

The open boat by stephen crane essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Despite the unease it elicits, nature is indeed indifferent to human concerns. Western Civilization holds principles of fairness, justice and equality in high esteem. But a study of history would not reveal the triumph of these principles in any reasonable measure. Conversely, the forces of nature play a dominant role in determining the fates and prospects of human lives. To a lesser degree, fortuitous circumstances of life, as in being born into privilege and wealth, also play a major role. Hence, helplessness is an apt description of the human condition of various eras of the past. In this scenario, random fortune, on the one hand, and brutal determinism, on the other hand, squeeze whatever an individual could achieve through his/her free, creative and industrious will. In this essay, *The Open Boat* – a short story published by Stephen Crane in 1897 – will be studied in this philosophical context. The essay will concur with the core suggestion of the story, namely, that Nature is indifferent to human suffering. But this fact does not need to be viewed pessimistically, for in coming to terms with the workings of Nature, and through their own efforts, humans can relate to it in harmony.

The story is based on a near-death shipwreck experience that Crane survived off the coast of Florida. The work stands out for its technical excellence. Such literary devices as irony, imagery and symbolism are infused into the storyline. But its inclusion in the American literary canon is largely due to its humanist thrust and its ethical ponderings. It deals with such themes as survival, humanitarianism and the challenge posed to humans by nature (Eye 65). The character of the Correspondent in the story – the doppelganger for the author – asks several important philosophical questions:

“” 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 all this trouble?” (Crane).

The authorial intent is deepened by such parallels in other key literary works. For example, a similar question could easily have been raised by Odysseus in the *Odyssey* as he navigated the seas for ten long years, though it would have extracted quite a different response. This is so, because “ in Homer’s world the outcomes of Odysseus’ situation are determined by responsive and involved gods, whereas in *The Open Boat* the four companions must face an impersonal and indifferent nature as the greatest determining force” (Meacham p. 44).

The most powerful statement of the short story is the negligible influence individuals have over the vagaries of Nature. This is evident in the very first line that starts: “ None of them knew the color of the sky”, reflecting the unpredictability and hopelessness that torment the hearts of the “ four poor waifs”, as they are set afloat in a small rowboat in frigid, hostile and shark-infested ocean waters. In the beginning, upon pondering the shock and awe induced by their situation, they feel that the forces of nature seemed to have conscious intentions, as their fortunes keep fluctuating rapidly. At times, the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-open-boat-by-stephen-crane-essay/>

forces of nature seem to help the struggling men by blowing them in the direction of the shore and also offering seaweed clumps for support. But during other moments of their arduous journey, “ the sea appears like a wild animal, consciously trying to overturn the boat and send its crew to a watery ending” (Meacham 43). But eventually, they come to the conclusion that the seven gods are neither really mad nor antagonistic to their cause. The truth seems to be somewhat more frightening than the two possibilities - “ even worse than the existence of a higher power intent on their destruction - the higher power has no intentions for them at all” (Meacham 43). The existential disinterest of nature is evidenced only after prolonged struggle. This sentiment is succinctly captured by the following passage:

“ He soon discovers that any particular wave mastered was not “ the final outburst of the ocean, the last effort of the grim water”; it is only a wave and soon there will be another.” A singular disadvantage of the sea lies in the fact that after successfully surmounting one wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats” The four are silent in the struggle; neither optimism nor hopelessness is expressed” (Dooley 15).

The Open Boat, alongside other of Crane’s critically acclaimed works such as Maggie (1893) and George’s Mother (1896) seem to suggest environmental determinism as the norm - a condition that could nullify human agency. This assessment is borne by several of Crane’s journalistic pieces as well. But a careful reading of The Open Boat actually opens up a fresh perspective. The story is seen to stand for the value of human endeavor and the significance of human solidarity amid the indifference of the cosmos. Crane’s experiences

in the American West can be partly credited for the mature philosophy of human action that is displayed in the short story. The story “ reaffirms the value of the resourceful human effort characteristic of Crane’s western tales and, in addition, offers the possibility of real success and genuine comradeship born of joint effort” (Dooley 14). In the chaos and utter distress of the situation the four men found themselves in, rancor and mistrust could easily have played spoilsport. But instead, what they showed was solidarity and co-operation. It is an extremely tough but fair trial of wits and determination. In what must stand as testimony to human volition and will, they manage to survive this exacting ordeal, albeit with the exception of one companion.

Works Cited

Crane, Stephen. *The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure*. New York: Doubleday & McClure Co., 1898. Print.

Dooley, Patrick K. “ The Humanism of Stephen Crane.” *The Humanist* Jan.-Feb. 1996: 14+. Print.

Eye, Stefanie Bates. “ Fact, Not Fiction: Questioning Our Assumptions about Crane’s “ The Open Boat.”” *Studies in Short Fiction* 35. 1 (1998): 65. Print.

Meacham, Meredith. “ Contemplating Sand and Trees in “ The Open Boat” and the Odyssey.” *The Humanist* May-June 2006: 43+. Print.

The Open Boat - Context. Web. 2nd June, 2012.