

= The Open Boat =

" The Open Boat " is a short story by American author Stephen Crane (1871 ? 1900) . First published in 1897 , it was based on Crane 's experience of surviving a shipwreck off the coast of Florida earlier that year while traveling to Cuba to work as a newspaper correspondent . Crane was stranded at sea for thirty hours when his ship , the SS Commodore , sank after hitting a sandbar . He and three other men were forced to navigate their way to shore in a small boat ; one of the men , an oiler named Billie Higgins , drowned after the boat overturned . Crane 's personal account of the shipwreck and the men 's survival , titled " Stephen Crane 's Own Story " , was first published a few days after his rescue .

Crane subsequently adapted his report into narrative form , and the resulting short story " The Open Boat " was published in Scribner 's Magazine . The story is told from the point of view of an anonymous correspondent , with Crane as the implied author , the action closely resembles the author 's experiences after the shipwreck . A volume titled The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure was published in the United States in 1898 ; an edition entitled The Open Boat and Other Stories was published simultaneously in England . Praised for its innovation by contemporary critics , the story is considered an exemplary work of literary Naturalism , and is one of the most frequently discussed works in Crane 's canon . It is notable for its use of imagery , irony , symbolism , and the exploration of such themes as survival , solidarity , and the conflict between man and nature . H. G. Wells considered " The Open Boat " to be " beyond all question , the crown of all [Crane 's] work " .

= = Background = =

Hired by the Bachelier newspaper syndicate to serve as a war correspondent during the Cuban insurrection against Spain , the 25 @-@ year @-@ old Stephen Crane boarded the filibustering steamship SS Commodore on New Year 's Eve , 1896 . The ship sailed from Jacksonville , Florida , with 27 or 28 men and a cargo of supplies and ammunition for the Cuban rebels . On the St. Johns River , less than 2 miles (3 km) from Jacksonville , Commodore struck a sandbar in a dense fog and damaged its hull . Although towed off the sandbar the following day , it was again beached in Mayport , Florida , and further damaged . A leak began in the boiler room that evening , and as a result of malfunctioning water pumps , the ship came to a standstill about 16 miles (26 km) from Mosquito Inlet (now called Ponce de León Inlet) . As the ship took on more water , Crane described the engine room as resembling " a scene at this time taken from the middle kitchen of Hades . "

Commodore 's lifeboats were lowered in the early hours of the morning on January 2 , 1897 , and the ship sank at 7 a.m. Crane was one of the last to leave the ship in a 10 @-@ foot (3 @. @ 0 m) dinghy . He and three other men (including the captain , Edward Murphy) floundered off the coast of Florida for a day and a half before attempting to land their craft at Daytona Beach . The small boat , however , overturned in the surf , forcing the exhausted men to swim to shore ; one of them , an oiler named Billie Higgins , died . The disaster was front @-@ page news in newspapers across the country ; rumors that the ship had been sabotaged were widely circulated but never substantiated .

Crane was reunited with his partner , Cora , several days after the ordeal , and quickly wrote his initial report of the sinking while waiting in Jacksonville for another ship . Desperate for work , he soon left for New York to secure a job covering the impending Greco @-@ Turkish War . Crane completed the story that would become " The Open Boat " a few weeks later , in mid @-@ February . According to fellow correspondent Ralph D. Paine , Crane had the opportunity to show the first draft of the short story to Murphy when Crane again passed through Jacksonville . When Crane asked his opinion , Murphy allegedly replied , " You 've got it , Steve ... That is just how it happened , and how we felt . Read me some more of it " .

= = Publication history = =

Crane 's report of the incident appeared on the front page of the New York Press on January 7 , 1897 , only three days after his rescue , and was quickly reprinted in various other papers . The account , titled " Stephen Crane 's Own Story " , concentrates mainly on the sinking of the Commodore , and the ensuing chaos . Crane dedicates just two paragraphs to the fate of his compatriots and himself on the dinghy , while detailing their inability to save those stranded on the sinking ship :

The cook let go of the line . We rowed around to see if we could not get a line from the chief engineer , and all this time , mind you , there were no shrieks , no groans , but silence , silence and silence , and then the Commodore sank . She lurched to windward , then swung afar back , righted and dove into the sea , and the rafts were suddenly swallowed by this frightful maw of the ocean . And then by the men on the ten @-@ foot dingy were words said that were still not words ? something far beyond words .

The report caused a sensation and spurred the author to write a narrative version of the events . The short story first appeared in the June 1897 issue of Scribner 's Magazine . A second and lesser story , " Flanagan and His Short Filibustering Adventure " , based upon the same shipwreck but told from the point of view of the captain , was published in McClure 's Magazine in October 1897 . " The Open Boat " was published in the United States by Doubleday & McClure in April 1898 as part of the book *The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure* , which included additional works by Crane such as " The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky " , " Death and the Child " , and " The Wise Men " . The English volume , published simultaneously with the American one , was titled *The Open Boat and Other Stories* and published by William Heinemann . Both editions included the subtitle " A Tale Intended to Be after the Fact . Being the Experience of Four Men from the Sunk Steamer ' Commodore ' " , and were dedicated " To the late William Higgins and to Captain Edward Murphy and Steward C. B. Montgomery of the Sunk Steamer Commodore " .

= = Plot summary = =

None of them knew the color of the sky . Their eyes glanced level , and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them . These waves were of the hue of slate , save for the tops , which were of foaming white , and all of the men knew the colors of the sea . The horizon narrowed and widened , and dipped and rose , and at all times its edge was jagged with waves that seemed thrust up in points like rocks .

" The Open Boat " is divided into seven sections , each told mainly from the point of view of the correspondent , based upon Crane himself . The first part introduces the four characters ? the correspondent , a condescending observer detached from the rest of the group ; the captain , who is injured and morose at having lost his ship , yet capable of leadership ; the cook , fat and comical , but optimistic that they will be rescued ; and the oiler , Billie , who is physically the strongest , and the only one in the story referred to by name . The four are survivors of a shipwreck , which occurred before the beginning of the story , and are drifting at sea in a small dinghy .

In the following four sections , the moods of the men fluctuate from anger at their desperate situation , to a growing empathy for one another and the sudden realization that nature is indifferent to their fates . The men become fatigued and bicker with one another ; nevertheless , the oiler and the correspondent take turns rowing toward shore , while the cook bails water to keep the boat afloat . When they see a lighthouse on the horizon , their hope is tempered with the realization of the danger of trying to reach it . Their hopes dwindle further when , after seeing a man waving from shore , and what may or may not be another boat , they fail to make contact . The correspondent and the oiler continue to take turns rowing , while the others sleep fitfully during the night . The correspondent then notices a shark swimming near the boat , but he does not seem to be bothered by it as one would expect . In the penultimate chapter , the correspondent wearily recalls a verse from the poem " Bingen on the Rhine " by Caroline Norton , in which a " soldier of the Legion " dies far from home .

The final chapter begins with the men 's resolution to abandon the floundering dinghy they have

occupied for thirty hours and to swim ashore . As they begin the long swim to the beach , Billie the oiler , the strongest of the four , swims ahead of the others ; the captain advances towards the shore while still holding onto the boat , and the cook uses a surviving oar . The correspondent is trapped by a local current , but is eventually able to swim on . After three of the men safely reach the shore and are met by a group of rescuers , they find Billie dead , his body washed up on the beach .

= = Style and genre = =

Although autobiographical in nature , " The Open Boat " is a work of fiction ; it is often considered a principal example of Naturalism , an offshoot of the Realist literary movement , in which scientific principles of objectivity and detachment are applied to the study of human characteristics . While a majority of critics agree that the story acts as a paradigm of the human situation , they disagree as to its precise nature . Some believe the story affirms man 's place in the world by concentrating on the characters ' isolation , while others ? including those who call " The Open Boat " ideologically Symbolist ? insist that the story questions man 's place in the universe through metaphorical or indirect means .

Like other major works by Stephen Crane , " The Open Boat " contains numerous examples of symbolism , imagery and metaphor . Vibrant descriptions of color , combined with simple , clear writing , are also apparent throughout , and humor in the form of irony serves in stark opposition to the dreary setting and desperate characters . Editor Vincent Starrett stated in his introduction to the 1921 collection of Crane 's work entitled Men , Women and Boats that the author keeps " down the tone where another writer might have attempted ' fine writing ' and have been lost . " Other critics have noted similarities between the story and shipwreck @-@ related articles Crane wrote while working as a reporter for the New York Tribune earlier in his career . Articles such as " The Wreck of the New Era " , which describes a group of castaways drowning in sight of a helpless crowd , and " Ghosts on the Jersey Coast " contain stark imagery that strongly prefigures that of " The Open Boat " .

= = Major themes = =

= = = Man vs. nature = = =

Similar to other Naturalist works , " The Open Boat " scrutinizes the position of man , who has been isolated not only from society , but also from God and nature . The struggle between man and the natural world is the most apparent theme in the work , and while the characters at first believe the turbulent sea to be a hostile force set against them , they come to believe that nature is instead ambivalent . At the beginning of the last section , the correspondent rethinks his view of nature 's hostility : " the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual ? nature in the wind , and nature in the vision of men . She did not seem cruel to him , nor beneficent , nor treacherous , nor wise . But she was indifferent , flatly indifferent . " The correspondent regularly refers to the sea with feminine pronouns , pitting the four men in the boat against an intangible , yet effeminate , threat ; critic Leedice Kissane further pointed to the story 's seeming denigration of women , noting the castaways ' personification of Fate as " an old ninny @-@ woman " and " an old hen " . That nature is ultimately disinterested is an idea that appears in other works by Crane ; a poem from Crane 's 1899 collection War is Kind and Other Lines also echoes Crane 's common theme of universal indifference :

A man said to the universe :

" Sir , I exist ! "

" However , " replied the universe ,

" The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation . "

The metaphysical conflicts born from man 's isolation are also important themes throughout the

story , as the characters cannot rely on a higher cause or being for protection . The correspondent laments the lack of religious support , as well as his inability to blame God for his misfortunes , musing : " When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important , and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him , he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple , and he hates deeply that there are no bricks and no temples . " Man 's perception of himself and the world around him are also constantly questioned ; the correspondent regularly refers to the way things " seemed " or " appeared " , leaving how a thing actually " was " entirely ambiguous . Wolford similarly pointed to the importance of the story 's strong yet problematic opening line ? " None of them knew the color of the sky " ? as one that sets the scene for the story 's sense of unease and uncertainty .

= = = Survival and solidarity = = =

Chester Wolford noted in his critical analysis of Crane 's short fiction that although one of the author 's most familiar themes deals with a character 's seeming insignificance in an indifferent universe , the correspondent 's experience in " The Open Boat " is perhaps more personal than what was described in earlier stories because of Crane 's obvious connection to the story . Sergio Perosa similarly described how Crane " transfigures an actual occurrence into existential drama , and confers universal meaning and poetic value on the simple retelling of man 's struggle for survival " .

Facing an ultimately detached nature , the characters find solace in human solidarity . They are often referred to collectively as " the men " , rather than singularly by their professions , creating a silent understanding between them of their togetherness . The first few sentences of section three attest to this connection : " It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas . No one said that it was so . No one mentioned it . But it dwelt in the boat , and each man felt it warm him . They were a captain , an oiler , a cook , and a correspondent , and they were friends , friends in a more curiously iron @-@ bound degree than may be common . " Survival is also an important thematic element in itself , as it is contingent upon the men to battle the elements in order to save themselves . The correspondent 's desire to survive is evident in his refrain of the lyrical line : " 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 ? " By repeating himself , the correspondent expresses himself ritualistically , and yet he remains existentially adrift .

= = = Sympathy = = =

In his 1990 book *Sea @-@ Brothers : The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby @-@ Dick to the Present* , author Bert Bender noted Crane 's sympathetic portrayal of the oiler Billie , the most physically able of the four characters , and yet the only one to perish . The correspondent even notes with wonder Billie 's exceptional ability to row despite having worked a double shift before the ship sank . Bender wrote that Crane " emphasizes that Billie 's steady , simple labor is the tangible basis for his role here as a savior , " and that the oiler 's portrayal as a " simple , working seaman , clearly expresses his sympathy with the democratic ideal of the sailor before the mast that figures so crucially in the tradition of American sea fiction . " That Billie does not survive the ordeal , however , can be seen as an antithesis to Darwinism in that the only person to not survive was in fact the strongest physically .

" The Open Boat " directly references Lady Caroline Norton 's 1883 poem " Bingen on the Rhine " , which focuses on the death of a French Foreign Legionnaire , far from home , while grasping the hand of a comrade . Recalling the poem , the correspondent sees how the soldier 's dire circumstances mirror his own , leading him to feel sorry for the anonymous poetic figure ; noting the similarities between the dying soldier and the shipwrecked correspondent , critics such as Edward Stone and Max Westbrook believe this realization causes the correspondent to discover the necessity for human sympathy in an uncaring world . While the literary reference may be considered ironic , unsympathetic , and only of minor interest , Stone for one argued that this poem may also

have served as a source for *The Red Badge of Courage* , which also explores man 's relationship with the metaphysical .

= = Reception and legacy = =

" *The Open Boat* " is one of the most frequently discussed works in Crane 's canon , and is regularly anthologized . Wilson Follett included the story in the twelfth volume of his 1927 collection of Crane 's work , and it also appeared in Robert Stallman 's 1952 volume *Stephen Crane : An Omnibus* . The story and its subsequent eponymous collections received high acclaim from contemporary critics and authors . Praising the merit of the story and his friend 's literary importance , journalist Harold Frederic wrote in his review for *The New York Times* that " even if he had written nothing else , [" *The Open Boat* " would] have placed [Crane] where he now undoubtedly stands . " English poet Robert Bridges likewise praised the story in his review for *Life* , stating that Crane " has indelibly fixed the experience on your mind , and that is the test of a literary artisan " . American Newspaperman and author Harry Esty Dounce praised the story as chief among Crane 's work , despite its seemingly simple plot , writing for the *New York Evening Sun* that " those who have read ' *The Open Boat* ' will forget every technical feat of construction before they forget the long , heartbreaking mockery of the day , with land so near , the bailing , the egg @-@ shell changes of seats , the terrible , steady cheerfulness and brotherhood of the queer little human group " .

After Crane 's premature death from tuberculosis at the age of 28 , his work enjoyed a resurgence of popularity . Author and critic Elbert Hubbard wrote in Crane 's obituary in the *Philistine* that " *The Open Boat* " was " the sternest , creepiest bit of realism ever penned " . Also noting the depressing Realism utilized in the story , editor Vincent Starrett stated : " It is a desolate picture , and the tale is one of our greatest short stories . " Another of the author 's friends , H. G. Wells , wrote that " *The Open Boat* " was " beyond all question , the crown of all [Crane 's] work . " Singling out Crane 's usage of color and chiaroscuro in his writing , Wells continued : " It has all the stark power of the earlier stories , with a new element of restraint ; the color is as full and strong as ever , fuller and stronger , indeed ; but those chromatic splashes that at times deafen and confuse in *The Red Badge* , those images that astonish rather than enlighten , are disciplined and controlled . " The story remains popular with critics ; Thomas Kent referred to " *The Open Boat* " as Crane 's " magnum opus " , while Crane biographer Stanley Wertheim called it " Crane 's finest short story and one of the masterworks of late nineteenth @-@ century American literature " .