

“A Mystery of Heroism”

1. What was your first reaction to the story? Did you consider Collins a hero or a fool? Why?
2. There is a good deal of “rank” in this story—several lieutenants, a captain, a major, a colonel, and a lieutenant colonel. But Collins is a private. Discuss whether or not you think his lowly rank is significant in any way.
3. When Crane “paints” the battle scene in colorful language, he draws our attention to the legs of certain men who are wearing white duck (linen) trousers. Why do you think Crane emphasizes the image of the men’s white legs? What does the white contrast with?
4. In modern war, it has been said, machines resemble humans, and humans resemble machines. Find two or three examples from this story showing that Crane believes war personifies machines and dehumanizes people. What do you think of this idea about the dehumanizing effects of war and the glorification of its machines?
5. What situational irony occurs at the end of the story as a result of Collins’s action?
6. What do you think is Collins’s motive for his daring act? Simple thirst? The reactions of his comrades? Some other force within him? In what sense might the “mystery” in the title of the story refer to Collins’s motivation?
7. The ending of the story is ambiguous—that is, it is open to more than one interpretation. Do you think the lieutenants spilled the water, or was the bucket empty by the time Collins got back? Does the empty bucket mean something? Explain how you interpreted the final lines of the story, and comment on whether or not you think this is a good ending.

Choices

The Outrage of War

1. Write a brief essay in which you summarize Stephen Crane's attitudes toward war, based on your reading of "A Mystery of Heroism." In your essay, respond to these questions: (a) Is anyone in the story a hero in the sense of being willing to risk his life for a high moral principle? (b) Do you find irony in Crane's attitudes toward war? (d) Does Crane really show you that war is “kind”?

2. War Is...

Write a poem or a short prose piece about war based on one of the subjects or themes in Crane's work. Your work should be clearly focused on the topic and the content should be gritty and true to life.