

Nature and character in "a white heron" and "the open boat"



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Realism, as William Dean Howells declared, involves "the young writer who attempts to report the phrase and carriage of everyday life" (641-642). This mode of expression essentially boils down to individual writers' perspectives on life, and includes elements such as regional realism as well as local color. Nonetheless, realist pieces are typically character-centered. Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" and Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" are both centered around a character or a group of characters; however, the difference arises when one examines the relationship between humans and nature in these two pieces. While both "A White Heron" and "The Open Boat" are character-centered pieces, the former piece demonstrates that humans ultimately have the ability to control nature, whereas the latter piece shows how humans are powerless in the face of nature. Crane makes his ominous themes readily apparent. While the characters in "The Open Boat" are very much aware of their dooming situation, they have a difficult time truly placing themselves in the context of nature. Within the first few paragraphs of the piece, readers discover that the men have a literal sense of blindness when thrown in the middle of the non-human world. The narrator states, "As each slaty wall of water approached, it shut all else from the view of the men in the boat" (Crane, 991). This literal blindness also represents a larger, metaphorical blindness to their situation. Since the men are unable to see around them, they are also unable to comprehend their environment and their insignificant place in nature. When the men are placed in the context of nature, they are so dwarfed that it renders them literally and metaphorically blind. Readers see this theme resurface when the correspondent reflects on his situation throughout the piece. One example of this occurs near the end of the narrative: "He thought: 'I am

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going to drown? Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?' Perhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature" (Crane, 1005). Here, the correspondent is having trouble comprehending his place in nature, thinking that it is impossible for nature to doom him to such a cruel fate after everything he has suffered through. This shortsightedness is symbolized, as discussed earlier, by the literal blindness that being in the water causes in him and his comrades; it also foreshadows the theme that man is indeed vulnerable in the "final phenomenon of nature." Persistence is also an overarching theme in "The Open Boat." While one could argue that this persistence is simply a result of the men's situation, one could also point to the unwillingness of humans to accept their oblivion in the face of nature. One demonstration of persistence can be found when the men discover a lighthouse in the distance: "It was precisely like the point of a pin. It took an anxious eye to find a light-house so tiny" (Crane, 993). In spite of their metaphorical and literal blindness, the men strain their eyes to search for any glimmer of hope. Their stubbornness and refusal to accept defeat and give in to the blindness speaks to their inability to accept their insignificant role in nature. In a somewhat similar vein, the men later encounter a large windmill. The encounter causes the correspondent to question nature, regarding the windmill as representing "in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual [. . .] She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent" (Crane, 1003). In this passage, the correspondent realizes the role of man in the presence of nature. It seems as if he begins to accept his utter

powerlessness amid nature's emotionlessness. Ironically, although nature is

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perceived as character-like in this piece due to its continued and essential presence, nature, without emotions, is the least human presence of all. However, even though this passage quite directly states that nature is "flatly indifferent," the key to interpretation lies in what happens after this scene. Just as the correspondent begins to accept nature as a powerful, uncaring force, his musings are sharply interrupted by the captain speaking, and the perspective shifts again to the individuals as they continue to row (Crane, 1003-1004). Even though he begins to understand his insignificant role in nature, the correspondent cannot help but apply his continued persistence. This impulse not only speaks to man's insignificant role in nature, but suggests that the correspondent has a difficult time accepting the truth he has stumbled upon in the face of the windmill, so that he chooses to ignore it and move on. His willful ignorance in the face of truth further solidifies the fact that man is portrayed as being helpless and unimportant.

"A White Heron" certainly takes a staggeringly different, more complex perspective than "The Open Boat" with regards to humans and their relationship with the environment around them. Although the Ornithologist demonstrates a clear control over nature, Sylvia's relationship with nature is much more complex. Ultimately, by posing this dichotomy, "A White Heron" demonstrates that humans may have the choice to control nature if they would like to do so. Jewett begins by contrasting Sylvia and the Ornithologist as two potential models for relationships between man and nature. In the first few paragraphs of the piece, Sylvia is described as at one with her environment: "It seemed as if she had never been alive at all before she

came to live at the farm [. . .] this was a beautiful place to live in, and she should never wish to go home" (Jewett, 527). Right away, this statement establishes that the tone of the piece to be different than Crane's piece. Sylvia is not at the mercy of nature; rather, she is in harmony with it. This situation will later be contrasted with that of the Ornithologist. The opening scene also describes Sylvia and a cow. Mischievous, the cow stands perfectly still in order to hide herself, but Sylvia and her grandmother don't mind: "If the creature had not given good milk and plenty of it, the case would have seemed quite different to the owners. Besides, Sylvia had all the time there was" (Jewett, 526). This is the first clue that Sylvia and her grandmother have the option to control the cow (either through forcing it to comply with their will or through deserting it). However, for personal reasons, they choose not to control the cow, and thus Sylvia's relationship with nature is further established. The Ornithologist's actions are posed in contrast to Sylvia's harmonious relationship with nature. Jewett explains, "Sylvia would have liked him vastly better without his gun; she could not understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much" (530). This extract demonstrates a very clear antagonistic relationship between the Ornithologist and nature. Earlier in the piece, the Ornithologist talks about how "I have shot or snared every one myself" (Jewett, 529), referring to his collection of birds. His use of the word "myself" conveys a tone of pride in his work, revealing that he makes a conscious choice to manipulate nature for his own satisfaction and pleasure. This dichotomy comes to a climax in the final scene, when Sylvia climbs the evergreen tree and spots the elusive white heron. Sylvia, demonstrating her harmony with nature, benignly scales the tree in search of the bird. She is caught up in the dilemma of whether

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she should alert the Ornithologist to the bird's presence and receive the money her family desperately needs, or keep her silence (Jewett, 532-533). Although she ultimately chooses not to reveal the white heron's location, her dilemma represents the overarching theme of the story: humans choose whether or not they will harm nature, and therefore they have the inherent ability to control it. The presence of this choice is essential to the connection between "A White Heron" and "The Open Boat." In "The Open Boat," the men do not have a choice. As previously discussed, no matter how much they persist, nature remains indifferent to them. In "A White Heron," the two opposing characters represent the choices that humans have in terms of controlling nature. While Sylvia may choose not to manipulate nature, it is implied that she has the ability to control some elements of the natural world, whether she chooses to utilize this ability or not. In opposition, the Ornithologist clearly makes a choice in favor of using nature for his own benefit. Although he does not succeed in catching the elusive white heron, this one failure is a result of Sylvia's personal choice. Ultimately, the essential choice speaks to the theme in "A White Heron" which demonstrates that humans have the ability to manipulate nature. Personal choice places them at the metaphorical center of the universe, where their judgement calls have a direct effect on the universe around them; thus, they have control over nature. This piece can be contrasted with Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," which focuses on the more naturalistic theme that humans have little to no control in the face of nature, and that their lives are insignificant in the grand scheme of the universe.