



Cowardice, Manhood, and  
Dreams of Glory: The  
American Civil War in *The  
Red Badge of Courage*

A young man misses his cow, runs from battle, and emerges a hero.

# Causes of the American Civil War

- Two fundamental questions remained after the American Revolution (1776-1783):
  - Are we a group of sovereign states that can leave at any time or are we an indivisible nation?
  - Would we continue to allow slavery in this country?
- “Free” states and “slave” states disagreed about allowing slavery in territories that were not yet states
- Abraham Lincoln’s election in 1860 (first Republican) on the platform that these territories would not allow slavery

# Brief Overview of the War

- April 12, 1861-May 10, 1865
- Slave states seceded to form the Confederate States of America; Lincoln and American congress did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the Confederacy
- Hostilities ensued on April 12, 1861 when the Confederates opened fire on the federal garrison at Fort Sumter to force them to lower the American flag
- Fighting begins in 1861, but really gets nasty in 1862
- By 1864, the North is engaged in “total war”
- Robert E. Lee surrenders to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox on April 9, 1865
- Confederate president Jefferson Davis captured on May 10, 1865
- Total of 625,000 deaths in the war

# Some Major Battles of the Civil War

- Shiloh: April 6-7, 1862; Grant (U) vs. Johnston and Beauregard (C); Union Victory
- Second Manassas: August 28-30, 1862; Lee (C) vs. Pope (U); Confederate Victory
- Antietam: September 17, 1862; Lee (C) vs. McClellan (U); Union Victory (sort of); Lincoln announces Emancipation Proclamation after this battle
- Gettysburg: July 1-3, 1863; Meade (U) vs. Lee (C); Union Victory
- Vicksburg: May 18-July 4, 1863; Grant (U) vs. Pemberton (C); Union Victory; Often considered the turning point of the war
- Appomattox: April 9, 1865; Grant (U) vs. Lee (C); Union Victory; Effectively the end of the war

# Some Information about Stephen Crane

- Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1871
- Parents were a suffragette and a Methodist Episcopal minister
- Completed about two years of college
- Never serves in the military
- Began his career as a freelance writer in New York
- Published *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* in 1893
- Gained international renown for *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)
- Worked as war correspondent during the Spanish-American War and Greco-Turkish War
- Died in 1900 (aged 28) of tuberculosis

# Publication History of *The Red Badge of Courage*

- Crane began to write his second novel (*Courage*) in 1893
- He was largely inspired by articles about the war in *Century Magazine*
- Serialized in newspapers in 1894
- Published in full in 1895
- Expanded version from Crane's original manuscript published in 1982

# What Was Going On in 1892-1893

- 1892: *Plessy vs. Ferguson*
- 1893: Election of Grover Cleveland—again!
- 1893: Beginning of a major economic depression that will last until 1897
- 1893: Overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy
- 1890s: Rumblings that would eventually drive the United States into the Spanish-American War (1898)

# Plot of *The Red Badge of Courage*

- Very roughly based on the Battle of Chancellorsville...or that is the rumor
  - April 30-May 6, 1863
  - Hooker (U) vs. Lee (C)
  - Significant Confederate victory
- “The youth”/Henry Fleming: Our protagonist
- Henry’s cow: The symbol of peace and a life without glory
- Tall soldier/Spectral soldier: Jim Conklin, dies after the engagement Henry flees
- Henry’s friend: His loyal helper with flags



# Ambiguity in *The Red Badge of Courage*

- Narrator mentions no names in the whole text
  - Names provided only in dialogue
  - Even Henry's name is gathered only from other soldiers addressing him; he is called "the youth" throughout
- Despite graphic and realist depictions of the fighting, no actual battle signifiers used; few details that clue the reader in to the fact that it is the Civil War
- Lends an atmosphere of universality and reproducibility to the emotions, psychology and action

# The Psychology of the Soldier

- The drive to enter the army motivated by a desire for glory from great deeds of arms and the approbation of attractive girls and old men
- Shift from desire for “Greek-like struggles” to less passionate and bloodthirsty conception of war
- On the eve of battle, the soldier feels “dragged” into the war by “a merciless government” and fears the answer to “the Question,” i.e. will terror of death lead to the cowardice of desertion?
- Eventually enters into a “trance” resulting from the mechanical actions of operating the machinery of war
- Transforms from “a man” to an “animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war”
- Thirst for glory spurs deeds of valor
- After the battle, the soldier returns to himself and “despises” those bloody deeds
- Shifts from “blood and wrath” to a peaceful, grateful man purged, as it were, of his desires

# Similes, Metaphors, and Colorful Descriptions

- “The colonel, perchance to relieve his feelings, began to scold like a wet parrot.”
- “Following this came a red rage. He developed the acute exasperation of a pestered animal, a well-meaning cow worried by dogs.”
- These extravagant descriptors and comparisons provide a sense of verisimilitude, despite the fact that they are highly crafted and a departure from the bald language of realism

# Significance of the Flag

- “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. He kept near, as if it could be a saver of lives, and an imploring cry went from his mind.”
- The captured Confederate flag is a “red badge of courage”

# Definition of Manhood

- Manhood is the perception of others: “He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man.”
- Soldiers abandon their manhood when they are actually fighting; they become animals
- The aftermath of battle is an assurance of manhood
- Henry becomes a man in his journey from farm to successful soldier

# Women in *The Red Badge of Courage*

- The reluctant mother attempting to keep her son safe on the farm
- Attractive girls cheering him on after he enlists
- The personification of the flag
- The concept against which a man is defined

# The Enchanted, Violated Body

- “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.”
- “It was clear to him that his final and absolute revenge was to be achieved by his dead body lying, torn and glittering, upon the field.”
- The male body damaged or destroyed by war is the signifier of glory and cultural value

# War as *Bildungsroman*

“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...he saw that the world was a world for him.”