

ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

The Red Badge of Courage (1895)



Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

INTRODUCTION

The Civil War battle of Chancellorsville was fought upriver from Fredericksburg, Virginia on the first three days of May 1863. President Lincoln, dissatisfied with the failure of General Burnside in the battle of Fredericksburg, replaced him as commander of the Union Army with General Joe Hooker. Burnside had lost roughly 9,000 men trying to take the high ground above Fredericksburg, while Confederate General Robert E. Lee lost 1,500. Hooker still outnumbered Lee more than 2 to 1.

Hooker decoyed by sending cavalry south to cut off communications between Fredericksburg and the Confederate capital of Richmond, faking an attack on Richmond. Then he sent 70,000 men up the Rappahannock River to cross over and outflank Lee dug in at Fredericksburg. After skirmishes near Chancellorsville, about 15 miles upriver, Lee's cavalry led by Jeb Stuart took control of the roads. Hooker hesitated when he should have attacked. Lee outwitted him with the boldest move of his career: He kept about 19,000 of his men where they were and sent General Stonewall Jackson around Hooker's right flank at Chancellorsville with 26,000 men--one third of his army. The legendary Jackson, the most daring southern officer, hit the Union flank by surprise with tremendous force and routed an entire corps. After 3 days of confused and desperate fighting, Hooker retreated northward across the Rappahannock, having lost 17,000 men. Chancellorsville was Lee's most brilliant victory, but it cost him more than he could afford--11,000 men and Stonewall Jackson, who was accidentally shot to death in the dark by one of his own sentinels. Lee said, "I have lost my right arm." Ernest Hemingway adapted Jackson's last words as the title for a novel, "Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees."

I

Stephen Crane is the first American fiction writer with the perspective of a film director. He opens with a panoramic shot of fog dissipating to reveal the Union Army resting on the hills, personified as a single

entity awakening, trembling and casting its eyes across the river at the eyelike gleam of enemy campfires--like two prehistoric monsters about to attack each other. War is a regression that induces the primitive consciousness of early man.

The style combines Impressionism--vividly pictorial and full of color--with poetic Expressionism, the animistic personifications that deepen the psychology and give a mythic quality to the story. Also impressionistic is the rapid passage of time, from winter to spring and from dawn to night in the four sentences of the first paragraph, followed by a leap into the indefinite "Once..." The tall soldier, later named Jim Conklin, is inflated by hearing news of a troop movement: "We're goin' way up the river, cut across, an' come around in behint 'em." This corresponds to the actual events leading to the battle at Chancellorsville in 1863. The river is the Rappahannock in Virginia, though the troops are unaware of where they are most of the time and Crane generally restricts point of view and understanding to that of the common soldier—to an Everyman, the youth eventually named Henry Fleming. This technique is the influential "Method" originated by Henry James to increase Realism.

That the soldiers are not named at first is consistent with the impersonality of the military, war and Nature. Introduced as "the youthful private," Henry is not named until Chapter 11. These are common men with common names, as Crane the Realist conveys general truths by focusing on representative character types. *The Red Badge* is typical of the Realist novel in its attack on Romanticism, especially in the romantic novels about the Civil War that were popular during the 1880s and 90s. The youth is full of romantic illusions about himself and war: He "despaired of witnessing a Greeklike struggle." Dreaming of glory, "He had burned several times to enlist." His mother, a voice of Realism, discourages him but he is inspired by war propaganda in the press—"the twisted news." In a "prolonged ecstasy of excitement," he finally enlists.

He feels prepared to be a warrior but his mother disarms him by going on with her chores, milking the cow and peeling potatoes while she cautions him like he is a child. According to Crane she is right, except for her faith that "the Lord'll take keer of us all." Henry already believes that "he must be a hero." The pattern throughout the novel of great expectations followed by disillusionment, initiated by the disappointing response of his mother, continues after his glorious arrival in Washington is followed by "months of monotonous life in a camp." As he is drilled and drilled he comes to regard himself not as a hero but as merely "a part of a vast blue demonstration." His mental conditioning is conveyed by verbatim repetition of "his old ideas"--that men have evolved beyond war.

The pathos of the Civil War, in some cases making enemies of brothers, is evoked one night when Henry is on guard duty and strikes up a conversation with a counterpart, a ragged Confederate guarding the other side of the river. The enemy is not really a monster at all. "The youth liked him personally." The Confederate is ironically accurate in describing Henry: "'Yer a right dum good feller.' This sentiment, floating to him upon the still air, had made him temporarily regret war." Temporarily. In the morning one may kill the other. Anticipating his first time under fire, Henry naively "tried to mathematically prove to himself that he would not run from a battle," but he must admit that he might run, because "he knew nothing of himself."

Jim Conklin tells the men that some Union cavalry has set out for Richmond, which is consistent with the historical fact that the Union General Hooker sent out cavalry as a decoy, faking an assault on the Confederate capitol while he snuck 70,000 troops around Lee's flank at Chancellorsville to attack the Confederate Army from behind. Worrying that he might be the only one to run away, Henry questions Jim, who is mature enough to admit that he might run himself. The honesty and humility of Jim establish him as a moral exemplar against whose character and conduct Henry is measured.

II

The attack is delayed and for awhile even Jim Conklin appears to have been mistaken, another disappointment for Henry. Once again he feels merely "part of a blue demonstration." Blue denotes the color of his uniform and connotes his mood. The phrase is an example of Expressionism, as it expresses a feeling with an image and makes an abstraction concrete, transcending the ordinary perception of reality.

Paradoxically, Henry feels isolated in the army. He feels unique rather than common, fearing that he is unique also in doubting himself, that his companions are “all heroes.” Then he swings to the opposite extreme and imagines they all are doubtful just like him.

Once again the enemy is monstrous, just across the river peering at him with “red eyes.” His predicament is prehistoric. Against the dawning sky “loomed the gigantic figure of the colonel on a gigantic horse.” The optical illusion is a metaphor of mental illusion, perception exaggerated by fear. A commanding officer has the power of life and death--the power of God--and the responsibility to slay the “dragons advancing.” The colonel has an exaggerated importance as Henry watches him “lift his gigantic arm and calmly stroke his mustache.” At the same time Crane satirizes the impatient youth for presuming to know more than all his officers and for “grumbling about the camp like a veteran.” Continuing the pattern of inflation and deflation, Henry overhears officers betting a box of cigars on the outcome of the battle, as if it is a sporting event, contrary to his own exalted anticipation. The bet introduces a motif of gambling and chance, a theme characteristic of Naturalism.

Crane’s aesthetics throughout the novel are Impressionist, however, the opposite of Naturalist. In fact, as already noted, his style often extends from realistic impressions into poetic Expressionism, as when he renders the regiment as a centipede, “one of those moving monsters wending with many feet.” Then the columns of troops are “huge crawling reptiles” and “serpents crawling from the cavern of the night.” In war, humans regress to the lowest forms of bestiality. Men are reduced to snakes and their weapons to machines invading the Garden--the countryside and the heart--where “The sky overhead was of a fairy blue.” The ironic incongruity emphasizes the indifference of Nature and the warlike nature of men.

The troop movement now confirms that Jim Conklin was right after all, in accord with the battle at Chancellorsville: “They were certainly going to come in behind the enemy.” Crane does not specify how many troops because the individual soldier would not know that. The uniquely realistic effects of this novel derive from limiting perception mostly to the impressions of one scared young rifleman. Ironically, the youth and his companions imagine themselves to be “part of a blasting host,” whereas their regiment is going to be held in reserve until the battle is almost lost because Union General Hooker hesitated and did not exploit his advantage of surprise, turning what should have been a rout into an inconclusive disappointment. Appreciating that irony at the end of the book depends upon the reader having historical knowledge of the battle.

Pacifist professors like to teach *The Red Badge* as an “anti-war novel,” but Crane’s similes imply that war is part of the natural order: “Tents sprang up like strange plants. Camp fires, like red, peculiar blossoms, dotted the night.” By firelight the forms of the soldiers are seen to have “satanic effects.” One of Crane’s most admired Impressionist metaphors expresses Henry’s projective romanticism: “The moon had been lighted and was hung in a treetop.” As if the great colonel with the gigantic arm had hung it up there. This is followed by his feeling a “vast pity for himself” and by more naive projection: “The whole mood of the darkness, he thought, was one of sympathy for himself in his distress.” He has not yet learned what the correspondent learns in “The Open Boat,” that Nature is indifferent.

Wilson the over-confident loud soldier makes Henry feel like a “mental outcast.” Now he even admits that “he would not be able to cope with this monster.” He has prepared himself to run away. The worst monster of all has become his fear. The chapter ends with the voices of men playing cards, implying again that everything is subject to chance.

III

As the regiment crosses a river at night (the Rapidan, a tributary of the Rappahannock) across pontoon bridges, Crane renders perception with poetic imagery, assonance and alliteration: (1) “fire wine-tinted the waters”; (2) “of the river. Its rays”; (3) “moving masses of troops”; (4) “sudden gleams of silver or gold. Upon the other shore a dark and mysterious range of hills was curved against the sky. The insect voices of the night sang solemnly.” The cumulative *s* sounds--a total of 19 sibilants--evoke the swishing friction of uniforms, the movement of water and the hissing of snakes, recalling the heavy alliteration in poems of Poe, an early influence on Crane.

Impressionist brevity hones irony into wit: "Presently the army sat down to think." Henry returns to "his theory of a blue demonstration," but soon finds himself running, "carried along by a mob." He feels trapped in a "moving box." The trap is a signature metaphor in Naturalistic fiction and some critics have seized upon this passage as evidence that Crane is a Naturalist. Crane sets them up to make this stock response by emphasizing determinism in four successive sentences. Then in the next paragraph, in effect, he satirizes them for being in boxes themselves: "he had never wished to come to this war. He had not enlisted of his free will. He had been dragged by the merciless government." On the contrary, we recall how eager he was to enlist. The tone here mocks both Henry and kneejerk Naturalists. It affirms the existence of free will and holds Henry responsible for his decisions. In the next paragraph, wallowing in self-pity he "wallowed" across black water and "some white bubble eyes" look at him as if contradicting his lie to himself, imaging his paranoia.

When his regiment joins the brigade, Henry gets a larger view of the action and the incongruity of peace in war: "He was aware that these battalions with their commotions were woven red and startling into the gentle fabric of softened greens and browns. It looked to be a wrong place for a battle field." He encounters a corpse on the field and tries "to read in the dead eyes the answer to the Question." At this point, lacking the faith of his mother, he is agnostic like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, but unlike Ishmael his curiosity "was quite easily satisfied."

"Absurd ideas took hold upon him," he is overtaken by fear and loses faith in the Union generals--as did President Lincoln--anticipating an ambush: "It was all a trap." In fact, it is the Union Army that is trying to ambush the Confederates, and they fail because General Hooker, like Henry, fears a trap. The way Henry disparages officers is characteristic of enlisted men in the military. Too often they are right, as in this case at least in respect to General Hooker. Now Henry is so frightened he lags behind, until he gets called a skulker by the lieutenant of his company: "he hated the lieutenant, who had no appreciation of fine minds. He was a mere brute." As if what you need in a battle is an army of fine minds too reasonable to fight.

In this episode Crane establishes a number of conventions of the modern war novel and war movies, including (1) the arduous taking of terrain only to give it up again, adding to a sense of futility and absurdity; (2) digging in, only to be ordered to leave the entrenchments behind and move on; and (3) the "fever of impatience" to engage the enemy. The withdrawal in this chapter is General Hooker's retreat when he should have advanced. He got intimidated by rebel skirmishers, allowed the Confederate General Jeb Stuart to control the roads with his cavalry and gave General Lee time to respond by sending troops to meet the Union forces trying to outflank him.

Henry tries again to rationalize his fear away, as when he tried to prove to himself mathematically that he would not run: "Regarding death thus out of the corner of his eye, he conceived it to be nothing but rest." Now, in self-pity, he even welcomes it: "He would die; he would go to some place where he would be understood." But then "A brigade ahead of them and on the right went into action with a rending roar" and "The youth, forgetting his neat plan of getting killed, gazed spellbound." The loud soldier, Wilson, is humbled and entrusts Henry with a packet to be given to his folks upon his death in an envelope that is yellow, the color popularly associated with cowardice, though Crane implies that Wilson's behavior here is quite natural and poignant.

IV

Smoke and haze on the battlefield are metaphors of Henry's limited ability to see or understand, and also of the further obfuscation and uncertainty spread by rumors. "The men of the new regiment watched and listened eagerly, while their tongues ran on in gossip of the battlefield." Here the authentic dialogue is Realism, rendered with techniques of Impressionism including brevity, rapidity, evocative imagery and dramatic intensity. "The din in front swelled to a tremendous chorus." This makes evident their position in the rear as reserves. Henry's projection of emotion is conveyed with more Expressionism: "a flag that tossed in the smoke angrily" while a shell "screaming like a storm banshee went over the huddled heads of the reserves."

There is more psychological Realism when, relieving the tension, the lieutenant gets shot in the hand: "He began to swear so wondrously that a nervous laugh went along the regimental line." But suddenly

there is nothing to laugh about: "It was seen that the whole command was fleeing. The flag sank down as if dying." This renders the collapse of the Union right flank under the command of General O. O. Howard, here called Saunders. Now the reserves "had to hold on," but this stampede to the rear sets a compelling precedent to Henry, who by now is prepared to panic.

V

They defend against a frontal assault by Stonewall Jackson. Henry "suddenly lost concern for himself and...became not a man but a member." Just as he was drilled. He passes his first test under fire and afterward "he felt the subtle battle brotherhood more potent even than the cause for which they were fighting. It was a mysterious fraternity born of the smoke and danger of death." This feeling of brotherhood is comparable to that of the men in "The Open Boat." Henry's priorities are consistent with studies of what motivates men in combat. Primarily, they fight for each other.

War is not what young Henry has been led to expect: "There was a singular absence of heroic poses... The officers...neglected to stand in picturesque attitudes." Likewise, the bodies on the field are grotesque. The dead men seem to have "fallen from some great height to get into such positions. They looked to be dumped out upon the ground from the sky." Not so much like fallen angels as like men fallen from heroes in romantic novels to pathetic creatures in reality. He discovers that war is paradoxical in demanding contradictory behaviors simultaneously: "The soldier went mechanically, dully, with his animal-like eyes upon the officer." Soldiers must obey orders like machines but must fight like wild animals. Henry fights with a "red rage" like a "pestered animal" and a "driven beast." A comparable doubleness is expressed in Crane's style by his immersion of the reader in the action through Impressionist techniques while inducing simultaneous detachment with his ironic tone.

Chance, randomness and the insignificance of the common soldier are imaged as "men dropped here and there like bundles." Expressionism conveys the animistic consciousness of men in combat, as by the personification of artillery: "The guns squatted in a row like savage chiefs. They argued with abrupt violence. It was a grim pow-wow." The analogy to Indians emphasizes again that war is an expression of universal human nature. Quickening in pace, collapsing time, the chapter ends with a series of vivid impressions: "Once he saw a tiny battery go dashing along the line of the horizon. The tiny riders were beating the tiny horses." Like toys in a game being played by the Generals. Here again Crane's painterly Impressionism makes the reader a participant in the sensations of the battle while simultaneously detaching him with attention to aesthetic effects rather than to the effects of cannon fire. His artful camera pulls back into a panoramic shot of flags rippling all around with "the red in the stripes dominating. They splashed bits of warm color upon the dark lines of troops."

Once again Henry is astonished by the incongruity between the hellish battlefield and the heavenly purity of the sky: "It was surprising that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment." His astonishment reflects his continuing projection of human feelings and expectations onto Nature.

VI

The first sentence describes Henry's psychological development through the course of the story: "The youth awakened slowly." Here, after only his first battle, he imagines that he has mastered his fear and his "supreme trial had been passed. The red, formidable difficulties of war had been vanquished. He went into an ecstasy of self-satisfaction." The ongoing pattern of naive inflation followed by deflation--as regular as breathing--continues throughout the novel, including the very end, when, as here, Henry imagines that "It was all over at last!" Crane's final ironic deflation of Henry is the fact that he is just getting started in this war, that he has many more battles ahead.

As he is congratulating himself on being such an admirable fellow and shaking hands all around, here they come again! Shells start falling like "war flowers bursting into fierce bloom." The oxymoron of war flowers expresses the unexpected. At first Henry is in denial: "Surely, he thought, this impossible thing was not about to happen. He waited as if he expected the enemy to suddenly stop, apologize, and retire bowing. It was all a mistake." His attitude is absurd. Momentary peace turns him into a pacifist fool more

vulnerable to the enemy than before. "He became like the man who lost his legs at the approach of the red and green monster... He seemed to shut his eyes and wait to be gobbled." Near him, a man who seems courageous suddenly howls and runs away. It is important to notice that Crane's tone is *not* ironic here in praise of "exalted courage, the majesty of he who dares give his life."

The soldier "ran like a rabbit. Others began to scamper away through the smoke." Such comparisons of men to animals--over 90 in the novel--insist on a Darwinian as opposed to a Victorian concept of the human species, another characteristic feature of Naturalism. With so many precedents and provocations, it comes as no surprise when Henry is finally transformed into a "proverbial chicken," drops his gun and runs away "like a blind man."

In his effort to rationalize running away, he pities the artillery men in a passage that anticipates the stream-of-consciousness technique later developed by Modernists: "Methodical idiots! Machinelike fools!" He projects his self-pity as an absurd "pity for the guns." In this passage the rapidity of movement from one perception and event to the next evokes his rapid flight--so far to the rear that he finds himself "slinking around" the staff officers. Inflating again, trying to justify his cowardice, he imagines himself better informed than his commander, who is a fool--even a criminal! He feels like thrashing the General for not consulting him for intelligence on the battle--for not immediately ordering the entire brigade to follow Private Fleming and run like hell!

Only a "moment later," Henry learns that his comrades who did not run away have held the line without him. He is the fool, after all. They are heroes and the General is brilliant "like a sun."

VII

Even as Henry cringes "as if discovered in a crime," he felt that, nevertheless, "he had been wronged." He even blames his comrades for their victory. "A yellow fog lay wallowing in the treetops" is a metaphor of his wallowing in cowardly self-pity and foggy thinking. Throughout the novel, Henry is faulted more for his moral than for his physical cowardice. Short, simple declarative sentences express his breathless desperation to justify his position. "He had done a good part in saving himself, who was a little piece of the army. He had considered the time, he said, to be one in which it was the duty of every little piece to rescue itself if possible." The repeated diminutive "little" contributes to the childish tone of his rationalization. Even after he has been proven wrong, Henry continues to reason by weighing "probabilities in the scales of desire," as put by Ambrose Bierce.

Crane's relentless ridicule of Henry--the common man as a youth--recalls Ben Franklin: "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable* creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do." Henry's position in the rear is so indefensible now that he abandons reason altogether and turns in "animal-like rebellion against his fellows." He runs away and hides like a child, finding apparent sanctuary in the thick woods. Cannons boom in the distance. Just as he brought romantic notions of war to the battlefield, he has brought romantic views of Nature: "It was the religion of peace... He conceived Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy." This episode is Naturalistic in contradicting both the high literary tradition of idealizing Nature--Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, Jewett--and the sentimentality of Victorian popular culture.

Instead of exalting the squirrel as a manifestation of spiritual values as Thoreau might, Henry throws a cone at it. If he had his gun he might have shot at it. In those days, the poor ate squirrels. He thinks because the squirrel runs away, "Nature had given him a sign... Nature was of his mind..." Which mind? Henry consciously sees Nature sentimentally, but his argument in his own defense, comparing himself to the squirrel, implies a Naturalistic universe. Unconscious of the contradiction, "He walked on, going from obscurity into promises of a greater obscurity." After he sees a small animal catch a fish, he comes upon a dead man with eyes like a dead fish. Later, the men of his regiment are called "fresh fish."

Crane uses a traditional analogy between Nature and the architecture of organized religion--"arching boughs made a Chapel"; "There was a religious half light." However, his description of the dead soldier contradicts religious, philosophical and popular sentimentality with ghastly physical details that place humans in the natural order with squirrels, fish and ants: "One was trundling some sort of bundle along the

upper lip.” Previously, soldiers fell “like bundles.” Henry retreats, naturally, from this reality, but Nature, in the symbolic form of branches “pushing against him, threatened to throw him over upon it.” He even feels an inclination to touch the corpse, until he is overcome by the sight of “the black ants swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly close to the eyes.” Again he runs away from death, from Nature—while still seeing the place as a Chapel.

VIII

He is still projecting his sentiments into Nature, hearing the trees “sing a hymn.” There is a lull in the noises of insects “as if they had bowed their beaks and were making a devotional pause.” But then the peace is blown away by a “crimson roar” of cannons. By now even Henry has acquired a sense of irony, seeing “that it was an ironical thing for him to be running thus toward that which he had been at such pains to avoid.” He realizes he and his fellows had an exaggerated sense of their importance and “had imagined that they were deciding the war.” No longer seeing Nature as a gentle mother, he is developing a more realistic outlook: “It seemed that Nature could not be quite ready to kill him.”

Frank Norris’s parody of Crane may have been provoked by the sentence, “He stood regardant for a moment.” Joining the wounded men on the road, Henry “felt that he was an invader.” The tattered soldier beside him has “lamblike eyes”—Christ-evoking. The stranger “mustered sufficient courage to speak,” a shy man in society (like Jack Potter the marshal in “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky”), yet by implication brave in battle. When he asks Henry where he got hit, he becomes a conscience—and Henry runs away. In his shame he displaces his big real problem with a little imaginary one, in effect still running away. “He bent his head and fastened his eyes studiously upon the button as if it were a little problem.”

IX

“He wished that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage.” He does not wish for courage, merely for the appearance of it. That would be a small thing compared to the condition of Jim Conklin, who got shot in the battle and is now a walking specter of death. Jim is barely alive yet walking because he wants to meet his death with dignity in the field, on ground of his own choosing, and he is terrified of being run over by artillery wagons on the road. Aware that he is dying, he is in a transcendent state, threatened with annihilation at any moment by the machines of war in the Garden. “Leave me be—” Solitude, self-reliance, intensity, confronting ultimate truth—these are characteristics of the transcendental mode of consciousness. That he succeeds in his heroic struggle to reach his “good place” to die celebrates the strength of the human spirit. This affirmation offsets with dramatic force the satirical, even cynical tone of the narrative. Jim is transcendent in that sense and also as an embodiment of loyalty, honesty, humility, courage, spiritual power and self-sacrifice. Hence, he too, like the tattered man, is a spiritual exemplar evoking Christ.

At the outset of the novel, Jim is introduced with Realism as fallible and subject to inflation like other men. At the same time, that he is taller than the other men—higher—implies that he is also exceptional in character. His death scene is one of the longest in the novel, the most poignant and one of the most powerful in American literature. The best man dies unjustly, like the oiler in “The Open Boat.” The implications of this scene, whether Naturalistic or Christian, have been much debated by critics. Jim falls like a tree, emphasizing his height, dignity and naturalness. Crane makes a point of having him contort himself so as to make “the left shoulder strike the ground first.” In literary tradition, the left side is associated with intuition, the unconscious, and access to the transcendent: “The body seemed to bounce a little way from the earth. ‘God!’ said the tattered soldier”—identifying Jim with the divine.

Jim has been called a “Christ figure” by critics who have cited as evidence: (1) his initials J.C.; (2) his identification with God by the tattered soldier; (3) the wound in his side; and (4) the image of the wafer, a reference to the sacrament of communion. To be sure, all this *evokes* Christ, in order to exalt Jim by comparing the virtues of these two exemplars. Crane’s morality is Christian, which made him a bitter critic of un-Christlike Christians, in the tradition of Melville and Twain.

However, most of the evidence in this scene *contrasts* Jim with Christ and depicts a Naturalistic universe rather than a Christian one: (1) Christ was one of the most uncommon men in history and is

considered divine, whereas Jim is a common man of high character; (2) Christ was a peacemaker, Jim is a soldier; (3) Christ died with dignity, Jim is grotesque, “dancing a sort of hideous hornpipe”; (4) Christ was reverent, Jim’s teeth “showed in a laugh”; (5) Jim is compared to a tree that falls, identifying him with Nature rather than with a God above, whereas Christ rose from the dead; (6) Christ inspires faith in Heaven, Jim’s death incites rebellion as Henry yells “Hell—”; (7) the wafer is the sun--a pagan divinity--not the body of Christ; (8) the wafer is red, a motif of war, not of salvation and heavenly peace--it was a “fierce wafer” until Crane cut the modifier; (9) Christ ascends to Heaven, Jim merely bounces, then comes down to earth; (10) Christ founded a religion, Jim dies in obscurity.

X

The tattered man, while displaying a comparable spirit, calls Jim a “jim-dandy”—“b’jiminey.” These common expressions reinforce the character of Jim as an exemplary common man. Dying himself, the tattered man modestly contrasts himself to Jim, becomes talkative and rambling while getting weaker. Henry is so haunted by “the ghost of shame” and so defensive he runs away again, contrary to the example set by both the tattered man and by Jim. He leaves the wounded man, who just wants someone to talk to while he dies, “wandering about helplessly in the field.” One of the great ironies of the novel is that his moral cowardice in abandoning the tattered man, not running away from a battle, is Henry’s worst act. Allegorically, he has abandoned his conscience: “The simple questions of the tattered man had been knife thrusts to him.”

His guilt makes him feel “that he could not keep his crime concealed in his bosom” and that (next chapter), “With his heart continually assuring him that he was despicable, he could not exist without making it, through his actions, apparent to all men.” He resembles the guilty Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* until he is “redeemed” by a red badge of courage--by the appearance of virtue. Crane measures the decline in the power of conscience since the Puritans by implicitly contrasting Dimmesdale, who is tortured to death by his guilty conscience, with Henry, a typical man of his day in being able repeatedly to rationalize his guilt away.

Crane wisely cut a long passage of further satire, originally a chapter, in which Henry rants some more against the universe. The academic editors who have restored such cuts in reprinting the text do a disservice to Crane, as these passages are redundant.

XI

Henry feels vindicated by an apparent retreat, then disappointed to see his side advance. Compensating for his self-pity, he fantasizes becoming a hero and “getting calmly killed on a high place before the eyes of all”—not in obscurity like Jim. “For a few moments he was sublime.” But then the difficulties of becoming a hero “began to drag at him.” Like, for instance, he has no rifle. He argues against his own childish excuses. He has ailments, he’s hungry, he’s thirsty, he hates himself, “He was a craven loon.” Hoping his comrades will be routed, he is a traitor in his heart. “He thought it would prove...that he had fled early because of his superior powers of perception.” But then he swings back to denouncing himself, slandering heroes and envying corpses.

Finally then, “He returned to the creed of soldiers.” At this point, ironically, for the first time in the story, he is named. He attains identity just when he fears losing his good name and being reduced to a “slang phrase”—like yellow belly.

XII

Henry feels like the only one who ran, then confronts “waves” of Union troops running away to the rear just as he did: “They charged down upon him like terrified buffaloes.... He forgot that he was engaged in combating the universe.” Trying to question the men running past him, he grabs one--who knocks him on the head with his rifle. This defines the title *The Red Badge of Courage* as ironic, like the narrative tone throughout, so ironic it is comical: Henry acquires the appearance of courage by getting hit on the head by one of his own men who has run away like himself.

After getting hit, “He fought an intense battle with his body.” Irony upon irony, in this interior battle he proves himself a true hero. Like Jim Conklin now, he resists falling down: “He went tall soldier fashion. He imagined secluded spots where he could fall and be unmolested. To search for one he strove against the tide of his pain.” This also recalls the dead soldier with ants on his face, suggesting that he must have been heroic like Jim to have reached that secluded place to die. It is further ironic that Henry does not realize his own true courage and is only concerned about the appearance--the red badge. “His head seemed swollen to a size that made him think his neck to be inadequate.”

“I kin give yeh a lift,” says the cheery soldier who guides him back to his regiment in the dark. Henry is still morally in the dark, so self-absorbed that he neither takes notice of his benefactor’s face nor thanks him. In the next chapter, he behaves even worse toward Wilson. To the reader, at the very time Henry feels that his red badge lifts his character in the eyes of others, he lowers himself the most.

XIII

“He could see the forms of men throwing black shadows in the red light, and as he went nearer it became known to him in some way that the ground was strewn with sleeping men.” This sentence illustrates principles of Crane’s distinctive Impressionism that include: (1) restricting awareness to the limitations of the protagonist; (2) deepening realism through archetypal imagery of light and dark; (3) sharpening the picture by economical selection of the most significant visual features; (4) intensifying the motif of red with the fire in the dark; and (5) dramatizing the process of increasing perception and awareness.

It turns out that Wilson, the braggart who got scared he was going to be killed, survived the battle after all. When Henry nervously repeats his lie that he got shot in the head, Wilson, a true friend, backs up his story. And the corporal promises, “Come on, Henry, I’ll take keer ‘a yeh.” These are among the men Henry has been reviling. By the corporal’s count, forty-two men disappeared like Henry, “but if they keep on a-comin’ this way, we’ll get th’ comp’ny all back by mornin’ yit.” The corporal does not accuse them of running away. Consequently, as easily as that, ironically, Henry is home free. All his terror of exposure as a yellow belly was based on his unfairly thinking the worst of his fellow men. The generous corporal accepts his lie: “Yeh’ve been grazed by a ball. It’s raised a queer lump as if some feller had lammed yeh on th’ head with a club.”

These men were inexperienced. So many ran in this first battle it would be impractical in the midst of hostile action to accuse any of them. As a rule in all armies, soldiers in combat who run away are executed. During the Civil War, however, 1 in 9 Confederates and 1 in 7 Yankees became a deserter at one time or another. It was the first war requiring a draft and there were riots by draft resisters. In the army, large numbers of soldiers preferred surrender to dying for a cause. In a letter, General Custer’s wife wrote in dismay: “My husband’s troopers seem to have absolutely no unkind feeling toward the Secessionists at all. And they never talk about their triumphs and exploits. They are always teasing each other about how *badly* they fought and how many times they ran away.”

After examining Henry’s wound, the corporal seems aware that he is probably lying about getting shot: “It’s jest a damn good belt on th’ head, an’ nothin’ more.” Yes, the red badge is a “damn good” alibi. Wilson bandages Henry’s head with a handkerchief “like a tender woman’s hand.” He praises his friend for his courage: “Yer a good un, Henry. Most ‘a men would a’ been in th’ hospital long ago. A shot in th’ head ain’t foolin’ business.” Of course, Henry *is* fooling. Wilson seems to know that as well as the corporal, as implied by his attitude when he tells Henry to shut up and not attract attention: “‘Don’t be makin’ a damn fool ‘a yerself,’ he said severely.” When Henry snuggles down into his blanket in great relief, in a moment he “was like his comrades”—an ironic phrase in several ways.

He is like those who ran away, but thanks to Wilson and the corporal, he feels like he got away with it. The red badge has given him only the appearance of being like those who did not run, but that is good enough for Henry. As a representative common man, he is essentially like his comrades, with the same basic nature, but the emphasis here is upon his actual conduct as opposed to the appearance: (1) his physical cowardice in abandoning his comrades on the line and running away; (2) his moral cowardice in

abandoning the tattered man; (3) his dishonesty even to himself in feeling that because of the red badge he is "like his comrades" who did not run away.

XIV

The warmth of the fire is followed in the morning by an icy dew on his face, an instance in the rhythmic alternation of opposite extremes throughout the novel--usually, as here, at the ends and the beginnings of successive chapters, as in the story "The Open Boat." Wilson tends Henry "with tenderness and care," having matured ahead of him in the battle: "He was no more a loud young soldier." Henry wakes up feeling he has been asleep "for a thousand years," but Wilson is the one who has grown older in self-knowledge and acquired humility: "I believe I was a pretty big fool in those days.' He spoke as after a lapse of years."

Wilson tells Henry the regiment lost over half its men in the battle, yet it turns out only a few were killed. By implication, virtually half the regiment ran away like Henry, making all his feelings of being the only one ironic in retrospect. Though he knows the truth, Wilson generously absolves Henry and the rest who ran away by assuming they all had valid reasons to be "'wanderin' around in th' woods, fightin' with other reg'ments, an' everything. Jest like you done.' 'So?' said the youth."

XV

Guilt is evident in Henry's defensive resentment of his friend. When he remembers the yellow envelope Wilson entrusted to him, and resolves to use it to his own advantage, he acts like the "yellow belly" he previously feared being called: "He now rejoiced in the possession of a small weapon with which he could prostrate his comrade at the first signs of a cross-examination. He was master. It would be he who could laugh and shoot the shafts of derision." Nobody has been laughing at him or shooting shafts of derision. Quite the contrary. Just as he did not notice the face of the cheery soldier who guided him back to the regiment, nor thank him, here Henry the common man is too guilty, self-absorbed, ungrateful, petty and meanspirited to acknowledge Wilson's kindness.

He feels "immensely superior to his friend, but he inclined to condescension. He adopted toward him an air of patronizing good humor. His self-pride was now entirely restored." Actually he has little to be proud of and much to be ashamed of--above all his abandoning the tattered soldier. One of the ironies here is that, up to this point, all the other characters are portrayed as superior to Henry. Just as he values the appearance of courage more than the reality, Henry bases his feeling of superiority on a lie: "He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man." Now that he is comfortable, he becomes a selfish bourgeois: "A man with a full stomach and the respect of his fellows had no business to scold about anything he might think to be wrong in the ways of the universe, or even with the ways of society. Let the unfortunates rail; the others may play marbles." He has forgotten Jim Conklin. In this mood, also, he would be indifferent to the plight of poor Maggie.

Henry revises his recent history in order to feel comfortable, romanticizing himself even more than before, feeling "chosen of the gods and doomed to greatness." Others had run away in terror, whereas "he had fled with discretion and dignity." When his friend Wilson asks him to return the yellow envelope, he lets him "escape unmolested with his packet" only because he cannot think of anything clever to say. Then, congratulating himself, he calls his lack of wit generosity.

XVI

Overcompensating for his cowardice with unearned self-esteem, Henry now becomes the loud soldier, which emphasizes his inferiority to Wilson: "'Mebbe yeh think yeh fit th' hull battle yestirday, Fleming'." The fragility of his false confidence is measured by how easily he is deflated: "The speech pierced the youth." Inflated like the Swede in "The Blue Hotel," Henry becomes "suddenly a modest person."

XVII

Now the enemy enrages Henry: "It was not well to drive men into final corners; at those moments they could all develop teeth and claws." He set his teeth "in a curl like snarl.... To the youth the fighters resembled animals tossed for a death struggle into a dark pit.... The blue smoke-swallowed line curled and writhed like a snake stepped upon.... It was revealed to him that he had been a barbarian, a beast. He had fought like a pagan who defends his religion.... He was now what he called a hero."

This is Realist debunking of the popular Romantic conceptions of courage and the "hero." Crane portrays "courage" as an unconscious reflex and a "hero" in battle as one who regresses to the instincts of an enraged animal, the opposite of the conventional romantic hero. Henry has proven his capacity, as a representative common man, to regress to bestiality. In fact, he proves himself exceptionally capable: "They now looked upon him as a war devil." This is certainly to his credit under the circumstances of war. He has earned his red badge. However, as always, he is inflated by his accomplishment, overlooks the moral dimension and persists with a fairy tale vision of life: "He had slept and, awakening, found himself a knight." Content with appearances, unlike Wilson he is not yet learning what his experiences should be teaching him.

XVIII

Going to the rear to fill canteens for the men, Henry and Wilson overhear the commanding General of their division making battle plans with one of his officers. Asked which regiment is most dispensable, the officer names Henry's: "They fight like mule drivers." The General orders them forward, indicating that they will be sacrificed. "New eyes" are given to Henry: "And the most startling thing was to learn suddenly that he was very insignificant. The officer spoke of the regiment as if he referred to a broom." No longer feeling like a knight, Henry now abruptly expects to get slaughtered like a sheep.

XIX

In one of the most representative images of the Civil War, depicted in many paintings, "The line fell slowly forward like a toppling wall and, with a convulsive gasp that was intended for a cheer, the regiment began its journey." Dynamic, vivid Impressionism renders the psychology of battle: "His mind took a mechanical but firm impression, so that afterwards everything was pictured and explained to him, save why he himself was there." The last clause indicates that he has finally transcended his ego: "There was the delirium that encounters despair and death, and is heedless and blind to the odds. It is a temporary but sublime absence of selfishness." There is no irony in the tone here. Crane has portrayed Henry as selfish until he transcends himself for the good, thereby becoming "sublime"--like Jim Conklin.

When the spell of their frenzied charge fades, they fall back into their egos, no longer sublime: "They returned to caution. They were become men again." They huddle together like sheep--a recurrent simile. Stirred to action by the initiative of Wilson, they advance once more and Henry is inspired by a symbol--the flag: "It was a goddess, radiant." When the color sergeant gets hit, he and Wilson save the flag from falling. They act as virtual knights in the traditional sense of fighting for and holding up an ideal often personified in a female--the sacred Union. While it is true that, as an Impressionist, Crane does not discuss the Union cause, he affirms it here with the most dramatic possible emphasis. He has portrayed the way a soldier naturally exaggerates the significance of a battle as the psychological basis for hyperbole in this episode. For though the Union loses the battle here at Chancellorsville, Henry and Wilson lead their regiment to small victories that prefigure the ultimate victory of the Union in the Civil War.

XX

In the meantime, once again advance is followed by retreat, triumph by futility. Henry overcame his egotism to some degree when he fought for the regiment and now he is fighting for all that is symbolized by the flag--so committed he wrenches it away from Wilson: "Each felt bound to declare, by an offer to carry the emblem, his willingness to further risk himself." This is another example of Henry acting with a "sublime absence of selfishness." Enemy riflemen targeted a color bearer for the symbolism, to damage

morale. Now that Henry has redeemed himself from cowardice, the narrative focus expands to the collective psychology of all the men in combat, to evoke more fully the chaotic experiences of war.

Although he has his sublime moments, Henry the common man is motivated perhaps more by anger and vindictive hatred than by high ideals: "He had thought of a fine revenge upon the officer who had referred to him and his fellows as mule drivers." Ironically, here he is motivated most by hatred of one of his own officers. Then "the retreat of the mule drivers was a march of shame." But they withstand an assault and the "impetus of enthusiasm was theirs again. They gazed about them with looks of uplifted pride." Pride is all they need to feel like men.

XXI

All it takes is some taunts by veterans to deflate Henry again, as he realizes what has been true of his perceptions all along: "Elfin thoughts must have exaggerated and enlarged everything, he said." This is reinforced when he overhears the officer who called the regiment mule drivers condemn them again. The denunciation of "MacChesnay" echoes criticism of General Hooker for his failure at Chancellorsville: "Good Lord, man, you stopped about a hundred feet this side of a very pretty success!" The pattern of swinging from one extreme mood to the opposite continues at the end of the chapter when the officers and men celebrate Henry and Wilson as heroes: "That's Flemin', an' he's a jimhickey." This laudatory slang term parallels the tattered man calling Jim Conklin a jim-dandy, elevating Henry to the status of Jim as a soldier: "He an' a feller named Wilson was at th' head 'a th' charge...all th' time!" Crane maintains aesthetic distance and his underlying tone of irony by letting the men do the praising of Henry and Wilson. That they are singled out, encircled and exalted by their comrades is the strongest approval they could receive.

XXII

Henry continues to project his mood in selective perceptions--called Expressionism in literature--as when he "could see the two flags shaking with laughter amid the smoke remnants." In combat he no longer fears the enemy as a monster, he is virtually unconscious: "He did not know that he breathed; that the flag hung silently over him, so absorbed was he." The change in Henry is emphasized by contrasting his run to the rear with his stalwart character now: "The youth had resolved not to budge whatever should happen." Ironically, now he is primarily motivated not by the lofty ideals symbolized by the flag he carries at such risk, but by his need for a scapegoat, by his craving for revenge against "the officer who had said 'mule drivers,' and later 'mud diggers'." Paradoxically, there remains something childish in his courage here, his self-pitying notion that he can achieve revenge against his own officer by getting killed.

One especially memorable example of Expressionism is the orderly sergeant shot through the cheeks so "his jaw hung afar down, disclosing in the wide cavern of his mouth a pulsing mass of blood and teeth. And with it all he made attempts to cry out." So grotesque is the image, so pathetic the humanity, as in the dark war paintings of Goya, it is a nightmarish vision larger than life. Crane increasingly emphasizes the grotesque to give forms to the insanity and horror of war, such as the "bodies lying twisted into impossible shapes," multiplying images in quick takes, jump cuts, closeups and panoramas. Impressionism and Expressionism give his art a greater vividness, rapidity of movement, psychological depth and intensity than the combat scenes in Tolstoy--or anyone else.

XXIII

Just when they grow weak from exhaustion, they are ordered to get up and *charge!* Unexpectedly, the "mob of blue men hurling themselves on the dangerous group of rifles were again grown suddenly wild with an enthusiasm of unselfishness... They were in a state of frenzy, perhaps because of forgotten vanities, and it made an exhibition of sublime recklessness.... He felt the daring spirit of a savage religion mad." The Confederate color bearer in this scene who dies clutching his flag is comparable to Jim Conklin: with his "terrible grin of resolution" while trying not to fall down—"He fought a grim fight."

XXIV

Again, establishing a convention in war fiction and movies, after taking ground at a terrible cost, the regiment “received orders to retrace its way.... They trampled slowly back over the field across which they had run in a mad scamper.” On their retreat to the river Henry says to Wilson prematurely, “Well, it’s all over.” As if they have won the war. Of course, in truth, the war is actually far from over. Henry’s natural but ironic optimism is repeated in the final imagery of the novel.

Henry now has time to “marshal all his acts” in his mind with some objectivity, in contrast to his emotionalism and madness over the previous three days of the battle: “He was enabled to look at them in spectator fashion and to criticize them with some correctness, for his new condition had already defeated certain sympathies.” The verb “defeated” parallels his inner battle with his outer one. To his credit, Henry has grown enough to criticize himself. His “new condition” is security as a respected member of his regiment, hence he is no longer rebelling against his comrades, society or the universe. He is no longer shaking his fist at the battlefield, he is carrying the flag and leading every charge. He has become a good soldier, even an exceptional one like Jim Conklin.

Now that he can take pride in his actions, naturally he feels validated by his comrades: “He saw that he was good. He recalled with a thrill of joy the respectful comments of his fellows upon his conduct.” Of course it is an oversimplification to see him that simply, as purely good. All the movie and television adaptations of *The Red Badge of Courage* omit the satire and the ironies and reduce the story to a youth becoming a man. It is clear from Crane’s satire of Henry as a common man throughout most of the narrative that overall he does not have a high opinion of men and that therefore merely becoming one is not much of an achievement.

At the same time, no one but an academic critic who has never been in combat would deny that he has earned the right to feel somewhat good about himself. Further to his credit, Henry is haunted by his conscience in the form of the tattered soldier he abandoned—“he who, gored by bullets and faint for blood, had fretted concerning an imagined wound in another; he who had loaned his last of strength and intellect for the tall soldier; he who, blind with weariness and pain, had been deserted in the field.” This “vision of cruelty brooded over him.” He dwells upon it: “For a long time this pursuing recollection of the tattered man took all elation from the youth’s veins. He saw his vivid error, and he was afraid that it would stand before him all his life.” This is evidence of moral character and a genuine concern for others, whether inherent in the common man or developed through adversity. It is evident in “The Veteran,” the sequel to *The Red Badge* that depicts Henry as an old man, that he atoned for his sin against the tattered man by his conduct in the war thereafter.

Gradually “he mustered force to put the sin at a distance... And at last his eyes seemed to open to some new ways. He found that he could look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly. He was gleeful when he discovered that he now despised them.” Among these earlier gospels would be his romantic illusions that glorified war and falsified the nature of courage and heroism, as well as his rebellion against society and the universe. “He felt a quiet manhood.” Though he is still a youth in years, after his experiences in three days of battle, the feeling of manhood, requiring only pride, is natural. And it is “quiet,” implicitly modest, like Jim Conklin. Henry is no longer a loud soldier. He has been portrayed as courageous in four different episodes: (1) “He went tall soldier fashion” after getting knocked in the head (XII); (2) he fights like a “war devil” (XVII); (3) he fights with “a temporary but sublime absence of selfishness” (XIX); and (4) he fights “with an enthusiasm of unselfishness” and “sublime recklessness” (XXIII).

At the end, having ridiculed the representative common man for his faults through most of the novel, dramatized his transformation into a hero and portrayed his moral growth, Crane balances all that with his ironic tone, reminding us of how prone Henry is to rationalize in order to comfort himself: “He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man.” Some critics read the irony at the end as meaning that Henry deserves no credit for anything. This is difficult to reconcile with his obvious heroism in “The Veteran,” where he gives his life to save animals from a fire, just as Henry Johnson the black servant risks his life to save a white child from a fire in “The Monster.” Both of these heroic Henrys are self-sacrificial like Billie the oiler in “The Open Boat.” Implicitly there are

men like them on both sides all over the battlefields of the Civil War. In *The Red Badge*, in addition to Henry the most evident are Jim Conklin, the tattered man, the dead man in the woods, Wilson and the Confederate color bearer.

After three days of war, it is natural for Henry to yearn for peace, and after all that fighting, to feel peaceful. In this sense “his soul changed.” He does not know who won the battle or whether the enemy would surrender. The war might be over tomorrow. Just as earlier his feelings in the battle felt out of synch with Nature--the fairy blue sky--now he feels good despite the “low, wretched sky,” the rain and the mud: “Yet the youth smiled...” Naturally, he fantasizes “tranquil skies...an existence of soft and eternal peace”--every combat soldier’s dream. Crane added the final line to the original manuscript, a deliberate cliché—that every cloud has a silver lining—a parody of sentimental romance: “Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds.”

The soldiers have bantered about the strategy of “comin’ in behind ‘em,” in effect ridiculing General Hooker for failing to execute the maneuver successfully at Chancellorsville. The last line of the novel, the cliché following the phrase “eternal peace,” is ironic on its face, since it is clear that the war is not over, that there are more battles and challenges to come. “He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle” is only wishful thinking. He is tired, he needs a bath. The final irony of the novel is the historical fact that Henry is marching with his regiment not to tranquility and peace, but to the battle of Gettysburg.

Michael Hollister (2015)