

Two perspectives,
one reality: analyzing
"the open boat"



**ASSIGN
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Novelist Ray Bradbury once said, “ I used to take my short stories to girls’ homes and read them to them. Can you imagine the reaction reading a short story to a girl instead of pawing her?” (“ Ray Bradbury Quotes”). While speaking from a comical perspective, Bradbury understands this: short stories are powerful. They have the power to create an alternate reality. Sadly, they often underrated when compared to the typical novel because have less content, less quantity, or less detail. But a story’s length does not determine that the quality of its message or the style of its language. The essence of a story, regardless of its length, is determined by the reader’s reaction. To grab attention, the writer must include the essential elements of story telling, such as setting, characters, and theme. Yet, in Stephen Crane’s short story, “ The Open Boat,” the reader understands these three elements from a chillingly realistic perspective when given the facts that drive this historical fiction.

First, the historical facts regarding the location and context of this story not only give context to its setting, but they also create a disturbingly authentic reality. The reader must first understand that this story is based off a real incident in Stephen Crane’s life and career. As a war reporter, Crane traveled to varying locations across the globe in order to report events and incidents related to war. In the specific instance of both this historical account and this short story, Crane is supposed to be traveling to Cuba to report an event of gunrunning to rebels in Cuba right before the Spanish-American War began in 1898 (“ Fact and Fiction”). However, he is sidetracked by a shipwreck. Considering the amount of context given in the short story itself, this information is priceless. The narrator only hints at the actual, physical

context of the story when discussing the water's condition. He says, " The January water was icy, and he [the correspondent] reflected immediately that it was colder than he had expected to find it off the coast of Florida" (356). After reading and sifting through such a lengthy short story, the reader may often overlook this simple detail. However, understanding this one simple detail brings reality to this situation. First of all, this story is real. Florida is an actual place that exists on the maps our children learn about in fifth grade. Florida is the real place from where Crane departed in order to purposefully travel to Cuba and to unknowingly spend 30 hours on a dinghy (" Fact and Fiction"). Deep-sea swimming is a serious matter, and if ill prepared, deep-sea swimming is a deadly matter. In a newspaper article reporting the sinking of their ship, Crane states, " The whistle of the Commodore [their ship] had been turned loose, and if there ever was a voice of despair and death, it was in the voice of this whistle" (" Fact and Fiction," pp. 43). Here, Crane discusses an actual reality from a first person point of view. This reality of this fact creates a new sense of urgency in the short story. Urgency often leads to panic, and panic often ends in disaster.

These historical facts only contribute to the reality of this situation: four men stuck in the middle of the ocean, fighting for life. These four characters, who are fighting for life and bonded by a " subtle brotherhood," have real counterparts in history, counterparts which also offer an element of frightening actuality to this story (345). In reality, the correspondent represents Crane, the cook exemplifies the actual cook of the Commodore, the captain signifies Captain Edward Murphy, and the oiler is Billie Higgins. Simply put, these four individuals are real people who had families,

occupations, identities. According to Crane's newspaper article, both Murphy and Higgins were men of outstanding character. If Crane had reported the entire story in this article, "the splendid manhood" of those two men would have shined from it ("Fact and Fiction," pp. 72). Yet for some reason that mortal men may not understand, Murphy and Higgins nearly lost their lives on this dinghy. As previously mentioned, deep-sea swimming is not a laughing matter. Neither are the lives of two honorable individuals a laughing matter. But sadly, one of these lives does end by the conclusion of the narrative's action. While the short story does not explicitly mention Higgins' death, Crane outright mentions this fact in his newspaper article. In this story, the narrator briefly mentions that the oiler lay "face downward," but in his newspaper article, Crane states that the captain saw "Billy Higgins lying with his forehead on sand that was clear of the water, and he was dead" (358; "Fact and Fiction," pp. 73). While the reader can infer his death from the short story, the story is missing the word "dead." The reader may have hope while reading the end of the story, but the historical account crushes this hope. The historical reality regarding the characters makes this horrifying reality alive not only because the characters did not deserve such struggle, but also because of the euphemisms regarding their reality.

Finally, the frightening reality of this short story is furthered by the combination of its history and its theme. A prominent theme of this short story is the struggle man faces when attempting to define his purpose in life. Universally speaking, almost every human being that has, does, or will exist asks himself about this "purpose" in life. The narrator of "The Open Boat" struggles with this as well. Throughout the story, he re-states this quote, 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 (353). Without understanding Crane's purpose in life and specifically in this trip, the consistency of this phrase may cause pity and a misunderstanding of his pleas. The reader may easily think the narrator is simply upset by the thought of death. But it goes much deeper than that. Historically speaker, Crane has a set purpose for being on the Commodore. He was en route to Cuba in order to document an important moment in history. He was aiding the rebel cause. He was ready to help people. But in a seemingly random series of events, his purpose was immediately taken away. The depth of his purpose is essential to understanding why Crane constantly doubts his existence. The reality of losing purpose is deep, real, and bit depressing. Defining purpose in life is rough enough, despite the added complication of a shipwreck en route to Cuba.

Crane's fiction is powerful in its cumulative effect: it contains images, characters, setting details, lessons, themes, and more all within a few pages. Even without knowing personally knowledge of these characters, the reader can almost interact with them. But when the reader goes beyond these literary elements and explores its historical context, the reader is given a new, more frightening perspective. From setting to characters and even themes, these elements and the history of the narrative are constantly working to create a story with a reality no man may desire.