

The Red Badge of Courage

March 24 through April 16, 1993

adapted by Thomas W. Olson



Stephen Crane THE MAN

Stephen Crane lived a short, intense, and spontaneous life, searching constantly for experiences about which to write.

Born in Newark, New Jersey, on November 1, 1871, he was the fourteenth child of an itinerant Methodist minister. His early years were spent moving around the states of New Jersey and New York as his father served different pastorates, and as a result he attended many different schools. Upon completing his secondary education, he attended Lafayette College and Syracuse University for one semester each. When his parents died, he moved to New York City to try making a living as a reporter.

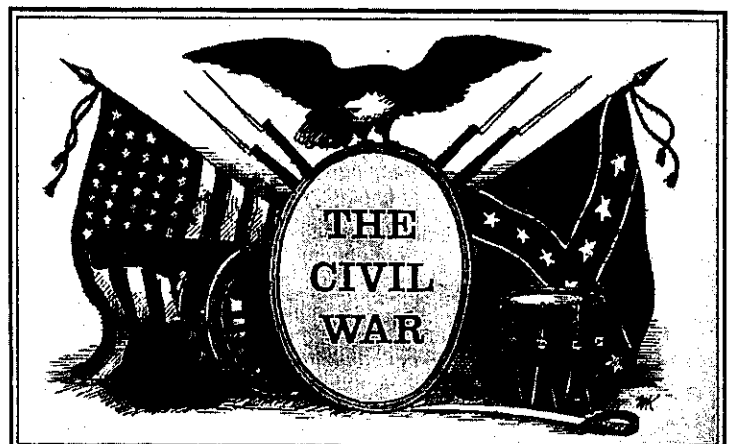
Living in poverty on the Lower East Side of New York, he met many poor art students and street people who inspired him to write his first book, *Maggie; A Girl of the Streets*, a harshly realistic story of life in the slums and a girl that is driven to suicide by poverty. Unable to find a publisher, he published it at his own expense. This book found a very limited audience, but did attract the attention of writers Hamlin Garland and William Dean Howells, who in 1895 helped him publish his next novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*. This book was well received, earning him acclaim for his use of realism and opening many doors to him as a traveling correspondent.

Working as a reporter for Irving Bacheller's newspaper syndicate, he traveled to various places such as New Orleans, Mexico, and the Far West, as the western lands of the United States were called. On January 1, 1897, Crane was on his way to Cuba to cover the Cuban insurrection when he was shipwrecked, a disaster which he re-created in a

short story, "The Open Boat." He was to write four volumes of short stories and many free-verse poems.

His next assignments took him to Greece to cover the Greco-Turkish War. It was on this trip that he met Cora Taylor, whom he later married. They settled in London where he became friends with other great writers of the time, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and H.G. Wells.

But a correspondent's life did not allow him to remain at home, and so in 1898 he traveled again to Cuba to report on the Spanish American War. His short story "The Blue Hotel," published in *Collier's Weekly*, was written while there. Returning to England in mid-January 1899, he found himself threatened by bankruptcy. He set to work in a frenzy, trying to write enough to cover his debts. Crane had never been a robust man and his constant travels into war-torn or under-developed areas of the world took their toll. Plagued by tuberculosis, he went to a sanatorium (a hospital that specializes in the treatment of chronic diseases) in Badenweiler, Germany where he died on June 5, 1900, at the young age of 28. ♦





Four Union generals who were wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg.

SYNOPSIS

The Red Badge of Courage

As with any play taken from a novel, our production is an adaptation. The playwright, Thomas W. Olson, had to make choices about which scenes in Crane's novel to depict, and how to present them. The action may be compressed to fewer scenes; however, the feeling and mood must be true to the original. Thomas Olson has been able to maintain the poetic sense of Crane's novel and the very personal feeling of being in the mind of Henry Fleming by using his mother's voice as if she were his conscience talking to him.

The play opens with Henry Fleming, a young volunteer in the Union Army, on sentry duty at some unspecified army encampment. We hear a rebel soldier call out to him and they have a conversation, of sorts, across battle lines, thus accentuating the

STEPHEN CRANE: *THE WRITER*

"The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting."
first line of Stephen Crane's novel, *Red Badge of Courage*

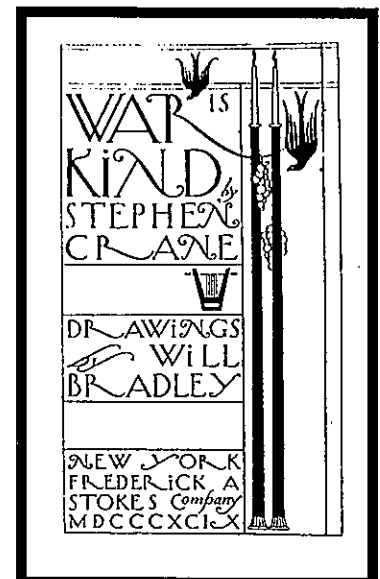
Crane has been called a realist, a naturalist, an impressionist, and a symbolist. He is all of these. Crane used language for its poetic use, which is to use words to mean more than they alone mean — they are symbols for other ideas, feelings — thereby heightening their meaning. He was an innovator in a new technique of fiction presenting situations faced by common men in very realistic terms. Here he stands in close kinship with writers Joseph Conrad and Henry James. Their aim, as stated by Conrad, was "by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is before all, to make you see." They aim to immerse the reader in the experience of the story so that its impact on him would occur simultaneously with the discovery of the circumstances by the characters themselves.

The Red Badge of Courage, appearing at a time when war was still treated primarily as a subject for romance, was the first non-romantic novel of the Civil War to attain widespread popularity. And although this has often been considered the first truly modern war novel, Crane was not concerned with the causes of the war, the political and social implications of the prolonged and bloody conflict, or stories of generals and victories/defeats. Instead he focused on the story of unknown foot soldiers fighting unknown enemies in battles of unknown outcome, their dreams of glory, their excitement in anticipating battle action, their frightened acts of cowardice and flight, and the inner struggles that follow. This for Crane was the truth of war; man facing himself, his emotions, his past, his future, and then coming to terms with them. It is a very personal war but one whose symbolic battlefields are numerous.

Crane wrote with the intensity of a poet's emotion, a compressed emotion that bursts into symbol and paradox. He is always dealing with the paradox of man — the conflict between his ideals and realities. Henry Fleming, the young volunteer soldier through whose eyes we see the war, is motivated not by courage or patriotism but by cowardice, fear, and finally egoism. Events of the novel are all filtered through his conscience as he seeks to discover the truth about how men really deal with the realities of war.

In this novel we do not get a panoramic view of the battlefield but

disconnected segments of it — all that a participant in an action can possibly take into his view at any one moment. The style, calculated to create impressions of confused motion and change, is deliberately disconnected and apparently disordered. Scenes and objects seem blurred; yet as the story progresses, we see the impact of one event on another, which forms the character of Henry Fleming. ♦



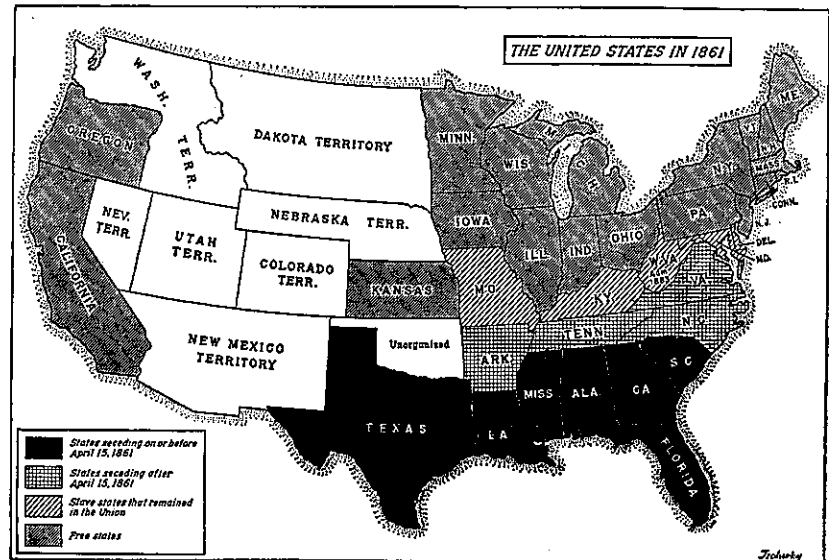
strangeness of war in which young men from very similar backgrounds, who speak the same language, hold the same aspirations, end up fighting and perhaps killing each other. Henry remembers advice his mother gave him and longs for home.

We are next introduced to two fellow soldiers with whom Henry forms close relationships, Jim Conklin, a seasoned soldier, and as we learn later, an old family friend, and Wilson, an untested, yet brash soldier who talks of how he wants to get into battle and "show those rebs a good fight." Henry, nervous about how he will really deal with fighting, talks to these two men about what war is like and asks how they think the troops will respond to battle — run or fight? Jim, the realist, saying some will stand and fight, some will probably run. Wilson doesn't want to talk or think about it.

Coming upon a dead Union soldier, Henry is faced with the truth of death on the battlefield; bodies are left without proper burial, boots are stolen from corpses; "mean things" had to be done to survive in a war. The tension of marching and drilling without actually fighting, while knowing that tomorrow you might be called upon to fight, wears on the men's nerves. Henry, fearful of how he will respond to battle, becomes increasingly edgy.

Finally, Jim tells them they are about to move into battle position. Henry and Wilson brag of bravery; however, as they part, Wilson gives Henry a packet to give to his family if he is killed in battle, a concern that he had never let anyone know he had. The battle begins and Henry is frozen in terror. Jim yells at him to fire and Henry, by chance, kills a rebel soldier. As he struggles to get his rifle from under the dead man's body, he sees Wilson run by, running away from the battle. For a moment Henry stands and then he too runs in terror.

We next see Henry in the forest leaning on a tree; the sounds of battle have ceased. He is confronted by a badly wounded



soldier who assumes Henry is also wounded since he is far from the battleground. Henry is in pain but it is the emotional torment of having run in the face of battle, not the pain of a wound. Fearful that the man will figure out what he has done, he runs from him. In his mind he talks to his mother, trying to explain why he ran. As he is justifying himself, Jim Conklin stumbles up to him. Henry is glad to see Jim again but then realizes that he has been badly wounded. He wants to help Jim; however, Jim becomes delirious and dies before anything can be done. Henry realizes that he must go back to his regiment and heads toward the battlefield that he has been trying to escape.

Heading back, Henry encounters another fleeing soldier. He restrains the soldier, trying to convince him to return to the battle, saying that others will find out about his cowardice. Desperate to get away, the soldier hits Henry on the head with his rifle butt and flees. When Henry comes to, he finds he is bleeding from a gash on his head. Passing out again, he is carried back to his regiment by an unknown figure.

When he comes to again, Wilson is standing over him. He tells Wilson that he was shot in the head during the fighting. His head is bandaged and Wilson exclaims

"There's your red badge of courage, Henry Fleming!" and calls him a hero, a term that Henry can not accept, knowing the truth of his own cowardice. He recalls how Jim Conklin died, a real hero. Now Henry is anxious to get back into the battle, to regain his self-esteem. As he says, "in the end it all just comes down to dyin'...either way." Wilson follows his lead and they head back to the battlefield.

Back on the field, Henry once again nearly loses his resolve until the regimental flag bearer stumbles up to him and dies, giving Henry the flag. Taking up the flag, he and Wilson head into the fracas, suddenly resolved not to turn back. They win the battle and Henry is hailed as a hero.

After the battle, Henry tells Wilson that he can't be a hero because in the first encounter he ran from the field. Wilson admits he also ran and starts to explain, but Henry stops him. He returns Wilson's packet and shares with him a letter he is writing to his mother, telling her that death has lost its fearsomeness. He has seen death, and that is all it is, "just death — no more, no less." He has earned his red badge and has moved beyond his fears to recognize that dishonor and deceit may be worse than death itself. ♦

Remembering Why It Was Fought

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . ."



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The beginning of Lincoln's Gettysburg address reminds us of the background that surrounds the wartime events of *Red Badge of Courage*. The United States, divided against itself over the issue of slavery, was in the midst of a war that would decide this ideological conflict and pave the way for equality among the races in America. While Crane does not treat the issue of slavery in the book, its presence pervades this and all the novels of the Civil War. Lincoln's words remind us of this stirring, glorious campaign to uphold the noble cause against slavery, but Crane focused on the other face of war: the absurd, bloody, terrifying chaos as seen through the eyes and emotions of a young, Union soldier.

In order to keep the war's purpose in our minds, we have chosen to include in the production of *Red Badge of Courage* an African-American singer, whose Civil War songs and spirituals will thread through the production. Take particular notice of how his presence informs how you feel about the play and its characters, as it reminds us why these young men were risking their lives for their beliefs and testing their hopes for heroism. ♦

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.
The unexplained glory flies above them,
Great is the Battle-God, great, and his Kingdom—
A field where a thousand corpses lie.

Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,
Raged at his breast, gulped and died,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Swift blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Stephen Crane, 1899.