

STEPHEN CRANE

The Red Badge of Courage



E N R I C H E D C L A S S I C

*The Red Badge
of Courage*

Stephen Crane

Introduced by Donald B. Gibson



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STEPHEN CRANE wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* in his early twenties and died at twenty-eight, yet his novel delivers one of the most powerful statements against war that can be found in all of literature. With stunning immediacy it reveals the deep-rooted anxieties of a young man groping toward maturity, and it introduced a literary voice that influenced many writers. Although *The Red Badge of Courage* resonates with an unfathomable genius, the clarity and power of its images are accessible to all.

This Enriched Classics edition of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is introduced by Donald Gibson, professor of English at Rutgers University. A noted Crane scholar, he is the author of *The Red Badge of Courage: Redefining the Hero*, part of the Twayne's Masterworks Studies, as well as *The Fiction of Stephen Crane*.

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Introduction

When *The Red Badge of Courage*, by Stephen Crane, was published over one hundred years ago in 1895, no one had seen a novel quite like it. The novelist Harold Frederick wrote in a *New York Times* review on January 26, 1896: "If there were in existence any books of a similar character, one could start confidently by saying that it was the best of its kind. But it has no fellows. It is a book outside of all classification." Many of those who reviewed it for newspapers and journals thought it to be an astonishingly brilliant piece of experimental writing; others disagreed and thought it simply odd and either poorly or strangely written. In retrospect it seems that those who saw it in a favorable light were correct, for history has vindicated the positive judgment. The novel has been in print since its publication and its author has come to be seen as among the most gifted and talented of American writers. The great American novelist Ernest Hemingway wrote in *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935), "The good writers are Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Mark Twain. That's not the order they're good in. There is no order for good writers." Hemingway's statement has been frequently and widely quoted in support of the contention that Crane is among the great American writers. Indeed many

have felt that Hemingway's acclaimed war novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), was strongly influenced by Crane's earlier book.

What is most interesting about Crane's novel is how different it was from the other novels of his time. These differences are, in fact, what make *The Red Badge of Courage* a classic of American and world literature. The characteristic that most distinguishes it is its comparatively peculiar use of language. *The Red Badge* uses words in strange and unusual ways and its figurative language, the means by which one object, thought, or feeling is compared to another, was unheard of. One such use appears in the final line of the ninth chapter: "The sun was pasted in the sky like a red wafer." First of all, the notion that the sun might, in fact, be "pasted" in the sky is quite unusual. This particular line, the most widely commented upon and controversial line in the novel, has been discussed by literary critics more than any other because, though it seems to be a striking comparison, the reader is not likely to know exactly what it means though we know the definition of every word in the line. Many interpretations of the line have been put forward, but no one has explained it to the satisfaction of most readers. What kind of "wafer" is referred to, and whatever its kind, what is a "red" one?

Crane's unconventional use of language had a large role in establishing him as a transitional writer standing between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His interest in the Civil War was shared by millions of other Americans, who remembered the war by reading, hearing, seeing, or creating the thousands of memoirs, diaries, biographies, autobi-

ographies, poems, plays, songs, speeches, short stories, histories, drawings, photographs, paintings, maps, and other memorabilia associated with it. His writing about the Civil War, therefore, is his contribution to an activity shared with many of his nineteenth-century contemporaries. The way he wrote his novel, however, especially the language he selected, looks forward to the twentieth century in numerous ways.

First of all, Crane rejected the language generally thought suitable by his contemporaries for use in serious literature. The "literary" language he rejected was a formal English, governed by certain rules. It could not, for example, employ slang or any words other than conventional ones. It could refer only to polite subjects and could not deal with anything deemed ugly, unclean, or immoral. Such language avoided the speech of many working-class people and saw only the manner of speech identified with middle- or upper-class usage as suitable for literature. Certainly no profanity could be allowed. In his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Crane violated all of these principles—but he also published the novel under a pseudonym, Johnston Smith. He used slang and profanity and he used language in general, as in *The Red Badge*, in outlandish ways. For example, when she arrives home late from work, Maggie is greeted by her mother: "Hah, where deh hell yeh been? Why deh hell don' yeh come home earlier? Been loafin' 'round deh streets. Yer gettin' teh be a reg'lar devil." The narrator's speech also has its own unusual character, as shown in this passage from the novel's second chapter.

Formidable women, with uncombed hair and disordered dress, gossiped while leaning on railings or screamed in frantic quarrels. Withered persons, in curious postures of submission to something, sat smoking pipes in obscure corners. A thousand odors of cooking food came forth to the street. The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels.

By breaking through the restrictions imposed on language by nineteenth-century tastes Crane opened the way for the very free use of language in twentieth-century literature. By using whatever language he deemed most fit, he also made it possible to write more realistic literature. He was able to write about common people by employing a language more nearly like that actually spoken by them.

In addition, Crane's language challenged the traditional distinction between the language of poetry and the language of literary prose. The final paragraph of Chapter 17 of *The Red Badge*, for example, is a case in point.

The forest still bore its burden of clamor. From off under the trees came the rolling clatter of the musketry. Each distant thicket seemed a strange porcupine with quills of flame. A cloud of dark smoke, as from smoldering ruins, went up toward the sun now bright and gay in the blue, enameled sky.

The personification of the forest, the reference to it as though it were a person, the highly colorful and

original reference to gunfire as "rolling clatter," the metaphors likening burning bushes to "porcupine[s] with quills of flame" and describing the blue sky as "enameled," all reflect characteristics more commonly belonging to poetry than to prose. In the twentieth century it was not unusual for writers to breach the lines separating poetry from prose, to make poetry less poetic and prose more poetic. Crane helped make this possible by refusing to acknowledge or believe that poetry and prose were entirely different kinds of writing.

Crane could only write the above passage because of his beliefs about the relation between poetry and prose. The prose-like character of his poetry reveals the same belief. This is one of his most widely known poems, which appeared in *The Black Riders* in 1895, the same year he published *The Red Badge*.

A man said to the universe:

"Sir, I exist!"

"However," replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation."

If we were to make the comparison, obviously this poem relates to prose in much the same manner that the passage before it relates to poetry. This poem is as prose-like as the passage preceding it is poetic. Thus, again, Crane did not, as later literature did not, make the hard and fast distinction between poetry and prose traditionally required of literature prior to his appearance on the literary scene. His

sense of what literature is influenced his use of language, and his use of language is very much like that of twentieth-century writers. He felt the need to challenge literary tradition in the same way he felt obliged to question tradition in general. Some aspects of his biography throw light on his literary propensities.

Crane was born in Newark, New Jersey, on November 1, 1871. He was the son of a Methodist minister, and all of his biographers have remarked on the influence his strict religious background had on his life. All speak of the significance of his being the last-born of thirteen children in such a family, implying that as the youngest, Crane would have been less subject to the rigid upbringing imposed upon his siblings. Whatever the causes, his biography reveals him to be a rebellious child and later a rebellious young man. At a young age he rejected the fundamentalist religious beliefs of his father, who died when Stephen was nine. His rebelliousness continued to manifest itself when he failed to matriculate at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania or at Syracuse University in New York after one semester at each school. It seems he was far more interested in baseball, cards, and shooting pool than in reading or studying. "Not that I disliked books, but the cut-and-dried curriculum of the college did not appeal to me," he wrote. "Humanity was a more interesting study. . . . So, you see, I had first to recover from college." Elbert Hubbard, writer, editor, friend, and supporter of Crane, tells the story that in a psychology class Crane argued with the teacher and the teacher "sought to silence him by an appeal to the Bible: 'Tut-tut, what does St. Paul say, Mr. Crane,

what does St. Paul say?" asked the distinguished Professor. "I know what St. Paul says," was the answer, "but I disagree with St. Paul." "Take your seat, Sir!" roared the Professor."

Defiance of convention marked Crane's life and creative work. *Maggie*, his first novel, was privately published by Crane himself after he was unable to find a publisher. The novel takes place in New York's Bowery district and is about the life of a poverty-stricken young Irish woman whose empty and meaningless life causes her, after being abandoned by her worthless, deceiving lover, to descend into prostitution and finally suicide. The subject was forbidden, the characters were deemed inappropriate for literature, and the language was condemned. Though not all of its contemporary reviews were negative, a significant number were. For example, one review of the 1896 reprint of *Maggie* observed:

It has been rendered somewhat less disgusting than formerly by the evident aid of some friendly editor who realizes that there might be limits to the public appetite for profanity. . . . People now "trow fits" part of the time instead of "raising hell." . . . Plentiful dashes have also been judiciously introduced. The same hand might well have suppressed the whole book.

Another review of the same year includes all of Crane's novels to that point, *Maggie*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and a third novel, *George's Mother*.

Taking all three stories together, we should classify Mr. Crane as a rather promising writer of the animalistic school. His types are mainly human beings of the order which makes us regret the power of literature to portray them. Not merely are they low, but there is little that is interesting in them. Even the old mother [in *George's Mother*] is not made pathetic in a human way; her son disgusts us so that we have small power of sympathy left. Maggie it is impossible to weep over. We can feel only that it is a pity that the gutter is so dirty, and turn in another direction. In short, Mr. Crane's art is to us very depressing.

The Red Badge of Courage displays Crane's resistance to tradition in ways both similar to and different from *Maggie*. As in *Maggie*, Crane uses language in *The Red Badge* that opposes tradition because it was outside the literary limits established up to his time. The characters of the war novel are of a class generally felt by most authors and readers of his time as not suitable for serious literature, and hence, Crane defies the literary conventions of his time by presenting them, by making them central to the narrative, and by using the language that they speak. Thus, in regard to language, Crane flouts convention on two counts: with the odd diction and figures of speech of his narrator and with the vernacular speech of the soldiers he writes about. But unlike *Maggie*, which refers to sex and sexuality, *The Red Badge* contains no such innuendoes.

Responses occasioned by the publication of *The Red Badge* from a great number of its reviewers were very much like those to Crane's earlier novel and to

his volume of poems, *The Black Riders*. Many readers and reviewers, like those quoted above, were not only annoyed, but even angered by Crane's writing. General Alexander C. McClurg, a man who had worked his way up through the ranks from private, was fuming when he wrote the following review in 1896.

The Red Badge of Courage is a vicious satire upon American soldiers and American armies. The hero of the book (if such he can be called—'the youth' the author styles him) is an ignorant stupid country lad, who, without a spark of patriotic feeling, or even of soldierly ambition, has enlisted in the army from no definite motive that the reader can discover, unless it be because other boys are doing so; and the whole book, in which there is absolutely no story, is occupied with giving what are supposed to be his emotions and his actions in the first two days of battle. His poor weak intellect, if indeed he has any . . .

But General McClurg is quite wrong about the novel being a satire on American soldiers and armies. There is some question, indeed, as to whether *The Red Badge* is a war novel at all. Certainly there is nothing in the novel that would suggest that Crane favors either the North or the South in the struggle, or even that he has any interest in the war's outcome. Though the majority of soldiers we see in the narrative are Union, there are also Confederate soldiers portrayed, and without the slightest animosity or disfavor. If the soldiers are looked at critically,

it is always because of personal foibles and not because of their allegiances. Neither the author nor any character in the book expresses attitudes about politics or about any social issues. Some few critics have said it is an antiwar novel, but that is also questionable. The general's anger stems from Crane's "failure" to write a more traditional war story that casts an aura of glory over the soldier, the army, the cause, and the country. That is the kind of story that many of Crane's contemporaries and forbears wrote, but Crane had other ideas. He could never have written anything about war so conventional that General McClurg would have approved it.

The Red Badge was highly controversial, as might be expected of a work of literature so entirely different, but not all the reviewers were as hostile as General McClurg. An 1895 review praises it highly.

No one before except Tolstoy, so far as we know, has described so vividly the curious petty details of personal conduct and feeling when the fight is thickest. . . . At times the description is so vivid as to be almost suffocating. The reader is right down in the midst of it where patriotism is dissolved into its elements and where only a dozen men can be seen, firing blindly and grotesquely into the smoke. This is war from a new point of view, and it seems more real than when seen with an eye only for large movements and general effects.

This review appeared in the *Philadelphia Press*, the newspaper in which Crane's novel had been serial-

ized from December 3 to 8 in 1894, about a year prior to its publication as a book. The review concludes:

One should be forever slow in charging an author with genius, but it must be confessed that *The Red Badge of Courage* is open to the suspicion of having greater power and originality than can be girdled by the name of talent.

But on the whole American reviews were not overwhelmingly favorable.

If the British were later to claim that they discovered Crane, it was because they seemed less apprehensive about recognizing the genius of his novel than American critics. The British seemed to have less difficulty proclaiming Crane's greatness than the Americans because the Americans were not as confident of the soundness of their literary judgment. Whereas the American response, even at its strongest, was in general timid and uncertain, the British had no problem pronouncing Crane a genius and seeing his novel for the extraordinary work that it is. They knew that the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* would change the course of western literature. The publication of Crane's volume of poetry, *The Black Riders*, confirmed the English judgment. Where the Americans saw a "bad boy" who broke the rules and needed to be punished and restrained (as some of the reviews above suggest) the English saw an unusually gifted writer to be freed and nurtured. That may be why Crane moved to England: he knew that English readers and critics

loved, respected, and held him in high regard. (The equally famous and esteemed writers Henry James and Joseph Conrad were among his friends in England.) He remained there until his wife, Cora, took him to Germany, where it was thought that he would receive the best care for the tuberculosis he'd contracted. Crane died in a German sanitarium at twenty-eight.

Given Crane's inclination to question convention, it is no wonder that he was heavily influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin's work, *Origin of Species*, was published in 1859, and it began almost immediately to challenge the authority of existing institutions, especially religious authority. Darwin's theory of evolution held that both plants and animals, including humankind, had evolved from simple, single-celled organisms to more complex ones. Humankind had developed over thousands of years from earlier anthropoid species, in short, from animals. Such a view conflicts with the account of the origins of humankind contained in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Genesis tells us that Adam was created on the sixth day of creation by God in His own image and Eve was created by God from Adam's rib. Darwin says that humankind and nature as we know it were not created in a span of days but during hundreds of thousands of years. Darwin's theory explains life as coming to exist strictly through the operation of natural law. There is no place in Darwin's theory for the story of the origins of life that Genesis puts forth. By Crane's time, at the end of the nineteenth century, most everybody knew who Charles Darwin was and had some idea, however vague and popular-