A Mystery of Heroism

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN CRANE

Stephen Crane was born the youngest of fourteen children to a Methodist minister father and a devout mother. Raised primarily by an older sister, Crane was a sickly but intelligent child who taught himself to read at the age of four. After spending two years as an undergraduate at Claverack College, Crane moved to New York City to work as a freelance writer. There, he published *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* in 1893 under a pseudonym. The publication of his most famous novel *The Red Badge of Courage* two years later, in 1895, which focused on a soldier hoping to prove his bravery during the Civil War. That novel, quickly followed by his book of poems *The Black Riders*, raised him to international fame. However, after a series of scandals and accusations regarding Crane's presence in brothels, which he said he frequented for research purposes, he traveled to Greece and Cuba to work as a war correspondent. After surviving a shipwreck and reporting on both the Greco-Turkish conflict and the Spanish-American War, Crane purchased an expensive home in Sussex, England and lavishly entertained his literary friends. Deeply in debt, he died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-eight. In his lifetime, he published three short story collections, two poetry collections, and five novels.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though the battle that takes place during "A Mystery of Heroism" is unnamed, the soldiers' names and weaponry used imply that it likely takes place during the American Civil War, as does Crane's most famous novel *The Red Badge of Courage*. The soldier casualties of the Civil War are estimated at 620,000—around two percent of the population—with another 50,000 civilian deaths. The death toll was both unprecedented and still unmatched in any American conflict. Born six years after the end of the Civil War, Crane lived in an era greatly impacted by the incredible loss of life caused by the war and many of his teachers at Claverack College were veterans, all of which influenced the topic and themes of his fiction. The Civil War marked the end of the American Romantic movement—emphasizing imagination, emotion, and abolition—that dominated American literature from around 1820 and often romanticized war and treated soldiers as heroes. Crane was among the first writers of his era to depict the American Civil War, and war in general, as brutal, raw, and realistic, which played a role in ushering in a period of American Realism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of the themes Crane explores in "A Mystery of Heroism"—including the grim realities of war and the mysteries and absurdities inherent in the seemingly simple concept of courage—he also explores in his novel *The Red Badge of Courage* and his other Civil War stories collected in the book *The Little Regiment*. Crane was greatly influenced by the writings of Hamlin Garland, who gave a manifesto of American realistic fiction in his 1894 essay collection *Crumbling Idols*. Crane's work established him as a major figure in the mid-19th century movement of American Realism. This style, featuring ordinary people and harsh social realities, is found also in the works of writers such as Sam R. Watkins, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, William Dean Howells, and many others. Watkins's memoir *Co. Aytch* considers the Civil War with frankness and realism, much as Crane does, in a period in which romanticizing war was popular. Bierce's civil war stories similarly explore the absurdities and brutal realities of that and all wars, though Bierce, who fought in the Civil War, came to resent Crane's popularity of Crane's Civil War focused work especially because Crane was born after the war. Stephen Crane's writing is believed to have influenced Earnest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, a novel highlighting the waste of war, as well as other Modernist literature. "A Mystery of Heroism" can also be seen as having an influence on more recent novels such as Tim O'Brien's 1990 novel *The Things They Carried*, a collection of connected short stories which examine the psychological weight and absurdism of war.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Mystery of Heroism
- **When Written:** 1895
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** August 1895, in the Philadelphia Press
- **Literary Period:** American Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Realist, Impressionist, Absurdist
- **Setting:** an unnamed battle in an unnamed war
- **Climax:** Collins returns across the battlefield with the bucket of water and stops to give the dying officer a drink.
- **Antagonist:** War
- **Point of View:** Third person, free indirect discourse

EXTRA CREDIT

A Convincing Writer. Stephen Crane, despite being born after the American Civil War, was such a convincing writer of war that newspapers like the *Saturday Review* were convinced he

had experienced war firsthand. However, he actually wrote many of his most famous Civil War stories before 1897, when he began work as a war reporter and first saw a battle personally.

Friends in High Places. Crane ran in a circle of some of the most famous writers of his time, including Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Henry James, and Ford Madox Ford. During Crane's life, these friends bolstered his damaged reputation after a series of scandals. After his death, they hailed him one of the most inventive and creative spirits of the era.

PLOT SUMMARY

"A Mystery of Heroism" takes place during an unnamed battle. The artillery for one regiment is stationed on the hill above the **meadow** that has become a battlefield, and the infantry shelters behind the hill. Shells explode, killing men on the field and the hilltop. The battle is loud and chaotic. A lieutenant of the battery rides towards the battle, holding his injured right arm in his left hand.

Fred Collins, safe beneath the hill with the infantry, wishes aloud that he had a drink of **water**. Collins's companions mock him, asking why he doesn't go and get his drink from the well across the battlefield. Collins indignantly tells them that he will get his drink. His companions don't believe him.

A soldier points out the lieutenant with the injured arm to his companions; he has been struck by a shell and lies face-down on the battlefield mangled and trapped under his horse.

Collins's resentment towards his friends leads him to ask his superiors for permission to cross the battlefield and get water from the well. They are bemused by the request. When one of them asks if it isn't a big risk to take for a drink of water, Collins says that he doesn't know. His anger, which had driven his determination, is fading. Collins's superiors grant him permission but can't tell whether or not Collins actually wants to go.

Collins's companions, stunned at his bravery, give him their canteens to fill and repeatedly ask if he's really going to get the water. Collins insists that he is, and his companions watch him go. As Collins approaches the battlefield, he realizes that it was emotion that led him to this moment and finds himself somewhat surprised to be in such a dangerous situation. He is strangely unafraid, and wonders if that makes him a hero. He finds this to be a disappointing thought. Collins concludes that he has too much shame, which disqualifies him from being a hero.

A shell falls near Collins, startling him into a run. He runs across the meadow and reaches the ruins of a farmhouse, and he throws himself down beside the well. He lowers a canteen into the depths of the well, but it fills so slowly that Collins feels that the water is mocking him. Suddenly, he becomes afraid. He is desperate to fill the canteens quickly and return to safety. He sees the light of another exploding shell reflected on the wall of the well and jerks back. Abandoning the canteens, he picks up an old bucket and fills it. Collins then runs back onto the battlefield towards his regiment, carrying the sloshing bucket and certain that he will be struck by a shell at any moment.

The lieutenant of the battery with the injured arm lies dying on the ground, one leg trapped beneath his horse. He pushes himself up when Collins runs by, and rather than crying out to him in pain, politely requests a drink of water.

Collins, terrified, screams that he cannot stop. Still, as the lieutenant's head lowers again, Collins turns around and runs back to him. Collins frantically turns the lieutenant over; the lieutenant sighs, wearing a small smile. Collins's hands are shaking, and he splashes the water in the lieutenant's face. Collins then turns and runs on towards his regiment.

When he arrives at the safety of the hill, his companions laugh and cheer. His superiors order him to pass the bucket around to the men. In a joking scuffle, however, the first two officers to take the bucket spills all the water on the ground.

CHARACTERS

Fred Collins – Collins is an infantryman in an unnamed war. As an ongoing battle rages, he watches from safety behind a hill where the infantry is stationed until. However, when he states that he wants a drink of **water** from the well that sits in the middle of the meadow that is the current **battlefield**, he is goaded into actually going to get the water by his comrades, who do not believe he's brave or silly enough to actually do it. Collins is impulsive yet introspective. He does go out to the well to get the water he doesn't truly need, but he also recognizes that it is his resentment towards his comrades that leads him into danger. While racing across the battlefield, he is puzzled by the fact that he is not more afraid. He wonders if his lack of fear might make him heroic, but ultimately denies himself the title of hero because of what he assesses to be his prior shame and pettiness. While collecting the water from the well, Collins is struck by true fear, and he is overwhelmed by terror as he runs back across the field carrying a bucket of water towards his regiment and safety. Still, he stops in the midst of the danger to give a dying officer a drink. This action, like his decision to fetch the water, is more impulsive than considered: Collins first tells the officer that he can't stop yet finds himself running back to him anyway. And Collins ends up spilling most of the water on the officer's face rather than just in his mouth. Collins eventually reaches the safety of his regiment to the cheers of his comrades, but has no chance to drink his water because two lieutenants carelessly spill the bucket.

The wounded lieutenant – The lieutenant of the battery is a

member of Collins's company who commands an artillery battery, and who at one point rides by the infantrymen. He passes by slowly and calmly on his horse and appears unconcerned about his wounded right arm, which he holds in his left hand as though the arm doesn't belong to him at all. He smiles grimly at Collins's comrades as he rides onto the **battlefield** and remarks to himself that the enemy is being excessive in their use of cannons. The next time the infantry sees the lieutenant, he has been struck by the explosion of a shell and lies dying on the field with one of his legs pinned beneath his horse. He lies there, with no one to help him or even hear his groans of pain until Collins passes by on his way back to the hill with the **water** from the well. Rather than crying out to Collins, the lieutenant's face clears, and he politely requests a drink of water. When Collins initially refuses and races by, the lieutenant sinks slowly back to the ground with his face turned towards the battle. But when Collins suddenly returns and turns him over, the lieutenant smiles and sighs like a child. The lieutenant does not complain when Collins accidentally splashes the water in his face and then runs off.

Collins's comrades – When Collins expresses his desire for a **drink** of water from a well located in the middle of a **battlefield** being bombarded by shells and gunfire, his comrades of the infantry A Company needle him about how he's going to get it. They laugh at him when he insists he will cross the battlefield to reach the well. As Collins prepares to leave, they are astonished to find that they've goaded him into actually attempting this wild, dangerous journey to the well. They then become animated and excited, gesturing, questioning, warning, and advising him. They repeatedly ask him if he's *actually* going to go. The entire regiment, not all of them actively involved in Collins's plan, watches him go, even as some of them call him foolish and desperate. As Collins walks away, he feels a gulf between himself and them. When Collins, terrified by his ordeal, successfully returns with a bucket of water, his comrades greet him with laughter and shouting. They, unlike Collins, seem unaffected by the trauma and chaos of the battlefield, safe behind the shelter of the hill.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HEROISM

Stephen Crane's "A Mystery of Heroism" tells the story of infantryman Fred Collins, who crosses a raging battlefield to get a drink of **water** from a well. His quest to cross the **field** to get the water is framed within the story as a satirical hero's journey: no one in his regiment is actually in desperate need of water, and Collins insists on making his dangerous journey to the well more out of annoyance at his fellow infantry soldiers for thinking he won't make the trip than for any other reason. Through this situation of a man facing extraordinary danger for a pointless—or even ridiculous—reason, the story explores the nature of heroism. As it portrays Collins racing across the battlefield to the well and then back, the story forces the reader, and at times Collins himself, to ask: Can an extraordinary act toward a frivolous end be heroic? Must a hero feel no fear, or is facing fear a key part of heroism? What is the significance of heroic acts that go unnoticed, or which are truly brave and generous but shoddily done? In the end, Collins does successfully bring a bucket of water back to his regiment, only for two lieutenants, in a joking scuffle, to accidentally spill the water to the ground. Through this ending the story further raises the questions of whether heroism depends on a successful outcome or if heroism exists regardless of the success of the undertaking.

The story's exploration of heroism begins as Collins sets out on a frivolous quest. It is a brave act, but it is also thoughtless, impulsive, and emotionally driven. He walks out into danger not to fulfill a need, but because of dumb pride: the desire to prove he can succeed. If he is a hero, he is an unlikely and even unwilling one. The story raises the question of whether any heroic action can arise from such an origin. If the intention is not heroic, can the action be? The good that comes from it, however, in the opportunity for Collins to provide a dying officer with a drink of water on the battlefield, implies that, perhaps, many heroic actions begin in just such accidental and tawdry ways.

Setting out across the battlefield towards the well, Collins should be frightened, but instead feels simply dazed. He contemplates heroism; stories have told him that men who lack fear are heroes. This definition, then, should make him a hero. The idea is a dismal one; he feels pitiful and inadequate compared to the heroes of legend. Collins decides definitively that he has too much shame to be considered a hero; he thinks instead that he is "an intruder in the land of fine deeds." However, Collins's definition of heroism is both simplistic and unrealistic. His definition of a hero as fearless and faultless leaves no room for the failings of ordinary men or even the flaws of exceptionally good ones. The story reveals the fault in Collins's definition of heroism through Collins's own actions. When Collins soon does become terrified on the battlefield, he falls outside of his own understanding of fearless heroism. Yet, in the midst of his terror, he turns around on the battlefield to offer a drink to a dying officer, an act of true generosity and heroism. The story does not invite a reader to agree with Collins's idea of heroism, but rather to consider how Collins interacts with it and differs from it. Collins might, the story

implies, be more heroic for taking selfless action in the face of his terror than for his initial lack of fear.

While Collins's impulsive act of turning back to give the dying lieutenant water can and should be considered heroic, he does not actually succeed in providing the officer's requested drink of water. Instead, he spills the water on the dying man. Though the officer seems comforted by Collins's mere presence, smiling and sighing, the story raises the question of the significance of generous acts that are poorly completed. Collins intends to give the officer a drink of water and fails; does his failure, the story asks, subtract from the true bravery required to turn around on the active battlefield and prolong the risk to his life for the sake of a dying man? This heroic act, too, goes unnoticed by the regiment waiting for Collins—does this alter its significance? The regiment cheers for Collins's success in bringing back the water, but even that success is undermined when two officers immediately and accidentally spill it. Through this doubled undertaking and doubled failure—in giving the officer a drink and retrieving the water—the story invites questions about the heroism of brave acts that come to unfortunate and unforeseen ends. Is heroism, the story asks, a product of outcomes or of intent?

The story never resolves the questions about heroism that it raises. Collins's actions in the story are simultaneously heroic and ridiculous, truly brave and yet pointless, profoundly generous and totally wasted. "A Mystery of Heroism" forces these fundamental questions about heroism to the surface while refusing to answer them, and so, as the story's name implies, what becomes emphasized above all is the *mystery* of heroism, and the complex and even opposed factors that play into the origin and performance of any heroic action. What is further implied in this fundamental mystery of heroism is a debunking of the common conception of heroism, in which a stalwart hero calmly commits heroic actions that save the day. Rather, the story suggests that heroism in war is instead largely accidental and usually unrecognized, and that heroic actions are often unsuccessful or even squandered.

THE BRUTALITY OF WAR

Stephen Crane's "A Mystery of Heroism" depicts an unnamed battle in an unnamed war. The purpose of the war is never made clear, and the tactics or goals of the battle are similarly left muddy. The enemy army is remote and never appears in person. Collins's regiment engages with that enemy only through shells and bullets. Meanwhile, the story often focuses on the terrible destruction of the battle: houses blow up, a meadow burns, soldiers are mangled and die painfully, and even horses die horrifically. By portraying a war and battle that seem to have no larger purpose, in which heroic quests are undertaken for ridiculous reasons and then the fruits of the quest wasted, and in which the overwhelming consequence is the destruction and devastation of nature, human homes, human lives, and even animals, "A Mystery of Heroism" emphasizes the senseless waste and destruction of war.

The story studiously avoids offering any meaning or purpose to the battle taking place or the war at large. The protagonist Collins's regiment has no identifiable goal. It is not attempting to advance or take ground, it is not fighting for any ideal or country or reason. The enemy, meanwhile, is both nameless and faceless, appearing only as shells and bullets. To Collins, it seems that the enemy is the shells themselves, capable of "red hate" and targeting their own victims. Even in Collins's company, the artillery is hard at work firing from afar during the battle, while the infantry, which fights up close, stands around watching with nothing to do. Because of the shells, the deaths on the battlefield are sudden and senseless—war has become impersonal, mechanized, and disconnected from a human enemy. The battle could be occurring everywhere or anywhere, and story becomes not the portrayal of a single battle but rather a statement about the very nature of war.

The lack of any purpose to the battle, along with the aimlessness of the troops and the officers, makes it seem as if the primary purpose of the battle is the destruction it causes. Through vivid imagery, the story emphasizes how war destroys *everything*: lives, landscapes, and civilization itself. The story describes in detail the "convulsive" movements and "torn" bodies of dying men and horses. Descriptions of brutal violence are frequent and plainly offered as a simple fact of battle. The landscape of the battlefield is often personified to emphasize the pain inflicted by war on the land itself. In the meadow, which begins the story green and beautiful, there is a "massacre of the young blades of grass." The very ground beneath the grass is then torn up and displaced, flung into the air by exploding shells. The meadow is not only burning; it is "suffering." War's destruction of not just nature but also human civilization is evident in the repeated bombing of the structures on the other side of the battlefield. The well-house and barn have been struck by a shell; only fragments, embers, and smoke remain. To emphasize the destruction, the well-house is struck again as the infantry watches, sending the fragments flying. These structures, the product of human effort, are completely obliterated. They are not strategic or intended demolitions, but rather the needless collateral damage of a purposeless war that breeds only devastation. The story, then, invites the essential question that none of the characters have an answer to: if all the destruction has no purpose and the deaths are simply senseless waste, why wage war at all?

ABSURDITY AND FUTILITY IN WAR

Stephen Crane's "A Mystery of Heroism" follows Fred Collins, a soldier who gets goaded by his fellow infantrymen into crossing a dangerous **battlefield** to get **water** from a well, even though no one

actually needs the water. Collins, then, leaves the safety of his regiment's shelter and takes an absurd risk for a trivial goal. Collins eventually does succeed in retrieving a full bucket of water from the well and runs back across the battlefield with it. When an officer dying and unable to move in the middle of the field calls out to him for water, Collins initially shouts that he can't stop and runs by, then turns around anyway. Hands shaking, he splashes the water all over the dying man who gets essentially none of it to drink, making the action of turning back ironically pointless. When he finally reaches his regiment again, Collins is met with laughter at his ridiculous but miraculous success. Then, in a joking scuffle over the bucket by two silly lieutenants, the water gets spilled and wasted. Ultimately, no one gets even a drink. Meanwhile, the story is also filled with petty and ridiculous moments, with officers calling out instructions no one follows, soldiers milling around to no effect, and a commanding officer ignoring the good advice of an underling out of pride and spite. The squabbling dysfunction of the regiment along with the very concept of Collins's unnecessary quest, his failure to successfully give the dying officer a drink, and the story's ironic twist—the spilling of the hard-won bucket of water—indicate the futility of individual effort among the chaos and absurdity of war.

The absurdity of war is initially established in the story through the incompetence of the regiment and officers. The infantry aimlessly observes the battle, but does not take part in it, and becomes more interested in Collins's endeavor to cross the battlefield than the conflict raging upon it. Soldiers calmly remark on the brutal deaths of their comrades—"There goes th' bugler!"—as though watching a sporting event. When, occasionally, rational orders or advice are given, they are ignored by officers who seem to seem to see such competence as a threat to their position. The joviality of the spectating regiment in the face of the brutal violence and chaos of the battlefield emphasizes the ridiculousness of the procedure of war.

Collins's quest—to risk his life to fetch water when none is needed—is itself absurd, and as the primary goal of the story, reflects that absurdity also onto this specific battle and onto war as a whole. Just as Collins's foolhardy quest for water has no great impact on himself or others, his role as an infantryman carries no weight. His individual efforts as a man who is thirsty are no more and no less useless than his individual efforts as a soldier, should he be given an opportunity to fight. His role, then, like the many men the infantry has watched die on the battlefield under the onslaught of falling explosives, would be to die randomly, caught by an exploding shell. When he requests permission to risk his life for water, his superiors allow him to go, implying his uselessness on the battlefield and suggesting that his death on a silly mission and his death in battle amount to the same. His life is not worth more to his superiors than a pointless trip for water, and his individual efforts mean nothing against the great chaotic machine of war.

Though Collins's journey to the well is unnecessary in concept, it becomes even more ironically futile when the water he endangered himself to retrieve is spilled twice over. Returning across the battlefield with his bucket of water, Collins impulsively turns back to give a dying officer a drink. In his terror for his life, Collins's hands shake; the water spills onto the dying officer and Collins runs away again before the officer gets a proper drink. Collins actions in returning to the officer can be considered heroic; but his heroism is thwarted by his terror. Further, there is no saving the dying officer. Drink of water or not, he will die. So even the heroic act of Collins offering the water is futile, and one can argue that the heroism in the act is defined *by* its futility—by showing kindness that will have no impact on the outcome for this dying man. The final moment of ironic pointlessness in the story is the ultimate fate of Collin's retrieved bucket of water, which is immediately spilled by careless officers jokingly roughhousing about who gets to drink it. Collins's ridiculous and pointless quest which, with the kind act to the dying officer, might have meant something, is rendered ultimately futile.

Collins accomplishes an impressive—though ridiculous—feat in surviving the battlefield twice over to bring water back from the well. However, the war, the chaos of the battlefield, and the carelessness of the officers contrive to reverse his success. In his quest and in his snap decision to return to comfort the dying officer, Collins attempts to make meaningful choices as an individual, unlike the rest of his regiment who stand gawking at the battle because their superiors refuse to provide or accept rational orders. Yet every effort Collins makes at taking action as an individual, even towards such a pointless comfort as getting a drink of water, is ironically reversed by the circumstances of war. There is a common belief that, irrespective of everything else, war at minimum gives soldiers the chance to define themselves, to become heroes, to gain glory. In the way that each of Collins's choices and actions are rendered futile, "A Mystery of Heroism" argues the opposite: that amid the chaos or war it is absurdity that reigns, and any meaning is just the product of luck or accident.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WATER AND THE WELL

The water in "A Mystery of Heroism" is a complicated symbol. It can be seen as a symbol for what a soldier desires in war: purpose and meaning earned through personal initiative and bravery. And so, Collins risks his life to cross the battlefield and bring water back. At the same

time, neither Collins nor anyone else in the story actually *needs* the water—no one is dying of thirst—and so the water can be seen as a symbol of the soldier's desire for a little comfort, a little luxury, beyond mere survival. Yet the fact that no one needs the water, and that actually getting the water involves crossing a raging battlefield, also makes the water a symbol of the way that the desire for such common things as purpose or comfort can push those deprived of them to do ridiculous or even futile things. This sense of the water is implied when Collins reaches the well, and feels that the water is mocking him in an ironic reversal; the water should embody life, soothing and calming, the fruition of his goal. Instead, Collins panics at the well, and everything he wanted it to be—a meaningful heroic goal, dangerous yet attainable, which implies the reward of both water and the admiration of Collins's comrades—is overturned and made hollow. That the water is ultimately spilled by the officers to whom Collins brings it back—wasting Collins's bravery and denying any comfort the water could provide—makes the water a symbol of the combined absurdity and brutality of war. The water, carried through such danger only to end up on the ground, signifies the defeat of Collins's purpose, the futility of his effort, and the way that war makes a destructive mockery of everything.

The water also seems to play a special symbolic role during Collins's interaction with the dying officer. When the officer dying in the middle of the field asks the passing Collins for a drink, Collins initially refuses and races past. But in an act of true bravery and selflessness, Collins then turns back, risking his own life to give the dying officer a drink. On the one hand, this act seems to again capture the futility and absurdity that pervades war. First, the officer is going to die no matter what, and no drink of water will save him. Second, Collins is so rushed and frightened that he ends up mostly spilling the water on the officer's face rather than giving him a drink. And yet, the officer seems comforted by the water and by Collin's choice to give it to him. The spilled water comes to seem almost like a baptism for the dying officer, cleansing him and easing his way into death. And Collins's act of giving the water, in turn, comes to seem even more heroic *because* of its futility: it is an act of pure kindness and generosity regardless of the consequences. In this way, the water comes to symbolize the full mystery of heroism and its underlying interplay of bravery and selfishness, generosity and wastefulness, meaning and absurdity, and achievement and futility.

THE MEADOW

The meadow, and what happens to it during the battle, is a symbol of the utter destructiveness of war. At the beginning of "A Mystery of Heroism," the meadow is an example of natural beauty, covered in long grass waving in the breeze. It holds a farmhouse, too, which stands in for humanity's symbiotic relationship with nature and a way of life based around cultivation rather than death. The battle and its barrage of shells destroys all of this. The farmhouse is bombed out. There is a "massacre" of the blades of grass. The very earth beneath the grass is torn up and flung into the air. War transforms the meadow from a place of peace and beauty, a place offering the potential for human civilization to flourish, into a chaotic field of confusion, violence, and death.

The destroyed meadow also functions as a kind of metaphorical land of death. Collins's journey across the meadow and back is reminiscent of the classic mythical trope of the "descent and return" quest made by a mortal into the underworld and back. As he passes through the meadow, Collins exists in a kind of limbo: he is a living intruder passing through this deathscape, and yet he is also at constant risk of being killed, of joining the dead and the meadow becoming his permanent home. This sense of the imminence of death is overwhelming. At one moment, while collecting the **water**, Collins's fear incapacitates him such that he feels that he is "no more than a dead man." When sense returns to him and he recalls his life, he flees the meadow towards the land of the living. Interrupting that flight, Collins makes a brief stop to give water to the dying officer, a man, like Collins, caught still living among the death of the meadow. This moment captures a divergence between those facing the possibility of death: Collins then struggles to return to life and runs towards the safety of the hill, while the officer turns his face to the meadow, accepting his death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Doubleday edition of *The Complete Short Stories and Sketches of Stephen Crane* published in 1963.

A Mystery of Heroism Quotes

"Then somebody yelled: "There goes th' bugler!"

As the eyes of half the regiment swept in one machinelike movement, there was an instant's picture of a horse in a great convulsive leap of a death wound and a rider leaning back with a crooked arm and spread fingers before his face.

Related Characters: Collins's comrades (speaker), Collins's comrades

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the beginning of the story as the infantry watches the battle on the meadow rage from behind the safety of the hill. Here, the story emphasizes for the first time the violence and brutality that accompanies war. The death throes of the horse and rider on the field are highlighted—framed, as though in a painting—for the observer. As the reader is invited to visualize the grotesque "picture" the story presents, the subject of that picture hides his face from his own imminent death with his "spread fingers."

In the passage, brutality is framed by the absurdity of war. A soldier from the infantry notes the violent death of the bugler with incredible nonchalance. The regiment sheltered behind the hill is aimlessly watching the battle but not participating. Their calmness in the face of the destruction of people and animals on the battlefield is not heroic stoicism under fire, but rather an absurdly inappropriate reaction. The regiment is "machinelike," cold and incapable of the correct emotional responses of horror, fear, and grief. The implication is that they have been desensitized to the brutality of war, which only makes that brutality all the more powerful for the reader.

That the first death in the story is the death of the bugler also emphasizes the senseless waste of war. The bugler is carrying his instrument to guide the actions of the troops in battle. He has no weapon, and does not personally fight. When the enemy kills the bugler, they destroy an essential means of communication for the regiment, further dismantling the structures of human civilization in and around the battle.

Collins, of A Company, said: "I wisht I had a drink. I bet there's water in that there ol' well yonder!"

"Yes; but how you goin' to git it?"

For the little meadow which intervened was now suffering a terrible onslaught of shells. Its green and beautiful calm had vanished utterly. Brown earth was being flung in monstrous handfuls. And there was a massacre of the young blades of grass. They were being torn, burned, obliterated. Some curious fortune of the battle had made this gentle little meadow the object of the red hate of the shells, and each one as it exploded seemed like an imprecation in the face of a maiden.

Related Characters: Collins's comrades, Fred Collins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

Fred Collins in this moment wishes a second time for water and begins to theorize about how he might find some. He, like the rest of his regiment stationed beneath the hill, is disinterested in the battle. His absurd preoccupation with his thirst—a minor distraction compared to the raging battle—emphasizes his lack of investment in his army's unnamed goal. Collins merely "wisht" for a drink—he is not dying of thirst and he doesn't truly need the water. His idea of getting a drink from the well, first raised in this passage, is itself absurd. To get to the well, for the water that would be just a little luxury, he must cross the fiery wasteland that the meadow has become. The cost of the journey far outweighs the benefit.

The meadow, and its destruction before Collins's eyes, is representative of the violence and brutality of war. The story devotes a full paragraph to describing the "massacre" of the meadow: its blades of grass, its green beauty, and the earth it rested on. The meadow has become the object of the "red hate of the shells," which attempt not only to kill it, but to destroy it utterly. This is what Collins must face in order to pursue his absurdly trivial goal: the red hate of the shells which desire to see him "obliterated." The description of the destruction of the meadow also shows the collateral damage of war. It is not just men being killed; it is as if nature itself is being murdered.

In the absurdity of Collins's desire for water and the horrifying conditions he must pass through to reach the well, this passage also introduces one of the primary questions the story raises about the nature of heroism. To cross the meadow would certainly be a brave and extraordinary act. The story questions whether such an act, when applied to a frivolous and unnecessary goal, can still be considered heroic.

The wounded officer who was riding across this expanse said to himself: "Why, they couldn't shoot any harder if the whole army was massed here!"

Related Characters: The wounded lieutenant (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which takes place after the wounded lieutenant passes by the immobile infantry and heads out into the bombarded meadow, emphasizes both the sheer destruction of war and the absurdity of such unchecked violence. The lieutenant, riding through the meadow even as it is destroyed by exploding shells, is shocked by the intensity of the bombardment. The enemy, it seems, is shelling the meadow with everything they have, and "couldn't shoot any harder."

The enemy is shooting pointlessly, since so many of the shells strike the earth rather than the soldiers. There is no purpose in shooting the meadow with such intensity when there is no densely packed army to shoot. The danger to the enemy comes not from any soldier's anyway, but rather from the regiment's artillery, which is stationed on top of the hill and is as yet relatively untouched by the shells. The lieutenant understands the purpose of the bombardment to be destruction, and nothing more. The enemy is wasteful, both with their shells and with human life. The destruction they create on the meadow is profound and unnecessary.

Meanwhile, the fact that the wounded lieutenant is heading out past the artillery into the meadow is itself a little strange, and suggests that the lieutenant's injuries are perhaps more serious than they appear. Further, it sense the officer out into the meadow where Collins will soon also go, and the officer's fate will make clear the danger of Collins's "quest" to get the water.

❝ The wise young captain of the second company hazarded to the lieutenant-colonel that the enemy's infantry would probably soon attack the hill, and the lieutenant-colonel snubbed him.

Related Characters: Collins's comrades

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a young officer gives advice—advice that turns out to be accurate—to a superior officer, who ignores it. This passage is one of several in the story that demonstrate the incompetence of the leadership of the regiment and, through that incompetence, emphasize the absurdity of war. The superior officer doesn't just disagree with the younger officer on strategic or tactical terms. Rather, the superior officer "snubs" the younger one. This description suggests that the lieutenant-colonel refuses good military advice because he is motivated by pride and spite, and views suggestions from a younger and lower-ranked man as an affront to his position.

Very few soldiers in the regiment seem to have any investment at all in the battle taking place. The lieutenant-colonel prioritizes his pettiness over strategic maneuvers and the safety of his men. When soldiers such as the wise young captain show interest in the battle and its outcome, they are ignored or shot down. Though outnumbered by their disinterested, insouciant, or petty comrades, the few invested soldiers portrayed in the story throw the majority of the regiment into stark relief, emphasizing the destructive absurdity of most of the soldier's apathy in the face of incredible violence.

❝ There was a quarrel in A Company. Collins was shaking his fist in the faces of some laughing comrades.

"Dern yeh! I ain't afraid t' go. If yeh say much, I will go!"

"Of course, yeh will! You'll run through that there medder, won't yeh?"

Collins said, in a terrible voice: "You see now!" At this ominous threat his comrades broke into renewed jeers.

Related Characters: Collins's comrades, Fred Collins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Just after the enemy's exploding shells have struck their regiment's battery on top of the hill, Collins and his comrades are still preoccupied with the quest for the well and disinterested in the destruction taking place just above them. The circumstances of Collins's ridiculous quest, and the fact that it takes center stage in a battlefield story, are themselves absurd and reflect that absurdity onto the battle as a whole. As this passage reveals, there is not any true need for water, and Collins is not initially motivated by any sense of bravery or heroism. He decides to bring water back from the well simply because his jeering comrades

don't believe he can.

Once again, petty motivations drive the actions of the characters around the battle, rather than strategy, patriotism, or any ideal. This both emphasizes the absurdity of individual action in war—if most actions are driven by petty concerns, why would any be valuable?—and raises further questions about the nature of heroism. Collins, as the protagonist of a story set on a battlefield, might be reasonably expected to undertake some gallant quest for the good of his regiment or the life of a friend. Instead, he is moved by resentment to undertake a life-threatening quest for a silly goal, just to prove that he can. Through Collins's rather meager motivations for embarking on his "quest," the story establishes questions whether heroism is dependent on intent. With such a trivial goal and such petty motivation, can Collins truly be heroic?

> The colonel was watching Collins's face. "Look here, my lad," he said, in a pious sort of a voice—"Look here, my lad"—Collins was not a lad—"don't you think that's taking pretty big risks for a little drink of water."
>
> "I dunno," said Collins uncomfortably. Some of the resentment toward his companions, which perhaps had forced him into this affair, was beginning to fade. "I dunno wether 'tis."

Related Characters: Fred Collins (speaker), Collins's comrades

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Collins has just sought permission from his superior officers to cross the meadow and retrieve water from the well on the other side. Both the commanding officers and Collins himself are puzzled by the request and the conversation. The officers don't understand why he would want to cross the battlefield for water he doesn't need, and Collins, as this passage shows, is unable to concretely understand the risk or the value of the reward even to himself. He doesn't know whether the water is worth risking his life for, but at this point he seems caught in the inertia of his initial idea and unable to turn back.

The officers, though they patronize Collins, calling him "lad" and making vague attempts to question his motivation, do not refuse to let him go. The puzzlement of the officers, as well as Collins's own confusion, contributes to the sense of absurdity around the battle. The officers don't know quite what to do with him, but, in allowing him to go to the well, they decide that his life is not worth more than the possibility of water they don't need. Further, they decide that possibly losing a soldier who could fight later for no real reason is an acceptable outcome, suggesting the meager value that the army places on its soldiers. Ultimately, the officers simply shrug off the exchange as another of the absurdities of battle and do nothing to stop it, suggest that like Collins the officers seem to have little actual control over what is going on in the war or the battle.

Finally, this passage, with Collins's confusion about how he got himself into this situation, marks the beginning of his personal contemplation of heroism. He recognizes that it is his "resentment" and nothing else that put him into this position, but the questioning of the officers forces him to consider the worth of the mission, the risk, and what each means for him, even if he has no answers to their questions.

> He wondered why he did not feel some keen agony of fear cutting his sense like a knife. He wondered at this, because human expression had said loudly for centuries that men should feel afraid of certain things, and that all men who did not feel this fear were phenomena—heroes.
>
> He was, then, a hero. He suffered that disappointment which we would all have if we discovered that we were ourselves capable of those deeds which we most admire in history and legend. This, then, was a hero. After all, heroes were not much.
>
> No, it could not be true. He was not a hero. Heroes had no shames in their lives (...).
>
> He saw that, in this matter of the well, the canteens, the shells, he was an intruder in the land of fine deeds.

Related Characters: Fred Collins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Collins walks away from his comrades towards the meadow, which is still being bombarded by the enemy. Collins is quiet, preoccupied with his own confusion about what he is doing, why he is doing it,

and how he is feeling about it. He is unsure of why he doesn't feel afraid and seeks an answer within himself. In this passage, he considers heroism as that answer.

It is important here that Collins's definition of heroism is drawn from stories, "history and legend," rather than from his own personal experience. As Collins understands it from these sources, heroes do great deeds. After considering whether he might himself to be a hero because of his lack of fear, Collins feels only "disappointment"—Collins seems to feel that if he clears the bar for being a hero, then that diminishes the idea of what a hero is. A lack of fear, he decides, can't be the only defining feature of a hero. A hero must also be faultless, and because Collins cannot call himself faultless, he cannot call himself a hero. In this passage, Collins seems to faintly recognizes the satirical nature of his own quest. He senses that he is a foolish parody of a hero, and his journey for water can't be heroic compared to the truly "fine deeds" of the heroes of history and legend. In recognizing the silliness of his satirical hero's journey, Collins decides that what is imperfect can never be truly heroic.

Yet the story itself seems to argue with Collins's idea. Collins's concept of heroism is unrealistic, and functions as the frame by which the story explores its own questions of heroism. Is Collins right to deny himself the title of hero? If so, does he fail as a hero because he is not faultless or because of the absurdity of his quest? With Collins's larger-than-life definition of a hero, the story wonders on the one hand whether anyone can fit his fearless or faultless definition of a hero, or, on the other hand, what the heroism of an ordinary man might look like.

> The sky was full of fiends who directed all their wild rage at his head.

When he came to the well, he flung himself face downward and peered into its darkness. (...) He grabbed one of the canteens, and, unfastening its cap, swung it down by the cord. The water flowed slowly in with an indolent gurgle.

And now as he lay with his face turned away he was suddenly smitten with the terror. It came upon his heart like the grasp of claws. All the power faded from his muscles. For an instant he was no more than a dead man.

Related Characters: Fred Collins

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

Collins is nearing the edge of the battlefield and, startled by the explosion of a shell, begins to run towards the well. After Collins's contemplation of heroism, he becomes overwhelmed by the noise and chaos of the battle. Collins's experience of the meadow and the personification of the shells emphasizes again the unrelenting violence of war. The shells are "fiends" who send their "wild rage" at Collins specifically, targeting him and screaming at him. He perceives the attack as an offense aimed at him, the explosions falling down on "his head." The brutality of war is senseless, and the enemy is nameless, yet Collins experiences the violence of the bombardment as personal, which perhaps might be read as suggesting that whatever else war is, it is always something that is directly threatening soldier's lives.

This passage also marks the first time in the story that Collins feels fear. The onset of the fear is shocking, both to Collins and to the reader, after the joviality of the other soldiers and Collins's own numbness. It comes upon him "suddenly" and irreversibly, through no control of his own. Just as his earlier lack of fear was an involuntary condition, his sudden onset of fear is as well. He is "smitten" by it, like a blow. Collins's fear now absolutely precludes him from his own definition of heroism: he fails to be either faultless or fearless. But rather than making clear that Collins's is not a hero, this shift is another indication from the story that Collins's definition of heroism is too narrow—it wouldn't make any sense for someone to be fearless in a battlefield rocked by exploding shells. The definition of heroism must be something different.

> There was the faintest shadow of a smile on his lips as he looked at Collins. He gave a sigh, a little primitive breath like that from a child.

Collins tried to hold the bucket steadily, but his shaking hands caused the water to splash all over the face of the dying man. Then he jerked it away and ran on.

Related Characters: The wounded lieutenant, Fred Collins

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 225-226

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place after Collins has reached the well, gotten some water, and is now running back to the safety of his regiment from the well. He has encountered the dying lieutenant who had earlier in the story rode out into the battlefield and who has requested a drink of water from Collins. Collins, in his terror, screams that he cannot stop and runs past, yet he then turns around and runs back to the lieutenant anyway. Collins attempts to give the lieutenant water, but his fear causes him to spill it. The entire turn of events raises new question about the nature of heroism.

In turning back to give the lieutenant water despite his own overwhelming fear, Collins has done something truly selfless and generous, even heroic. Yet, Collins fear causes his arms to shake, and he fails to actually give the lieutenant his requested drink of water. In this way, turning back and further endangering his life was a futile act, which raises the question of whether heroism depends on the success of the undertaking?

Perhaps the answer is offered by the fact that the lieutenant, who smiles at Collins, is comforted by the sight of another living person. The lieutenant's smile and sigh suggest that the failure of Collins's undertaking to give him water does not make the action futile, since it still brought the lieutenant comfort.

And yet, there is an even deeper and more fundamental futility to Collins's act. The water isn't going to save the dying lieutenant. It's just a brief comfort along the way to the lieutenant's imminent death. Collins efforts to show the lieutenant kindness, in the bigger picture, will have no outcome but the death of the lieutenant and the possible death of Collins himself. One could argue that Collins's actions, then, are completely pointless and sentimental. And yet, one could also argue that it is the profound futility of the act that actually makes it heroic. Collins gives the lieutenant comfort in his moment of death, for no larger reason than that it seems like a small kindness.

The passage, though it does not fully answer the question of whether heroism depends on a successful outcome, suggests through the lieutenant's reaction to Collins that the act of turning around despite his fear was truly heroic. This, then, refutes Collins's definition of a hero as fearless and faultless. With Collins's fear and his impulsive generosity, the story implies that feeling fear may even be necessary for heroism. Collins is more heroic for acting selflessly in the midst of his terror than for his lack of fear, even if, at the end of the passage, he runs away again.

> When one tried to drink the other teasingly knocked his elbow. "Don't, Billie! You'll make me spill it," said the one. The other laughed.
>
> Suddenly there was an oath, the thud of wood on the ground, and a swift murmur of astonishment among the ranks. The two lieutenants glared at each other. The bucket lay on the ground empty.

Related Characters: Collins's comrades, Fred Collins

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which ends the short story, Collins has returned to his regiment with the water. His comrades cheered, and two officers took the bucket of water. Then, joking around about who gets to drink the water, the officers spill the bucket of water that Collins risked his life to get. The carelessness of the officers once again emphasizes the absurdity of war and the senselessness of violence. A hard-won victory in the form of the bucket of water is squandered almost immediately. Collins's Individual effort is negligently wasted. The bucket of water is lost for no sense or purpose—as are lives on the battlefield—as a result of the amusement or inattention of more powerful men.

Collins, who began the story thirsty, never gets a drink. His quest is rendered finally and ironically futile, emphasizing the pointlessness of individual effort in the absurdity of war. Any good that came from Collins's quest—the meeting with the dying lieutenant—is accidental and unrecognized, as is Collins's heroism. These accidents do not make Collins's actions in helping the lieutenant less heroic, but rather suggest something about the very nature of heroism in war. It is difficult to achieve, often thwarted, seldom witnessed or understood, and largely accidental.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A MYSTERY OF HEROISM

Behind a clay bank which shields an army from the shells of the enemy, the uniforms of the men are covered in dust and dirt. The sound of the army's artillery, or battery, on top of the hill is loud, and the infantry can see the guns, men, and horses silhouetted against the daytime sky. When the guns go off, they flash like red lightning. The artillerymen, dressed in white trousers and following the orders of their officers, seem impressive to the infantry below. Fred Collins of the infantry A Company remarks that he wishes he had a drink of **water**.

The story introduces a noticeably vague setting: a nameless battle in a nameless war. The army is not fighting for any identifiable ideal or purpose, and the enemy is both nameless and faceless, present only via the exploding shells it shoots. By providing no context or reason for the battle, what gets emphasized instead is its violence, and the senselessness and waste of that violence. Collins's disinterest in the battle and his wish for a drink is the first indicator of the absurdity of war and futility of individual effort and desire within it. Collins's personal preoccupations are more important to him than the nameless battle, yet seem absurdly trivial in the midst of such violence.

Someone yells "There goes th' bugler!" and half the regiment turns to see a dying man and horse caught by an exploding shell. In front of the infantry is a **meadow** with long green grass and beyond it is a house ruined by an explosion. The remains of a fence are visible and smoke rises from what used to be a barn. Two privates discuss "the greatest questions of the national existence." The battery duels with the enemy cannons. Soldiers struggle to escape the chaos of the battle. An officer screams until his voice breaks. The infantry regiment moves to a more sheltered spot under the hill.

The casualness with which the soldier shouts about the death of the bugler—and the fact that the rest of the infantry's only reaction is to turn and watch with no indication of accompanying horror or grief—indicates that the men of the infantry are both familiar with and unbothered by the violence occurring on the battlefield nearby. As the infantry watches, the war destroys men, animals, and signs of human civilization, which is evident in the ruin of the house beyond the meadow. The men of the infantry are simply observers of the carnage, and don't participate in it in any way, even through emotional investment. The apathy of the men in this passage is an indication of the meaninglessness that exists in war: some men die horrible deaths while others look placidly on.

A lieutenant from the battery passes by on a calm horse, holding his right arm in his left hand impassively, as though his arm belongs to someone else. Dirty and sweating, he smiles grimly at the men and rides toward the **meadow**.

Though it is unclear how the lieutenant was injured or what his purpose is in riding towards the battlefield—again contributing to the sense of waste and brutality in a battle without meaning—it is clear that he is taking action. Though he appears invested in the battle, he shows little concern for his injuries. Much like the observing infantry, the lieutenant is impassive when faced with violence, even violence inflicted on his own body. Whether this impassiveness is a feature of the absurdity of war or the lieutenant's own bravery is unclear. In this ambiguity, the story implies that absurdity and heroism often go together in war.

Collins again wishes aloud for a drink. He can see a **well** across the meadow. Someone asks Collins how he's going to get to the well: the **meadow** is being torn up by shells. The grass burns, and dirt is thrown into the air. Away in the meadow, the wounded lieutenant muses to himself that the enemy "couldn't shoot any harder if the whole army was massed here!" A shell strikes the ruins of the house and the infantry watches from shelter like men watching a terrible storm from the shore. There is chaos on the battery; hit by a shell, artillerymen and their horses lie dead on the ground.

Collins isn't dying of thirst. He'd just like some water. The absurdity of Collins's desire for water and eventual quest to get is revealed in the juxtaposition of his casual desire with the description of the violent destruction of the meadow. Collins is safe beneath the hill, if a little thirsty. To reach the well, he would have to cross a meadow which is being heavily bombarded: a ridiculous journey to take to get a drink of water. The enemy is not only violent, they are excessive. The lieutenant notes that excessiveness of force even as he rides through the worst of it. There is no need for such a fierce barrage of shells, yet the enemy seems intent upon causing destruction for the sake of destruction itself. The repeated explosion of the house is also noteworthy because it emphasizes the destructiveness of war on human effort and civilization. The house is already in ruins—now it is obliterated by the shells. Again, the infantry simply watches the nearby carnage. This passage makes clear the collateral damage of war beyond the loss of human life through its descriptions of the destruction of the meadow, the house, and the horses.

A companion jokes with Collins, asking him why he doesn't go get his drink from the **well**. Collins insists that he will. An officer with wild eyes rides by and shouts that they've "got to get out" of the battle. A careless major laughs and jokes about the destruction of the battery. A young captain offers his opinion on the enemy's plan and is ignored by the lieutenant colonel.

Amidst the chaos and destruction of the battle, the juxtaposition with regiment's jokey lack of concern stands out. Collins and his comrades are distracted, more interested in their argument about whether Collins will cross the battlefield than what is happening on that battlefield. Meanwhile, when officers attempt to give strategic advice, other commanders, no more concerned with the battle than Collins's comrades, ignore them for petty reasons. Each time someone attempts to take action in the battle, his efforts are wasted by the carelessness of others and the chaos of the war. These ridiculous moments of soldiers standing aimlessly and orders going ignored indicate again both the absurdity of war and the futility of individual effort within it.

A private points out to his companion that the wounded lieutenant from the battery who had been holding his right arm with his left hand had been struck by a shell. He now lies face-down in the meadow with his foot caught in the stirrup above the body of his dying horse.

The story once again carefully and viscerally describes the carnage of the battle and creates a. picture of the maimed or dead lieutenant and his horse, emphasizing the brutality of war. The lieutenant's body is brought to the attention of the regiment—and the reader—with the same casual tone as the death of the bugler was pointed out: as though the men, as spectators, are bound to look.

Collins argues with his laughing companions that he isn't afraid to go to the **well** and that he will go get the water. They don't believe that he'll make it across the **meadow**. He threatens, "You see now!" as they continue to mock him.

Collins remains oblivious of the violence and death on the field as anything more than an obstacle to his goal of reaching the well. He is preoccupied with the jeering of his companions, of turning their mockery around—their jeering is absurdly more important to him than either the progress of the battle or the death all around them. As a member of the infantry, safe beneath the hill, Collins is still a spectator. He has not invested himself in the battle and fails to fully understand the stakes of his argument with his comrades. In attempting to prove himself to his friends by undertaking the journey to the well, Collins misunderstands the nature of heroism and bravery as something that is innate—that a person has as a quality—rather than what the story suggests it is: largely the product of circumstance and accident.

Collins finds his captain conversing with the colonel and asks for permission to get **water** from the well. The captain laughs and tells Collins he must be pretty thirsty. Collins agrees. The captain asks if he can wait and Collins tells him he can't. The captain says, "look here, my lad," though Collins is not a lad, and then asks Collins if it isn't a big risk to take for a bit of water. Collins responds that he doesn't know. It was Collins's resentment towards his friends that forced him into the situation, and now his resentment is fading.

It's noteworthy that both Collins himself and his commanding officers are puzzled by the idea of Collins's request. Collins does not himself know whether the gratification of proving himself to his comrades is worth the risk to his life. His waning resentment seems to suggest that it is not *worth the risk, yet Collins doesn't withdraw his absurd request. Collins's motivations at this point are strictly unheroic. He is motivated by spite, and not motivated very strongly at that. As he is unable to back out of the plan when facing questioning from his superiors, he is also unable to absolutely justify the risk even to himself.*

The captain and the colonel, after brief contemplation, allow Collins to go to the **well** if he wants. They tell him to bring some of the other men's' canteens with him and to hurry back. Collins thanks them. The captain and colonel suddenly realize that they can't tell whether Collins actually wants to go or not. They see him surrounded by his companions and suppose that, either way, he is going.

By allowing Collins to risk an absurdly dangerous mission for an unnecessary reward, the officers display once again the incompetence of the army's leadership. In this decision, they are no less absurd than Collins and his friends for suggesting the quest. The captain and the colonel have judged Collins's life as worth nothing more than the possibility of water no one needs and perhaps the amusement or interest of whether he will survive. The behavior of the officers emphasizes Collins's uselessness in the battle and the meaninglessness of his individual efforts in war: they seem as worth the same having died on the battlefield for unnecessary water as he is worth keeping around to die in the actual fight.. The absurdity of the war is further highlighted by the way the officers shrug off the entire encounter. It is next to meaningless to them what Collins does and whether he wants to go., and they feel themselves as powerless to stop it anyway. The entire army—from Collins to the officers—seem to operate out of a kind of dumb inertia.

Collins appears "as a man dreaming." He is silent as he receives the questions, warnings, and chatter of his comrades. As the stunned men prepare him to go, they repeat, "Are yeh sure a-goin'?" Collins angrily insists that he is. Carrying five or six canteens and pulling his cap down over his head, he marches off.

Collins's friends, the observers of the battle, are excited at the prospect of something new to watch. While none of the infantry previously displayed any true investment in the battle besides a cursory interest in who had died, they are now attentive to what seems to be a daring challenge for Collins. They ready him to leave in a manner reminiscent of dressing a knight for battle. Their excitement and amazement, which Collins sought in agreeing to undertake this journey, now, after the waning of his initial fervor, only irritates him. He is weighed down by their canteens and their disbelief that he is actually going to do this. Collins effort to get the water is presented as a kind of ridiculous quest: a man sets off to face terrible odds and gain a prize, but the prize has little value to him or anyone else, the man is going not for a great purpose but because of a sense of slightly wounded pride. The absurdity of this quest implies the absurdity of this entire war and battle that have caused it to happen, but at the same time the absurdity of the quest suggests that perhaps all quests and the ideas of heroism that animate those quests are also, at heart, absurd.

The regiment, like one being, turns together to watch Collins with four hundred eyes. Unnamed voices chatter, musing that they never thought Collins would be brave enough to do something like this. An infantryman calls it "foolishness" to take such an unnecessary risk and fetch **water** from a dangerous place when they aren't dying of thirst. Another voice says that someone must have put Collins up to it. Someone else calls Collins a "desperate cuss."

Just as the regiment watched the deaths of their comrades, it now watches Collins walk into danger. Collins's comrades, like Collins himself, consider the undertaking to be a test of courage rather than what it really is: a test of Collins's luck as he runs through incredible danger. The men of the regiment, previously the mere announces of battlefield deaths, become now the voices of reason among the absurdity of Collins's quest and the battle as a whole, calling Collins foolish and correctly assuming that he was goaded into leaving. The last voice, which calls Collins desperate and stubborn, is the first to imply that his quest might be the result of the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by frontline witness to violent war.

As Collins walks away towards the **meadow**, he becomes dimly aware of a gulf, "the deep valley of all prides," which has suddenly appeared between himself and his comrades. It was simple emotion which led him—blindly, he now feels—to his current "obligation to walk squarely up to the face of death." Still, even if he could turn back without shaming himself, he is unsure if he would want to. He feels mostly surprised that his mind has put his body in such a dangerous situation.

As a potential hero, Collins is very unsure, both of himself and his quest. Though he sets out with a goal, he feels immediately adrift. His purpose is clear, but the path that led him into the danger of actually going on this quest is mystifying even to him. Collin's is engaging in what might be described as an ironic reversal of the hero's journey: his motivations are as ridiculous as his quest. Meanwhile, suddenly detached from the large machinelike collective of his regiment, Collins is surprised and confused, and understands keenly the separation between himself and his comrades. This separation is both physical and experiential. Collins, by walking into the meadow, ceases to be one of the sideline watchers, crossing out of safety and into war: and despite both the ridiculousness of the quest and how he ended up embarking on it, the story suggests that there is something meaningful—a pride—in willingly facing such danger.

Collins is conscious of how dull and dazed his mind is. He wonders why he isn't terrified. Centuries of stories say that men are afraid of danger and the men who aren't afraid are heroes. In that case, Collins thinks, he must be a hero. He feels disappointment at finding himself capable of the great deeds of legend; if he is a hero, heroes are not very impressive.

Collins initially defines heroism as a lack of fear. He bases this understanding not on his personal experience or any real-life knowledge, but instead on the heroes of legend and history. Stories are his only reference point for heroism, and it can be inferred from this that he has never seen heroism among his fellow soldiers, which is supported by the fact that those on display in the story all seem complacent, ridiculous, or dysfunctional. Since Collins has never witnessed the heroism of an ordinary man, he struggles to reconcile the idea of legendary heroism with his own unimpressive endeavors. Rather than bravely and boldly walking into danger, as a hero of legend, Collins is simply dazed, his body moving him along while his mind wanders. His definition of heroism, as applied to himself, is disappointing because, though Collins has been ignorantly brave in going on this "quest," he has not yet done anything very heroic. Collins's difficulty in reconciling his idea of heroism with his own life suggests that the story itself disagrees with his initial definition of heroism as the province of the fearless.

Collins decides that this can't be true; he is no hero because heroes have nothing to be ashamed of. He remembers his own shame: avoiding a friend rather than paying back a loan, and being rude to his now-dead mother. Collins realizes that he is "an intruder in the land of fine deeds."

Collins narrows his definition of heroism yet further: a hero must be both fearless and faultless. Under this definition, because of his sometimes shameful behavior, Collins can't be a hero. This understanding is something of a relief to him. It means that heroes are as impressive as he previously thought, and he has no way of living up to them, even if he'd wanted to: he can continue to revere heroes, and be free of having to be one himself. However, while Collins understands his two shameful acts to be great sins, they seem small and childish compared to the apathy of the regiment's leadership and the brutal violence of the surrounding battle. In this way, the story implies that perhaps Collins is too harsh a critic of himself, and further suggests that his definition of heroism is not particularly applicable to the situation. Collins's heroic ideal is legendary and has no place on a real battlefield. Collins and his quest are satirical reflections of that legendary heroic ideal; yet, the story implies, that does not necessarily preclude him from displaying the real-world heroism that exists beyond stories and in the lives of everyday, actual men.

The regiment has looked away from Collins by now. From the battle appears a line of charging men, their guns adding to the noise of the fight. An officer falls dead, and there is cheering from the field. A shell falls near Collins; the howling of the explosion presses into his ears. Startled, Collins runs for the shelled house across the **meadow**, the canteens he carries knocking together. The details of the house become clear as Collins nears it. He sees bricks from the chimney and a door hanging on its hinge. The air is full of the noise of bullets, explosions, and yelling. Collins feels that all of the rage of the battle is directed at him.

During the descriptions of the battlefield in this section, it is unclear which of the armies is charging and which is cheering. This vagueness and confusion is by design. The normal details of battle, such as who is winning, is irrelevant to the story, for two reasons: first, because the story is focused on Collins's satirical hero's journey rather than the larger battle; and second, because the obscurity of detail surrounding the battle—its purpose and circumstances—emphasizes the senseless brutality of war. Though the enemy is faceless and the battle itself is separate from the interest and emotions of the infantry, Collins, once on the battlefield, experiences the violence of the shells as a personal attack. This attack breaks him out of the numbness of his initial walk towards the meadow. The chaos and destruction around him forces him to become more than an observer. He is turned into an unwilling and unarmed participant. War, the story implies, is always aimed at destroying the individual soldier, regardless of what side he's on.

Reaching the **well**, Collins throws himself down and stares into it. He lowers a canteen by its strap into the water. It fills painfully slowly. Lying with his face aimed away from the battle, Collins finally feels fear. He goes limp, like a dead man. In a moment, he recovers enough to scream a curse at the canteen, leaning down to watch it fill. He can see the reflection of his eyes in the well. His expression seems both to plead with him and to blame him. The water mocks him with its sluggishness in filling the canteen.

As his fear comes upon him, Collins finally invests himself emotionally in the battle—not in its outcome or purpose, but in the way that it threatens his life. This moment also clearly marks Collins as failing to meet his own requirements of heroism: he has faults, and now he feels fear. In his moment of terror, he has none of the characteristic of a legendary hero. However, through his fear the story invites further questioning of Collins's understanding of heroism. At this point, it becomes clear that the qualifications that Collins has set forth for heroism are unreasonable. Must a hero truly feel no fear—an uncontrollable emotion? Or does heroism require *fear for a hero to overcome, or even to just endure? Collins is not paralyzed by his terror for long. He continues collecting the water, a simple act made brave and impressive by the very fact of his fear.*

The light of a shell reflects on the wall of the **well** and Collins jerks away and stands. He hesitates, then grabs an old bucket sitting nearby. He lowers it into the well, where it floats for a moment and then sinks. He pulls it out and then runs back across the **meadow** toward his regiment, unbalanced by the bucket's weight. Collins's face goes white; he anticipates the strike of a shell at any moment. He imagines falling like he has seen other men fall, killed before their knees hit the ground. He sees the line of his regiment, impossibly far away.

The symbol of water here reveals itself as an ironic reversal of Collins's desire for comfort and the fruition of his goal. Rather than being soothed at the well, Collins panics. The water is what "unbalances" him. Having reached is goal, Collins now feels the emotional impact of the deaths he witnessed from the safety beneath the hill by way of his perfectly reasonable fear that he is about to meet the same fate. He understands the chaos, brutality, and senselessness of the battle on a personal level. His regiment is in another world entirely: one of safety and ignorance. Though Collins can return to safety, he can't return unchanged by his experience on the battlefield or go back to being merely an apathetic spectator. Collins's went on his quest for ridiculous reasons, but the experience of the quest has truly made him grow and change.

The lieutenant from the battery with the injured arm has been groaning among the storm of the noise of the battle with no one alive to hear him. When Collins runs by, the lieutenant lifts himself up. His elbows is crooked and his feet are still caught in the stirrups, one over his horse and one trapped beneath it. His face is contorted from pain, and he appears to be about to cry out. Instead, his expression smooths and he calls politely to Collins: "Say, young man, give me a drink of **water**, will you?"

Within the violence of the battle and Collins's intense fear, the calm manner of the lieutenant's request comes as an absurd and jarring break in the chaos. The lieutenant, pained and dying, speaks to Collins with more civility and affability than any of Collins's friends or superiors did. The lieutenant's civility is all the more absurd because it is unexplainable. About to cry out in pain, he suddenly loses all indication of fear and suffering to speak to Collins. The behavior is out of place in the middle of the war, just like the regiments' jovial spectating of the regiment beneath the hill is. The lieutenant's request also gives Collins an opportunity for heroism. In this opportunity, the story raises further questions about the nature of heroism: if an intention is not heroic, but rather foolish, like Collins's quest, can an action which arises from it be heroic? The story's depiction of Collins as an accidental or ironic hero implies that the heroism of everyday men is often unplanned or unwilling, the product of accident or happenstance.

Collins is too afraid to be surprised. He feels "mad" from the threat of danger. He screams, "I can't!" and runs on. Collins, terrified, turns suddenly and runs back to the lieutenant. He offers the **water**: "Here it is! here it is!" The lieutenant droops face-first towards the ground. Collins grabs him by the shoulder, telling him to "Turn over, man, for God's sake!" The lieutenant turns his face towards the **battlefield**, wearing a tiny smile. He sighs. Collins's hands are shaking, and he accidentally splashes the water in the lieutenant's face. Collins yanks the bucket away and runs towards safety.

This section returns again to the question of heroism and its relationship to fear. Collins's choice to turn around at further risk to his life is an impulsive yet truly generous act. His fear, however, prevents him from succeeding in his goal of actually giving the lieutenant a drink of water, emphasizing the futility of individual action in war. Though Collins tries his best, the circumstances of war–the chaos of the battle and his own shaking hands—thwart him and make the action ironically pointless. Yet one could also argue that it is the ultimate futility of the act which makes it truly heroic. The only thing Collins can do for the dying lieutenant is give him comfort—no drink of water will save his life—and the lieutenant, smiling, seems comforted by Collins's attempt to give him water, soothed by the mere presence of a living person on a battlefield filled only with the dead. The selflessness of an act which can have no impact besides leading possibly to Collins's own death makes it undeniably heroic, finally refuting Collins's understanding of heroism. Just as a lack of fear does not create a hero, as Collins realized, the presence of fear does not preclude heroism. Nor, the story implies, does Collin's failure to give the lieutenant a drink make his actions less heroic. In fact, Collins's spilling of the water could itself be seen as a kind of accidental blessing, with the water a baptism of sorts that cleanses the lieutenant before death.

When Collins reaches the regiment it welcomes him with shouting and laughter. The captain tells him to give the bucket to the men. Two young and playful lieutenants take it first. One knocks the elbow of the other when he tries to drink. One jokes, "You'll make me spill it," and they laugh. There is a sudden curse and a thud. The regiment murmurs in astonishment and the lieutenants glare at each other. The bucket lies empty, the **water** spilled on the ground.

Collins completes his quest for water against all the odds. And yet the final ironic reversal of the story—the spilling of the bucket of water by the careless lieutenants—emphasizes the chaos and absurdity of war and the futility of individual effort within it. Every time Collins attempts to make choices and take action—in giving the lieutenant a drink and fetching the water—his efforts are overturned by forces beyond his control. War, ruled by absurdity, does not provide Collins with the opportunity to distinguish himself or become a hero. Rather, he must make his own opportunity for heroism, found accidentally within a foolhardy quest. In the ultimate futility of Collins's actions, the story suggests that heroism in war is born largely of accidents and goes largely unrecognized. There is no glory for Collins in comforting the lieutenant. His comrades cheer for him not because of his moment of true selfless bravery but because of the success of his pointless quest for water. The spilling of the bucket reveals again the carelessness of the regiment's leadership and the officers' disregard for human life. As they waste the water, they also waste human life with their pride, inattentiveness, and incompetence, emphasizing the senseless destruction of war.

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