

The Open Boat



by Stephen Crane

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Introduction

Published in 1897, "The Open Boat" is based on an actual incident from Stephen Crane's life in January of that year. While traveling to Cuba to work as a newspaper correspondent during the Cuban insurrection against Spain, Crane was stranded at sea for thirty hours after his ship, the *Commodore*, sank off the coast of Florida. Crane and three other men were forced to navigate their way to shore in a small boat. One of the men, an oiler named Billy Higgins, drowned while trying to swim to shore. Crane wrote the story "The Open Boat" soon afterward. The story tells of the travails of four men shipwrecked at sea who must make their way to shore in a dinghy. Crane's grippingly realistic depiction of their life-threatening ordeal captures the sensations and emotions of struggle for survival against the forces of nature. Because of the work's philosophical speculations, it is often classified as a work of Naturalism, a literary offshoot of the Realist movement. "The

"Open Boat" has proved an enduring classic that speaks to the timeless experience of suffering a close call with death.

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Author Biography

Stephen Crane enjoyed both popular success and critical acclaim as a leading American author of the Realist school. Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1871, Crane was the youngest of fourteen children born to Jonathan Townley Crane and Mary Helen Peck Crane. His father was a Methodist minister and his mother a devout social activist. Crane was raised in the idealistic atmosphere of evangelical reformism. Crane's father died in 1880 and his mother had to support the family by doing church work and writing for religious journals. Death became a familiar event in the Crane household; by 1892 only seven of the fourteen children were still living.

Crane attended military school at Claverack College, where he pursued an interest in Civil War studies. He later spent some semesters at Lafayette College and then Syracuse University, though during these years he was mainly concerned with freelance writing and the prospect of becoming a novelist. In 1891, Crane moved to New York City, where he supported himself by writing for the *New York Tribune*. His first-hand observations of the gritty life in the Bowery inspired his first novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, published in 1893 under the pseudonym "Johnston Smith." Its frank portrayal of the sordid lives of the urban poor caused many publishers to reject the manuscript, requiring Crane to publish it on his own. Although *Maggie* received critical praise from prominent literary Realists, including Hamlin Garland and William Dean Howells, it was not widely read until its second printing in 1896 after Crane's reputation was established. In 1895, Crane achieved international fame with his second novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, which told the story of a young Henry Fleming's experiences in the Civil War. This unsentimental account vividly captured the sensations of the battlefield as well as the emotions of the young soldier whose romantic illusions about warfare are shattered by his encounter with the real thing. Crane also published a collection of poetry in 1895 titled *The Black Riders and Other Lines*.

In 1897 Crane decided to leave New York to become a war correspondent. While covering the Cuban Revolution, Crane met Cora Taylor, the proprietor of a Florida hotel and brothel. The couple would eventually move to England as common-law husband and wife. While still covering the war in Cuba in 1897, Crane was shipwrecked at sea off the Florida coast. He was stranded at sea for thirty hours with three other men, who eventually rowed to shore in a small life raft. One of the men, an oiler named Billy Higgins, drowned in the surf while trying to swim to shore. Crane later turned the experience into what many consider his greatest short story, "The Open Boat" (1897). For the rest of his life, he continued to work as a journalist and war correspondent, using his experiences as the basis for his fiction. Unable to return to New York because of his conflict with police, Crane spent most of his last years in England, where he lived beyond his means. His reputation as a leading author of the Realist school led him to form close friendships with other major writers, including Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and H. G. Wells. Crane's later works, including *The Third Violet* (1897) and *Active Service* (1899), were not considered up to the level of his earlier successes. In 1899 Crane's health began to deteriorate and he found himself plagued with financial troubles. While working on a new novel in 1900, Crane succumbed to tuberculosis and died at the age of twenty-eight.

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Summary

"The Open Boat" begins with a description of men aboard a small boat on a rough sea. Details begin to emerge. They are four survivors of a shipwreck: the cook, overweight and sloppily dressed, who is bailing water out of the bottom of the boat; the oiler, a physically powerful man named Billie who is rowing with one oar; the unnamed correspondent, who is rowing with the other oar; and the captain, who lies injured in the bottom of the boat. Each man stares intently at the waves which threaten to swamp the boat. A few characteristics become evident about each man: the cook is the most talkative of the four; the oiler, taciturn and an adept seaman. The captain is profoundly sorrowful at the loss of his ship and the potential loss of life along with it. The correspondent remains less well defined. The reader does learn that he engages in rather pointless discussion with the cook about the likelihood of being seen by rescuers or of finding a house of refuge on shore. They debate the points until the oiler has twice repeated that they are "not there yet."

This section features further character development and superb descriptive passages depicting the tiny boat's course across the rough waves. The captain briefly expresses doubt about their chances of survival, but then reassures the men that "we'll get ashore all right." The captain is the first to spot a barely visible lighthouse and they know they are approaching shore.

The captain improvises a sail using his overcoat and an oar to give the oiler and correspondent a chance to rest, but when the wind dies they resume rowing. The exhausted correspondent thinks of the absurdity—from his current point of view—of people choosing to row a boat for pleasure. He shares this thought with the other men, and the oiler smiles in sympathy. Unwilling to risk running the boat ashore in the rough surf, the men smoke cigars, drink from their water supply, and wait to be spotted by the lighthouse rescue crew.

The lighthouse appears deserted. The men discuss rowing toward land and swimming through the surf once the boat inevitably capsizes in the rougher water closer to shore. They know that they will only grow weaker with the passage of time. They exchange "addresses and admonitions" in case they do not all live through the ordeal. The narrator offers some musings—not attributed to any of the men in particular—about how unjust it would be to die after coming so far. When the oiler takes the boat toward shore, it quickly becomes apparent that the rougher waves will capsize their vessel when they are still much too far out to swim. They return to deeper but safer offshore water. A current takes them away from the lighthouse, and they row toward "little dots which seemed to indicate a city on the shore." The correspondent and the oiler now take turns rowing so that each can spend some time at rest.

Someone is seen on the shore waving to them. Soon a crowd gathers, disembarking from a bus. Despite their efforts to communicate distress, the men realize that the people on shore are tourists who think they are fishermen or pleasure boaters. No help is coming.

The four men spend a cold night rowing steadily toward distant lights. While the correspondent is rowing alone, a large shark cruises in the vicinity of the boat. The predator is never named, but is described in terms of its shape, size, speed, and the sound of the dorsal fin slicing through the water. This eerie scene is powerfully depicted.

Thoughts of drowning plague the crew. They agonize privately over the injustice of their situation: "If I am going to be drowned... why... was I allowed to come thus far?" The repeated phrase is never attributed; it may be their collective inner refrain. The correspondent silently recalls—incorrectly—a poem he learned as a schoolboy and never before truly understood, about a soldier who dies lamenting that he will never again see his native land.

At dawn, the men decide that their only chance is to row toward the distant shore again and swim when the

boat capsizes. The narrative stays primarily with the correspondent's inner thoughts during this passage. He reflects that nature—previously personified as malicious, desiring his death—is in fact perfectly indifferent to his fate. On the captain's order, the oiler rows the boat directly toward shore. Waves crash into the boat as it enters the breakers. The cook briefly bails out water, and then the men abandon the foundering craft. The oiler swims strongly and steadily toward the shore. The cook, in his lifejacket and clutching an oar, bobs along until the captain calls to him to turn over on his back; in that position he rows himself as if his large, bouyant body were a canoe. The correspondent clings to a piece of a lifejacket and paddles slowly, thinking of the vast distance he has yet to cross. The injured captain clings to the stern of the overturned boat, which is pushed toward the beach by the strong surf. A wave tosses the correspondent over the boat and into waist-deep water, but he is too weak to even stand up. Suddenly, a man appears on shore, stripping off his clothes and running into the water. The rescuer drags the cook to safety and then approaches the captain, who waves him away to help the correspondent first. Billie, the oiler, is face-down in the shallow water, dead. The three living men are fed and tended. That night they listen to the sound of the waves against the shore "and they felt that they could then be interpreters."

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Characters

Billie

See Oiler

Captain

The injured captain is unable to help row the lifeboat. Having lost his ship, the captain is more forlorn and dejected than the other characters, but he feels that it is his duty to guide the men to safety. He makes the decisions for the crew, and he provides words of encouragement to the men rowing. At one point, the captain seems the least optimistic about the possibility of survival. However, he only once allows himself to express such pessimism, and he quickly reverses himself, speaking as if he is “soothing his children,” saying that “we'll get ashore all right.” in the end he survives by clinging to the overturned boat as it is washed into shallow water by the surf. Even then, he waves away a rescuer and points to the correspondent, indicating that he should be helped ashore first.

Cook

The cook is described as fat and untidily dressed. He does not help row, but he does work steadily bailing seawater out of the boat. He is the most talkative of the four men, and remains unshakably certain that they will be rescued. When they finally sight shore, and a building, he keeps commenting on how strange it is that the "crew" of what he imagines is a life-saving station has not spotted them and sent out a rescue boat yet. He repeats this long after it becomes apparent that the building is vacant and no one has seen them. He is the only one of the four men in the boat who wears a life jacket. Underscoring the randomness of the natural disaster that has befallen the four very different men, the unfit cook is one of the three who survives, while the oiler, a strong and capable seaman, drowns in the surf just off shore.

Correspondent

The character of the correspondent is autobiographical in nature. Crane was himself shipwrecked off the Florida coast while working as a war correspondent. The correspondent is the only character in the story to whose thoughts the reader is given direct access. As the story progresses, the absurdity of the situation impresses itself deeply on the correspondent's mind. He recognizes that he might drown despite all of his efforts to survive, which causes him to consider the disheartening possibility that nature is indifferent to his fate. His melancholy leads him to imagine his own death as like that of a French soldier in a poem who dies,

unmourned, far from his homeland. In the end, the correspondent survives, largely due to sheer luck: a large wave that carries him into shallow water near land.

Oiler

The oiler, Billie, is the only character in the story whose name is given. This fact has often been remarked upon by critics. He is also the only character in the open boat who does not survive the ordeal. He is the most physically able of the four characters and seems the most determined to survive. The strongest rower, the oiler also makes the strongest effort to swim ashore when the boat capsizes in the surf. Yet his efforts come to nothing—he drowns in the shallow water just off shore while the other characters are saved by what appears to be random chance.

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Themes

Individual vs. Nature

During the late nineteenth century, Americans had come to expect that they could control and conquer their environment. With the technological breakthroughs of the Industrial Revolution, humankind appeared to have demonstrated its ability to both understand and to dominate the forces of nature. In "The Open Boat," Crane questions these self-confident assumptions by describing the precarious situation of four shipwrecked men as they are tossed about on the sea. The men seem to recognize that they are helpless in the face of nature. Their lives could be lost at any moment by the most common of natural phenomena: a wave, a current, the wind, a shark, or even simple starvation and exposure. The men are at the mercy of mere chance. This realization profoundly affects the correspondent, who is angered that he might be drowned despite all of his efforts to save himself. In a passage that drips with irony, Crane writes of the correspondent: "He thought: 'Am I going to drown? Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?' Perhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature." This passage suggests the absurdity of an individual's sense of self-importance against the mindless power of nature.

Perspective

One of the main themes of the story concerns the limitations of any one perspective, or point of view. Crane's famous first sentence of the story presents this theme immediately: "None of them knew the color of the sky." The men in the boat are so focused on the danger presented to them by the waves that they are oblivious to all else. The story continually emphasizes the limitations of a single perspective. When the shipwrecked men are first spotted from the shore, they are mistaken for fishermen. The people on shore do not perceive their distress and only wave cheerfully to the men.

Crane writes of the men in the boat that if they were viewed "from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtless have been weirdly picturesque." This serene perspective contrasts markedly with the frightening and violent reality the men in the boat are experiencing. Crane's point seems to be that humans can never fully comprehend the true quality of reality, but only their own limited view of it. Throughout the story, the situation of the men in the boat seems to them "absurd," "preposterous," and without any underlying reason or meaning. Yet once the three survivors are safely on shore at the end of the story, they believe that they can look back and "interpret" the import or meaning of what has happened to them. The reader is left to wonder whether anything can ever be truly understood, or if all understanding is simply an agreed-upon, limited perspective that provides the illusion of unity to the chaos of lived events.

Death

The drama of the story comes from the men's realization that they are likely to drown. Having to confront the

probability of their own imminent death, each of the characters accepts what Crane calls a “new ignorance of the grave—edge.” It is interesting that Crane refers to this understanding as “ignorance” rather than “knowledge.” Being at the mercy of fate has demonstrated to them how wrong their previous beliefs about their own importance had been. The correspondent, in particular, is troubled by the senselessness of his predicament, and he thinks about a poem in which a French soldier dies, unceremoniously, far from his home and family. Facing senseless death, the universe suddenly seems deprived of the meaning he had previously attached to it. Thus, he is overtaken by a new “ignorance” about life, rather than a new “knowledge.” Crane seems to endorse the idea that nature is random and senseless by having the oiler drown in the surf. Of all the men, the oiler seemed the most likely to survive, being the most physically fit. His death implies that the others’ survival was merely the result of good fortune. Once the survivors are safe from danger, however, death’s senselessness is quickly forgotten.

Free Will

Crane was regarded as a leading member of the Realist or Naturalist movement in his time. One of the main concerns of the Naturalists involved the dilemma of whether human beings could exercise control over their fate or whether their fate was predetermined by their environment. To state it differently, they asked whether humans possess a free will or were powerless to shape external events. Drawing upon deterministic philosophies such as those of Charles Darwin, Auguste Comte, or Karl Marx, the Naturalists analyzed the various natural forces that effected the “struggle for life.” These concerns are evident in “The Open Boat.” Although the four men are clearly making the best effort to get to shore, it is never certain until the end whether they will drown. Their fate seems to rest mostly in the hands of forces beyond their control. A prime example of this comes when the correspondent gets caught in a current while trying to swim to the shore. He is trapped by an invisible force—an underwater current—which he can neither understand nor escape. For unknown reasons, the current suddenly frees him and he is washed ashore by a giant wave. It seems clear that Crane attributes the correspondent’s survival more to uncontrollable forces than to his own efforts.

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Style

Point of View

Perhaps the literary technique most remarked upon by critics of “The Open Boat” is Crane’s unusual use of a shifting point of view. The story is told alternatively from the perspective of each of the crew members, as well as from the vantage point of an objective observer. Often, it is not clear whose viewpoint is predominant at a given time. There are passages of dialogue, too, in which the different speakers are never identified. In these ways, the reader is given the sense that all of the crew members share similar feelings about their predicament. There is also the suggestion that their reactions are archetypal and universal; that is, that anyone would respond the same way to what they are going through. The correspondent is the only character whose inner thoughts are clearly identified—perhaps because he, being a writer, has the ability to articulate their experience best. Some critics have viewed Crane’s shifting perspectives as a flaw, because it hinders independent character development. But, arguably, the story does not need its characters to develop as much as to experience the same fear and anger. Crane captures the sights, sounds, and emotions of a near-death experience so powerful that it denies the characters the ability to comprehend. For each of the characters the possibility of death seems unjust and senseless. Only in the end can they begin to “interpret” their experience, yet the reader is not privy to their conclusions. Thus, the shifting point of view appears to emphasize the failure of interpretation by all of the characters, rather than the knowledge that each has gained.

Realism

Stephen Crane is considered one of the foremost American authors of the Realistic and Naturalistic

movements of the late nineteenth century. The Realists shared a mission to banish sentimentality and genteel conventions from their fiction. They sought to depict life as it is by constructing a "photographically" vivid description of familiar or harsh circumstances. Crane's precise rendering of the sea-tossed men in "The Open Boat" is a prime example of realist technique. He succeeds in making the reader feel as though he or she could understand exactly what it was like to live the experience. The Realists often shocked their readers with "objective" depictions of sexual indiscretion, brutality, vulgarity, and unredeemed injustice. Their fiction deliberately dispensed with the tone of moral condemnation that characterized most nineteenth-century fiction that addressed such themes.

Crane is usually associated with a particular brand of Realists known as the "Naturalists." In addition to the issue of objective treatment, the Naturalists were also intensely concerned with the question of whether human beings could exercise control over their fate or whether their fate was determined by their environment. Influenced by deterministic philosophies such as those of Charles Darwin or Karl Marx, the Naturalists analyzed the omnipotent, "natural" forces that effected the "struggle for life." These concerns are evident in "The Open Boat." The fate of the four men seems to rest mostly in the hands of forces beyond their control. A prime example of this comes when the correspondent gets caught in a current while trying to swim to the shore. He is trapped by an invisible force—an underwater current—which he can neither understand nor escape. For unknown reasons, the current suddenly frees him and he is washed ashore by a giant wave. Crane attributes the correspondent's survival to the uncontrollable forces of nature, not to his own efforts.

Setting

Since "The Open Boat" is the fictional treatment of a real-life experience that befell Crane off the coast of Florida, the setting of the story would seem determined by the actual event. However, there is good reason to question what the setting conveys about the themes and symbolic meanings of the story. Even though such an event actually happened, it was still Crane's choice as an artist to write about it. For Crane, the event must have held some deep meaning that was inseparable from the setting, or else he might have transformed it into a fictional account of a near-death experience in some other context. The experience of being in an open boat, adrift on the rough sea, seems to have communicated to Crane a sense of helplessness in the face of nature's indifference. Symbolically, nature is perfectly represented by the sea, the wind, the cold, and even the shark that periodically swims near the boat. These elements pose a great danger to the men, who have little they can do to protect themselves beyond rowing toward the shore and hoping for assistance. The nearly helpless men in the boat can be seen as a metaphor for all people before the forces of nature. Their power to act on their own behalf is small indeed when compared against the natural forces that allow them to exist, yet could strike them down at any moment.

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Historical Context

Social Darwinism

Every field of thought in the late nineteenth-century was impacted by the theories of Charles Darwin. Although Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, its influence was felt most strongly in the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. A variety of thinkers in the social sciences began to apply Darwin's evolutionary theories to explain the development of human societies. Known as the "Social Darwinists," these thinkers posited the existence of a process of evolution based on hereditary traits that predetermined the behavior of human beings. The most famous of these thinkers, an English social scientist named Herbert Spencer, popularized the phrase "survival of the fittest" to describe the omnipotent law of "natural selection" which determines the natural evolution of society. Most Social Darwinists adapted the idea of natural selection to existing racial theories, using this hereditary or evolutionary reasoning to explain the condition of

the different races in their own time. The Social Darwinists were divided over the issue of whether humans could shape the direction of their own evolution for the better, or if they were powerless to influence the process of natural selection. While many resisted the arguments of all other Social Darwinists, their highly-publicized controversies led to the subtle spread and popularity of evolutionary reasoning in society at large.

Realism and Naturalism

The pervasiveness of Darwinism in the late nineteenth century was related to a trend in social thought away from abstract idealism toward the investigation of concrete reality. With the technological breakthroughs of the Industrial Revolution, the prestige of science and the experimental method had reached an all-time high. In literature, this cultural context was reflected in a new literary movement called Realism, which sought to construct a "photographically" vivid depiction of life as it is. Their preference for "hard facts" mimicked the scientific method. The Realists shared a mission to banish sentimentality and genteel conventions from their fiction. William Dean Howells preached the doctrine of Realism which gained the support of such authors as Mark Twain and Henry James. As the movement spread, Realism became more controversial when some practitioners began to shock their readers with "objective" depictions of sexuality, brutality, vulgarity, and unredeemed injustice. They deliberately dispensed with the tone of moral condemnation that characterized most nineteenth-century fiction dealing with such themes. In the 1890s, Realism took on a newly philosophical character in the writings of the Naturalists. Influenced by French novelist Emile Zola, the leading Naturalist, some American authors sought to integrate deterministic philosophies into their literature. The Naturalists were intensely concerned with the question of whether human beings could exercise control over their fate or whether their fate was determined by their environment. Influenced by deterministic philosophies such as those of Darwin or Marx, the Naturalists analyzed the "natural" forces or "scientific" laws that affected the "struggle for life." One of the most successful Naturalists, Stephen Crane, said that we live in "a world full of fists" in which the survivors are not necessarily the most "fit" but only the most fortunate.

The Spanish–American War

When Cuban revolutionaries began a war for independence against Spain in 1895, the United States lent financial and moral support to the uprising. American newspapers covered the rebellion closely and ran anti-Spanish stories on a daily basis. Crane, in fact, was employed as a newspaper correspondent on an assignment covering the uprising when the ship he was traveling on, carrying a cargo of arms for the revolutionaries, sank off the coast of Florida. The experience led him soon afterward to pen the story "The Open Boat." In February 1898, Spanish forces sank the American battleship *Maine* in Havana Harbor, killing 260 American seamen. On April 24, the United States declared war on Spain with the overwhelming support of the American people. The Spanish–American War was an extremely popular war that tapped into a glorification of masculine bravado that dominated society at the turn of the century. Theodore Roosevelt's "Rough Riders," who led the attack on San Juan Hill, became one of the most enduring symbols of courage and masculinity of the times. The reporting of the Spanish–American War reflected a dominant preoccupation with the human struggle to survive amid brutal circumstances.

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Critical Overview

"The Open Boat" is widely considered to be a technical masterpiece of the modern short story. As far as artistry is concerned, the story's excellence in realism and dramatic execution have never been questioned. As Bettina Kapp wrote in *Stephen Crane*, "Crane's sensual images of man struggling against the sea remain vivid long after the reading of 'The Open Boat.' The salt spray and deafening roar of the waves pounding against

the dinghy can almost be tasted and heard.” Many critics have dissected the technical aspects of this story’s Realism and plot construction. John Berryman has composed a nearly line-by-line close reading of the story, demonstrating its tight movement from the opening line to the last word.

On the surface, the meaning of “The Open Boat” would seem rather straightforward. Most contemporary readers of the story recognized the realism in Crane’s approach, but few remarked on its deeper philosophical meanings. It has subsequently become clear, however, how much Crane shared with the more pessimistic Naturalists. Indeed, the most common understanding of the story would point out how it demonstrates that human fate is determined by the forces of nature. But, how does Crane characterize the meaning of nature? The way in which critics answer this question largely determines how they interpret the story. In “The Essentials of Life: ‘The Open Boat’ as Existentialist Fiction,” Peter Buitenhuis argues that, in fact, the story is not Naturalistic but Existential. To support this assertion, Buitenhuis points out that nature is not governed by any discernible natural laws in the story—Darwinian, Marxist, or otherwise. Instead, the story is about the correspondent’s realization of the absurdity of the human condition. The Existentialists were a school of philosophers in the 1940s who argued that the only possible meaning given to the universe is subjective, that is, a creation of each person’s individual perspective. Donna Gerstenberger has expanded on this position in “‘The Open Boat’: Additional Perspective.” She argues that the story is essentially an ironic statement about the disparity between man’s belief in a just and meaningful universe and the reality of a world that is totally indifferent to man’s concerns. In contrast to Buitenhuis, Gerstenberger points out that the correspondent never reaches any kind of “heroic” knowledge of man’s condition, but continues to insist on his false ability to “interpret” his experience. Both of these interpretations suggest that Crane may not fit very neatly into the category of “Naturalist.” While he shared many of their same concerns, Crane seems profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of understanding nature, or the universe, whereas most of the Naturalists believed that nature’s laws could be discerned and explained (if not controlled).

In a recent article, “For the Record: Text and Picture in ‘The Open Boat,’” George Monteiro provides evidence that suggests the story should not be too narrowly viewed as a retelling of personal experience. Monteiro demonstrates that Crane’s descriptions closely resemble episodes from other sources, including an illustration, a poem, and a textbook. By drawing these parallels, he shows Crane’s artistry in choosing particularly telling images and episodes to create his fiction rather than simply reconstructing actual events. Finally, James Nagel in *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism*, suggests that Crane’s fiction mimicked the concepts of the Impressionists in painting. By emphasizing the flawed perspective of individuals, Crane did not simply attempt to reconstruct “reality,” but rather showed that reality cannot be reduced to a single viewpoint. The Impressionists believed that a truly realistic painting should depict the subjective and distorted impression that an image inscribes upon the mind. Nagel argues that in “The Open Boat” the characters are able to transcend this weakness by accepting the inadequacies of their own perspective.

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Essays and Criticism

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Interpreting the Uninterpretable: Unreasoning Nature and Heroic Endurance in Crane's *The Open Boat*

In the essay that follows, Mark Elliot examines the way Crane transformed the raw material of his firsthand experience as a shipwreck survivor into a short story, "The Open Boat," which "explores the mysteries of nature and human life on many levels."

Ever since it was first published in 1897, "The Open Boat" has widely been considered a masterpiece of literary realism. All of the most recognizable elements of Realism are present within the story. In its graphic probing of events and in its objective description of the characters' psychological state, the story successfully presents a realistic sensation of the characters' experience without any of the false heroism or romantic plots that characterized other contemporary fiction. "The Open Boat" has no plot in the traditional sense; it is almost a mere description of thoughts and events. In fact, since author Stephen Crane actually experienced the events related in the story when he was ship-wrecked with the crew of the *Commodore*, one might suspect that the story is not fiction at all. Indeed, the story's subtitle, "A Tale Intended to be After the Fact, Being the Experience of Four Men From the Sunk Steamer *Commodore*," presents the story as if it were a journalistic account. Yet, despite its appearance as an objective narrative, "The Open Boat" raises deeply philosophical issues and is rife with symbolism. When analyzed closely, it becomes clear that a simplistic categorization of the story as "realistic" fiction fails to do justice to the multi-dimensional qualities of "The Open Boat."

A few days after Crane survived a shipwreck off the Florida coast, he published an account of his experience in a newspaper story entitled "Stephen Crane's Own Story." It is interesting to compare this non-fictional account with the short story "The Open Boat," which appeared six months later. In this first account, Crane relates only the events of the *Commodore*'s sinking, without either the descriptive quality or the access to inner thoughts that characterize the later fictional story. In addition, Crane deliberately leaves out any description of his experience on the life raft, commenting that "the history of life in an open boat for thirty hours would no doubt be very instructive for the young, but none is to be told here now. For my part I would prefer to tell the story at once, because from it would shine the splendid manhood of Captain Edward Murphy and of William Higgins, the oiler." In this statement, the theme and purpose of "The Open Boat" can be discerned. Despite the unsentimental realism of the story, Crane sought to portray his idea of the true meaning of heroism. His remark that such a story would be "instructive for the young" is particularly revealing because it links the purpose of "The Open Boat" with that of Crane's most famous novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, in which a young man's romantic dreams about courage and heroism are shattered by his encounter with a real war. Henry Fleming, the young soldier, learns that battle is chaotic and meaningless and that heroism has nothing to do with extraordinary acts, but more with the mere luck of survival. Similarly, after Crane reflected upon the events of his shipwreck, he tailored his fictional account of it to the theme of heroism in the face of imminent death. In a perfect metaphor of the forces of nature versus the struggles of man, Crane makes the men on the boat a symbol of the heroism of simple human endurance against an indifferent universe.

Each of the men in the dinghy is faced with the likelihood of his own death. While they row and wait to be rescued, the realization sets in that they are largely helpless in the face of nature's awesome power. The sea serves as a powerful reminder of the forces of nature: their lives could be lost at any moment by the most common of natural phenomena, such as a large wave, a strong current, an ill wind, or most ominously, a hungry shark. This profoundly affects the men, who feel that it would be unjust to be drowned after all their best efforts to save themselves. In a passage that drips with irony, Crane writes of the correspondent: "He thought: 'Am I going to drown? Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?'" Perhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature." This passage suggests the absurdity of an individual's sense of self-importance against the mindless power of nature.

The heroism of the individuals in the story comes from their grim determination and human camaraderie in trying to overcome their situation. Crane creates a kind of collective consciousness for the crew by alternating the perspective from which the story is told, which includes each of the crew members as well as the vantage point of an objective observer. Often, it is not clear whose point of view is predominant at a given time. In this way, the reader is given the sense that all of the crew members share similar feelings about their predicament. In addition, each character contributes to the effort to save the group: the injured captain navigates, the correspondent and oiler take turns rowing, and the cook maintains lookout. None of them complain about the division of tasks, or betray any wish to improve their own chances of survival over the others. In a striking passage, the depth of their camaraderie is revealed: “They were friends, friends in a more curiously ironbound degree than may be common.... There was this comradeship that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life. But no one said that it was so. No one mentioned it.” Paradoxically, the harrowing hours on the rough sea is both terrifying and “the best experience” of their lives. Comprehending the cold indifference of the universe to their plight, the men rely on each other in the understanding that— if nothing else—they share the same predicament and are not alone in the world. In a strangely Darwinian scene, their return to a primitive state of nature in the “struggle for life” does not reduce the men to savages but rather affirms their humanity.

The Darwinian implications of “The Open Boat” demonstrate Crane’s interest in the philosophical ideas of the literary Naturalists. A European variant of the Realist movement, the Naturalists sought to integrate deterministic philosophies such as Darwinism or Marxism into their literature. The Naturalists emphasized the hidden forces or “natural” laws that affected what Darwin called the “struggle for life.” They were intensely concerned with the question of whether human beings could exercise control over their fate, or whether their fate was entirely determined by their environment. In “The Open Boat,” the fate of the four men would seem to rest mostly in the hands of forces beyond their control. For instance, when the correspondent makes his attempt to swim ashore he gets caught in a underwater current that prevents his progress. Literally and symbolically, he is trapped by an invisible force—a current—which he can neither understand nor escape. For unknown reasons, the current suddenly frees him and he is washed ashore by a giant wave. In this description, it would seem that Crane attributes the correspondent’s survival more to uncontrollable forces than to his own efforts.

Crane departs from the Naturalists, however, in that he does not posit the existence of any discernible “laws of nature.” Nature, in the story, is incomprehensible to man and probably without ultimate meaning or purpose. In an ironic reversal of the Darwinian rule of the “survival of the fittest,” the only member of the crew to perish in the ordeal is the oiler, who had seemed the most physically “fit” to survive. While it is possible to interpret the oiler’s death as a heroic sacrifice—suggesting that he exhausted himself rowing the boat for the others—it seems more in keeping with the theme of the story that the oiler was simply unlucky. For Crane, nature is chaotic and takes no account of human struggles. In the most famous passage from the story, the correspondent imagines that a tall windmill on shore with its back to the men is the personification of nature: “It represented to a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But, she was indifferent, flatly indifferent.” This realization haunts the men as they attempt to save themselves. Their heroism comes from their desire to live, and from their human dignity and camaraderie regardless of nature’s indifference.

The suggestion that the perilous hours on the open boat constituted “the best time of their lives” presents the idea that their understanding of the human condition can only come when confronted with the probability of imminent death. Each of the characters acquires what Crane calls a “new ignorance of the grave-edge.” It is interesting that Crane refers to this understanding as “ignorance” rather than “knowledge.” Being at the mercy of fate has demonstrated to them how wrong their previous beliefs about their own importance had been—they revert to a kind of primitive innocence. The correspondent thinks about a poem in which a French soldier dies, unceremoniously, far from his home and family. Realizing that he faces a similarly senseless

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death, he finds the true meaning of courage and heroism in the simple will to survive. Once the survivors are safe from danger, however, death's senselessness is quickly forgotten. The last line of the story has the men looking out upon the sea once again deluded into believing they can make sense of it: "When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters." With the death of the oiler and the rescue of the others, the bond between the men is broken and each is left to believe that his experience and particular reason for survival has some larger meaning. Their brief moment of human brotherhood and understanding ends with their rescue.

Compared to his journalistic account of the *Commodore's* shipwreck in "Stephen Crane's Own Story," Crane's fictional account, "The Open Boat," possesses a depth of philosophical meditation and symbolic meaning that raises it far above simple Realism. While the descriptive quality of the story is vivid and evocative, it is more than a straightforward realistic telling of an actual event. Crane uses the incident to question the possibility of human understanding of nature, and to pose a definition of heroism constituting a selfless brotherhood in the struggle for life. Under adverse circumstances, the men experience a rare connection as fellow beings united in their helplessness before the power of nature, and in their silent recognition of its indifference to their struggles. This moment of heroic transcendence is fleeting, however, as the men return to the false security of human society in the end. A triumph of short fiction, Crane's "The Open Boat" explores the mysteries of nature and human life on many levels.

Source: Mark Elliot, "'Interpreting' the Uninterpretable: Unreasoning Nature and Heroic Endurance in Crane's 'The Open Boat,'" in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 1998. Elliot is a Ph.D student in history at New York University. With a strong background in American literature, he is a former editor of "New England Puritan Literature" for *The Cambridge History of American Literature*.

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Tales of Adventure

In the following excerpt, Knapp commends "The Open Boat" as a great piece of short fiction and a compelling narrative of struggle between individuals and the indifferent, vast natural world.

"The Open Boat" (1898), one of America's finest short stories, describes the adventure that satisfied Crane perhaps most fully. He said once that he wanted to go "to some quarter of the world where mail is uncertain." He did just that when he accepted Bachelier's assignment in November, 1896 to cover the Cuban Revolution. Thick fog enshrouded the St. Johns River as the *Commodore* set sail from Jacksonville with Crane aboard. Although Captain Edward Murphy had taken the precaution of hiring a local pilot to help the vessel out of the harbor, it struck a sand bar. The following morning, the *Commodore* was towed free, but Murphy neglected to review the damage done the ship, which continued on into deeper waters. By the time the leak was discovered, there was no hope of saving the ship. Although the Captain tried to steer it back to the harbor, the pumps and engines gave out and it foundered. Passengers and crew were ordered into the lifeboats. Crane's conduct during this harrowing ordeal was superb: he soothed frightened men, helped bail out water, and acted like a born sailor. After the crew was in the lifeboats, Crane, the Captain, the cook and the oiler climbed into a ten-foot-long dinghy.

Although the boat managed to stay afloat on the high seas, Crane's harrowing experience was far from over. The mate's lifeboat capsized and the men on it drowned. Crane was deeply moved by the courage of the

sailors who drowned: no shrieks, no groans, only silence.

The remaining lifeboats reached land the following day. The dinghy, however, could not get ashore because of the rough surf and so remained out at sea. No one on shore could see or hear the men in the dinghy. The captain fired his pistol but to no avail, and the men were forced to spend another night in the dinghy, rowing frantically to prevent being swallowed up by the rough seas. They then decided to row to Daytona Beach and try to make it through the breakers there. But the boat overturned, and they had to swim. A man on the beach saw what happened and ran for help. All but the oiler were saved.

“None of them knew the color of the sky,” is perhaps one of the most celebrated opening lines of any short story. The opening line conveys the fierce struggle between finite man and the infinitude that engulfs him—as in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. The sea for Crane, as it is for Melville, is “the image of the ungraspable phantom of life.”

The men’s agony at not knowing their fate is underscored by the power of those surging waters— waves that could sweep the men under at any moment. “The horizon narrowed and widened, and dipped and rose, at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks.”

Man, like the helpless survivors in the boat, is thrust here and there and floats about in utter helplessness. No matter how hard people try to fix and direct themselves, they are castaways. Salvation—if there is one—lies in the bonds between men that assuage their implacable solitude.

The craft pranced and reared, and plunged like an animal. As each wave came, and she rose for it, she seemed like a horse making at a fence outrageously high. The manner of her scramble over these walls of water is a mystic thing, and moreover, at the top of them were ordinarily these problems in white water, the foam racing down from the summit of each wave, requiring a new leap, and a leap from the air.

Crane’s use of changing rhythms throughout the tale points up the terror of the dinghy’s passengers and exemplifies the utter senselessness of existence itself.

Crane suggests that if an observer were to look upon the events objectively, viewing them “from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtless have been weirdly picturesque. But the men in the boat had no time to see it, and even if they had had leisure, there were other things to occupy their minds.” Values of virtue, bravery, integrity were once of importance, but now are meaningless in a godless universe where nature observes impassively human despair and frustration. Yet, the harrowing sea journey creates a new morality, which gives fresh meaning to life: “the brotherhood of men ... was established on the seas. No one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. But it dwelt in the boat, and each man felt it warm him.” Comfort and feelings of well-being emerge as each helps the other assuage his growing terror.

In the midst of fear and harrowing terror, there is also irony and humor:

If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life? It is preposterous. If this old ninny-woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men’s fortunes. She is an old hen who knows not her intention. If she has decided to drown me, why did she not do it in the beginning and save me all this trouble. The whole affair is absurd.... But, no, she cannot mean to drown me. Not after all this work.

A mystical relationship exists between the men in the dinghy—and the sea and heavens. Crane feels compelled to point out man’s smallness, to set him back into nature and reduce him to size.

Conversations between the oiler and the cook, seemingly trivial, since they revolve around food— “What kind of pie do you like best?”—serve in reality to point out the absurdity of humankind’s preoccupations. They also act as a way of dispelling progressive terror. As for the captain, he is ridiculed; the men laugh at him, again distracting themselves from their great fear of death.

The sight of a shark heightens the men’s dreadful tension. Crane does not mention the shark by name, but the reader can almost hear the shark’s fin cut the water’s surface and see its phosphorescent gleaming body. Like the survivors of “Raft of the Medusa,” whose harrowing episode is famous in French maritime history, the men in the dinghy do not know there is a lifesaving station twenty miles away.

When the ordeal is over, the men, safely on land, look back at the water: “white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea’s voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.” The narrator’s voice withdraws, as it were, from the chaotic drama, introducing a sense of spatial and temporal distance. Comfortable on land, the narrator can indulge in the luxury of waxing poetic and thus transform subjective emotions into a work of art.

Its poetry and rhythmic schemes make “The Open Boat” the match of Melville’s “White Jacket” and the best of Jack London and Joseph Conrad. This tale’s unusually punctuated sentences of contrasting length simulate the heart beat of man under extreme stress, producing an incantatory quality. Crane’s sensual images of man struggling against the sea remain vivid long after the reading of “The Open Boat.” The salt spray and deafening roar of the waves pounding against the dinghy can almost be tasted and heard....

Source: Bettina L. Knapp, “Tales of Adventure,” in *Stephen Crane*, Ungar Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 145–62.

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For the Record: Text and Picture in The Open Boat

In the following excerpt, Monteiro asserts that “The Open Boat” derives not only from Crane’s personal experience, but from his creative response to literary and other artistic sources as well.

Only the most primitive critical response would insist that Crane’s fictional treatment of his experience of shipwreck off the Florida coast on New Year’s Day 1897 could have been drawn directly and transparently from immediate life, that the author, moreover, had only to recall the details of existence aboard the small open boat, along with his moment–by–moment reactions to his plight and situation, to produce his “tale intended to be after the fact,” as he described the story. In this note I shall attempt to show how in two key instances in “The Open Boat” Crane drew upon memories of his reactions to three texts: one poetic, one expository, and one visual.

Poetic and Visual

In an early review of *The Open Boat and Other Stories*, the London Academy called Stephen Crane “an analyst of the subconscious.” To give “a faint notion of the curious and convincing scrutiny to which, through some forty pages, the minds of the crew are subjected” in the book’s title story, the anonymous

reviewer quotes two passages: the first is the “If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned” question that the correspondent poses to himself at various moments; the second is the correspondent’s meditation on the “soldier of the Legion” dying in Algiers. It is the second instance that interests us here.

Having long since enlisted in what he called the beautiful war for realism, the young author nevertheless had reached back for a schoolboy’s memory of Mrs. Caroline E. S. Norton’s poem, “Bingen.” “A verse mysteriously entered the correspondent’s head,” writes Crane; “he had even forgotten that he had forgotten this verse, but it suddenly was in his mind:”

A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers,
There was lack of woman’s nursing, there was
dearth of woman’s tears;
But a comrade stood beside him, and he took that
comrade’s hand,
And he said: “I never more shall see my own, my
native land.”

These, the opening lines of Mrs. Norton’s poem, with some twenty words silently omitted at the very middle of the verse, Crane drew upon to render the emotional state of his castaway narrator. It was the pathos of the soldier, dying far from his homeland, in the throes of defining his hopeless situation and his unavoidable fate that came suitably to the writer’s hand. Crane tells us that the correspondent “had been made acquainted” with the soldier dying in Algiers “in his childhood,” even as Crane had probably discovered Mrs. Norton’s poem, its title expanded to “Bingen on the Rhine,” in his grade–school reader. (Over the years at random I have picked up copies of three such readers—*National Fifth Reader* (1870), *Lippincott’s Fifth Reader* (1881), and *Swinton’s Fifth Reader* (1883)—and in what must be a measure of the poem’s popularity, each one of them prints “Bingen on the Rhine.”) It is equally clear, however, that Crane’s knowledge of Mrs. Norton’s poem went beyond the unadorned reprintings in grade–school texts, for his description of the dying soldier and the setting for his death elaborate on Mrs. Norton’s text. Crane expands,

The correspondent plainly saw the soldier. He lay on the sand with his feet out straight and still. While his pale left hand was upon his chest in an attempt to thwart the going of his life, the blood came between his fingers. In the far Algerian distance, a city of low square forms was set against a sky that was faint with the last sunset hues.

There is nothing in the lines Crane quotes to validate the correspondent’s view of the dying soldier, though the clause “the blood came between his fingers” expresses concretely what the poem, in a clause omitted by the correspondent, states more abstractly as “while his life–blood ebb’d away.” It could be argued, of course, that in having the correspondent elaborate on the original lines of “Bingen,” Crane was merely exercising a writer’s legitimate license. It is more likely, however, that Crane was also familiar with a particular reprinting of Mrs. Norton’s poem, an edition in 1883 featuring illustrations by William T. Smedley, Frederic B. Schell, Alfred Fredericks, Granville Perkins, J. D. Woodward, and Edmund H. Garrett. Published in Philadelphia by Porter and Coates, this edition appeared more than three decades after the first publication of the poem and six years after the poet’s death. Crane’s paragraph of “elaboration,” it seems likely, draws directly on two illustrations by Smedley keyed into the lines “a Soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers” and “His voice grew faint and hoarser.” Since the soldier does not hold his hand over his heart, as Crane has it, it is unlikely that Crane had Smedley’s illustration before him as he wrote—though it is possible, one should note, that the “light” patch just below the soldier’s throat might well have been remembered by Crane as the soldier’s “pale left hand.” But the soldier’s feet, both in story and illustration (if not in the poem), are “out straight and still.” And the soldier’s death in both story and illustration (though not in the poem) plays itself out against “the Far Algerian distance, a city of low square forms ... set against a sky that was faint with the last sunset hues.” It should surprise no one that we have here still another instance of Crane’s translation of visual

experience into the stuff of fiction.

Expository

The major lines of Crane's imagination were set by his familial concerns with matters of religion and warfare, particularly as that imagination shaped his early work. Indeed, ... Crane saw the events aboard the "open boat" and subsequently out of it and in the ocean as ironically bringing to question the tenets of Christian consolation. This he did in the broadest context, playing off the configuration of events against the trope of the Pilot-God and his Ship-World. Parables of man (a pilgrim) sailing in a lifeboat (belief in Christianity) on the rough seas (life in the world), dating from the Middle Ages, were abundant in Crane's time in religious tracts and emblem books. Such parables also appeared in textbooks used in the public school system. These later, however, were demythologized. There were no longer any Christian referents in stories of shipwreck in the grade-school readers issued by Lippincott's and Swinton's. Typical of these is the following excerpt, the concluding paragraphs of an account entitled "A Ship in a Storm," taken from a typical grade-school reader:

On the dangerous points along our sea-coast are lighthouses, which can be seen far out at sea, and serve as guides to ships. Sometimes the fog is so dense that these lights can not be seen, but most light-houses have great fog-bells or fog-horns; some of the latter are made to sound by steam, and can be heard for a long distance. These bells and horns are kept sounding as long as the fog lasts.

There are also many life-saving stations along the coast where trained men are ready with life-boats. When a ship is driven ashore they at once go to the rescue of those on board, and thus many valuable lives are saved.

This account stresses not loss of life, but the saving of it. The efficacy of strategically placed light-houses and life-saving stations is indicated, the implication being that man is capable of mitigating and diminishing the dangers posed for him by a destructive sea. Many valuable lives are otherwise saved because of man's foresight in creating and skillfully deploying life-saving stations. This is the lesson of this grade-school account, and it is a lesson remembered (and subsequently tested) by the correspondent and his companions—babes in the wood—in the open boat.

"There's a house of refuge just north of the Mosquito Inlet Light, and as soon as they see us, they'll come off in their boat and pick us up."

"As soon as who see us?" said the correspondent. "The crew," said the cook.

"Houses of refuge don't have crews," said the correspondent. "As I understand them, they are only places where clothes and grub are stored for the benefit of shipwrecked people. They don't carry crews."

"Oh, yes, they do," said the cook.

"No, they don't," said the correspondent.

"Well, we're not there yet, anyhow," said the oiler, in the stern.

"Well," said the cook, "perhaps it's not a house of refuge that I'm thinking of as being near Mosquito Inlet Light. Perhaps it's a lifesaving station."

"We're not there yet," said the oiler, in the stern.

Nor would they ever get to it if they were thinking of a life-saving station, for there was not a one on that coast of Florida. (And if they returned their thoughts to houses of refuge, there was none within twenty to thirty miles in either direction, north or south.) Since there were no life-saving stations on the entire Florida coast, what prompted the cook and the correspondent to think that they might be close to one? And on what basis would the cook later say, "We must be about opposite New Smyrna... Captain, by the way, I believe they abandoned that lifesaving station there about a year ago." To which assertion the captain answers only, "Did they?"

It is possible, of course, that the author of "The Open Boat" did not know, just as his cook did not and just as, possibly, the oiler and the captain did not, that there were no life-saving stations off the coast of Florida. It is further possible that the notion that there would be such stations, even to the extent of the cook's "remembering" the existence of one at New Smyrna, did not derive from personal experience but was the legacy of an elementary-school textbook. It is no wonder that they argue over the very existence and the probable location of those stations whose crews will save them, elation and despair following one another as they become sure and less than sure about the accuracy of their senses and the soundness of their information. Ultimately, of course, they will have to jettison their hopes for rescue by those who man such stations because there are no such stations anywhere near them. They will brave the unpredictable waves and the surf as each man is forced to strike out for himself.

A concluding point. The grade-school account had begun with the observation that the sea can have two opposing appearances: it can be blue and calm, the setting for joyous peace; and it can be turbulently destructive to human life. Something like this notion had impressed Crane. In a little poem collected in *War Is Kind* he wrote,

To the maiden
The sea was blue meadow
Alive with little froth-people
Singing.
To the sailor, wrecked,
The sea was dead grey walls
Superlative in vacancy
Upon which nevertheless at fateful time,
Was written
The grim hatred of nature.

In "The Open Boat" Crane had written wryly of those on shore who, certain of the nature of sport in a boat, waved gaily at the men in the dinghy in false recognition of their playful holiday at sea.

For Stephen Crane the task of the literary realist called for creative response to experience in all modes, including those that are literary and visual.

Source: George Monteiro, "For the Record: Text and Picture in 'The Open Boat,'" in *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 2, July, 1984, pp. 307-11.

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The Open Boat: Additional Perspective

In the following excerpt, Gerstenberger studies the epistemological aspect of “The Open Boat,” which deals with the human limitations of knowing anything with objective certainty. She also examines Crane's choice to divide his point of view among the various characters in the story, with particular emphasis on the character of the correspondent.

Stephen Crane's “The Open Boat” is generally acknowledged to be among the masterpieces of the modern short story. The question of the story's excellence has never been debated; the only questions have been the proper means of defining the story's modernity and of accounting for what appear to be certain awkwardnesses of style, tone, and point of view.

“The Open Boat” has been hailed as an example of naturalistic fiction at its best until recent years, when the automatic and somewhat naive tendency to equate naturalism and modernity has been called into question in all the arts. Thus Peter Buitenhuis asserts in a recent study [“The Essentials of Life: ‘The Open Boat’ as Existentialist Fiction,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 3, 1959, 243–250], “‘The Open Boat’ is not a naturalistic story,” and he confronts the story as “existentialist fiction,” concentrating on Crane's ironic presentation and the story's demonstration of the absurdity of the human condition. While Mr. Buitenhuis does not address himself to the question of “The Open Boat” as a *modern* short story, the implicit assumption is that use of the term *existential* automatically confers the status of modernity, as well it may. Yet such a reading leaves its author troubled by the same kinds of questions that troubled those who saw the story as naturalistic fiction—questions about Crane's style and about the story's protagonist. The answers to such questions come into focus when “The Open Boat” is viewed as a story with an emphasis on the epistemological aspect of the existential crisis.

The epistemological question about the problems of knowing and the limitations of man's ability to see and to know has become both subject and style in modern art from Conrad to Joyce, Picasso to Faulkner, Pirandello to Beckett. So persistent and pervasive has been the preoccupation with epistemological questions in modern art that it might almost be said to constitute a way of defining one aspect of modernity. Conversely, it might be said that the somewhat naive and programmatic view of reality held by the naturalists gives their work a certain old-fashioned quality, which Crane's story, demonstrably, does not share. “The Open Boat” calls equally into question the assumptions of photographic reality as well as those of idealized, romantic views of the universe.

With his opening sentence, “None of them knew the colour of the sky,” Crane makes clear a major concern of “The Open Boat.” The word *knew* in this famous first sentence is the key word, for the story which follows is about man's limited capacities for knowing reality. This opening sentence leads the reader toward the concluding line of the story, “and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters”—a conclusion which, when the special emphasis of the story is acknowledged, is a good deal more complex than has generally been thought.

Crane's irony in “The Open Boat” grows out of the epistemological direction of the story. It is invested in the language and in the authorial point of view as well as in tone. This irony, based on Crane's perception of the disparity between man's vision of a just and meaningful universe and a world totally indifferent to such unrealistic notions, acknowledges the absurdity at the heart of the existentialist vision. Yet Crane, through his ironic treatment of his material, moves one step further: the implication of “The Open Boat” is that the vision of any human being must, of necessity, be false, *even if* that vision be a knowledge of the absurdity of the universe.

This extension of the epistemological question makes it clear that Crane intentionally divides his points of view among the various characters, and it is difficult to accept Peter Buitenhuis's conclusion that

Unfortunately, instead of confining these attitudes to a single character, the protagonist Crane shifts at times to the points of view of the oiler, the cook, and the captain as well. He was probably trying to emphasize through this device that the experience was deeply shared by the four men, a point essential to the story's conclusion. However, in attributing to the four not only similar emotions but also similar formulations about the nature of existence, he presumes too much on the reader's willing suspension of disbelief. Crane also unnecessarily seeks to make his point by using the omniscient point of view.

To conclude, as Buitenhuis has, that Crane is mistaken in his failure to present his story from a single point of view, is to assert that Crane intended his story to be something other than it is, to assume that the sole aim of the story is a demonstration of the absurdity of the universe. I would suggest, on the contrary, that while the shared experience of absurdity is an aspect of the story, Crane's intention includes a demonstration of the impossibility of knowing anything with objective certainty, given the subjective, human instrument for perception.

The kind of authorial intrusion represented by the famous passage, "Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtless have been weirdly picturesque," can be accepted within the framework of Crane's intention when it is understood that, although the man on the balcony would have a distancing perspective not available to the men in the boat, he would be wrong about what he would be seeing. The human need to translate the open boat into the landscape terms of "picturesque" immediately falsifies at the same time that it represents a truth of human perception. The reader is reminded once again, by a passage like this, that a part of the injustice, the absurdity of the universe, is man's inability ever to know anything about the complex whole of experience.

In a similar kind of response, the correspondent, looking shoreward, contemplates the tall white windmill amidst the deserted cottages, which, in an echo of Goldsmith's formalized landscape, "might have formed a deserted village" and picturesquely sees it as "a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants." To see the wind tower is to translate it into something else, into a reality invested with subjective meaning, even though that meaning be a statement about the objectivity of nature. For the tower "represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of man."

In much of modern literature, there is a sense in which existential man sometimes seems to achieve a modicum of heroic stature when he apprehends and accepts the absurd universe, for he has done what man can do, and insofar as he has done what all men are not able to do, he stands apart from the common run of men. Crane, however, is not willing to grant to his correspondent an heroic moment as a result of the "right" kind of perception (which in itself, in existential terms, often becomes a kind of absolute), for as the correspondent contemplates the flat indifference of nature, "a distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him, then, in this new ignorance of the grave—edge, and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and his words, and be better and brighter during an introduction or at a tea."

One might expect Crane to speak of the man's "new *knowledge* of the grave—edge," but his insistence upon *ignorance* denies the correspondent the absolute sanction so often bestowed as a result of confronting hard reality. Further, the conclusion of the passage, "he would mend his conduct and his words, and be better and brighter during an introduction or at a tea" has the same kind of anti-heroic effect worked so neatly upon Eliot's Prufrock, who can hardly be expected to force any moment to its crisis within the context of "tea and cakes and ices." Crane refuses to permit his reader comfort of the kind involved in the equation that when the

man who suffers becomes the man who knows, something of absolute value, however depressing, has been achieved.

Crane's practice of using apparently inappropriate or consciously awkward metaphors, analogies, or descriptive adjectives, which appear to devalue or overvalue in specific passages, challenges the reader's too-easy assumptions about what may be defined as heroic within the context of experiential stress. Several examples from the opening pages of the story may suggest the achievement of this general technique: "By the very last star of truth, it is easier to steal eggs from under a hen than it was to change seats in the dinghy." The linking of absolute abstraction ("the very last star of truth") with the homely, agrarian observation about the difficulty of stealing eggs from under a hen seems as inappropriate to the act of changing rowers as do the parts to each other. But the purpose of heroic deflation, of irony, is served, as it is in the serviceable awkwardness of the following: "In a ten-foot dinghy one can get an idea of the resources of the sea in the line of waves that is not probable to the average experience, which is never at sea in a dinghy." Crane refuses to romanticize the absurdity of experience, and the reader is constantly reminded that experience, like perception, is betrayed by the language by which it is conceptualized.

Not only does Crane constantly deny by stylistic devices the heroism of action or even of enduring necessity, but he also denies the heroism of knowledge in the context discussed above. Crane's extensive use of the subjunctive mood is a part of his statement that even a tough-minded view of the universe involves man in an uncertain questioning of the conditions within which his responses, even to absurdity, must be framed.

Examples of this kind all bear on the claim that "The Open Boat" may best be viewed as a story with an epistemological emphasis, one which constantly reminds its reader of the impossibility of man's *knowing* anything, even that which he experiences. The reaction of the correspondent, near the close of the story, to his fight for life against a hostile current is of interest because of its reminders of earlier passages central to an understanding of the story. He sees the shore, the white beach, and "green bluff topped with little silent cottages ... spread like a picture before him." The shore, in fact, is very close at this point, but "he was impressed as one who, in a gallery, looks at a scene from Brittany or Algiers." The immanence of death, the difficulty of achieving the shore, formalizes experience once again into landscape, reminding the reader of the necessarily false perception of the earlier hypothetical view of the open boat from a balcony. (The use of the word *gallery*, a term also meaning *balcony*, reinforces the relationship of the two passages.) The locating of the landscape in "Brittany or Algiers" inevitably calls up a vision of the soldier of the Legion dying in Algiers, both in the romanticized picture of Lady Carolyn Bingen's lines and also in terms of the moment of understanding and fellow feeling that the correspondent experiences as he pictures the soldier lying "on the sand with his feet out straight and still." "It was no longer merely a picture of a few throes in the breast of a poet, meanwhile drinking tea and warming his feet at the grate; it was an actuality—stern, mournful, and fine."

It has generally been assumed that the soldier dying in Algiers is important to Crane's intentions in "The Open Boat" because he provides the opportunity for a clear example of the kind of understanding, of human sympathy, of the valuable kind of knowledge which comes from experiential stress. In this respect, "The Open Boat" has been viewed as an "initiation" story, pre-figuring Hemingway's use of experiential stress as a key to knowledge. But it is important to bear in mind that the correspondent's new attitude toward the soldier falsifies, as do all the "pictures" or "landscapes" by which man seeks a delineated context for knowledge. The story in its totality makes it perfectly clear (as do Crane's other tales) that there is nothing "stern, mournful, and fine" in death, and this incident, which has generally been read as indicative of the correspondent's growth in knowing, may well serve as an example of the impossibility of untainted knowledge. To *know* the soldier in Algiers without a self-pitying desire to find something "stern, mournful, and fine" in death is not possible. The death of Billie, the oiler, contrasts with the picture of the soldier's death, and it certainly is indicative of the indifference of nature, for the arbitrary absurdity of his death is underlined by the fact that he is the strongest and the most realistic of the men aboard the dinghy. Crane's

description of his death is presented more starkly than anything else in the story: “In the shallows, face downward lay the oiler. His forehead touched sand that was periodically, between each wave, clear of the sea.” No pictures, no objectifying landscapes, no stylistic ironies. The question of human perception is no longer a problem that applies to the oiler.

Within the epistemological context discussed in his paper, it would seem necessary, finally, to raise a question about the concluding lines of Crane’s story: “the wind brought the sound of the great sea’s voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.” The story has clearly shown the final absurdity to be the falsification of man’s attempts to “interpret,” an act in which he is betrayed by the very language he must use to conceptualize, by the narrowness of vision, and by the further limitation of his need to frame, to formalize his apprehensions in a landscape, a poem, an irony, or a subjunctive statement of conditions that never were on land or sea. To “interpret” is not to be equated with knowing, and perhaps the final irony is in the community of shared experience which these final lines seem to suggest, for however communal the interpretation of the “great sea’s voice,” nothing in the story suggests that any one of the three men remaining can conceptualize the death of the oiler without, perhaps, falsely transfiguring him into a figure like the soldier of the Legion, whose death was “an actuality—stern, mournful, and fine.”

Source: Donna Gerstenberger, “‘The Open Boat’: Additional Perspective,” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. XVII, No. 4, Winter, 1971, pp. 557–61.

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Compare and Contrast

1890s: The Cuban struggle for independence from Spain becomes a unified political movement under the leadership of Jose Marti, following unsuccessful, small-scale revolts. American intervention in the war is followed by Cuba's independence from Spain and a period of U.S. occupation.

1997: Cuba is now a communist nation under the leadership of Fidel Castro. In October, Cuba receives the remains of Castro's fellow revolutionary, Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Guevara had been killed in Bolivia thirty years earlier.

1896: The United States' s foreign policy is marked by aggressive imperialism, an approach advocated by the Republicans and the newly elected president, William McKinley. Alaska is purchased by the government in 1867, and Hawaii is annexed in **1898**. Following the Spanish–American War in 1898–1899, the United States extends its influence to Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam.

1990s: U.S. foreign policy is characterized as interventionist. As a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States helps to mediate conflicts around the world, including the Middle East and Bosnia. The Persian Gulf War in 1991 is fought by the United States to prevent Iraq from invading Kuwait.

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Topics for Further Study

What philosophical values, if any, are presented or advocated by Crane in “The Open Boat”? Explain. How are heroism and courage defined in “The Open Boat”?

Explain how the narrator's concentration on his senses, such as seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, touching, smelling, create the feeling of immediacy in “The Open Boat”

Like “The Open Boat,” Winslow Homer's painting “The Gulf Stream” treats the theme of survival at sea. Compare Homer's treatment of this theme with Crane's treatment.

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Media Adaptations

“The Open Boat” is available on video from Film Video Library. Produced by the University of Michigan, this 29-minute black-and-white film was created in 1965 as part of the “American Story Classics” series.

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What Do I Read Next?

In The Red Badge of Courage (1895) Stephen Crane explores the nature of courage and heroism through the eyes of Henry Fleming, a youth full of romantic dreams of war. Henry is rudely disillusioned when he enlists in the Union Army and discovers what real war is about on the battlefields of the American Civil War.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) tells the tragic yet triumphant story of an old fisherman's relentless battle with a giant marlin far out in the Gulf Stream off the coast of Cuba. The ordeal pushes the old man to the limits of human endurance in his determination to triumph over nature.

Jack London's “To Build a Fire” (1902) is another naturalistic story of human struggle against nature. In this tale, a man's life depends on his ability to build a fire in the freezing wilderness.

Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850–1920 (1995) by David E. Shi provides a highly accessible survey of the Realistic movement in the arts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This book is valuable for any student studying the history, literature, art, or architecture of those years.

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) is a masterpiece of literary Naturalism. Dreiser's novel graphically depicts life in New York and Chicago at the turn of the century through the parallel stories of Carrie's fortuitous rise from a penniless farm girl to famous actress, and Hurstwood's dramatic fall from respectable tavern manager to homeless drifter.

William Graham Sumner's *What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883) is a classic statement of Darwinian principles applied to human society. The work posits the omnipotent beneficial law of “survival of the fittest” which determines the state of all existing social conditions. The answer to the question posed in the book's title: nothing.

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Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources

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Crane, Stephen. "Stephen Crane's Own Story." In *American Literature: A Prentice Hall Anthology*, Elliott, Emory, editor, Prentice Hall, 1991.

Further Reading

Halliburton, David. *The Color of the Sky: A Study of Stephen Crane*, Cambridge University Press, 1989. Provocative study of Crane's entire body of work which emphasizes its philosophical aspects and is organized by themes rather than chronology or works. The title is taken from the opening line of "The Open Boat."

Nagel, James. *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980. Fascinating study which suggests that Crane applied concepts derived from the impressionist school of painting to his fiction.

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