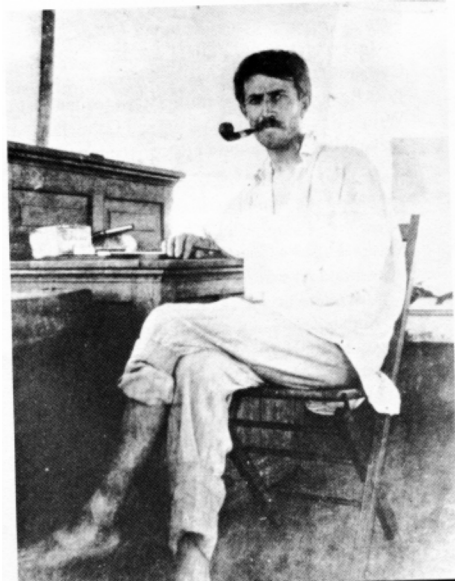


ANALYSIS

“The Open Boat” (1897)



Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

INTRODUCTION

In 1895 an insurrection broke out in Cuba, one in a long series of rebellions against Spanish rule. The United States was officially neutral, but a majority of Americans sided with the rebels and many contributed to their cause. Early one morning in 1896 at Jacksonville, Florida the steamship *Commodore* was loaded with rifles and ammunition to be smuggled into Cuba. Stephen Crane, as a newspaper reporter hoping to sneak in with the cargo, signed on board using an alias. Soon after leaving port the *Commodore* sank--probably sabotaged.

Crane and three members of the crew drifted in a dinghy within sight of the beach, tossed around by rough sea for about 24 hours, from the morning of January 2, 1897 to the morning of January 3. They finally struggled ashore, exhausted, except for the oiler, who got struck on the head in the water and died. Crane is reported to have conducted himself bravely throughout the ordeal. A few days afterward, he wrote a journalistic account for the newspapers. Then he hastily wrote a poor story about it called “Flanagan.” Eventually he crafted “The Open Boat,” now considered his greatest short story. His newspaper account focuses on the sinking of the ship, whereas the work of art focuses entirely on the men in the open boat after the ship has sunk.

I

The first sentence may be the most famous of any short story ever written. “His technique was amazing and extraordinarily contagious,” wrote the novelist Ford Madox Ford. “How many stories since its day have not opened with a direct imitation of the marvelous first sentence of ‘The Open Boat’: ‘None of them knew the color of the sky.’ Haven’t a thousand stories, since then, opened with just that cadence... And of course there is more to it than just the cadence of the eight monosyllables to the one disyllable. The statement is arresting because it is mysterious and yet perfectly clear. So your attention is grasped even before you realize that the men in the boat were pulling or watching the waves so desperately that they had

no time to look up. That is skill, and when it comes, as it did with Crane, intuitively, out of the very nature of the narrator, it is...genius.”

The first sentence is an immediate example of Crane’s Realism, exact observation, indirection and irony. One would expect the men to notice the vast sky overhead, but they are too focused on the danger all around them: “...all the men knew the colors of the sea.” At the outset, Impressionism is evident in the emphasis on colors, perceptions and movement, and in the simile of “waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks.” The second paragraph renders the human tendency to project feelings and even moral values into Nature: “These waves were most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall...” Morality and barbarism apply to humans not to ocean waves. In literary criticism such projection is called “the pathetic fallacy.” Debunking this fallacy, common in sentimental literature of his time, is one of Crane’s most insistent themes throughout his writing, most famously in *The Red Badge of Courage*.

The open boat is civilization, what is left of it after the ship has sunk, dramatizing the supremacy of Nature. The four men in the boat are first identified by their function in a social order: “The cook squatted in the bottom,” the oiler rows and steers, the correspondent helps the oiler row and the captain lies injured, increasing the vulnerability of the group. “In the wan light the faces of the men must have been gray. Their eyes must have glinted in strange ways as they gazed steadily astern. Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtless have been weirdly picturesque. But the men in the boat had not time to see it.” Crane adheres to the Impressionist principle of limiting description to what the representative protagonist would see from inside the boat, while in the process, by speculation he also paints the scene from outside the boat—even including a cinematic pull-back shot from overhead--having it both ways. The balcony image introduces the theme of absurdity and establishes doubleness in Crane’s perspective as expressed in his style: simultaneous participation in the action and ironic detachment.

The men remain so focused on the sea they notice daylight not when the sky changes but when the water changes color. As it gets lighter they are characterized beyond their function by their attitudes in this crisis: The cook is an optimist who looks forward to being rescued by a crew from a house of refuge nearby. The correspondent is a pessimist who informs the cook that “houses of refuge don't have crews.” They argue. The cook revises his opinion, but remains optimistic, whereas the oiler is a realist who says, “We're not there yet.”

II

The injured captain tries to lead by encouraging the men, even forcing a chuckle. Nature seems to contradict his posture, however, when a seagull threatens to land on his head. The function of a lighthouse is to warn, whereas, in ironic reversal, the lighthouse they see at Mosquito Inlet is an attraction that becomes a symbol of their hope: “It was precisely like the point of a pin. It took an anxious eye to find a lighthouse so tiny.” Occasionally the boat gets swamped by water in a prelude to their inevitable immersion themselves. The cook bails, yet remains cheerful.

III

“Meanwhile the lighthouse had been growing slowly larger.” Crane reverts to a traditional narrative style of direct exposition to evoke “the subtle brotherhood of men that was here 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.” If they were four women in the boat, would they mention it? Would they suppress their feelings? Literature transcends gender, yet occasionally there are situations that call upon the reader to transcend gender with understanding. The bonding of men in crisis is often strengthened by silence and weakened by sentiment. Talking alters consciousness and may distort or dissipate feelings when they are reduced to words. This is a theme in Hemingway as well. Among men, silence can be an intense expression of shared feeling: “There was this comradeship that the correspondent...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.”

Of course, men also bond by cursing. The correspondent, in pain from rowing, “mentioned to the boat in general how the amusement of rowing struck him, and the weary-faced oiler smiled in full sympathy.” Meanwhile “the land arose from the sea” and they anticipate reaching the shore with a “quiet cheerfulness.”

The correspondent hands out cigars, the men ride “impudently in their little boat...with an assurance of an impending rescue shining in their eyes.”

IV

The captain points out to the cook, “there don't seem to be any signs of life about your house of refuge.” The previous chapter ends on the upbeat, whereas this one begins on the downbeat, a pattern in the seven-part structure of the story that evokes both the wheel of fortune and the motion of the boat up and down on the waves. There is a similar pattern in *The Red Badge*.

The cook remains optimistic: “Funny they don't see us!” Crane again transcends the Impressionist principle, originated by Henry James, of limiting perception to the consciousness of a protagonist when he intrudes to establish facts as the basis for his ironic tone: “there was not a life-saving station within twenty miles in either direction; but the men did not know this fact, and in consequence they made dark and opprobrious remarks concerning the eyesight of the nation's life-savers.” In their ignorance the men are unjust, like Nature: “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.” This sense of life as absurd is a characteristic of Existentialism, first expressed in American literature by Melville in *Moby-Dick* (1851), then verged upon here (1898), then developed fully in a modern sense by Chopin in *The Awakening* (1899).

As he does in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane ridicules the human inclination to demand and expect justice from Nature, one of his most insistent themes: “But no; she cannot mean to drown me. She dare not drown me. She cannot drown me. Not after all this work!” The absurdity of the correspondent himself is expressed in his impulse to shake his fist at the clouds: “Just you drown me, now, and then hear what I call you!” He is childish and typically human, whereas Ahab, though comparable in his defiance of Nature, is mad and tragic.

Impressionistic technique is particularly effective in the prolonged scene of the men in dialogue about what they are seeing on the shore. Their brief rapid observations accelerate the pace of the narrative, increasing suspense, animation and vividness. This technique puts the reader in the position of Billie the oiler steering the boat with his back to the beach so that he cannot see and must imagine what the men are describing. The action on the beach is rendered entirely through the reactions of the desperate men, whose perceptions are not always accurate. Distance is evoked by their attempts to identify objects. Adding to the rapidity and Impressionistic effect, speakers are not identified, but we can infer that the optimistic cook is the one who thinks he sees a life-boat and insists upon it until he sees that in fact it is merely a hotel omnibus: “Maybe they are going around collecting the life-crew, hey?”

When they see a man on the beach waving his coat who appears to be signaling them, they try to interpret what he means: “He just stands there and keeps his coat revolving like a wheel. The ass!” This extends the motifs of projection and circularity. The circularity here, like the wind and the fighting in “The Blue Hotel,” evokes futility. The man waving his coat is no doubt trying to help them, yet they project their frustration onto him: “I feel like socking him one...he seemed so damned cheerful.” As their hopes of reaching the beach through the surf recede, “The form of the lighthouse had vanished from the southern horizon, but finally a pale star appeared, just lifting from the sea.” Hope rises eternal from the human soul, but here it is pale and remote in the dark. “The land had vanished.” The correspondent, who corresponds to the modern reader, is forced to question the meaning of his life. The captain orders the oarsman to “keep her head up!”--words repeated by him and by the oarsman for emphasis, affirming the head or intellect.

Meanwhile, reclining all day while the other men break their backs rowing, the cook is so out of touch with reality he asks Billie what kind of pie he likes best. In the pattern of rising and falling moods, this chapter ends “dreamfully.”

V

Both the oiler and the correspondent tell the cook to shut up about food, but he goes on torturing the hungry men with a dream of “ham sandwiches and--” This pattern of contrasting desire and reality by close juxtaposition, inflation abruptly followed by deflation, up then down, is characteristic of Realists debunking Romanticism and is most pronounced in Crane. The oiler and the correspondent alternate

rowing and resting, exhausting themselves while the cook, after making their situation worse by talking about food, ties a life belt around himself and reclines at ease, benefiting from his incompetence with oars. Humans are unequal and life is unjust.

The “enormous fin” of a shark makes a furrow “on the black waters. It might have been made by a monstrous knife.” Crane’s stories usually contain an archetypal monster that gives his vision depth, dramatic intensity and power. The shark is a specific manifestation of the larger monster of the sea. At the same time, ironically, the correspondent cannot help but greatly admire the beauty of the shark. This paradox is comparable to the experience of both terror and beauty when facing death in *Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) by Poe, one of Crane’s influences.

VI

The correspondent’s obsessive anticipation of death is expressed by repetition of the phrase, “If I am going to be drowned...” Resisting the sense of absurdity, feeling sorry for himself, he clings desperately to the notion of justice in Nature, much as he is clinging to the open boat: “For it was certainly an abominable injustice to drown a man who had worked so hard, so hard. The man felt it would be a crime most unnatural.” The story dramatizes the reality that it would not be a “crime” at all. In fact, under the circumstances, it would be quite natural.

As it occurs to him that “nature does not regard him as important,” he is frustrated by the futility of rebelling. “A high cold star on a winter’s night”--remote and dim--is his metaphor of the hope for salvation that Nature seems to offer, an echo of the “pale star” that replaced the lighthouse as a symbol of hope for literal rescue. “Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation.” Here again Crane is verging on Existentialism: The correspondent is (1) confronting the possibility that he is not immortal; that (2) the universe is meaningless; and that (3) life is absurd. This is not yet Existentialism because he still has religious hope, though it is as remote and dim and inaccessible, it seems, as a star--which recalls the star signifying the birth of Christ.

Now that he is facing death himself, the correspondent is able to empathize with a soldier of the Legion who “lay dying in Algiers”--in a poem he once read. The soldier is French, he is remote in space and time like the star, dying in a desert rather than at sea, he may even be fictitious, yet the correspondent is moved by the memory of him because their common plight gives him that feeling of brotherhood already established with the other men in the boat. Literature helps him comprehend his experience: “The correspondent, plying the oars and dreaming of the slow and slower movements of the lips of the soldier, was moved by a profound and perfectly impersonal comprehension. He was sorry for the soldier of the Legion who lay dying in Algiers.” The correspondent feels a correspondence between himself and the dying soldier. He transcends his ego and his self-pity by becoming “impersonal”--objective--which permits him to comprehend and leads to empathy and pity for another. The correspondent has learned that, one way or another, we humans are all in the same boat.

Crane was the correspondent in his newspaper report, but not in this fiction, for here the correspondent is unable to empathize until he faces death himself, whereas Crane was able to imagine *The Red Badge of Courage*. Through techniques of Impressionism Crane evokes the agonizing duration of the ordeal, the correspondent’s exhaustion, his desperation for sleep and his bonding with the oiler, by compression of time and by repetition of their requests to each other for relief from rowing: “‘Billie!--Billie, will you spell me?’ ‘Sure,’ said the oiler.” The correspondent asks twice and Billie only once. We do not get Billie’s point of view, his reticence seems a virtue and by implication he is more physically fit and does most of the rowing--exhausting himself.

VII

At dawn, as the boat heads for shore, the tall white windmill looms with a different significance than the lighthouse: “This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It 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 men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent.” He has stopped projecting his sentimental expectation of justice into Nature and has adopted a fundamental premise of Naturalism. Crane is rejecting the Romantic

tradition of idealizing Nature--Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson. The windmill depends on Nature to operate, it moves around in circles like Nature and is said here to represent the indifference of Nature. The comparison of men to an animal, in this case reducing men to ants, is also a characteristic of Naturalist fiction. Crane uses over 90 such animal similes in *The Red Badge of Courage*.

The correspondent adopts Crane's tone of understatement when he becomes too tired to "grapple fundamentally with the fact" that he may drown: "It merely occurred to him that if he should drown it would be a shame." He is adapting to the indifference of Nature. When he and the other men tumble into the cold surf, his expectations are contradicted again by reality, and in the shock he reverts to emotional projection: "The January water was icy, and he reflected immediately that it was colder than he had expected to find it off the coast of Florida. This appeared to his dazed mind as a fact important enough to be noted at the time. The coldness of the water was sad; it was tragic. This fact was somehow mixed and confused with his opinion of his own situation, so that it seemed almost a proper reason for tears. The water was cold."

In the struggle to reach the beach, the oiler "was ahead in the race"-- and in the human race, by virtue of his self-sacrifice in doing most of the labor to help them all survive. The sensations of the correspondent are rendered through intensely vivid impressions like those experienced under the most extreme emotional pressure: "The shore was set before him like a bit of scenery on a stage, and he looked at it and understood with his eyes each detail of it." The cook, having contributed the least to their survival, is an easy rider who turns over on his back in his life-belt and paddling with an oar "went ahead as if he were a canoe." The captain calls to the men to come and cling to the overturned boat--but they no longer can. Now at the mercy of chance in Nature, the correspondent can only try to keep his head up.

"Presently he saw a man running along the shore. He was undressing with most remarkable speed. Coat, trousers, shirt, everything flew magically off him." He is glimpsing the man between the breakers that are fragmenting his view. By chance, a large wave lifts the correspondent and "flung him with ease and supreme speed completely over the boat and far beyond it"--like a "miracle of the sea." By this time the man undressing on shore is naked—"naked as a tree in winter; but a halo was about his head, and he shone like a saint." This projection is consciously figurative and attributes to some natures the qualities of heroism also exhibited by Billie the oiler, a common man who so exhausted himself from rowing he now lies face down in the sand. The one who most deserved to survive is the only one who died, a resounding final contradiction of the sentimental notion of justice in Nature. Billie is the most Christ-evoking figure for his sacrifice. Before this experience in the open boat, the correspondent had been cynical of men and idealistic about Nature. Now he has an esteem for the best in human nature.

"The Open Boat" is often taught as an example of Naturalism, due to its unusually deterministic circumstances, emphasis on the indifference of Nature and the unjust death of the oiler. Throughout his fiction Crane is consistently Naturalistic on these themes. At the same time, in contrast to Naturalists such as Zola and Dreiser, he does not deny free will--he *exalts* it. The naked savior is exalted as a hero and a saint among men, which would be undeserved if he had no free will. Also, the aesthetics of the story are Impressionist, not Naturalist: (1) the authorial voice muted rather than prominent; (2) the point of view limited rather than omniscient; (3) the texture painterly rather than scientific; (4) the discipline economical rather than documentary; (5) the movement rapid rather than methodical; (6) the style richly poetic rather than prosaic; (7) the tone ironic rather than literal-minded.

Michael Hollister (2015)