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Stephen Crane's Class Warfare: *The Red Badge of Courage* and Class Conflict

William Hollis IV
waholl0881@ung.edu

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William Adam Hollis IV

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The Red Badge of Courage and Class Conflict

Abstract:

Despite the persistent and varied critical attention paid to Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* since its original publication in 1895, scant consideration is given to the sociocultural contexts that inform the novel, thematically mark the text, and influence Crane's art.

Remarkably, the progressively stratified society of 1890s America, its increasingly dynamic class distinctions, economic tensions, and the perpetually contentious and prolonged shift from a rural agrarian to an urban industrial society, remain largely unexamined within the novel.

However, the contemporary issues of 1890s America's industrial-capitalist society Crane repeatedly confronts within his repertoire, including poverty and the suffering of the under-classes, are equally present within *The Red Badge of Courage*. The goal of this paper is to analyze how, within the text, Crane used the Civil War as a metaphor for the social upheaval that characterized his contemporary society, including the growing class distinctions and abuses endured by the working class. By examining the influences that shaped Crane's life, such as his socially conscious upbringing, his lifelong career as a journalist and correspondent, and the social, political, and economic turmoil that characterized the 1890s, the decade of his professional career, it becomes obvious that the issues Crane constantly addresses within his other writings function as intrinsic elements within *The Red Badge of Courage*. This paper demonstrates that Crane utilizes the evolution of Henry Fleming, the novel's protagonist, from a

sheltered farmhand to battle-tested veteran to parallel the United States' socio-economic shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy. Additionally, Crane's class awareness is evident in his portrayal of the hierarchy within the Union army. Through his disparate portrayals of the enlisted men, representing the labor class, and the officers, symbolizing the elite, upper-class, Crane displays the discrepancies and antagonism between classes, reflecting those of his contemporary society.