The Red Badge of Courage

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN CRANE

Stephen Crane was born into a large family of a Methodist minister. Crane attended a quasi-military prep school and a handful of unsuccessful years at college, but left school seeking real-world experiences as an adventurer and writer. Crane wrote poetry, short stories, and several novels, all of which earned him acclaim for his innovative literary style and probing social and psychological analysis. Crane also travelled extensively as a foreign correspondent for newspapers, covering subjects including poverty and war. Travel and hard-living took their toll and Crane died young, at 28, of tuberculosis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Crane was born six years after the Civil War (1861 - 1865) but the intensity of the war still resonated in American culture when he wrote the novel. With over 600,000 men killed, the violence of the Civil War was unprecedented. Unlike his contemporaries writing about the war, Crane doesn't examine the large-scale political conflicts between the Union and Confederate sides. Instead, Crane follows the very limited viewpoints of infantrymen in a fictitious Union regiment: the 304th New York State Volunteers. Historians interpret the setting of *Red Badge* as the Battle of Chancellorsville in northern Virginia. It was a turning point: the last victory of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the battle just before the horrors of Gettysburg.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Crane was a pioneer of American literary Naturalism. First apparent in his novel about a prostitute titled *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Crane created art from how individuals dealt with the stresses of modern life, including urbanization, industrialism, and religious doubt. He detailed stark social circumstances without any varnish of sentimentality. Crane also changed the focus of literary description from outward events to the internal workings of a character's psychology. Crane probes intense personal doubts about religion, nature, and meaning itself. Other American naturalist landmarks in the 1890s include *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, and *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War*
- **When Written:** 1893
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1895
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism
- **Genre:** Short novel or novella
- **Setting:** A Civil War battlefield, probably a fictionalization of the Battle of Chancellorsville, fought May 2–5, 1863, in northern Virginia
- **Climax:** Henry and his friend Wilson lead the charge to overwhelm an enemy position, taking the enemy flag and several prisoners.
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Nameless characters: Crane's narrator never uses proper names of characters, such as "Henry" or "Wilson." The narrator only uses general names such as "the youth," "the loud young soldier," and "the tattered man." The reader learns the characters' names only through the speech of others.

Color of battle: The narrator also never says "Union" or "Confederate." Soldiers are described as enemies, or as part of lines and masses only distinguished by their flags or by uniform color: blue and gray. This technique places the focus on the small concerns of the soldiers rather than on the larger political and military goals of the armies.

PLOT SUMMARY

The sun rises over a riverside encampment of new inexperienced soldiers in the blue Union uniforms of the 304th regiment from New York. A tall soldier, Jim Conklin, tells the others that he heard a rumor about the generals' plan: the regiment will soon be in battle. Some soldiers in the regiment believe the rumor, others are skeptical and tired of infantrymen trying to predict their commanders' strategies. A young private, Henry Fleming, listens to the debate, then returns to his bunk to think. With dreams of fighting in glorious battles, he had enlisted against his mother's will. Now Henry worries that he might act cowardly and run away during fighting. He returns to ask Jim and another soldier, the loud and overconfident Wilson, if they ever fear running away. Jim says that he'll do what the other men do. Henry feels eager for a battle to test his courage.

The regiment eventually does march and digs into position in the woods. With battle imminent, Wilson gets spooked and nervously gives Henry a packet of letters to return to Wilson's family in case Wilson dies. Soon, an advance brigade of blue

soldiers runs past in crazed retreat, which shakes Henry's self-confidence. The gray enemy approaches through the trees and Henry, feeling like a cog in a machine, fires frantically. The enemy retreats and the soldiers congratulate each other. But another enemy charge comes on, and Henry turns and runs away with a terrified mob of fellow blue soldiers.

While he runs, Henry feels that he did the right thing in running away. He reasons that self-preservation is natural, and thinks that the generals and any soldiers who stayed to fight were fools. When the retreat stops, Henry overhears that his regiment actually did defend their position against the odds. Ashamed, Henry skulks off into the woods alone, and comes upon the corpse of a dead soldier in a "chapel" of trees. Henry is horrified by the gruesome sight of ants running over the discolored face. He flees and joins a retreating procession of wounded soldiers. Walking along, a tattered man questions Henry about his injuries, but Henry, feeling deeply guilty, moves away from him. Henry privately wishes for his own wound, "a red badge of courage." Henry sees a grievously hurt, almost ghostlike soldier who is refusing any assistance. Discovering the man to be Jim Conklin, Henry promises to help. Jim runs wildly into nearby fields and Henry and the tattered man follow. Jim falls dead. The tattered man, getting worse himself, keeps asking about Henry's wound, but Henry abandons him.

Close to the battlefield, Henry encounters a large group of blue soldiers running away. He grabs one to ask "Why—why—" but the soldier bashes his rifle on Henry's head to escape. Now bleeding and disoriented, Henry wanders in search of a safe place. An anonymous cheerful soldier guides Henry back to his regiment's camp. Henry lies to his regiment that he was shot in the head. His wound is treated by a quiet subdued Wilson. The next morning, Wilson asks Henry for his packet of letters. In comparison with his friend's embarrassment about fearing death, Henry soon feels strong, proud, and ready to fight.

Their regiment returns to the fight and takes part in a raucous deafening battle. Henry goes berserk, firing even after the enemy retreats. His companions view him with astonishment and the regiment's fiery lieutenant praises his bravery. Henry is dazed but pleased—he has overcome his fears without even being aware of the process.

Between battles, Henry and Wilson overhear an insulting officer put down their regiment for fighting like "mule drivers." They desperately want to prove him wrong. The regiment is sent on a dangerous charge against enemy lines, and many of Henry's companions are killed. When the color guard gets shot and falls, Henry grabs the regimental battle flag and rallies the exhausted regiment to a near victory. Afterwards, other soldiers hear the regiment's commanders praising the bravery of Henry and Wilson. Still, Henry is angry at the insulting officer and dreams of being killed in a glorious battle as his revenge.

Across the field, a wave of gray soldiers overtakes a crucial fence. Running with the flag, Henry leads his frenzied regiment to overwhelm the enemy soldiers. Wilson captures the enemy's battle flag. They all congratulate each other and feel that "they were men." The regiment is then ordered back over its gained ground all the way to its original camp on the river. Henry reflects on his triumphs and the guilt still haunting him, but feels matured and tranquil, yearning for peace.

CHARACTERS

Henry Fleming (the youth) – Henry Fleming is a young private who volunteered for the infantry against his mother's wishes. Having "dreamed of battles all his life," Henry has romantic notions of war influenced by Greek classics such as the *Iliad*. These ideas of war are challenged by his actual experiences with war. Henry's resulting psychological turmoil is the focus of the narrative, especially his anxiety about lacking the courage to fight. Henry's emotions are never settled: after he flees from battle, Henry is overcome by guilt and self-pity; when he shows courage under fire, he recovers his pride. Within a few short days, he transforms from a hot-headed, idealistic young boy into an experienced soldier who feels like a grown man. Over the course of the story, Henry tries out many philosophical approaches to discover his individuality and place within the war, as if searching for answers to the question he asks at one point: "Why—why—." In the face of gruesome casualties and the chaos of war, Henry also struggles to interpret symbols such as the **flag** for meaning. But their meaning keeps changing, and Henry flip-flops between self-confidence and insignificance, between courage and cowardice. Henry seems mature by the end of the novel, but this may be just another moment of calm in a much bigger storm.

Wilson (the loud young soldier, the youth's friend) – Wilson is a new volunteer and Henry's closest friend in the regiment. He begins as a brash and confident soldier, but by the start of the first battle Wilson is deeply afraid that he'll die. Because of the narrator's limited point of view, Wilson disappears from the story while Henry is away from his regiment, but he too matures through personal conflicts. From being a "loud young soldier," Wilson becomes a quiet, generous, and reflective man. Like Henry, Wilson eventually fights fiercely, selflessly, and well. In the novel, Wilson serves as a reflection of Henry. His differences from Henry add perspective to Henry's character and experience.

Jim Conklin ("the tall soldier") – Another friend of Henry's in the regiment, Jim offers Henry a pragmatic viewpoint on courage at the beginning of the story: run when others run, fight like mad when they fight. He also embodies the consequences of this viewpoint. Jim is so terribly injured in the first battle that he is almost unrecognizable to Henry. As the injured "spectral soldier," with his eyes gazing deep into the unknown, Jim is like a window into death. But if he finds any secrets or meaning as he stares into death, Jim never passes

them along. The spectral soldier represents a meeting point between life and death, and between Henry's glorious ideals of war and the shocking gruesome reality of the real thing.

Tattered man – A nameless, dirty, and twice-shot soldier who meets Henry in the procession of the wounded. By asking Henry about the fighting and Henry's non-existent wounds, the **tattered man** works like Henry's external conscience. Henry thinks that the tattered man knows his secrets, though Henry is probably projecting his guilt and shame on to others. Even though the tattered man selflessly tries to assist the wounded Jim and then needs help himself when he is on the verge of dying, Henry deserts him: a juvenile attempt to escape his own shame. The memory of the tattered man and Henry's abandonment of him plagues Henry's conscience.

Henry's mother – Appearing only in an early flashback, Henry's mother objects when he volunteers for the army. Henry's mother does not share her son's glorified visions of war. Instead, she advises him to avoid shameful acts and corrupt men—advice about self-preservation, not glorious self-destruction. Capping it off, she also makes him promise to mail back any socks or shirts that need mending. Henry's mother's comments contrast Henry's ideals of war with the mundane realities of life as a soldier.

Insulting officer – An anonymous officer who says of Henry's regiment that "they fight like a lot 'a mule drivers." Having just won their fight, Henry feels otherwise. These two difference shows how the meaning of battles and war are subject to different interpretations based on the perspective of the interpreter. From the officer's perspective, courageous individual efforts are insignificant parts of a larger strategy. From Henry's perspective, he (Henry) is a hero. The insulting officer also exposes Henry's motivations to fight—not for patriotic ideals, but to get his revenge and prove the officer dead wrong.

Cheerful soldier – An anonymous soldier who shows up to guide Henry after he is slammed on the head by a rifle butt, and, dazed, is searching for safety. The cheerful soldier embodies the selflessness and altruism of Henry's heroic ideals. The soldier is described with religious overtones, particularly his paternal kindness, disembodied voice, and almost miraculous ability to guide Henry back to his regiment. This symbolism counters the deep uncertainty about religious expressed in the story, such as the dead soldier in the "chapel" of trees.

Lieutenant – A mid-level commander in Henry's regiment named Hasbrouck. He is described as fiery with an endless supply of foul language. The lieutenant represents the qualities of selfless valor and leadership that Henry and Wilson want to emulate. Though shot in the hand and again in the arm, the lieutenant remains committed to rallying his regiment to fight and charge. In contrast to Henry's fixation on personal glory, the lieutenant sees the regiment as a unit, and does not get mired in contemplating his **wounds** or his actions.

Dead soldier – An anonymous, deceased Union soldier whose decomposing body Henry finds in the woods. The dead, decomposing body's position in a "chapel" of trees implies a profound uncertainty about the promises of religion; could this body, being eaten by ants, really have a soul in heaven? The rotting, ant-strewn corpse also shows that nature is unrelenting. Ultimately, the dead soldier shows that Henry's hopes for a glorious death are naïve.

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.

COURAGE

Red Badge is a study of courage and fear, as seen in the shifting currents of Henry's thoughts and actions during the battle. Henry begins the story with youthful romanticized ideas about courage from the classical tradition: in particular, the heroic ideals found in the ancient Greek epic poem the *Iliad* by Homer. In the *Iliad*, warriors mingle with gods, die gloriously, and enjoy everlasting fame. But the tremendous violence of the Civil War unsettled these notions of courage and glory. The soldiers in *Red Badge*, especially Henry and Wilson, begin to doubt their naïve versions of courage when faced with battle. Instead, they discover a grittier and more complicated form of courage. And they only discover it after the fact: during Henry's most courageous moments in battle, he is hardly aware of anything except heat, noise, anger, and the mechanical repetition of firing. Even when courage is present, it's not really there. So what is courage?

Courage takes many forms in the novel, none of which are stable. Wanting to find a lasting form of courage, Henry hopes for a **wound** or "red badge of courage" to wear. Taking it to the extreme, Henry daydreams about a glorious death. But is courage self-destructive? Is it a performance for others, or for yourself? Does it happen when we're not thinking about it? Henry seeks answers from himself and from the soldiers around him, including **corpses** and the wounded. Though the story may provide no clear answers, it offers several perspectives: Jim Conklin, Wilson, and the lieutenant each offer different versions of courage to compare with Henry's. Perhaps there is courage in Jim's willingness to see things pragmatically, or in Wilson's acceptance of his limitations, or even in Henry's deep self-questioning. In the end, the reader

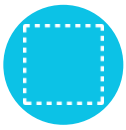
must decide about courage—who has it, and even whether it's good or bad.

THE WAR MACHINE

Red Badge uses the language of machines, labor, and industry to describe war. In contrast, Henry dreams about a classical idealized kind of war. But that kind of romanticized war, emphasizing heroic action, is a thing of the fictional past: it has no relation to an industrial war such as the Civil War, in which individual soldiers become cogs in a much larger machine. As *Red Badge* reveals, the war machine is designed to move massive armies and churn out **corpses**. (Machine guns were used for the first time in the Civil War.) Machines are unsympathetic, unthinking, and impersonal, and the war machine makes Henry's hopes for personal glory seem pathetic, even tragic. Crane also uses the theme of a mechanized war to make a grim comment on the industrialism of the late 19th century and its dehumanizing effect on laborers.

YOUTH AND MANHOOD

All the men in the 304th regiment are inexperienced in battle, and many—like Henry and Wilson—are very young. The narrative consistently refers to Henry as "the youth," emphasizing his naïveté. Though *Red Badge* is mostly about finding courage, it is also largely about Henry's quest to become a man. Because of his romantic view of war, Henry initially thinks he'll achieve manhood through fighting. And for him, and many other soldiers, manhood seems to hang in the balance of each battle: they feel weak when the enemy has them trapped, and manly when they fight and win. By the end of the novel, after facing the realities of war, Henry is only a few days older and still has some juvenile characteristics, but he feels like a man. Has he matured? Perhaps: Henry finally dreams of tranquility and peace rather than war. He discards his boastfulness for a quiet more mature sense of self-determination.



NOISE AND SILENCE

From popping musketry to the belching of artillery explosions to the "devotional silence" of the woods, *Red Badge* gets much of its descriptive power from its descriptions of sound. The noises of battle give the reader a soldier's point of view and do more than just describe war: they convey the intensely disorienting experience that battle must have been for soldiers on the ground. For a low-ranking infantryman like Henry, noise is his only news of the battle. The narrative describes explosions as the armies communicating with each other. All this noise overwhelms Henry and he can't understand what's going on: a metaphor for the chaos and senselessness of war. On the other hand, silence is golden. When "the loud young soldier" Wilson matures from his empty boastfulness, he quiets down. The story ends with Henry yearning for "soft and eternal peace"—the end of noise and war altogether.

NATURE

Henry has a keen eye for his surroundings, and descriptions of landscapes get a great deal of attention in the narrative. Descriptions of scenery emphasize the stark difference between nature and the war machine. Battles look strangely inappropriate being fought on sunny fields. When the smoke clears, the sky is just as blue and beautiful as before. Nature exists separately from the war, going "tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment." At first it seems as if this separateness makes nature a tranquil refuge from the war. But as the novel progresses, Henry realizes that nature is merely indifferent to human concerns. This is shockingly apparent when Henry sees ants feeding on the face of a dead soldier. This unsympathetic view of nature, common to Naturalism, the literary movement that Crane pioneered, comes from the late-19th-century fascination with Darwin's theory of natural selection and the fight for survival in a hostile world.

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Henry is fascinated by the spectacle of death. He looks into the eyes of **corpses** for answers to his questions about death, but they fail to communicate anything but strangeness, emptiness, and horror. When Henry and Wilson each get a **flag** to carry for the regiment, a position of honor, each time they must wrestle it from the hands of a dying man. Without providing any definitive answers, *Red Badge* explores a host of questions regarding death in general and death in war in particular: Do our beliefs endure beyond the grave? Is fighting and dying worth it? Can death be glorious? Can we ultimately know anything about what happens after death?

SYMBOLS

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

CORPSES

Henry is fascinated with **corpses** in his search for answers about courage, glory, and self-sacrifice. He had initially believed that a glorious death would give him everlasting fame. But in the war, he sees corpses landing in awkward positions and looking betrayed. In doing so, they show the grotesque reality of war and reveal death as meaningless. In

particular, the dead soldier in the "chapel" in the forest does not seem glorious to Henry—it's just a mound of rotting meat. Its pointless death defies any effort to find meaning in death itself.

WOUNDS

For Henry, **wounds** are a "red badge of courage" to show off like a Purple Heart medal—the modern military award given to soldiers wounded in combat. Henry wants a wound to prove that he fought bravely and sacrificed himself. But wounds in *Red Badge* are not that simple. They reveal the flip side of Henry's romantic ideas: the grim reality of war wounds. For example, after he's wounded, Jim looks like his whole side had been "chewed by wolves." Wounds reveal the ironies of war, too: when Henry gets his own wound, it comes when a fellow Union soldier strikes him with a rifle butt to get Henry out of his way. Henry then must lie to his regiment about the wound's origin. Wounds also don't have to be physical. The **tattered man** reflects Henry's internal wounds—his guilt for running away and abandoning people.

THE TATTERED MAN

A living symbol, the **tattered man** represents Henry's own conscience projected onto someone else. The tattered soldier embodies Henry's feelings of guilt and shame for fleeing battle. He also exposes Henry's juvenile ways of dealing with his conflicted feelings: when the tattered man needs help, Henry abandons him, just as he wishes to abandon his own guilt.

FLAGS

By definition, **flags** are symbols of something else, such as a state or country. In *Red Badge*, battle flags symbolize the opposing armies. More importantly, they represent a soldier's need to believe in his army and in the war itself. The flag transcends individual concerns and represents the soldiers as a collective force. The political symbolism of Civil War flags is mostly absent from *Red Badge*. Instead, they are compared to beautiful colorful birds. Flags in *Red Badge* are symbols about symbols, about the abstract causes for which soldiers put their lives on the line. When he takes over as flag-bearer, Henry is safeguarding all of the symbols that hold his world together.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Red Badge of Courage* published in 2005.

Chapter 1 Quotes

He had burned several times to enlist. Tales of great movements shook the land. They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them. He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis

Here we're introduced to Henry Fleming, a young man who feels a strong desire to fight in the war with the Southern states of the Union. Henry has been brought up to believe in the timeless code of honor and heroism--to be a mature man, he believes, is to be willing to fight for one's country and sacrifice one's life when necessary. Henry has developed such a philosophy over years of reading books, such as the ancient Greek epics of Homer, and also reading newspaper stories about the military's clashes with its opponents.

Henry is at once hopelessly naive and desperate to become a man. He thinks that manhood is a question of bravery and courage--and yet he naively thinks that he'll be able to prove his manhood as soon as he arrives on the battlefield, not realizing how distinctly "unheroic" and dehumanizing modern warfare has become.

Chapter 2 Quotes

He finally concluded that the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze, and then figuratively to watch his legs to discover their merits and faults. He reluctantly admitted that he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer. To gain it, he must have blaze, blood, and danger, even as a chemist requires this, that, and the other.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Henry is nervous about fighting in an actual battle--he senses that his desire for courage won't translate into actual courage once the fighting starts. Henry's thought process is

complicated and full of contradictions. He tries to force himself to admit the truth: there's no way to prepare oneself for battle, only the reality of the battle itself. Henry begins to think of himself as a mere pawn or specimen in the war: like a chemical sample for a scientist, he'll be exposed to different stimuli (such as danger and violence) and react accordingly.

Henry's analogy between himself and a chemical sample is unnerving because it suggests that Henry doesn't respect himself as a full human being: he's content to be a mere cog in the army, ordered around by his superiors. He's so young and immature that he takes no responsibility for his own actions--he's just waiting for the right stimuli to control his behavior. At the same time, his detachment from his own sense of courage shows a kind of maturity, or at least a willingness to question himself relatively impartially.

Chapter 3 Quotes

The ranks opened covertly to avoid the corpse. ... The youth looked keenly at the ashen face. ... He vaguely desired to walk around and around the body and stare; the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Henry crosses paths with a corpse--a victim of the war in which Henry himself is fighting. The corpse makes a big impression on Henry; as he stares into the corpse's dead, dull eyes, he's full of fear and anxiety.

Henry's strange interaction with the corpse reminds us that Henry is surrounded by death and danger on all sides--in the next battle, he could easily end up just like the corpse. And yet Henry seems perversely fascinated with the corpse and with the principle of fighting in battle itself. Henry wants to know the answer to "the Question"--perhaps, what it's like to die. In general, then, the passage suggests that Henry is repelled yet also fascinated by death and danger--suggesting that he's still immature, and doesn't really understand the realities of his war.

Chapter 4 Quotes

The battle reflection that shone for an instant in the faces on the mad current made the youth feel that forceful hands from heaven would not have been able to have held him in place if he could have got intelligent control of his legs.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Henry is in the midst of a battle. He's surrounded by danger--indeed, many of his fellow soldiers have turned and run away from the oncoming Confederate troops. And yet Henry doesn't run. He's frightened by what he sees, and yet he continues to stay and watch the enemy soldiers march toward him.

Is Henry being brave in this scene? Crane suggests exactly the opposite--Henry *would* be running from the Confederate danger, except that he's paralyzed with fear (a good example of the "flight or fight" reaction). In general, then, the passage underscores the reality that courage cannot be measured in any concrete, external way. Henry's behavior might *look* like bravery to an outside observer, but in reality Henry is just as afraid as the troops that are running away.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Directly he was working at his weapon like an automatic affair. He suddenly lost concern for himself, and forgot to look at a menacing fate. He became not a man but a member. ... He was welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

"Not a man but a member" is arguably the most important phrase in the entire book. As the novel begins, Henry is an optimistic youth, full of idealistic theories of honor and courage. But as we move on, Henry begins to feel less and less like a human being--he feels himself becoming a cog in the vast "war machine" of the Union. Here, Henry is caught

in the middle of battle, and feels a sudden eerie calm as he begins to merge with his own weapon and the other soldiers around him.

The passage is interesting because of the similarities it draws between Henry and his gun. Henry, like the gun itself, is just a "tool"; in the same way that Henry manipulates his gun, generals manipulate Henry. Crane suggests that the rise of industrialization in America in the second half of the 19th century created an environment in which human beings became "industrialized," too--i.e., in which they were treated as disposable objects to be sent to their deaths in battle.

❝ Under foot there were a few ghastly forms motionless. They lay twisted in fantastic contortions. Arms were bent and heads were turned in incredible ways. It seemed that the dead men must have fallen from some great height to get into such positions. They looked to be dumped out upon the ground from the sky.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this gory passage, Crane describes the dead bodies of Henry's fellow soldiers. The soldiers aren't the least bit dignified or impressive in death--rather, they look like they've fallen from a great height (suggesting that their bodies have been horribly mangled during the fighting).

Up to this point, Henry has still believed in the romanticized idea of glory and honor in battle. But now that he's confronted with the sight of grotesque human corpses, he fully grasps the horrors of war. War isn't an opportunity for glory or lasting fame; on the contrary, the soldiers who die in battle become anonymous corpses, no different from all the other death around them. Nothing could be further from the idealistic love of war with which Henry began his time in the army.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Into the youth's eyes there came a look that one can see in the orbs of a jaded horse. His neck was quivering with nervous weakness and the muscles of his arms felt numb and bloodless. His hands, too, seemed large and awkward as if he was wearing invisible mittens. And there was a great uncertainty about his knee joints.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

Henry has already fought battle, "bravely" standing against his Confederate opponents. But when the Confederates come back again, Henry suddenly feels weak and frightened. He's withstood his first challenge as a soldier, but now that he has a second opportunity to prove his bravery, he sees the utter futility of bravery itself. Fear seems to break down Henry's entire body: Crane describes him as an old, "jaded horse" whose knees and arms are slowly losing all their strength.

The individual is meaningless in battle: a single soldier like Henry will merely be worked again and again until his body gives out, or until he's murdered by a Confederate opponent. In all, Crane uses the passage to convey the total dehumanization of war.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ He had fled, he told himself, because annihilation approached. He had done a good part in saving himself, who was a little piece of the army. ... It was all plain that he had proceeded according to very correct and commendable rules. His actions had been sagacious things. They had been full of strategy. They were the work of a master's legs.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, Henry has just deserted his army--he's been so frightened by the arrival of more Confederate troops that he's run away from the fighting altogether. Here, safe from battle for a moment, Henry tries

to justify his own actions. There was no chance that he could have survived the fight, he tells himself--the very futility of the battle is proof that running away was the logical thing, and even the "right thing," as he'll live to fight for his army again.

Henry's thought process is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it reminds us how childish his ideas about chivalry and bravery were--almost as soon as he found himself in an actual battle, his bravery failed him altogether. Furthermore, Henry's rationalizations of cowardice show him thinking in terms of individualism; in other words, he justifies his behavior by arguing that protecting his own life is the highest good. Henry's hypocrisy, of course, is that he's trying to pretend that he made a "choice" to run away. In reality, Henry didn't choose to run at all--his desertion was practically an involuntary reaction, in which logic played no part. Crane doesn't condemn Henry's actions, but he notes Henry's frantic rationalizations, too.

❝ He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip. ... The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look.

Related Characters: Dead soldier, Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49-50

Explanation and Analysis

In this frightening, almost nightmarish scene, Henry stumbles upon a soldier's corpse. To Henry's horror, the corpse is covered in ants, who walk all over the dead body with no respect for human dignity. Nature, one could say, is totally indifferent to human concerns--the universe doesn't care about the differences between the Union and the Confederate armies; life goes on either way. Note the subtle color symbolism here--the red and blue (the official colors of the Confederate and Union troops) of the soldier's body have become green and yellow, symbolizing the decay of all political and ideological values in the face of utter annihilation.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

As the battle goes on, Crane reiterates his shocking, industrial imagery. The fight, we're told, sounds like a huge, "grinding" machine--a machine for which, we can guess, individual lives don't count for anything. The war itself, we should recognize, is practically a character in the book--an autonomous destructive force that transcends (and sneers at) all political affiliations.

And yet Henry is eerily attracted to the spectacle of battle, in spite of all the horrors he's seen lately. War is a drug, it's often said: fighting is grim and terrifying, but also surprisingly addictive. Henry, still a young, impressionable youth, seems hypnotized by the slaughter of the war--thus, he goes back into the fray.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Because of the tattered soldier's question he now felt that his shame could be viewed. He was continually casting sidelong glances to see if the men were contemplating the letters of guilt he felt burned into his brow.

Related Characters: Tattered man, Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

In the previous chapter, a "tattered man" asks Henry if he's been wounded. Henry, knowing full-well that he wasn't wounded at all (since he ran from the battle) immediately feels guilty. As he walks along with the other soldiers, many of whom *do* have horrific wounds sustained during the battle, Henry feels that everyone is judging him for his cowardice--he thinks that his desertion must be obvious to everyone else.

Of course, there's little chance that anyone else really realizes that Henry ran away--on the contrary, Henry's stigma of guilt is totally internal; he remains so fiercely loyal to the principle of courage and heroism that he *feels* ashamed, and assumes that he looks like a coward. Thus, the passage makes an important point: Henry has seen some horrifying things in battle, but he continues to believe that fighting with one's fellow troops is the right thing to do. His belief in the value of courage and heroism can't be stripped away so easily.

> At times he regarded the wounded soldiers in an envious way. He conceived persons with torn bodies to be peculiarly happy. He wished that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

In this famous passage, Henry begins to wish that he had sustained a wound of some kind. A wound, he feels, would prove to everyone else that Henry has indeed fought bravely in battle, rather than running away from the fray like a coward.

Throughout the novel, there's a conflict between internal heroism and external signs of heroism. Henry continues to believe that true heroism means being recognized for one's heroism--in other words, being respected because of external wounds sustained during battle. But as we've come to see already, no external sign can prove one's courage under fire. Henry might appear to be brave because he stands his ground during a battle, when in reality he's just paralyzed with fear. In all, then, Henry's desire for a "red badge" reflects his perverse attraction to the brutality of war: as much as he 's frightened by battle, he's also almost masochistically drawn to danger because of his ideals of courage and sacrifice.

Chapter 10 Quotes

> The simple questions of the tattered man had been knife thrusts to him. They asserted a society that probes pitilessly at secrets until all is apparent. ... [H]is crime ... was sure to be brought plain by one of those arrows which cloud the air and are constantly pricking, discovering, proclaiming those things which are willed to be forever hidden.

Related Characters: Tattered man, Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the Tattered Man berates Henry with questions about his war wounds. The Tattered Man wants to know where Henry has been wounded--a question that Henry hates, because it reminds him that he's a coward, and doesn't have wounds of any kind on his body.

The Tattered Man, we come to see, is an externalization of Henry's own guilty conscience. Just as Henry comes to despise himself for his own lack of courage during the battle, the Tattered Man continues to "attack" Henry with probing questions that reiterate Henry's cowardice. Henry desperately wants to be perceived as a brave man by his fellow troops, but the Tattered Man's questions suggest that Henry is a long way from being celebrated for his bravery. Ironically, Crane describes the the Tattered Man's questions in harsh, militaristic language ("knife thrusts," "arrows")--even though Henry has fled from the literal battle, he's entered into a metaphorical "battle" for recognition.

Chapter 11 Quotes

> As he watched his envy grew ... Swift pictures of himself, apart, yet in himself, came to him—a blue desperate figure leading lurid charges with one knee forward and a broken blade high—a blue, determined figure standing before a crimson and steel assault, getting calmly killed on a high place before the eyes of all. He thought of the magnificent pathos of his dead body.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Henry continues to buy into the fantasy of "glorious death," a subject that Crane has already debunked with his harsh, detached descriptions of meaningless battles in an indifferent universe. Henry, in spite of his past cowardice, still aspires to be a brave soldier. Or rather, Henry aspires to be *seen* as a brave soldier--the recognition of his peers is so important to him that he imagines his own corpse displayed before "the eyes of all."

The passage strongly suggests that Henry's desire for military glory is still just an immature daydream, a manifestation of his own insecurity about his manhood. Henry thinks he wants to die, but he also wants to savor the pleasure of being remembered as a brave soldier--much like Tom Sawyer, he wants the ghoulish pleasure of attending his own funeral and listening to his peers praise him for his heroism.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"The fight was lost. The dragons were coming with invincible strides. The army, helpless in the matted thickets and blinded by the overhanging night, was going to be swallowed. War, the red animal, war, the blood swollen god, would have bloated fill.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

In this vivid passage, Henry faces the horrors of war once again. The passage is a great example of how Crane casts war as a character in its own right, independent of all political and ideological conflicts. War is like a wild animal, hungry for dead bodies and blood. By personifying war itself, Crane reiterates the point that war destroys both sides: for all the lofty ideals of the Union and Confederate troops, both sides will be equally devastated by the conflict. While in this particular case it's the Union troops who are under attack, Crane makes it clear enough that the Confederate soldiers will be "swallowed up" themselves sooner or later--the "red animal" of war doesn't play favorites.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"Yeh've been grazed by a ball. It's raised a queer lump jest as if some feller had lammed yeh on th' head with a club."

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Here Henry comes to realize that the wound he sustained from the butt of a rifle is being interpreted as a gunshot wound--i..e, a sign of genuine courage. Henry finally has the "Red badge" he's been craving--an outward sign of his bravery.

As the passage makes clear, Henry continues to feel some guilt about his cowardice. Even though the other soldiers perceive his injury as a gunshot wound, they acknowledge that it *looks* like he's been clubbed (which, in fact, he has). Henry seems close to being found-out--his wound fools the other soldiers, but just barely. In all, the passage reinforces the point that there can be no external proof of bravery--even if other people regard you as a hero because of your wounds, true bravery comes from within.

Chapter 14 Quotes

The youth took note of a remarkable change in his comrade ... He seemed no more to be continually regarding the proportions of his personal prowess. He was not furious at small words that pricked his conceits. He was no more a loud young soldier. There was about him now a fine reliance. He showed a quiet belief in his purposes and his abilities.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth), Wilson (the loud young soldier, the youth's friend)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

After fighting in a battle, soldiers often experience drastic changes of personality or emotional state. They stop trying to show off and prove their bravery, and accept their own limitations as human beings. Wilson, a friend of Henry's who was initially loud-mouthed and testy, has become docile and calm with his peers, reflecting the fact that he's been in serious danger in battle. Henry, in spite of his apparent war wound, is much the same as he was before the war--despite his delusions of worldliness and military experience, he hasn't really been changed by his experiences in battle (just as Henry's wound isn't really a war wound at all, just an imitation of one). Wounds and "red badges" are no replacement for genuine experience and self-realization.

Chapter 15 Quotes

His self pride was now entirely restored. In the shade of its flourishing growth he stood with braced and self-confident legs, and since nothing could now be discovered he did not shrink from an encounter with the eyes of judges, and allowed no thoughts of his own to keep him from an attitude of manfulness. He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Henry regains some of his self-confidence. In their first battle, Wilson had desperately given Henry letters that he'd written to his loved ones back home, in the event that Wilson was killed in battle. Remembering Wilson's "cowardice" now makes Henry feel more confident--because he interprets Wilson's actions as cowardly, he feels better about his own acts of cowardice (and feels that he has "insurance" against Wilson if Wilson should ever try to discover the truth). Indeed, Henry tries to delude himself into believing that it wasn't cowardly at all to run from the fighting--instead of facing his mistakes and learning from them, he ignores them and confines them to "the dark." Henry's immaturity is surer than ever: no true soldier could believe himself to be heroic for such shallow reasons--ironically, Henry's total confidence in his own heroism is a sure sign of his inexperience as a soldier.

Chapter 17 Quotes

It was revealed to him that he had been a barbarian, a beast. He had fought like a pagan who defends his religion. Regarding it, he saw that it was fine, wild, and, in some ways, easy. ... [H]e was now what he called a hero. And he had not been aware of the process. He had slept and, awakening, found himself a knight.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Crane illustrates the shallowness of heroism. Henry has been firing his gun with great energy and intensity--he's in the midst of a great battle, yet he's also in something like a trance state. Delirious with fear, Henry doesn't realize that he's firing his gun at all--as a result, Henry continues firing long after the enemy has retreated. Henry's peers interpret his actions as heroic, and applaud his courage.

The shallowness of Henry's heroism is overwhelmingly obvious--Henry didn't even realize that he was being heroic; he has to be told that he was acting like a "barbarian." The irony is that Henry has aspired to be recognized for his bravery--now that his dream has come true, he's too dissociated to enjoy it, and disappointed by how "easy" it was. Henry is still very much a young, immature man, but here he learns yet another lesson about the nature of courage and heroism.

Chapter 19 Quotes

Within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag which was near him. It was a creation of beauty and invulnerability. It was a goddess, radiant, that bended its form with an imperious gesture to him. It was a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes. Because no harm could come to it he endowed it with power.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Henry is here deeply inspired by the presence of his army's flag. The flag is held high, leading the soldiers into the battle. Moreover, the flag acts as a rallying point, and a symbol of the soldier's courage and idealism. Henry is especially drawn to the flag: he thinks that his duty as a soldier is to fight for his flag.

Crane both admires and questions Henry's idealistic love for the flag. Soldiers fight and die for all kinds of reasons--their country, their religion, their families, etc. Henry, ever the idealist and the Romantic, seems not to have a good, deep reason to fight in battle. Instead, he fights for the flag itself, rather than the many things the flag symbolizes (country, political ideology, the actual Union cause, etc.). Henry's relationship to the flag is depicted in almost erotic language--the flag is like a beautiful woman, to whom Henry is drawn. For not the first time in the book, Crane portrays Henry's experiences battle in strange, almost sexual terms.

Chapter 21 Quotes

He discovered that the distances, as compared with the brilliant measurings of his mind, were trivial and ridiculous. The stolid trees, where much had taken place, seemed incredibly near. The time, too, now that he reflected, he saw to have been short. He wondered at the number of emotions and events that had been crowded into such little spaces.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Crane conveys a sense of utter futility here. The Union soldiers, including Henry, have just won what they think of as a great victory--happy with themselves, they march back to their fellow soldiers, where they learn that they should have kept marching forward. Although Henry and his peers had thought that they'd covered a great distance during the battle, claiming a great deal of land for their side, the reality is that they've barely covered any distance at all. Henry comes to realize that he's been too idealistic and Romantic in his thinking--while he thought of himself as having achieved great victories in battle, he now realizes that his victories have been comically trivial, just a drop in the bucket.

The passage is important because it shows Henry developing a measure of self-awareness. He's coming to see through his own idealism and pseudo-heroism--the truth, he recognizes, is that he's just a meaningless cog in the war machine.

Chapter 22 Quotes

A spluttering sound had begun in the woods. It swelled with amazing speed to a profound clamor that involved the earth in noises. The splitting crashes swept along the lines until an interminable roar was developed. To those in the midst of it it became a din fitted to the universe. It was the whirring and thumping of gigantic machinery, complications among the smaller stars.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

Henry prepares for another battle, and as it begins, the noise of gunfire becomes almost deafening. Crane describes the noise of the battle as a "spluttering sound," suggesting the chaos of the scene. Furthermore, he compares the sound to a huge, whirring machine. Crane has compared a battle to a machine in the past--but here, the "thumping" machinery threatens to swallow Henry and his peers up indiscriminately.

The horrors of war are so vast that Henry has *needed* to believe in the fairy tales of courage and chivalry--if he didn't have beliefs to comfort him, he could have been crushed under the sheer terror of the Civil War. Now that Henry is a more experienced soldier, he's coming to recognize the war for what it really is--a chaotic, "whirring" storm, both huge and meaningless.

Chapter 23 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Henry and his fellow troops prepare to charge against the Confederate troops. To Henry's great surprise, his fellow soldiers are incredibly brave and intimidating--instead of being overcome with fear of death, they yell and charge recklessly, proving their courage.

Crane is halfway between praising the soldiers' heroism and describing it as meaningless, almost inhuman. He notes that the soldiers have surrendered their selves to battle--in other words, they're not concerned with their own safety, their own fears, or even their own thoughts. They've consented to be mere gears in the war machine. Crane characterizes the soldiers' former individuality as "vanity," as if the desire to save one's own life is just a childish delusion that can be "cured" with military service. Crane also seems to criticize the soldiers' actions with less-than-romantic terms--he characterizes them as a mob, suggesting that in rising to the challenge of battle, the soldiers have surrendered their own humanity.

❝ The youth's friend went over the obstruction in a tumbling heap and sprang at the flag as a panther at prey. He pulled at it and, wrenching it free, swung up its red brilliancy with a mad cry of exultation even as the color bearer, gasping, lurched over in a final throe and, stiffening convulsively, turned his dead face to the ground.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth), Wilson (the loud young soldier, the youth's friend)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Henry and his "friend," Wilson, compete to capture their opponents' flag, a symbol of the Confederate cause itself. Although Henry wants to claim the Confederate soldiers' flag as a prize, Wilson gets there first. Wilson, noticing that the enemy flag-bearer is mortally wounded, wrenches the flag free.

Crane contrasts Wilson's savage exultation with the pain and misery of the dying flag-bearer. War is a zero-sum game: for every victory that one soldier savors, another soldier is murdered. Wilson, overcome with enthusiasm for his fellow soldiers and his cause, doesn't stop to notice the dying soldier. He seems to have no respect for the soldier's humanity--after all, the soldier is his enemy, a faceless being he's been taught to hate. In encouraging soldiers to pursue glory and heroism, Crane suggests, war forces soldiers to surrender their natural sympathy for other human beings.

❝ He felt a quiet manhood, nonassertive but of sturdy and strong blood. He knew that he would no more quail before his guides wherever they should point. He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man.

Related Characters: Henry Fleming (the youth)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of the novel, Henry comes to terms with his own insignificance in the world. At first, Henry craved recognition from his fellow soldiers--he derived his self-worth from his peers' respect and admiration. But gradually, Henry has come to think of heroism in a much different sense. It is futile, he realizes, to pursue glory in battle--no single soldier can ever be more than a "drop in the bucket" of the war effort--there's no room for an Achilles or a Hector in the Civil War. Instead, Henry believes that he can attain heroism by accepting his own place and developing a quiet strength within himself.

Paradoxically, in denying his own importance, Henry rises to true maturity: he becomes a man. Critics have often debated whether or not Crane intended the passage to be ironic or not--Henry's acceptance of his own smallness could certainly be interpreted as cynical or resigned, but here it's also portrayed rather optimistically, as he thinks of his future. Perhaps Crane's real point is that, good or bad, accepting one's personal limits is a "coping mechanism" to which all soldiers must resort sooner or later.

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.

CHAPTER 1

Morning dawns on a riverside encampment of soldiers: Union army volunteers from the 304th regiment of New York. As the camp stirs, a tall soldier named Jim Conklin tells the others he's heard a rumor that the generals plan to march their regiment into battle soon. The regiment has yet to see battle, and the soldiers debate Jim's news: some believe it, but some don't. One private, angry that the regiment hasn't marched for weeks, calls Jim a liar.

The novel shows the war from the perspective of soldiers who are always uninformed. Their arguments are never about the political issues of war. By leaving out the politics, Crane separates the war from the grand ideas that motivate the armies, and focuses on the soldiers' direct experience of battle.

A young private, Henry Fleming, listens to Jim and returns to his bunk to think. As a youth, he had always dreamed of glorious battles, his imagination inflamed by newspaper reports of great victories. He remembers enlisting against his mother's wishes. She warned him not to disgrace himself or do anything that he would be ashamed to tell her. This irritated Henry. He wasn't enlisting to avoid shame. He was out for glory.

Henry's dreams of battles and heated newspaper reports all greatly differ from the gritty reality of war. His mother's advice is Henry's first taste of the difference between the ideal and the real. Her view of war is bureaucratic rather than heroic—she tells him to do his duty and not mess up.

Henry suspects that education, religion, and daily concerns have sapped the greatness from men that was described in Greek classics, such as the *Iliad*. He had thought that enlisting and fighting was the only way he could gain the glory he craved. And as the crowds cheered his regiment just after it formed in Washington, he *had* felt like a hero. But since then, military life has been nothing but monotonous drills, reviews, and waiting.

Henry's idealized vision of war is shared by the non-soldiers who cheer on the army. But as for reality, Henry's mother is right. Modern warfare is bureaucratic, with its waiting and drills, compared to the high drama of battles like those in the Iliad.

Now faced with the possibility of battle, Henry realizes he doesn't really know how he'll act: will he fight courageously, or will he run away? Henry asks Jim if he's ever considered running. Jim replies that he'd run if everyone else did, but if they stood firm and fought, so would he. Henry feels reassured.

Just before battle, Henry realizes his own inexperience. Jim's response to Henry outlines a pragmatic idea of courage—he's uninterested in being a hero, and knows he couldn't be blamed for doing what everyone else does.

CHAPTER 2

Jim was wrong: for several days afterwards, the regiment doesn't move. Henry remains nervous about his courage, realizing that an actual battle will be the only way to test it. Henry watches the other soldiers closely, trying to figure out if they are heroes or cowards.

As an adolescent struggling with his self image, Henry constantly tries to see himself through the eyes of others. His frequent comparisons between himself and others are often flawed.

One morning, a colonel appears on horseback with orders, and Henry's regiment marches to join other soldiers in formation. As they walk, the infantrymen boast and argue about the army's strategies, becoming more lighthearted as they go.

In the story, strategies from commanders are often incomplete or only partially overheard. Soldiers argue about them to reclaim some sense of control.

A fat soldier breaks out of line to steal a horse from a nearby house. A young girl rushes out to fight him off, and the regiment is distracted in cheering for her.

An example of what Henry's mother might say is a soldier disgracing himself. Will these men really become heroes?

After a long march, the soldiers make camp. Henry feels homesick and isolated from the others. He meets a friend, the loud soldier Wilson, and asks him if he would run from battle. Of course not, Wilson replies, and leaves Henry alone, feeling worse than ever.

Wilson's apparent bravery probably overcompensates for his own worries. But it shuts up Henry: his questioning takes place inside his head for the rest of the novel.

CHAPTER 3

The next day the long march continues. The new, inexperienced soldiers grow tired and start to throw away their bright new jackets, hats, and knapsacks along the roadside.

A metaphor for a big question: what are the essential qualities of a soldier? Appearance says nothing about internal strength.

One morning, Henry is kicked awake by Jim. The soldiers are soon running toward spatters of gunfire. Henry realizes he couldn't run away if he tried: the regiment boxes him in. Henry starts to feel like a victim, dragged to slaughter against his wishes.

Henry contradicts himself for the first time. Claiming to be a victim, Henry is in denial about volunteering. He feels he might have made a mistake he doesn't want to admit.

The fast-moving mass of soldiers divides to pass a **corpse** in a worn-out blue uniform. Henry stares at its eyes, looking for any kind of answer, but the mob of soldiers around him pushes him forward.

For Henry, the corpse has seen the real meaning of war, but it cannot share its messages with the living.

Again and again, the soldiers take up positions in the woods behind rocks and tree limbs for protection, but each time they are then ordered to march further. Soon the soldiers get annoyed, and start to complain that their commanders must be fools. Less nervous now than curious, Henry watches the battle lines stretch over the landscape.

Like Henry, the soldiers displace onto their commanders their misgivings about joining the army, their mistaken belief that it would be glorious. Complaining gives the soldiers the illusion that they have some control of their situation.

Eventually, the regiment nears the fighting. Guns flash and the noise grows to a roar. Wilson taps Henry on the shoulder and, with fear in his voice, tells Henry he expects to get killed. Wilson hands over a packet to be given to his parents in case he dies in battle.

Faced with an actual battle, Wilson the braggart becomes a frightened sentimental sap. Early on, Wilson is a character of extremes: first overly brave, then overly timid.

CHAPTER 4

The battle rages in front of Henry's regiment. Soldiers watch and argue about its progress, claiming that various parts of their army are getting crushed while others are winning decisive victories.

For the soldiers and reader alike, it's hard to know what's actually happening or who's winning during the battle.

Artillery shells and bullets start hitting the ground and trees around Henry's position. Their lieutenant is shot in the hand and swears so terribly that his men laugh nervously.

The lieutenant sustains the first wound. Rather than being a badge of courage, it seems funny. The significance of wounds will keep changing.

In the distant smoke, Henry sees a Union battle **flag** fall over. Suddenly, a mob of blue soldiers retreats through the woods, running away from the wild yells of another mob, gray and red, in pursuit. Furious officers scream to stop and beat their panicked men, but they keep running. Henry hears nearby veteran soldiers mock the retreating men sarcastically.

The fallen flag symbolizes a defeat for the soldiers and for their commitment to fight as a unified force. When it falls, every man runs helter skelter for his own life. Note how the only things that distinguish the two sides are flags and colors.

Henry realizes that if he started to run, nothing could compel him to stop. But he doesn't run yet: he wants to see whatever monster caused this frenzied retreat.

Henry sees the uncontrollable force of human nature in the panicked retreat.

CHAPTER 5

Henry's regiment was supposed to have served in this battle as reinforcements. But now, with the front line gone, they hurriedly get ready for the enemy's charge, fumbling awkwardly with cartridges of ammunition. Henry feels startled and stupefied.

The soldiers' lack of any battle experience shows up in their physical clumsiness. This foreshadows the officer's insulting comments in chapter 18.

The screaming mob of enemies approaches through the trees. Without waiting, Henry fires a first wild shot. As his regiment starts blazing away, Henry's individual anxieties disappear: he feels like a cog in a machine, or part of a "mysterious fraternity." Henry gets furious with the oppressive battle smoke. He fires and loads automatically without stopping.

Henry's individuality and anxieties disappear into the "labor" of war. The battle combines the materials of industry, hard work, and the "fraternity" of masculine bonding.

The lieutenant collars a soldier trying to run away and beats him back into line. Henry sees several soldiers get shot, their faces looking betrayed, their **bodies** dropping into awkward poses as if they'd fallen from the sky.

The dead represent the shortcomings of romantic ideas about war: unlike glorified angels, the soldiers' deaths are grotesque and meaningless.

Henry's regiment repels the enemy charge. Gunfire gives way to the regiment's triumphant cheers. The soldiers grin at each other in congratulations. Henry feels like he's just worked a hellish day in a factory.

The soldiers need each other like fellow workers on an assembly line. The work is not glamorous, but they all appreciate a job well done.

Henry watches the scene around him. A battery of artillery guns is lobbing shells overhead. The Union battle **flag** flies again over distant troops. And to Henry's astonishment, the sun shines brightly in the blue sky above.

The mood of battle is not reflected in the landscape. It might be hellish for Henry, but it's just another sunny day for mother Nature, indifferent to human strife.

CHAPTER 6

After a quick nap, Henry wakes and reflects with delight that the test of his courage is over. He feels great about himself. He shakes hands with other soldiers. Everyone is proud.

Henry has to interpret his courage after the fact. During battle, he had no sense of it. His judgment is premature, indicating his inexperience.

But the celebration quickly ends when the soldiers realize the enemy is charging again. Preparing to fight again, the soldiers now feel dejected, like slaves forced to fight by their masters. Everyone complains about the lack of reinforcements.

The flip side to being a laborer is being a slave. The soldiers' changes with their mood—now that they're scared, they feel victimized again.

Henry feels intimidated by the persistence of the enemy. Who are these guys, anyway? Didn't they just get beaten? Henry's confidence drains away, and he begins to feel nervous and jittery.

Henry has little combat experience, so he doesn't know how to deal with war's relentlessness. He's also angry since his sense of victory will now be erased.

As the fighting begins, a soldier near Henry jumps up and runs away howling. Soon other soldiers drop their guns and flee. Feeling left behind and terrified, Henry turns and runs with no sense of direction. With his back to the fighting, Henry is more scared than ever, and he races to stay ahead of the retreating pack.

Compare this to Jim's answer in Chapter 1 about following the lead of others. When each man feels isolated and afraid, the soldiers' sense of fraternity disintegrates into a mob with every man out for himself.

Henry runs past a battery of artillery gunners and sees reinforcements coming. He feels these soldiers, now in the path of the enemy, are either wondrous men or total idiots. His pace slows as he gets further behind the lines of reinforcement. He slinks past a general on horseback and, as he does so, overhears that Henry's regiment held off the charge.

Henry's perspective on his own courage depends entirely on the events of the battle. When he thought everyone ran, he felt smart for running. When he learns that other soldiers stayed behind and were victorious, he feels ashamed. .

CHAPTER 7

Upon hearing about his regiment's surprising victory, Henry feels as guilty as a criminal. He resents the "stupidity" of his fellow soldiers who stayed to fight. On the contrary, Henry feels he had assessed the situation rationally and, by running, saved the army at least one of its soldiers. But he thinks his regiment won't understand that and will hate him.

To protect himself from feeling like a coward, Henry tells himself that his fellow soldiers' courage was in fact stupidity. Ironically, later on Henry will think of the exact same behavior as courageous when he stands his ground and fights.

Confused and mentally anguished, Henry wanders into the thick woods. He throws a pine cone at a squirrel who runs off. Henry is pleased to interpret this as a sign: he reasons that it's nature's law to run from danger. Henry feels in harmony with Nature.

To deal with his guilt, Henry interprets the squirrel incident as proof of Nature's sympathy. He has a deep need for approval from somewhere, and his mind keeps searching for it.

Henry pushes deeper into the silent woods to a grove with high branches that resembles a chapel. In this "chapel," Henry is horrified to discover a Union soldier's **corpse**. Ants are running over its discolored face and swarming up to its dull eyes, and one carries off a piece of flesh. Henry screams, but stays and stares into the dead man's eyes. He slowly paces backward, afraid that the corpse will jump up or call after him, and then he flees in terror.

The silence and "chapel" imagery suggest a religious encounter, but with death rather than life. Whatever the solider did in battle doesn't matter anymore—now he's just dead. The ant-covered corpse represents Nature's indifference to human concerns.

CHAPTER 8

The silence in the woods is suddenly broken by the awesomely loud noise of new fighting, "like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine." Henry thinks that the earlier fight must have been nothing compared to this battle. Curious, Henry starts running back toward the battle from which he had fled.

Finding no answers in nature, Henry hopes to find answers in the battle at large. So, he runs back toward the place he ran away from—a metaphor for his constantly changing mind.

Henry runs into a column of bloodied **wounded** soldiers returning from the front. One laughs and sings hysterically; another complains about their general; almost all of them groan. Another "spectral soldier," gray and ghostlike, walks silently with eyes that seem to stare into the unknown.

These soldiers, wounded after battle, offer Henry his best chance to discover if wounds and death can be glorious. The soldiers' complaints, groans, and silent, staring eyes suggest not.

Walking along, Henry is approached by a dirty, **tattered man** with two **wounds** in his head and arm. The tattered man tries to strike up a conversation about how well the fight went and how bravely the soldiers fought. Because Henry is in the column, the tattered man assumes Henry is wounded and asks about his wound. Henry stutters nervously and escapes through the crowd.

The tattered man embodies Henry's guilt about running from the battle. Henry isn't wounded and has no reason for being where he is. He abandons the tattered man, just as he wants to escape his own conscience.

CHAPTER 9

Henry tries to blend in with the wounded soldiers. But after the **tattered man**'s questions, he feels like they can perceive his guilt. He starts to envy their **wounds** and wishes he had one too: "a red badge of courage."

Henry still naïvely thinks it's all about him. His guilt makes him nervous. He longs for a wound to serve as proof of his courage, which inwardly he still doubts.

The graying spectral soldier walks at Henry's side, refusing everyone's offers to help him. Henry suddenly recognizes him as Jim Conklin. Jim says the fight was terrible and he got shot. He tells Henry he's afraid of falling and getting run over by the artillery wagons. Henry, sobbing, promises to help him. But Jim becomes remote, asking to be left alone. Henry pleads with Jim to leave the road for safety.

By helping Jim, Henry sees a chance to make up for not helping the regiment when he ran away.

Spurred on by some strange energy, Jim suddenly bolts away into the fields. Henry is terrified by the sight and chases after Jim with the **tattered man**. When Jim eventually stops, he stands motionless, demanding to be left alone. His body trembles and stiffens, and he falls awkwardly to the ground dead.

Jim's surreal sprint into the woods to die is among the book's most gruesome episodes. Courage and sympathy have no place here. Instead, the scene shows physical suffering and terror that only the dead know.

Henry is spellbound by Jim's **corpse**. He stares into Jim's paste-like face and, when Jim's jacket falls away, sees Jim's awful **wound**. Agonized and enraged, Henry shakes his fist back at the battlefield.

Henry gets an up-close look at wounds, death, and corpses, but nothing makes sense, and he erupts in frustration. Jim's wound was not a symbol of glory or a badge or honor.

CHAPTER 10

The **tattered man** is awed by Jim's strength and by his strange death. He then admits to Henry that he's also starting to feel very unwell, implying that he'd like Henry's help. Henry is scared he'll witness another grim death, but the tattered man reassures him he won't die yet because he's got children depending on him.

Jim didn't want help; the tattered man does. Henry gets a second chance to help a wounded man, but his irritated response suggests he was only helping Jim to help himself.

The **tattered man** tells Henry how he got shot in the head without even knowing it. He then describes Henry as looking pretty bad and warns him to take care of his own **wound**, one that might be inside, one that he might not even feel. The tattered man asks Henry where his wound is and Henry replies "don't bother me." Henry feels like the man's questions are "knife thrusts."

Once again the tattered man acts like an external version of Henry's own conscience, identifying that Henry does in fact have a wound inside: his own guilt, which cut into him like "knife thrusts."

Henry resolves to leave the **tattered man** and tells him goodbye, even though he knows the tattered man will probably die without help. Confused, the tattered man stutters and protests, and starts to mistake Henry for another soldier.

But Henry cannot face up to his own guilt. Instead, he runs away from it like a child, even though he knows the tattered man will die without him.

Henry leaves, abandoning the **tattered man** to wander in the field. Now Henry envies the **corpses** of dead soldiers. He wishes he were dead because he'll never be able to hide his secrets.

Henry thinks that his guilt—an internal wound—will be just as visible as the external wound he lacks.

CHAPTER 11

Moving again toward the "furnace roar" of the battle, Henry finds a road packed with retreating wagons and men. This discovery comforts Henry: it seems to amplify the danger he fled at first but has now resolved to confront.

The retreat justifies Henry's own hasty retreat earlier, and also boosts Henry's sense of his own courage, since he is now returning to fight what these men are fleeing.

Everyone moves aside for a column of soldiers headed to the front lines. Henry perceives them as a glorious "procession of chosen beings" and feels pathetic, totally inadequate by comparison.

Despite the deaths he has just seen, Henry still views war as glorious. He sees in these soldiers the man he hopes to be.

Henry imagines trading places with one of these men. He pictures himself strong and determined, charging the enemy and getting "calmly killed" on a hilltop for all to see. Henry feels a thrill at contemplating the "magnificent pathos" of his own **corpse**.

Henry imagines death as a romantic part of a story. Who gets "calmly" killed in war? Notice that the point isn't just to get killed, but to be seen getting killed.

Henry almost heads to the front lines, but realizes that he has no gear and no regiment—he's hungry, thirsty, and physically spent. He needs to find his regiment, but fears their harsh disapproval, and that his name will become a catchphrase for coward.

Henry confronts his human needs and realizes the limitations of being just one individual in the army. Realizing one's limits is a major part of becoming a mature person.

Henry thinks his problem could be solved if the army lost. Then his decision to flee from overwhelming odds would be vindicated. Henry realizes this is a terrible thing to wish, but he sees no way out of it.

In growing up, Henry must compromise his desires for his duty, his own vindication versus the oath of loyalty to his army.

CHAPTER 12

Not long after, Henry is shocked to see the very same column of soldiers he had thought so brave come running crazily back through the woods. Confused and caught up again in the raw chaos of war, Henry frantically asks the fleeing soldiers about what's happened. Henry grabs a soldier and stammers "Why—why—" The soldier struggles, demands to be let go, and finally slams his rifle butt on Henry's head to escape.

A major moment of disillusionment for Henry: how could these men, who in Chapter 11 seemed to him to be "chosen beings," now flee in terror? Henry's simple but poignant "Why" implies a lot of questions about war and its purpose—the only answer he gets is a brutal rifle butt to the head.

Henry collapses in pain from the bleeding **wound** on his head, struggling even to crawl. He imagines somewhere safe he can collapse and struggles forward to find it.

Henry isn't wounded by an enemy, but by an ally. His "badge" (wound) is a mark of dishonor and betrayal, not of courage.

On his way to find refuge, Henry passes screaming officers, artillery batteries that "belched and howled like brass devils," and more soldiers rushing to the breached line. Henry pushes on, disoriented, remembering pleasant scenes of his past, and contemplating giving up.

The parallel descriptions of the frenzy of battle and Henry's dazed sensations emphasize how unimportant a single man is in a huge army, and how little he can comprehend.

Just then, a cheerful soldier comes along and assures Henry that he'll return him to the regiment. Though the dark woods seem like a huge hive of confusion, the cheerful soldier guides Henry with an amazingly accurate sense of direction. On finding Henry's regiment, the cheerful soldier shakes Henry's hand and leaves. Henry realizes that "he had not once seen his face."

The cheerful soldier represents pure selfless human kindness. His actions contrast Henry's treatment of the tattered man in Chapter 10 The cheerful soldier is also a divine guide, a Christlike shepherd who returns Henry to the fold (his regiment).

CHAPTER 13

Henry stumbles toward the campfire of his regiment, concerned about being exposed for a coward, but helpless to do anything else. The guard on duty orders him to halt. It's Wilson, who is happy to see him.

Though we was terrified of death, Wilson apparently stayed with his regiment through the fight. Wilson never seems to suspect Henry of running away.

Henry stammers out a story: separated from the regiment, he saw terrible fighting and got shot in the head. The regiment's corporal comes over to check him out. They presumed Henry was dead, but of the 42 men missing that day, many soldiers have wandered back to find their camp.

Henry lies to make himself seem courageous, rather than a victim of friendly fire. The corporal's report implies that, like Henry, many other soldiers ran away from battle only to wander back later.

The corporal inspects Henry's **wound** and concludes that he's been grazed by a bullet, finding "a queer lump jest as if some feller had lammed yeh on th' head with a club." Wilson bandages Henry's head and admires his tough attitude in returning to camp because "[a] shot in th' head ain't foolin' business." Henry fidgets nervously.

Though the evidence points to Henry's lump being exactly what it is—the result of a smack on the head—everyone believes his lie. Henry is uncomfortable with Wilson's praise because he knows he doesn't really deserve it.

Some soldiers are pale and exhausted around the fire. Others have sunk into "death-like" sleep. Wilson gently cares for Henry, arranging his own blankets for Henry to sleep on. Henry falls gratefully asleep and "in a moment was like his comrades."

Wilson's generous acts show he has matured. Henry has rejoined his regiment, his community, but it's a community of death. Henry's reunion with his men is ambiguous, not glorious..

CHAPTER 14

In the morning, Henry wakes to the distant sounds of battle, which sound as if they have no beginning or end. Looking around in the grayish light of dawn, Henry mistakes the other sleeping soldiers for **corpses**. A second later he realizes they're alive, but he feels his vision may come true on a bloody battlefield in the future.

The noise signifies the endless grind of the war machine. Henry's vision might be of the Battle of Gettysburg, the Civil War's bloodiest battle and his regiment's most likely next stop.

Bugles, drums, and shrill officers help stir the sleepy camp to life. Among the grumbling soldiers, Wilson tends the fire. When Wilson adjusts Henry's bandage, Henry lashes out in irritation, and Wilson offers him breakfast. When three soldiers nearby get into a scuffle, Wilson goes to intervene and settles their dispute. Henry reflects on the changes in Wilson: no longer a testy, belligerent youth, Wilson is now quieter and humble, but confident in his abilities.

Wilson was initially a "loud young soldier" to compensate for his fears. Now, having faced his fears and admitted his personal limitations, he is a quieter and confident man. Henry still hasn't gotten there, as his testy reaction to Wilson shows.

Henry and Wilson talk about the previous day. Wilson says the regiment saw hard fighting, but Henry reassures him that they didn't see anything compared to the fighting he has experienced. Henry tells him Jim Conklin is dead. Wilson says the regiment lost half their men in the fight, but many were just scattered, fighting alongside other regiments and then returning, just like Henry.

Henry, who ran, puts down the fighting that Wilson actually saw. Henry is still the loud, bragging boy that Wilson used to be. WIlson doesn't realize it, but his comment about soldiers from the regiment getting "scattered" implies that many men did just what Henry did: ran, only to return later claiming to have fought in order to avoid looking like cowards.

CHAPTER 15

The regiment reassembles and is ready to march. In line, Henry remembers the packet of letters that Wilson had entrusted to him. Henry decides to keep the packet as a "small weapon" to use against Wilson if he asks about Henry running away. Thinking back on Wilson's serious and sentimental gesture of the packet, Henry feels superior and proud again.

Henry is as much at war with his insecurity as with the enemy: the tattered man with his "knife thrusts," the "small weapon" Henry holds to use against Wilson. Here, Henry is smug about Wilson's fear, as if he had never suffered any weakness.

Feeling like a veteran, Henry forgives himself for his anxieties and internal philosophical debates: they were just youthful delusions. Now he feels like a man of experience, confident that he's been chosen for glory. He remembers how the other soldiers who ran away were overly hasty and wild. Henry scorns them, believing that he fled the battle with "discretion and dignity."

Henry flip-flops on his attitudes about himself. He assumes he's become a man (after one day) and a veteran (after one fight). His interpretation of his running away as more dignified than his fellow soldiers' actions is ridiculous: he tried to run faster than everyone else.

Wilson nervously approaches Henry and asks for his packet of letters back. Seeing that Wilson is blushing with shame, Henry returns the packet without a word. Because he withheld comment and did not take advantage of his friend, Henry judges himself to be a generous and extraordinary man.

Though it costs him embarrassment, Wilson is ready to face his fears and shortcomings. But Henry is not ready, preferring to remain happily delusional about his self-importance.

CHAPTER 16

The regiment marches to relieve other soldiers dug into some trenches. Settling in, Wilson puts his head down and promptly falls asleep. The firing of muskets and cannons swells to a tremendous roar.

Earlier, Wilson was terrified when faced with battle. Now, having faced his fear, he takes a nap.

When the gunfire dies down, the soldiers share rumors that their army has suffered a terrible defeat. The regiment is pulled back and Henry catches glimpses of the gray enemy and hears their triumphant yells.

The noise of war drowns out thoughts and feelings. When it gets quiet, the men come back from battle mode to themselves.

Henry starts complaining about his commanders, telling other soldiers that the generals must be idiots because their soldiers are fighting hard and still losing. Another soldier sarcastically says that Henry must think he fought yesterday's battle all by himself. Henry, stung and afraid that his secret will be discovered, quickly quiets down.

The soldiers try to pass the blame. Since they don't control their own fates and want to seem courageous, they can't admit fault or defeat. But when Henry carries it too far, he feels exposed as a hypocrite.

The lieutenant leads them back to a position in a clearing and tells his complaining soldiers to shut up—less talking, more fighting. But they're tired and annoyed, and feel hounded by the relentless enemy. Forming into a line, they wearily await the approaching charge.

The oppressive noise and enemy fire makes the soldiers feel trapped and alone. This setting amplifies the psychological tension, which is just as much a part of battle as gunfire.

CHAPTER 17

The assault begins. Henry is furious that the enemy has given them no time to rest, no room to breathe. He tells Wilson the enemy better watch out if they keep up the chase. Wilson calmly replies that if the enemy keeps chasing them, everyone will be driven back into the river. This makes Henry even angrier.

While Henry still acts tough, Wilson calmly reveals what's really at stake: everyone in their regiment could be killed. If they were driven into the river, the regiment would end up where it started and its journey would have been an absolute failure.

Henry's regiment starts shooting, creating a wall of smoke. Henry feels like his rifle is a little useless stick. Disoriented by the noise, the smoke, and his own surging hatred, Henry is absorbed in the action. He stands, fires, and falls, thinking he might be shot. He ignores it, continuously reloading the hot barrel to keep shooting. Sensing that the enemy might be falling back, Henry pushes forward, firing furiously.

Henry is driven by rage and rather than by visions of glory. Henry is not aware of an enemy or purpose. He's just working on instinct and reflex, like a factory worker. He ignores a possible wound rather than proudly focusing on it.

A voice calls out to Henry to quit. He realizes he's alone in front with no enemies in sight. He turns to see his regiment staring at him, amazed. The fight is over, and Henry says, "Oh."

Henry achieves his dream: to appear brave in the eyes of others. His weak response ("Oh") shows how courage can be dull and unglamorous.

The lieutenant praises Henry, saying that if he had ten thousand "wild cats" like Henry he could win the war in a week. The soldiers congratulate each other and Henry for fighting like a beast. But Henry hadn't even been aware of the fight. It feels to him as if he was asleep and woke up a knight.

Henry hadn't planned or even realized his courageous outbreak. It happened somewhere deep within his consciousness, beyond his capacity to perceive or describe it.

CHAPTER 18

The soldiers learn that one of their own was wounded: Jimmy Rogers, who is screaming and thrashing in the grass. Henry goes with Wilson to find some water, but there is no stream. As they return, they get a view of the entire battlefield, watching lines of men and masses of troops. They see a general and his staff riding along, almost running over a wounded man on the ground.

The battle has begun to change Henry: he now joins Wilson in trying to help others. Just as Jim was afraid of being run over, the wounded man is almost trampled by officers. This is a metaphor for the insignificance of individual soldiers within the vast war machine.

The general stops near enough for Henry and Wilson to overhear some news. A strong enemy charge is threatening to break the lines, and the attack will be costly to repel. The general asks an officer what troops he can spare. The officer offers Henry's regiment, saying that they fight like "mule drivers." The general accepts, admitting that few of them will probably survive.

As if zooming out from Henry's individual experience of fighting, the officers gain a wider and more calculating perspective on the battle. Soldiers and regiments are like pieces in a chess match. Some, like Henry's regiment, are expendable.

Disheartened, Henry and Wilson return to their regiment to share the news of their impending charge. They don't tell anyone about the officer's insult. Henry feels like his eyes have been opened to his own insignificance. The soldiers tighten their belts and get ready for a sprint to the woods. Henry and Wilson quietly nod when a shaggy soldier nearby says they'll all get swallowed.

There's an ironic gap between the feeling of being important and the reality. Henry matures not just by fighting hard, but by coming to terms with his insignificance. Both take courage. But Henry isn't quite ready to give in to his limited importance: he will fight against it, and the insulting officer, in the next skirmish.

CHAPTER 19

Henry's regiment stumbles forward to start their charge across a clearing. Enemy gunfire erupts from the distant woods, breaking up the regiment's formation. Soldiers collapse awkwardly when shot and the charge leaves a trail of **bodies** on the ground.

Crane uses the charge to explore how individual actions can become group actions, and vice versa. When the charge falters, the soldiers break formation: they fall from a group back into individuals.

Focusing on a distant clump of trees, Henry runs unconsciously ahead of the pack, looking crazed, like an "insane soldier." He feels as if he can sense everything around him: each blade of grass, the rough bark of trees, the feverish enemy, the falling soldiers.

Once again, Henry is leading the battle charge, but is totally unaware of it, focused on a single goal. He's in a zone, only able to perceive close detail amid the chaos of war.

At first, the soldiers feel like frenzied berserkers, but they soon falter, huddling together like dazed sheep. The lieutenant screams to get them moving. Wilson fires a shot into the woods, snapping the soldiers out of their trance. The regiment starts forward again.

Everything depends on mindset. When confident, the soldiers transcend their individuality and become dangerous. When doubtful, they huddle like a herd of frightened animals.

But when they reach some trees, the soldiers hesitate a second time. The lieutenant, Henry, and Wilson all scream at the men to push on. Their **flag** obediently gets moving again and the men follow. Running nearby, Henry feels a deep love for the flag. It seems like a goddess to him, "a creation of beauty and invulnerability."

Henry's personification of the flag as a goddess represents how soldiers under stress need strong symbols to believe in. Confident leaders can do the same job. Notice how Henry and Wilson help the lieutenant inspire the men.

Henry sees the color sergeant get shot and stumble. He and Wilson each lunge for the **flag** and they tug it away from the **corpse**'s firm grasp.

If the flag falls, the symbolic power dies with its carrier. The two friends struggle to keep the flag's meaning alive.

CHAPTER 20

Henry and Wilson scuffle to carry the **flag**, each wanting to put himself at greater risk. Henry pushes Wilson off roughly.

Both Henry and Wilson are inspired by a mix of selflessness and the desire for glory.

Facing incredible fire, the regiment gives up the charge again and slinks back to the trees. The soldiers feel stunned and betrayed by their unsuccessful attempt to beat an enemy that suddenly seems invincible. More enemy soldiers start to close in around them. The lieutenant has been shot in the arm but continues to urge the men on, swearing wildly.

The soldiers' faith in their flag and leaders makes them feel invincible. But realizing that they're not, they feel as if their faith was futile. Just as their flag nearly fell, the lieutenant gets shot—another assault on the regiment's symbols of strength.

Henry realizes that his wish to prove the insulting officer wrong will not come true. Ashamed and angry, Henry joins the lieutenant in trying to inspire the regiment to fight, but the men are run down.

Wanting revenge on the officer, Henry is still fighting a battle for self-esteem.

The regiment starts to scatter in panic. Suddenly, the lieutenant sees gray soldiers advancing through the smoke and a vicious and desperate fight breaks out at close range. Henry sits on the ground with the **flag**, consoled only that his regiment will go down fighting.

Henry has no gun in this battle. But he does have the flag, which serves as a more powerful symbolic weapon. The men are finally motivated by their own desperation.

Soon the enemy fire dwindles away. The smoke clears and the field is empty, except for some twisted **corpses**. Victorious, the blue soldiers cheer hoarsely, proud for having proved that "they were men."

The soldiers had felt trapped and powerless. They fought to push back the enemy, but also to prove their manhood to themselves and to others.

CHAPTER 21

Relieved, the regiment returns back to the line of other blue soldiers. They are met with jeers and sarcastic questions from veteran soldiers still in reserve. Henry's regiment is insulted and angry, but Henry realizes that the distance they covered to the trees, even though it had seemed vast, is actually pretty small.

Henry realizes what readers already know: that his subjective impressions do not accurately reflect reality. It's a sad change for the regiment: the honor they had felt just moments before vanishes in an instant.

The insulting officer storms over and complains to the colonel of Henry's regiment that they stopped too short, just 100 feet from victory. Apparently, the charge was only a diversion for another attack. The insulting officer calls Henry's regiment "a lot of mud diggers."

An ironic twist: the victory is interpreted as a loss, and the regiment suffered for a diversion, not the real attack. Cogs in the war machine, the soldiers can't see the big picture.

The colonel apologizes. The lieutenant starts to protest that his men fought hard, but the colonel shuts him up. Wilson complains to Henry about the injustice of it all. Each agrees that they fought as hard as they could. They blame the general in charge.

The soldiers' extreme efforts and bravery is unimportant to the commanding officers. To those officers, the soldiers are just chess pieces, to be moved, and possibly killed, as part of a larger strategy.

Several soldiers rush over to Henry and Wilson, reporting that they overheard the colonel and lieutenant praising the bravery Henry and Wilson showed in leading the charge. They should be major-generals, said the colonel. Henry and Wilson shrug off the compliments, but they are secretly thrilled.

The regiment's officers recognize that Henry and Wilson have leadership qualities, especially their willingness to put themselves at risk to inspire the other soldiers.

CHAPTER 22

As his regiment awaits its next assault, Henry feels calm and self-confident. He becomes absorbed in watching the fighting down the line and in distant fields. Waves of blue and gray surge against each other, trying to win positions behind fences or trees.

Detached from his battle mindset, Henry sees the fighting like an officer: he's not watching soldiers; instead, he sees colored waves and strategic surges.

A "churchlike" silence descends just before the gunfire becomes a colossal roar. Henry's ears are overwhelmed. His regiment, depleted but ready, charges again into the field. Henry stands in the middle of the new fighting with the **flag** still over him.

The noise signals the climax of the novel. In the group roar, no individual voices can be heard, just as the soldiers, including Henry, have merged to become a single wave of men.

Henry's regiment notices a group of enemy soldiers running toward a fence nearby. They fire vigorously to stop them, but the enemy reaches the fence and, protected behind it, starts to do serious damage. A sergeant is shot through the cheeks, unable to scream. Soldiers drop dead around the field.

Having just watched the battle unfold, Henry and his fellow soldiers know that losing the fence is bad news. Like the corpses in the novel, the sergeant cannot communicate the meaning of his wound.

Still angry with the insulting officer, Henry resolves not to budge, hoping to prove that his regiment is not a bunch of "mule drivers" and "mud diggers." Henry thinks his final revenge will be his own **dead body** lying on the battlefield. Wilson and the lieutenant are nearby, but the regiment is growing weaker.

Sensing defeat, Henry tries to save his pride by dreaming that his corpse will be his revenge. But he should know that the insulting officer will not care—and that corpses are not symbols of glory.

CHAPTER 23

The colonel orders Henry's regiment to charge: they must retake that fence. To Henry's surprise, the soldiers are not weary, but resolved and ready to go, fastening bayonets to their gun barrels.

Henry has been too self-absorbed to credit the other soldiers. Like the insulting officer in Chapter 21, he also considered them merely "mud diggers."

The soldiers spring forward with new energy, feeling reckless and unselfish. Henry runs in front of the men of his regiment, carrying the **flag** and shrieking encouragements.

Soldiers must give themselves to the reckless rush of battle. Henry has become a leader.

Seeing the mad charge of Henry's regiment, many of the gray soldiers run away. However, a handful of determined enemy soldiers remain behind the fence with their **flag** waving above them.

To Henry, this final conflict is largely between the opposing flags. Which symbol will endure?

Henry's regiment stops and fires a devastating volley at close range. Henry sees that the enemy's flag bearer is mortally wounded. Henry wants that **flag** for himself as a prize. But Wilson leaps over the fence and rips away the enemy's flag from the dying man's grasp. He screams in triumph.

As in chapter 19, a flag is pulled from the hands of a corpse. When the enemy flag bearer dies, his regiment effectively ceases to exist, so the battle ends when Wilson gets the flag.

Henry's regiment celebrates. They've captured four men: one ignores the blue soldiers; one yells horrible curses at them; another sits in silent shame; and one curious youth eagerly talks of battles and outcomes, yearning for news. Settling down behind the fence with their **flags**, Henry and Wilson congratulate each other.

The prisoners seem just like Union soldiers. The curious youth is a lot like Henry. The story suggests that all soldiers are humans and are driven primarily by emotions, not military or political affiliations.

CHAPTER 24

All the battles on the fields start to wind down. Orders soon come for the regiment to march back to its camp on the river.

Notice how the regiment walks away from all the ground it just fought to win.

During the walk, Henry's mindset changes from hardened battle-mode to more everyday thoughts. He starts to study all of his past actions. He remembers running away from battle. Now he knows he was wrong but forgives himself for being a novice.

Henry's thoughts fit his past mistakes into a narrative about his character. He recasts his story now as the tale of how he became a courageous man...

Henry then remembers the **tattered man** and cringes. As the regiment chats about their victory, Henry is sad and silent, worried that abandoning the tattered man will always haunt him. But Henry has an insight: yes, his guilt will remain, but his guilt will also make him a better man. Henry is glad he can look back with disgust at his boasts and naïve attitudes about war.

...but it's not that easy. Henry still has guilt that haunts him. The tattered man doesn't fit into the story Henry wants to tell about himself. So he revises that story again, and it gets more complex, incorporating contradictions and faults.

Henry thinks he sees things with new eyes. He realizes that, in the big picture, he is tiny but not insignificant. With this balance of humility and self-esteem, Henry feels a "quiet manhood."

Henry finally realizes what Wilson already did. Even though his role is small, Henry commits to playing it as best he can.

It starts to rain and the soldiers grumble as they trudge through the mud. But Henry smiles, believing again that he has a place in the world. Relieved to be out of battle, Henry imagines tranquil scenes and "an existence of soft and eternal peace." Then a ray of sunlight breaks through the low clouds.

Having a much better sense of himself, Henry can relax. He has also matured in wanting peace, rather than war. The ray of sunlight suggests hope, but is also a reminder of nature's indifference to the war.

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