

## Nature's Paradoxicality in Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat"

Salma Haque\*

### Abstract

*Stephen Crane's (1871-1900) one of the best known short stories, "The Open Boat" is based on his own real-life traumatic incident. It starts with a description of four shipwrecked men aboard an open dinghy on a turbulent sea. There is the captain, a correspondent, an oiler, and a cook. In the story, their struggle for survival is found in the setting of the sea, which symbolizes nature. Nature is the protagonist and the open boat represents helpless men in the vast universe. The story is notable for its use of irony, imagery, symbolism and the exploration of themes as survival, solidarity and the conflict between men and nature. With the help of tone and imagery, Crane successfully portrays the cruelty of nature to the boatmen. At the beginning of their ordeal, the men find nature unpredictably fierce. Throughout the story, we see nature's antagonism and indifference and the boatmen try their best to overcome the adversaries of nature. In this paper, I shall show that nature is paradoxical as well as unpredictable, and these characteristics completely overwhelm the endangered men.*

**Keywords:** nature's paradoxicality, its unpredictability and mystery.

"The Open Boat" is the most frequently discussed work of American writer Stephen Crane, famous for his naturalistic writing in which human beings have no control on their lives. In this type of writing Crane portrays "life as it is" and it differs from realism where the realists believe that human beings at least have control of the events in their lives. Crane's first novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is regarded by some critics as America's first naturalistic writing. His other works "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and "The Blue Hotel" are also known for naturalism. As a naturalist, he is called a leader. His short story "The Open Boat" is more than a narrative of adventure and has pessimistic tone and the external forces like the sea, waves, sharks, seagulls etc. are unkind to the stranded men. In January 1897, the writer was shipwrecked and lost at sea for thirty hours. He and three other men were forced to row to shore on a ten-foot life boat. The short story was written several weeks after the harrowing incident. It stirred the minds of the reader and remains popular with critics. Thomas Kent refers to the short story as Crane's "Magnus opus" (1986: 145). In it the setting is dark, with the vast sea symbolizing nature which is an entity that acts as itself and those who act within it are subject to its power. It is not an ordinary setting; rather very active in the lives of the characters and has contradictory qualities. "The Open Boat" has seven sections and the narrative point of view is that of the correspondent who suggests that all four men are having the exact same thoughts at the exact time: "As for the reflections of the men, there was a great deal of rage in them. Perhance they might be formulated thus" (IV:31-2). The sea is a realm that welcomes people from all cultures, all professions and classes. That is why, we see varied types of boatmen in it. The first part of the story introduces the

---

\*Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh

four characters—the injured captain, the correspondent, the fat, jovial cook, and the oiler. All seem equal before the eyes of nature. The correspondent is able-bodied and shares rowing duty with the oiler. The captain is calm and the oiler is hard working and is obedient to the injured captain. He is also generous to the correspondent whenever is asked to row. The cook is positive and naïve. He is the first person to suggest that “there’s a house of refuge just north of the Mosquito Inlet Light”(I: 61) and talks of “pies” and “ham sandwiches”(V:3). He also makes himself useful by bailing water from the boat. In support of the theme of indifference of nature, the somber tone is consistently maintained by the men’s having no names. In the eyes of nature, they are mere things, not individuals. Everyone is known by his profession. The only name we get is the oiler’s—Billie. The story includes little dialogue and deals with conflict between man and nature. This story contains moments of crises. In its vastness, the sea is indifferent to the shipwrecked men, but the oiler displays more courage than the other boatmen. Nature retains its mysterious aura and appears throughout the story as a powerful symbol of cruelty. Nature is present on every page and the entire action takes place on it. When the stranded men progress through the story, nature’s lack of concern for them becomes increasingly clear. At the beginning of their journey nature snarls, hisses; later it merely “paces to and fro” (VII: 147) and helps them reach the shore although the oiler died at the end of the perilous journey. Crane uses mysterious nature abundantly and the truly paradoxical nature is steadily revealed. The fact that nature has two faces will be analyzed, with examples from the story.

After break of dawn, the stranded men can see the gravity of the ordeal they have to undergo for survival. The sea rises menacingly over the gunwales. According to Shulman in “The Open Boat” “. . . the impersonal violence of nature is the antagonist” (1978, 441) with “. . . malign intent” (Hilfer, 2012: 248). The shipwrecked men consider their situation unfair and wish to “throw bricks at the temple” (VI: 11). So, we see instead of praying they curse the creator and get isolated from God and nature.

It is clear from the beginning that the sea plays an integral part in the story. Since assistance from nature is impossible, the stranded boatmen change their notion of nature as entirely hostile force. We, the reader, gain an insight of the story through the first sentence: “None of them knew the color of the sky” (I: 1). It implies the overall relationship between the individual and nature. It also implies the limitations of anyone’s perspective about nature. The only green, indicating hope, is that of the land that is unreachable to the men. The horizon appears and hides behind the waves like their uncertain fate. Sometimes the waves are “most wrongfully and barbarously abrupt and tall” (I: 8).

Sometimes the waves are “more gentle than the others” (II: 64-5). On one hand, the boatmen view nature as cruel filled with indifference, unpredictability due to the traumatic incident experienced at sea. On the other hand, they perceive her as kind, helpful for survival because they experience favourable winds and calm night. Likewise, human beings also fall somewhere in the grey area in between two polar opposites. They get furious with their trepidation when nobody responds to their waving. At the same time, they get hopeful about their survival when they see men on the shore.

The sea becomes more menacing in the subsequent paragraphs. They do not find affinity with it as they find the sea as a battleground on which they will die. And their trial seems limitless. Moreover, at night the correspondent sees a shark which symbolizes the threat of nature and the helplessness of the boatmen.

It is at sea, with no help, that they face their ultimate challenge. The oiler symbolizes the indomitable will of the human spirit. The cook is unfit and the captain is unable to row due to his injury. Hence the oiler and the correspondent row alternately despite the fact that rowing " . . . is not an amusement; it is a diabolical punishment . . ." (III: 46). They have to row for collective survival because they have realized that each individual depends solely on the other.

The boatmen listen to the waves or simply look out at the horizon, the sounds of the waves, and physical manifestations permeate the story. As men cannot understand the language of nature, they are separate from her. So it is not easy to understand the laws of nature and the differences in natural things and processes. It is pictured as empowering men as they are feeling helpless in her lap and are sure about getting drowned as keeping the lifeboat afloat amidst the massive waves very difficult to them. In this story, nature is more of a character like Egdon Heath of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) where nature plays upon all the characters, moulding their lives by its pervasive influence. This nature is also ugly as well as beautiful, bright as well as dark.

In J. M. Synge's well-known tragedy *Riders to the Sea*, the sea also plays a great role throughout the work as a background, as a living character, as a force of nature, as an agent of destiny. Like the sea of "The Open Boat" it is also dark, mysterious, and powerful. That is why the characters do not know its moods. It has been presented as both kind and cruel. It is kind as it provides livelihood to the inhabitants of the island. The men fish and the women collect sea weeds as fuel from it. The same sea also causes their tragedies by taking their lives and the people struggle for survival and submit hopelessly to the uncontrolled natural force, the sea. Thus it is also a giver and taker of life.

In "The Open Boat" there are two settings: first is the ocean, and the second is land. The ocean symbolizes wilderness, paradoxicality by showing bright and gloomy sky, high and low waves and the shore is an epitome of calm. Nature is an object of profound mystery and is enriched with many symbols. Crane's short story highlights nature's paradoxical nature through ocean. Nature is the protagonist which shows its heroism and has a direct impact on individual. At one point of time the distressed men on the boat are deeply plagued by doubts and are left adrift at sea without anyone to comfort them during their bouts of fear. The correspondent loses hope and thinks it is ". . . really the intention of the seven mad gods to drown him" (VI: 5). When he realizes that fate will not answer to his pleas, he gets disappointed and recollects a poem about a soldier who lies dying in Algiers. In his childhood these verses were less to him than the breaking of a pencil's point"(VI:36-7). Now the correspondent feels kinship with the dying soldier and fears that he too will perish without a connection to whatever gives him his sense of

self. He decides that there is no higher purpose to surviving other than prolonging a life that is meaningless. All formulate their own opinions about nature and are disappointed when nobody responds to them. Even the best rower, the oiler cannot save them.

Facing the cruel nature, the men on the small boat find solace in human solidarity—a sentiment directly in contrast to men’s feelings towards nature. They know that the only way to endure the force of nature is through their comradeship. The captain tries to calm them and “It (is) difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas” (III: 1-2) and it gives them comfort as well as strength to go on together. Nature is a silent witness to their predicament. The boatmen think rescue is impossibly distant although they try to get to land. The cook claims “There is a life station close by”(i:62) and when they see a lighthouse on the horizon, they row in that direction. But the sea is against them being intentionally cruel. As the trapped men are ready to accept death, the captain asks the men to send news of his death if he cannot reach and “. . . briefly exchanged some addresses . . .” (IV: 31).

When the captain fears drowning, he regrets the injustice of his fate, dying before he could “nibble at the sacred cheese of life”( IV:35) —as if he were a puny mouse, more of a pest than a noble creature. Tally also explains that “At sea, nature cannot be conquered or tamed, but must be treated with respect if man is to survive the encounter (2009, 72). Unfortunately the miserable men do not seek spiritual guidance.

The ceaseless waves suggesting the forces of nature and uncontrollability of life constantly threaten to destroy the boat and drown the men. In this situation, the correspondent happens to find four dry cigars and three dry matches in “the top pocket of his coat” (III: 77) miraculously. After a search somebody produces three dry matches and the boatmen celebrate this discovery by puffing at the big cigars and become optimistic. At the same time, they find some wet cigars which symbolize their physical and spiritual weakness by the heavy forces of nature. They also curse a lot as they cannot think positively. They also start thinking all kinds of negative things about the people on shore who do not come forward to their rescue; rather “The man waving a coat blended gradually into this gloom, and it swallowed in the same manner the omnibus and the group of people” (IV: 268). The appearance of the resort people reminds that, despite the fate-changing turn that has overtaken the men in the lifeboat, life beyond the boat goes on, same as it ever was. As they think the seven mad gods want to drown them, the captain finally says : “ If no help is coming, we might better try a run through the surf right away”(VII:9-10).

The correspondent thinks about the indifference of the universe to human kind as the oiler keeps on rowing. Suddenly, some cruel waves interrupt his thoughts and crash over the boat, spilling the men out into the water. When the correspondent is trapped, he is able to swim when a “. . . large wind eventually caught him and flung him with ease.”(VII: 105). He cursed the gods several times, the gods who rule the sea, because he did not know the plan of nature. He also hated deeply “ the fact that there are no bricks and no temples”(VI: 11-2). The same waves did not send the strongest oiler to the shore. Thus nature proves that “men’s will power do not control their destinies” (Greenfield, 1958: 562).

Although the violent sea posed danger, the boat remained intact. When they reach the shore it becomes "... instantly populated with blankets, and flasks and women with coffee pots and all the remedies sacred to their minds" (VII: 141-43). They also carry the oiler's body onto the beach and the sea surrounds them. This way nature proves her frightening as well as safe to them though she was figured as limitless and cruel. The injured captain also "... (succumbed) to the icy January waters"(Billingslea, 1994: 23).

Nature shows its cruelty for the last time when the oiler meets death. As nature ultimately determines the destiny of human characters, all the shipwrecked have been saved except the oiler who tried his hardest to keep the boatmen together and bring them to safety. Suddenly all see "In the shallows, face downward lay the oiler" (VII: 136). The boatmen discover that, somehow, the oiler, the strongest man and best swimmer, has been drowned by a huge wave for whom "... the little boat made good way with her new rig." (III: 92). Thus, nature proves herself a punisher by killing the oiler and a benefactor by saving the rest of the boatmen. Nature also shows that it does not act out of any motivation that can be understood in human terms.

Nature always hides its true nature under a veil. That is why sufferings and blessings are unpredictable. When fate forced the distraught boatmen to share a dinghy, they felt lost in their interactions with the sea and showed collective anger at the malicious waves. As they have limited vision, they saw the sea only as an entity that destroys all life forgetting the truth that it also gives life.

Although nature acts as a disturbing reminder that death is always at hand, the other boatmen are not bowed by the weight of the oiler's demise because they have overcome their fear of death. They have also realized that they had no control over the oiler's death. They have passed through the tumultuous journey and return to normal life, wiser for the experience, from the world of the unknown, to the world of the known. They have also learned how to get through difficult times.

In the end they recognize the helpful aspect of nature after fighting the timeless battle of man versus nature. At the beginning of their peril, their hopes evaporated due to their loneliness in this vast universe. At the end, the rescue makes them understand that they are not alone. Like a mother, nature embraced the distressed men to her lap and established equilibrium between men and nature. We also learn that nature is the most powerful element in the world-it cannot be controlled and cannot be predicted but we have to struggle as the boatmen did.

This paradoxicality of nature has existed and will always exist. The stranded men feared the crashing waves that threatened to sink their dinghy. Now that they have experienced life they feel they could be interpreters of nature because they do not know that she is beyond their grasp and is a mystic wonderland which performs magic to overwhelm people all the time.

**Notes:** All quotes of "The Open Boat" are in the book Kennedy, X. J, *Literature: an Introduction to Fiction*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1995.

**Works Cited**

- Billingslea, O., ‘ Why does the Oiler Drown? Perception and Cosmic Chill in “The Open Boat”’, *American Literary Realism*, Vol: 27, No.1, Fall, 1994.
- Greenfield, Stanley B., “The Unmistakable Stephen Crane”, *PMLA*, Vol.73, No. 5, Part I, December 1958.
- Hilfer, Anthony. ‘Nature as Protagonist in “The Open Boat”’. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 54, No. 2, Summer 2012.
- Kent, Thomas, *Interpretation and Genre: The Role of Generic Perception in the Study of Narrative Texts*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1986.
- Shulman, Robert. “Community, Perception and the Development of Stephen Crane”, *American Literature*, Vol : 50, No. 3(Nov.1978).
- Tally, Robert T Jr. *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque Writer* London: Continuum. 2009 print.