

# The Non-naturalistic Elements in "The Open Boat"

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**Abstract**—Stephen Crane is one of the most significant writers in American literature who is always related to Naturalism. "The Open Boat" is universally acknowledged as his well-known short story which belongs to the literary Naturalism. Many scholars find the Naturalism elements in the story to illustrate its Naturalism theme, especially when explaining the death of the oiler. However, from the author's point of view, "The Open Boat" does not only reflect the ubiquitous Naturalism ideological trend which considers that Nature is superior to the human during the late nineteenth century, but also shows some conventional perspectives or views through the use of non-naturalistic elements by Crane, especially by the elaboration of the four men on the boat and the presentation of the death of the oiler. It is concluded that naturalistic tendency plays a minor role instead of mainstream in Crane's creation in "The Open Boat".

**Keywords**—Stephen Crane; "The Open Boat"; Naturalism; non-naturalistic elements

## I. INTRODUCTION

Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (1897)<sup>1</sup>, like Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War (1895), reveals Crane's characteristic subject matter — the physical, emotional, and intellectual responses of people under extreme pressure, the dominant themes of nature's indifference to human's fate, and the consequent need for compassionate collective action. Along with Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893), "The Open Boat" locates Crane within American literary naturalism alongside its other practitioners, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser. [1]<sup>2</sup>

Most scholars hold the opinion that the story only expresses a classical intrinsic meaning of Naturalism, which consider the nature as the dominance that cannot be changed by human beings. However, these kinds of analysis only see the surface of the story. A book cannot be analyzed or estimated only by the already-affirmed standpoints based on the previous researches, but should also by the creation background of the specific books, whatever they were written by the same writer. Of course, the text analysis based on close reading is also important to help the readers to understand the story. As Shen Dan says, "It won't be enough

for us to be satisfied with understanding only its contents and social meaning, what we should do more is to learn to analyze what narration skill and language methods the writer uses to express the contents of a story." [2]<sup>3</sup> Thus, this paper tries to give readers a new kind of interpretation of "The Open Boat" by means of the analysis of the language as well as its contents and social meaning.

## II. THE CREATION BACKGROUND

Creation background is the basis of reading and understanding of a book. "The Open Boat" was created in a special period. Stephen Crane was born in Newark, New Jersey, on 1st November 1871. His early years were spent in the cities of Newark, Bloomington, and Paterson, New Jersey. In 1896, an agreement with the McClure syndicate to supply it with war stories sent Crane south to Florida, hoping to reach Cuba, where rebels had begun their struggle for independence from Spain. Crane sailed as a correspondent on the steamer Commodore, which, on January 1, 1897, left Jacksonville, Florida, with munitions for the Cuban insurrectionists. Early on the morning of January 2, the steamer sank. With three others, Crane reached Daytona Beach in a ten-foot dinghy on the following morning. The ordeal of sea becomes the source of "The Open Boat". [3]<sup>4</sup>

Crane is often associated with a phase of late nineteenth-century thought known to literary historians as "naturalism." The literary "naturalist" is skeptical, and often contemptuous, of religion; he tends to account for human origins, human conduct, and human destiny in terms rather more in harmony with Darwin and Nietzsche than with the New Testament. Also important in "naturalist" writing is a loss of belief in individual autonomy. True "individuality," and real freedom of will, are rare commodities in thoroughgoing naturalist fiction. In that case, naturalism is incompatible with

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<sup>1</sup> Under the title "Stephen Crane's Own Story," The New York Press on January 7 carried the details of his nearly fatal experience. In June 1897, he published his fiction "The Open Boat" in Scribner's Magazine. The story gave the title to "The Open Boat" and Other Tales of Adventure.

<sup>2</sup> "The Open Boat" locates Crane within American literary naturalism alongside its other practitioners, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser. [1]

"humanism" — or, in any case, with the belief that humanity somehow stands at the center of the world, if not of the cosmos; or with the belief that readers are somehow the chief concern, and ultimate product, of the universe. For the naturalist, "man" is not by any means the measure of all things.

However, "The Open Boat" is not a production only of the Naturalism thought, there is clear reasons and creation motivation. As Crane once said in his sketches: "I know nothing about war, of course, and pretend nothing, but I have been enabled from time to time to see brush fighting, and I want to say here plainly that the behavior of these Rough Riders while marching through the woods shook me with terror as I have never before been shaken."<sup>5</sup> Readers can easily see Crane's fear, tension and nervousity caused by the war. Since one's experience could give influence on his or her subsequent creation, then readers can reasonably speculate that Crane wrote "The Open Boat" after the influence of the previous wars. That's why the author thinks that "The Open Boat" is not a naturalism literary work, but a story which was wrote by the writer after a series of great influences by his previous experiences (especially the experiences in several wars).

Certainly, readers can't speculate the creation motivation only by the analysis of the writer's personal experiences. What readers need to do is to find more details in the specific literary work written by the writer to illustrate their opinions. The followings are the author's attempt to analyze the non-naturalistic elements in "The Open Boat".

### III. THE PARADOX BETWEEN FAITH AND DESPAIR

In "The Open Boat", Crane gives readers so many times of strong paradox between faith and despair. Readers can find that hope and despair interweave. As soon as the four people see the light of hope, they face hopelessness subsequently. For example:

A singular disadvantage of the sea lies in the fact that after successfully surmounting on wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats.<sup>6</sup>

The captain... said that he had seen the lighthouse at Mosquito Inlet.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile the lighthouse had been growing slowly larger. It had now almost assumed color, and appeared like a little grey shadow on the sky.<sup>8</sup>

Slowly the land arose from the sea. ... Finally the captain said that he could make out a house on the shore.<sup>9</sup>

In an hour, perhaps, they would be ashore.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> From Stephen Crane's "Prose and Poetry." (1984)

<sup>6</sup> From part I, paragraph 10

<sup>7</sup> From part II, paragraph 11

<sup>8</sup> From part III, paragraph 3

<sup>9</sup> From part III, paragraph 10

A broad stretch of lowly coast lay before the eyes of the men.<sup>11</sup>

Tide, wind, and waves were swinging the dinghy northward.<sup>12</sup>

The light-heartedness of a former time had completely faded.<sup>13</sup>

...

Readers can find several rounds of combination of faith and despair. Almost as soon as the four people see the shore, the lighthouse, or the men on the bank, they find that it was only a vain. As everyone knows, the four refugees had already experienced a war before they are on the tiny dinghy, thus each time of despair would enhance their fear of facing death. Round and round of faith coming with despair would torture the four refugees. As Crane says "It is fair to say here that there was not a life-saving station within twenty miles in either direction; but the men did not know this fact, ..." The third-person perspective used by Crane here can reach a dramatic effect that readers know much more than the persons in the story, thus readers will be more anxious and fearful than the persons themselves in the story. What readers can feel in the unique paradox of faith and despair used by Crane is the strong dramatic irony of the contradiction between nature and human beings. When readers read this part, they can feel the four refugees' hope and despair personally on the scene.

The most dramatic and climactic part of the story was in the fourth part, begins with "Look! There's a man on the shore!" Since this sentence, readers cannot be sure that each sentence belongs to whom in the following conversations. Readers can easily feel the tension and the high density of the following conversations until the four people make sure that the men on the bank would not rescue them without any reason. The long conversations here fully show the strong desire for survival of the four people, and they hope to grasp the gleam of hope to go on living. However, what waits for them is still desperate future.

### IV. THE PARADOX BETWEEN NATURE AND HUMAN BEING

The objects in "The Open Boat" are not many. The gulls make a strong impression on readers besides the sea. Let's see how Crane describes the gulls.

Canton-flannel gulls flew near and far. Sometimes they sat down on the sea, near patches of brown seaweed that rolled over the waves with a movement like carpets on a line in a gale. The birds sat comfortably in groups, and they were envied by some in the dinghy, for the wrath of the sea was no more to them than it was to a covey of prairie chickens a thousand miles inland. Often they came very close and stared at the men with black bead-like eyes. At these times they

<sup>10</sup> From part III, paragraph 15

<sup>11</sup> From part IV, paragraph 3

<sup>12</sup> From part IV, paragraph 4

<sup>13</sup> From part IV, paragraph 8

were uncanny and sinister in their unblinking scrutiny, and the men hooted angrily at them, telling them to be gone. One came, and evidently decided to alight on the top of the captain's head. The bird flew parallel to the boat and did not circle, but made short sidelong jumps in the air in chicken-fashion. His black eyes were wistfully fixed upon the captain's head.<sup>14</sup>

...

The gulls went in slanting flight up the wind toward the grey, desolate east. A squall, marked by dingy clouds and clouds brick-red like smoke from a burning building, appeared from the south-east.<sup>15</sup>

Contrast with the constraint and awkwardness of the four people in the little boat, the overstriking words above show the freedom and comfort of the gulls. Although human beings consider themselves as omniscient and almighty, in fact, they are tiny and insignificant compared with the Nature. When facing those gulls, the oiler curses them as "ugly brute", while the cook and the correspondent swear them look as if they were "made with a jackknife". The captain wishes to "knock it away with the end of the heavy painter, but he did not dare do it, because "anything resembling an emphatic gesture would have capsized this freighted boat." In many researches, it expresses a classical intrinsic meaning of Naturalism, which considers the nature as the dominance that cannot be changed by human beings. However, from my point of view, the contrast between the freedom of gulls and the inability of the four men only expresses the desperate emotion of the men on the little dingy. Without the excellent contrast, readers can hardly feel the emotion of the men on the dingy, and the expression effect will be cut down.

## V. THE PARADOX BETWEEN PROBABILITY AND IMPROBABILITY

A most controversial issue in this book is the death of the oiler. Crane describes the scene as follows:

...But suddenly the man cried, "What's that?" He pointed a swift finger. The correspondent said, "Go."

In the shallows, face downward, lay the oiler. His forehead touched sand that was periodically, between each wave, clear of the sea...

Most papers focus this part because of the unreasonable plot that the oiler is the strongest man in the boat that it seems he would not die at all events. However, Crane creates a paradox here to present a probability of the oiler's death.

First, readers can find several sentences to illustrate the strongness and good rowing skills of the oiler, such as:

The shore was still afar. The oiler was a wily surfman. "Boys," he said swiftly, "she won't live three minutes more, and we're too far out to swim. Shall I take her to sea again, Captain?"

"Yes; go ahead!" said the captain.

<sup>14</sup> From part II, paragraph 10

<sup>15</sup> From part IV, paragraph 17

This oiler, by a series of quick miracles and fast and steady oarsmanship, turned the boat in the middle of the surf and took her safely to sea again.<sup>16</sup>

From these descriptions of the oiler, Crane tells readers that the oiler shows quick reflex of emergencies and has a superior rowing technique. That's why the oiler undertakes most of the rowing mission among the four people. Just because of this, the oiler would inevitably face death at last.

While the little boat gradually approaches the lighthouse, Crane presents readers a description based on the omniscient perspective:

He mentioned to the boat in general how the amusement of rowing struck him, and the weary-faced oiler smiled in full sympathy. Previously to the foundering, by the way, the oiler had worked a double watch in the engine-room of the ship.<sup>17</sup>

Crane uses the word such as "weary-faced", as well as the phrase "had worked a double watch" to depict the state of the oiler after a long-time work. Obviously, the painstaking is one of the reasons that the oiler dies at last because of the lack of physical strength.

When the four people feel despair after they see somebody on the bank without being rescued, the oiler piled the oars until his head drooped forward and the overpowering sleep blinded him; and he rowed yet afterward. Then he touched a man in the bottom of the boat, and called his name. "Will you spell me for a little while?" he said, meekly.<sup>18</sup>

...

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry, Billie," said the correspondent, contritely.

"That's all right, old boy," said the oiler, and lay down again and was asleep.<sup>19</sup>

Here, readers can strongly feel the helplessness of the exhausted oiler after rowing the boat round and round. What the oiler needs is sleep, however, the situation doesn't give him the chance to rest for a long time. Readers can almost see the destiny of the oiler.

Thus, the death of the oiler is not a consequence of the Naturalism which shows helpless by accident, but a probability underneath the superficial improbability.

## VI. CONCLUSION

"The Open Boat" does not only reflect the naturalism effect, but also shows some conventional perspectives or views through the use of non-naturalistic elements by Crane, especially by the elaboration of the four men on the boat and the presentation of the death of the oiler. It is concluded that

<sup>16</sup> From part IV, paragraph 13-15

<sup>17</sup> From part III, paragraph 8

<sup>18</sup> From part V, paragraph 6

<sup>19</sup> From part V, paragraph 16-17

naturalistic tendency plays a minor role instead of mainstream in Crane's creation in "The Open Boat".

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