An Episode of War

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN CRANE

Born in New Jersey to a religious family, Crane came from deeply rooted American stock. One ancestor was the 17th-century founder of New Haven Colony, while another was a delegate at the first meeting of Congress in Philadelphia. Though sickly as a child, Crane loved baseball but not academics. He tried some years studying at a university ("a waste of time") but preferred sports and fraternity meetings to classes. He dropped out, took up local journalism in New Jersey, and moved to New York, where his examinations into slum life developed into his social-realist tell-all novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). Though today a classic of journalism-fiction crossover, the book sold poorly in its time, so Crane turned his attention to a historical fascination of his: the American Civil War. While churning out short stories for money, Crane put together his novel about a guilt-wracked Civil War deserter, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which proved an overnight success. With his newfound notoriety, Crane became a war correspondent, traveling the world to write about the Greco-Turkish War and later the Spanish-American War. He moved to England, where his fame was strongest, with his new partner, the journalist Dora Taylor. His health degraded from these extensive travels, however, and tuberculosis claimed his life at the age of 30. In his *The Red Badge of Courage* (which has never fallen out of print) and his many short stories on the subject, Crane is remembered as America's foremost chronicler of the Civil War. His psychological realism and his use of irony place him in the school of American Naturalism. He helped paved the way for Modernist writers and for later explorations into wartime consciousness, especially in the work of Ernest Hemingway.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although Crane does not name the conflict at the heart of "An Episode of War," he was known primarily as a Civil War writer and expected readers to connect his story to that conflict. The bloody and nationwide American Civil War (1860-1865) began when 11 states south of the Mason-Dixon line seceded from the United States in 1860-1861. Fueled largely by the desire to govern themselves and keep their own slaves, Confederate (Southern) troops took sides against Union (Northern) troops until 1865, their surrender at The Battle of Appomattox in Virginia. This war took place some 40 years before Crane published "An Episode of War" (1899), so it's worth considering the conflicts that were going on in his own time. The Spanish-American War (1898), a short but dramatic fight involving Crane's countrymen, had just concluded in Cuba, while England (where the story first appeared) was in the midst of a colonial conflict in South Africa, the Second Boer War (1899-1902). Crane's purposeful vagueness in his story (he never states who is fighting, or where, or when) would have made readers think of the war tragedies of their own day.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Crane's most famous novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), is also about the Civil War and deals with many of the same ideas of shame, inexperience, and psychological trauma found in "An Episode of War." Crane's story "The Open Boat" (1897), which follows four shipwreck survivors as they attempt to survive at sea, also deals with similar themes of mortality, nature, and human insignificance. Many memorable poems exist from the Civil War era, including Herman Melville's "Shiloh" (1866) and Walt Whitman "Reconciliation" (1865-1866). In terms of realistic depictions of war and stark, bare-bones prose style, Ernest Hemingway is one successor to Crane's legacy, especially in his World War I novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell To Arms* (1929). Wilfred Owen's World War I poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est" (1918-1919) shares with Crane's story a frank disgust for patriotic, romantic war narratives.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** An Episode of War
- **When Written:** 1899
- **Where Written:** Crane allegedly began the story after a visit to Civil War battlefields in Northern Virginia.
- **When Published:** 1899
- **Literary Period:** Postbellum
- **Genre:** Realism, American Naturalism, Short Story
- **Setting:** An anonymous Civil War battlefield.
- **Climax:** The wounded lieutenant becomes overwhelmed by his fear of medical treatment.
- **Antagonist:** The rude officer and the mean surgeon that the lieutenant encounters behind the scenes.
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient.

EXTRA CREDIT

Imagination. Though Crane is famous for capturing the harsh realities of the American Civil War, he was born after it ended and thus never saw it himself. He studied first-person accounts of the war to make his own fiction more realistic.

Stranded. In his time as a war correspondent, Crane was aboard the SS *Commodore* when it sank off the coast of Florida. He survived for 30 hours on a small lifeboat, an experience which later became his short story "The Open Boat."

PLOT SUMMARY

In the opening scene, a lieutenant is dividing coffee for his troops in a camp behind their battlefield. The men wait eagerly as he draws portions on his blanket with a sword. Suddenly he is shot, but it takes everyone a minute to understand what just happened. The lieutenant tries to brandish his sword, but, unable to do so with his arm wounded, he tries even more awkwardly to sheathe it. The men stare helplessly, looking first at the lieutennant and then toward the distant **forest** where the bullet originated, until an orderly-sergeant nervously steps up to help him. The man's over-carefulness captures the general feeling of vague fear, awe, and respect that surrounds the newly wounded lieutenant.

Sad, silent, and humiliated, the lieutenant departs slowly for the field hospital, glancing at the woods as he does so. As he passes the growing battle, he notices things that he never could before. The spectacle of war starts to appear beautiful and poetic. A general and his aide—an otherwise unremarkable sight—now appear colorful and remind him of a historical painting. The appearance of a battery, as gunmen launch it into battle, captivates him. He dwells on its sights and sounds even as it fades well beyond his sight.

As the lieutenant makes his way to the hospital, he passes two groups of off-duty soldiers who make him feel increasingly ignorant and helpless. Incredibly, a group of stragglers seems to know everything about the fight, even facts that the lieutenant himself never learned while in the front lines.

A while later, another group of officers belittles the lieutenant further when they ask him questions he can't answer. Worst of all, one officer from this gathering scolds the lieutenant like a parent for not dressing his wound. Brashly, the man rips open the lieutenant's sleeve and attempts to dress it, all the while making the lieutenant feel silly and ignorant.

The lieutenant finally arrives at the chaotic field hospital, which is a converted **schoolhouse**. A surgeon is kind to the lieutenant at first, but then, noticing his wound, becomes mean and cold, begrudgingly tending to him. He mocks the lieutenant's inadequate bandage and calls him a baby when he shows fear. But the lieutenant, reduced and embarrassed, stops cold at the doors of the schoolhouse and refuses to enter. Despite the surgeon's insistence, the lieutenant is terrified of amputation.

Crane jumps forward in time to the lieutenant's return home. He has lost the arm after all, and his family weeps. He stands in shame as he tries to brush off their grief, insisting—unconvincingly—that the injury isn't as bad as it looks.

CHARACTERS

The Lieutenant – The lieutenant, the helpless and frail protagonist of Crane's story, suffers a gunshot wound then searches for the field hospital, while enduring the belittlement of the surgeon and the officer. Readers don't learn much about the lieutenant—not even his name—though the story's conclusion hints at naiveté and innocence: his mother greets him when he returns home, and though he has a wife, he has no children yet. Furthermore, everything about the man suggests powerlessness, a quality readers wouldn't ordinarily expect from a military leader. First, though he is surrounded by subordinates in the beginning, the office of lieutenant is a substitute role for a higher-ranking general, suggesting that whatever responsibilities the man has are secondary. Next, he is shot in the arm not while fighting valiantly but while portioning coffee to his men on the sidelines of battle—a situation so inglorious that he spends the rest of the story in a state of profound embarrassment that culminates when he returns home with an amputated arm. Third, his reaction to the injury is almost cowardly: instead of charging toward enemy (he can't even see them, as they're shrouded by the **forest**), he clumsily sheathes his sword, and he stands silently while his corporals look on in surprise. By depicting the lieutenant's weakness, Crane brings out several of the story's themes that center on humankind's insignificance and the humbling effects of military experience. As he crosses the camp for the field hospital, his character develops in two ways. First, he begins to see the world and the battle more clearly—a string of discoveries that show how strongly war can cloud people's clarity and thinking. Second, his private sense of self-doubt at being shot deepens into a public sense of shame when an officer and a surgeon belittle him for his injury. These embarrassing encounters show Crane's argument that people disregard rank when judging others.

The Surgeon – The curt, hot-headed surgeon, denigrates the lieutenant when he finally reaches the field hospital, and he mocks the lieutenant's fear of amputation. Building on the dismissive behavior of an officer earlier in the story, the surgeon makes it clear that people in war can look down on the injured. He is "busy" when the injured lieutenant finally reaches the hospital, a stressful and hectic place, but he still has time for a "friendly smile" and a "Good morning." When he spots the man's injury, however, the surgeon's kindness freezes into dramatically curt treatment and a look of "great contempt." He now acts "impatiently," "disdainfully," and with "scorn." This instant switch in demeanor makes it clear to the reader that the man sees illness and injury as evidence of weakness. By being so mean to the undeserving lieutenant just because he's hurt, the surgeon illustrates one of Crane's central themes: that

people judge each other less by rank or status and more by their own private value systems, like health or inherent ability. Aside from illustrating the ways in which people can be judgmental, the surgeon also shows how people can damage the self-esteem of others. "This wound," says Crane, "evidently placed [the lieutenant] on a very low social plane." The surgeon uses language that makes this low social opinion clear both to the reader and to the protagonist. He makes the lieutenant act "very meek" and guilty for the simple accident of having been shot. And when the surgeon scolds the man's fear ("Come along. Don't be a baby"), he makes the lieutenant seem as inexperienced and irrational as a child. (It doesn't help that the terrified lieutenant won't enter the hospital, a converted **schoolhouse**, in fear of the treatment he'll find there.) The surgeon's suggestion of infancy is crucial to the lieutenant's shame, a feeling that takes root when he's injured under embarrassing circumstances and worsens as he discovers his own ignorance and ill-preparedness. Arriving at the climax of the story, the surgeon's belittlement cements Crane's theme that war has a unique ability to show people—in this case, the lieutenant—their own shortcomings in painful detail.

The Officer – The over-eager and dismissive officer scolds the injured lieutenant for improperly treating his wound, further adding to the protagonist's deep sense of shame. Though his exact rank is unclear, this officer is likely the equal or the superior of the lieutenant. As such, he is the first one to belittle him from a position of authority. When he meets the officer, the lieutenant has just been relieved of duty after suffering a gunshot under embarrassing circumstances. The officer heightens this fresh shame in two ways. First, when they cross paths, he asks the lieutenant about "things of which he knew nothing." For a military leader to be ignorant is embarrassing indeed. Second—and far graver—the officer immediately "scolds" him for improper care of his wound (a verb Crane repeats for effect). Without really asking, the brash officer tries to fix it, cutting the lieutenant's sleeve and laying "bare the arm," as the lieutenant's "nerve[s] [...] softly fluttered under his touch." His over-confidence makes the lieutenant hang his head and feel inadequate. And the whole process, with the officer unwrapping trembling, naked skin, resembles a parent changing a baby's diaper—a feeling of belittlement that later solidifies when a surgeon chides the fearful lieutenant for acting like a "baby." This surgeon, furthermore, lets readers know that the officer's bandage was poor from the start, a revelation that suggests the lieutenant has been denigrated by someone as clueless as he is. The officer's "scolding" behavior in the moment, and his brazenness toward the meek lieutenant, help introduce two of Crane's themes: that people (such as the officer) tend to treat the injured with snobbishness, and that war makes people (such as the lieutenant) keenly aware of their own inadequacies.

The Orderly-Sergeant – The orderly-sergeant, a timid and fearful subordinate, helps the lieutenant sheathe his sword after he's shot in the arm. At the story's opening, the sergeant is one of a large group of men who surrounds the lieutenant as he divides their portions of coffee. When the lieutenant is shot, the surprise is so great that the men—including their injured superior—stand in awestruck silence. Two major themes arise from this behavior. First, the men's silence and inactivity show how ill-prepared they are for the trials of war. The orderly-sergeant, as an implied part of the wide-eyed and fearful group, certainly contributes to this theme. But his main role in the story occurs when he helps the lieutenant sheathe his sword: he approaches him "tenderly," "leaning nervously backward" (a phrase Crane repeats), making sure not to let "his finger brush the body" of the wounded man. "A wound," says Crane in explanation, "gives strange dignity to him who bears it." The orderly-sergeant's extremely careful treatment here illustrates the heightened "dignity" with which some people treat the wounded. Until now, the sergeant and his comrades had "thronged" forward to get their coffee, but now, as the sergeant makes clear, his wound commands a certain respect. This is the first clue to Crane's argument that people ignore rank, instead paying closer attention to health and innate ability, when judging others. Soon, characters like the officer and the surgeon will prove this further, in opposite ways, when they denigrate, rather than revere, the wounded man.

The Lieutenant's Family – The lieutenant's sobbing family—his sisters, mother, and wife—meet him when he returns home missing an arm in the story's conclusion. Though Crane only gives the family only three lines of description, he intends them to say a great deal about his protagonist's inexperience and sense of shame. The fact that his mother is here makes the lieutenant seem young; this is heightened by the fact that, presumably, he has no children. If he is merely a teenager (as many Civil War fighters were), then his accidental injury while dividing the company's coffee takes on the greater meaning of an inexperienced teenager thrown into forces beyond his control. Furthermore, the absence of any brothers or a father suggests that perhaps they, too, are off at war. The young lieutenant's premature return without them, then, would have acutely heightened his shame. Last, their tears add yet another layer of embarrassment. A mother might weep at a son's dramatic escape from death, but likely not at the inglorious reality: a fumbling accident over coffee. The fact that she weeps gives readers a clue into the heroism that the outside world expects from returning soldiers, an imagined heroism that weighs heavily on the conscience of Crane's embarrassed protagonist.

TERMS

Battery – A battery is a fortified arrangement of cannons on a battlefield. When the **lieutenant** sees a battery "swirling" or

"sweeping" across the field, he's watching a group of soldiers wheel these large weapons into combat.

Breastwork – A breastwork is a defense structure—either a manmade wall or a natural feature of the earth—that protects troops when they are behind the lines of combat. It is supposed to allow peace and safety from the battlefield as well as a clear vantage point of the front lines. The **lieutenant** is shot while dividing coffee behind his company's breastwork, and the fact that he gazes out beyond the supposedly defensive structure highlights how surprised he must be to have been hit behind-the-scenes.

Bearer of the corps standard – The bearer of the corps standard is responsible for holding the company's flag in combat. This is a very specific role for Crane to identify; by doing so, he makes it clear to readers that the battlefield is a world of ranks and offices—designations, as readers discover, that soon become irrelevant when people notice the **lieutenant**'s gunshot wound.

Charger – A charger is a horse that has been trained to carry a soldier into battle. Once relieved from duty, the wounded **lieutenant** observes a horse and then a charger from a distance. Crane's switch in language from the simple "horse" to the more poetic "charger" helps illustrate the wounded man's aesthetic epiphanies once he's had some distance from battle.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RANK VS. HUMAN JUDGMENT

In "An Episode of War," Stephen Crane's snapshot of a wounded Civil War lieutenant's search for medical treatment, Crane gives none of his characters a name or even a memorable personality. What he gives them is a military rank, which the men immediately flout with their behavior or attitude toward each other. The anonymity of Crane's characters, and their disregard of status, suggest that low-ranking buglers and high-ranking generals, rather than staying separate in a rigid military hierarchy, are all part of the same basic humanity. The lieutenant's gunshot wound, however, marks him as exceptional. As he crosses the battle camp toward the infirmary, he meets soldiers who either revere or denigrate him for his injury. Through these different attitudes toward the wounded general, Crane argues that people naturally want to organize themselves into a hierarchy—if rank doesn't accurately define them, people will find their own, more instinctive ways to create status.

Crane is careful to specify soldiers' ranks, but his word choices show that he finds such designations artificial. At the story's opening, Crane's protagonist, the lieutenant, stands among subordinates like "corporals," representatives of "grimy [...] squads," and an "orderly-sergeant." As soon as a bullet strikes him, however, these characters become merely "men." The lieutenant soon passes "a general" and his "aide," a "bugler, two or three orderlies, and the bearer of the corps standard." But as he watches from afar, these designations give way to more general, anonymous words like "aggregation," "unity," "mass" (twice), "chorus," and "battery." By swapping these official ranks for abstract nouns, Crane prepares readers for the idea that military titles cannot accurately capture human nature even on a battlefield.

A gunshot wound—not the title of lieutenant—is the first thing to make the hasty men respect Crane's protagonist. Before the gunshot strikes him, the lieutenant's men "throng" forward rather ignobly to grab their allotments of coffee. But after the lieutenant is hit, the men stare at him in reverence, "statue-like and silent." A sergeant, the first to approach the wounded man after a period of silence, "tenderly" sheathes the lieutenant's sword and leans "nervously" backward," careful not to "brush" a finger against the man. The sergeant is not only scared of harming his lieutenant further; he is awed by the "strange dignity" given to any wounded person. A wound, says Crane, has the power to make "other men understand sometimes that they are little." By explaining the sergeant's reverent body language, Crane shifts the typical value system in a war story. From this point on, the lieutenant is no longer active in the fight. So it is now his wound—not the uniform or badges that readers can expect him to wear—that define him on the battlefield.

Other men soon denigrate the lieutenant for his wound. This fact shows that injury, as an identifier of status, elicits more complicated, more realistic attitudes than mere rank might do. The lieutenant meets several officers on his way to the hospital. Though they are his equals, they treat him like a child and "scold" him (a verb Crane repeats) for neglecting his wound. This insult gives readers a sense that although some men revere the "dignity" of injury, as the sergeant did, others clearly do not. Shortly after, when the lieutenant arrives at the hospital, the behavior of workers there reinforces this feeling. The surgeon's "smile" fades to a look of "scorn" and "contempt" when he sees his superior's wound. He treats the lieutenant "disdainfully" and mocks his fear of amputation. After the officer and surgeon's reproaches, Crane explains that the lieutenant's "wound evidently placed [him] on a very low social plane." These belittling responses are the exact opposite of the sergeant's instinctive respect for infirmity. By giving two diametrically opposed attitudes toward the lieutenant's wound—the sergeant's respect and the surgeon's disdain—Crane illustrates a basic fact about humanity: despite

the widespread use of rank in war or society, people will settle on more instinctive ways to judge others, such as health or inherent ability.

INEXPERIENCE AND SHAME

Stephen Crane's short story "An Episode of War" depicts a Civil War lieutenant as he sustains a wound in the battle camp and searches for medical attention. A plot like this might normally appear in a valiant and patriotic war thriller, but Crane uses it ironically: to show the fragility, stubbornness, and naiveté of humans in war. Through the attitudes of secondary characters, Crane makes his wounded protagonist look and feel childishly ill-prepared for the rigors he has supposedly been trained to handle. Crane portrays his protagonist in this way not to make fun of him but to argue that the trials of war can reduce otherwise adept humans to a state of inadequacy. Crane uses the lieutenant's feeling of childishness to make a larger narrative comment about shame: his growing humiliation shows that the public nature of war—with its esteemed ranks in battle and its promise of glory back home—has a unique ability to expose people's shortcomings to themselves.

In the opening scene, Crane shows his lieutenant as technically skilled, but only at a distance from the fight—a perfect setup for failure when real danger strikes. First, a lieutenant is necessarily a deputy role, an emergency deputy for a higher ranking officer. (The phrase "in lieu" means "in the place of.") It's a respectable office but clearly a substitute. By choosing this role, Crane hints that the highest official in his story has only secondary abilities. Behind the front lines, the lieutenant has plenty of skill—only the wrong kind of skill. He carefully distributes coffee to his men by misusing the implements of war: he spreads the grounds on his rubber blanket (a new technology designed to protect soldiers from the damp earth) and divides "astoundingly equal" portions with his sword. Wearing a "frowning and serious" face, he is "on the verge of a great triumph in mathematics." His tools of choice and grave appearance suggest the concentration of a war strategist poring over a map, but the punchline is that Crane's protagonist is merely serving drinks.

The man's tactical ability disappears the moment a bullet strikes his arm (a wound that hurts him but does not endanger his life), and Crane reverses his scene of "triumph" into a total failure. At this crucial moment, instead of brandishing his sword against the enemy—as would be expected—the lieutenant hides it. But even *this* is difficult for him. He remains stationery and silent while "engaged in a desperate struggle" to sheathe it with his left hand. The tool he once wielded with precision at a safe distance from combat has now "become a strange thing to him […] as if he had been endowed with a trident." Crane's ironic use of the war terms "trident" (the weapon of the Greek god Poseidon) and "struggle," combined with his depiction of a sword as a harmless object, draw attention to a skilled man's total inability in war.

Soon, other characters belittle the lieutenant and help turn his newfound self-doubt (a private feeling) into shame (a public one). An officer "scolds" the lieutenant for failing to wrap his arm, and, a surgeon treats him with "scorn" and "contempt." Before these bullies, the lieutenant hangs his head, feels demoted to a "very low social plane," and believes (absurdly) that "he did not know how to be correctly wounded." His embarrassment takes on the terms of childhood inexperience. First, he fails to answer basic factual queries about the battle and regards his questioners with wide-eyed "wonder." Second, the scolding officer unwraps his sleeve, laying "bare the arm, every nerve of which softly fluttered under his touch," as a parent might do when changing a baby's diaper. Third, the surgeon mocks his fear, saying "Come along. Don't be a baby." Last, when he approaches the field hospital (a converted **schoolhouse**), the wounded lieutenant won't approach "the door of the old schoolhouse." Because he's so squeamish, readers are told, he stubbornly neglects his wound, which ultimately leads to the amputation of his arm. Although the lieutenant's justifiable fear stems from the pain and medical treatment he'll face on the other side of the door, he seems overly preoccupied with the schoolhouse itself—just as a child might hate going to school. Crane's language of adolescence perfectly captures the lieutenant's new relation to world. Once presumed competent for leadership, he is now publically seen as "helpless" and feels lesser as a result.

When the lieutenant returns home, his family's grief represents society's public glare, and it is here that he feels the heaviest shame for his inexperience. The lieutenant's sisters, mother, and wife greet him. But by limiting this homecoming to two short sentences, Crane invites his readers to ask certain questions about its emotional impact on the lieutenant: where, for instance, are his brothers? Did they achieve the glorious death that he missed? Also, the lieutenant has a wife but no children. Does that imply that he is no older than a teenager? Crane's implications here—of a failed young man returning home—gives readers a new way of feeling his embarrassment. His family "sobbed for a long time" over his lost arm, and it seems that his family has pieced together a traditional wartime narrative: a valiant struggle and a narrow escape from death. The ironic truth, however, is that he was hit while serving coffee and lost an arm due to his fear of medical treatment. Because he stands "shamefaced amid these tears," readers assume he is painfully aware of the difference between his family's vision and the reality of his bumbling, inglorious accident. Crane asks readers to imagine the types of war stories they *expect* to hear, and to compare those stories to the reality of his bumbling lieutenant. Once readers do this, the heaviest burden upon the lieutenant is not the judgment of officers on the battlefield; it is his family's (and, by extension,

society's) expectation of a valiant hero at home.

WAR, CLARITY, AND BEAUTY

In Stephen Crane's Civil War vignette "An Episode of War," the protagonist, a lieutenant on his way to the field hospital, undergoes a radical change in his perception after a bullet strikes him in the arm. He soon discovers that people removed from the battle have a remarkably clearer understanding of it than he does. He also begins to notice the beauty in the world, realizations that Crane conveys with the type of language he uses to describe them. He asks readers to pay close attention to his word choices so that they can discern an argument about the way people pay attention in a military scenario. War, argues Crane, clouds logic and disguises basic truths about the world. Only those removed from it can see the world—and the war itself—as it really is.

Crane's opening in the battle gives readers the feeling that combat complicates a person's mere ability to think. Crane shrouds his opening battlefield scene in confusion. He describes the protagonist's wound only indirectly: "suddenly the lieutenant cried out and looked quickly at a man near him as if he suspected it was a case of personal assault." Crane never uses words like "gunshot" or "gunfire," nor does he provide a loud bang to clue readers in to what's happened. By leaving readers to discern a gunshot entirely from the lieutenant's behavior, Crane places them in the shoes of his confused and unsuspecting soldiers. Just after being shot, the lieutenant tries but cannot find the direction of the gunfire. All he sees are "little puffs of white smoke" emerging from "the hostile **wood**." Crane uses irony here ("little puffs" seem hardly dangerous) to heighten the confusion of the moment. Throughout this opening scene, Crane uses words like "mystery," "astonished," "mystically," "puzzled," and "awed" to cement this sense of confusion. By the time the lieutenant leaves his men to look for the infirmary, readers have a very good sense of how combat can frustrate the use of logic.

Encounters with non-active soldiers give readers the sense that real knowledge exists only outside the battle. At one point, the lieutenant asks a group of stragglers for directions to the hospital. They describe "its exact location" and then describe with perfect precision "the performance of every corps, every division, the opinion of every general." The lieutenant meets this recitation with a look of "wonder." The men's perfect knowledge is clearly different from the lieutenant's silent stare. Crane explains that "these men, no longer having part in the battle, knew more of it than others." This is the first clue to his argument that those on the outside of conflict (such as these men) have a clearer understanding it than those in the middle of it (such as the lieutenant). The lieutenant soon meets another group of men who ask him for details "of which he knew nothing." The word "nothing" is a powerful contrast to the stragglers' repeated "every" ("the performance of every corps, every division, the opinion of every general"), an adjective which might as well amount to *everything*. In these encounters between a soldier straight from the front line and the camp life behind the scenes, readers get a deepening sense of the knowledge that is curiously denied to people who are closest to the battle.

Though he's missed basic facts about his own battle, the wounded lieutenant soon learns more important, more universal truths about the world. Now that he's safely removed from the fight, he takes an "intent pause" at the battle and suddenly notices the aesthetic value of the world around him. He can now observe things as a painter might, not just as a lieutenant: a "black horse," some "blue infantry," and the "green woods" combine into "a historical painting." In the paragraphs surrounding the lieutenant's release from combat, Crane's deeply poetic language echoes this sudden shift in perception. Crane uses more alliteration ("glistening guns"), more similes ("as dramatic as the crash of a wave on the rocks"), more metaphors ("The sound of it was a war chorus"), and closer attention to psychological effect (the spectacle "reached into the depths of man's emotion"). In order to stress his argument about the clarity that people gain with distance from combat, Crane describes this drastic shift in his protagonist's awareness: "he was enabled to see many things which as a participant in the fight were unknown to him."

Though Crane does not discuss art or writing with any depth in "An Episode of War," readers can reasonably draw an autobiographical conclusion from the lieutenant's sudden aesthetic epiphanies. Aside from writing fiction, Crane was a war correspondent in the Spanish-American War among other conflicts, traveling to front lines and then digesting his experience in print. The lieutenant's awakening stands a metaphor for the role of the writer—especially the journalist—in society. Only someone, argues Crane, with a deliberate distance from his or her life experience can make compelling sense of it to others.

NATURE AND HUMAN INSIGNIFICANCE

In Stephen Crane's "An Episode of War," readers watch the moment a Civil War lieutenant is wounded on the sidelines of combat. But instead of launching into a tale of allies and enemies—as a typical war writer might do—Crane focusses on the fragility of his group of soldiers. They can't understand what's happened, and they struggle to take any action at all. People, argues Crane, are often powerless to understand or change their fate—especially in situations as stressful as war. To heighten the sense of their insignificance, Crane portrays nature as a domineering, mystifying force that both conceals the men's enemies and stands as a looming reminder of their frailty.

By making his Civil War soldiers passive and confused, Crane

suggests that even hard-boiled, trained fighters can be helpless. Though his wound is minor, once the lieutenant is shot in the arm, he and his men stand "silent," rather than charging into battle. The lieutenant's audible "hoarse breathing" heightens this silence as he struggles to sheathe his sword—itself a symbolically passive action. His body language, too, gives the impression of weakness: he walks "slowly" and "mournfully," and he holds his arm "tenderly," as if it's made of "brittle glass." More than quiet and overly gentle, Crane's soldiers—he calls them "spectators"—are unable to move in this decisive moment. Though unwounded, they stand "statue-like" and "stone-like." Their main verbs are passive ones like "look," "watch," "stare," and "gaze." This silent passivity on the battlefield is a far cry from the strong-willed behavior readers expect from fighters. This opens readers up to the idea that people, in Crane's view, are ultimately frail.

But, by keeping their enemy hidden from the story, Crane makes his men seem helpless not just against a particular opponent, but helpless simply as human beings. The lieutenant soon sees very serious action, but Crane uses ambiguous diction to make it unclear who is fighting whom. Crane names fighters only with an indefinite article—"a general," "an aide," "a bugler"—in order to divert readers' attention from a specific man-to-man conflict. Crane also never mentions historical facts of the fight. There is no Confederacy, for instance, and no Union: just soldiers against each other. Crane doesn't even name the battle he's depicting, the date, or the place, forcing readers to view the men's uselessness as a universal human fact, not just a fact about the Civil War. If Crane detailed the Confederates' historical disadvantage to the Union, for instance, readers might simply think these men were poorly trained. Instead, Crane's ambiguity of diction and action makes readers feel that all humans in all times, no matter how trained or prepared, face the same fundamental disempowerment.

In absence of a visible enemy, Crane uses the distant **forest**—a symbol for the vastness and power of nature—to heighten the men's sense of smallness. Eight separate times, the lieutenant and his men stare at the "wood," the "forest," or "the woods." Because a specific enemy never appears from it, the forest becomes the closest thing to an aggressor. At first the men turn toward the wood to find the enemy—but instead find vague "little puffs of white smoke" indicating only the obvious fact of gunfire. Soon, the forest itself becomes "the hostile wood." While Crane of course knows that trees cannot themselves be malicious, he uses this ironic personification to heighten the men's sense of vulnerability in the world. Then, as the "puzzled" lieutenant tries "awkwardly"—and fails—to sheathe his sword, he glances again at the forest. And he takes a parting glance at it again as finally he sulks away from the font lines, feeling "helpless." That the lieutenant glances at the forest in these particular moments of weakness seems to contrast nature's vastness and power with humankind's helplessness.

Crane's figurative language in two places gives readers one final clue to his view that nature can be a reminder of humans' insignificance. First, when the orderly-sergeant feels awe at the "little[ness]" of humankind, Crane expresses this with a metaphor about "the curtain which hangs before the revelations of all existence." Second, Crane describes the forest as a thing "that veiled [the lieutenant's] problems." In a story so short, Crane expects readers to connect these two mentions of fabric—a curtain or a veil—that separates humans from the fundamental truths they are desperate to learn. By including the distant forest in this symbolic barrier to truth, Crane hints that nature can be seen as a realm of permanent and fundamental truth, but that it is beyond humankind's comprehension. Though Crane never himself demonizes nature against the humans in this story, he hints that nature is indifferent to the conflicts of humans on Earth. As such, nature, for Crane, is one more means to suggest the smallness, impermanence, and fickleness of human beings.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE FOREST

The forest that looms on the outer edge of the battlefield symbolizes the insignificance and frailty of human beings compared to the vastness and power of nature. The forest's role in the story unfolds in three stages. First, it hides fundamental truths about the world. When a bullet strikes the lieutenant's arm, it's clear the enemy is hiding in the distant wood. The men scan the forest for any sign of the enemy but find only "little puffs of white smoke" (evidence of gunfire). This is the first clue that the wood, "which veiled [the lieutenant's] problems"—and nature more broadly—hides important truths from people. Second, because Crane never shows readers the enemy forces, the wood begins to feel like an aggressor in its own right. Crane calls it "the hostile wood" and shows men glancing nervously at it over their shoulders. This vague fear immediately positions people as something weak in the presence of nature. Third, Crane contrasts the permanence of the forest with the protagonist's moments of inadequacy: the lieutenant repeatedly looks at the wood as he fumbles "awkwardly" with his sword, feeling "puzzled" and "helpless" as nature stands immovable in the distance. By reminding the lieutenant of nature in these moments, Crane sets up a sharp contrast between human smallness and nature's infiniteness. In these three roles—as a barrier to the world's truths, as a seemingly hostile force, and as a reminder of human insignificance—the forest helps solidify Crane's argument that humans and their struggles are tiny in the grand scheme of

things.

THE SCHOOLHOUSE

On the surface, the schoolhouse—converted into a field hospital full of grey-faced wounded men—symbolizes the bleak reality of death in combat. But the fact that this sad place was once a school for children adds a dash of irony to the wounded lieutenant's fear of it. By making the the lieutenant terrified of a schoolhouse, Crane makes him seem childlike and whiny, behaviors that add to the character's overall sense of inexperience in combat.

Before the injured lieutenant even reaches the hospital, he encounters a happy group of off-duty soldiers "making coffee and buzzing with talk like a girls' boarding school." This initial comparison makes it clear that a school is a cheerful place. So when the lieutenant next arrives at the "old schoolhouse," even though his fear of amputation is perfectly justified, it's ironic that he should be so scared of the building itself. Once "meek" and shy, he now "wrathfully" refuses to enter, his face "flushed." To him, "the door of the old schoolhouse [looks] as sinister [...] as the portals of death." Crane repeats the adjective "old" to stress the familiarity and innocuousness of the place, further heightening the strangeness of the lieutenant's terror.

Crane describes the lieutenant's fear in terms of the building not to make fun of him but to suggest soldiers' fundamental naiveté. Usually, the only other people so averse to school are children, so readers begin to associate the lieutenant's behavior with that of a child. The surgeon on duty helps cement readers' association when he tells the lieutenant not to "be a baby," as a schoolyard bully might do. In this way, the symbol aids in the lieutenant's greater character development, away from a position of military authority and toward embarrassing inexperience. By combining the story's main symbol of mortality (a hospital) with the harmlessness of a schoolhouse, Crane makes the building not just a simple symbol for death in war but a more complex representation of humans' response to it.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Doubleday edition of *The Complete Short Stories & Sketches of Stephen Crane* published in 1963.

An Episode of War Quotes

The lieutenant was frowning and serious at this task of division. His lips pursed as he drew with his sword various crevices in the heap, until brown squares of coffee, astoundingly equal in size, appeared on the blanket. He was on the verge of a great triumph in mathematics, and the corporals were thronging forward, each to reap a little square, when suddenly the lieutenant cried out and looked quickly at a man near him as if he suspected it was a case of personal assault. The others cried out also when they saw blood upon the lieutenant's sleeve.

Related Characters: The Lieutenant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 653

Explanation and Analysis

This excerpt depicts the story's initial conflict: the moment the lieutenant is shot behind the scenes of battle. When the bullet arrives, he is taken completely off-guard, as he has been portioning his company's coffee rather than engaging in combat.

Crane illustrates two main feelings here. First, the lieutenant's ironic adeptness in dividing this coffee—an ability that makes his subsequent inactivity in crisis seem all the more embarrassing. Phrases like "frowning and serious," "task of division," and "great triumph in mathematics" suggest that he is very good at dividing coffee. Furthermore, he is using his sword to do it, drawing "astonishingly equal" crisscrossed lines in the mound of roasted beans. This is the man's sole moment of ability. Soon, he's reduced to ignorance and uselessness by every person and situation he meets. This fall from competence makes the man's embarrassment all the worse.

Second, Crane wants readers to feel the men's surprise at the sneak attack while off-duty. So, he doesn't explicitly tell readers there's been a gunshot. Instead, he focusses on the men's surprised response—a cry, a sudden glance, a mistaken accusation, a collective cry at the sight of blood. Any reader would be excused for having to read the scene three or four times to understand what's happened. The trials of war, Crane shows readers, cloud people's judgment.

Turning his eyes from the hostile wood, he looked at the sword as he held it there, and seemed puzzled as to what to do with it, where to put it. In short, this weapon had of a sudden become a strange thing to him. He looked at it in a kind of stupefaction, as if he had been endowed with a trident, a scepter, or a spade.

Related Characters: The Lieutenant

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 653

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Crane depicts the lieutenant's dawning confusion as he draws his sword against the enemy forces that have just shot him. The main irony, however, is that the enemy is tucked away in the distant forest. So pulling his sword in the first place—though a step better than standing in awkward silence, as he's been doing until now—is still the wrong response to the situation. This instinct, then, shows readers how inept he is.

Even worse is how awkwardly he handles the sword with his left hand. He grabs the middle of the blade, not the handle, and glares at it in "stupefaction"—a word of confusion that shares a root with "stupid." Crane's description of the sword as a "strange" object contrasts sharply with the preceding scene, in which the lieutenant divided "astonishingly equal" portions of coffee with his blade. The difference here—between brilliant ability in peacetime and incompetence in war—introduces Crane's theme that war brings out inexperience in the people it involves. Two elements of Crane's simile—the scepter and the trident—reflect this sharp contrast perfectly. They are symbols of sovereign and military strength (the Greek god Poseidon wields the latter), qualities the lieutenant clearly lacks.

Also significant is the depiction of the forest as a menacing entity. Since the gunshot erupted, the forest has hidden the enemy and repeatedly reminded the lieutenant of his inability to find them. Here, finally, the narrator makes clear that the men regard the "hostile" wood with fear. This shows a clear difference between the fixed permanence of nature and the transient smallness of human affairs.

A wound gives strange dignity to him who bears it. Well men shy from this new and terrible majesty. It is as if the wounded man's hand is upon the curtain which hangs before the revelations of all existence—the meaning of ants, potentates, wars, cities, sunshine, snow, a feather dropped from a bird's wing; and the power of it sheds radiance upon a bloody form, and makes the other men understand sometimes that they are little.

Related Characters: The Orderly-Sergeant, The Lieutenant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 654

Explanation and Analysis

This orderly-sergeant—the first to help the lieutenant after his gunshot—has just stepped up to sheathe the man's sword for him. His "nervous" behavior shows a fearful respect of the injured man, and Crane's narrator interjects to explain why this is. In short, Crane says that an injury is an experience of life that the uninjured cannot know. So, in a way, a wounded person knows more of life than those around him or her. Words like "majesty," "terrible," "radiance," and "bloody" suggest the seriousness of this rare knowledge. And the breadth of Crane's "curtain" simile—which encompasses both the miniscule ("ants") and the timeless ("wars, cities")—suggests how deeply into life's mysteries this knowledge can seem to run.

Having described this strange power of a wound to instill awe in its spectators, Crane introduces the idea that an official rank like "lieutenant" can be irrelevant to the way people judge each other. Physical impairment, argues Crane, is a much more instinctive and powerful marker of status.

As the wounded officer passed from the line of battle, he was enabled to see many things which as a participant in the fight were unknown to him. He saw a general on a black horse gazing over the lines of blue infantry at the green woods which veiled his problems. An aide galloped furiously, dragged his horse suddenly to a halt, saluted, and presented a paper. It was, for a wonder, precisely like a historical painting.

Related Characters: The Lieutenant

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 654

Explanation and Analysis

The lieutenant, freshly wounded, has just left his company to find the field hospital. On the way, he pauses at the sight of the battle. Though he has presumably seen a simple scene like this before—an aide delivering a message to a general—he is all of a sudden transfixed by it.

Crane uses artistic language to illustrate the strength of the lieutenant's observation. He focusses heavily on color: *blue* infantry, a *black* horse, *green* woods. These items assemble into "a historical painting." Crane describes things so visually in order to show that, once removed from battle, soldiers can understand "many things" that were hidden from them when they were "participant[s]." It's not the content of the scene, however, that's been hidden to the lieutenant; it's the aesthetic quality of it all, its colors, its beauty. This moment—made tangible by Crane's language—marks a turning point in the lieutenant's consciousness of the world.

> The battery swept in curves that stirred the heart; it made halts as dramatic as the crash of a wave on the rocks, and when it fled onward this aggregation of wheels, levers, motors had a beautiful unity, as if it were a missile. The sound of it was a war chorus that reached into the depths of man's emotion.

Related Characters: The Lieutenant

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 654

Explanation and Analysis

After a bullet strikes his arm, the lieutenant makes his way to the field hospital and continues to soak up the world's beauty in a way that he couldn't while entrenched in battle. The sight of a general and his aide has just reminded him of an "historical painting," and now, watching a collection of artillery fighters make their way across the field, he absorbs the spectacle as a poet might do.

In true poetic style, Crane describes everything about this scene in terms of something else. The battery becomes a tide on rock, its constituent wheels and levers combine into a single "missile," the battery's sounds unite into a "chorus." Crane's similes and metaphors, which substitute one thing for another, reflect the way the lieutenant considers the scene over a long period of time, mulling it over and making sense of it to himself.

Crane also pays close attention to the psychological effect of these sights. The battery's movement "stirred the heart," and its sound "reached into the depths of man's emotion." These phrases suggest the depth of the lieutenant's aesthetic experience. This psychological attentiveness, combined with high poetic language, makes this scene the clearest expression of the lieutenant's newfound clarity in the world. All he needed to activate this awareness of beauty was to remove himself from combat.

> In fact, these men, no longer having part in the battle, knew more of it than others. They told the performance of every corps, every division, the opinion of every general. The lieutenant, carrying his wounded arm rearward, looked upon them with wonder.

Related Characters: The Lieutenant

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 655

Explanation and Analysis

On his way to the field hospital, the lieutenant meets a group of men in the camp who seem to know everything about the terrain and the battle. They provide facts that were completely unknown to him, a surprise that causes him to feel shock at his own ignorance.

Crane inserts this scene as part of the lieutenant's education after sustaining a wound. Only with some distance from the battle can he understand how much he has failed to grasp while in combat. The narrator explains that these men "know more" about the battle because they "no longer [have a] part in it," highlighting the fact that combat clouds the judgment even of those closest to the action.

Aside from showing the lieutenant—and, by extension, the reader—war's ability to confuse people, this scene adds an element of public humiliation to the lieutenant's education. It's the first of three peacetime encounters that expose his ignorance to people more knowledgeable than he is, each encounter deepening his shame and sense of incompetence.

> He appropriated the lieutenant and the lieutenant's wound. He cut the sleeve and laid bare the arm, every nerve of which softly fluttered under his touch. He bound his handkerchief over the wound, scolding away in the meantime. His tone allowed one to think that he was in the habit of being wounded every day. The lieutenant hung his head, feeling, in this presence, that he did not know how to be correctly wounded.

Related Characters: The Officer, The Lieutenant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 655

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the lieutenant has just met an overconfident officer who scolds him for not dressing his wound properly. Though he has yet to reach the hospital, where real doctors work, the lieutenant is so embarrassed that he lets the man attempt a makeshift bandage. The scene is notable for showing the lieutenant's humiliation at having been accidentally wounded and the officer's arrogant attitude toward the wounded.

Crane illustrates the lieutenant's humiliation in two places. The first is the opening line of the excerpt. For one to "appropriate" something is to use it for one's own purposes, without permission. The fact that this verb applies not just to the lieutenant's arm but to the lieutenant *himself* shows his total submission to the alleged authority of another. The second humiliation is in the fact that the lieutenant hangs his head—the classic gesture of shame.

It's also worth noting the officer's condescending behavior, "scolding" the lieutenant and opening the wounded man's clothes to the naked skin—as a parent would do when changing a baby's diaper. This reduction to a state of childhood helps illustrate the lieutenant's inexperience and shame. The officer's judgmental attitude, furthermore, shows Crane's belief that designations like rank and status—symbolized by the protagonist's office of lieutenant—mean less to others in social situations than an impairment or injury might.

> He seemed possessed suddenly of a great contempt for the lieutenant. This wound evidently placed the latter on a very low social plane. The doctor cried out impatiently: "What mutton-head had tied it up that way anyhow?" The lieutenant answered, "Oh, a man."

Related Characters: The Lieutenant, The Surgeon (speaker), The Officer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 655

Explanation and Analysis

After sustaining a gunshot and traversing the camp, the lieutenant finally reaches the field hospital, where a surgeon is extremely rude to him simply for being injured. At first the surgeon is polite, smiling and wishing the lieutenant a good morning, but at the sight of the wound, the surgeon loses all respect for his patient.

Other than using words of disgust like "impatiently" and "contempt," Crane indicates the sudden transition in the doctor's attitude by describing the interplay of social hierarchy. In contrast to the orderly-sergeant, who earlier was filled with awe in the presence of a wounded man, the surgeon finds any wounded person to belong to a "very low social plane." This stark contrast makes clear Crane's argument that, rather than rank (such as lieutenant) dictating the way people treat each other, something as basic as a physical impairment can cause stronger and more diverse reactions in social situations. Confirming the irrelevance of rank to social judgments, the lieutenant calls the officer simply "a man" when asked who dressed his wound.

Also worth noting is the doctor's disdain for the lieutenant's bandage, which the arrogant "mutton-head" officer dressed a few scenes earlier. With this insult, Crane invites readers to wonder about the officer: if he was incompetent with a makeshift bandage, was he really in a position to belittle the lieutenant for his accidental wound? With this question in mind, readers get the sense that few people on the battlefield are as experienced as they let on.

> "Let go of me," said the lieutenant, holding back wrathfully, his glance fixed upon the door of the old schoolhouse, as sinister to him as the portals of death.

Related Characters: The Lieutenant (speaker), The Surgeon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 656

Explanation and Analysis

In the story's climax, the wounded lieutenant is so terrified of amputation that he freezes before the hospital doors, refusing to enter. As the makeshift field hospital occupies a converted schoolhouse—a place for children—it is an ironic object of terror for an adult man. Though the real object of the lieutenant's fear is the very real possibility of an amputated arm, Crane describes the man's fear in terms of the physical building itself. The "door" of the "old" (and thus familiar, quaint, or unthreatening) schoolhouse is the thing on which he "fixe[s]" his gaze. The door becomes "as sinister to him as the portals of death," an ironic personification for a place of children's education.

For the first time, Crane describes the lieutenant with a violent word—"wrathfully"—rather than a meek word of shame and silence. Readers get the sense of his childish anger and stubbornness. It doesn't help that the surgeon mocks his fear, telling him not to be a "baby," as a schoolyard bully would do. Crane shows him losing his temper at the door of a schoolhouse in order to suggest that war reduces people to a state of childish inexperience.

> And this is the story of how the lieutenant lost his arm. When he reached home, his sisters, his mother, his wife, sobbed for a long time at the sight of the flat sleeve.

Related Characters: The Lieutenant's Family, The Lieutenant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 656

Explanation and Analysis

Right after the wounded lieutenant loses his temper and refuses to enter the hospital, Crane jumps ahead to the lieutenant's return home. The first line of this excerpt tells readers that the lieutenant has lost his arm after all, despite the bullying surgeon's insistence that he wouldn't. The ironic way in which Crane breaks the news is worth scrutiny; it's as if he's summarizing a "story" of valor, told to eager listeners. In reality, however, Crane's tale was an inglorious one filled with an antihero's blunders and humiliation. With this irony in mind, readers begin to wonder why, exactly, the lieutenant's family weep at the sight of his "flat sleeve." Does the family imagine—as any family might—that their son has narrowly escaped death? Would they cry as much if they knew he was just serving coffee and couldn't even find the enemy?

Second, it's telling that Crane leaves certain people out of the family gathering. There is a wife, but no children, suggesting the man is very young. There is no father, nor brothers, suggesting they are away, perhaps dying the honorable death unearned by the useless lieutenant. Crane's two suggestions here—that the protagonist is very young, and that he returns home while other men are still in battle—leaves the story on a sharp note of shame and inexperience, two feelings that have plagued the lieutenant since the first scene.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

AN EPISODE OF WAR

A lieutenant has lain his rubber blanket on the ground and spread on it a mass of coffee. "[F]rowning and serious," he stands above the blanket dividing the coffee with his sword into "astonishingly equal" squares. In doing so, he is about to enact "a great triumph in mathematics." A group of corporals, lined up along the breastwork, watches him expectantly, "throng[ing]" forward and eager for their portion.

This opening scene is packed with irony that will soon become significant to the protagonist's development. A military leader is hard at work behind the scenes of battle. He wears a look of dire concentration. He puts to use the implements of war—his trusty sword and a textile specially designed to keep soldiers dry. Throughout, he displays "astonishing" capability, as evidenced by the narrator's dramatic language ("a great triumph"). All this is typical of a war hero. But rather than poring over a battle map or strategizing his men's fight, the lieutenant is merely serving coffee, dividing roasted beans with his weapon instead of battling the enemy. This mock-heroic punchline is the perfect setup for the embarrassments that soon befall the protagonist. And this setup is the first clue to the story's central theme, that people, no matter how skilled in peacetime, are often unprepared for the real trials of war.

Suddenly, the lieutenant yells and glares at the man nearest him. Some of the corporals cry out, too, when they notice blood on his sleeve. He winces, sways a bit, and then straightens himself so he can stand in silence, staring out over the breastwork at the distant **forest** where "little puffs of white smoke" appear. Only the lieutenant's "hoarse breathing" is audible. His "statue-like" men stand in silence along with him and soon turn their gazes to the wood as well.

The vagueness of the action here is significant. Crane doesn't say, "A bullet struck the lieutenant." Instead, he illustrates the chaos of the moment by showing only the men's confused response. They were hit behind a breastwork, a wall that's meant to shield them, so they're shocked. This deep confusion introduces Crane's argument that one needs distance from war in order to understand it. Interestingly, the men's instinct is to do nothing. Though they soon realize the lieutenant has been shot, no one makes a move or says anything, which suggests that they are inexperienced and ill-prepared for war. Importantly, however, the blood on the lieutenant's sleeve tells readers that the wound is minor; this lets them focus on other aspects of the story—like the protagonist's emotions—rather than solely on his health. This passage is also significant because Crane introduces the symbol of the distant forest. The gunshot clearly originated there, but the density of the trees makes it impossible to discern the enemy's movements. That nature can hide important truths gives the forest a menacing quality that will continue to make the lieutenant feel insignificant and powerless.

The lieutenant reaches for his sword, but since his right hand is now incapacitated, he has a fumbling, awkward time about it, gripping the middle of the blade with his left hand "awkwardly." It's as if the weapon were suddenly "a trident, a scepter, or a spade." All the while, he has been staring at the "hostile" **forest**. Soon deciding the sword is useless, however, he tries to sheathe it. This is even more awkward to do, since his scabbard is on his left hip. He "breath[es] like a wrestler," and the whole scene looks like a circus spectacle.

Finally, the lieutenant does something that befits his title: he grabs his sword. But even here, Crane highlights the protagonist's cluelessness by making him grunt with the sword amid an awkward silence. When the lieutenant gives up and tries to sheathe the thing, Crane takes this inability to the next level by comparing his movements to a circus act. Crane uses the sword—the iconic symbol of combat—to show an instantaneous shift in character: minutes earlier, he was deftly wielding the weapon to divide coffee, but now, when put to its intended purpose, the object becomes useless. This shows war's unique ability to bring out people's inexperience. On another note, it's significant that the forest is a "hostile" belittler of the lieutenant's struggle. Readers begin to see the two entities as opposites: nature sits fixed and permanent, while humans fuss over their petty problems.

The lieutenant's men stand by "stone-like" and dumbfounded until an orderly-sergeant steps up to help him sheathe the sword. He approaches "tenderly" then nervously backs away, careful not even to "brush" a finger against the wounded man's body. The narrator explains that "[a] wound gives a strange dignity to him who bears it," as if the injured had a "hand [...] upon the curtain" of life's mysteries.

With the orderly-sergeant's nervous behavior, Crane introduces his belief that official roles—such as "lieutenant"—mean less in social situations than sudden changes in health. Previously, the crowd of subordinate corporals had "throng[ed]" forward for coffee, without regard for the presence of a superior. But now that the lieutenant's been wounded, words like "tenderly" and "brush" indicate the sergeant's sudden respect for his superior. Crane's language—the hand upon the curtain—makes clear the extent of this respect, as if injured people were on a different spiritual plane from that of the healthy. The sergeant's behavior here prepares readers for later attitudes toward the lieutenant, from people who also judge him for his injury instead of his military role. On another note, Striking words like "stone-like" and the earlier "statue-like" make the men seem totally clueless. This is Crane's last say about them before he moves on to other scenes, so he wants readers to feel that, when tragedy strikes, most people have no idea what to do. The soldiers' collective uselessness here will help readers understand the protagonist's deepening embarrassment later on, in the presence of over-confident bullies.

Once his sword is put away, another soldier offers him a shoulder. The lieutenant waves him away "mournfully," looking "helpless." He stares again over the breastwork at the **forest** before sauntering off, holding his wrist "tenderly" as the men glance back and forth between him and the wood.

Crane pushes the symbol of the forest once again. First the lieutenant and, second, his men repeatedly turn to it in their confusion. Previously, the lieutenant had stared at the woods in confusion and embarrassment, but now, with dominant words like "mournfully," the overwhelming attitude toward the forest is one of defeat. In this way, nature not only hides things from people; it symbolically triumphs over them, reminding them of their insignificance.

Now relieved from duty, the lieutenant is "enabled to see many things which as a participant in the fight were unknown to him." He watches the developing battle from a safe distance. The first thing he notices is a general on a "black horse" meeting the "lines of blue infantry" against the "green **woods** which veiled his problems," all of which looks like a "historical painting."

Here, Crane gives one final message about the forest: that it "veils" people's problems. This adds an element of mystery to nature, a quality that dwarfs the humans who try to penetrate these mysteries. Meanwhile, as the lieutenant traverses the battlefield, Crane's language takes on its most significant role in the story. It's important how *Crane describes the battle; not just* what *he describes. Instead of mere infantry and a horse, he goes the extra step of describing the colors of these sights: black, blue, and green. These observations combine into a "historical painting." Crane's simile here is a dramatic way of describing an otherwise commonplace sight for a lieutenant. Crane wants readers to know that, now that he's off-duty, the lieutenant can notice the world's aesthetic value. The lieutenant can observe things more sensitively—"things which […] were unknown to him" in combat. This sudden shift in awareness deepens Crane's argument that war can cloud people's clarity when they're in the thick of it. Contemplative distance, argues Crane, is crucial to understanding the world.*

Next, the lieutenant sees a general, a bugler, some orderlies, and the bearer of the corps standard. They all ride "quivering" chargers into battle while shells explode overhead. The lieutenant pauses to watch a "shining [and] […] swirling" battery make its way across the field. He is struck by the "slant of glistening guns" and the "roar of the wheels." The spectacle "stir[s] the heart," "reache[s] into the depths of man's emotion," and combines into a "beautiful unity" as the battery recedes into a distant "black mass." The lieutenant watches until he can no longer see the action, but even from a distance he continues to notice the sound of gunfire "crackl[ing] like bush-fires" and "reverberat[ing] like thunder."

Crane goes over the top with poetic language here to illustrate his lieutenant's radical shift in consciousness. Crane engages all aspects of sight: shape ("slant"), movement ("quivering"), color ("black"), light ("glistening"), and so on. He also engages the full spectrum of sound, from "crackled" to "reverberate" and "roar." This sensory language tells readers that the lieutenant now absorbs the world with his full faculty of sensation, something he couldn't do while confused in the thick of battle. Further, poetic devices like alliteration, simile, and substitution ("horses" become "chargers") suggest that the off-duty lieutenant can digest this scenery in a poetic and engaging way, much as poets and novelists like Crane himself. Lastly, the lieutenant initially notices very specific ranks like "generals" and a "bearer of the corps standard." But these titles soon disappear into collective nouns like "mass" and "unity." This switch suggests that military rank cannot accurately capture human nature.

After the battle has fully moved on, the lieutenant asks a group of off-duty soldiers for directions to the field hospital. They tell him exactly where it is and then go on to describe the battle with impressive precision. These soldiers have such perfect knowledge of the battle because they aren't taking part in it. The lieutenant stares at them in disbelief.

Like the captivating sights and sounds of the battery, the men in this scene continue the lieutenant's education. In this way, they further Crane's argument that being in the middle of war is detrimental to knowledge. But instead of revealing aesthetic realities about the world, the soldiers tell the lieutenant how clueless he's been to basic factual matters in the battle. Ignorance is extremely embarrassing for people in positions of power. So by having these men school the lieutenant on matters both small and large—from simple field directions to crucial war details—Crane mixes shame into the lieutenant's attempt to rectify the ignorance that the war has imposed on him.

Arriving at the road, the lieutenant finds a brigade making coffee and chatting away like "a girls' boarding school." When the lieutenant walks up, the men ask him some things about the battle, but he doesn't know the answer. One officer, seeing the lieutenant's gunshot wound, starts to "scold" him for not dressing it properly. Without asking, the officer tries to fix it. He cuts the lieutenant's sleeve open to the naked skin, "every nerve of which softly fluttered under his touch." As the officer admonishes the lieutenant in a condescending tone, the wounded man hangs his head, feeling stupid.

The arrogant officer—repeatedly scolding the lieutenant's undressed wound, and laying bare his "softly flutter[ing]" skin for a sling—resembles a parent changing a baby's diaper. This reduction to childhood marks a turning point in the lieutenant's deepening shame: once privately doubtful of himself, he is now publically embarrassed for his inexperience. Also worth noting is the fact that the officer chides him just for being wounded. This injustice furthers Crane's argument that people tend to judge others on superficial flaws—such as an injury—rather than on rank and social status. Another thing to note is the narrator's comparison of the cheerful off-duty men to a girls' boarding school. This simile—equating school with carefreeness—will become more important as Crane imbues his next symbol, the old schoolhouse, with ironic terror.

Finally, the lieutenant reaches the hospital, a converted "old" **schoolhouse**. He stands watching the mayhem of the place: two ambulances full of groaning and wounded men have crashed, the drivers insult each other loudly, a crowd of patients comes and goes, the grounds are littered with sick people. Catching sight of a particularly grey-faced man, the lieutenant is overwhelmed by the urge to tell him that he is dying.

At the hospital, readers get a sense that the lieutenant is not just mournful and embarrassed—he's also scared for his life. But instead of fixating solely on the gravity of his injury, the man has an irrational unease about the hospital building itself. The fact that the hospital—a place that makes the lieutenant uneasy and fearful—is a converted schoolhouse deepens readers' opinion of him as almost childishly inexperienced. He has just passed one happy field camp—compared to a "girls' boarding school"—so it's ironic that the appearance of an actual school would now introduce mortal fear.

A surgeon passes by; though he's busy, he still smiles at the lieutenant and wishes him good morning. But upon noticing the lieutenant's wound, the surgeon's cheerful demeanor becomes a look of "contempt." He curtly admits the lieutenant, insulting the "mutton-head" who improperly bandaged the wound. He asks who did it, to which the lieutenant responds, "Oh, a man."

This initial encounter with the surgeon shows how sharply people can judge one another based on injury alone. The lieutenant's rank obviously can't protect him from a man who treats the wounded with "contempt." The irrelevance of rank in people's social judgment is also apparent in the lieutenant's vague response to the surgeon's question about who bandaged his arm. Rather than identifying the officer's rank—as he did on the battlefield when watching individual soldiers—he calls the officer a mere "a man." The surgeon's anger also shines light on the "mutton-head" officer who bandaged the lieutenant's arm in the preceding scene. If the officer's dressing was incompetent in the first place, then the officer had no real right to "scold" the lieutenant like a condescending parent. Though he succeeded in embarrassing the lieutenant, readers realize he may well have been as unequipped as the lieutenant, underscoring Crane's argument that war is uniquely capable of making people—such as the lieutenant—feel inadequate.

The surgeon examines the lieutenant's wound "disdainfully," and then tells him to enter the hospital in a tone that suggests he's committed a crime. The lieutenant, who has been "meek" until now, grows agitated at the request. His face flushes, and he asks whether he will lose his arm. The doctor scoffs and tells him not to "be a baby." At this, the lieutenant stops cold and "wrathfully" shakes free of the doctor's grip. With his eyes locked on the "old" **schoolhouse** door, "as sinister to him as the portals of death," he refuses to budge.

The lieutenant is justly afraid of amputation, but his fixation is on the "doors" of the schoolhouse, rather than solely on his health. Crane explains his fear in terms of the schoolhouse door to heighten the lieutenant's sense of childishness and squeamish fear. Like a child, he has an irrational aversion to the physical structure of a school. Crane uses "old," a term suggesting the schoolhouse is quaint, familiar, and endearing, to heighten the irony of his fear. And the doctor's insult of choice ("baby") makes him sound like a schoolyard bully. All of this contributes to an overall sense of the lieutenant's childishness and inexperience.

The narrator tells readers that "this is the story of how the lieutenant lost his arm." In a fast-forward to the future, the lieutenant has arrived home, his arm amputated. The lieutenant's family—his sisters, mother, and wife—greet him, weeping for a long time. He stands "shamefaced" while they cry, and brushes it off: "Oh, well, [...] I don't suppose it matters so much as all that."

Crane uses a conventional war "story" conclusion for an ironic effect. Readers might expect a line like this at the end of a valiant tale of battle and near-death. Instead, Crane uses it to punctuate the inglorious tale: a useless soldier is accidentally shot while serving coffee and loses an arm because he's afraid of entering a schoolhouse. By using the familiar-sounding line in this unfamiliar way, Crane heightens the banal reality of war and the unfair expectations families might have of their returning sons. Also, the description of the lieutenant's family is more important for what it omits than what it includes. The lack of children suggests that the lieutenant is very young. The lack of father and brothers suggests the lieutenant's shame at returning with an inglorious wound while other men, perhaps, are still out fighting. These suggestions pile upon the lieutenant's already profound shame.

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