**The Open Boat – Stephen Crane**

**Context**

Born in 1871 in Newark, New Jersey, Stephen Crane hailed from a line of strong-willed men who took active roles in the founding and building of America. On his father’s side, one man sailed to America with Sir Francis Drake, and another served as a representative to the pre–Revolutionary War Continental Congresses. Crane was always proud of his family’s part in American history, and it motivated him to carve out his own place in history, albeit in a style all his own. It is a marvel that in his short life, Stephen Crane produced so much memorable fiction; he died in 1900, at the young age of twenty-eight. Although his last years were dominated by poor health, Crane left a grand mark on American literature. His influences were few, but his disciples were many, among them Hemingway and Joseph Heller as well as many twentieth-century war novelists. Crane was probably unaware of the literary legacy he would leave, but he always had a good idea of the legacy he inherited.

Although he began writing at a very young age, Crane first made his presence felt in the literary world at age twenty-two with *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), which he wrote while living in the slums of New York and for which he needed money from his brother to publish. *Maggie* was instantly notable not only for the conditions in which Crane wrote it but also for its unblinking look at its subject: the underbelly of New York. Crane attempted to depict what he saw as the enslavement of the poor by their own poverty. He was committed to naturalism and realism, as he would be throughout his life, no matter what subject he was writing about. A “naturalist” writer approaches subjects objectively, almost scientifically, staying detached as much as possible. “Realist” writers strive to portray their subjects as realistically as possible. Crane’s best-known work, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), was a naturalistic novel set during the Civil War. Told from a private’s point of view, *Red Badge* resonated with readers who were familiar with the life of the grunt: the constant threat of the unknown, the feeling of being a pawn in someone else’s schemes, the suppression of personality, and self-doubt.

“The Open Boat” (1897) evolved from Crane’s real-life experience of being stranded in a dinghy on the Atlantic Ocean. On December 31, 1896, Crane sailed out of Jacksonville, Florida, bound for Cuba, to cover the emerging war as a correspondent. His ship sank in the morning of January 2, and Crane and three crew members spent thirty hours in a dinghy before coming ashore near Daytona Beach. Crane immediately wrote “Stephen Crane’s Own Story,” a newspaper account of the sinking, but he shied away from further telling of his experience, writing only that “The history of life in an open boat for thirty hours would no doubt be instructive for the young, but none is to be told here now.” Crane waited for years before he turned his experience into “The Open Boat.”

“The Open Boat” confronts both Crane’s time aboard the dinghy and the symbolic implications of fighting for one’s life amidst forces that are uncaring about one’s survival. The correspondent in the story is based on Crane himself, while the injured captain, the cook, and Billie the oiler all have their real-life counterparts in the men who shared the dinghy with Crane. The actual captain did indeed injure himself in the ship’s foundering, and William Higgins, the actual oiler, did indeed die on the shore. Although all of Crane’s characters are based in reality, Crane turns them into archetypes (ideal models) of humanity and submits them to the whims of nature. The critical reception of “The Open Boat” was enthusiastic, with both H. G. Wells and Joseph Conrad praising the story. Unfortunately for Crane, the experience that gave him this story also took away his health. Following his experience at sea, Crane became vulnerable to the diseases that would eventually kill him.

Despite his poor health, Crane never stopped moving in an attempt to be on the frontline of some of the grimmer scenes of his time. His travels took him to Greece to report on the Greco-Turkish War; to England, where he befriended contemporaries such as Henry James, H. G. Wells, and Joseph Conrad; back to Cuba to cover the Spanish-American War; and finally to England and Germany, where he succumbed to tuberculosis. During all this time, Crane persisted in writing fiction and poetry, much of it characterized by his naturalistic perception of man caught in the throes of the conflicting, alienating forces that define the human condition. Ultimately, Crane tried to follow his own maxim that “the nearer a writer gets to life the greater he becomes as an artist.” For him, this meant a commitment to reality in life as well as in art. Crane lived this maxim so deeply that in the end, his desire to report from the thick of war was responsible for putting him in contact with the diseases that killed him while he was still in his twenties.

### Analysis of Major Characters

#### The Correspondent

For Crane, each crew member is an archetype that, when joined with his fellow castaways, constitutes part of a microcosm of society. The captain represents the leaders; the cook the followers; the oiler the good, working men; and the correspondent the observers and thinkers. As his profession as a reporter suggests, the correspondent functions as the eyes and voice of the story. Crane underlines this point in his introduction of the characters in the first section. While the cook is cowering on the boat’s floor and the oiler is silently working at his oar, the correspondent watches the waves and wonders why he is caught on the ocean, a question that reveals the correspondent’s search for purpose in life. With this question alone, the correspondent begins to shape our perceptions of the ordeal the men are undergoing.

In the first five sections of “The Open Boat,” the correspondent’s challenges to the sea, which he associates with nature and fate, reveal his desire to make sense of surviving the ship only to drown in the dinghy. Although he understands that nature and fate do not act and think as men do, the correspondent nevertheless goads them because he believes that there is a purpose to nature, that it in some way validates his struggle for survival. The correspondent initially thinks he finds the answer when he considers the “subtle brotherhood of men” that develops among the crew in response to the overwhelming cruelty of nature. At this point, he takes pleasure in the pain caused by rowing in the rough sea because he believes that this pain is the healthy byproduct of his effort at community, which nature has forced them to create and is the only thing that really matters. As the men realize that no one is coming to save them, however, the correspondent comes to lose hope in the “subtle brotherhood” that had seemed to be the noble purpose of submitting to nature’s punishment.

#### The Captain

The captain is the consummate leader, a man who never shirks from the responsibility he takes for those who have entrusted their safety to him. When he loses his ship to the sea at the beginning of the story, the captain suffers infinitely more than the other survivors. Deprived of his ship, he becomes a broken man who has lost the very thing that grants him his authority. Yet the captain, through his dedication to guiding the men to safety, retains a degree of dignity to go with the ineffable sense of loss he feels at having failed in his charge. In this sense, the captain is at once a majestic and tragic figure, one who has not measured up to the standards he has set for himself but continues to fight for his fellow men. His quiet, steady efforts in the boat are not self-motivated and afford him no personal redemption. Instead, his actions are directed toward the others.

#### The Oiler (Billie)

Of the four characters in the boat, the oiler represents the everyman, the one whom Crane intends to resemble the average person most closely. The oiler functions as the lynchpin of the crew, holding everyone together through his staunch heroism. He has the fewest delusions about the men’s physical plight, but he never gives in to the hopelessness that the others mask with idle talk about nonexistent opportunities for rescue or meditations about the cruelty of nature. Instead, the oiler maintains an image of strength, warmth, and integrity. He echoes the captain’s orders, reinforcing the social structure of the crew and instilling confidence in the others, whose outlook rises and falls with the waves.

### Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

#### Themes

##### Nature’s Indifference to Man

Despite the narrator’s profusion of animistic (animal-like), humanistic (manlike), and deistic (godlike) characterizations of nature, Crane makes clear that nature is ultimately indifferent to the plight of man, possessing no consciousness that we can understand. As the stranded men progress through the story, the reality of nature’s lack of concern for them becomes increasingly clear. The narrator highlights this development by changing the way he describes the sea. Early in the story, the sea snarls, hisses, and bucks like a bronco; later, it merely “paces to and fro,” no longer an actor in the men’s drama. In reality, the sea does not change at all; only the men’s perception of the sea changes. The unaltered activity of the gulls, clouds, and tides illustrates that nature does not behave any differently in light of the men’s struggle to survive.

Crane strengthens the idea that nature is indifferent to man by showing that it is as randomly helpful as it is hurtful. For every malevolent whim that the men suffer, they experience an unexpected good turn in the form of a favorable wind or calm night. The fact that the men almost seem to get assistance from nature destroys the notion of nature as an entirely hostile force. Nothing highlights this point so much as the correspondent’s final rescue. Plowed to shore and saved by a freak wave, the correspondent must embrace the fact that the very thing that has put him in harm’s way has saved him. This freak wave, however, may also be responsible for killing the much hardier oiler, a turn of events that demonstrates two ideas: nature is as much a harsh punisher as it is a benefactor, and nature does not act out of any motivation that can be understood in human terms.

##### Man’s Insignificance in the Universe

“The Open Boat” conveys a feeling of loneliness that comes from man’s understanding that he is alone in the universe and insignificant in its workings. Underneath the men’s and narrator’s collective rants at fate and the universe is the fear of nothingness. They have an egotistical belief that they should have a role in the universe, that their existence should mean something. When the correspondent realizes by section VI that fate will not answer his pleas, he settles into despair. His subsequent recollection of the poem about the soldier who lies dying in Algiers reflects his feelings of alienation at being displaced from his position in the universe. Like the soldier who dies in alien territory, the correspondent fears that he too will perish without a connection to whatever gives him his sense of self.

Throughout “The Open Boat,” the correspondent understands pain to be the necessary byproduct of his efforts to overcome nature, the willful enemy. He comes to value his suffering because it is nobly derived; in the earlier sections, the correspondent, whom the narrator says is cynical, is often cheerful and talkative in his descriptions of the physical pain he experiences. By the end of the story, however, the correspondent’s new awareness that the universe is unconcerned with the situation’s outcome makes him physically and spiritually weary. He decides that there is no higher purpose to surviving other than prolonging a life that is meaningless. His comment in section VII that the coldness of the water is simply “sad” underscores this despair. At this point, all sensations of pain and pleasure are merely physical and have no spiritual meaning.

##### Society as Meaning in a Harsh World

In assembling the men in the dinghy and creating a microcosm of mankind, Crane sets up man’s greatest invention, society, against what first seems to be a cruel, unrelenting nature. When faced with the savage, stormy sea, the men in the dinghy immediately band together because they recognize that society is the best defense against the chaos of nature. The men derive meaning from their fellowship, created to oppose nature, which they view as the force that seeks to undo them. Even when they become disheartened by the fact that nature shows no regard for them, they can still turn to one another. In creating society, they have created an obligation to one another that they must honor to survive. The narrator observes that the men’s cooperation is “personal and heartfelt,” which suggests that the men derive some spiritual satisfaction from the arrangement. Although they are shut out of the realm of cosmic importance, these men nevertheless construct something that is meaningful to them.

#### Motifs

##### Drowning

As the narrator attempts to capture the men’s thoughts as they endure many demoralizing episodes, he inserts a refrain into the text three times that suggests that the men’s general fear of death is exacerbated by the unconcern of nature. The refrain is a rant against fate, which the narrator personifies as an incompetent fool unable to govern men’s lives. The narrator is not really trying to tell us that fate is cruel. Instead, he is suggesting that the men are furious because they believe that fate has toyed with their lives. The men consider their situation unfair, and in the refrain, they protest against it. The fact that the narrator intrudes on the story with this refrain at the moments when fate seems to have let the men down creates the impression that this is, in fact, the men’s reaction. The refrain acts as the narrator’s interpretation of how the men themselves interpret their situation

Hidden deeper in the refrain is the narrator’s conviction that a higher power does not exist to weigh in on men’s affairs. By making outright references to “the seven mad gods who rule the sea,” the narrator clues us in to the mythical implications of the story, insinuating that these pagan gods, who are traditionally involved in men’s lives, have abandoned the stranded men. More important, the narrator hints at the absence of an overseeing God through a subtle use of numerology. The thrice-repeated phrase “If I am going to be drowned” in the refrain alludes to the New Testament Gethsemane scene in which Peter denies Jesus three times. In the Bible, man denies God, but Crane inverts the scene so that it is God denying man.

##### Waves

A ceaseless presence in the story and constant nuisance to the refugees, the ocean waves suggest both the forces of nature and uncontrollability of life. At the beginning of the story, the narrator presents the waves as the men’s primary concern, the thing they must master if they are to survive the shipwreck. In this sense, the waves resemble the ever-changing demands of the present, the part of life that demands the most attention but allows for the least reflection. Crane seems to imply that because the men cannot control the waves’ ebb and flow, man in general cannot affect the outcomes of his life and can hope only to respond constructively to what he encounters. Just as the waves are constantly changing, becoming sometimes violent and sometimes favorable, the pressures in man’s life will continue to jostle his progress toward whatever he seeks. The narrator’s final mention of the waves as “pacing to and fro” emphasizes this point by suggesting that the waves, in their motion, are impatiently waiting for the men, who must eventually venture out again onto the seas of fortune.

#### Symbols

##### The Boat

The boat, to which the men must cling to survive the seas, symbolizes human life bobbing along among the universe’s uncertainties. The boat, no larger than a bathtub, seems even smaller against the vastness of the ocean. The boat is inconsequential and always in danger of capsizing, much as we as humans are inconsequential and frail in the context of the world around us. The fact that the boat is characterized as “open” supports this interpretation: the boat is unprotected and thus open to suffering the unexpected turns of fortune that are unavoidable in life. For the men, being in the open boat becomes the reality of their lives, and they realize from their experience on the boat how little control they have over where they can go and what they can do. Through the boat, Crane implies that life is not something we can control, but rather life is what we must hang onto as we make our way in the world.

##### The Oiler’s Death

The oiler’s death and lack of explanation surrounding it reinforce the randomness of nature’s whims and symbolize the indifference of nature toward man. Because he is no more deserving of death than any other crew member, and in some cases is less deserving because he has worked the hardest under the most physical strain, his death highlights the fact that nature is arbitrary in how it chooses its victims. The events surrounding the oiler’s death also uncover the fact that the “subtle brotherhood of men” sensed by the crew is nothing more than a delusion. The men make a break for land on their own, and the good-natured oiler leaves everyone behind to reach the shore. In this way, Crane illustrates that there is a limit to what working together can accomplish and that all men ultimately end up alone.

##### The Poem

The poem that the correspondent recites about the soldier who pitifully lies dying in a foreign land represents the correspondent’s understanding of his own plight. Just as in youth he never considered it a tragedy that the fictitious soldier dies away from home, the correspondent realizes that, as a grown man, his situation is like the soldier’s and that it is nature that now regards his death as inconsequential. This understanding forces the correspondent to see the soldier’s story as tragic because it is the only way to give his own life weight. The correspondent endows the fictitious soldier with humanity, a gesture that reveals both his maturity at understanding what his life really amounts to and his self-delusion for using fiction to give meaning to his own situation. In truth, the poem does not make the correspondent’s plight any more real. Rather, it only reinforces the meaningless of his struggle, which the narrator later describes as “the plight of the ants.”

##### The Cigars

The four wet cigars and four dry cigars serve as a complex symbol of hope for spiritual salvation and as the ultimate loss of that salvation. When the correspondent finds these cigars in his pockets, Crane makes it clear that there are two interpretations of the men’s plight. First, like the four sodden cigars, the four men are physically and spiritually soaked by the heavy, demoralizing forces of nature—they are broken and useless. Second, like the four dry cigars hidden deep inside the correspondent’s pocket, there is something inside the men that remains untouched by the cold, drenching despair that the sea imparts. At the moment when the correspondent digs through his pocket, the men are likely to see themselves optimistically—as the four dry cigars—because their cooperation and hard work has seemingly put them on track to defeat nature. Yet by the end of the story, the men’s optimism is not intact, and they feel misery, not triumph. The wet cigars more aptly illustrate the tragedy of the men’s spirits.

**Shifting Frames of Reference and Impressionism**

Although Crane was foremost a realist and naturalist writer who valued firsthand, close-up experience as the key to understanding, Crane in “The Open Boat” relies on impressionism to communicate the gulf between objective reality and what his characters perceive as reality. Whereas the logic of realism and naturalism calls for experience and perception to be nearly identical, impressionism differs from the other two in that it allows for the fact that a character’s grasp of reality is at best fleeting or even impossible. Crane’s impressionistic technique in “The Open Boat” is ideal for placing his readers into the same frame of reference as his characters. The story’s first sentence, “No one knew the color of the sky,” thrusts the reader into the position of his characters, who have a limited perspective of the world. Each character lives alone in his own reality, as does the narrator, whose lack of omniscience (the ability to be all-knowing) underscores one of the story’s central messages: no one truly knows anything.

Crane enriches his impressionistic technique by juxtaposing close-up, sensory descriptions of the men’s experience in the dinghy with the narrator’s detached perspective. The narrator says that the mountainous gray waters obstruct the men’s view of everything outside the boat, but in the next sentence the narrator comments on how the whole scene would have been picturesque if viewed from afar. The point of shifting the frame of reference is to convey that the significance of intense moments, such as the men’s experience in the dinghy, depends on the perspective from which they are seen. This idea becomes relevant to the characters themselves as they realize that, from a cosmic perspective, their lives are inconsequential.

**Existentialism and Irony**

In “The Open Boat,” Crane conveys an existential view of humanity: that is, he depicts a human situation in which the individual is insignificant in the universe and yet, through free will and consciousness, must interpret a reality that is essentially unknowable. The men in the dinghy, particularly the correspondent, try desperately to justify their survival in the struggle against the sea, but the values by which they live and the appeals they make to the heavens are inadequate. The universe is indifferent to their courage, valor, and brotherhood, and there is no response to the men’s furious appeals to fate and God to answer for the outrageous misfortune that has befallen them. Crane’s use of the word *absurd* in the narrator’s refrain challenging fate—“The whole affair is absurd”—resonates well with the existentialist creed that the universe itself is “absurd” and that there is no meaning in the natural order of things. At best, these men can construct their own meanings, such as the “subtle brotherhood of men” they form, but in Crane’s vision, they are shut out from the cosmos.

The irony in Crane’s vision of “The Open Boat” is that, in describing the situation of the correspondent, who has come to understand his insignificant position in the natural universe through the manmade tower, the narrator continues to give human qualities to inhuman things. For example, the narrator calls nature a “she.” For both the narrator and correspondent, nature is an old, inscrutable mistress whose workings are always beyond their grasp. At the end of the story, the captain, correspondent, and cook are no more able to converse with nature than they were at the beginning. Indeed, they finally realize that there is no such thing as conversing with nature. This awareness drives home the irony of the final sentence in the story, in which the narrator says that the three surviving men feel that they can be interpreters of the ocean’s voice. The men’s capacity to interpret nature for other people refers simply to their understanding that the sea’s voice is incoherent and the universe a cosmic void. There is nothing to interpret.

**Alternative Interpretations**

Critics generally agree that “The Open Boat” is an examination of man’s relationship to the universe as well as of man’s relationship to other men. But there are different opinions about the precise nature of these relationships. On one hand, Crane’s work seems to be anti-Romantic. Romanticism argues that human beings exist in harmony with nature. The sea in this story, with its constant snarls and hisses, is a hostile force to mankind and certainly not in harmony with the men who are fighting for their lives. American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau believed that nature is a mystic wonderland that in every corner holds tiny clues to how man fits seamlessly into the universe. “The Open Boat” suggests the opposite: man is alienated from the universe and doomed to lead a cold, unnatural existence.

On the other hand, “The Open Boat” could be seen as a Darwinian story that shows how man is intimately connected to nature. Whereas the anti-Romantics tried to separate man completely from nature, the Darwinians understand Crane to be embracing nature so tightly that his plot simply expands on Darwin’s idea of “survival of the fittest.” In this interpretation, nature has no will or purpose. Just as the men come to realize that nature has not actually taken up arms against them, they begin to devote themselves to “the business of the boat”—to survival. Although the oiler’s death seems to undermine the Darwinian interpretation of the story, because he is clearly the strongest of the group and therefore should have survived, it actually reinforces the idea of “survival of the fittest.” While the cook, captain, and correspondent all depend on a manmade or naturally occurring device to help them to the shore, the oiler goes it alone, relying only on his human strength and not on his more evolved capacity for thought and strategy. The “fittest” are the men who have relied on man’s ability to intelligently adapt and create.