

# Examining pathos in steven crane's 'the open boat'

[Literature](#), [Fiction](#)



' Without obviously aiming for pathos, Crane achieves it. The story, like the seamen, betrays ' no hurried words, no pallor, no plain agitation,' but achieves a real sense of loss at its conclusion. Explain how Crane does this. It is certain that as the reader, one is left feeling bereft and truly sorrowful at the close of ' The Open Boat'. However, it is not with emphasising the self-pity of the seamen, or using particularly emotive language, that Crane achieves this, but rather by subtly manipulating the plot structure, carefully and effectively establishing the characters, and selecting a narrative style that is objective and detached. These techniques culminate in a conclusion that is both unexpected in its resolution, and unexpected in its effect on the reader, who is left to dwell on the fate of the seamen long after the final page is turned. One of the most important aspects of The Open Boat which allows it to achieve pathos so successfully is the plot structure. In the beginning of the short story, a grim picture is painted of the circumstances of the seamen. We realise how dangerous their situation is, and thus take the story seriously right from the first paragraph. As the story progresses we almost find ourselves joining them on the boat, growing used to the radical changes of the wind and surf, and becoming tolerant of the endless waves threatening to overcome them. In the first few paragraphs we are given opportunity to connect properly with the seamen, their situation and who they are, before anything significant happens. This is important because we are therefore effectively focused on the seamen, rather than the happenings of the story, from the beginning. In this way we are included in the struggles of the seamen as well as in the raising of their hopes. This first happens when a lighthouse is spotted and a more optimistic outlook is afforded. The

prospect of a life-saving station/house of refuge allows us to think the men will be safe after all- that is until we are told that there is no nearby help station, and that the men are no closer to being saved, although they themselves are unaware of this. This dramatic irony elicits a real sympathy for the seamen because we know that their hopes are going to be dashed as ours were, and we fear for their safety. After they realise no help is coming and exchange relative's contact details in the event of death, the reader is reminded of the seriousness of the situation and responds accordingly, admiring their bravery. Crane then lifts our hopes for a second time with the presence of the waving man on the beach, but we are merely left as equally frustrated as the men themselves when nothing comes of his frenetic hand movements and dusk falls. Crane then focuses once again on the difficulties the seamen are facing, the extremely wet and cold conditions and the pressure the small boat and her crew are put under by the ruthless waves. There is an ominous sighting of a shark by the correspondent and we are reminded of all they are up against. This is done strategically as it then leads us to contemplate how unfair it would be if the seamen were to die after all their strenuous work. As the correspondent asks the question ' If I am going to be drowned... why was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?' we realise how slim their chances of survival are, which is an important set up for our relief when they do in fact reach shore further on the story. The indescribable effort that comes with rowing is once again highlighted and we are almost assured by the hard work of the correspondent and oiler, thinking how incredibly cruel it would be to have one of them die at the conclusion of the tale. As the story begins to rise to a

climax when the men decide to attempt to swim to shore, we are relieved and think that they will finally make it back to land after all their struggles. Attention is focused on the undertow-weakened correspondent, who notes that the oiler is swimming strongly to shore, and after assessing the situation the reader feels that if any of the men were to die it would most likely be the correspondent. When he makes it to solid ground safely along with the cook and the captain, we are lead to think that all is well and that all crew members are safe — it is as if we have our backs turned to the oiler. However, Crane then essentially pulls the rug out from underneath us with the death of the oiler, and we are left feeling incredibly sorry at his death. Feelings of guilt exacerbate our sense of loss — we realise we should have been paying more attention to the oiler instead of concerning ourselves with the correspondent. The overall plot takes us on a frightening journey with the men, and as we overcome each struggle with them we find ourselves being drawn into their lives — the unexpected death of the oiler therefore results in sincere feelings of guilt, loss and sadness on the part of the reader. Characterisation and the painstaking development of the characters is another aspect of this short story which allows it to be so effective in its finish. From the first page Crane takes every effort to introduce the seamen to us in a way that ensures we will become fond of each of them and their particular personalities. As mentioned above, we as readers are almost placed in the boat with the seamen and through observing the camaraderie between them and also being given insight into each crew member's feelings and thoughts, a real connection is established between the characters and ourselves. Crane first subtly taps into our capability to feel sympathy by

telling the story of the captain and the ship which sank, and how distraught he is because of it. The oiler and correspondent are revealed to be endearing and ever-obliging characters, repeating and following instructions and never once complaining that they are the only two doing the rowing. Even the cook, with his somewhat stubborn attitude, wins our favour with his willingness to bail out the boat repeatedly. We become close to the seamen and by instinct sympathetic to their plight, although they themselves do not dwell on their own misfortune. Perhaps this is what Crane does most skilfully — he avoids writing about the self pity of the sailors right until the end of the story, and instead focuses on their tenacity, moments of optimism and will to survive, not allowing them to contemplate the unfairness of what has happened to them or complain about their condition, and in doing so in this way we admire greatly their bravery and determination, feel sorry for the seamen on their behalf, and find ourselves subconsciously rooting for the seamen's survival. Just as the correspondent (who was previously indifferent to the story of the soldier in Algiers) was ' moved by a profound and perfectly impersonal apprehension' by the story and truly felt so sorry for him, so are we moved by the correspondent's own plight. It is not their own wallowing that binds us to the characters, but their individual personalities and determination, which is why the loss of the oiler resounds so deeply at the end of the story. The third aspect which has great impact on the overall mood and conclusion of ' The Open Boat' is the narrative style selected for its telling. Crane employs an extremely effective literary technique by using the omniscient narrative point of view. An objective, detached and unsympathetic voice delivers the tale of the four men in a manner which

leaves the onus of feeling sorrow and pity on the reader. The objective viewpoint also results in the story being more sincere and therefore more seriously taken. It also enables Crane to give a full description of the seamen's situation (the terrible conditions at sea and their glaring vulnerability, for example) whilst not involving the seamen themselves, which ensures that the men do not come across as self-pitying. We are able to fully appreciate the direness of their situation this way, and are also made aware of the powerfulness of the sea and how pathetic the boat is in comparison — for this reason we can also fully appreciate how exceedingly brave the men are, and as they do not dwell on the horror of their circumstances themselves, we are left to do it for them. We are only aware of the men's quiet internal questionings of fate and nature because of the chosen narrative style, which naturally leaves us feeling sorry for the men although they themselves eventually accept their situation and plunge into the icy waters without much thought or remorse. The narrative voice employed, which is entirely separate from the situation, tells the story at a meandering pace, not once allowing any panic or despair the men may be feeling to work its way into the tone. Towards the end of the story Crane effectively focuses the narration on the correspondent, and we are given a limited view of the oiler's progress, remaining more concerned with the more immediate and obvious struggles of the correspondent instead. We learn to listen to the voice earnestly, and when it delivers to us, quite simply, that the oiler lies face down and dead in the shallows, we are horrified at the loss, having almost trusted that the calm voice of the narrator would never allow such a thing to happen. The full effect of nature rests heavily on the reader's

shoulders at this point, and true loss and remorse is experienced. It is evident that Stephen Crane has put a great amount of effort into ensuring that the four seamen do not come across as self-pitying or weak, whilst at the same time enabling us to appreciate and register the seriousness of their situation and the true extent of their bravery, and to grow to support and care for the vulnerable men. Through the skilfully structured plot, objective, omniscient narrative style and characterisation of the men, we are taken on an obstacle-ridden journey with the men and their hope to survive transfers itself into our own thinking as we become the fifth crew member. As a result of all of the above, Crane successfully places us in a position to feel maximum loss, sadness and sympathy at the conclusion of his story, and in doing so achieves what was never apparently intended in the first place — pathos.