

Tone and stance on
war in the red badge
of courage and in
pharaoh's army



War has both rattled and captivated society since the beginnings of human history. Tales from war have long excited audiences, and images of great courage and heroic acts have often shaped the public view of war into a grand experience of fighting for a noble cause. However, literature has also expressed other, less lionizing stances towards war. Both *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane and *In Pharaoh's Army* by Tobias Wolff are examples of this different perspective. While they are about two very different wars fought for very different reasons, neither work focuses as much on the war's purpose or goal as much as on a soldier's experience—either through fiction or nonfiction. Through the tones of their narratives, Crane and Wolff both develop a stance that war is not about glory or courage, but is rather a monotonous struggle. Soldiers, for these authors, are more focused on their own survival or image than on selfless courage in the name of a greater cause.

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane develops his stance through a tone of irony by emphasizing the differences between the glorious thoughts of the main character, Henry, and the author's vivid description of the realities of war. By almost mocking the character, Crane develops his stance on war, which he sees as a monotonous struggle that has very little to do with selfless heroism; instead, war is a state of self-preservation. The title itself refers to “a wound, a little red badge of courage” that Henry envied the wounded soldiers for having (51). Showing that this superficial proof of courage is more important to Henry than actual combat (which Henry avoids) reflects the tone of irony Crane continues throughout the novel. The main character's thoughts are constantly filled with imaginations of glory—

from “ the strength” he felt “ to do mighty deeds of arms,” (7) to the “ thunderous, crushing blow” he conceived “ that would prostrate the resistance and spread consternation and amazement for miles,” (120) to his “ self-pride” which was “ entirely restored” because nobody knew he fled the battle, “ so he was still a man” (82). In this last example, Crane’s ironic tone is especially apparent as he presents Henry’s thinking as almost a logical fallacy. Henry, presumably, is a man because “ he had performed his mistakes in the dark” (82). Crane contrasts Henry’s thoughts with violent and vivid descriptions of war—including men dropping “ here and there like bundles,” with “ blood streaming widely down” their faces, or “ clinging desperately” to a tree “ and crying for assistance” (34). Crane’s powerful descriptions of battle invoke a world uncaring of human suffering and make Henry’s desire for glory seem foolish in contrast.

Even when Henry performs quite a heroic action—bearing a flag at the head of a charge that “ seemed eternal,” (106) as described by Crane at great length—it turns out that this advance was a very minute and insignificant part of the great struggle of war, and, according to a lieutenant, “ wasn’t very far, was it?” (111) This is, again, a use of irony that develops Crane’s stance on war. Not only does he show it as a lengthy and painful struggle, but also one where soldiers are not concerned with selfless actions for a greater cause. By the end of the novel, he depicts Henry realizing his mistaken thoughts—finding that “ he was gleeful” to discover that he despised “ the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels” (128). This ending solidifies Crane’s stance on war by having his character come to agree with

it—that war is truly not very similar to the traditional image of glory associated with it.

While *The Red Badge of Courage* disputes traditional notions of courageous warfare, *In Pharaoh's Army* depicts an experience of war so far from selfless courage that the concept is hardly mentioned—an experience where the top concern was to obtain a 21-inch color television, to better watch the “Bonanza special on Thanksgiving night” (18). Resembling that used by Crane, Tobias Wolff’s tone is clearly ironic and mocking. Also calling to mind Crane’s, the tone here is established in part by indirectly ridiculing the main character’s thoughts, although in this case the character is the author’s past self, whom he presents as a product of the absurdity of the war. Using this tone, Wolff is able to develop a stance that war is, again, not about selfless courage but rather about self-preservation. The message given to soldiers before their tour, “if you do everything right, you’ll make it home,” (5) reflects this notion, and Wolff uses his own thoughts and actions as a soldier to exemplify the whole war effort. He shows that from the start, the Americans, including himself, saw the Vietnamese as “people, not peasants,” (4) but would quickly learn (as he indicates by portraying himself and other individuals, such as Captain Kale) that a friendly connection with the people they were supposed to be helping was hardly possible.

Wolff raises this criticism of the war many times, often through criticizing his own character, who, like others, “would kill every last one of [the Vietnamese] to save our own skins,” (140) or “didn’t think of our targets as homes,” because “when you’re afraid, you will kill anything that might kill you” (138). Wolff even goes further to directly criticize this attitude by <https://assignbuster.com/tone-and-stance-on-war-in-the-red-badge-of-courage-and-in-pharaohs-army/>

showing how it lost the war; he explains that “once [the Viet Cong] were among the people we would abandon our pretense of distinguishing between them.” (140) This fundamental distrust between the Americans and their Vietnamese allies is a point Wolff returns to frequently, by again showing that he personally “wasn’t so sure about our friends,” even though “these men had never given me any reason for such a thought, as I well knew” (138). By continuing this tone of self-reflection that indirectly mocks himself, he strongly advances his stance on the war by accepting that he was very much a part of what he is criticizing. Wolff makes it quite simple to understand the absurdity and lack of glory in a war in which “the idea of those people coming at us with even a fraction of the hardware we routinely turned on them seemed outrageous,” (7) and the sergeant he lived with had to “somehow let me know what orders to give him to preserve the fiction of my authority” (162). Through a mocking and ironic tone, Wolff develops a stance that war is rather absurd; self-preservation trumps fighting gloriously for a cause.

While *The Red Badge of Courage* and *In Pharaoh’s Army* differ in the wars depicted and in the circumstances under which the wars took place, the similarities in their tones and stances on war are quite interesting. Neither focuses especially on the purpose of each war, but each still develops a shared stance—that war has little to do with glorious combat or selfless courage. Instead, war is endless futile fighting in which soldiers are interested more in their own lives and how they are perceived than in fighting valiantly for a noble cause. Certainly, through this stance each book

is—and has been—able to affect readers' own stances on war, challenging the age-old images of glory and heroism associated with warfare.