

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Red Badge of Courage (Unabridged) by Stephen Crane

Book Information

Stephen Crane, The Red Badge of Courage
(Unabridged)

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278 Pages

Book Level: 8.0

Interest Level: UG

This stirring tale of action in the American Civil War captures the immediacies and experiences of actual battle and army life.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Misc./Other; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Power Lessons AR, Grade 8

Main Characters

Henry Fleming the main character in the book; a young man who enlists in the Union Army; often called "the youth"

Jim Conklin a friend of Henry's from childhood, who is also referred to as "the tall soldier"

the tattered soldier an injured soldier whose words prick at Henry's conscience

Wilson another soldier in Henry's regiment, who is often called "the loud soldier" or, in latter chapters, "the friend"

Vocabulary

cavalry an army component mounted on horseback

epithet a disparaging or abusive word or phrase

melee a confused, hand-to-hand fight

veteran an experienced soldier

Synopsis

Henry Fleming is a youth who enlists in the Union Army in search of adventure. After being entertained lavishly on the way to Washington, his regiment sits for months in camp. During this time the youth begins to consider how he will respond when he finds himself in battle. He realizes he is untested and fears he might turn and run.

After a long and seemingly senseless march, Henry's regiment finally becomes engaged in the battle. Henry withstands the first barrage of fighting; however, as the fighting continues, those around Henry turn and run. Henry does the same.

Separated from his regiment, Henry encounters a line of wounded soldiers. Among them is "the tattered soldier" who asks Henry where his wound is located. Afraid his sin will be recognized, Henry tries to lose himself in the crowd. He then encounters his old friend, Jim Conklin, who has been seriously wounded. Jim runs off into a field and dies. His death is witnessed by Henry and the tattered soldier.

As he walks through the countryside, Henry struggles with his conscience over his actions and how he might be perceived by his regiment. Another Union soldier, panicking in his retreat, strikes Henry with his rifle.

Henry returns to his unit claiming to have been shot. Wilson, the loud soldier, takes care of him. Wilson's behavior has been changed by his experience in the fighting. No longer loud and boastful, Wilson is now kind and caring. Henry ponders the change in his friend, and continues to struggle with his conscience.

The next day Henry and his regiment engage in more fighting. Henry and Wilson overhear some officers discussing the battle. They learn that their regiment will be ordered to charge into devastating fighting. When the order is given, Henry and Wilson perform admirably. They rescue the Union flag from the dying color bearer. Henry carries it into the battle and uses his position to encourage his comrades.

After the fighting is done, Henry learns he has been praised by one of the colonels. His performance in that battle allows him to see clearly all he had done in the past. Henry is at peace with his conscience and realizes he is now a man.

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

When Henry was away from his regiment, the tattered soldier repeatedly asked him about his wound. He asked, "Where yeh hit?" and "Where is it located?" If Henry had answered these questions honestly, how would he have described his wound?

Henry's wound was not a physical one. If he had been honest with himself and others, he would have admitted that his wound was the guilt he was carrying as a result of his actions. Henry's struggle with this guilt is the central conflict of the story.

Literary Analysis

The climax of the story is when the central problem is resolved or the conflict is ended. What event marks the climax of this story? How does this event resolve the problem or conflict?

The climax of this story occurs in Chapter XX when Henry carries the flag forward and stands firm as the remains of his regiment turn back the enemy. The ability to do this heals Henry's conscience and allows him to grow to manhood.

Inferential Comprehension

Henry was very concerned about how those in his regiment would respond to him when he returned. What do you think they would have thought of Henry's behavior? Support your answer with examples from the book.

Students' answers will vary but should include examples from the story to support their opinion.

Constructing Meaning

The morning after returning to his regiment, Henry was considering what he might do when his friend asked him to return the envelope. Henry felt superior to Wilson. Of himself Henry thought, "He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man." What does this sentence mean and what does it reveal about Henry?

Wilson had revealed his fear when he gave Henry the envelope. Wilson had also been wrong about the outcome of the battle. Henry, on the other hand, had made a bad decision in running, but he had been able to conceal the mistake from others. No one else was aware of what he had done, so Henry believed he was still a man. At this point in the story, Henry is still most concerned about others' perceptions, rather than virtue or truth.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting *The Red Badge of Courage* is set during the Civil War. Many of the men who fought in that war were very young. In this story, Henry is often called "the youth," although his age is never specifically stated. *The Boys' War* by Jim Murphy is a book that describes the experiences of young males during the Civil War. It is possible that Henry was as young as some of the boys described in this book and had experiences and perceptions similar to theirs. Share this book with students and have them discuss how the experience of that war might affect a young person.

Understanding Characterization *The Red Badge of Courage* is a novel that uses a series of experiences to illustrate a change in the story's protagonist, Henry. He begins the story as a naive youth who is preoccupied with himself. By the end of the story he has grown to be a man. Have students discuss how Henry's thoughts and actions reveal his personality. Have them pinpoint events that spur changes in his thinking and lead to growth. Create a time line of the story that highlights the important events or encounters, and summarizes the process of Henry's growth.

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Understanding the Author's Craft This story contains many religious and Biblical symbols. Henry's change can be viewed as a spiritual one. The change begins when Henry witnesses the death of Jim Conklin. Jim Conklin can be seen as a symbol of Jesus Christ, as the person whose death redeems his friend. His wound in the side, his gory hand, and even his initials hint at this comparison. The chapter ends with a metaphor: "The red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer." This can be read as a reference to the sacramental blood and body of Christ and a signal of the beginning of the change in Henry Fleming. Have students reread Chapter IX, noting and discussing any language that supports this symbolism.

Comparing and Contrasting This book includes vivid descriptions of Henry Fleming's battle experiences and the emotions he felt during those battles. Most of his fighting was done at close range, and Henry was often enveloped in that fighting. The type of fighting Henry faced was very different from the war experiences many military personnel might have today. Have students compare and contrast the fighting described in the book with the military tactics of a modern war. Discuss how the differences might affect the emotions experienced by those involved.