*Writing clearly; using words that sound good and make sense*

*Using a narrow argument - focusing on a section of the book*

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American Literature

Mr. Baker

*The Red Badge of Courage*

History suggests that human existence has been a multi-million year struggle to understand and control the natural world. Despite eons of evolution and philosophical development, man still finds itself in a struggle with the world in which he inhabits. Through the course of many battles in Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of* Courage, the soldiers frequently lack control over their environment because of their lowly stature. Succumbing to nature's treachery, the men are often in poor spirits. Although volatile throughout the book, Henry's attitude at the end of the book contains a positive outlook on life due to a newfound feeling of control he achieves in the last two lines. Crane's bleakly ironic tone during the last lines of the novel undermines Henry's unexpected positive attitude, replacing it with a dark view of nature through the lens that is war.

The soldiers in Henry's regiment are out of place in their surroundings and attempt to control nature in their discomfort. Just prior to the book's conclusion, Henry references the importance of "walking sticks" (171), a tool with which the soldiers attempt to control nature. The regiment's quest for control of nature appears unsuccessful as Henry describes his fellow soldiers as a "bedraggled train, despondent and muttering, marching with churning effort in a trough of liquid brown mud under a low, wretched sky" (171). Henry explains this train of humans to be disorganized and quietly dissatisfied with the discomfort caused by the natural occurrences such as mere mud and the alleged low-hanging sky. The description of the regiment's remainder is not unlike a herd of animals; Crane's usage of the word "trough" -- a long, narrow open container for animals to eat or drink out of -- conjures imagery of herds of farm animals "despondent[ly]" and ignorantly being walked by some higher power through the perils of nature. In the pursuit of winning the war, the soldiers attempt to control the natural world to reduce nature's capricious nightmarish effects. A few sentences after suggesting animal imagery, Henry explicitly likens himself to "an animal blistered and sweating in the heat" (171). This utter weakness displays the men in surrender to the powers of nature, unable to exercise their wavering ability to even maintain their humanity.

Juxtaposed with his previously hellish description of nature is Henry's final outlook on the natural world. Instead of existing as a suffering animal, Henry smiles, "for he saw the world was a world for him" (171). Just after describing a setting not far from hell, Henry mentions "images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, [and] cool brooks," saying that he had achieved "an existence of soft and eternal peace" (171). In describing skies, meadows, brooks, and mentioning the sun in the very next phrase, Henry alludes to the four classical elements: air, earth, water, and fire. Through the four elements of which nature is composed, Henry describes the whole of nature as a distinctly and wholly positive entity. Henry's new view of nature exists in stark contrast with nature's description just prior, leading one to question the sincerity of either description. Nature's continually oppressive essence described just prior (which permeates the remainder of the novel) suggests that perhaps Henry's new description of nature is whimsical and naive. To quell any remaining doubt that Henry's control of nature is facetious, Crane finishes the novel in a tritely picturesque way: "a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds" (171). The scene appears to be one from a fairytale rather than one from a novel depicting death and other atrocities of war. Even despite the image's cliché quality, the irony is grounded in harsh reality: the clouds are described as being "leaden," a familiar word because of its use in the description of bullets for hundreds of pages prior. Living in a state of self-delusion, Henry refuses to accept his lack of control over his life.