

MB, ENGL 3620

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### **“The Open Boat”: Fact and Fiction**

After reading Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat”, I wondered how much the facts of Crane’s experience of spending thirty hours at sea in a ten foot boat after the *Commodore* sank influenced his writing of “The Open Boat” and how much of the short story was fiction. In my research I found, unsurprisingly, that the distinction between real life events and fictional narrative in “The Open Boat” is really blurred. This liquid relationship between fact and fiction in “The Open Boat” leads us to examine the relationship that literary fiction as a whole has with fact, truth, and “real life”. It also invites us to look at the purpose and usefulness of fiction and literature in general, as well as the value that the act of writing holds for a writer. And finally for me, as a fiction writer, it invites me to consider the relationship between the events in my life and the content of my writing.

At this point I want to acknowledge two important things: First, that you cannot know the mind of an author from their writing. Any speculation I have to make about what Crane’s writing meant to him or his purposes in writing is just that—speculation. Second, I want to note that, paradoxically, you both cannot separate a writer’s life from their writing and you cannot distill the complexity of a writer’s life from their writing. As a writer and as a human, I appreciate this. In spite of this, examining the relationship between writers and their writing is a valuable endeavor, and in any case it is interesting.

To better understand the relationship between Stephen Crane’s real life experience and his short story as well as how that can impact the interpretation of “The Open Boat”, I’d like to

look closely at the text using William K Spofford's article "Stephen Crane's 'The Open Boat': Fact or Fiction?". Spofford's article does a wonderful job of combing through Crane's earlier prose and poetry to find similarities between the literary devices he used in works pre-dating his shipwreck experience and the short story, identifying similar phraseology, themes, and motifs utilized in "The Open Boat" as in poetry and stories like *The Red Badge of Courage* and "The Reluctant Voyagers". Some examples that he shares include Crane's deliberation on the relationship between man and indifferent nature or fate, brotherly comradery and affection, and descriptions of the sky during a cold night and the colors of the dawn on the sea.

A recurring theme in "The Open Boat", and throughout Crane's writing, is the perception of nature (or the universe or fate) being indifferent to man. As an example of this theme cropping up in work predating "The Open Boat", Spofford quotes a poem published by Crane in 1899. "A man said to the universe:/ 'Sir, I exist!'/ 'However,' replied the universe,/ 'The fact has not created in me/ A sense of obligation.'" Spofford compares this verse to the moment in "The Open Boat" when the correspondent realizes that "nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him". Other moments that reflect the indifference of nature include the symbolism of the windmill which, to the correspondent, represents "the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual...[nature] did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent." In his essay, Spofford identifies a handful of other works that pre-date "The Open Boat" and Crane's experience being shipwrecked that also show this theme of men struggling against indifferent nature, including lines of poetry, the sketch "The Black Dog", and "Coney Island's Failing Days". He then compares the correspondent's angry response of wanting to "throw bricks at the temple" and how he "hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no

temples” to a scene in *The Red Badge of Courage* when Henry stands beside Jim Conkline’s body and shakes his fist, starts to rage against nature but, as Spofford says, “realize[s] that such an oration would make no impression and save[s] his breath with a curt ‘Hell--’”.

Another theme that Spofford identifies as being prevalent in Crane’s work is this idea of brotherly comradery. He identifies the presence of this theme in “The Open Boat” as a sort of “reworking” of the same theme as he had explored in earlier works, especially *The Red Badge of Courage*. He explains how, in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Henry Fleming encounters a dead soldier that he does not know, then a procession of wounded soldiers, and then he mourns over the death of his friend, Jim Conklin. In “The Open Boat”, the correspondent’s relationship with brotherhood is reversed, where he begins the story feeling sympathy with and affection towards his comrades, and then his perspective broadens and becomes universal through his experience, piqued at the moment that he recalls the poem he was forced to memorize as a child. The poem is about the death of the soldier and had not meant much of anything to the correspondent before, but in the open boat becomes more real and personal to the correspondent. “He was sorry for the soldier of the Legion who lay dying in Algiers.” Spofford argues that he was prepared for this moment of understanding by his comradery with the others in the open boat as the brotherhood he feels for them naturally extends to a feeling of universal brotherhood, a development in the story that Spofford argues is a “rearrangement of earlier materials” that Crane had used before.

Throughout his discussion of the recurring themes in Crane’s work, Spofford also draws attention to repeated descriptions and images, especially images that Crane used in poems published before his trip on the ill-fated *Commodore*. Some of these recurring images include a red sun stuck in the sky similar to the red wafer of a sun in *The Red Badge of Courage*, a single and cold star in the night sky, white moonlight on water, and even specific colors like carmine,

gold, green and blue together to describe sea water, or, in the case of “The Pace of Youth”, light on lake water. Spofford argues that these recurring images in Crane’s work may suggest that they were not images Crane and his ship-mates actually saw and experienced during their thirty hours in a dinghy on the open sea, but instead that they were images Crane had deliberated often before the experience.

This multitude of examples Spofford provides of Crane reusing phrases, themes, and ideas illustrates how the themes that the story explores may have been on Crane’s mind long before the shipwreck. Spofford also suggests that the shipwreck gave Crane this vehicle to bring these ideas together with descriptions and motifs he had already tried his hand at using. He invites the consideration of whether those tried descriptions were real to his experience, or if they were a product of his habits as a writer, and I think that is a very interesting question. Although there is not really a way for us to ever know for sure how much of the account is style and how much is factual, for myself, I am curious if the descriptions and themes in “The Open Boat” could not be both true to Crane’s experience *and* a product of his writerly arsenal.

In an essay titled “Style and Meaning in Stephen Crane: The Open Boat” by James B. Colvert, Colvert says, “What [Crane] saw in real life is rendered not as history, but as history transmuted by the resources of his imagination. These resources were the images, themes, motifs, and descriptive patterns he worked out...very early in his literary career...he observed the world from a pre-established literary point of view, a view which largely determined what was seen and what the observed event signified.” Colvert seems to be saying, in effect, that “The Open Boat” may not be literally historically accurate in its every detail and fact, but it is a true account of Crane’s experience delivered by the resources he had been long developing as a writer. Spofford suggests that Crane’s earlier writings had an influence on how he chose to

depict his experience; Colvert seems to be saying that Crane's earlier literary work not only influenced how he depicted his experience, but also how he experienced it.

I believe this is where much of the value of fiction in writing and literature comes from: writing and reading both have potential to shape the way we see and experience the world, and good writing and reading can help us to see and experience the world well. I am reminded of the E.M. Forster quote shared recently in class, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" When it comes to understanding our own experiences better, writing and writing fiction are valuable tools that allow us to really know what we think as we see what we say. Dr Sian Griffiths said to me last semester: "Fiction can get better at the truth than real life can." As a fiction writer, this is on my mind often. I cannot speak for Crane, but I know that if I had experienced a shipwreck, exploring my experience through a fictional narrative would be helpful for me in better understanding my own experience in a way that, although fictional, would still be true.

In a video about what it means to be an artist or a creator, author John Green said, "The ideas don't come from having an extraordinary kind of life; they come from paying an extraordinary kind of attention to life." I loved reading Stephen Crane's short story and imagining this piece of short fiction as being, in some ways, the closest to the truth that Crane could get as a writer. Getting close to this truth becomes important when it can have an impact not only on those who read what we write, but on us, the writers. I think the fact that so many of the themes and motifs that Crane wrote about in fiction and poetry came up in a fictional narrative meant to capture a real-life experience could potentially show the way that his writing practice was impacting not only his writing style but also the way that he experienced the world.

As we pay extraordinary attention to our thoughts by saying them--or by writing them--we gain opportunities to see better and be better.

I wish for Crane's sake that he had not experienced the trauma of a shipwreck, but because he did, I am glad that he was such a talented and thoughtful writer whose practice and extraordinary attention equipped him to write "The Open Boat", a short story which we may not be able to verify as being completely historically accurate, but I still trust to be, in many ways, true.

#### Works Cited

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