



The Red Badge of Courage
By Stephen Crane:

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Megan Andrews



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QUICK CARD

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE



<i>Reference</i>	<i>The Red Badge of Courage</i> . Stephen Crane. (1895) ISBN-13: 978-0486264653
<i>Plot</i>	When young Henry Fleming enlists in the Civil War, he dreams of epic battles and heroism. His encounter with the reality of war will change his perspective.
<i>Setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Civil War battle loosely based upon the Battle of Chancellorsville • Henry's youth • The battlefield • The woods • The interior of Henry's mind
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Henry Fleming – (protagonist) a youth endeavoring to come of age. He longs to have courage and to become a war hero. • Wilson – also called the loud or boasting soldier. He becomes a dedicated soldier whose experience grants him humility and concern for others. • The Cheery Soldier – the friendly, helpful soldier who befriends Henry when he returns after his cowardly flight • The General – he demeans Henry's unit and goads Henry to fight • Jim Conklin – (also called the tall soldier) His confidence encourages and inspires the new soldiers. Henry witnesses his unheroic and meaningless death. • Lieutenant Hasbrouck – Union leader who calls Henry a “wildcat” in his second engagement. • The Tattered Soldier – the talkative and friendly soldier whom Henry deserts because he asks too many questions that might expose Henry as a phony and a liar.

<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Society; Man vs. Himself; Man vs. Man: Will Henry find the courage he seeks and become a war hero? Will Henry find a way to reconcile himself with his cowardly behavior? Will Henry gain experience and become a man?
<i>Theme</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature's indifference to man's fate • The need for social and human empathy and action • The impossibility of courage in a purely material world without God • Man as a machine/animal • Coming of Age – Naiveté to Experience • Survival of the Fittest • Fragmented Man – the Meaninglessness of Life
<i>Literary Devices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagery – use of vivid language to create pictures which represent abstract ideas • Symbolism – an extended metaphor or image that draws on story themes • Literary Realism – represents society “as it really is.” Literary realists demonstrate a great concern for accurate representations of reality. • Regionalism/Local Color – use of dialect and description to realistically portray a particular region or locality • Negative Capability – the ability to live with the seeming paradox of human existence (to live as though there were meaning in a world without meaning). This is one of the major ideas of modernist literature. • Social Determinism/ Social Darwinism – idea that heredity and social environment determine one's character and shape one's actions. This replaces ideals and virtue. Only the fittest survive. • Darwinism – evolutionary theory which influenced motive in character development for Crane (i.e. man is an animal who acts via instinct and not any higher orders or faculties. He's a bundle of cells subject to genetic ancestry and conditioned by social and economic circumstances.) • Naturalism – realistic literary representations of nature. An outgrowth of literary realism.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



1. Where does this story happen?

This story takes place during the Civil War, one of the bloodiest conflicts in American history. The crucial elements of the story's climax center around the Battle of Chancellorsville. As winter's brutal chill retreats, spring fogs snake over the grey fields, enveloping an army which Crane describes as "stretched out on the hills, resting" (5). The sleeping soldiers wake, and in tandem with the greening hills, begin to "tremble with eagerness" and anticipation at the promise of movement, purpose, and battle. Bored and restless with a long period of inactivity, this untried band dreams of battle glory and lusts for the fray. The bold Jim Conklin declares: "Th' army's goin' t' move" (6).

1c. Does the story happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area?

Soon after the first scene, young Henry Fleming's regiment breaks camp and begins slowly advancing towards the Battle of Chancellorsville. The action of the piece transpires both on the march and in the various battlefields as Fleming's regiment falters from one scene to the next, a many faced-pawn on the Union Army chessboard.

1d. What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? What words, phrases, or descriptions does the author use to create this atmosphere?

Even in the beginning of the piece, when the soldiers are untried and full of illusions of glory, the atmosphere of the piece is foreboding. Full of feverish excitement and false bravado, the soldiers are restless and cocky. Henry recalls his vision of the battlefield as "extravagant in color" and "lurid with breathless deeds" (7), but simultaneously he remembers his mother's cautions which threw a "yellow light upon the color of his ambitions." Something sickly and dull sits hidden at the heart of this great conflict, which Henry and his fellow soldiers have yet to discover. As the period of waiting stretches longer and longer and they chafe under inactivity, they begin to feel less like Greek heroes and more and more like faceless members of a "vast blue demonstration" (10). They hope that a chance to prove their mettle in battle will dispel this faceless feeling. Yet from the beginning, Henry fears how he will behave when tested. As far as war is concerned, he is "an unknown quantity" (11).

Even as the social atmosphere of the piece remains tense and expectant, the grey fog and the oozing brown mud of the landscape create a monotonous backdrop for the story's events, making the soldiers' badges of gore appear in lurid contrast.

h. Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why?

Henry's battalion, the 304th, is a miserable group. Far from honored among the Union ranks, they are derisively labeled "a bunch 'a mule drivers." Their commander willingly serves them up to be slaughtered in brutal front line skirmishes, declaring, "I can spare them best of any" (84). Yet officers and generals are not the individuals around whom the story focuses. Rather, Henry's contacts are simple infantry men. Some are full of illusions like Henry, untried and naïve. Others are battle-worn and blustery. They are all simple men, farmers and tradesmen who have turned in their plows and joined the ranks. These common men's responses to the savagery of war become Henry's primary reference as he studies his own nature, searching for courage.

2b. When does this story happen? How long a period of time does the story cover? A few minutes? A single day? A whole lifetime?

The story takes place over the course of two days in which Henry and his regiment engage in three separate skirmishes.

2e. In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grown up? How does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives affect the story?

Henry Fleming is a young man at the start of the piece. Referred to commonly throughout the story as "the youth," Fleming betrays a singular naivete and intense introspection. He considers the possibility that war might not be as glorious as he first assumed and this doubt disturbs him. Crane emphasizes Henry's self-doubt:

"He (Fleming) was forced to admit that as far as war was concerned he knew nothing of himself. . . He felt that in this crisis his laws of life were useless. Whatever he had learned of himself was here of no avail. He was an unknown quantity. He saw that he would again be obliged to experiment as he had in early youth. He must accumulate information of himself, and meanwhile he resolved to remain close upon his guard lest those qualities of which he knew nothing should everlastingly disgrace him" (11).

Preternaturally self-aware for one so young, Henry Fleming worries from the beginning of the story that his courage will not withstand a test. This struggle for mastery of his fear proves the driving conflict of the piece. Were Henry Fleming older or more experienced in the cruel and impersonal ways of the natural world, the story would hardly be as compelling.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



3. Who is the story about? (Protagonist)

Henry Fleming is a new soldier, young and eager and idealistic. Even as he imagines that battles must be like the Homeric conflicts of the Greeks, with great marches and sieges and extravagant colors and lurid, breathless deeds, he harbors a secret fear. He wonders if, given the chance at last to stand and fight, he will turn tail and run. Once entertained even for an instant, this “little panic-fear” takes root, becoming an unhealthy obsession. He steals side-ways glances at his boasting comrades, who babble of their eagerness for bloodshed and feign confidence of victory. In the privacy of his own mind, Henry resolves to keep a close watch upon himself, lest his unknown qualities should “everlastingly disgrace him” (11). He envies his comrades their experience and confidence and hopes to attain some courage of his own along the way.

In addition to wondering whether he will prove himself courageous, Henry wonders idly whether he has any individual worth, or whether he is merely a cog in a great machine, a faceless member of “the blue demonstration.” Once attained, will his courage be of any import in the greater war? Can he possibly distinguish himself?

Interestingly enough, as Henry begins to observe the same fear which roosts in his heart plaguing the other men in his regiment, he does not feel sympathy or compassion but instead feels superior. He scoffs at their public faltering, successfully erasing from his memory those moments wherein he struggled with fearfulness himself. This pompous instinct emphasizes Henry’s youth and immaturity.

4. Who else is the story about?

Henry makes a few acquaintances over the course of the story, all of whom become points of reference for him as he compares his secret quailing to the steadfast, animalistic behavior of his fellow soldiers.

Jim Conklin –

Otherwise known as “The Tall Soldier,” Jim Conklin is a realist. While Henry vacillates between ideals of battle-glory and fear of his own cowardice, Jim Conklin admits his humanity frankly. Henry asks him early on in the story whether Jim thinks that he will run when faced with a battle. Jim responds coolly, “If whole lot of boys started and run, why I s’pose I’d start and run. And if I once started to run, I’d run like the devil, and no mistake. But if everybody was a-standing and a-fighting, why, I’d stand and fight. Be jiminey, I would. I’ll bet on it” (13). In contrast to Henry’s ideals of courage and

individuality, Jim posits that all potential bravery in battle is nothing more than a mob mentality at work. He predicts that his response to a fight will be governed solely by the actions of the whole battalion. He will function as part of a greater whole. While there is small comfort in the confidence of such mechanical obedience, there is little threat of cowardice as well. Henry feels slightly reassured. At least this untried man does not possess a resounding self-confidence. Perhaps Henry too will function as a mere cog in the great war machine. Perhaps this machine mode will save him from disgrace. Feeling grateful to Jim for his honesty and his encouragement, Henry is sickened when Jim dies later on in the story, in a manner both horrifying and meaningless.

Wilson –

Otherwise known as “The Loud Soldier,” Wilson is initially an annoyance to Henry. Upon first entering the army, Henry cautiously sounds his fellow soldiers for a sense of their mood on the upcoming conflict. He wonders, secretly, whether any other man fears his own weakness when tested in a battle. He thinks that he “would have liked to have discovered another who suspected himself. A sympathetic comparison of mental notes would have been a joy to him” (14). Instead, he encounters Wilson. Pompous and brash, Wilson declares that he won’t run, no matter how fierce the fray. Henry skulks off, feeling uneasy and resentful of Wilson’s bold bravado. Yet at the first sounds of a skirmish, Wilson reveals his true colors. He approaches Henry and whispers with intense gloom and “girlish lip” trembling in fear of death, “It’s my first and last battle, old boy. Something tells me...I w-want you to take these here things – to – my – folks” (26). With this, he shoves a yellow packet of letters into a stunned Henry’s hands. With a glance “as from the depths of a tomb,” he raises a limp hand as if in farewell blessing and wanders away. All bravado crushed by his fear of impending death, Wilson becomes a sympathetic character to whom Henry could turn for comfort later in the piece. He becomes a dedicated soldier, humble and concerned with the well-being of others. This much cannot be said for Henry.

The Cheery Soldier –

This Union man befriends Henry soon after his initial cowardly flight from his regiment. He is helpful and warm and unsuspecting in the face of Henry’s vague explanation for his head-wound.

The General –

This harsh, war-weary character speaks negatively of Henry and his unit. His derisive description of them as “a bunch of mule drivers” goads Henry to fight with a furious desire to prove him wrong.

Lieutenant Hasbrouk –

This Union leader calls Henry a “wildcat” approvingly after his battalion’s 2nd encounter in the battle.

The Tattered Soldier –

This gentleman attaches himself to Henry during a march soon after Henry’s cowardly flight. Henry soon deserts him because he asks too many questions that might

expose Henry as a phony liar and a deserter. Henry bemoans these probing queries, considering them to be “upraising the ghost of shame on the stick of their curiosity” (53).

The army –

Henry considers the army itself as its own separate entity, which consumes each individual man and shrinks him to an insignificant “part of the blue demonstration” (13). As Henry becomes accustomed to functioning as a part of this great machine, he thinks of it as “one of those moving monsters wending with many feet” (16). The more he watches the army function, the less he thinks of it as a collection of individual men and the more he considers it an entity all its own, “whole brigades grinned in unison, and regiments laughed” (17). In a moment of crisis and conflict, Henry observes his part in this great collective consciousness:

He became not a man but a member. He felt that something of which he was a part – a regiment, an army, a cause, or a country – was in crisis. He was welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire. For some moments he could not flee no more than a little finger can commit a revolution from a hand. (30-31)

Motivated by more than a sense of brotherhood for his companions in the fight, Henry is governed by a mob mentality. As Jim Conklin remarked at the start of the story, a single man will run or stand and fight in accordance with the actions of “the others” for the most part. All the soldiers function in a unit, a cog in the great war machine. Henry suddenly feels that he does not exist apart from the regiment as a whole. He is merely a finger on a larger hand and as such he is bound to the others, dependent on their collective consciousness to determine his actions.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



5. What does the protagonist want?

Initially, Henry wants to survive the battle, distinguish himself as a hero, find his courage and so earn a place with his comrades.

6. Why can't he have it?

Henry faces many obstacles in his journey to maturity. First and foremost, he wants to survive the national conflict. Each battle threatens his physical life, thus creating a Man vs. Man conflict in the case of hand to hand combat, but a Man vs. Society conflict when considered in the national and political sense.

In addition, Henry longs to be a courageous soldier, but his desire for self-preservation is at odds with this impulse to prove his bravery. This is a Man vs. Self conflict. As Henry fights his natural impulse to flee for his life, he yearns for a red badge of courage of his own. He sees the gruesome comradeship his comrades have attained with one another through their wounds. He notes the unifying nature of their suffering when he describes them as a unit rather than individuals: "the mob of men was bleeding" (54). Though the men are many, the mob is one in Henry's eyes. They each wear a red badge of courage, a sign of belonging. He is an outsider, branded by his cowardice even as they are branded by their bravery.

When Henry realizes that he is a coward, not a hero, he must reconcile himself to his failure and find some way to rejoin his troop while maintaining some respect. This is both a Man vs. Society and a Man vs. Self conflict.

Ultimately, however, Henry's very conception of courage as an ideal or a virtue, comes under fire in this Naturalist drama. For true courage cannot exist in a world without God. This is a Man vs. Nature or a Man vs. God conflict.

7.f. What other problems are there in the story? Are there larger issues, (a larger context or frame) in which conflict exists and forms a background for the story (A war setting for example)?

Henry's quest for courage leads him to a larger, more existential question as the piece progresses. As he struggles to achieve meaning and purpose through gaining an identity as a courageous soldier, he functions within a religious framework that seems curiously out of place in a godless universe. Though his perspective on the world still

relies heavily on Christian images and a sense of morality, Henry makes no mention of the Christian God.

Instead, each image enthrones Nature as the sovereign deity of the piece. It is from her that Henry hopes to find justification. Initially, he considers her to be “a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy” (41). He sees her quiet meadows and serene forests as evidence of a “religion of peace” which he assumes she must value above all else. He rationalizes that his cowardly flight is merely an appropriate compliance with her law of peace. Fleeing the battle for the first time, he stumbles into a peaceful copse and expects to find Nature’s bloodless religion holding sway. He describes the copse as “chapel-like” with its gentle light and overarching branches spread out against the sky. Instead of finding life and serenity within, however, he meets a rotting corpse, grotesque and decomposing...a shrine to the Nature’s true mantra: all living things must die. Henry and the corpse exchange a “long look.” Henry watches in horror as a stream of ants snack placidly on the dead man’s eyes.

Hoping to discover a haven from the darkness of the world, Henry flees to Nature for comfort. Sadly, she has no sympathy to offer. As the corpse stares wide-eyed and ants crawl unconcerned over his face, Nature in all her impersonal cruelty dawns on Henry. There is no difference between him and the corpse. The chapel holds no comforting promise of life after death. Instead, it threatens him with a disconcerting possibility: perhaps life holds no more meaning than death. Unlike the Christian God, Nature does not cherish Henry’s life. In fact, for her perhaps the difference between Henry and the dead man is only a matter of a lucky shot...a few more ants...Perhaps she does not oppose but rather works in tandem with “The Great Death” in pursuit of her religion of peace. Perhaps the most peaceful world exists after the death of men.

Disturbed and frightened by Nature’s true face, Henry desperately tries to flee. Suddenly, all natural elements, so harmless and peaceful a moment before, seem to catch at him and impede his progress. Nature turns savage, brutal and bloodthirsty.

In light of this new deity’s priorities, Henry’s moral and virtuous compunctions seem similarly futile. Could such an unscrupulous and unprincipled deity require morality from Henry? Or does he merely cling to echoes of a past religious tradition, in an attempt to give meaning to a life rendered meaningless?

Henry’s thoughts echo Christian concepts as the story progresses. Yet without a reference to a God outside of the natural world who established them, they seem empty and hollow. An example of this empty religion occurs as Henry and the tattered soldier watch Jim Conklin rave in his death throes. The pitiful tattered soldier at Henry’s elbow cries, “God!” as Jim falls to his knees, succumbing to a wound so horrific that Henry describes it like a maiming from an animal attack. No God answers the pleading cry, no mercy comes to ease Jim’s suffering.

Henry observes the “ceremony” of his friend’s “agony” and shakes his fist impotently at the battlefield. These words allude to Christ’s ceremonial agony on the cross, but no salvific purpose gives this dying man’s pain worth. Full of righteous wrath at this

pointless torment, Henry intends to deliver a philippic, but he only manages to stammer: "Hell! - " He raises his eyes to the sky from which Christian help would traditionally come, but he sees only a "red sun, pasted in the sky like a wafer" (51). Nature's blood red communion wafer presides over the scene, offering neither the solace nor the sympathy that Christ's body would have afforded.

In place of Christ's red badge, memento of his salvific agony, the sufferers in Nature's congregation wear the ensigns of a brutal and impersonal universe. They share in a Hell of sorts as hostile Nature advances wound by wound. They fall one by one to The Great Death, since no divine Protector bars the way. Even as Henry attempts to give meaning to the cruel world around him with allusions to a traditional religious construct, he conspicuously avoids any mention of God, thus sapping the comfort from the construct altogether. "The red sun hangs in the sky like a wafer." This communion image invites readers to think of the salvific power and eternal comfort found in the Christian Eucharist. In this context, however, the communion wafer becomes a mockery, a bastardized Eucharist for the new religion of Naturalism. While the Christian Eucharist promises a Resurrection after death, this Naturalist communion merely ritualizes the power of the "Great Death," which, un-mastered, comes inexorably on for each and every living thing.

Even as this image promises no eternal salvation for Henry and the others, it does offer a small temporal comfort. Communion is a sacrament meant to be shared among many. All men partake of this fellowship of suffering. Thus, inevitably, Henry will earn a place among his fellows. The commonality of death offers an irreligious fellowship, but a fellowship nonetheless. Since without Christ there is no way to share in resurrection, Henry and the others must be satisfied with the unity of suffering, mortality, and ultimate insignificance.

8. What happens in the story?

Henry faces his first real battle and, contrary to all his ideals of courage and valor, flees in terror to the woods. Meeting the dead man in the forest and feeling the impersonal, amoral response of Nature to his desertion, Henry struggles to justify himself. Surely, if there is no difference between life and death, no moral or ethical standard of good living established by God, then Henry's flight was valid, motivated by the highest virtue that could exist in a purely natural world: the instinct for survival. Faced with the threat of death, he did what any creature of the natural world should do: he fled and so preserved his life.

Yet these equivocations sour when he encounters a regiment returning from the fray and hears that his fellow soldiers: "held them!" His feelings of guilt worsen as he sees the soldiers' wounds and feels keenly the lack of his own. He soon falls into step with a "tattered soldier" who begins to pester him with well-intentioned concern, "where're ya wounded?" Terrified that his desertion is plain to all, Henry wants to run again. Before he can, however, he runs into Jim Conklin, whose final agony prompts Henry to shake his fist at the battlefield with impotent rage. Even as Henry reels from the sight of his friend's pointless suffering, his discomfort grows as the tattered soldier continues to press him about his wound (54).

Henry abandons the tattered soldier and soon encounters another friendly regiment. By a twisted turn of events, he is struck in the head by a rifle butt and knocked unconscious. When he wakes, he finds he is being cared for by a cheery soldier who believes he received his head wound in valiant battle. Henry seizes his opportunity to clear himself of all suspicion and claims that he was grazed by a bullet. The soldiers seem satisfied and Henry marvels that his badge could be so easily won.

He returns to his own regiment where Wilson (who betrayed his fear before the battle in giving Henry his letters from home) helps him to convalesce. At this point, Henry knows that his secret is safe, hidden by a red badge...for who is to say that the badge was not earned courageously? Instead of making him humble, however, Henry's unmerited badge simply makes him cocky, cruel, and insufferable.

He remembers Wilson's letters and thinks with satisfaction that if Wilson should go asking questions about his actions in the battle, he will "prostrate his comrade at the first signs of cross-examination." Far from empathizing with Wilson's admission of fear, Henry adopts an air of "patronizing good humor" (73). He proclaims with newfound self-assurance that since he "performed his mistakes in the dark" he is "still a man," while in contrast Wilson has lost his honor (73).

When Wilson asks to have his letters back, since they are public proofs of his cowardice, he blushes deeply, and obviously suffers great shame. Henry reflects with condescending pity that he himself "had never been compelled to blush in such manner for his acts; he was an individual of extraordinary virtues" (74). As if forgetting the paltry rifle blow that gave him his "red badge" and his preceding cowardice which prompted him to desert his post, Henry feels himself superior to Wilson. Armed with his false wound and assured that his lapse into cowardice will remain secret, Henry begins to rewrite his past as a self-aggrandizing hymn to his own courage. He envisions the stories of valor he will tell to the enraptured crowds back home upon his return from the wars.

Possessed by groundless pride and self-confidence, Henry eagerly anticipates the next battle. He resolves bombastically that if driven by the enemy into "final corners" men like him "could all develop teeth and claws" (79). Indeed, even as the second battle begins, Henry seems to transform into an angry wildcat, "his teeth set in a cur-like snarl" (80). He fights so furiously and so well that the lieutenant declares: "if I had ten thousand wild cats like you I could tear th'stomach outa this war in less'n a week!" The other soldiers turn to look at him in awe as a "war devil," a "barbarian," a "beast," and a "hero." And he wins all these long-coveted titles, all this long-anticipated praise for one moment of inhuman, instinctive, animalistic carnage. Henry is satisfied with this self-made substitute for "courage," and resolves to think of himself from then on with an air of self-importance and well-earned honor.

9.a. How is the main problem solved? Does the protagonist get what he's after?

Even as Henry pats himself on the back for his vicious onslaught and declares himself a true asset to his regiment at last, an officer arrives with new orders for the 304th. He sneers loudly, "They (the 304th regiment) fight like a lot 'a mule drivers. I can spare them best of any" and resolves to send these disposable soldiers into the hottest section of the fighting. He predicts snidely, "I don't believe many of your mule drivers will get back."

Henry starts, dismayed. Never before has he imagined himself as insignificant or disposable. Yet as he and his fellows rush madly on into battle with little to no chance at victory or even survival, Henry begins to see how purposeless their fight truly is. He wonders suddenly “what reason he could have for being there” (87). Fighting an enemy regiment stationed in the trees, Henry feels that his opponent is faceless and impersonal, merely a “persistent wood.” He sees his fellow soldiers and notices with dismay that they too feel the “lack of responsibility for being there.” He muses: “It was as if they had been driven. It was the dominant animal failing to remember in the supreme moments the forceful causes of various superficial qualities. The whole affair seemed incomprehensible to many of them” (89). Animalistic and mulish, the men charge headlong into battle for no reason they can comprehend.

Desperate to prove that his efforts (whether courageous or cowardly) can matter, can further the cause, can lend meaning to their short, brutal existence, Henry takes up the flag and leads a charge. For a moment, he feels a “despairing fondness for this flag,” describing it as “a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes... He kept near, as if it could be a saver of lives” (90). Pouring all his hopes for meaning and significance into this patriotic emblem, Henry makes a mad foray into the field for the sake of his “country.” But when the dust clears, and the battle fog lifts from his mind, Henry sees that his unit has been shattered and dispersed. His charge was for nothing and “the retreat of the mule drivers was a march of shame to him.” He and his fellows agree that further valor would only result in more pointless bloodshed. They think as one: “It was of no purpose to strive against walls. It was of no use to batter themselves against granite. And from this consciousness that they had attempted to conquer an unconquerable thing there seemed to arise a feeling that they had been betrayed” (91). Having looked as a last resort to their national pride to give their sacrifice significance, the men discover that they have been pitted against an unconquerable enemy by an unfeeling and impersonal government. Drawn in by ideals of glory, Henry and his fellows have become mere cannon-fodder, mere cogs in the great war-machine.

Feeling the sting of their retreat bitterly, Henry sees that the ground over which he charged so valiantly is trivial and ridiculous compared with his battle-frenzied perceptions of it. He realizes for the first time how senseless each individual skirmish really is to the progress of the national conflict. His efforts, whether brave or cowardly, valorous or craven, have little to no effect on the outcome even of a small battle, much less of the nation’s war. Courage proves inconsequential even in the political sense. This moment of deflated ego and dismay is the climax of the piece.

10. How does the story end?

Much as before, Henry rewrites history to better suit his self-image and bolster his sense of personal significance. On the battlefield Henry realized the insignificance of his own efforts and hated the young lieutenant for his ironically accurate assessment of the troops as “mule drivers.” Now with one simple, second-hand compliment from the generals on the ferocity of his charge with the flag, Henry erases all unpleasant memories of the battle. He and Wilson exchange looks of joy and congratulations and Henry summarizes placidly: “They speedily forgot many things. The past held no pictures of

error and disappointment. They were very happy, and their hearts swelled with grateful affection for the colonel and the youthful lieutenant” (99). They’ve been declared courageous for their animal advance and with that badge upon their breasts they pledge allegiance to the impersonal army once again. All the suffering which preceded this compliment and seemed to shatter their confidence has been wiped away. He and Wilson remember only selectively, rewriting history to bolster their own self-worth in the face of a bleak and uncaring universe.

Does the protagonist solve his own dilemma? Is it solved by some external source or 3rd party? Is he helpless in the end to achieve his goal (like Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*), or does he triumph by virtue of his own efforts (like Odysseus in *the Odyssey*)? (9.e)

Henry self-consciously constructs a resolution for this story. Unsatisfied with the meaninglessness which reality affords his sacrifices, he rewrites the story to give worth to his life. And his constructed resolution needs constant tending.

Even in the last pages of the story, Henry feels the old familiar fear that his desertion will be found out. He panics, sure that his “vivid error” will “stand before him all his life.” While at first this may seem to be a stalwart sign of some external standard or code which convicts Henry, his response to the lingering qualm highlights his resolve to impose meaning on the meaningless and order on the chaos. The scene reads:

“Yet gradually he mustered force to put the sin at a distance...He found that he could look upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly. He was gleeful when he discovered that he now despised them. With this conviction came a store of assurance. He felt a quiet manhood, nonassertive but of sturdy and strong blood. He knew that he would no more quail before his guides wherever they should point. He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man” (109).

In accordance with his previous efforts to rewrite his own history, Henry takes the matter of his guilt into his own hands. With a concerted effort, he consciously “puts the sin at a distance.” He separates himself from his previous qualms and “earlier gospels” of morality (virtues of courage) and resolves to despise them. Acting as his own judge, he forgives himself for his earlier crime of cowardice and declares himself a blameless equal to all men. He even goes so far as to redefine manhood. According to Henry, a man is: “One who has been to touch the great death and found that, after all, it was but the great death.” A man is one who has discovered, as Henry has, that life is short and death alone follows.

While Henry speaks tranquilly of “the great death” in this final scene, implying that he has somehow moved beyond the fear of mortality, his word choice echoes the scene in Nature’s chapel from earlier in the story. The only other scene wherein Henry describes death as “the great death,” that chapel scene marks the moment when Henry first realized Nature’s horrifying indifference to man’s state. This truth realized, Henry was terrified and revolted. He fled the place he once deemed a “chapel” and a shrine to Nature’s “peace.” Yet here, Henry professes to feel no fear of “the great death” which once frightened him so very fiercely. He speaks grandly of Nature’s “eternal peace” as if none of his former war-torn revelations remain with him.

In this final neat resolution, this profession of faith in Nature’s religion of peace is merely Henry’s last attempt to force meaning and significance into an empty world. The very nature of the Natural world is temporality, as Henry knows from horrifying personal experience. Yet Henry’s insistence on Nature’s peace being “eternal” marks his conscious desperation. Having constructed an economy where courage and heroism give value to the individual, Henry fails to live up to his own standards. Thus, he constructs another economy just as false as the first. Neither morality nor immortality can exist in a world without God. No virtues can lend significance to a man’s days and no promise of “eternal life” can lengthen his hours. If Nature reigns, as Henry claims, then peace is fleeting and all will fall to the great death and pass too quickly even from the memories of those left behind.

In a matter of speaking, Henry solves his own problem here at the end of the story. Dismayed and shattered by the insignificance of his best efforts, Henry rewrites history, remembers selectively, and imposes his own meaning on the world around him. As a result, he walks through the last pages of the story in a superficial bubble of peace and contentment.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



11.e. What does the protagonist learn? Does he explain to the reader his perspective on events that have transpired?

Henry summarizes the lessons he has learned in the final pages of the story. He recalls with an inconsistent tone of nostalgia:

He was a man. So it came to pass that as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath, his soul changed. He came from hot plowshares to prospects of clover tranquilly, and it was as if hot plowshares were not. Scars faded as flowers...the youth smiled for he saw that the world was a world for him...He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle. The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal...He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks – an existence of soft, eternal peace. (110)

Surfacing from the blood and wrath of battle, Henry feels the need once more to mark his progress, quantify his maturity, and so give meaning to the events he has endured. He has realized over the course of the story that courage doesn't exist outside of oneself in an amoral, irreligious universe. No overarching code of virtue or morality governs men's actions. "The great death" claims cowards and heroes alike. A man is only as significant as he says he is. Desperate to matter in the face of inexorable mortality, Henry resolves to actualize himself and rewrite his past to shore up his own sense of significance.

Though all his conscious effort strains to create significance for himself with an urgency that marks his fear of death, Henry speaks of "the great death" in a blasé tone. He implies that a true man simply accepts the temporal nature of life, without whimpering in fear or trying to flee. A man can only impose meaning on his life while he still breathes and lie sweetly to his soul to keep his spirits high as death approaches.

This learned, Henry makes a series of quick adjustments to his state. He redefines himself as a man, like all other men. He declares his soul "changed." He relegates all his former animalistic behavior to the past and actively wills his scars to "fade as flowers." In the place of the "sultry nightmare" and "red sickness of battle" he "turns with a lover's thirst" to Nature. Though she once frightened him with her impersonal economy of death and temporality, he now turns to Nature consciously like a "lover" and declares her world to be a place of "soft and eternal peace." Though nothing in his recent experience with Nature has been either soft or permanent, Henry declares it to be so in the final pages of the piece. He takes dominion over his own fleeting present and effectively lies to his soul in order to find contentment while he lives.

Just as he clung to religious imagery earlier in the story, Henry clings to the concept of eternity here at the end of the story since it holds a vague comfort, though it is out of place in the natural universe where nothing lasts forever.

Upon first glance, this scene reads like a triumphant realization of manhood and “coming of age.” Yet Henry is, in these last pages, reverting to his initial foolhardy error. Whereas before, he trusted ideals of morality or virtue to lend meaning to his life and resolved to be courageous, here in the end he trusts this new definition of “manhood” to validate his existence.

13.d. What is the main idea of the story? What answer does the story seem to suggest for the question, “What is a good life?”

According to Henry’s final observations in the story, a good life, a man’s life, is one lived with calm acceptance of life’s brutality and meaninglessness. He never seems more satisfied with his life than when he knows “that he will no more quail before his guides wherever they should point” (109). When he has finally accepted that “the great death” will come for him, but after all it is “but the great death,” he feels “gleeful.” This moment of “gleeful realization” marks a turning point for Henry which represents his “Coming of Age.” He achieves manhood and maturity when he realizes that the only good life open to him is one in which a man keeps his mind from existential worries and simply enjoys the peaceful elements of Nature, surrendering peacefully to her order when his time comes.

In the face of this bleak Natural order, Henry sees the significance of social and human empathy. All men suffer this naturalistic reality together. Feeling empathy for one another in this brotherhood of suffering is all that lends depth to Henry’s experience.

13.e. What aspect of the human condition is brought to light and wondered at in this story?

Man’s fundamental fear of death and his longing for existential meaning remains the focal point of this story. Though Henry resolves to relinquish all his fears to the sovereign sway of Nature, he subconsciously clings to vague religious constructs and dreams of eternity, hoping against hope that their promise of lasting peace and significance of life will bolster his sense of purpose in Nature’s empty, brutal world.

This Naturalistic worldview that permeates the story leaves Henry and readers alike with an overwhelming sense of man’s insignificance. Man is primarily animalistic according to Crane, governed merely by an instinct for survival. Life is impersonal and temporal. A man is just one faceless member of a crowd and if he falters he will be replaced by another faceless cog, beaten out according to Nature’s laws of the survival of the fittest.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



15. Does the author use common words and phrases in uncommon ways?

Hyperbole –

In the course of his descriptions, Henry often has a visceral response to the scenes before him. As if to communicate the depth of his revulsion or the forcefulness of his longing, he sometimes overstates or exaggerates images. For example, when he sees a unit of soldiers returning from the front with various gory bandages and blood-stained wounds, he states grimly: “The mob of men was bleeding.” While this statement is figuratively accurate, Henry’s description is hyperbolic in that he references the group as a whole, treating them as if they are one entity, suffering universally. The men are one unit, one person, one wound, one red badge that condemns Henry.

16. Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader’s mind?

Simile –

Crane uses imagery and comparisons to make his settings vivid and compelling, as when Henry runs “like a blind man” or the battle din sounds “like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine” (44). Further on in the story, Henry looks to the sky as if for some salvific help but sees only the sun hanging blood-red in the sky, “like a wafer” without the accompanying comfort of the sacrament (51).

Metaphor -

Sometimes, Crane tries for an even more dramatic comparison, eliminating these comparative terms, “like” and “as.” The copse of trees where Henry tries to find refuge “is a chapel” (41-42). The pine needles within this wooded church “are a gentle brown carpet” (42).

Personification –

Crane lends human characteristics to the silent deity of the piece: Nature. Initially, Henry sees her as “a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy” (41). Yet as the piece progresses, she “goes tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment,” leading the more perceptive reader to question whether or not she is truly a soft-hearted woman.

17. Does the author use the characters and events in her story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way?

Symbolism-

The recurring image of the battle wound which shines out as a mark of courage and soldier's worth, the "red badge of courage," is the symbol of the piece. Henry longs for a red badge of his own which might validate his soldier's experience and earn him a place of honor among his brothers. He watches their procession with envy boiling in his breast:

He was amid wounds. The mob of men was bleeding. Because of the tattered soldier's question, he now felt that his shame could be viewed. He was continually casting sidelong glances to see if the men were contemplating the letters of guilt he felt burned into his brow. At times, he regarded wounded soldiers in an envious way. He conceived persons with torn bodies to be peculiarly happy. He wished that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage. (47)

Worried that his cowardice might be burned across his brow, obvious for all his comrades to see, Henry envies the vivid proofs of their steadfast duty on the battlefield. He envies them their "happiness." They are above reproach themselves, as their injuries attest.

This image only deepens as Henry realizes that courage may not be a supportable ideal in a world governed by purely animalistic instinct. Courage loses its luster. It is no longer a virtue, weighty due to some external moral code. It becomes merely a decoration, a façade of significance or meaning that is truly baseless. Henry obtains his own red badge, but he doesn't earn it through any courageous action, but appearances are everything and Henry twists this fortuitous injury to his own ends, bolstering his standing in the opinions of his fellows. This symbol soon represents the hollow nature of a Naturalist reality. Courage is nothing more than an illusion men construct to lend meaning to their fleeting lives.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



18. Who is the author?

Born during the era of Reconstruction in America in 1871, just six years after the conclusion of the Civil War, Stephen Crane was always fascinated by the repercussions of the war that had ravaged his parent's generation. As a child, he was precocious and moody. He was writing by the age of four and he had his first article published by the time he was sixteen.

He received an excellent education at Claverack College, a military school where he excelled at Literature and History and relished the rigorous physical training. Though he wrote later that these years at Claverack were, "the happiest time" of his life, he dropped out of school in 1891 and began working as a reporter first for the New York Tribune and later for the New York Press. As a journalist, he cultivated a powerful writing voice that managed to elicit emotion from readers without verging on sensationalism. His way with the language was clipped, curt, incisive, and moving. One critic described his tone as "crisp, unsentimental, and abrupt." This brusqueness certainly served Crane well when he turned his attention to drafting war stories.

Before he began work on his classic *The Red Badge of Courage*, however, Crane spent many years in New York City, living in the worst section of the Lower East side commonly known as The Bowery. Famous scenes for foulness, depravity, degradation, and debauchery, these slums gave Crane first-hand experience with the suffering and poverty of average American laborers. His reputation suffered as he became a regular at the Bowery's countless brothels and tenements, but he maintained that he kept to the slums just to "research." He professed that "there he found human nature open and plain with nothing hidden."

Whatever his motives, Crane's time in the bowery certainly gave him firsthand knowledge of human suffering which he channeled into his depictions of battle experiences. Many of the analogies Crane uses in the *Red Badge of Courage* are aimed at the common laborer, who struggles to maintain his sense of individuality in the face of dehumanizing industrialization. Though this is a slightly different sort of suffering than war-time horror, Crane depicted the latter in such a way as to make all sufferings feel universal.

In 1892, Crane was posing for a portrait and happened to pick up an issue of *The Century* magazine. Upon reading some of the first-hand accounts of soldiers from the war, Crane remarked: "I wonder that some of these fellows don't tell how they felt in those scraps. They spout enough of what they did, but they're as emotionless as rocks." He immediately set to work writing his own fictional account of a soldier's experience in the war. He published *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1894. He wrote with such compelling realism that Civil War veterans claimed to have fought beside him at

Antietam, which was of course preposterous since he wasn't even born until 6 years after the war ended. Truly, his work was groundbreaking in terms of its introspective focus, brutal realism, and journalistic tone of irony and ambivalence. This jaded tone that colored the piece provide a commentary on the mindset of Crane's contemporaries as Americans reflected on the effects which the great conflict had had on their world. Crane voiced a universal uncertainty that gnawed at the American consciousness – a fundamental doubt about man's ability to improve or outgrow a Darwinian state of Determinism.

Crane was involved in quite a few scandals due to his seedy acquaintances from the brothels of the Bowery, but eventually he met a female war correspondent named Cora Taylor, with whom he eventually settled down in England. Crane died of tuberculosis at a Black Forest sanatorium in Germany at the age of 28. His work was quite influential even during his lifetime and would eventually inspire Ernest Hemingway as well as seed the Modernist and Imagist movements.

21. What did the author believe? Was the author associated with a particular intellectual school or mode of literature?

Stephen Crane was an early adherent of American Naturalism, a philosophy which posits that only the natural world exists, and neither spiritual nor supernatural elements really operate in the universe. As a literary movement, Naturalism was an offshoot of Realism. Like the realists, naturalists favored fact, logic, and impersonality over imagination, symbolism and the supernatural. However, many naturalists were criticized for their selective depictions of reality, ever focused on misery, corruption, vice, and suffering. Some contemporaries considered them to be pessimistic about man's state. Be that as it may, Naturalists distinguished themselves from their contemporaries, writing with singularly detached narrative tones of a universe that was utterly indifferent to human life. They were proponents of Determinism, arguing that each character's fate had been decided and determined by impersonal forces of nature beyond man's control.

Crane ruminated on these Naturalistic philosophies all his life. In a short story called *The Open Boat*, he wrote: "When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples." This same series of revelations bombards young Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Horrified by the knowledge that Nature cares nothing for his temporal plight, Henry first shakes his fist at the natural world, thinking of it as a temple to a new and cruel deity. Yet by the end of the piece, his impotent rage is replaced with a deterministic calm. He accepts the natural world as the boundary of existence and only clings to ideas of eternity as a child might cling to a fairy-story for comfort.

Perhaps the most succinct description of Crane's philosophy comes in a poem he wrote five years after the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage*. The poem reads:

"A man said to the universe:
'Sir, I exist!'
'However,' replied the universe,

‘The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.’

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. According to Henry's own assessment at the end of the story, this piece is an account of his journey to maturity. Does Henry really mature over the course of the story?
2. At the start of the story, all Henry wants is to prove himself courageous. Do his priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this shift? Is he changed for better or worse?
3. Is Henry a "sympathetic character?" Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Why? Why not?
4. Among what kinds of people is the story set? How do their social statuses and worldviews effect Henry's outlook on life and maturing process?
5. Is there a single antagonist in this story? If so, how does the author's description inform you of his antagonism?
6. Examine the symbol of the "red badge of courage." What theme or idea does Crane intend to highlight or discuss with this device? Is there an ironic tone accompanying his use of the term "courage?"
7. Were you satisfied with the resolution offered at the end of this story? Why or why not? Do you believe Henry's responses to the events of the story in his self-conscious summary at the end of the piece? Or are his reactions anti-climactic somehow?

STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central *conflict*. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane: Story Chart

SETTING

The American Civil War (1861-1865)

A Union regiment stationed near Antietam.

A unit of untried, unseasoned foot-soldiers whom generals and lieutenants alike treat like cannon-fodder.

Spring weather throughout the piece: stormy and wet and miserable with only fleeting glimpses of the sun.

CHARACTERS

Henry Fleming (Protagonist): a youth dazzled by thoughts of glory in battle who becomes quickly disillusioned by reality

Wilson: Formerly known as "the loud soldier." Wilson is humbled and softened by his first experience with the horrors of war. Unlike Henry, he stands and fights even as he admits his fear

Jim Conklin: Henry's friend at the start of the war, Jim dies a gruesome death which causes Henry, the witness, to shake his fist impotently at the impersonal cruelty of the world.

The Tattered soldier: A nameless creature dying slowly of an unknown wound who attaches himself to Henry and attempts friendship. His pesky questions about the location of Henry's wound make him a nuisance.

Nature herself: She is herself a character in the piece. She is impersonal, unconcerned with the life or death of the soldiers. In her economy, only animal instinct and the survival of the fittest governs.

Climax:

Henry has a second chance in the field of battle. This time he fights like an animal. His "heroic" efforts are bloody and impersonal and instinctive, but they earn him the fleeting respect of his comrades and superiors. He sees the flag only to retreat. As the battle rages wears off, he finds himself to be utterly insignificant.

Denouement:

Gained only a small piece of ground. What victory was there? He is shaken by the meaninglessness of the experience. Yet he swells with pride under the admiration of the generals, who but a moment earlier mortally offended him by calling him a "mule-driver."

Rising Action:

Henry's desire to live trumps his ideals of heroism and he runs from the first real battle. He later hears that his fellows "held them." He feels guilty and equivocates. Meets the dead soldier in Nature's chapel. His acquaintance with the tattered soldier and Jim Conklin's death each exacerbate his guilt. Receives a loophole injury to the head. Returns to his company. Lies. Shames Wilson. Rewrites his own history to save his own pride and self-image.

THEME:

Heroism or Courage cannot exist in their ideal forms in a world without God.
Survival of the Fittest
The importance of a community of sufferers in an impersonal universe.
Coming of Age in such a world is merely loss of naivete and gaining of harsh experience.

Exposition:

In the midst of the American Civil War, young Henry Fleming dreams of proving his worth on the glorious field of battle. Despite the cautions of his mother, he volunteers for the Union forces. All too soon he begins to realize that war is far from glorious. He fears that he might dishonor himself and flee combat.

Conclusion:

He takes up the colors for his unit and pushes back the enemy. He resolves pompously that he is now "a man." He declares his soul to be "changed." And foresees eternal peace in his future.

PLOT

CONFLICT

Will Henry find his courage and belong with the others? (Man vs. Self)
Will Henry survive? (Man vs. Man / Man vs. Nature)

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane: Story Chart



