

Oak Meadow American Literature Syllabus

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Lesson 1

The Red Badge of Courage

By Stephen Crane

Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* gave birth to American realism. *Red Badge* was groundbreaking in its unflinching account of a Civil War battle, its complex psychological landscape, and its stylized prose. Certainly, it was among the first American novels to offer a realistic, rather than romantic, account of war.

Crane's life fueled his writing. Amazingly, he had never seen battle when he wrote *Red Badge*, but shortly after completing the novel he became a war correspondent. In addition to covering the Spanish American War, he was shipwrecked en route to Cuba—an ordeal he relates in his classic short story, "The Open Boat." Despite the success of his novels, by 1898 Crane was near bankruptcy. He died of tuberculosis in 1900.

Outline of Reading Assignments

Lesson 1: Chapters 1–5

Lesson 2: Chapters 6–15

Lesson 3: Chapters 16–24

Assignments

1. Read Chapters 1–5.
2. Vocabulary: Write down the definition of each word, and use the words in sentences. Also, find three words on your own, define them, and use them in sentences.
3. Answer comprehension questions in full sentences.
4. Respond to critical thinking questions by writing at least one full paragraph for each question. Use direct quotes and supporting details from the assigned chapters to explain your answer.

Vocabulary

epithet

vociferous

pilfer

stolid

perambulate

harangue

confidant

commiserate

Comprehension

1. When the novel opens, the regiment is despondent and Henry, the “youth,” is dissatisfied. Why?
2. How does Henry’s mother feel about her son going to war? What advice does she give him after he decides to enlist?
3. When the youth goes to “bid adieu to many schoolmates,” there are a variety of responses to his “martial spirit.” Explain.
4. What do the tall soldier and the loud private wrangle about? Who is mistaken in his argument?
5. Give at least one instance when Henry refers to his regiment as a “blue demonstration.” What does he mean by this?
6. Briefly describe what happens when one of the soldiers tries to “pilfer a horse from a dooryard.” How do the troops respond?
7. Describe the loud soldier. What is his name? What is his attitude towards the impending battles? What does he give Henry before the fighting begins?
8. What strategy do some of the soldiers use to protect themselves in battle? Are they all in agreement about this strategy? Explain.
9. In the “moments of waiting” before seeing his first action, the “youth thought of the village street at home.” What does he recall about it?
10. What happens to the soldier who retreats in the first battle?

Critical Thinking

1. Crane never loses sight of the fact that the Civil War was fought in rugged terrain, in battlefields of wilderness. In fact, amidst the most gruesome details of battle he contrasts astonishing natural imagery.

In this way, nature is fused into the psychology of the novel. Citing the book's opening paragraph and the final paragraph of chapter 5, discuss the significance of the landscape thus far. Locate other passages and episodes that point to the significance of nature. We will return to this question in the next lesson.

2. Before his first battle, Henry spends time observing many skirmishes, until he finally "encountered the body of a dead soldier."

First, discuss Crane's description of the corpse. Is there anything romantic about it? Is it excessively gruesome? Are there particularly vivid images?

Second, discuss Henry's reaction to the dead man. Does he respond differently than his comrades? What does his response reveal about his personality?

3. In his "months of monotonous life in a camp," Henry began his own internal conflict, as a "panic-fear grew in his mind." With the inevitability of battle, Henry is forced to admit "that as far as war was concerned he knew nothing of himself."
 - a. Before he enlists, how had Henry's "youthful eyes... looked upon the war?" Now that he is engaged in the Civil War, what does Henry fear *most* about fighting? What does this obsessive fear reveal about his personality? How does he attempt to measure himself with his comrades? Why does he feel himself a "mental outcast?"
 - b. Henry feels that the resolution of his self-doubts will come only in battle. In fact, he "saw salvation in such a change." Does this redemptive change occur during his first battle? Is there a dissolution of his personality and his internal debate?
4. **Creative Response:** Before the regiment's first skirmish, the loud soldier hands Henry a "little packet done up in a yellow envelope."

Begin by listing a few of the objects the packet might have contained.

Next, imagine the packet contained a letter from the soldier to his family. Imitating the soldier's dialect, compose the letter.

5. *Red Badge* is set during the Civil War battle of Chancellorsville. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to familiarize ourselves with the historical background of the novel.

First, explain the cause of the Civil War. What was the central conflict? When the war began, how long was the fighting expected to last?

Next, give a basic chronology of the Civil War, highlighting the major battles. Include an account of the Battle of Chancellorsville.

Lesson 2

The Red Badge of Courage

Assignments

1. Read Chapters 6–15.
2. Vocabulary: Remember to use the words in sentences, and to find three words on your own.
3. Answer questions in full sentences. These questions require both comprehension and critical thinking skills. Write **at least** one full paragraph for each question, using direct quotes and supporting details from the assigned chapters.

Vocabulary

blanch	imprecation	sinuous	remonstrance
marshal (verb)	laggard	fracas	ague

Comprehension/Critical Thinking

1. Just as Henry begins to feel he had passed the “test” of his first battle, his “ecstasy of self-satisfaction” is brought to a halt. Suddenly, “cries of amazement [break] out along the new ranks of the regiment,” and the Confederate soldiers attack.
 - a. Describe what takes place in the ensuing battle. Why does Henry retreat? Is there anything in the description of the battle itself to suggest that Henry was cowardly?
 - b. Discuss the range of emotions that Henry experiences as he wanders the battlefields. Initially, how does he regard his retreat? When does he begin to feel shame? Besides retreating, what is Henry shameful about? Is he able to reconcile his actions to himself?
2. Perhaps the strangest and most haunting episode of *Red Badge* involves Jim Conklin (the “tall soldier”) and the tattered soldier.

- a. Describe Jim's death. What does he ask of Henry? Where does he run to and why? What are some of the "ritelike... movements of the doomed soldier?" How does Henry react to his friend's agony?
- b. Citing some specifics, explain how Crane's tone contributes to the eeriness of this soldier's slow and uncompromising death.
- c. "All I want," says the tattered man after witnessing Jim's death, "is some pea soup an' a good bed." This simple desire grows increasingly absurd as we learn that he, too, is mortally wounded.

What strange behaviors does the tattered man exhibit? Why does Henry run, leaving "the tattered man wandering about helplessly in the field?" Is he justified in abandoning the wounded soldier, or is it a selfish act?

3. To a great degree, Henry's shame and self-loathing result from his ideal of honor. As he stares at the maimed soldiers, it is this ideal that makes him wish for "a wound, a [little] red badge of courage."

Citing specific examples, discuss Henry's concept of honor. Where does it come from? Does it seem like the other men share his values? Thus far, has he been able to live up to his standards?

4. Ironically, Henry is wounded, but not during battle.
 - a. Begin by explaining how Henry gets hurt, then describe the wound itself. Cite some of Crane's more gory details.
 - b. Next, describe Henry's state of mind during this episode. Why does he behave so wildly? What motivates his actions?

5.

After a time the sound of musketry grew faint and the cannon boomed in the distance. The sun, suddenly apparent, blazed among the trees. The insects were making rhythmical noises. They seemed to be grinding their teeth in unison. A woodpecker stuck his impudent head around the side of a tree. A bird flew on the light-hearted wind.

Off was the rumble of death. It seemed now that Nature has no ears.

- a. Beginning with the above excerpt, continue your exploration of the contrast between nature and war. What is Crane suggesting by celebrating nature as—in a sense—the heroine of the novel?
 - b. How does nature inspire Henry? When does he receive solace from the natural world?
Be specific!
 - c. On a separate sheet of paper, copy one of the passages about nature. Feel free to embellish the excerpt with decorations.
6. When Henry returns to his regiment, he is wounded and confused.
- a. What does tell his comrades about his head injury and his whereabouts? Were you surprised by Henry's account?
 - b. Henry is tended to by his friend, Wilson. Soon, the youth "took note of this remarkable change in his comrade since those days of camp life..." Describe this change. How does it surface in Wilson's actions? What brought it about?
 - c. In only a short time, Henry is able to restore his self-respect. In fact, he even feels a sense of superiority over Wilson, the one who cared so selflessly for him. What is the "small weapon" that gives Henry power over Wilson? Does he ever use this weapon?