

The Red Badge of Courage Study Guide

by Gregory Power

For the novel by Stephen Crane

CD Version



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The Red Badge of Courage Study Guide

A Progeny Press Study Guide

by Gregory Power

edited by Andrew Clausen

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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"?

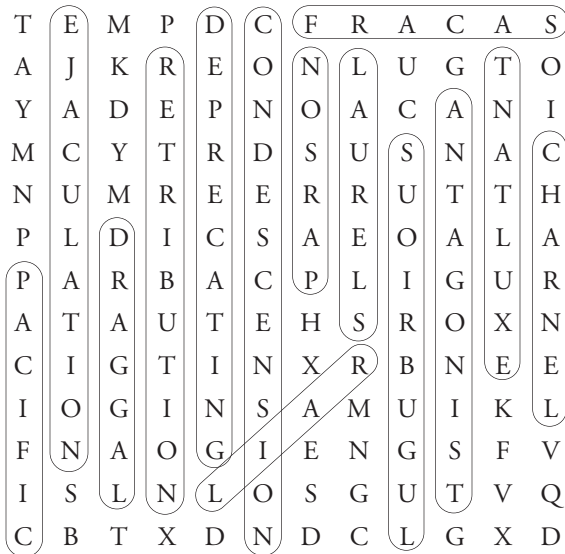
7. What makes the dead soldier the men encounter "invulnerable"? In what way is the dead man vulnerable?

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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Word Search:



Questions:

1. When we first meet Wilson, he is loud, cynical, chafing against army discipline, and fearful of what the battle may bring. By Chapter 14 he has changed. “He showed a quiet belief in his purposes and abilities. And this inward confidence evidently enabled him to be indifferent to little words of other men aimed at him.” His first experience in battle has changed him; he “had now climbed a peak of wisdom from which he could perceive himself as a very wee thing.”
2. The packet gives Henry a hold on Wilson: if Wilson threatens to reveal Henry’s cowardice, Henry will reveal Wilson’s fears before the battle when Wilson thought he would die.
3. Henry is not above a kind of blackmail. Additionally, his conscience is troubling him; Wilson actually knows nothing about Henry’s cowardice the day before. Only Henry is obsessed with the previous day’s actions.
4. It soon becomes clear that no one knows that Henry ran in battle. Since “he had performed his mistakes in the dark,” no one could reproach him for lack of manliness. He could still be boastful and pompous.
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.