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THE COLOR OF WAR

A COMPUTER ANALYSIS OF COLOR IN *THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE*



As I first read the *Red Badge of Courage* over 35 years ago, I, like others, was struck by Stephen Crane's use of color. How many colors, my junior high school mind wondered, can there be? I'd finally act on that question in 1995 with the help of a number of computer programs to relieve the tedium of actually having to isolate the color words among the over 46,000 words Crane used in the novel. As I attacked the Project Gutenberg e-text edition of the work, mercilessly pulling words from sentences, excising punctuation marks, and cutting away the narration, I remembered comments from Flannery O'Connor. In *Mystery and Manners*, she describes works of fiction becoming, "literary specimen[s] to be dissected. Every time a story of mine appears in a freshman anthology," she writes, "I have a vision of it with its little organs laid open, like a frog in a bottle."¹ So, to justify my mayhem, I searched for another metaphor, one less discomfoting. I found it one day while gazing at a print we have of Georges Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The painting has always fascinated me with its countless dots of pure color creating shadow and shading. Often, I find myself unable to resist varying my distance from the print, and marveling repeatedly at Seurat's technique—the fruit of "about forty preliminary color studies" according to art historian Frederick Hart.²

As I drew closer to *Red Badge*, I discovered a work with more color than others had noted, a work where complexity arose from simplicity, where color paints both the myth and reality of war. Others had searched the work before, isolating color words. Claudia C. Wogan in 1960 counted 235 uses of 24 color words.³ As I studied her list of color words, I thought of the tedium of hand-counting those words in the pre-computer

era of 1960, and wondered that anyone would have the fortitude to persevere in such a Herculean task. I also wondered if color words might have been missed, and if a quantified computer-based study of the text would offer additional insights. I went to work with my trusty desktop computer.

First, I located the Project Gutenberg's electronic text of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Compiled by Arthur Smith from the 1990 First Vintage Books/Library of America edition, this text is the work as it was first published without the additional material included in the Binder edition. I then wrote a parsing program for my computer that electronically "read" the text and kept track of each word and numbered its position in the text. This program could read the entire work and then rewrite it, in eleven seconds, as a file containing a series of numbered words in their original sequence. I then imported the resulting file into Microsoft's Access database program where I could electronically sort, count, and arrange the words in limitless ways. Now, I was ready to ferret out all those color words.

Determining what color words to search for was the next problem. Looking at Wogan's list of only 24 color words made me wonder if, perhaps, earlier searches for color words were less exhaustive than they might have been. I consulted Steven Glazier's *Random House Word Menu* and discovered a listing of 414 color words from absinthe to zinc.⁴ Looking over the list, I found a number of words that could double as images of color or as objects: fire, smoke, iron, bronze, gold, and silver to name a few. I decided to include these words in my initial search and to view their use in context rather than discounting them. I further expanded the search by searching for variations of the base color words. For example, the computer looked not only for the base word, "white," but also for "whiter," "whitest," "whitish," and "whiteness." The computer found 343 matches for 39 of the base color words on this list, a statistic suggesting that *Red Badge* is even more colorful than we may have thought. With the results of the computer search, I went to work drawing a color map of the book.

The resulting color map shows a fairly even use of color words throughout the book, but slightly more color words appear in the second half than in the first half. Interestingly, the last tenth of the book contains 16.9% of the color words, suggesting

that color grows in importance as the novel reaches its conclusion. In the last tenth of the novel, we find both images of color and insights into Henry's motives in battle. The colors here become somber; blues, grays, and browns paint the strongest images. We see that the enemy "began briskly to slice up the blue men."⁵ Henry had "resolved not to budge whatever should happen," motivated by the vision of his "dead body lying, torn and glittering" as "a poignant retaliation upon the officer who had said 'mule drivers,' and later 'mud diggers.'" The earlier fear that had been covered by Henry's ignobly won red badge now is replaced by vengefulness against the Union officer who Henry believed "had dubbed him wrongly." With colors taken from a dark palette, Henry now sees "his vivid error." Crane writes, "his eyes seemed to open to some new ways." Henry's changed perception echoes the change he noted in his loud comrade after their earlier encounter with the enemy.

Much earlier in the narrative, upon his return to his unit after running in battle, Henry notes that about the formerly loud soldier there was "now a fine reliance." Henry no longer saw him "as a blatant child . . . filled with a tinsel courage," and "wondered where had been born these new eyes." Does Henry climb the "peak of wisdom" as his loud comrade had? Crane's consistent reliance upon shades other than red, from this episode forward suggests that he does.

The heavy use of red early in the book and culminating in chapter XIII—the "reddest" chapter in the book—sets off the central irony upon which the book hinges: that Henry's red badge represents courage only to those who don't know the true nature of the wound. The chapter most using the color red details the most inaccurate perception held by the book's characters, a perception that arises from the myth of battle as represented by glorious gore.

We see the association of the color red with the mythology of war early in the story. As the book begins, we first see the "red, eyelike gleam of hostile camp-fires" as the fog rises. The "herald in red and gold" relates not fact, but rumor, third hand information, to be accepted as unquestioned certainty. Henry reflects upon how he had "dreamed of battles all his life—of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire." Henry "had regarded battles as crimson blotches on

the pages of the past. He had put them as things of the bygone with his thought-images of heavy crowns and high castles." These are the images informing the inexperienced soldier. Henry also finds himself informed by returning veterans. " 'They'll charge through hell's fire an' brimstone t' git a holt on a haver-sack, an' sech stomachs ain't a'lastin' long,' he was told" by the veterans. Such tales left him imagining "red, live bones sticking out through slits in the faded uniforms." Still, Henry "could not put a whole faith in veteran's tales." Though "they talked much of smoke, fire, and blood, . . . he could not tell how much might be lies." On the eve of his first battle, Henry finds himself contemplating battle and staring at the "red, shivering reflection of a fire" on the wall of his tent, a scene reminiscent of Plato's cave metaphor. Only when Henry faces the reality of war will he know its true colors.

That reality appears strikingly in the image of Henry's first encounter with a dead soldier, dressed in yellowish brown, ashen faced, his tawny beard blowing in the wind. Later, as Henry runs from battle, he finds himself horror-stricken by yet another dead soldier. Lying on a carpet of brown pine needles, "the corpse was dressed in a uniform that had once been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green." His "eyes had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish." Ants ran "over the gray skin of the face." Here, in the most horrible reality of war, the only mention of the color red is the observation that the red of his mouth "had changed to an appalling yellow." Even as Henry runs from the dead man, he finds himself "pursued by the sight of black ants swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly near to the eyes." Henry's eyes now see the true colors of war.

As the scenes of actual battle unfold in the book, we find that the color of smoke, not of blood, dominates the narrative. These colors of blue and gray, which one might associate with the colors of the opposing sides, remind one of Clausewitz's description of the "fog of war." Henry sees "long gray walls of vapor where lay battle lines." When he encounters fleeing troops, it is as if "steel fibers had been washed from their hearts." In the battle descriptions of the sixteenth chapter, we hear the cannons "in the fog-filled air." At the height of battle, Crane writes of the soldiers that "they had passed into a clearer atmosphere. There

was an effect like a revelation in the new appearance of the landscape." He continues, writing, "the opposing infantry's lines were defined by the gray walls and fringes of smoke." And the fury of the charge would be "incapable of checking itself before granite and brass."

As the battle rages, curses and oaths take on the dark hues of battle. From the tall soldier we hear a "black procession of curious oaths." The lieutenant, "his infantile features black with rage," bellows "a blue haze of curses." After the fighting is over, we hear Henry's "crimson oaths" as he recalls his cowardice. With the fighting over, the book approaches completion with a significant movement away from the dark colors of battle to more traditionally heraldic colors.

In the last chapter, in addition to crimson, we find purple, and gold repeated. Henry is now interpreting his valor, placing it back within the heroic myths he had accepted as a child. Perhaps he is doomed to perpetuate those earlier dreams he had of battle—"of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire." But a more optimistic reading suggests that Henry can now "look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly." Crane writes,

So it came to pass that as he trudged from the place of blood and wrath his soul changed. He came from hot plowshares to prospects of clover tranquilly, and it was as if hot plowshares were not. Scars faded as flowers.

Although the last sentence finds Henry basking in a "golden ray of sun," Crane's final image of the "hosts of leaden rain clouds" provides a reminder to Henry and to us of war's true color.

NOTES

1. Flannery O' Connor, "On Her Own Work," *Mystery and Manners*, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, eds. (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1969), 108.
2. Frederick Hartt, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 4th edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993), 947.

3. Claudia C. Wogan, "Crane's Use of Color in *The Red Badge of Courage*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, VI (Summer 1960): 169
4. Steven Glazer, ed., "Words of Color," *Random House Word Menu* (New York: Random House, 1992).
5. Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, Project Gutenberg electronic text, Online: Internet (2 November 1995) [FTP://ftp.usafa.mil/pub/dfeng/crane/badge10.txt](ftp://ftp.usafa.mil/pub/dfeng/crane/badge10.txt). All quotations from *The Red Badge of Courage* are from this unpaginated edition. Access to the locations cited depends on the search feature of the viewing software.