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*On The Experience of Combat in The Red Badge of Courage*

In The Red Badge of Courage, Stephen Crane speaks from something of a hybrid standpoint on the effect of combat on individual soldiers. Certainly, while some soldiers are undoubtedly hardened by the experience, others are shattered by it, but the reactions to combat described in the book are almost as many and varied as the characters to whom those reactions are ascribed. On closer examination, it would appear that Crane’s overarching point regarding the psychological impact of combat is that it is a uniformly transformative experience for those involved. Combat itself is portrayed as a near-mystical experience, a stream of events with the power to blur the boundaries between reality and perception. In this paper, the transformative experience of combat upon the youth in The Red Badge of Courage will be examined at length.  
 It is perhaps interesting to note that, writing after the fact and without any personal connection to the Civil War but for a stint “at Claverack College, a military school on the east bank of the Hudson, where he drilled with his classmates and marched about the playing fields in adolescent self-delight,”[[1]](#footnote-0) Crane does not appear to take a particular political or ideological slant in the text. Instead, he chooses to paint what has been called by many reviewers[[2]](#footnote-1) an “impressionistic” view of the war, foregoing overt provision of context and grounding in favor of an almost wholly sensory approach. Names are but a perfunctory afterthought, and they are never learned from the narrator, only from the snippets of conversation he reports to the reader. The places involved seem merely scenes for “the youth” to meditate upon. Crane could have easily provided concrete geographical anchors and historical information for these sets in the manner of a historical fiction writer like Patrick O’Brian, but he chose not to- with the result that The Red Badge of Courage reads more like a contemplation of War as some kind of cosmic entity rather than as a “war novel.” With this in mind, and given a little tweaking with respect to technology and scenery, the vision of combat which Crane provides could easily be transformed into a narrative of a soldier in a wide variety of wars, and in this sense it is timeless; as Ernest Hemingway remarked, it is “truer to how war [is] than any war the boy who wrote it would ever live to see.”[[3]](#footnote-2)

Given this background and the style in which The Red Badge of Courage is written, it is not surprising that Crane chooses to paint combat in a manner neither against nor for the Civil War as a specific event. Crane is more interested in evincing a particular feeling of parallelism between combat and inner change on the one hand and war and change in the wider world on the other. For instance, the youth’s first experience of combat, in which he fights because of a feeling that “something of which he was a part- a regiment, an, army, a cause, or a country- was in crisis,”[[4]](#footnote-3) is a clear reference to the crisis that the “culmination of nearly a century of sectional conflict,”[[5]](#footnote-4) which Lincoln’s election brought to a head, and which ultimately resulted in the Civil War. In the youth’s second experience with combat, he discovers that the sentiments of some of his comrades, along with many people of the Union and the Confederacy, both at home and engaged in combat, are misguided. The war was not something that could be easily resolved- that it was sadly not the case that “one more sech fight as that an’ th’ war’ll be over,”[[6]](#footnote-5) no matter how titanic and traumatic that fight might be to those involved in it. The youth has fought as good a fight as any, and even so, the war drags on unchanged. He is asked to throw himself once more into hell’s maw, and this time he breaks and deserts his regiment. The youth’s desertion may not have come at the urging of Mr. Vallandigham,[[7]](#footnote-6) but the feelings of helplessness, fear, and futility which drive the youth to commit the act mirror the same feelings which prompted 200,000 Union soldiers and 104,000 Confederate soldiers[[8]](#footnote-7) to desert over the course of the war.

Following the youth’s desertion, the reader is presented with a front-row view of the first stage of his metamorphosis. After a great deal of lying to himself regarding his motivations for deserting, the youth finds himself struck with an irresistible desire to seek the front once more, “its grim processes fascinated him. He must go close and see it produce corpses.”[[9]](#footnote-8) This shift from direct participant to fascinated observer is akin to the shift America experienced following the Civil War. Once the heat and flame of war had passed, Americans had time to reflect, much as the youth as he wandered in the wilderness following his flight, about the meaning of war and whether or not it would have been more prudent to avoid the conflict altogether, rather than “getting calmly killed on a high place before the eyes of all,”[[10]](#footnote-9) in a metaphorical sense. The question at hand for the youth and, by extension, for America, at this point seems to be whether or not there are things worth dying for. The youth ultimately comes to the conclusion (albeit by way of a stray rifle-butt to the head) that in the end, fighting is not required to give some abstract self-justification, but is sometimes a necessity in and of itself. He is placed once more at the head of battle, and having no room in his conscience to run, he resolves that he must fight; not for glory or the furthering of some political motive, but simply to “hold [a little tree] against the world.”[[11]](#footnote-10) It would seem that Crane’s reason for this phase of the youth’s development is to advance the idea that there are times where war is the only option, however undesirable, and that the motivations for war are at best merely excuses for the primal need for self-preservation. This sentiment is echoed by the long train of events and clashes of opinion which led up to the Civil War- whatever the reason any individual man had for fighting, it was a fight that had to be fought. In this sense, Crane appears to speak in defense of the war as a kind of unavoidable event, almost like a natural disaster, or the inevitable fall of an object trapped by gravity.

From this point, he is quickly forged into a warrior-spirit, “capable of profound sacrifices, a tremendous death,”[[12]](#footnote-11) and charges with the American flag into the ranks of the enemy. This final step in his transformation is brought on by his acceptance of the necessity of war, but it is separate from the preceding step in that it marks his conscious surrender to the myth of glory. Despite the fact that the youth knows that the war is in and of itself an empty act, he has found in it a purpose entirely separate from the purposes which it ostensibly touts as true- he has found his own reason to fight. Above all other images in the text, the symbolism of the youth’s charge to capture the Confederate flag[[13]](#footnote-12) is too plain to ignore or to have occurred by accident; Crane is clearly stating that for him, the defeat of the Confederacy was a reason worth fighting a war for. That is not to say, however, that Crane is necessarily damning the Confederacy or the opinions of their supporters; the highly personal nature of this final tempering combat is a sign of an openness to the validity of other points of view upon the matter. Crane is not saying that men should fight for *his* cause, but that should they fight at all, they should fight for *a* cause.

At the last, the youth has not been hardened or broken by combat, by his own admission, “as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath his soul changed. He came from hot plowshares to prospects of clover tranquility, and it was as if hot plowshares were not. Scars faded as flowers.”[[14]](#footnote-13) He has been wrought anew by the experience, just like America was wrought anew by the shared experience of the Civil War. Crane’s closing scene, wherein a ray of light pierces the clouds over the river, is a prayer of hope, not just for the youth, but for the nation. A prayer that the war’s transformative power might change the United States in such a way that the scars made by the hot plowshares of combat might one day also fade to flowers.

*-D.N.*

1. Delbanco, Andrew. "The American Stephen Crane: The Context of The Red Badge of Courage." *New essays on The red badge of courage*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 52. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. e.g. “The Impressionism of Crane and Conrad, Author and Authority” by Gloria Ellen Richards. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Foote, xi [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Crane, 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Stone, 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Crane, 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. See Stone, 32-38 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Weitz, Mark. "Desertion." *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: a political, social, and military history*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2000. 593. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Crane, 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Crane 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Crane 178 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Crane 232 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Crane 234-236 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Crane 245 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)