

The Red Badge of Courage

Background Info

Author Bio

Full Name: Stephen Crane

Date of Birth: 1871

Place of Birth: Newark, New Jersey

Date of Death: 1900

Brief Life Story: Stephen Crane was born into a large family of a Methodist minister. Crane attended a quasi-military prep school and a handful of unsuccessful years at college, but left school seeking real-world experiences as an adventurer and writer. Crane wrote poetry, short stories, and several novels, all of which earned him acclaim for his innovative literary style and probing social and psychological analysis. Crane also travelled extensively as a foreign correspondent for newspapers, covering subjects including poverty and war. Travel and hard-living took their toll and Crane died young, at 28, of tuberculosis.

Key Facts

Full Title: *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War*

Genre: Short novel or novella

Setting: A Civil War battlefield, probably a fictionalization of the Battle of Chancellorsville, fought May 2–5, 1863, in northern Virginia

Climax: Henry and his friend Wilson lead the charge to

overwhelm an enemy position, taking the enemy flag and several prisoners.

Protagonist: Henry Fleming (“the youth”)

Antagonists: The war machine of enemy soldiers, Henry’s own anxieties and conscience, the insulting officer

Point of View: Third-person limited omniscient

Historical and Literary Context

When Written: 1893

Where Written: New York City

When Published: 1895

Literary Period: Naturalism

Related Literary Works: Crane was a pioneer of American literary Naturalism. First apparent in his novel about a prostitute titled *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Crane created art from how individuals dealt with the stresses of modern life, including urbanization, industrialism, and religious doubt. He detailed stark social circumstances without any varnish of sentimentality. Crane also changed the focus of literary description from outward events to the internal workings of a character’s psychology. Crane probes intense personal doubts about religion, nature, and meaning itself. Other American naturalist landmarks in the 1890s include *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, and *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London.

Related Historical Events: Crane was born six years after the Civil War (1861-1865) but the intensity of the war still resonated in American culture when he wrote the novel. With over 600,000 men killed, the violence of the Civil War was unprecedented. Unlike his contemporaries writing about the war, Crane doesn’t examine the large-scale political conflicts between the Union and Confederate sides. Instead, Crane follows the very limited viewpoints of infantrymen in a fictitious Union regiment: the 304th New York State Volunteers. Historians interpret the setting of *Red Badge* as the Battle of Chancellorsville in northern Virginia. It was a turning point: the last victory of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the battle just before the horrors of Gettysburg.

Extra Credit

Nameless characters: Crane’s narrator never uses proper names of characters, such as “Henry” or “Wilson.” The narrator only uses general names such as “the youth,” “the loud young soldier,” and “the tattered man.” The reader learns the characters’ names only through the speech of others.

Color of battle: The narrator also never says “Union” or “Confederate.” Soldiers are described as enemies, or as part of lines and masses only distinguished by their flags or by uniform color: blue and gray. This technique places the focus on the small concerns of the soldiers rather than on the larger political and military goals of the armies.

Plot Summary

The sun rises over a riverside encampment of new inexperienced soldiers in the blue Union uniforms of the 304th regiment from New York. A tall soldier, **Jim Conklin**, tells the others that he heard a rumor about the generals’ plan: the regiment will soon be in battle. Some soldiers in the regiment believe the rumor, others are skeptical and tired of infantrymen trying to predict their commanders’ strategies. A young private, **Henry Fleming**, listens to the debate, then returns to his bunk to think. With dreams of fighting in glorious battles, he had enlisted against his **mother’s** will. Now Henry worries that he might act cowardly and run away during fighting. He returns to ask Jim and another soldier, the loud and overconfident **Wilson**, if they ever fear running away. Jim says that he’ll do what the other men do. Henry feels eager for a battle to test his courage.

The regiment eventually does march and digs into position in the woods. With battle imminent, Wilson gets spooked and nervously gives Henry a packet of letters to return to Wilson’s family in case Wilson dies. Soon, an advance brigade of blue soldiers runs past in crazed retreat, which shakes Henry’s self-confidence. The gray enemy approaches through the trees and Henry, feeling like a cog in a machine, fires frantically. The enemy retreats and the soldiers congratulate each other. But another enemy charge comes on, and Henry turns and runs away with a terrified mob of fellow blue soldiers.

Characters

Henry Fleming (the youth) – Henry Fleming is a young private who volunteered for the infantry against his **mother’s** wishes. Having “dreamed of battles all his life,” Henry has romantic notions of war influenced by Greek classics such as the *Iliad*. These ideas of war are challenged by his actual experiences with war. Henry’s resulting psychological turmoil is the focus of the narrative, especially his anxiety about lacking the courage to fight. Henry’s emotions are never settled: after he flees from battle, Henry is overcome by guilt and self-pity; when he shows courage under fire, he recovers his pride. Within a few short days, he transforms from a hot-headed, idealistic young boy into an experienced soldier who feels like a grown

man. While he runs, Henry feels that he did the right thing in running away. He reasons that self-preservation is natural, and thinks that the generals and any soldiers who stayed to fight were fools. When the retreat stops, Henry overhears that his regiment actually did defend their position against the odds. Ashamed, Henry skulks off into the woods alone, and comes upon the corpse of a **dead soldier** in a “chapel” of trees. Henry is horrified by the gruesome sight of ants running over the discolored face. He flees and joins a retreating procession of wounded soldiers. Walking along, a **tattered man** questions Henry about his injuries, but Henry, feeling deeply guilty, moves away from him. Henry privately wishes for his own wound, “a red badge of courage.” Henry sees a grievously hurt, almost ghostlike soldier who is refusing any assistance. Discovering the man to be Jim Conklin, Henry promises to help. Jim runs wildly into nearby fields and Henry and the tattered man follow. Jim falls dead. The tattered man, getting worse himself, keeps asking about Henry’s wound, but Henry abandons him.

Close to the battlefield, Henry encounters a large group of blue soldiers running away. He grabs one to ask “Why—why—” but the soldier bashes his rifle on Henry’s head to escape. Now bleeding and disoriented, Henry wanders in search of a safe place. An anonymous **cheerful soldier** guides Henry back to his regiment’s camp. Henry lies to his regiment that he was shot in the head. His wound is treated by a quiet subdued Wilson. The next morning, Wilson asks Henry for his packet of letters.

man. Over the course of the story, Henry tries out many philosophical approaches to discover his individuality and place within the war, as if searching for answers to the question he asks at one point: “Why—why—.” In the face of gruesome casualties and the chaos of war, Henry also struggles to interpret symbols such as the **flag** for meaning. But their meaning keeps changing, and Henry flip-flops between self-confidence and insignificance, between courage and cowardice. Henry seems mature by the end of the novel, but this may be just another moment of calm in a much bigger storm.

In comparison with his friend’s embarrassment about fearing death, Henry soon feels strong, proud, and ready to fight.

His regiment returns to the fight and takes part in a raucous deafening battle. Henry goes berserk, firing even after the enemy retreats. His companions view him with astonishment and the regiment’s fiery **lieutenant** praises his bravery. Henry is dazed but pleased—he has overcome his fears without even being aware of the process.

Between battles, Henry and Wilson overhear an **insulting officer** put down their regiment for fighting like “mule drivers.” They desperately want to prove him wrong. The regiment is sent on a dangerous charge against enemy lines, and many of Henry’s companions are killed. When the color guard gets shot and falls, Henry grabs the regimental battle flag and rallies the exhausted regiment to a near victory. Afterwards, other soldiers hear the regiment’s commanders praising the bravery of Henry and Wilson. Still, Henry is angry at the insulting officer and dreams of being killed in a glorious battle as his revenge.

Across the field, a wave of gray soldiers overtakes a crucial fence. Running with the flag, Henry leads his frenzied regiment to overwhelm the enemy soldiers. Wilson captures the enemy’s battle flag. They all congratulate each other and feel that “they were men.” The regiment is then ordered back over its gained ground all the way to its original camp on the river. Henry reflects on his triumphs and the guilt still haunting him, but feels matured and tranquil, yearning for peace.

Wilson (the loud young soldier, the youth’s friend) – Wilson is a new volunteer and **Henry’s** closest friend in the regiment. He begins as a brash and confident soldier, but by the start of the first battle Wilson is deeply afraid that he’ll die. Because of the narrator’s limited point of view, Wilson disappears from the story while Henry is away from his regiment, but he too matures through personal conflicts. From being a “loud young soldier,” Wilson becomes a quiet, generous, and reflective man. Like Henry, Wilson eventually fights fiercely, selflessly, and well. In the novel, Wilson serves as a reflection of Henry. His differences from Henry add perspective to Henry’s character and experience.

Jim Conklin (“the tall soldier”) – Another friend of **Henry’s** in the regiment, Jim offers Henry a pragmatic viewpoint on courage at the beginning of the story: run when others run, fight like mad when they fight. He also embodies the consequences of this viewpoint. Jim is so terribly injured in the first battle that he is almost unrecognizable to Henry. As the injured “spectral soldier,” with his eyes gazing deep into the unknown, Jim is like a window into death. But if he finds any secrets or meaning as he stares into death, Jim never passes them along. The spectral soldier represents a meeting point between life and death, and between Henry’s glorious ideals of war and the shocking gruesome reality of the real thing.

Tattered man – A nameless, dirty, and twice-shot soldier who meets **Henry** in the procession of the wounded. By asking Henry about the fighting and Henry’s non-existent wounds, the **tattered man** works like Henry’s external conscience. Henry thinks that the tattered man knows his secrets, though Henry is probably projecting his guilt and shame on to others. Even though the tattered man selflessly tries to assist the wounded Jim and then needs help himself when he is on the verge of dying, Henry deserts him: a juvenile attempt to escape his own shame. The memory of the tattered man and Henry’s abandonment of him plagues Henry’s conscience.

Henry’s mother – Appearing only in an early flashback, **Henry’s** mother objects when he volunteers for the army. Henry’s mother does not share her son’s glorified visions of war. Instead, she advises him to avoid shameful acts and corrupt men—advice about self-preservation, not glorious self-destruction. Capping it off, she also makes him promise to mail back any socks or shirts that need mending. Henry’s mother’s comments contrast Henry’s ideals of war with the mundane realities of life as a soldier.

Insulting officer – An anonymous officer who says of **Henry’s** regiment that “they fight like a lot ‘a mule drivers.” Having just won their fight, Henry feels otherwise. These two difference shows how the meaning of battles and war are subject to different interpretations based on the perspective of the interpreter. From the officer’s perspective, courageous individual efforts are insignificant parts of a larger strategy. From Henry’s perspective, he (Henry) is a hero. The insulting officer also exposes Henry’s motivations to fight—not for patriotic ideals, but to get his revenge and prove the officer dead wrong.

Cheerful soldier – An anonymous soldier who shows up to guide **Henry** after he is slammed on the head by a rifle butt, and, dazed, is searching for safety. The cheerful soldier embod-

ies the selflessness and altruism of Henry’s heroic ideals. The soldier is described with religious overtones, particularly his paternal kindness, disembodied voice, and almost miraculous ability to guide Henry back to his regiment. This symbolism counters the deep uncertainty about religious expressed in the story, such as the **dead soldier** in the “chapel” of trees.

Lieutenant – A mid-level commander in **Henry’s** regiment named Hasbrouck. He is described as fiery with an endless supply of foul language. The lieutenant represents the qualities of selfless valor and leadership that Henry and **Wilson** want to emulate. Though shot in the hand and again in the arm, the lieutenant remains committed to rallying his regiment to fight and charge. In contrast to Henry’s fixation on personal glory, the lieutenant sees the regiment as a unit, and does not get mired in contemplating his **wounds** or his actions.

Dead soldier – An anonymous, deceased Union soldier whose decomposing body Henry finds in the woods. The dead, decomposing body’s position in a “chapel” of trees implies a profound uncertainty about the promises of religion; could this body, being eaten by ants, really have a soul in heaven? The rotting, ant-strewn corpse also shows that nature is unrelenting. Ultimately, the dead soldier shows that Henry’s hopes for a glorious death are naïve.

Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the *Summary and Analysis* sections.
- Use the *ThemeTracker* section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

Courage

Red Badge is a study of courage and fear, as seen in the shifting currents of Henry’s thoughts and actions during the battle. **Henry** begins the story with youthful romanticized ideas about courage from the classical tradition: in particular, the heroic ideals found in the ancient Greek epic poem the *Iliad* by Homer. In the *Iliad*, warriors mingle with gods, die gloriously, and enjoy everlasting fame. But the tremendous violence of the Civil War unsettled these notions of courage and glory. The soldiers in *Red Badge*, especially Henry and **Wilson**, begin to doubt their naive versions of courage when faced with battle. Instead, they discover a grittier and more complicated form of courage. And they only discover it after the fact: during Henry’s most courageous moments in battle, he is hardly aware of anything except heat, noise, anger, and the mechanical repetition of firing. Even when courage is present, it’s not really there. So what is courage?

Courage takes many forms in the novel, none of which are stable. Wanting to find a lasting form of courage, Henry hopes for a **wound** or “red badge of courage” to wear. Taking it to the extreme, Henry daydreams about a glorious death. But is courage self-destructive? Is it a performance for others, or for yourself? Does it happen when we’re not thinking about it? Henry seeks answers from himself and from the soldiers around him, including **corpses** and the wounded. Though the story may provide no clear answers, it offers several perspectives: **Jim Conklin**, **Wilson**, and the **lieutenant** each offer different versions of courage to compare with Henry’s. Perhaps there is courage in Jim’s willingness to see things pragmatically, or in **Wilson’s** acceptance of his limitations, or even in Henry’s deep self-questioning. In the end, the reader must decide about courage—who has it, and even whether it’s good or bad.

The War Machine

Red Badge uses the language of machines, labor, and industry to describe war. In contrast, **Henry** dreams about a classical idealized kind of war. But that kind of romanticized war, emphasizing heroic action, is a thing of the fictional past: it has no relation to an industrial war such as the Civil War, in which individual soldiers become cogs in a much larger machine. As *Red Badge* reveals, the war machine is designed to move massive armies and churn out **corpses**. (Machine guns were used for the first time in the Civil War.) Machines are unsympathetic, unthinking, and impersonal, and the war machine makes Henry’s hopes for personal glory seem pathetic, even tragic. Crane also uses the theme of a mechanized war to make a grim comment on the industrialism of the late 19th century and its dehumanizing effect on laborers.

Youth and Manhood

All the men in the 304th regiment are inexperienced in battle, and many—like **Henry** and **Wilson**—are very young. The narrative consistently refers to Henry as “the youth,” emphasizing his naiveté. Though *Red Badge* is mostly about finding courage, it is also largely about Henry’s quest to become a man. Because of his romantic view of war, Henry initially thinks he’ll achieve manhood through fighting. And for him, and many other soldiers, manhood seems to hang in the balance of each battle: they feel weak when the enemy has them trapped, and manly when they fight and win. By the end of the novel, after facing the realities of war, Henry is only a few days older and still has some juvenile characteristics, but he feels like a man. Has he matured? Perhaps: Henry finally dreams of tranquility and peace rather than war. He discards his boastfulness for a quiet more mature sense of self-determination.

Noise and Silence

From popping musketry to the belching of artillery explosions to the “devotional silence” of the woods, *Red Badge* gets much of its descriptive power from its descriptions of sound. The noises of battle give the reader a soldier’s point of view and do more than just describe war: they convey the intensely disorienting experience that battle must have been for soldiers on the ground. For a low-ranking infantryman like **Henry**, noise is

his only news of the battle. The narrative describes explosions as the armies communicating with each other. All this noise overwhelms Henry and he can’t understand what’s going on: a metaphor for the chaos and senselessness of war. On the other hand, silence is golden. When “the loud young soldier” **Wilson** matures from his empty boastfulness, he quiets down. The story ends with Henry yearning for “soft and eternal peace”—the end of noise and war altogether.

Nature

Henry has a keen eye for his surroundings, and descriptions of landscapes get a great deal of attention in the narrative. Descriptions of scenery emphasize the stark difference between nature and the war machine. Battles look strangely inappropriate being fought on sunny fields. When the smoke clears, the sky is just as blue and beautiful as before. Nature exists separately from the war, going “tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment.” At first it seems as if this separateness makes nature a tranquil refuge from the war. But as the novel progresses, Henry realizes that nature is merely indifferent to human concerns. This is shockingly apparent when Henry sees ants feeding on the face of a **dead soldier**. This unsympathetic view of nature, common to Naturalism, the literary movement that Crane pioneered, comes from the late-19th-century fascination with Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the fight for survival in a hostile world.

The Living and the Dead

Henry is fascinated by the spectacle of death. He looks into the eyes of **corpses** for answers to his questions about death, but they fail to communicate anything but strangeness, emptiness, and horror. When Henry and **Wilson** each get a **flag** to carry for the regiment, a position of honor, each time they must wrestle it from the hands of a dying man. Without providing any definitive answers, *Red Badge* explores a host of questions regarding death in general and death in war in particular: Do our beliefs endure beyond the grave? Is fighting and dying worth it? Can death be glorious? Can we ultimately know anything about what happens after death?

Symbols

Symbols are shown in **red** text whenever they appear in the *Plot Summary* and *Summary and Analysis* sections of this LitChart.

Corpses

Henry is fascinated with **corpses** in his search for answers about courage, glory, and self-sacrifice. He had initially believed that a glorious death would give him everlasting fame. But in the war, he sees corpses landing in awkward positions

and looking betrayed. In doing so, they show the grotesque reality of war and reveal death as meaningless. In particular, the dead soldier in the “chapel” in the forest does not seem glorious to Henry—it’s just a mound of rotting meat. Its pointless death defies any effort to find meaning in death itself.

Wounds

For **Henry**, **wounds** are a “red badge of courage” to show off like a Purple Heart medal—the modern military award given to soldiers wounded in combat. Henry wants a wound to prove that he fought bravely and sacrificed himself. But wounds in *Red Badge* are not that simple. They reveal the flip side of Henry’s romantic ideas: the grim reality of war wounds. For example, after he’s wounded, **Jim** looks like his whole side had been “chewed by wolves.” Wounds reveal the ironies of war, too: when Henry gets his own wound, it comes when a fellow Union soldier strikes him with a rifle butt to get Henry out of his way. Henry then must lie to his regiment about the wound’s

origin. Wounds also don’t have to be physical. The **tattered man** reflects Henry’s internal wounds—his guilt for running away and abandoning people.


The Tattered Man

A living symbol, the **tattered man** represents **Henry’s** own conscience projected onto someone else. The tattered soldier embodies Henry’s feelings of guilt and shame for fleeing battle. He also exposes Henry’s juvenile ways of dealing with his conflicted feelings: when the tattered man needs help, Henry abandons him, just as he wishes to abandon his own guilt.

Flags

By definition, **flags** are symbols of something else, such as a state or country. In *Red Badge*, battle flags symbolize the opposing armies. More importantly, they represent a soldier’s need to believe in his army and in the war itself. The flag transcends individual concerns and represents the soldiers as a collective force. The political symbolism of Civil War flags is mostly absent from *Red Badge*. Instead, they are compared to beautiful colorful birds. Flags in *Red Badge* are symbols about symbols, about the abstract causes for which soldiers put their lives on the line. When he takes over as flag-bearer, **Henry** is safeguarding all of the symbols that hold his world together.

Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in *Summary and Analysis* make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the *Themes* section. For instance, a bar of  indicates that all six themes apply to that part of the summary.

Chapter 1

Morning dawns on a riverside encampment of soldiers: Union army volunteers from the 304th regiment of New York. As the camp stirs, a tall soldier named **Jim Conklin** tells the others he’s heard a rumor that the generals plan to march their regiment into battle soon. The regiment has yet to see battle, and the soldiers debate Jim’s news: some believe it, but some don’t. One private, angry that the regiment hasn’t marched for weeks, calls Jim a liar.

The novel shows the war from the perspective of soldiers who are always uninformed. Their arguments are never about the political issues of war. By leaving out the politics, Crane separates the war from the grand ideas that motivate the armies, and focuses on the soldiers’ direct experience of battle.



A young private, **Henry Fleming**, listens to **Jim** and returns to his bunk to think. As a youth, he had always dreamed of glorious battles, his imagination inflamed by newspaper reports of great victories. He remembers enlisting against his **mother’s** wishes. She warned him not to disgrace himself or do anything that he would be ashamed to tell her. This irritated Henry. He wasn’t enlisting to avoid shame. He was out for glory.

Henry’s dreams of battles and heated newspaper reports all greatly differ from the gritty reality of war. His mother’s advice is Henry’s first taste of the difference between the ideal and the real. Her view of war is bureaucratic rather than heroic—she tells him to do his duty and not mess up.



Henry suspects that education, religion, and daily concerns have sapped the greatness from men that was described in Greek classics, such as the *Iliad*. He had thought that enlisting and fighting was the only way he could gain the glory he craved. And as the crowds cheered his regiment just after it formed in Washington, he *had* felt like a hero. But since then, military life has been nothing but monotonous drills, reviews, and waiting.

Henry’s idealized vision of war is shared by the non-soldiers who cheer on the army. But as for reality, Henry’s mother is right. Modern warfare is bureaucratic, with its waiting and drills, compared to the high drama of battles like those in the Iliad.



Now faced with the possibility of battle, **Henry** realizes he doesn’t really know how he’ll act: will he fight courageously, or will he run away? Henry asks **Jim** if he’s ever considered running. Jim replies that he’d run if everyone else did, but if they stood firm and fought, so would he. Henry feels reassured.

Just before battle, Henry realizes his own inexperience. Jim’s response to Henry outlines a pragmatic idea of courage—he’s uninterested in being a hero, and knows he couldn’t be blamed for doing what everyone else does.



Chapter 2

Jim was wrong: for several days afterwards, the regiment doesn’t move. **Henry** remains nervous about his courage, realizing that an actual battle will be the only way to test it. Henry watches the other soldiers closely, trying to figure out if they are heroes or cowards.

As an adolescent struggling with his self image, Henry constantly tries to see himself through the eyes of others. His frequent comparisons between himself and others are often flawed.



One morning, a colonel appears on horseback with orders, and **Henry’s** regiment marches to join other soldiers in formation. As they walk, the infantrymen boast and argue about the army’s strategies, becoming more lighthearted as they go.

In the story, strategies from commanders are often incomplete or only partially overheard. Soldiers argue about them to reclaim some sense of control.



A fat soldier breaks out of line to steal a horse from a nearby house. A young girl rushes out to fight him off, and the regiment is distracted in cheering for her.

An example of what Henry’s mother might say is a soldier disgracing himself. Will these men really become heroes?



After a long march, the soldiers make camp. **Henry** feels homesick and isolated from the others. He meets a friend, the loud soldier **Wilson**, and asks him if he would run from battle. Of course not, Wilson replies, and leaves Henry alone, feeling worse than ever.

Wilson’s apparent bravery probably overcompensates for his own worries. But it shuts up Henry: his questioning takes place inside his head for the rest of the novel.



Chapter 3

The next day the long march continues. The new, inexperienced soldiers grow tired and start to throw away their bright new jackets, hats, and knapsacks along the roadside.

A metaphor for a big question: what are the essential qualities of a soldier? Appearance says nothing about internal strength.



One morning, **Henry** is kicked awake by **Jim**. The soldiers are soon running toward spatters of gunfire. Henry realizes he couldn’t run away if he tried: the regiment boxes him in. Henry starts to feel like a victim, dragged to slaughter against his wishes.

Henry contradicts himself for the first time. Claiming to be a victim, Henry is in denial about volunteering. He feels he might have made a mistake he doesn’t want to admit.



The fast-moving mass of soldiers divides to pass a **corpse** in a worn-out blue uniform. **Henry** stares at its eyes, looking for any kind of answer, but the mob of soldiers around him pushes him forward.

For Henry, the corpse has seen the real meaning of war, but it cannot share its messages with the living.



Again and again, the soldiers take up positions in the woods behind rocks and tree limbs for protection, but each time they are then ordered to march further. Soon the soldiers get annoyed, and start to complain that their commanders must be fools. Less nervous now than curious, **Henry** watches the battle lines stretch over the landscape.

Like Henry, the soldiers displace onto their commanders their misgivings about joining the army, their mistaken belief that it would be glorious. Complaining gives the soldiers the illusion that they have some control of their situation.



Eventually, the regiment nears the fighting. Guns flash and the noise grows to a roar. **Wilson** taps **Henry** on the shoulder and, with fear in his voice, tells Henry he expects to get killed. Wilson hands over a packet to be given to his parents in case he dies in battle.

Faced with an actual battle, Wilson the braggart becomes a frightened sentimental sap. Early on, Wilson is a character of extremes: first overly brave, then overly timid.



Chapter 4

The battle rages in front of **Henry’s** regiment. Soldiers watch and argue about its progress, claiming that various parts of their army are getting crushed while others are winning decisive victories.

For the soldiers and reader alike, it’s hard to know what’s actually happening or who’s winning during the battle.



Artillery shells and bullets start hitting the ground and trees around **Henry’s** position. Their **lieutenant** is shot in the hand and swears so terribly that his men laugh nervously.

The lieutenant sustains the first wound. Rather than being a badge of courage, it seems funny. The significance of wounds will keep changing.



In the distant smoke, **Henry** sees a Union battle **flag** fall over. Suddenly, a mob of blue soldiers retreats through the woods, running away from the wild yells of another mob, gray and red, in pursuit. Furious officers scream to stop and beat their panicked men, but they keep running. Henry hears nearby veteran soldiers mock the retreating men sarcastically.

The fallen flag symbolizes a defeat for the soldiers and for their commitment to fight as a unified force. When it falls, every man runs helter skelter for his own life. Note how the only things that distinguish the two sides are flags and colors.



Henry realizes that if he started to run, nothing could compel him to stop. But he doesn’t run yet: he wants to see whatever monster caused this frenzied retreat.

Henry sees the uncontrollable force of human nature in the panicked retreat.



Chapter 5

Henry's regiment was supposed to have served in this battle as reinforcements. But now, with the front line gone, they hurriedly get ready for the enemy's charge, fumbling awkwardly with cartridges of ammunition. Henry feels startled and stupefied.

The soldiers' lack of any battle experience shows up in their physical clumsiness. This foreshadows the officer's insulting comments in chapter 18.



The screaming mob of enemies approaches through the trees. Without waiting, Henry fires a first wild shot. As his regiment starts blazing away, Henry's individual anxieties disappear: he feels like a cog in a machine, or part of a "mysterious fraternity." Henry gets furious with the oppressive battle smoke. He fires and loads automatically without stopping.

Henry's individuality and anxieties disappear into the "labor" of war. The battle combines the materials of industry, hard work, and the "fraternity" of masculine bonding.



The lieutenant collars a soldier trying to run away and beats him back into line. Henry sees several soldiers get shot, their faces looking betrayed, their bodies dropping into awkward poses as if they'd fallen from the sky.

The dead represent the shortcomings of romantic ideas about war: unlike glorified angels, the soldiers' deaths are grotesque and meaningless.



Henry's regiment repels the enemy charge. Gunfire gives way to the regiment's triumphant cheers. The soldiers grin at each other in congratulations. Henry feels like he's just worked a hellish day in a factory.

The soldiers need each other like fellow workers on an assembly line. The work is not glamorous, but they all appreciate a job well done.



Henry watches the scene around him. A battery of artillery guns is lobbing shells overhead. The Union battle flag flies again over distant troops. And to Henry's astonishment, the sun shines brightly in the blue sky above.

The mood of battle is not reflected in the landscape. It might be hellish for Henry, but it's just another sunny day for mother Nature, indifferent to human strife.



Chapter 6

After a quick nap, Henry wakes and reflects with delight that the test of his courage is over. He feels great about himself. He shakes hands with other soldiers. Everyone is proud.

Henry has to interpret his courage after the fact. During battle, he had no sense of it. His judgment is premature, indicating his inexperience.



But the celebration quickly ends when the soldiers realize the enemy is charging again. Preparing to fight again, the soldiers now feel dejected, like slaves forced to fight by their masters. Everyone complains about the lack of reinforcements.

The flip side to being a laborer is being a slave. The soldiers' changes with their mood—now that they're scared, they feel victimized again.



Henry feels intimidated by the persistence of the enemy. Who are these guys, anyway? Didn't they just get beaten? Henry's confidence drains away, and he begins to feel nervous and jittery.

Henry has little combat experience, so he doesn't know how to deal with war's relentlessness. He's also angry since his sense of victory will now be erased.



As the fighting begins, a soldier near Henry jumps up and runs away howling. Soon other soldiers drop their guns and flee. Feeling left behind and terrified, Henry turns and runs with no sense of direction. With his back to the fighting, Henry is more scared than ever, and he races to stay ahead of the retreating pack.

Compare this to Jim's answer in Chapter 1 about following the lead of others. When each man feels isolated and afraid, the soldiers' sense of fraternity disintegrates into a mob with every man out for himself.



Henry runs past a battery of artillery gunners and sees reinforcements coming. He feels these soldiers, now in the path of the enemy, are either wondrous men or total idiots. His pace slows as he gets further behind the lines of reinforcement. He slinks past a general on horseback and, as he does so, overhears that Henry's regiment held off the charge.

Henry's perspective on his own courage depends entirely on the events of the battle. When he thought everyone ran, he felt smart for running. When he learns that other soldiers stayed behind and were victorious, he feels ashamed.



Chapter 7

Upon hearing about his regiment's surprising victory, Henry feels as guilty as a criminal. He resents the "stupidity" of his fellow soldiers who stayed to fight. On the contrary, Henry feels he had assessed the situation rationally and, by running, saved the army at least one of its soldiers. But he thinks his regiment won't understand that and will hate him.

To protect himself from feeling like a coward, Henry tells himself that his fellow soldiers' courage was in fact stupidity. Ironically, later on Henry will think of the exact same behavior as courageous when he stands his ground and fights.



Confused and mentally anguished, Henry wanders into the thick woods. He throws a pine cone at a squirrel who runs off. Henry is pleased to interpret this as a sign: he reasons that it's nature's law to run from danger. Henry feels in harmony with Nature.

To deal with his guilt, Henry interprets the squirrel incident as proof of Nature's sympathy. He has a deep need for approval from somewhere, and his mind keeps searching for it.



Henry pushes deeper into the silent woods to a grove with high branches that resembles a chapel. In this "chapel," Henry is horrified to discover a Union soldier's corpse. Ants are running over its discolored face and swarming up to its dull eyes, and one carries off a piece of flesh. Henry screams, but stays and stares into the dead man's eyes. He slowly paces backward, afraid that the corpse will jump up or call after him, and then he flees in terror.

The silence and "chapel" imagery suggest a religious encounter, but with death rather than life. Whatever the soldier did in battle doesn't matter anymore—now he's just dead. The ant-covered corpse represents Nature's indifference to human concerns.



Chapter 8

The silence in the woods is suddenly broken by the awesomely loud noise of new fighting, "like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine." Henry thinks that the earlier fight must have been nothing compared to this battle. Curious, Henry starts running back toward the battle from which he had fled.

Finding no answers in nature, Henry hopes to find answers in the battle at large. So, he runs back toward the place he ran away from—a metaphor for his constantly changing mind.



Henry runs into a column of bloodied wounded soldiers returning from the front. One laughs and sings hysterically; another complains about their general; almost all of them groan. Another "spectral soldier," gray and ghostlike, walks silently with eyes that seem to stare into the unknown.

These soldiers, wounded after battle, offer Henry his best chance to discover if wounds and death can be glorious. The soldiers' complaints, groans, and silent, staring eyes suggest not.



Walking along, Henry is approached by a dirty, tattered man with two wounds in his head and arm. The tattered man tries to strike up a conversation about how well the fight went and how bravely the soldiers fought. Because Henry is in the column, the tattered man assumes Henry is wounded and asks about his wound. Henry stutters nervously and escapes through the crowd.

The tattered man embodies Henry's guilt about running from the battle. Henry isn't wounded and has no reason for being where he is. He abandons the tattered man, just as he wants to escape his own conscience.



Chapter 9

Henry tries to blend in with the wounded soldiers. But after the tattered man's questions, he feels like they can perceive his guilt. He starts to envy their wounds and wishes he had one too: "a red badge of courage."

Henry still naively thinks it's all about him. His guilt makes him nervous. He longs for a wound to serve as proof of his courage, which inwardly he still doubts.



The graying spectral soldier walks at Henry's side, refusing everyone's offers to help him. Henry suddenly recognizes him as Jim Conklin. Jim says the fight was terrible and he got shot. He tells Henry he's afraid of falling and getting run over by the artillery wagons. Henry, sobbing, promises to help him. But Jim becomes remote, asking to be left alone. Henry pleads with Jim to leave the road for safety.

By helping Jim, Henry sees a chance to make up for not helping the regiment when he ran away.



Spurred on by some strange energy, Jim suddenly bolts away into the fields. Henry is terrified by the sight and chases after Jim with the tattered man. When Jim eventually stops, he stands motionless, demanding to be left alone. His body trembles and stiffens, and he falls awkwardly to the ground dead.

Jim's surreal sprint into the woods to die is among the book's most gruesome episodes. Courage and sympathy have no place here. Instead, the scene shows physical suffering and terror that only the dead know.



Henry is spellbound by Jim's corpse. He stares into Jim's paste-like face and, when Jim's jacket falls away, sees Jim's awful wound. Agonized and enraged, Henry shakes his fist back at the battlefield.

Henry gets an up-close look at wounds, death, and corpses, but nothing makes sense, and he erupts in frustration. Jim's wound was not a symbol of glory or a badge of honor.



Chapter 10

The **tattered man** is awed by **Jim**'s strength and by his strange death. He then admits to **Henry** that he's also starting to feel very unwell, implying that he'd like Henry's help. Henry is scared he'll witness another grim death, but the tattered man reassures him he won't die yet because he's got children depending on him.

Jim didn't want help; the tattered man does. Henry gets a second chance to help a wounded man, but his irritated response suggests he was only helping Jim to help himself.



The **tattered man** tells **Henry** how he got shot in the head without even knowing it. He then describes Henry as looking pretty bad and warns him to take care of his own **wound**, one that might be inside, one that he might not even feel. The tattered man asks Henry where his wound is and Henry replies "don't bother me." Henry feels like the man's questions are "knife thrusts."

Once again the tattered man acts like an external version of Henry's own conscience, identifying that Henry does in fact have a wound inside: his own guilt, which cut into him like "knife thrusts."



Henry resolves to leave the **tattered man** and tells him goodbye, even though he knows the tattered man will probably die without help. Confused, the tattered man stutters and protests, and starts to mistake Henry for another soldier.

But Henry cannot face up to his own guilt. Instead, he runs away from it like a child, even though he knows the tattered man will die without him.



Henry leaves, abandoning the **tattered man** to wander in the field. Now Henry envies the **corpses** of dead soldiers. He wishes he were dead because he'll never be able to hide his secrets.

Henry thinks that his guilt—an internal wound—will be just as visible as the external wound he lacks.



Chapter 11

Moving again toward the "furnace roar" of the battle, **Henry** finds a road packed with retreating wagons and men. This discovery comforts Henry: it seems to amplify the danger he fled at first but has now resolved to confront.

The retreat justifies Henry's own hasty retreat earlier, and also boosts Henry's sense of his own courage, since he is now returning to fight what these men are fleeing.



Everyone moves aside for a column of soldiers headed to the front lines. **Henry** perceives them as a glorious "procession of chosen beings" and feels pathetic, totally inadequate by comparison.

Despite the deaths he has just seen, Henry still views war as glorious. He sees in these soldiers the man he hopes to be.



Henry imagines trading places with one of these men. He pictures himself strong and determined, charging the enemy and getting "calmly killed" on a hilltop for all to see. Henry feels a thrill at contemplating the "magnificent pathos" of his own **corpse**.

Henry imagines death as a romantic part of a story. Who gets "calmly" killed in war? Notice that the point isn't just to get killed, but to be seen getting killed.



Henry almost heads to the front lines, but realizes that he has no gear and no regiment—he's hungry, thirsty, and physically spent. He needs to find his regiment, but fears their harsh disapproval, and that his name will become a catchphrase for coward.

Henry confronts his human needs and realizes the limitations of being just one individual in the army. Realizing one's limits is a major part of becoming a mature person.



Henry thinks his problem could be solved if the army lost. Then his decision to flee from overwhelming odds would be vindicated. Henry realizes this is a terrible thing to wish, but he sees no way out of it.

In growing up, Henry must compromise his desires for his duty, his own vindication versus the oath of loyalty to his army.



Chapter 12

Not long after, **Henry** is shocked to see the very same column of soldiers he had thought so brave come running crazily back through the woods. Confused and caught up again in the raw chaos of war, Henry frantically asks the fleeing soldiers about what's happened. Henry grabs a soldier and stammers "Why—why—" The soldier struggles, demands to be let go, and finally slams his rifle butt on Henry's head to escape.

A major moment of disillusionment for Henry: how could these men, who in Chapter 11 seemed to him to be "chosen beings," now flee in terror? Henry's simple but poignant "Why" implies a lot of questions about war and its purpose—the only answer he gets is a brutal rifle butt to the head.



Henry collapses in pain from the bleeding **wound** on his head, struggling even to crawl. He imagines somewhere safe he can collapse and struggles forward to find it.

Henry isn't wounded by an enemy, but by an ally. His "badge" (wound) is a mark of dishonor and betrayal, not of courage.



On his way to find refuge, **Henry** passes screaming officers, artillery batteries that "belched and howled like brass devils," and more soldiers rushing to the breached line. Henry pushes on, disoriented, remembering pleasant scenes of his past, and contemplating giving up.

The parallel descriptions of the frenzy of battle and Henry's dazed sensations emphasize how unimportant a single man is in a huge army, and how little he can comprehend.



Just then, a **cheerful soldier** comes along and assures **Henry** that he'll return him to the regiment. Though the dark woods seem like a huge hive of confusion, the cheerful soldier guides Henry with an amazingly accurate sense of direction. On finding Henry's regiment, the cheerful soldier shakes Henry's hand and leaves. Henry realizes that "he had not once seen his face."

The cheerful soldier represents pure selfless human kindness. His actions contrast Henry's treatment of the tattered man in Chapter 10. The cheerful soldier is also a divine guide, a Christlike shepherd who returns Henry to the fold (his regiment).



Chapter 13

Henry stumbles toward the campfire of his regiment, concerned about being exposed for a coward, but orders to do anything else. The guard on duty orders him to halt. It's **Wilson**, who is happy to see him.

Though we was terrified of death, Wilson apparently stayed with his regiment through the fight. Wilson never seems to suspect Henry of running away.



Henry stammers out a story: separated from the regiment, he saw terrible fighting and got shot in the head. The regiment's corporal comes over to check him out. They presumed Henry was dead, but of the 42 men missing that day, many soldiers have wandered back to find their camp.

Henry lies to make himself seem courageous, rather than a victim of friendly fire. The corporal's report implies that, like Henry, many other soldiers ran away from battle only to wander back later.



The corporal inspects **Henry's wound** and concludes that he's been grazed by a bullet, finding "a queer lump just as if some feller had lammed yeh on th' head with a club." **Wilson** bandages Henry's head and admires his tough attitude in returning to camp because "[a] shot in th' head ain't foolin' business." Henry fidgets nervously.

Though the evidence points to Henry's lump being exactly what it is—the result of a smack on the head—everyone believes his lie. Henry is uncomfortable with Wilson's praise because he knows he doesn't really deserve it.



Some soldiers are pale and exhausted around the fire. Others have sunk into "death-like" sleep. **Wilson** gently cares for **Henry**, arranging his own blankets for Henry to sleep on. Henry falls gratefully asleep and "in a moment was like his comrades."

Wilson's generous acts show he has matured. Henry has rejoined his regiment, his community, but it's a community of death. Henry's reunion with his men is ambiguous, not glorious.



Chapter 14

In the morning, **Henry** wakes to the distant sounds of battle, which sound as if they have no beginning or end. Looking around in the grayish light of dawn, Henry mistakes the other sleeping soldiers for **corpses**. A second later he realizes they're alive, but he feels his vision may come true on a bloody battlefield in the future.

The noise signifies the endless grind of the war machine. Henry's vision might be of the Battle of Gettysburg, the Civil War's bloodiest battle and his regiment's most likely next stop.



Bugles, drums, and shrill officers help stir the sleepy camp to life. Among the grumbling soldiers, **Wilson** tends the fire. When Wilson adjusts **Henry's** bandage, Henry lashes out in irritation, and Wilson offers him breakfast. When three soldiers nearby get into a scuffle, Wilson goes to intervene and settles their dispute. Henry reflects on the changes in Wilson: no longer a testy, belligerent youth, Wilson is now quieter and humble, but confident in his abilities.

Wilson was initially a "loud young soldier" to compensate for his fears. Now, having faced his fears and admitted his personal limitations, he is a quieter and confident man. Henry still hasn't gotten there, as his testy reaction to Wilson shows.



Henry and **Wilson** talk about the previous day. Wilson says the regiment saw hard fighting, but Henry reassures him that they didn't see anything compared to the fighting he has experienced. Henry tells him **Jim Conklin** is dead. Wilson says the regiment lost half their men in the fight, but many were just scattered, fighting alongside other regiments and then returning, just like Henry.

Henry, who ran, puts down the fighting that Wilson actually saw. Henry is still the loud, bragging boy that Wilson used to be. Wilson doesn't realize it, but his comment about soldiers from the regiment getting "scattered" implies that many men did just what Henry did: ran, only to return later claiming to have fought in order to avoid looking like cowards.



Chapter 15

The regiment reassembles and is ready to march. In line, **Henry** remembers the packet of letters that **Wilson** had entrusted to him. Henry decides to keep the packet as a “small weapon” to use against Wilson if he asks about Henry running away. Thinking back on Wilson’s serious and sentimental gesture of the packet, Henry feels superior and proud again.

Henry is as much at war with his insecurity as with the enemy: the tattered man with his “knife thrusts,” the “small weapon” Henry holds to use against Wilson. Here, Henry is smug about Wilson’s fear, as if he had never suffered any weakness.



Feeling like a veteran, **Henry** forgives himself for his anxieties and internal philosophical debates: they were just youthful delusions. Now he feels like a man of experience, confident that he’s been chosen for glory. He remembers how the other soldiers who ran away were overly hasty and wild. Henry scorns them, believing that he fled the battle with “discretion and dignity.”

Henry flip-flops on his attitudes about himself. He assumes he’s become a man (after one day) and a veteran (after one fight). His interpretation of his running away as more dignified than his fellow soldiers’ actions is ridiculous: he tried to run faster than everyone else.



Wilson nervously approaches **Henry** and asks for his packet of letters back. Seeing that Wilson is blushing with shame, Henry returns the packet without a word. Because he withheld comment and did not take advantage of his friend, Henry judges himself to be a generous and extraordinary man.

Though it costs him embarrassment, Wilson is ready to face his fears and shortcomings. But Henry is not ready, preferring to remain happily delusional about his self-importance.



Chapter 16

The regiment marches to relieve other soldiers dug into some trenches. Settling in, **Wilson** puts his head down and promptly falls asleep. The firing of muskets and cannons swells to a tremendous roar.

Earlier, Wilson was terrified when faced with battle. Now, having faced his fear, he takes a nap.



When the gunfire dies down, the soldiers share rumors that their army has suffered a terrible defeat. The regiment is pulled back and **Henry** catches glimpses of the gray enemy and hears their triumphant yells.

The noise of war drowns out thoughts and feelings. When it gets quiet, the men come back from battle mode to themselves.



Henry starts complaining about his commanders, telling other soldiers that the generals must be idiots because their soldiers are fighting hard and still losing. Another soldier sarcastically says that Henry must think he fought yesterday’s battle all by himself. Henry, stung and afraid that his secret will be discovered, quickly quiets down.

The soldiers try to pass the blame. Since they don’t control their own fates and want to seem courageous, they can’t admit fault or defeat. But when Henry carries it too far, he feels exposed as a hypocrite.



The **lieutenant** leads them back to a position in a clearing and tells his complaining soldiers to shut up—less talking, more fighting. But they’re tired and annoyed, and feel hounded by the relentless enemy. Forming into a line, they wearily await the approaching charge.

The oppressive noise and enemy fire makes the soldiers feel trapped and alone. This setting amplifies the psychological tension, which is just as much a part of battle as gunfire.



Chapter 17

The assault begins. **Henry** is furious that the enemy has given them no time to rest, no room to breathe. He tells **Wilson** the enemy better watch out if they keep up the chase. Wilson calmly replies that if the enemy keeps chasing them, everyone will be driven back into the river. This makes Henry even angrier.

While Henry still acts tough, Wilson calmly reveals what’s really at stake: everyone in their regiment could be killed. If they were driven into the river, the regiment would end up where it started and its journey would have been an absolute failure.



Henry’s regiment starts shooting, creating a wall of smoke. Henry feels like his rifle is a little useless stick. Disoriented by the noise, the smoke, and his own surging hatred, Henry is absorbed in the action. He stands, fires, and falls, thinking he might be shot. He ignores it, continuously reloading the hot barrel to keep shooting. Sensing that the enemy might be falling back, Henry pushes forward, firing furiously.

Henry is driven by rage and rather than by visions of glory. Henry is not aware of an enemy or purpose. He’s just working on instinct and reflex, like a factory worker. He ignores a possible wound rather than proudly focusing on it.



A voice calls out to **Henry** to quit. He realizes he’s alone in front with no enemies in sight. He turns to see his regiment staring at him, amazed. The fight is over, and Henry says, “Oh.”

Henry achieves his dream: to appear brave in the eyes of others. His weak response (“Oh”) shows how courage can be dull and unglamorous.



The **lieutenant** praises **Henry**, saying that if he had ten thousand “wild cats” like Henry he could win the war in a week. The soldiers congratulate each other and Henry for fighting like a beast. But Henry hadn’t even been aware of the fight. It feels to him as if he was asleep and woke up a knight.

Henry hadn’t planned or even realized his courageous outbreak. It happened somewhere deep within his consciousness, beyond his capacity to perceive or describe it.



Chapter 18

The soldiers learn that one of their own was wounded: Jimmy Rogers, who is screaming and thrashing in the grass. **Henry** goes with **Wilson** to find some water, but there is no stream. As they return, they get a view of the entire battlefield, watching lines of men and masses of troops. They see a general and his staff riding along, almost running over a wounded man on the ground.

The battle has begun to change Henry: he now joins Wilson in trying to help others. Just as Jim was afraid of being run over, the wounded man is almost trampled by officers. This is a metaphor for the insignificance of individual soldiers within the vast war machine.



The general stops near enough for **Henry** and **Wilson** to overhear some news. A strong enemy charge is threatening to break the lines, and the attack will be costly to repel. The general asks an **officer** what troops he can spare. The officer offers Henry’s regiment, saying that they fight like “mule drivers.” The general accepts, admitting that few of them will probably survive.

As if zooming out from Henry’s individual experience of fighting, the officers gain a wider and more calculating perspective on the battle. Soldiers and regiments are like pieces in a chess match. Some, like Henry’s regiment, are expendable.



Disheartened, **Henry** and **Wilson** return to their regiment to share the news of their impending charge. They don’t tell anyone about the **officer’s** insult. Henry feels like his eyes have been opened to his own insignificance. The soldiers tighten their belts and get ready for a sprint to the woods. Henry and Wilson quietly nod when a shaggy soldier nearby says they’ll all get swallowed.

There’s an ironic gap between the feeling of being important and the reality. Henry matures not just by fighting hard, but by coming to terms with his insignificance. Both take courage. But Henry isn’t quite ready to give in to his limited importance: he will fight against it, and the insulting officer, in the next skirmish.



Chapter 19

Henry’s regiment stumbles forward to start their charge across a clearing. Enemy gunfire erupts from the distant woods, breaking up the regiment’s formation. Soldiers collapse awkwardly when shot and the charge leaves a trail of **bodies** on the ground.

Crane uses the charge to explore how individual actions can become group actions, and vice versa. When the charge falters, the soldiers break formation: they fall from a group back into individuals.



Focusing on a distant clump of trees, **Henry** runs unconsciously ahead of the pack, looking crazed, like an “insane soldier.” He feels as if he can sense everything around him: each blade of grass, the rough bark of trees, the feverish enemy, the falling soldiers.

Once again, Henry is leading the battle charge, but is totally unaware of it, focused on a single goal. He’s in a zone, only able to perceive close detail amid the chaos of war.



At first, the soldiers feel like frenzied berserkers, but they soon falter, huddling together like dazed sheep. The **lieutenant** screams to get them moving. **Wilson** fires a shot into the woods, snapping the soldiers out of their trance. The regiment starts forward again.

Everything depends on mindset. When confident, the soldiers transcend their individuality and become dangerous. When doubtful, they huddle like a herd of frightened animals.



But when they reach some trees, the soldiers hesitate a second time. The **lieutenant**, **Henry**, and **Wilson** all scream at the men to push on. Their **flag** obediently gets moving again and the men follow. Running nearby, Henry feels a deep love for the flag. It seems like a goddess to him, “a creation of beauty and invulnerability.”

Henry’s personification of the flag as a goddess represents how soldiers under stress need strong symbols to believe in. Confident leaders can do the same job. Notice how Henry and Wilson help the lieutenant inspire the men.



Henry sees the color sergeant get shot and stumble. He and **Wilson** each lunge for the **flag** and they tug it away from the **corpse’s** firm grasp.

If the flag falls, the symbolic power dies with its carrier. The two friends struggle to keep the flag’s meaning alive.



Chapter 20

Henry and **Wilson** scuffle to carry the **flag**, each wanting to put himself at greater risk. Henry pushes Wilson off roughly.

Both Henry and Wilson are inspired by a mix of selflessness and the desire for glory.



Facing incredible fire, the regiment gives up the charge again and slinks back to the trees. The soldiers feel stunned and betrayed by their unsuccessful attempt to beat an enemy that suddenly seems invincible. More enemy soldiers start to close in around them. The **lieutenant** has been shot in the arm but continues to urge the men on, swearing wildly.

The soldiers' faith in their flag and leaders makes them feel invincible. But realizing that they're not, they feel as if their faith was futile. Just as their flag nearly fell, the lieutenant gets shot—another assault on the regiment's symbols of strength.



Henry realizes that his wish to prove the **insulting officer** wrong will not come true. Ashamed and angry, Henry joins the **lieutenant** in trying to inspire the regiment to fight, but the men are run down.

Wanting revenge on the officer, Henry is still fighting a battle for self-esteem.



The regiment starts to scatter in panic. Suddenly, the **lieutenant** sees gray soldiers advancing through the smoke and a vicious and desperate fight breaks out at close range. **Henry** sits on the ground with the **flag**, consoled only that his regiment will go down fighting.

Henry has no gun in this battle. But he does have the flag, which serves as a more powerful symbolic weapon. The men are finally motivated by their own desperation.



Soon the enemy fire dwindles away. The smoke clears and the field is empty, except for some twisted **corpses**. Victorious, the blue soldiers cheer hoarsely, proud for having proved that "they were men."

The soldiers had felt trapped and powerless. They fought to push back the enemy, but also to prove their manhood to themselves and to others.



Chapter 21

Relieved, the regiment returns back to the line of other blue soldiers. They are met with jeers and sarcastic questions from veteran soldiers still in reserve. **Henry's** regiment is insulted and angry, but Henry realizes that the distance they covered to the trees, even though it had seemed vast, is actually pretty small.

Henry realizes what readers already know: that his subjective impressions do not accurately reflect reality. It's a sad change for the regiment: the honor they had felt just moments before vanishes in an instant.



The **insulting officer** storms over and complains to the colonel of **Henry's** regiment that they stopped too short, just 100 feet from victory. Apparently, the charge was only a diversion for another attack. The insulting officer calls Henry's regiment "a lot of mud diggers."

An ironic twist: the victory is interpreted as a loss, and the regiment suffered for a diversion, not the real attack. Cogs in the war machine, the soldiers can't see the big picture.



The colonel apologizes. The **lieutenant** starts to protest that his men fought hard, but the colonel shuts him up. **Wilson** complains to **Henry** about the injustice of it all. Each agrees that they fought as hard as they could. They blame the general in charge.

The soldiers' extreme efforts and bravery is unimportant to the commanding officers. To those officers, the soldiers are just chess pieces, to be moved, and possibly killed, as part of a larger strategy.



Several soldiers rush over to **Henry** and **Wilson**, reporting that they overheard the colonel and **lieutenant** praising the bravery Henry and Wilson showed in leading the charge. They should be major-generals, said the colonel. Henry and Wilson shrug off the compliments, but they are secretly thrilled.

The regiment's officers recognize that Henry and Wilson have leadership qualities, especially their willingness to put themselves at risk to inspire the other soldiers.



Chapter 22

As his regiment awaits its next assault, **Henry** feels calm and self-confident. He becomes absorbed in watching the fighting down the line and in distant fields. Waves of blue and gray surge against each other, trying to win positions behind fences or trees.

Detached from his battle mindset, Henry sees the fighting like an officer: he's not watching soldiers; instead, he sees colored waves and strategic surges.



A "churchlike" silence descends just before the gunfire becomes a colossal roar. **Henry's** ears are overwhelmed. His regiment, depleted but ready, charges again into the field. Henry stands in the middle of the new fighting with the **flag** still over him.

The noise signals the climax of the novel. In the group roar, no individual voices can be heard, just as the soldiers, including Henry, have merged to become a single wave of men.



Henry's regiment notices a group of enemy soldiers running toward a fence nearby. They fire vigorously to stop them, but the enemy reaches the fence and, protected behind it, starts to do serious damage. A sergeant is shot through the cheeks, unable to scream. Soldiers drop dead around the field.

Having just watched the battle unfold, Henry and his fellow soldiers know that losing the fence is bad news. Like the corpses in the novel, the sergeant cannot communicate the meaning of his wound.



Still angry with the **insulting officer**, **Henry** resolves not to budge, hoping to prove that his regiment is not a bunch of "mule drivers" and "mud diggers." Henry thinks his final revenge will be his own **dead body** lying on the battlefield. **Wilson** and the **lieutenant** are nearby, but the regiment is growing weaker.

Sensing defeat, Henry tries to save his pride by dreaming that his corpse will be his revenge. But he should know that the insulting officer will not care—and that corpses are not symbols of glory.



Chapter 23

The colonel orders **Henry's** regiment to charge: they must retake that fence. To Henry's surprise, the soldiers are not weary, but resolved and ready to go, fastening bayonets to their gun barrels.

Henry has been too self-absorbed to credit the other soldiers. Like the insulting officer in Chapter 21, he also considered them merely "mud diggers."



The soldiers spring forward with new energy, feeling reckless and unselfish. **Henry** runs in front of the men of his regiment, carrying the **flag** and shrieking encouragements.

Soldiers must give themselves to the reckless rush of battle. Henry has become a leader.



Seeing the mad charge of **Henry's** regiment, many of the gray soldiers run away. However, a handful of determined enemy soldiers remain behind the fence with their **flag** waving above them.

To Henry, this final conflict is largely between the opposing flags. Which symbol will endure?



Henry's regiment stops and fires a devastating volley at close range. Henry sees that the enemy's flag bearer is mortally wounded. Henry wants that **flag** for himself as a prize. But **Wilson** leaps over the fence and rips away the enemy's flag from the dying man's grasp. He screams in triumph.

As in chapter 19, a flag is pulled from the hands of a corpse. When the enemy flag bearer dies, his regiment effectively ceases to exist, so the battle ends when Wilson gets the flag.



Henry's regiment celebrates. They've captured four men: one ignores the blue soldiers; one yells horrible curses at them; another sits in silent shame; and one curious youth eagerly talks of battles and outcomes, yearning for news. Settling down behind the fence with their **flags**, Henry and **Wilson** congratulate each other.

The prisoners seem just like Union soldiers. The curious youth is a lot like Henry. The story suggests that all soldiers are humans and are driven primarily by emotions, not military or political affiliations.



Chapter 24

All the battles on the fields start to wind down. Orders soon come for the regiment to march back to its camp on the river.

Notice how the regiment walks away from all the ground it just fought to win.



During the walk, **Henry's** mindset changes from hardened battle-mode to more everyday thoughts. He starts to study all of his past actions. He remembers running away from battle. Now he knows he was wrong but forgives himself for being a novice.

Henry's thoughts fit his past mistakes into a narrative about his character. He recasts his story now as the tale of how he became a courageous man...



Henry then remembers the **tattered man** and cringes. As the regiment chats about their victory, Henry is sad and silent, worried that abandoning the tattered man will always haunt him. But Henry has an insight: yes, his guilt will remain, but his guilt will also make him a better man. Henry is glad he can look back with disgust at his boasts and naïve attitudes about war.

...but it's not that easy. Henry still has guilt that haunts him. The tattered man doesn't fit into the story Henry wants to tell about himself. So he revises that story again, and it gets more complex, incorporating contradictions and faults.



Henry thinks he sees things with new eyes. He realizes that, in the big picture, he is tiny but not insignificant. With this balance of humility and self-esteem, Henry feels a "quiet manhood."

Henry finally realizes what Wilson already did. Even though his role is small, Henry commits to playing it as best he can.



It starts to rain and the soldiers grumble as they trudge through the mud. But **Henry** smiles, believing again that he has a place in the world. Relieved to be out of battle, Henry imagines tranquil scenes and "an existence of soft and eternal peace." Then a ray of sunlight breaks through the low clouds.

Having a much better sense of himself, Henry can relax. He has also matured in wanting peace, rather than war. The ray of sunlight suggests hope, but is also a reminder of nature's indifference to the war.



Important Quotes

Chapter 1 Quotes

He had burned several times to enlist. Tales of great movements shook the land. They might not be distinctly Homeric, but there seemed to be much glory in them. He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds.

Chapter 2 Quotes

He finally concluded that the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze, and then figuratively to watch his legs to discover their merits and faults. He reluctantly admitted that he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer. To gain it, he must have blaze, blood, and danger, even as a chemist requires this, that, and the other.

Chapter 3 Quotes

The ranks opened covertly to avoid the corpse. ... The youth looked keenly at the ashen face. ... He vaguely desired to walk around and around the body and stare; the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question.

Chapter 4 Quotes

The battle reflection that shone for an instant in the faces on the mad current made the youth feel that forceful hands from heaven would not have been able to have held him in place if he could have got intelligent control of his legs.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Directly he was working at his weapon like an automatic affair. He suddenly lost concern for himself, and forgot to look at a menacing fate. He became not a man but a member. ... He was welded into a common personality which was dominated by a single desire.

Under foot there were a few ghastly forms motionless. They lay twisted in fantastic contortions. Arms were bent and heads were turned in incredible ways. It seemed that the dead men must have fallen from some great height to get into such positions. They looked to be dumped out upon the ground from the sky.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Into the youth's eyes there came a look that one can see in the orbs of a jaded horse. His neck was quivering with nervous weakness and the muscles of his arms felt numb and bloodless. His hands, too, seemed large and awkward as if he was wearing invisible mittens. And there was a great uncertainty about his knee joints.

Chapter 7 Quotes

He had fled, he told himself, because annihilation approached. He had done a good part in saving himself, who was a little piece of the army. ... It was all plain that he had proceeded according to very correct and commendable rules. His actions had been sagacious things. They had been full of strategy. They were the work of a master's legs.

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip. ... The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look.

Chapter 8 Quotes

The battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him. Its complexities and powers, its grim processes, fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Because of the tattered soldier's question he now felt that his shame could be viewed. He was continually casting sidelong glances to see if the men were contemplating the letters of guilt he felt burned into his brow.

At times he regarded the wounded soldiers in an envious way. He conceived persons with torn bodies to be peculiarly happy. He wished that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage.

Chapter 10 Quotes

The simple questions of the tattered man had been knife thrusts to him. They asserted a society that probes pitilessly at secrets until all is apparent. ... [H]is crime ... was sure to be brought plain by one of those arrows which cloud the air and are constantly pricking, discovering, proclaiming those things which are willed to be forever hidden.

Chapter 11 Quotes

As he watched his envy grew ... Swift pictures of himself, apart, yet in himself, came to him—a blue desperate figure leading lurid charges with one knee forward and a broken blade high—a blue, determined figure standing before a crimson and steel assault, getting calmly killed on a high place before the eyes of all. He thought of the magnificent pathos of his dead body.

Chapter 12 Quotes

The fight was lost. The dragons were coming with invincible strides. The army, helpless in the matted thickets and blinded by the overhanging night, was going to be swallowed. War, the red animal, war, the blood swollen god, would have bloated fill.

Chapter 13 Quotes

"Yeh've been grazed by a ball. It's raised a queer lump jest as if some feller had lammed yeh on th' head with a club." — *The Colonel*

Chapter 14 Quotes

The youth took note of a remarkable change in his comrade ... 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.

Chapter 15 Quotes

His self pride was now entirely restored. In the shade of its flourishing growth he stood with braced and self-confident legs, and since nothing could now be discovered he did not shrink from an encounter with the eyes of judges, and allowed no thoughts of his own to keep him from an attitude of manfulness. He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man.

Chapter 17 Quotes

It was revealed to him that he had been a barbarian, a beast. He had fought like a pagan who defends his religion. Regarding it, he saw that it was fine, wild, and, in some ways, easy. ... [H]e was now what he called a hero. And he had not been aware of the process. He had slept and, awakening, found himself a knight.

Chapter 18 Quotes

These happenings had occupied an incredibly short time, yet the youth felt that in them he had been made aged. New eyes were given to him. And the most startling thing was to learn suddenly that he was very insignificant. The officer spoke of the regiment as if he referred to a broom.

Chapter 19 Quotes

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. It was a goddess, radiant, that bended its form with an imperious gesture to him. It was a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes. Because no harm could come to it he endowed it with power.

Chapter 20 Quotes

But the regiment was a machine run down. The two men babbled at a forceless thing. The soldiers who had heart to go slowly were continually shaken in their resolves by a knowledge that comrades were slipping with speed back to the lines. It was difficult to think of reputation when others were thinking of skins.

Chapter 21 Quotes

He discovered that the distances, as compared with the brilliant measurings of his mind, were trivial and ridiculous. The stolid trees, where much had taken place, seemed incredibly near. The time, too, now that he reflected, he saw to have been short. He wondered at the number of emotions and events that had been crowded into such little spaces.

Chapter 22 Quotes

A spluttering sound had begun in the woods. It swelled with amazing speed to a profound clamor that involved the earth in noises. The splitting crashes swept along the lines until an interminable roar was developed. To those in the midst of it it became a din fitted to the universe. It was the whirring and thumping of gigantic machinery, complications among the smaller stars.

Chapter 23 Quotes

the mob of blue men hurling themselves on the dangerous group of rifles were again grown suddenly wild with an enthusiasm of unselfishness ... they were in a state of frenzy, perhaps because of forgotten vanities, and it made an exhibition of sublime recklessness.

The youth's friend went over the obstruction in a tumbling heap and sprang at the flag as a panther at prey. He pulled at it and, wrenching it free, swung up its red brilliancy with a mad cry of exultation even as the color bearer, gasping, lurched over in a final throes and, stiffening convulsively, turned his dead face to the ground.

Chapter 24 Quotes

His mind was undergoing a subtle change. It took moments for it to cast off its battleful ways and resume its accustomed course of thought. ... He had dwelt in a land of strange, squalling upheavals and had come forth. He had been where there was red of blood and black of passion, and he was escaped.

He felt a quiet manhood, nonassertive but of sturdy and strong blood. He knew that he would no more quail before his guides wherever they should point. He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man.

ThemeTracker™

The LitCharts ThemeTracker is a mini-version of the entire LitChart. The ThemeTracker provides a quick timeline-style rundown of all the important plot points and allows you to track the themes throughout the work at a glance.

Themes	Chapter	
	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Jim Conklin tells a bunch of soldiers that their regiment has been ordered to march into battle. – Having dreamed of glorious battles all his life, Henry now worries that he might run away. – Henry asks Jim if he would ever run away. Jim replies he will follow the other soldiers' lead.
	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – After several days of waiting, the regiment finally marches to battle. – Henry meets Wilson and asks if he would run from battle. Wilson confidently says he would not.
	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The regiment runs toward the battle. Henry passes his first corpse. – The soldiers dig into position but are continuously ordered to move. – Wilson privately tells Henry he expects to die and hands him a packet of letters for his parents.
	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Bullets and shells start hitting around them. The lieutenant is shot in the hand. – A group of blue soldiers runs past in frenzied retreat. They are mocked by veteran soldiers nearby.
	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The enemy appears and charges Henry's regiment. Henry starts working furiously at his gun, feeling like a cog in a machine. – The lieutenant beats back a soldier who is trying to run away. – Henry's regiment celebrates when they successfully repel the enemy charge.
	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – But the enemy regroupes and charges them again. – One by one, blue soldiers start running away from the line. Henry soon joins them and runs like crazy. – Henry overhears a general saying that the 304th held back the enemy's charge.
	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Henry feels really guilty but rationalizes that he made the smart decision. – Henry wanders into the woods and feels in harmony with nature. But he discovers a dead soldier's rotting corpse and flees in terror.
	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Returning toward the battle, Henry finds a column of wounded soldiers in retreat. He sees a spectral soldier. – A tattered man asks Henry questions about his wounds, but Henry loses him in the crowd.
	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Henry decides he wants a wound—"a red badge of courage"—of his own. – Henry sees a spectral soldier who turns out to be Jim Conklin, suffering from a terrible wound. – Delusional, Jim runs into the fields and collapses dead. Henry and the tattered man follow and view the corpse in shock.
	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The tattered man tells Henry he's feeling bad. He describes his own injuries and asks Henry again about his wounds. – Henry is frustrated and abandons the tattered man in a field.
	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Henry meets another procession of retreating troops. – Everyone watches a column of soldiers heading toward the battle. Henry envies them, wishing he could go and die a glorious death.
	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The soldiers come running back from the battle in panicked retreat. – Henry grabs a passing soldier to ask "why—" but the man slams Henry's head with the butt of his rifle. – A cheerful soldier guides Henry back to his regiment. Henry realizes he never saw the man's face.
	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Henry lies to Wilson about what happened. The colonel says Henry's wound looks just like he got hit on the head. – Wilson bandages Henry's head and gives him his own blankets to sleep on.
	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Wilson fixes Henry's bandage, makes breakfast, and settles some disputes in camp. – Wilson tells Henry about the regiment's losses and how most of the men have returned, like Henry.
	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The regiment prepares for battle again. – Wilson sheepishly asks Henry for his letters back. Henry returns them and feels morally superior, ready for anything.
	16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The regiment marches into position in the woods. – Henry complains about the generals, but shuts up when another soldier calls him out for being too bold.

Theme Key

- Courage
- The War Machine
- Youth and Manhood
- Noise and Silence
- Nature
- The Living and the Dead



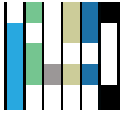
17

- Enemy soldiers attack the line. **Henry** furiously works his gun and gets completely absorbed in the action.
- When the fighting stops, **Henry** is standing alone in front of everyone. The **lieutenant** praises his fierceness.



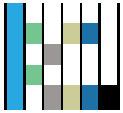
18

- **Henry** and **Wilson** run to find water and overhear an **insulting officer** call their regiment “mule drivers.”
- **Henry** and **Wilson** hear a general planning to use their regiment in a deadly assault and return to the line.



19

- The regiment charges into a clearing, but comes under heavy fire and stops twice along the way. The **lieutenant**, **Henry**, and **Wilson** scream encouragements.
- **Henry** and **Wilson** grab the battle **flag** from the fallen color guard.



20

- **Henry** pulls the **flag** away from **Wilson** and carries it at the front.
- The regiment starts to retreat, but there’s nowhere to go. The **lieutenant** gets shot in the arm.
- The enemy comes into view and the regiment wins a desperate fight at close range.



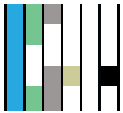
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- The regiment returns to the lines but gets called “mud diggers” by the **insulting officer**. They hadn’t made it far enough over the field.
- Some of the men tell **Henry** and **Wilson** how they overheard their commanders praising their bravery in battle.



22

- The regiment charges into the field again.
- A small group of gray soldiers takes over a strategic fence and cuts down much of the regiment.
- **Henry** imagines his own **corpse** on the battlefield as his revenge on the **insulting officer**.



23

- The regiment makes a furious charge to the fence and most of the enemy runs away.
- **Wilson** grabs the enemy’s **flag** from the dying color guard.
- The regiment takes four prisoners and celebrates victory.



24

- The regiment is ordered back to their camp on the river.
- **Henry** contemplates his past actions and judges them with a new fairness and maturity.