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Stephen Crane Captures the Effect of Fear and Realism in “The Red Badge of Courage”

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Abstract

Stephen Crane's “The Red Badge of Courage”, a war novel set in an unnamed battle of the Civil War, most likely the Battle of Chancellorsville was indeed a famous novel. The novel was routinely named as one of the greatest war novels of all time although, interestingly enough, Crane had no personal military experience. As the story unfolded, members of a newly recruited Union regiment were debating a rumour: they were finally out of the war the next day and engaged the enemy. One young soldier, Henry Fleming, reflected on what would become of him when he got to battle - namely, would he run or would he stand and fight bravely? He enlisted because he wanted to be a hero, like the warriors of the Greek epics. His own mother, however, was not interested in his notions of bravery, and discouraged him from being enlisted. When he told her he's joined the army, she denied him a farewell scene and merely said if he found himself in a situation where he would be killed or may do something wrong, he would go with his feelings. During the battle, even though Henry fought bravely, he did not receive any physical wound which bled. However, he does receive one but it was not the kind that he wanted to receive. The ensuing battle came to an end with Henry's regiment winning the battle. Henry, on walking away with the regiment, first felt pride in his accomplishments of battle. Then he remembered his fight and his treatment of the tattered man, and guilt rose up in him again. He was concerned that his mate would see it. However, he eventually let it go, and now saw his previous thoughts on war and battle as silly. He had made it through the trials of battle, from the red and the black, and was changed into a man. The golden sunlight streamed through the clouds as he marched with his regiment.

Keywords: *regiment, wound, blood, fight, treatment, warriors, soldier and accomplishments.*

Introduction: Stephen crane was the author of the war novel “The Red Badge of Courage”. The story was about a young private of the Union Army, Henry Fleming who fled from the field of battle during the American Civil War. Henry wished "that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage", a wish to have been wounded in battle. However, the wound he had received (from the rifle butt of a fleeing Union soldier), was not a badge of courage but a

badge of shame. Crane's short novel *The Red Badge of Courage* was published in 1895. The novel was not a success in the United States. *The Red Badge of Courage* was a massive success in England. The attention of the English critics caused many Americans to view the novel with renewed enthusiasm, catapulting young Crane into international literary prominence. His realistic depictions of war and battle led to many assignments as a foreign correspondent for newspapers, taking him to such locales as Greece, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Ironically, when Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage*, he had neither fought in a war nor witnessed battle, and was forced to rely on his powers of invention and imagination to create the extraordinarily realistic combat sequences in the novel. In fact, his work was so accurate that, most critics assumed, Crane was an experienced soldier. As a writer, committed to direct portrayal of his experience, Crane's work was a product of his imagination though the battle, neither the war, nor the armies were named in the book—*The Red Badge of Courage*. The story line shattered American preconceptions about what a war novel would be. In decades before Crane's novel, most fiction about the Civil War was idealistic, portraying the conflict as a great clash of opposed ideals. Crane focused on the psychology of a single soldier, Private Henry Fleming, his experiences of battle. In his narrowed scope, Crane represented Henry's mind as a maze of illusions and vanity challenged by the hard lessons of war. Crane had not depicted a world of moral absolutes, but rather a universe utterly indifferent to human existence.

This was startling and the unexpected shift drew the world's attention to *The Red Badge of Courage*, as did the novel's vivid and powerful descriptions of battle. With a combination of detailed imagery, moral ambiguity, and psychological focus, *The Red Badge of Courage* exerted an enormous influence on twentieth-century American fiction, particularly, on the writings of the modernists. These qualities continue to make the work absorbing and important more than a century after it was written.

Literature Review: It was a moment at the civil war where a Union regiment was camped and had taken rest along a riverbank. The hero of the story was Henry Fleming, a recruit with the 304th Regiment, worried about his courage. He feared that if he was to see battle, he might probably run. However, it was revealed by the narrator that Henry had joined the army as he was drawn to the glory of military conflict. Finally, the regiment was given orders to march, and the soldiers spent weary days travelling on foot. Eventually, they approached a battlefield and began to hear the distant roar of conflict, securing a position, the enemy charged ahead. Henry, along with his fellow soldiers, realized that he could not run even if he wanted to. He fired mechanically, like a cog in a machine.

The blue (Union) regiment defeated the gray (Confederate) soldiers, and the victors congratulated one another. Henry woke up from a brief nap to find that the enemy was again charging his regiment. Terror overtook him this time and he leapt up and fled from the line. As he scampered across the landscape, he told himself that he had made the right decision, and his regiment could not have won, and the men who remained to fight were fools. He passed a general on horseback and overheard the commander saying that the regiment had held back the enemy charge. Ashamed of his cowardice, Henry tried to

convince himself that he was right to preserve his life. He wandered through a forest glade in a confused and traumatized state where he encountered the decaying corpse of a soldier. Shaken with fright, he hurried away.

After some time gathering courage, Henry joined a column of wounded soldiers winding down the road. He was deeply envious of these men, thinking that a wound was like “a red badge of courage”—visible proof of valour. He met a tattered man who had been shot twice and who spoke proudly of the fact that his regiment had not fled. He repeatedly asked Henry where he was wounded, which made Henry deeply uncomfortable and compelled him to hurry to a different part of the column. He met a spectral soldier with a distant, numb look on his face. Henry eventually recognized the man was none other but, a badly wounded Jim Conklin. Henry promised to take care of Jim, but Jim ran from the line into a small grove of bushes where Henry and the tattered man watched him die.

Henry and the tattered soldier wandered through the woods. Henry heard the rumble of combat in the distance. The tattered soldier continued to ask Henry about his wound, even as his health worsened. At last, Henry was unable to bear the tattered man’s questioning and abandoned him to die in the forest. Henry continued to wander until he was close enough to the battlefield to watch some of the fighting. He saw a blue regiment in retreat and attempted to stop the soldiers to find out what had happened. One of the fleeing men hit him on the head with a rifle, opening a bloody gash on Henry’s head. Eventually, another soldier led Henry to his regiment’s camp, where Henry was reunited with his companions. His friend Wilson believed that Henry had been shot and cared for him tenderly.

The next day, the regiment proceeded back to the battlefield. Henry fought like a lion. Thinking of Jim Conklin, he raged like a mad bull against the enemy soldiers. His lieutenant said that with ten thousand Henrys, he could win the war in a week. Nevertheless, Henry and Wilson overheard an officer say that the soldiers of the 304th fought like “mule drivers.” Insulted, they longed to prove the man wrong. In an ensuing charge, the regiment’s flag bearer fell. Henry took the flag and carried it proudly before the regiment. After the charge failed, the derisive officer told the regiment’s colonel that his men fought like “mud diggers,” further infuriating Henry. Another soldier told Henry and Wilson, to their gratification, that the colonel and lieutenant considered them the best fighters in the regiment.

The group was sent to more fighting, and Henry continued to carry the flag. The regiment charged a group of enemy soldiers fortified behind a fence, and, after a pitched battle, won the fence. Wilson seized the enemy flag and the regiment took four prisoners. As he and the others marched back to their position, Henry reflected on his experiences in the war. Though he revealed his success in battle, he felt deeply ashamed of his behaviour the previous day, especially for having abandoned the tattered man. But after a moment, he puts his guilt behind him and realized that he had come through “the red sickness” of battle. He was now able to look forward to peace, feeling that he had the red badge of courage.

Plot: On one particular day the so called 304th New York Regiment awaits for a battle beside a river. Eighteen-year-old Private Henry Fleming remembered his reasons for being enlisted as well as his mother's protests and wonders whether he would remain brave in the face of fear, or turn and run. He is comforted by one of his friends from home, Jim Conklin, who admitted that he would run from battle if his fellow soldiers also fled. During the regiment's first battle, soldiers charged, but were repelled. The enemy quickly regrouped and attacked again, this time forcing some of the unprepared soldiers to flee. Fearing the battle was lost, Henry deserted his regiment. It was not until after he reached the rear of the army that he overheard a general announcing the victory.

Ashamed, Henry escaped into a nearby forest, where he discovered a decaying body in a peaceful clearing. Being disturbed, he hurriedly left the clearing and stumbled upon a group of injured men returning from battle. One member of the group, a "tattered soldier", asked Henry where he was wounded, but he dodged the question. Among the group was Jim Conklin, who had been shot in the side and was suffering delirium from blood-loss. Jim eventually died of his injury, resisting aid from a friend, and an enraged and helpless Henry ran from the wounded soldiers. He next joined a retreating column that was in disarray. In the ensuing panic, a man had hit Henry on the head with a rifle and wounded him. Exhausted, hungry, thirsty, and wounded, Henry decided to return to his regiment regardless of his shame. When he arrived at camp, the other soldiers believed his injury resulted from a grazing bullet in the battle. The other men cared for him and dressed his wound.

The next morning Henry went into battle for the third time. His regiment encountered a small group of Confederates, and in the ensuing fight Henry proved to be a capable soldier, comforted by the belief that his previous cowardice had not been noticed, as he "had performed his mistakes in the dark, he was still a man" Afterwards, while looking for a stream to obtain water with a friend, he discovered from the commanding officer that his regiment had a lack lustre reputation. The officer spoke casually about sacrificing the 304th because they were nothing more than "mule drivers" and "mud diggers." With no other regiments to spare, the general ordered his men forward.

In the final battle, Henry acted as the flag-bearer after the color sergeant fell. A line of Confederates hidden behind a fence beyond a clearing shot with impunity at Henry's regiment, which was ill-covered in the tree-line. Facing withering fire if they stayed and disgraced if they were to retreat, the officers ordered a charge. Unarmed, Henry led the men while entirely escaping injury. Most of the Confederates ran before the regiment arrived, and four of the remaining men were taken prisoner.

Reader- response approach: When Henry and his comrades did finally engage in a battle, Henry faced the enemy and fired repeatedly until, the enemy charge was repelled. Henry overcame a portion of his fear and gained confidence as he worked with the other soldiers of his regiment to hold the line. With the help of his fellow soldiers, Henry stood his ground and made some movements toward confidence and maturity. Henry's newfound confidence was short-lived. The realities of battle intervened and caused his fear and doubt to resurface.

Henry moved from a state of euphoria after repelling the enemy's charge in the first battle to a state of panic at the beginning of a second battle. When the enemy charged, Henry feared to take control. When the soldier next to him dropped his rifle and ran, Henry's ability to reason vanished, and he too ran. He abandoned any thoughts of honour and duty and sank into a state of total self-concern and immaturity. In his state of disgrace, he attempted to rationalize his retreat to make himself feel better.

Henry remained in this state of self-absorption through some critical events like- Jim Conklin's death could not jar him out of his thoughts about his own well-being. He also abandoned the tattered soldier because he feared the man's questions about his head wound; he committed a despicably selfish act rather than face his own lack of courage. In fact, his self-absorption was so deep that it stopped him from rejoining the fighting, even though he wanted to. Henry's accidental head wound was not the red badge of courage that he longed to acquire; rather, it became a shield that he used to protect the lie he had built around himself. Henry only began to emerge from his shell of self-absorption and fear when he recognized Wilson's weakness in giving him a bunch of letters to hold. On this strange foundation, Henry's confidence for battle began to take shape.

Henry's new-found confidence allowed him to face a tough reality: that as a soldier, he must kill or be killed. His confidence allowed him to feel anger toward the enemy, rather than fear. At this point, Henry, if not a hero, was certainly a courageous, confident soldier. His confidence gained strength that it began to influence the other soldiers. When Henry assumed the role of flag-bearer for the regiment, he became a symbol of bravery and courage. His transformation from child to man, from coward to a brave veteran was complete.

Conclusion: In my opinion, I feel that this story was an eye opener to many young boys who dreaded war. In fact, "The Red badge of Courage" a war novel by Stephen Crane was organized into many short chapters, which created an impression like as if the reader was looking through a series of snapshots in a photo album. This technique worked most effectively in the episodes related to battlefield action; the short chapters highlighted the interactions between the soldiers and their environment. The short chapters allowed the reader to enter Henry's mind and became a part of Henry's mental debate. Towards the end of the novel, when Henry participated in a battle and fought like a "wild cat," Crane showed Henry's transition as he awakened to the realization that he was, in fact, a soldier who had to kill. The new Henry was a changed man and a soldier hero. Henry became a model soldier, showing courage and bravery and allegiance to duty. Henry also determined that he would use his poor treatment of the tattered soldier as a reminder that he had to balance humility with confidence, a sentiment that marked Henry as a new person. Crane structured the novel to show Henry's quick growth from boy to man by the evening of the second day of combat. A transition, in which, the identity of every single boy who wanted to have a red badge of courage could accomplish through their service.

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