

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**The Red Badge of Courage**

by Stephen Crane

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# The Red Badge of Courage

## Background Information

*The Red Badge of Courage* is set in the American Civil War (1861-1865), but the names of the actual conflict, its battles, locations, or the enemies involved are rarely mentioned. Henry's regiment is referred to as the 304th New York regiment once, and mention is made of a regiment from Maine, but there is no specific identification of the enemy forces. In fact, even the characters are rarely referred to by name.

The novel, which was published in 1895, came out at a time when Social Darwinism was popular. Many people strenuously put forth the notion that, like the animal kingdom, only the fittest of humans and organizations should survive. Others strongly opposed the notion as it applied to human beings and their culture.

Out of this controversy developed the naturalistic school of writers. Their main belief was that people are caught up in powerful forces — heredity, instinct, environment (physical and social)— that they cannot control. Crane is cited as a leading example of naturalism. Therefore, in this novel, we might expect to find elements that characterize naturalism.

Because naturalistic writers presented life as it is with all its defects and problems, the authors rejected the romantic tendency to idealize life or people. In the sense that they presented both goodness and ugliness as they saw it, they were realistic writers. Their characters often had to battle physical, economic, or societal forces that were trying to crush them.

A historical point worth remembering, however, is that when this novel was published, readers had been used to romantic scenes of war. Warriors died, but they died bravely, frequently in the arms of a friend, and they died nobly for a cause. This is not the way death is depicted in this novel. We do not know what cause, if any, these warriors are fighting and dying for, and their deaths are anything but serene or tidy. For today's reader, used to extremely violent death scenes, the grim realism of Crane's description might be lost; it was not lost on the readers of his time, however.

It is of interest to note that this novel was hailed as an anti-war novel during the late 1960s and early 1970s because of the grim descriptions of death. But this is a point you should question and decide for yourself. Is this truly an antiwar novel; does it glorify war; what exactly is Crane's point?

*Note to the Teacher: All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone edition of The Red Badge of Courage, copyright 2004.*

# The Red Badge of Courage

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. correctly identify the literal incidents and their proper sequence in the plot.
2. correctly interpret the literal meaning of the novel's metaphors, and state in your own words what image the author is striving to create.
3. comment on the following repeated use of some specific images in the novel and point out how some of these images involve personification.
  - animals
  - machines
  - the sun
4. comment on the devices used by the author to present this not only as a specific young man's experience in war, but also as a universal experience applicable to any young person in any war.
5. identify the following as motifs in this novel:
  - What it is courage; who has it, and how does a person get it?
  - Coming of Age or Rite of Passage. The young innocent confronts an ordeal and comes out of it a wiser or a mature person.
  - The individual is alone, but he functions at his best when he works cooperatively with others.
  - Of all human endeavors, war allows man to find out who he is and as Henry says, "be measured."
6. explain how this is an example of a realistic novel.
7. comment on the use of nature in this novel as an "objective correlative."
8. discuss the scenes that Crane depicts in a realistic fashion.
9. recognize how dialect and jargon play an important part by adding to the verisimilitude of the book.

# The Red Badge of Courage

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Does Henry exercise free will and choice, or is he a captive of his own instincts?
2. In what sense is this novel a good example of a “rite of passage” or “coming of age” novel?
3. There are extensive descriptions of nature in this novel, and it might be said that nature has two functions in this novel:
  - To show how nature represents a force or universe that is completely indifferent to man’s travails and suffering.
  - To show how nature mirrors Henry’s situation in terms of body, mind, and emotions.
4. Demonstrate how this novel makes the point that skirmishes, battles, and wars are not won by individual Greek-like heroes but by average men fighting together as a unit.
5. How does Crane answer the questions the story raises:
  - What is courage?
  - Where does bravery come from?
  - How does one find courage?
6. To what extent is this an example of a naturalistic novel?
7. Trace the use of animal imagery in this novel and discuss what the images represent.
8. To Crane, like Hemingway, war allows man “to take the measure of himself.” In light of this novel, what do you suppose the phrase “to take the measure of himself” means? Do you think that this idea of war or battle being the measure of a man is true? Do you think most people today would accept or reject this idea?
9. Comment on these three features of Crane’s style which mark him as a realistic writer rather than a romantic writer:
  - terse dialogue
  - short sentences
  - simple, grim descriptions and metaphors

## Chapter II

### Vocabulary

**acute** – sharp; high  
**adherents** – followers; believers  
**blithe** – merry  
**commiseration** – empathy  
**dauntless** – brave  
**derided** – scorned  
**endeavors** – attempts  
**fathom** – measure; understand  
**flouted** – scoffed  
**obscurity** – unknownness; dimness  
**ominous** – sinister  
**serene** – calm  
**subdued** – low-key; restrained  
**tranquilly** – calmly  
**unscrupulous** – unprincipled  
**vigorous** – energetic  
**vociferous** – loud, noisy, and insistent  
**wags** – jokers  
**wending** – proceeding; traveling

1. Once again, the rumor of moving out to fight proves false. Why does Henry view this as an “irritating prolongation”?

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2. Why, since he spends so much time thinking about it, can he not calculate the answer?

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3. What is it that Henry would like to discover? Why does he not just ask someone outright?

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## Chapter VII

### Vocabulary

**aversion** – dislike  
**commendable** – praiseworthy  
**conciliate** – pacify  
**density** – thick-headedness  
**derision** – scorn  
**edifice** – structure  
**foliages** – leaves and brush  
**imbecile** – idiot; jerk  
**impudent** – cheeky  
**jovial** – jolly  
**sagacious** – wise  
**soughingly** – in a sighing manner  
**trepidation** – fear

1. Why does Henry feel wronged?

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2. Why is he angry with his former comrades?

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3. As Henry walks, his feelings of self-pity, guilt, and despondency deepen. How does he use the incident with the squirrel to justify what he did?

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4. As Henry walks in this very peaceable part of the forest, what does he stumble upon that upsets him?

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## Chapter XII

### Vocabulary

**adroitly** – deftly; skillfully  
**audacious** – bold; uninhibited  
**balking** – thwarting  
**burly** – husky  
**gamin** – imp  
**gesticulating** – gesturing  
**heedless** – careless  
**illumine** – light up  
**interminable** – never ending  
**invincible** – unconquerable  
**languid** – limp; sluggish  
**pallor** – paleness  
**remonstrance** – protest  
**secluded** – hidden

1. As the column of men going toward the front disappears, Henry sees a large body of men running through the woods. Crane writes, “He knew at once that the steel fibers had washed from their hearts.” What is the meaning of this image?

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2. Henry grabs a man and tries to ask a question. What does the man do, and why does he do it?

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### Chapter XIX

#### Vocabulary

**accoutrements** – equipment; accessories  
**belabored** – beat  
**deities** – gods  
**dullard** – idiot  
**imperious** – overbearing  
**infantile** – babyish; childish  
**stoic** – impassive; matter-of-fact  
**surmounted** – topped

1. Initially, what attitude does Henry and his comrades have as they lead the charge?

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2. What happens to make the men vulnerable again?

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3. What gets the regiment moving again?

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4. What figure of speech does Crane use to describe Henry's feelings for the flag?

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