

# The Red Badge of Courage Study Guide

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For the novel by Stephen Crane



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## Synopsis

*The Red Badge of Courage* is set during the Civil War at the Battle of Chancellorsville, in May 1863. Henry Fleming, a green recruit, has joined the Union army to satisfy his longing for glory and heroism. Henry's mind draws pictures "lurid with breathless deeds" on the battlefield. He imagines himself "a blue determined figure standing before a crimson and steel assault, getting calmly killed on a high place before the eyes of all."

Camp life, he soon discovers, is far less exciting than the army of his imagination. During long periods of enforced idleness, Henry is plagued by adolescent doubts: Will he distinguish himself in battle? Will he run? He longs for the fighting to begin so that he might be tested, might "watch his legs" in the midst of battle to see whether they stand firm or flee.

Henry's regiment, the 304th New York, soon sees action in the field, staving off a fierce Rebel assault. When the fighting seems to have ended, Henry is elated that he has held firm; he has not deserted his comrades; he has passed the trial. "The red formidable difficulties of war had been vanquished." Henry's "ecstasy of self-satisfaction" is interrupted by a renewed assault by the Confederate forces. This second attack, so close on the heels of the first, unnerves him completely, and Henry runs from the battlefield "in great leaps." When he comes to himself, he has traveled far from the fighting. His conscience alternately torments him for his cowardice and justifies him for his act of wise self-preservation.

When he falls in with a convoy of wounded soldiers, Henry wishes that, like them, he too had an external sign of valor, a wound, "a red badge of courage" to prove to his fellow soldiers, but especially to himself, that he is made of heroic material.

Eventually, through much mental and spiritual agony, Henry learns to stand in the face of physical danger with "an enthusiasm of unselfishness, . . . a sublime recklessness," that gives no thought to his own heroics nor to the opinions of others. He learns to despise the "brass and bombast" of his earlier dreams of war and glory. Instead he feels "a quiet manhood, non-assertive but of sturdy and strong blood . . . . He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death."

## Chapters 2, 3 & 4

### Vocabulary:

In the blanks provided, write a short definition of the vocabulary words found in each sentence.

1. [The tall soldier's] \_\_\_\_\_ unconcern dealt him  
*(serene)*  
a measure of confidence . . .
2. He remembered he had often cursed the \_\_\_\_\_  
*(brindle)*  
cow and her mates . . . .
3. “. . . lots of good a-'nough men have thought they was going to do  
great things before the fight, but when the time came they  
\_\_\_\_\_.”  
*(skedaddled)*
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ dead man forced a way for himself.  
*(invulnerable)*
5. Admitting that he might be wrong, a frenzied \_\_\_\_\_  
*(declamation)*  
of the kind would turn him into a worm.
6. He assumed, then, the \_\_\_\_\_ of one who knows  
*(demeanor)*  
that he is doomed alone to unwritten responsibilities.

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7. During his meals he always wore an air of blissful contemplation of the food he swallowed. His spirit seemed then to be \_\_\_\_\_  
*(communing)*  
with the \_\_\_\_\_.  
*(viands)*

**Questions:**

1. According to Henry, what is the only way to know for certain whether he will run in battle?
2. What does Henry's uncertainty about how he will perform in battle suggest about his character?
3. Other than his death, what does Henry seem to fear most?
4. Why is Henry so eager for the battle to begin?

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5. In Chapter 2, on the morning that Henry's regiment marches out, Crane uses a series of similes and metaphors to describe Henry's regiment and the enemy encampment across the river. What is the general comparison Crane is making? What do these comparisons tell you about Henry's mood or attitude toward what is happening?
  
6. What does Crane mean by referring to the regiment in which Henry marches as "a moving box"?
  
7. What makes the dead soldier the men encounter "invulnerable"? In what way is the dead man vulnerable?
  
8. What "Question" does Henry hope to find answered in the dead man's eyes?
  
9. How does Crane describe the Union soldiers' retreat from the enemy?

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10. What effect does this rout have on Henry?

**Dig Deeper:**

11. Henry continually tries to “measure himself by his comrades.” What is he looking for?
12. The Bible generally teaches that Jesus is to be our example, the standard by which we measure ourselves. (John 10:4; John 13:13–15; 1 Peter 2:21–23; 1 John 2:4–6) What is the danger in doing what Henry is doing: comparing himself to other men?
13. Can there be a good side to comparing or measuring ourselves against others? (Consider 1 Corinthians 4:15–17)

## *The Red Badge of Courage Study Guide Answer Key*

5. The lesson Henry has learned is that “many obligations of life were easily avoided.” As long as no one finds you out, there is no retribution. For Henry, this means that he will not have to explain his actions of the previous day, nor will he be required to answer for them. They will remain hidden.
6. Answers will vary. Just as courage requires only an outward sign (a red badge), thinks Henry, so guilt and cowardice are real only if they are externally visible. Since no one saw his cowardice, he is not a coward. Henry has not realized that virtues are inner characteristics, nor has he learned that God looks on the inward man, not on things that are external.
7. Henry is eager to seem like a veteran, and he is also casting about for someone other than himself to blame for their defeats.
8. Henry is trying to cover up his guilt and shame by arrogance and bombast, while Wilson has been refined in the fires of battle. His arrogance has been burned away and the serene self-confidence of Jim Conklin has replaced it. Henry has run from these refining fires.

### *Chapters 17 & 18*

#### *Questions:*

1. The Confederates are forcing Henry to confront his fears. How he stands up to their assault will prove either that he is, in fact, “poor and puny,” a trapped animal, or that he is a man.
2. Henry fights fiercely, like an enraged animal, like “a war devil,” “a barbarian, a beast . . . like a pagan who defends his religion.” These are all images of ferocity, but of a nearly sub-human sort.
3. Henry fights blindly, from some animal instinct. His fighting debases him, rather than ennobles him. Henry thinks of himself as a knight, but a knight is a disciplined warrior who fights, in part, because of his knightly code. Henry fights without a code.
4. Nature is completely indifferent to this war.

#### *Dig Deeper:*

5. Henry discovers that, to the officers, Henry and his comrades are a tool to be used by the officers to achieve their own purposes, and not even a particularly noble tool, but a “broom.”
6. Answers will vary. Ordinarily, God does not use people as things. (Although God’s use of the nations around Israel as a weapon to punish Israel may be an exception.) God is not indifferent to human needs and desires; His involvement in a human life ennobles rather than debases it. Our smallness before God magnifies God, Who in turn lifts us up. (See for example, Mary’s prayer beginning in Luke 1:46: “My soul magnifies the Lord . . . for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden. . . .”)

### *Chapters 19 & 20*

#### *Questions:*

1. Henry “loses himself” in the attack not by becoming less than a man (a broom or a beast), but by becoming more than a man. “There was the delirium that encounters despair and death, and is heedless and blind to the odds. It is a temporary but sublime [‘of high spiritual, moral or intellectual worth’] absence of selfishness.”
2. Henry and Wilson save the regiment’s flag from dishonor; they keep it from falling to the ground when the color sergeant is struck by a bullet.
3. Henry wants to continue the attack to prove to the scornful officers and to the entire regiment