BOOK SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Book Summaries help you understand books studied in schools and give you insights that make for great book reports. Gain a new perspective by reading about the author, and learn how settings, characters, and themes help make these books acclaimed works of literature.

The Red Badge of Courage

Published 1895

I. ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Stephen Crane was born on November 1, 1871, in Newark, New Jersey, the youngest child of the Reverend Dr. Jonathan Townley Crane and Mary Helen Peck Crane. The Cranes dated their roots in New Jersey back to 1665, when an ancestor also named Stephen Crane had settled in the area. The Reverend Crane died on February 16, 1880, after a brief illness. After her husband's death, Mrs. Crane moved her family to the nearby town of Roseville. In 1882 the Cranes moved to Asbury Park, a seaside town on the Jersey shore where Crane attended school for the next six years.

In 1888 Crane enrolled at Hudson River Institute (also called Claverack College), a semi-military academy. Crane entered Hudson with a less than stellar academic background, but although he failed to post an impressive academic record here, too, he did enjoy the cadet life at the academy. He stayed at Hudson for two years, working summers at his brother's news service in Asbury Park, and it was during these years that he began his lifelong rebellion against religious dogmatism. In 1890 Crane entered Lafayette College, which, like Hudson, was a Methodist school. He rarely attended classes, failed his courses, and dropped out at the end of the semester. His next school was Syracuse University, where again he lasted for only one semester. While there, in 1891, Crane wrote the first draft of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets.* After returning to New Jersey, he met Hamlin Garland, an established writer of realistic fiction who exerted a strong influence on Crane's writing.

In the fall of 1891 Crane moved to New York City, where he lived with art students in a boarding house and explored the slums of the city, particularly the Bowery. Following the advice of his mentor, Garland—who maintained that in order to depict slum life realistically, a writer must experience the pain endured by slum dwellers—Crane visited soup kitchens and other places where poor people congregated. Crane knew genuine deprivation during this period, and his health, never robust, was weakened. For the rest of his life he had a racking cough and a low resistance to disease. The Bowery became the fictional locale for *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets,* which was privately printed in 1893. The novel won the praise of William Dean Howells, an important writer whom Crane met through Garland.

In 1894 an abridged version of *The Red Badge of Courage,* which Crane had started writing the previous year, was published by the Bacheller Syndicate in its newspapers. Crane traveled in the West and Mexico from January to May 1895, and returned to see a book version of *The Red Badge of Courage* published by D. Appleton and Company in October. Before going West, Crane had become infatuated with a beautiful young society girl, Nellie Crouse. Some of his most revealing letters were written to her. Largely uninterested in social status, which was very important to Crouse, Crane knew his infatuation was hopeless. Their relationship was limited to the seven letters he sent her.

George's Mother, another novel set in the New York slums, and a revised version of *Maggie* were both published in June 1896. That December, *The Little Regiment and Other Episodes of the American Civil War* was published. These stories capitalized on the success of *The Red Badge of Courage,* and Crane was now

obsessed with the wish to see a war firsthand. An attempt to reach revolution-torn Cuba failed when his ship sank off the coast of Florida on January 2, 1897. 'The Open Boat,' published in June, is a fictionalized account of Crane's experiences as he and three others rowed through high seas to shore.

Having failed to reach Cuba, Crane decided to go to Greece to cover the Greco-Turkish War. He was accompanied by Cora Taylor, whom he had met while waiting for passage to Cuba in Jacksonville, Florida, where she ran a bordello. Both Crane and Taylor worked as war correspondents in Greece. Twice divorced and five years older than Crane, Taylor was still legally married to an Englishman who refused to grant her a divorce. Nonetheless, Crane and Taylor were married on August 25, 1898. After covering the war in Greece, the couple settled in England, where Crane made friends with many leading writers of the time, including Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Ford Madox Ford, and Henry James. Always short of funds, the Cranes nonetheless entertained lavishly at their elegant house in Ravensbrook. Crane wrote constantly, but could not become solvent. When the United States and Spain went to war in Cuba in 1898, he sailed for New York, having borrowed money from Conrad and other friends. The U.S. Navy would not accept Crane as a seaman, but he was hired by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* as a war correspondent. In Cuba, fellow correspondents were impressed by his courage.

In 1897 Crane had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, but the disease seemed to be in remission. While in Cuba, however, he fell ill with malaria, an event that possibly reactivated his tuberculosis. His health deteriorating, Crane still managed to get out his dispatches, some of which rank among his best work as a reporter. Fired by Pulitzer as the result of a misunderstanding, he returned to New York and was hired by William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* as a war correspondent. In all, Crane covered the war from April to November 1898. Meanwhile, several of his better stories had been published, including 'The Monster,' 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,' and 'The Blue Hotel.'

Crane returned home to England in 1898, and he and Taylor moved to Brede Manor, Sussex. As their extravagance continued, Crane, gravely ill, turned his hand to any kind of writing to pay his debts. He published a novel, *Active Service,* in 1899, its quality far below his usual standard. A volume of poems, *War Is Kind,* also appeared in 1899.

During a large Christmas week party at Brede, on December 29, 1899, Crane collapsed with a severe pulmonary hemorrhage. He died on June 5, 1900, at a sanatorium in Badenweiler, Germany. *The Whilomville Stories* and *Wounds in the Rain* were published posthumously the same year.

II. OVERVIEW:

The Red Badge of Courage attempts to recreate the combat experiences of a young, frightened soldier in the American Civil War. Henry Fleming, the protagonist, has never seen a real battle and worries about how he will behave under pressure. Crane's novel has been praised ever since it first appeared in print as highly realistic in its presentation of the psychology of a young man facing injury and possible death. One of the best American short novels, Crane's work vividly presents some of the horrors, both physical and psychological, that soldiers encounter in battle.

III. SETTING:

The battle of Chancellorsville in northern Virginia, waged from May 1 to May 3, 1863, seems to have been Crane's model for the fictional battle in *The Red Badge of Courage.* The action of the novel follows that of the original conflict—a Confederate victory—quite closely. Chancellorsville is not mentioned in the novel,

nor is General Joseph 'Fighting Joe' Hooker, the leader of the Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville. At one point in the novel, though, Crane does name the Rappahannock River, which separates the two armies. The real setting of *The Red Badge of Courage,* however, is the consciousness of Henry Fleming. The battle, his fellow Union soldiers, and the landscape are all seen through his eyes. His attitudes, which change frequently, determine what he and the reader see.

IV. THEMES AND CHARACTERS:

War, for Crane, was a favorite metaphor for human life, equally applicable to coal miners ('In the Depths of Coal Mine,' 1894) or to the people living in the slums of New York (*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*). Courage and heroism come under Crane's scrutiny in his classic book about wartime, *The Red Badge of Courage.* Henry has read classical tales of heroism, and dreams of performing brave deeds on the battlefield, but he is deeply worried about what will happen when the regiment finally goes into action. He and his regiment have marched into northern Virginia, but since then have done nothing but wait. His concern is not 'How will we men of the 304th New York Regiment do when we go into battle' but 'How will I do?' In the course of his self-questioning, he has been 'forced to admit that as far as war was concerned he knew nothing of himself.' Of course, although Henry does not consider it, all the men around him are also worried about the coming battle and how they will behave under fire.

Henry, more often referred to as 'the youth,' has a small circle of friends that includes Jim Conklin, 'the tall soldier,' whom he has known all his life, and Wilson, 'the loud soldier,' who constantly struts and brags. Most characters in the novel remain unnamed except for epithets such as these. Henry's identification with his companions is not strong enough to give him a sense of community with them. The regiment is often pictured as a powerful organism breathing, snorting, and shooting flames like a dragon.

The regiment goes into action after its long period of inactivity, and although Henry is relieved in a sense, his anxieties soon increase. When the enemy forces make their first charge, Henry's training helps him perform in the accepted manner; he and the regiment stand their ground, and the enemy is repelled. But all too soon a second charge is under way. The tired men of the 304th Regiment resume firing, but soon many of them throw down their rifles and run. Panic-stricken, Henry also heads for the rear, running 'like a blindman' and crashing into trees.

As his panic subsides, Henry rationalizes his desertion: he has behaved in a highly reasonable fashion; he has saved the U.S. government a piece of valuable equipment, himself; and he has followed the dictate of nature, which bids every creature to protect itself. Guilt-ridden despite his rationalizations, Henry falls in with some wounded men who have been forced to seek shelter in the rear. He finds the company of the wounded preferable to that of his own regiment, which he hopes has been soundly defeated, for its defeat would vindicate him completely.

But Henry's conscience undergoes further assault when he notices a man referred to as a 'spectral soldier,' walking as if he were a dead man looking for a grave. Henry suddenly realizes that this mortally wounded soldier is Jim Conklin, his best friend. Henry, hysterical with grief, promises to take care of his friend, but Jim recognizes Henry only for a moment before he shakes off Henry's hand. In a fit of panic, Jim runs from the road into a field, where he convulses and dies as Henry looks on helplessly.

Henry later suffers a head wound when a frightened deserter unexpectedly hits him with the butt of his rifle. An unnamed friendly soldier leads Henry back to his regiment, where Wilson, previously known as the 'loud soldier,' is on sentinel duty. Henry finds that Wilson has matured from a swaggering braggart to a

quietly confident soldier. Wilson and the corporal who examine Henry assume that he has been shot. The wound is Henry's means of entry back into the military society, and he realizes that this is the only society available to him.

After Henry's cover story has been accepted, his remorse practically disappears. He still worries that his cowardice will be exposed, but his ego has been restored. No longer an isolated wanderer in the company of the wounded and dying, Henry learns to take pride in his regiment and in his own ability to contribute to the war effort. Going into battle he fights like a madman, firing so furiously that he wins the admiration of his fellow soldiers. Henry becomes less self-centered as he begins to identify with Wilson and the other soldiers, and he finds the strength of purpose to atone for his earlier cowardice.

Throughout Henry's transformation, Crane emphasizes that coming of age involves an awareness of and concern for others. Henry learns that he is a person of contradictory impulses and actions, at times brave, at times cowardly, and this knowledge allows him to identify with the society around him. He thinks of others as well as himself; his is no longer an egocentric universe.

But Crane is careful not to present war as a simple rite of passage; he emphasizes that war brings out the most horrible aspects of life. War indeed tests souls, but in the process it ruins more men than it converts to higher ideals. Although the survivors of war were sometimes stronger, more compassionate men, Crane could never reconcile this phenomenon with the horror and the suffering of innocent creatures everywhere. Henry is able to change, but Crane himself never came to terms with a God who could tolerate wars.

V. LITERARY QUALITIES:

In preparation for writing *The Red Badge of Courage,* Crane studied the Civil War photographs of Matthew Brady and illustrations by painter Winslow Homer and drew on his own highly empathic imagination. The writers Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, Crane's good friends in England, claimed that Crane subscribed to the impressionistic literary movement and strictly observed the canon of impressionism: 'render; never report.' By means of his sharply etched and poetic images, Crane hoped to help his readers feel as if they were actually on a battlefield. For example, Crane describes the wounded enemy standard-bearer behaving as if he had 'invisible ghouls fastened greedily upon his limbs' as he tries to escape with his flag; Crane also renders a vivid image of the dirt and smoke assaulting the regiment: 'Wallowing in the fight, they were in an astonishingly short time besmudged....Moving to and fro with strained exertion, jabbering the while they were, with their swaying bodies, black faces, and glowing eyes, like strange and ugly fiends jigging heavily in the smoke.'

Ending *The Red Badge of Courage* was difficult for Crane. The professional writers among his friends marveled at how rapidly he produced his work, whether prose or poetry, and how rarely he revised what he had written. But three attempts to bring his second novel to a close were required, and even then he probably was not satisfied. Although he wrote the first draft of *The Red Badge of Courage* in nine days, he told Willa Cather that 'he had been unconsciously working the detail of the story through most of his boyhood.'

'It was essential that I should make my battle a type and name no names,' Crane said when explaining the overall plan of his book. As several critics have noted, this choice makes *The Red Badge of Courage* resemble an allegory. What makes it different from typical allegories such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) or William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (c. 1395) is Crane's attitude toward conventional

Christianity. Raised in a family of ministers and religious workers, he himself became an agnostic. Some of the imagery of the novel is drawn from religion, such as 'the chapel,' where Henry hopes to escape from the battle. But throughout the novel, everybody curses, nobody prays, and Crane uses imagery from his religious training to show that, for him, war is demonic; demons and devils abound in his poetic metaphors. Critic R. W. Stallman sees the death of Jim Conklin as a crucifixion and notes that the soldier's initials are the same as those of Jesus Christ. Critic Bettina L. Knapp sees the battle as an initiation similar to the one religious devotees experience before they receive illumination, the knowledge that God is with them and that they are one with him. The novel may well invite such interpretations because of its stark simplicity.

The best-drawn characters in Crane's books are usually those from low socioeconomic backgrounds—inner-city residents, soldiers, coal miners, seamen, and farmers. Crane did not romanticize his characters because he recognized that poverty-stricken people are quite capable of making their have-not status a basis for conceit. Crane found this attitude quite prevalent in the Bowery, and he made it as much the target of his ironic barbs as he did the conceit of the rich.

VI. SOCIAL SENSITIVITY:

Crane's novels reflect his basic beliefs about humanity. The chronic misery of the poor aroused his sympathy, as did the plight of common soldiers in wars. Having rejected traditional theological explanations as a boy, Crane never found a philosophy that adequately explained the hardships inherent in the human condition.

Because Crane's theme in *The Red Badge of Courage* is the fear and isolation common to all war, he deliberately avoids all specific references to the Civil War itself. The battle is presumed to be Chancellorsville, but neither its name nor the names of commanding generals are mentioned. Few characters have names or identities, and even Henry is usually referred to simply as 'the youth.' Crane is not concerned with the causes of the war, the implications of slavery, the tactics of the armies, or even the outcome of his battle. For the purposes of the story, it makes no difference that this is the American Civil War, or that in the real battle of Chancellorsville thirty thousand men were killed.

The novel vividly depicts the ravaging emotions that lead Henry to abandon his idealism, reevaluate his conception of bravery, recognize nature as a malevolent force, and repudiate the existence of God. The violence that he experiences holds no redemptive qualities. What he has learned in war—the indifference of death, the folly of valor and patriotism, and the illusion of God—becomes distorted and tangled in his memory by the novel's end, so that even the reality is lost and everything becomes a lie. There is no glory in war, not even for the heroes. There is only death for the victims and confusion for the survivors.

VII. RELATED TOPICS AND ADAPTATIONS:

Crane's novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* depicts the embattled lives of people surviving in the New York inner city and the brutalizing effects of poverty, ignorance, and drunkenness on their lives. The book has been labeled a work of naturalistic fiction; like Émile Zola, a nineteenth-century French naturalistic writer, Crane suggests that people are victims of their environments.

Following up on the success of *The Red Badge of Courage,* Crane wrote *The Little Regiment and Other Episodes of the American Civil War.* Possibly the most interesting story in this collection is 'The Veteran,' which shows Henry Fleming as an old man. When a barn catches fire, old Henry rescues a drunken hired

man who set the fire; when Henry returns to the burning barn to save some colts, he becomes trapped and dies.

In 'The Monster' (1898), a story similar to 'The Veteran,' Crane depicts a community's reaction to a disfigured man in its midst. In the story, a black man badly burns himself while saving a young white boy from a burning house; although the townspeople initially proclaim him a hero, they eventually brand him a monster. The renowned black American writer, Ralph Ellison, called 'The Monster' the first story in American literature to feature a black man as a hero.

The Red Badge of Courage was made into a movie in 1951 by John Huston, who both directed the film and wrote the screenplay. It starred Audie Murphy, the most decorated American hero in World War II, as Henry Fleming, and also featured Bill Mauldin, Royal Dano, and John Dierkes. In 1974 Lee Philips directed an adequate television movie version of the novel starring Richard Thomas as Henry.