

Bravery, nature, and maturation in ‘the red badge of courage.’”



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'The Red Badge of Courage' by Stephen Crane is not merely a war novel. It is an account of a young man's struggle to understand both himself and the world, as well as deal with the burdens that come with it. Henry, the young soldier and protagonist of the book, slowly starts to grasp nature's role in a human's life, and battles with himself to sort out his conflicting beliefs on bravery and cowardice. All throughout the novel he slowly transforms from a selfish, naïve youth to a mature, weathered soldier who understands what is truly important in life. These themes shine a light through endless bloodshed and ceaseless gunshots, giving the book a more personal aspect and allowing us to connect to it more profoundly. Bravery and cowardice, especially Henry's connection to it, are predominant themes in the book. Henry stubbornly pursues his romanticized version of bravery, of fearless men charging into battle and either emerging victorious or dying gloriously. However, once he is faced with the reality of battle his courage starts to dwindle and doubts set in, not sure whether he will be brave enough: "He finally concluded that the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze, and then figuratively to watch his legs discover their merits and faults." (12) Henry constantly compares himself to his comrades and his perception of courage has to do with how his peers praise him, constantly afraid they would laugh at him if he did not prove himself worthy. When he returns to camp after running away from the fighting, "He had a conviction that he would soon feel in his sore heart the barbed missiles of ridicule." (67) He often thinks of himself as a coward. However, during Henry's most courageous moment in battle he hardly notices the bravery he was showing; he isn't aware of anything except heat, noise, and the sound of his own gun. Nature's role in war and human affairs is a main topic in the book. It explores <https://assignbuster.com/bravery-nature-and-maturation-in-the-red-badge-of-courage/>

Henry's connection to it and his ponderings on its workings. The natural world continues with its own business no matter what horrors and atrocities are committed within it. Henry regards it as a safe haven and often seeks the comfort of nature when he is feeling overwhelmed by battle: "The landscape gave him assurance. A fair field holding life. It was the religion of peace."

(41) Later, Henry learns that the universe has complete disregard for human life. His vain beliefs of death, bravery, and glory don't interest it, and Henry is confronted by this when he sees a dead corpse under a tree. "The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to a dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open, its red had changed to an appalling yellow."

(42) Henry realizes that there is nothing glorious about death and that it is simply integral to nature. Henry's impression of nature as a peaceful refuge from war is shattered. He understands that the vast universe has no regard for human life whatsoever, and that everyone has a duty to protect not only themselves but also those around them. Somewhere within the relentless battering of the enemy army, Henry matures from a naïve boy to a wise man. Early on, he imagines that a uniform is all that was needed to be a hero. He constantly compares himself to others and thinks himself intellectually superior. However, he finds the true meaning of friendship and loyalty in Wilson and begins to care for other people apart from himself. This psychological transformation is driven by a number of factors, particularly the fear and injury he suffered during war, but also because of some self-reflection. Henry's ability to observe and reflect on the world and people around him is both his strength and his weakness. At the end of the book, he, now a matured veteran, understands the hardships of war and no longer hungers for the glory it could bring. "He turned now with a lover's thirst to <https://assignbuster.com/bravery-nature-and-maturation-in-the-red-badge-of-courage/>

images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks, - an existence of soft and eternal peace." (118)With Crane exploring themes such as bravery and cowardice, personal transformation, and nature, the book retains a more individual perspective on war. It allows the reader to understand and sympathize more with Henry because we recognize aspects of our own life in the story. It is not merely a war novel, but also a humane and intimate account of one soldier's struggle to understand himself and the world around him.