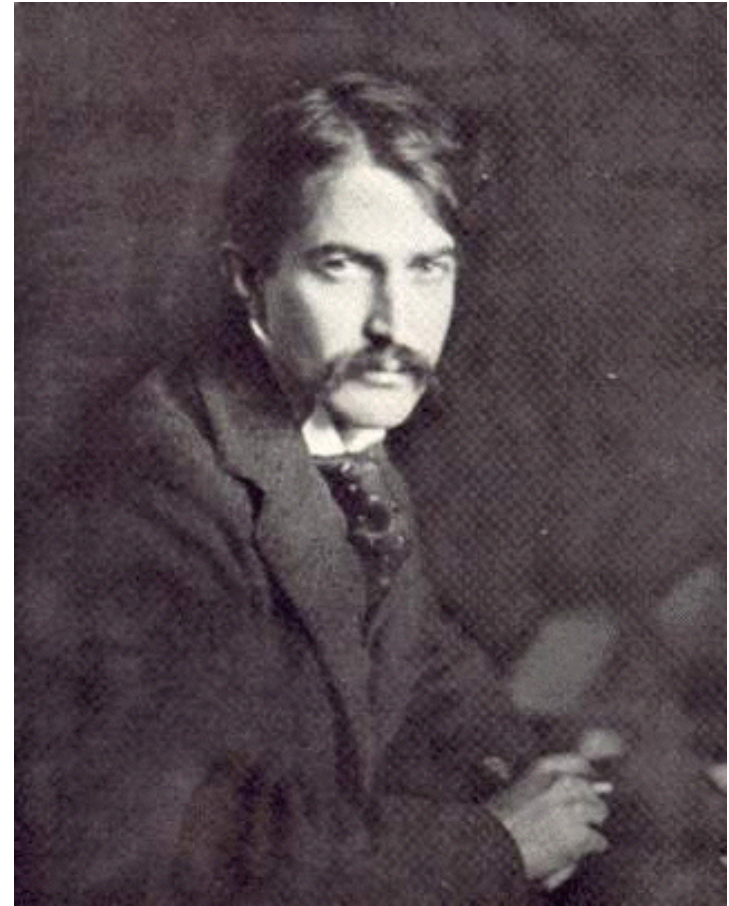


Stephen Crane (1871-1900)



A man said to the universe:
'Sir, I exist!'
'However,' replied the universe,
'The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.'
-- From *War Is Kind*, 1900

Achievement

- A brilliant writer, Crane was dead at twenty eight.
- Two great books *Maggie* and *The Red Badge of Courage*, impressive poems, and ninety pieces of short fiction.
- depiction of ghetto life and the deprivation of war
- True to naturalism, Crane shows his characters trapped in situations which they cannot control.
- Still, these characters show courage and valor in the face of insurmountable adversities.

Works

- *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, 1893
- *The Red Badge of Courage*, 1895
- *The Black Riders*, 1895
- *The Black Riders and Other Lines*, 1895 (poems)
- *George's Mother*, 1896
- *The Third Violet*, 1897
- *The Open Boat & Other Tales of Adventure*, 1898
- *War is Kind*, 1900 (poems).

Commentary on The Open Boat

- “The Open Boat” is a fictionalized account of a very traumatic personal experience in Crane’s life: a ship on which he was a passenger sank off the coast of Florida, and he found himself one of four men in a tiny open dinghy, struggling to make it through a narrow strip of rough sea and pounding surf that separated them from dry land.

philosophical question of man's relationship to the world of nature

- As it was, the men were forced to remain for thirty hours in the boat, rowing frantically against the tide and bailing constantly to keep the craft afloat in the treacherous water, before they were able to come ashore at Daytona Beach.
- We would expect that this story would be written as a heart-pounding adventure tale; yet it is very cerebral in its approach, focusing less on the adrenaline rush of danger than on the philosophical question of man's relationship to the world of nature that so completely overwhelms him.

Nature

- As Crane shows in this story, the protagonist's salvation is dependent upon whether or not he will adapt to his surroundings and help his fellow man, not whether or not he can conquer nature.
- As he demonstrates, this is a moot point, because it is impossible to conquer nature; it is too big, and too impersonal, and man is just a speck against its awesome power.
- The best one can do is learn nature's ways and work with, not against, them.

None of them knew the color of the sky

- This sense of complete absorption in the struggle against nature is illustrated by the famous first line of the story: “None of them knew the color of the sky.” The reason for this is soon made obvious; the imperiled survivors could not take their eyes off the waves, for to let their guard down for a moment would mean certain death.
- Significantly, Crane does not deal with the question of heroism; the men in the boat do not feel heroic, nor do they ask us to think of them in those terms. They are simply doing what they need to in order to survive, and supporting one another in this effort.

hyper-realism

- Interestingly, however, this does not make Crane's story realistic; it actually creates a kind of hyper-realism, an excruciatingly vivid nightmare state, in which waves resemble horses "scrambl[ing] over walls of water," "carpets on a line in a gale," and "white flames," to mention only a few of the dozens of metaphors.
- The homeliness of these images does not make the Crane's rendering of the experience any less profound; they simply call attention to the inability of mere words to convey it.

vivid language

- They also accentuate the gulf between an objective journalistic rendering of going down with a ship and the only way to convey the full horror of this experience.
- Crane borrows, in his fierce and startling imagery, something from Gothic romantics such as Poe; but in no other respect is this story romanticized.
- On the contrary, the threat of death is not in any way sensationalized, because it does not need to be; the usage of such extreme imagery makes it even more terrifyingly real.

anecdotes

- In addition to vivid language, Crane uses carefully-chosen anecdotes to make the situation seem harrowing. The extent to which these men are poised on the brink of life and death is illustrated by the seagull that lands on the captain's head; as Crane says, "The captain naturally wished to knock it away with the end of the heavy painter, but he did not dare do it, because anything resembling an emphatic gesture would have capsized this freighted boat; and so, with his open hand, the captain gently and carefully waved the gull away." To have remained in this state for thirty hours seems almost incomprehensible.

rhythm

- Crane's remarkable use of rhythm in this story reminds one of the motion of the sea; while each phrase has a distinct sense of rising and falling, each one is also a different length, just like the waves -- some of which are huge and rolling, while others are merely little swells. One can feel this in the lines "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."
- In his imagery, in his rhythm, Crane never allows us to forget the story's setting, even for a second; the huge and harrowing presence of nature, poised to destroy the insignificance which is man, commands our attention at all times.

men's attempts to help one another survive

Consider this passage where Crane describes the time “when we were swamped by the surf and making the best of our way toward the shore”.

“But finally [the correspondent] arrived at a place in the sea where travel was beset with difficulty. He did not pause swimming to inquire what manner of current had caught him, but there his progress ceased. 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. -- As the cook passed, much farther to the left, the captain was calling to him. ‘Turn over on your back, cook! Turn over on your back and use the oar.’ -- ‘All right, sir.’ The cook turned on his back, and paddling with an oar, went ahead as if he were a canoe.”

Nature Indifferent

- There is no fighting the sea; it cannot be conquered; but one can learn to bob along on its surface, and aid to the best of one's ability those fellow human beings who are also caught in the grip of nature's immense indifference.

quotes

"A tale intended to be after the fact: Being the Experience of For Men from the Sunk Steamer Commodore" (p. 192).

- The point of view of the story is from the correspondent's eyes. The story may not seem to be coming from this view (because it is written in the third person), but the series of events in *The Open Boat* actually happened. Steven Crane outlived this "human struggle" and lived to write about it.
- In this case, Steven Crane is the correspondent. We see the story through his eyes.

quotes

"Nevertheless, it is true that he did not wish to be alone with the thing (the shark). He wished one of his companions to awake by chance and keep him company with it. But the company hung motionless over the waterjar, and the oiler and the cook in the bottom of the boat were plunged in slumber" (p. 204).

- Does the above quote evoke a feeling of prejudice or bias (on the side of the correspondent)? If so, how? What does the experience with shark tell us about the *point of view*?
- *Question:* In actuality, the captain of the *Commodore*, and the two crew members spent nearly thirty hours in the open boat. William Higgins, the oiler, was drowned as Crane describes. Does a knowledge of these facts in any way affect your response to the story? Would you admire the story any less if you believed it to be pure fiction?

more questions to think about

- Think about this question and ponder upon the **reality** of human struggle... does their situation seem like something that could happen to you?
- In identifying who is actually struggling, are all of the men struggling? Who struggles the most? Who is the hero? Are all of the men *heroes*?

Web Resources

- The Crane Society
<http://www.gonzaga.edu/faculty/campbell/crane/index.html>
- Daniel Anderson's site on "The Open Boat" <http://sites.unc.edu/storyforms/openboat/openboat.html>
- Annotated version of *The Monster*
<http://www.barney.gonzaga.edu/~dbratlan/monster/monsterframe.html>