Stephen Crane: The Red Badge of Courage
Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................. 1

I The Author ................................................................. 2

II The Historical Setting of *The Red Badge of Courage* .................................

II, 1 The Civil War ......................................................... 3

II, 2 The Battle of Chancellorsville ..................................... 5


IV The Presentation of War in *The Red Badge of Courage* ................. 8

Closing Words ............................................................. 9

Literature
Introduction

Stephen Crane’s novel *The Red Badge of Courage* is one of the best books covering the American Civil War. The experiences and feelings of the young, untried soldier Henry Fleming during his first two days of battle are illustrated with such an accuracy and intensity that it seems impossible that its writer did not have any battlefield experiences before he wrote the book. It was only Crane’s imagination that created this realistic mixture of failure and success, cowardice and heroism, shame and pride, fear and confidence, youth and manhood, death and rebirth.

Before diving into the cruel and shocking world of *The Red Badge of Courage*, it is necessary to enlighten the life of the author and the historical background of the novel. Stephen Crane’s short biography is followed by a portrayal of one of the most important and most influential wars in American history: the Civil War. In addition to the military actions during the war and the Union’s final victory, the reasons for its outbreak will be provided. Afterwards the overwhelming question of the novel (Does the protagonist Henry Fleming, impressed by his battlefield experiences, enter manhood at the end of the novel?) will be discussed and tried to be answered. The end is determined by an analysis of the representation of and the attitude towards war in the novel.
I The Author

Stephen Crane began life six years after the Civil War on 1st November 1871, as the youngest of fourteen children of a Methodist family in Newark, New Jersey. After the early death of his father Reverend Jonathan Townley Crane in 1880, the family moved to Asbury Park on the New Jersey coast. After attending the local boarding school, Stephen spent half a year at Lafayette College and Syracuse University before he decided to leave college in 1891 and earn his money as a writer. He was said to have “distinguished himself at poker, billiards, and baseball for more than he did at his studies”¹.

In New York City, he found some newspapers and magazines who paid a small salary for his sketches and short stories. After two years of hand-to-mouth existence he thought about writing a longer fictional story about life in the slums of New York. When his first novel Maggie: A Girl from the Streets was written, he failed in finding a publisher for the unusual story about a young girl’s fall to prostitution and finally suicide and had to issue it on his own expense under a pseudonym in early 1893.

Influenced by Leo Tolstoy’s Sebastopol and being served with the essential historical knowledge from the popular but reliable series Battles and Leaders of the Civil War published in the Century magazine, he took up writing a best-selling war novel. By March 1894, he was able to present the first draft of his influential story of a young, untried soldier’s development and experiences on his first two days in war to several publishers. After a few revisions and cuttings The Red Badge of Courage was finally published by D. Appleton and Company in October 1895, bringing the hoped-for success. The responses to the young author’s work in America as well as in England were in the majority positive and critics were impressed by “the striking originality and power of Crane’s portrayal of combat through the thoughts and feelings of a young recruit”². At the age of 24, Crane had achieved fame on both sides of the Atlantic.

He continued his journalistic career as a correspondent covering the Cuban revolution in 1896-1897, the Greco-Turkish War in 1897 and the Spanish-American War in 1898. During this time he won the respect of his colleagues who could no longer ignore his enormous reporting and writing qualities. But they also recognised that he showed a very risky behaviour at the front and towards his troubled health. On his way to the Spanish-American War he came in close contact with death when his ship sank. His experiences on a dinghy at

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the cold and stormy Atlantic formed the basis for his best-known and maybe finest work *The Open Boat*. It was during this action-packed and dangerous episode of his life that he met Cora Howarth in a Jacksonville brothel. To escape provincial speculation about their immorality and Crane’s drug addiction, the young, unmarried couple decided to move to England in 1897 where they stayed for the rest of Crane’s life. As a result of a widespread malaria plague and tuberculosis, Stephen Crane died at the age of 28 on 5th June 1900.

II The Historical Setting of *The Red Badge of Courage*

II. 1 The Civil War

Although Stephen Crane does not give any further information about time and place of the setting of his novel it is obvious that the protagonist Henry Fleming is engaged in the American Civil War. The description of the countryside in which the struggles are taking place, the blue and grey uniforms of the soldiers and the mentioning of the *rebels* leave no doubt that Crane had chosen one of the most important wars in American history, maybe on the American point of view the most important war, as background for his story of a young soldier’s confrontation with real life.

In 1861, this war divided the young American nation into North and South and was the bloodiest war on the American continent. After four years of combat, from the first struggle at Fort Sumter on 12th April 1861 to the surrender of the Union General Robert Edward Lee to Confederate General Ulysses Simpson Grant at Appomattox on 9th April 1865, more than 600,000\(^1\) men had found death, most of them not knowing the political reasons they were fighting for.

Despite that the abortion of slavery was not the main reason for the outbreak of the all-American war, it was the last issue after a whole chain of differences and conflicts between North and South that made war inevitable.

In the nineteenth century, the northern and the southern part of the American nation had developed into two different directions. The North had rapidly been urbanised and industrialised and its politicians argued for stiff tariffs on incoming goods in order to protect the local industry. The majority of the population supported a strong central government. The

\(^1\) Encarta. (2000). “Bürgerkrieg, Amerikanischer“.
The southern part of the United States of America was still a rural and agricultural region with a system of large plantations, depending almost on its cotton, tobacco and sugarcane exports. The powerful plantation owners who were in opposition to protective tariffs and who fought for a decentralisation of governmental power determined the policy. Accompanying these differences, quarrels about the location of the transcontinental railroads were fought.

When new land was opened up in the western territories, the question of slavery got political importance. If a territory was opened to slave holding, it was closer linked to the South and supported the southern politics on federal level and if a territory was opened in which slave holding was prohibited, it was a supporter of the North. A series of further events increased the aversion towards slavery in the North. One was the Fugitive Slave Law from 1850 which allowed slave holders to hunt slaves on their flight like animals, followed by the issuing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852, which confronted the public with the brutality and inhumanity of slave holding, and a declaration of the U. S. Supreme Court that denied any rights to former slaves in free territory and stated that the U. S. Constitution protected slavery. When the Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln won the presidential elections in 1860, the gap between North and South had already been unbridgeable. On 20th December 1860, South Carolina declared its independence from the United States of America and was followed by six further cotton states. They joined together and founded the Confederate States of America with Jefferson Davis as the president of the new nation. When Abraham Lincoln entered his presidency he confirmed that the Union kept its territories in the South. Jefferson’s answer led inevitably to war: he ordered to attack the federal military base in Charleston, Fort Sumter. On 12th April 1861, the American Civil War was called to life. Lincoln called his men to arms and additional three states declared their membership to the Confederacy.

The Union’s position during this war was disadvantaged because they always had to be on the offensive in order to regain the lost southern territories and the rebel capital Richmond and their soldiers had to sacrifice their lives for a abstract, political purpose while the southern defenders fought for their right of independence and slave holding.

After first victories in the Battles of Bull Run in July 1861 and August 1862, the Confederate army under the leadership of General Robert Edward Lee lost the Battles of Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July 1863, which enabled the Union to control the whole Mississippi delta. General Ulysses Simpson Grant’s defeat in the Battle of Chattanooga on 23rd-25th November 1863 and the conquer of the main railway junction led to the destruction of the whole
southern supplies and was an important step to General Lee’s capitulation in Appomattox on 9th April 1865 and the final Union victory on 26th May 1865.

II. 2 The Battle of Chancellorsville

Due to some geographical details mentioned in the text and the clear description of the troops’ movements and actions, it was possible to identify the battle, which Stephen Crane pictured in his novel. A number of similar characteristics of the fictional struggle in which Henry is engaged and the historical Battle of Chancellorsville in Virginia on 1st-4th May 1863 showed that the author had used a factual, historic basis for his portrait of the feelings and decisions of a youthful soldier on the battlefield. The “real” Battle of Chancellorsville was one of the central battles and the bloodiest skirmish of the Civil War with a loss of about 18,000 men. It became a major setback for the Union’s plans to reconquer Richmond and enabled the Confederate army to march into the North. The large amount of young, untried soldiers sent to battlefield and the confusion and incompetence even among the upper ranks is one of the similarities of the historical and the figurative battle. The fear of wounded, retreating soldiers of being killed by carelessly driven wagons is as well a characteristic of Chancellorsville as of Henry’s observations. Even the sacrifice of a small group of men in order to hint the Union army’s further actions has its historical counterpart.

III The Red Badge of Courage - A Story of Initiation?

There are certain aspects that lead to the conclusion that The Red Badge of Courage is a story of initiation. Henry, a young and inexperienced boy with innocent and romantic ideas of honour and war, is the first time separated from the maternal gentleness of his home. On his journey to manhood, he is confronted with unexpected dangers and tests which offer him the opportunity to bring him to a clearer and mature view not only of the world but also of himself. He is wracked with doubts about his own ability to act brave and heroic under fire and in fact does really flee during his first real encounter with the enemy and so fails his first

test of maturity. Afterwards he acquires a symbol of group experience (his wound) and is accompanied for a short part of his journey by mysterious guide or mentor (the cheerful soldier) who helps him to find his right way after some time of aimless wandering around. The shocking experiences of the insignificance of human beings and the cruel reality of war and death change his point of view. He revolts against old authorities and his naïve, romantic visions of live and with his heroic behaviour in the last battle, he gains a “symbolic token of passage into manhood”\(^7\) when he captures the enemies’ flag. At the end of a conventional nineteenth century initiation story it is without any doubt recognisable that the protagonist has really passed his trials and entered into maturity.

*The Red Badge of Courage* is a different one. Crane does not give the reader any guarantee or assurance that Henry has really come through these experiences with a clear sight and has entered manhood. The whole story is told through Henry’s perspective and the recipient is left in a permanent state of ambiguity. Whenever “the youth” believes that he has achieved a significant height in his thinking and understanding, an ironic situation or verbal comment shows that the triumph was only subjective and that Henry’s judgements about his actions and himself are not reliable. Just when Henry feels self-confident and thinks that he has proved himself by holding the line in his first encounter with the enemy, he commits desertion and runs away “like a blind man”\(^8\). And at the closing of the novel, Henry is flooded with the impression “of soft and eternal peace”\(^9\) when next to him a procession of wounded and exhausted men is on its way to the next death bringing battlefield.

Recognising this fact, it seems that Henry’s final conclusion of being a man is also subjective and part of Henry’s self-centred and self-assuring character. Indeed, there are no signs that Henry has matured and changed his naïve and childish point of view through the novel. When Henry is troubled by his two desertions, he is less troubled by the intrinsic nature of these acts than that they might be exposed. He does not feel guilty for his desertion of the “tattered soldier” who had unselfishly given assistance to him when his friend Jim Conklin died and had been more concerned about the possibility that Henry might have a wound than about his own ones. Henry’s only anxiety is that his failures, his secrets will come out.

Throughout the entire novel, Henry is characterised as a reflective young boy who is very concerned about his self-image and his appearance to others. Having come closest to some kind of self-estimation, he is immediately engaged to rationalise and verify his deeds. This can be seen in his first desertion: in his flight from fighting. Just on the run, he repeats to

himself that his side is going to lose the battle and that his decision to save his life is justified. Later on, after having seen a fleeing squirrel, he assures himself that his retreat from danger was as natural as the animal’s flight and therefore not dishonourable. As important as his self-worth is his appearance to his comrades. After Henry’s reunion with his regiment, he is afraid that they might have seen his cowardice under fire or might discover his secret failure. He makes plans for to hint his weakness and lies twice about the origin of his wound. He insists on being injured by a shot and therefor he acquires respect by his companions. Based on the false “red badge of courage” and the acceptance by his regiment, he feels superior to his friend Wilson and believes that he is “now a man with experience”\textsuperscript{10}. The same conditions cause “the youth’s” happiness and self-confidence after his capture of the rebels’ flag. After having assured himself that his desertions will never come out in the open and that his high reputation will never be endangered, he feels that “he [is] a man”\textsuperscript{11}.

Stephen Crane underlines the doubts in Henry’s maturity by using the functional pattern of repetition and circular movements. The novel can be divided into two halves with its border nearly in the middle of the story when Henry receives his “red badge of courage”\textsuperscript{12}. The first part is dominated by the two battles and Henry’s flight, the second part is characterised by his own regiment attacking twice and finally forcing the enemy to run away. Nearly every process is repeated; nothing is individual. Soldiers on the fields are moving forwards and backwards, attacks and retreats, victories and defeats. Days and nights go by and nothing has changed, everything is still the same. These examples show that time is meaningless and does not have any productive influence on individual growth and development. Everything stays fully unchanged, as Henry’s attitude and behaviour.

Although the typical steps and contents of a nineteenth century initiation story are given, The Red Badge of Courage leaves a lot of room for interpretations of its final meaning. Crane offers the reader the sight of a young man’s feelings and emotions as he undergoes the trials of maturity in wartime and comes to grips with his own fear of death. But the author does not explicitly show that Henry really changes his thinking and his attitude towards himself and life in general and therefore this novel differs from the conventional ones of its times.

\textsuperscript{12} Crane. (1994). The Red Badge of Courage. Chap XII / XIII.
IV The Presentation of War in *The Red Badge of Courage*

Even though *The Red Badge of Courage* had been written in the late nineteenth century and it deals with the America Civil War, it impresses people all over the world in any times. The reason therefor can be found in the universal conception of the novel. Despite the historical background (the Battle of Chancellorsville), the author refused to name the battle or the war in which our youthful soldier is engaged in order to make the novel more realistic. By leaving out any information about labels and dates, the attention is moved from the historical frame and the local meanings to the emotional level. And without any textual signposts, the story is made much more immediate and gets universal character. The described brutality and violence could be part of actually any battle on any ground between two or more armies in any war. Henry’s cruel confrontation with death and his own fear to die, his human cowardice and his wild and unconscious actions are the ones of many soldiers worldwide.

Written by a young author in his early-twenties without any personal battlefield experiences but having grown up in a time when the backwash of the Civil War had left a nation full of maimed men and widowed women *The Red Badge of Courage* is called to be America’s first antiwar novel. The reader is confronted with the unflinching realism of blood and death on the battlefield. There is no place for romantic heroism and brave dying. Soldiers are shot through their stomachs, their faces, their hands; maltreated corpses are lying in grotesque manner in the mud. War does not emphasise the highest and noblest qualities of men, it gives you an idea about the lowest facilities of human character. Men involved in a battle lose their consciousness and act like insane, furious animals. Even Henry recognises that he “had been a barbarian, a beast”\(^\text{13}\) when he fought against the enemy.

In addition, the military machine has produced leaders who treat their men as insignificant creatures. The officers are not noble and honourable “but as petulant as five-year-olds with trivial concerns, temper tantrums, and callous views of other people”\(^\text{14}\). They talk of their soldiers as of goods or weapons that are needed for their plans. Instead of shouldering responsibility for their troops they do not hesitate to sacrifice the lives of hundreds for a suicide operation. They ride recklessly through the crowds of retreating soldiers and mow everyone down who does not make way. And also in war, the fighting men are divided into classes. The better-off enjoy the same privileges in wartime as in their normal lives: they do no have to walk the endless distances in mud and dust – they ride on horses and give their


orders to the walking men who have to follow without rejection. While an ordinary, poor soldier does not even have intact shoes the officers are dressed like dandies. In this point, Crane does not leave any doubt: war has nothing to do with fluttering flags and silvery shining weapons in the sunset. People do neither find a dignified death nor act selflessly and heroically. War is an event in which people lose all of their humanness and act according to their instinctive will to survive. By presenting such a continuously negative image of war, *The Red Badge of Courage* is worth being called America’s first *antiwar* novel.

**Closing Words**

In Stephen Crane’s novel *The Red Badge of Courage* historical facts and the fictional journey of Henry Fleming are perfectly connected. War is described as it really is: dirty, animalistic and destroying. Despite the chronological determination of the American Civil War, the story can be moved in any other time and any other war, which is one of the special features of the book. Beyond that, Stephen Crane managed to tell a different kind of initiation story in which the final meaning is as subjective as Henry’s self-estimation.
Bibliography

1) Primary Literature:

2) Secondary Literature: