The Fog of War: The Absence of Context in *The Red Badge of Courage*

*The Red Badge of Courage* has been called the “American *Iliad*” (Beaver 9) with good reason, for it defines with a uniquely American sensibility the meaning—or lack thereof—of war. Like the *Iliad* established a standard for manly heroism that has lasted millennia, Crane’s work might be said to upend the centuries-old Homeric model. Like Shakespeare’s *Troilus & Cressida*, *The Red Badge of Courage* exposes the lie of battlefield heroism—unmasks it as a descent into animalism (Dillingham 194). The old notion of courage and heroism as a product of war is cast aside—war is exposed as an event that produces victims, not victors.

Yet as a novel the object of which is to expose the base or “sub-human” (Dillingham 194) qualities of battlefield courage, Crane must strip war of the myriad secondary narrative elements that color and fog the clarity of the action. There are three such contaminating contextual elements that must be removed before we can, according to Crane, sufficiently judge the action of battle. These elements only appear in the book through their evident absence, a signal of Crane’s success in isolating war in a solitary spotlight, with little to no external influences to prejudice the mind of the reader. (Note how similar this literary process of reduction is to the American courtroom practice of selecting juries based on a citizen’s absence of knowledge of the event in question and its
companion characteristics—foreknowledge or contextual knowledge are thought to be sources of bias that will cloud a jury member’s judgment.) The erasure of the most common elements of literary narrative—cultural context and personal detail—proceeds from the macro to the micro, moving from the elision of the national dialogue at the macro level to the elimination of human reason at the micro level. We’ll look at each absent context in its turn, moving from the universal to the particular, to hopefully arrive at both Crane’s judgment of war behavior and a sense of why lack of context was a necessary literary device for a judicious appraisal of the topic.

One notable absence in The Red Badge of Courage is the utter lack of political context. The book is obviously about the Civil War, about a great battle at Chancellorsville, but neither the war itself nor the relevance of Chancellorsville to it is noted. As Amy Kaplan notes in “Literature and Imperialism” (Kaplan 442), few if any references are made to either side in the war. The Union is occasionally referred to as the men in “blue”, while the “Confederacy are noted only by the color “gray”. These innocuous terms are used in lieu of the militarily loaded terms “Union” and “Confederacy”. Thus Crane as author provides no foreknowledge for the reader to bias his or her assessment of the action; he strips the action of the military backstory and character of both the Union and the Confederacy. Neither Robert E. Lee nor Ulysses S. Grant, the historical giants of the war, are mentioned, since their names would instantly conjure either heroism or cruelty and color the entirety of one side of the war, again prejudicing the reader. In fact, at one point late in the novel, Crane portrays Henry gazing across the field at the gray-uniformed flagbearer (Crane 124). A trenchant moment, Henry sees his supposed enemy battling with conviction, commitment, and finally futility
to maintain the colors of his side. There is clear empathy in the narrative, if not necessarily in Henry’s own heart (although it can be plausibly assumed, even if Henry doesn’t verbally confirm that he feels compassion). This scene serves to balance the possibly existing prejudice readers might have for the Union; both sides fight with equal conviction, and those convictions are never unfurled and analyzed for their moral rectitude, leaving the reader to acknowledge and admire simple conviction itself.

This last point—on Crane’s refusal to investigate the moral beliefs of the flagbearers—summons the larger fact that Crane never once mentions slavery, the signal disagreement over which the Civil War was waged. Only at the beginning of the novel is a black solider deliberately portrayed by his color. “A negro teamster who had been dancing upon a cracker box with the hilarious encouragement of twoscore soldiers was deserted” (3). A rather innocuous scene, nowhere in the next 127 pages is the distinction between white and black mentioned. This cannot be mere oversight; Crane was deliberately stripping the war of its cultural context, just as he absented the military context. There were and are few cultural issues as volatile as slavery. Its absence from the novel forces the reader to focus on the fighting at the expense of the rightness of the Union cause, or the wrongness of the Confederacy cause. It is a form of narrative leveling that expertly permits the reader a newfound clarity of vision in the evaluation of violence.

Nor is any mention made of the companion cause of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln’s desire to maintain the integrity of the union. This central storyline could have surely been used to great narrative effect throughout the novel, particularly when Henry’s battalion, after capturing a great field and the enemy flag, they were forced to retrace their steps and the re-cede the vanquished territory (127). But the fragmenting of the
United States was ignored as a literary theme, rather astonishingly, considering the novel’s obvious success as a war narrative.

If Crane chose to trim away the fat of cultural and military context, he utilized this pruning technique to even greater effect at the level of the individual. From the very beginning of the novel, the characters of the novel are stripped of their cultural or personal characteristics. In most chapters, they are even denied their own names (Sadler 373). Throughout the story, they are given generic names, just as the Union and Confederacy were denied their proper appellations. There is the “youth” (later Henry Fleming), the “tall soldier”, the “loud soldier”, a “sarcastic man”, Henry’s mere “friend”, and the “red-bearded one”. For a novel of such brilliant characterization and visual description—Harold Bloom says, “The Red Badge of Courage is an impressionist’s triumph” (Bloom 1)—the use of these generic terms is jolting. But the lack of personalization again makes the reader simply recognize the basic humanity of these soldiers and elide from consideration their personal character. We are left with a *mise en scène* of simple human beings on a barren battlefield; there is no national, cultural, or personal context to bias the reader’s judgment nor, for that matter, the author’s.

Finally, we arrive at the interior psychology of the man. Here we find the central theme of the novel—that so-called ‘courage’ in battle may be nominally courageous, but it is mere animal nature, a reaction more than a choice, rage more than reason, the act of a berserker more than a hero. William Dillingham, in his essay “Insensibility in The Red Badge of Courage”, claims that Crane shows us that the motivations or causes of war behavior is “neither noble nor humane” (Dillingham 194). The point is that man moves from the high ground of human reason to the base level of mindless rage. Crane makes a
clear distinct between the two states. In the first half of the novel, Henry Fleming is consumed by conscience (Crane 9). His obsessively tries to “mathematically” prove that he wouldn’t flee at the first sign of danger (9). Linguist Gary Mayer calls this Fleming’s “intensional” orientation, in which he focuses on interior struggle to the exclusion of exterior battles (Mayer 258). He wrestles vainly with this dilemma, since ultimately there is no answer shy of an actual battle. Crane beautifully twists the storyline by giving Fleming a successful first experience of battle, where he fires his musket alongside his comrades. But shortly thereafter, the battle suddenly resumes, and Henry flees. Henry even rationalizes his flight by claiming a superior assessment of the situation—he thought they were about to be thrashed (Crane 44). Dillingham trenchantly suggests that Fleming flees because he is too caught up in trying to reason out his fate. Logical thought, we come to find out, has no place on the battlefield. It is after he is struck by another fleeing soldier and obtains a head wound that he begins the descent from reason to animality (Marcus and Mordecai 109). The pains of the body begin to dominate his thoughts as he wanders back to his regiment. Crane notes that Henry “did not give a good deal of thought to these battles that lay directly before him” (Crane 86). His logical side then completely deserts him in battle as he abandons himself to his hatred. Throughout the scene of his great and crazed fighting in Chapter XVII, Crane uses the language of unreason and emotion to characterize Henry’s behavior. He takes on the external appearance of a crazed man, later described as an “insane soldier” (102). He is variously possessed of a “great hatred”, “rage”, imagines “abominable cruelties”, and “revenge” (94). He is “not conscious that he was erect upon his feet”, and regarding the thought of being shot, he “did not think more of it (94). Later, bearing the flag, he found himself
“unconsciously in advance” of his surging comrades (102). His anger and lack of fear at being killed matches the evident mentality of his entire regiment. They advance in “crimson fury” and experience a “delirium” that is “heedless and blind to the odds” (103). These battle scenes capture Henry’s descent in a “sub-human” realm (Dillingham 194).

He fights like a “barbarian” and a “beast” (Crane 96). Both terms conjure the sub-human, the wild irrational element of life. Only by descending to this level had Henry fought bravely. But it wasn’t a conscious decision, not a heroic choice. It was simply the response of his organism to its environment. No credit could rightly be taken or claimed.

Crane elides human reason from the field of fire. No longer is the battle between blue and gray a question of moral conviction or the heroism delivered of a righteous cause. It is simple, base animal fury. But we only glimpse when the rest of our abstracted references are removed.

What Crane leaves out gives us the moral of his story. By stripping a nation of its narrative, a people of their identity, and humanity of its reason, we see that there is nothing high-minded about war. We see its primitivism. We haven’t evolved beyond our Paleolithic urges, they’ve just been codified into elaborate rituals of slaughter and mayhem: war. The battle itself is base brutality. The heroic is established *ex post facto*. The mythology of heroism is aftermath.

There is a modern analogue that nicely illustrates this posthumous lionization of the victims of battle. In David Fincher’s film *Fight Club*, Project Mayhem is a group of urban rebels who conduct various kinds of urban vandalism, such as putting subversive messages on billboards, “destroying a piece of corporate art” or “trashing a franchise coffee bar. During one of their expeditions, one of their members get shot and killed.
Back at their house, the group gathers round the dead man. Someone asks what the man’s name is, and another answers that in Project Mayhem nobody has a name. Another member objects and finally a senior member concludes, “In death, a member of Project Mayhem has a name. His name is Robert Paulson.” The group then begins, rather absurdly, to chant the man’s name.

I believe Stephen Crane would have appreciated this scene. It comically summarizes Crane’s conclusion about war, that in the pitch of battle there is only sub-human animal rage of beasts and berserkers, or the mortal fear of martial pariahs. There is no logical choice, just reaction. Only afterward, in death, is heroism granted to soldiers, as an adoring public deifies them for their martial valor, which was in fact nothing but blind passion. Only the spectators see glory (Kaplan 94). This is why Crane doesn’t assign full names and backstories to the soldiers and regiment in his narrative; he wants us to see them as functions of the “crimson fury” of war, blind, irrational, murderous. Heroism is an afterthought, applied by those who never fought. After a major battle, Henry thinks to himself, “It had been revealed to him that he had been a barbarian, a beast…He had overcome obstacles which he had admitted to be mountains. They had fallen like paper peaks and he 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” (Crane 96). It is only through Crane’s elisions of the seminal storylines of the war that we can clearly see this dichotomy of war’s living hell and its gilded aftermath.
Works Cited


Michael Meade is an accomplished storyteller, drummer, workshop leader and teacher of ritual and mythology. He is the author of *Men and The Water Of Life* (Harper San Francisco: 1993). His essays have appeared in many collections including *To Be a Man, Tending the Fire, Walking Swiftly and The Rag and Bone Shop of the H.* Born and raised in New York City, Meade has appeared at conferences and workshops before thousands of men and women throughout the United States and Europe. Share Share on Facebook. Tweet Tweet on Twitter. The Water of Life. Michael Meade, Regular price. Starting at: $17.47. Join Michael Meade for a new online workshop that explores how initiation means to awaken to who we are at the core of our lives. When seen with the eyes of initiation, the struggles we experience secretly seek to activate a deeper healing and greater illumination than we could initiate on our own. REGISTER. Living Myth Premium members receive a 30% discount - LEARN MORE. Michael meade podcast. On this free weekly podcast, Meade presents mythic stories that offer uniquely insightful and wise ways of understanding the current dilemmas of the world we live in. Living Myth proposes that genuine s Publications by authors named "Michael Meade". 8Publications. BMP Signaling Determines Body Size via Transcriptional Regulation of Collagen Genes in. Epub 2013 Sep 27. University of Louisville Department of Radiology, Louisville, KY, USA. View Article. Source. June 2004. © 2020 PubFacts. About PubFacts. Michael Meade Mosaic Voices, Vashon, Washington. 25,008 likes · 12,106 talking about this · 7 were here. Guided by renowned author and mythologist Michael Meade, Mosaic Multicultural Foundation brings myt See More. CommunitySee All. 25,008 people like this. 26,458 people follow this. 7 check-ins. AboutSee All.