

Henry's transition into manhood essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, is the impressionistic tale of Henry Fleming's pursuit of courage during the American Civil War. It is considered to be one of the most influential American war stories ever written, despite the fact that the author never experienced war himself. The novel has a coming of age theme that shows Henry transitioning through the use of metaphor and imagery. Henry leaves home with the intention of becoming a war hero and instead, he commits an act of cowardice through which he develops a state of denial.

This novel has formed a wide debate among readers which centers around the argument of whether or not Henry becomes a man by the end of the reading. I feel he does become a man, and my position is enforced by a few instances in the last parts of the book. Animal imagery is a major metaphor used throughout the novel to depict the animalistic nature of war. One constant metaphor that is one that refers to war as a red animal and blood-stained god. This idea is one that argues war is larger than its participants and extends beyond the understanding of the soldiers themselves.

This is also a concept of which Henry proves himself to be very naive in the beginning of the novel. The initial perception of war presented to the reader by Henry is a very grandiose one. He views himself almost as a Spartan warrior going off to battle; he informs his mother he is going off to war, and expects her to respond by telling him to return with his shield, or on it. This is not the advice she gives him. Due to her being a bit wiser, and understanding the vastness of war and its ability to make the single soldier insignificant, she gives him more realistic advice.

She says, Yer just one little feller amongst a hull lot of others, and you've got to keep quiet an' do what they tell yuh (p. 17). She also tells him that when a situation occurs he must do what is right, but the majority of what his mother tells him goes in one ear and out of the other. Henry soon gets his gruesome initiation with the reality of war. In his first interaction with battle, Henry fails to establish the state of animal blood lust and survival that is so highly praised in war. In fact, he proves himself to be very much a coward, when he deserts his regiment under fire.

Then he begins to insist that what he did was right, and try to convince himself it was a reasonable reaction to the circumstance. A serious prophet upon predicting a flood should be the first man to climb a tree (Ch. 11, p. 80). His delusional perception becomes most questionable when he fails to give support to a wounded soldier, who potentially may die without assistance. This is all very different from Henry's initial opinion of war the night before this first battle for which Crane says, The youth had been taught that a man became another thing in a battle.

He saw his salvation in such a change (Ch. 3, p. 37). This marks the moment when Henry builds up expectation in his mind of glory and becoming a man, these expectations are what eventually cause him to let himself down and engulf himself in bias perception. In Henry's experience with self disappointment in battle, he also becomes very aware of the reality of war. The reality of war that Henry is forced to realize involves the contrast between the large scale war and the individual soldier.

This is often referred to today as the fog of war, in which soldiers are engulfed in seeing dead and wounded bodies, and their only concern is fighting back against the bullets that are flying towards them. They have no understanding of the circumstances behind the full scale war. This is most apparently identified in the moment when Henry finally feels the obligation to prove himself, and earn a red badge of courage like the other wounded soldiers he has become so accustomed to viewing.

The narrator describes this moment as, within him, as he hurled himself forward, was born a love, a despairing fondness for this flag which was near him. It was a creation of beauty and invulnerability (Ch. 19, p. 123.). These are Henry's emotions directly before he seizes the Union flag in battle. This time in battle, unlike his first encounter, he doesn't think too much, but instead allows his instincts to take over, and he unleashes a part of himself that he was unaware existed.

This creates a shift in his level of self understanding and inadvertently turns him into a model of heroism for the other soldiers to admire. When Henry initially sets out for battle, he is eager to reach the battle field and claim the glory and honor that come with it, but he shortly finds he is disillusioned. After his regiment has battled honorably and he has captured a flag, he has a new found understanding of his capabilities and he has adopted the wisdom that comes from experience in battle. His desires are now not as childish and he no longer fiends for the adventure of war, but the tranquil nature of peace.

This can be seen in the lines following his regiment's last battle in the novel, when Crane says, He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks,—an existence of soft and eternal peace (Ch. 24, p. 149.). These are his thoughts as he marches with his regiment away from battle. He seemed no more to be continually regarding the proportions of his personal prowess. He was not furious at small words that pricked his conceits. He was no more a loud young soldier. There was about him now a fine reliance. He showed a quiet belief in his purposes and his abilities.

And this inward confidence evidently enabled him to be indifferent to little words of other men aimed at him. (Ch. 14, pp. 96-97.) He has gained that calm continuity within himself that only true men have, and it is further enforced when Crane points out that he is no longer affected by the thoughts or statements of others. This is the key sign of one who thinks for themselves and one who deems war as a cause for pride and duty and not a source of adventure. Henry is now mature enough and wise enough to appreciate the peaceful life he had back home.

This is the core point of his maturity and the proof that he has attained manhood. In sum, Henry becomes a man at the end of Red Badge of Courage, because he gains the wisdom necessary to be deemed as such. He no longer rushes into danger on the childish whim of becoming a hero; he no longer views war as a grandiose game for glory, but as a gruesome horror. More importantly, Henry has gained an appreciation for the simple aspects of life, and he no longer hungers for adventure, but for peace. These are the understandings inherent in men, and they have been adopted by Henry.