red badge of courage, but he also realizes that courage cannot be proved by the outside: even if everyone respects you because of your scars, true courage comes from within. The occurrence of this idea is the turning point of Fleming's psychological growth, perfecting his understanding of courage.

Based on the above recognition on nature, death, and courage, Henry chooses to return to the battlefield and fight for self-esteem. Soldiers do not fight for collective glory, because they cannot see the big picture in the gears of the war machine. With a more mature recognition of himself, he imagines tranquil scenes and "an existence of soft and eternal peace".

### 3.2 Frederic Henry's Results of Escape

Fleming's escape is an essential part of his spiritual growth, so he is destined to shoulder his responsibility to expiate his desertion; while Frederic is gradually waking up to reality as he fights, and his trauma is much deeper than Fleming to some extent (Hatten 76). Based on Hatten's study and additional researches conducted and summarized before in this study, the detailed analysis of Frederic's results will be elaborated in this section.

Different from Henry Fleming, Frederic's flight is a final result of disillusionment, not a process. From the moment he joined the battle, everything around him has been taking a toll on Frederic's mind and body. Due to cruel war, indifferent society and capricious fate, he gradually loses his values, ideals and beliefs and becomes a nihilist. But on the other hand, war and suffering also make his ideas move toward maturity. Hemingway devoted His whole life to writing a single theme -- grace under pressure. A Farewell to Arms actually depicts the initiation of Frederic. Disillusionment and initiation mainly come from the revelation of the nature of wars and social cruelty.

Although Frederic is brave, reticent and resilient, he is not a typical "Hemingway hero" in the beginning regarding the term's definition and Frederic's behavior. Initially, Frederic is young, passionate and almost ignorant of the destruction and hurt war brings. When he is asked about why he would join the war, And his answer is just "I was in Italy and I spoke Italian (Hemingway 13)". And, in his eyes, death is too far away. Therefore, he never accepts Catherine's belief that with death everything ends. But as time goes by, his passion gradually fades away and his fantasies of the war break. He feels bored and empty. He is aware that the war is the slaughterhouse. This point is emphasized by his constant drinking and dishonest for the priest's religion in this novel. Too much exposure to blood, injury and death has left him cold-hearted and numb and despair arises from the fact that "glory, honor, courage, or hallow" are obscene (Merrill 573). The war is just the propaganda by politicians. Finally, such desperation, combined with low morale and fear of the strong enemies, forces Frederic to leave the army. In conclusion, Frederic escapes with the strong sense of desperation and deeper understanding of reality.

The real climax of the novel takes place after the escape, giving rise to the absolutely vanishing harmony and meaning of life (Fetterley 203). After jumping into the river to escape, Frederic takes Catherine as his spiritual support, and all he wants at this time is to live peacefully with Catherine. But that happiness comes to an abrupt end when Catherine died in childbirth. With Catherine's death, Frederic realizes that human fate is as capricious as card games. Man is doomed to be at the mercy of fate. In the novel, Frederic is eating food when Catherine is suffering the pain of delivery. What Frederic does for Catherine, including praying for her security, is in vain finally because "You did not know what it was about." It seems that he will have a happy family, but a bolt from the blue-- the death of Catherine and the infant-- tortures him, and totally shatters his hope. After suffering great pains silently, Frederic becomes the real "Code Hero".

## 4. Significance of Escapism in Two Books

The Red Badge of Courage and A Farewell to Arms both involve the description of the escape plot, whose importance mainly includes the following three aspects:

### 4.1 Significance in The Red Badge of Courage

Choosing the escape theme impels the cognitive and ideological construction of the characters in the novel. Henry Fleming realizes his lack of responsibility sense and faces his instinctive fear in the process of escape (Mustofa 106). During the process of escape, Fleming witnesses comrades' death and the predicament of ordinary people, which stimulate his recognition: courage is not the performance for others, but for himself; As for manhood, the true manhood cannot be gained through battling, only through longing for peace; In terms of war, romantic war has given way to the mechanized one, which dehumanizes Americans at that time.

#### 4.2 Significance in A Farewell to Arms

The writing of escapism is the characters' resistance to the world's ugly hypocrisy and disillusionment and the work is the mirror of the authors' thoughts. For example, *A Farewell to Arms* is an autobiographical novel in which Hemingway's detailed portrayal of war is rooted in his own experiences as a soldier attending WWI. Like Hemingway, Frederic Henry is initially inspired by the propaganda of politicians and joins the army with a patriotic heart. However, he finds that war is actually a slaughterhouse, not "the great war" as advocated by politicians. For the protagonists, the direct form of resistance is escape. Yet before they flee, they have expressed their displeasure by taunting the chaplain in camp. Because most Americans are religious before WWI, the clergy have always been respected in the western world, but in this world of lost faith, Americans had doubts about religion and have made corresponding acts of resistance.

#### 4.3 Significance in Both Novels

The use of escapism reveals Americans' longing for belonging during the Civil War and WWI. Under the impact of Darwinism and modernization, Americans generally lost their faith and sense of belonging, which is reflected in two novels by describing ordinary people's realistic and spiritual predicaments. The escapes of both protagonists connote emptiness, disillusionment, and grief, while for Frederic it is a resolute resistance to suffering, in contrast with Fleming's more cowardly escape. This difference also coincides with the literary styles represented by Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway. Crane is deeply influenced by social Darwinism and believes that people are at the mercy of fate. Therefore, his characters lose the sense of belonging. The plot where Fleming escapes but finally returns, and finally becomes a war machine, shows how ordinary people are coerced by the ideology of the capitalist ruling class and finally surrendered absolutely. Hemingway, tortured by the cruel society, also realizes the dehumanization of war and thus portrays a typical "Hemingway Hero" who is modeled on himself. In doing so, Hemingway expresses his desire for longing under the "unfathomable forces" in society.

### 5. Conclusion

Escape is the basic motif in literature, which writers use to express the common spiritual and realistic dilemmas of human beings, such as wandering, confusion and no sense of belonging (Heilman 441). The escape motif in *The Red Badge of Courage* and *A Farewell to Arms* both present Crane and Hemingway's reflections on Americans' religion, politics, and ideology during the Civil War and WWI respectively.

As for the escape motif, there are some similarities of the two novels. Two Henrys hold romantic hopes about war initially, and after experiencing disillusionment, both of them are confused about the nature of war, which then facilitates their reflections on the meaning of life. Through their encounters in the war, the authors expose the war's harm and destruction of Americans, and then reveals the nothingness and darkness of society in terms of human nature and religion. In addition, both books reflect the resistance of ordinary people in the face of indifferent reality by depicting two Henrys' escape.

The description of escapism in *The Red Badge of Courage* is set against the backdrop of the American Civil War. The complex political and social background of this period caused ordinary people living in this environment to face spiritual difficulties. Due to the general emptiness in people's hearts in the social environment, Fleming fantasizes about becoming a "Homeric Hero" to prove his worth. And this fantasy is rooted in people's minds through collective memory - events recorded in the history books. Fleming's personal hero dream, on which is put a romantic shell by the Greek epics, is shattered when he experienced the war firsthand, and he chooses to be a deserter out of human instinct to protect himself. After realizing that "heroism is all vain" (Crane 172), he finally returns to the battlefield and becomes a "hero" who only fights for himself. Fleming's mental journey in escape can be summarized as: perplexity-epiphany-loss of innocence-recognition of life and ego.

In comparison to Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Frederic Henry's social environment in WWI is more nihilistic and depraved, so his disillusionment is more serious. This also partly explains why Frederic does not "return" to the battlefield. Like the writer Hemingway himself, Frederic is bewitched by capitalist politicians and joined the army full of enthusiasm, only to discover that the so-called "Great War" was nothing more than a slaughterhouse. Frederic's escape is divided into two forms: spiritual escape and physical escape. Earlier, when Frederic has doubts about the meaning of war, he meets Catherine and falls in love. The consolation of love is a good medicine for him to temporarily escape from the nightmare of the battlefield, which constitutes his spiritual escape. Later, when he is mistaken by the Allies as an enemy and faces death, his heroic and patriotic dreams are finally completely shattered. Eventually, he jumps into the river in search of freedom, which is his physical escape. His spiritual progress can be generalized as: passion-boredom-disillusionment-deep grief-nihilism.

To sum up, Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway reveal the dilemma of Americas in that era and the tragedy of the characters through the escape behavior of the common people. Escapism is presented in the form of psychological construction and cognitive construction in the writings of the two writers, which not only reflects the powerlessness of the characters under the control of fate, but also shows the resistance of ordinary people to the predicament.

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