

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE

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➤ **CRANE'S USE OF COLOR IN "THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE"**

Author(s): CLAUDIA C. WOGAN

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The term "impressionistic" is frequently applied to the prose Stephen Crane. Essentially, the impressionistic artist, either in painting or in literature, tends to view the world, not as a smoothly flowing inter-whole, but as a series of intense but disconnected moments or "pictures."

Experience is viewed as fragmentary. The narrative structure of Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* is essentially a series of such fragmentary scenes. These scenes, or "impressions," are often presented literally as pictures or paintings, and are described largely in terms of color. There can be little doubt that Crane's fiction was influenced to some degree by painting. He lived among artists in New York, and the artist is the subject of many of his newspaper sketches and stories. In "War Memories" Crane wrote "I bring this to you merely as an effect—an effect of mental light and if you like; something done in thought similar to that which the Impressionists do in colour; something meaningless and at the overwhelming, crushing, monstrous." [...]

The repeated use of color throughout *The Red Badge of Courage* is partially responsible for the rich, sensuous effect of the prose style. Crane often describes sound in terms of color—"red cheers" (87), a "black procession of curious oaths" (66), a "crimson roar" (85)—thus combining two sensory stimuli into one image. More important than this synesthetic effect, however, is the way in which Crane makes color function symbolically to give added meaning to his thematic content. This symbolic and metaphorical use of color has occasionally been mentioned by critics of his fiction. [...]

The primary association of the color red is with war, and thus has connotations of passion, bestiality, and rage, of something menacing and at the same time exhilarating, as well as its realistic associations with blood and with fire. Occasionally, however, the color carries with it an association with bombast and heroics, with Henry's unreal, idealistic picture of war as a grandiose Homeric struggle. Thus, "he adopted an air of a herald in red and gold" (21), and battles are "crimson blotches on the pages of the past" (24). The title image, "the red badge of courage," also carries this equivocal use of the word red, the primary association of the color being blood, with secondary, ironic overtones of Henry's false, childish concepts of courage. Similarly, when Crane

says at the end of the novel that the youth has rid himself of the "red sickness of battle" (200), it connotes both the hero's passing through the passion of war and his shedding of his false concepts of heroism. Crane frequently uses the color red (and others) both realistically and symbolically; a battle viewed as "a sketch in gray and red" (59) gives the image of red blood and gray uniforms, but also connotes the passion and confusion of war mingled with death (gray).

➤ THE STRUCTURE OF "THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE"

Author(s): ERIC SOLOMON

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It is true that many of Crane's effects are gained by recourse to an impressionistic method, a technique used by previous war writers to convey the sense of a vast battle scene. His combat descriptions are swiftly shifting impressions of action. Furthermore, he shows the influence of the impressionists in his dependence on color, the contrasts of light and shade. [...]

One aspect of naturalism that had already appeared in the war fiction of Bierce and Rudyard Kipling is the double process of animation of mechanical objects and depersonalization of human beings. Crane's novel is packed with parallels between the animal and human worlds. His picture of war shows the iron and steel weapons in the role of flesh-and-blood inhabitants of the combat world. Even the battle flag, normally a symbol, takes on a more human dimension here. The flag struggles to free itself from an agony and finally falls with a gesture of despair (257). The machines are humanized, and an abstraction like war itself is described as a red animal. Men, for their part, become either animals or machines. It is interesting to note how consistently Crane avoids physical descriptions of his characters and uses animal imagery to tell how men look in war.

[...]

Perhaps *The Red Badge of Courage* should be called an impressionistic-naturalistic novel—or vice-versa. Certainly Crane uses both manners throughout. The combination of a vivid, swift montage of combat impressions with a harsh, overwhelming, naturalistic picture of the individuals trapped in the war machine is Crane's method of fitting the combat world into fiction.