

Close Reading and Study Questions: “The Open Boat” – Stephen Crane

Directions: On THIS SHEET of paper, respond to the following questions. Please hand-write your answers in blue or black ink. Answer each question completely. YOU MAY USE THE THIS COMPLETED SHEET WHEN YOU TAKE THE READING QUIZ.

Close Reading of the Story

1. Identify the protagonist and the antagonist of the story.
2. Note how color is used and how colors enhance the imagery and meaning of the story. List colors associated with nature and list colors associated with humanity (cite THREE specific passages).
3. The four men in the boat represent certain types of people. Note ONE passage which reveals the character of each man. Are any of these characters stereotypes? Explain.
4. “The Open Boat” is rich in metaphors and similes. Find THREE SIMILES and THREE METAPHORS in the story.
5. Crane frequently employs personification and anthropomorphism (the attribution of a human form, human characteristics, or human behavior to nonhuman things). Find at least THREE examples of either of these.
6. Discuss repetition within the story. Why are some words and lines repeated? Particularly consider, “If I am going to be drowned...”

7. Find TWO passages that represent or illustrate the insignificance of humanity or indifference of nature.
 8. Find TWO passages that represent the power of nature.
 9. The end of the story (who survives and who dies specifically) reveals irony. Explain the irony and how it relates to the Naturalist theme of the story.
 10. In the story, length/duration and redundancy play a narrative role in creating meaning. How do these elements reflect the situation the characters experience? (Hint: think of the undulation of waves)

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What is the effect of our being told early in the story that the men are not near a rescue station?
 2. Why does Crane deliberately place the dinghy's crew in sight of land in the story? What does the serenity of the scene on land emphasize about their situation and about humanity's relation to Nature?
 3. What does *The Open Boat* say about the behavior and perceptions of men in a crisis (men facing death)? Why are the men enraged at being near the shore?
 4. "The Open Boat" is rich in symbolism. Identify and interpret the following symbols in the story: the sea, the gull, the shark, the tower and the seaweed.
 5. What examples of understatement are present? How does understatement contribute to the general effect of the story?
 6. What elements of Naturalistic writing are evident in this story?
 7. *The Open Boat*, according to one critic, represents Crane's vision of "a universe essentially indifferent to man." Do you agree? Why?
 8. Compose a thesis statement focusing on the development of the Naturalist theme revealed in "The Open Boat." Remember a thesis statement is a **complete sentence** which offers insight into a truth about life or human behavior.

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Rhetorical Elements

DIRECTIONS: (A) Identify the literary/rhetorical elements in each section (B) For the sections highlighted in **BOLD**, briefly explain the significance and/or purpose of each element in relation to the story as a whole.

1. A seat in this boat was not unlike a seat upon a bucking bronco, and by the same token, a bronco is not much smaller. The craft pranced and reared, and plunged like an animal. As each wave came, and she rose for it, she seemed like a horse making at a fence outrageously high. The manner of her scramble over these walls of water is a mystic thing, and, moreover, at the top of them were ordinarily these problems in white water, the foam racing down from the summit of each wave, requiring a new leap, and a leap from the air. Then, after scornfully bumping a crest, she would slide, and race, and splash down a long incline, and arrive bobbing and nodding in front of the next menace.
2. As each slatey wall of water approached, it shut all else from the view of the men in the boat, and it was not difficult to imagine that this particular wave was the final outburst of the ocean, the last effort of the grim water.
- 3. There was a terrible grace in the move of the waves, and they came in silence, save for the snarling of the crests.**
4. The sun swung steadily up the sky, and they knew it was broad day because the color of the sea changed from slate to emerald-green, streaked with amber lights, and the foam was like tumbling snow.
5. The crest of each of these waves was a hill, from the top of which the men surveyed, for a moment, a broad tumultuous expanse, shining and wind-riven.
6. Canton flannel gulls flew near and far. Sometimes they sat down on the sea, near patches of brown seaweed that rolled on 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 dingey, 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.
- 7. In the meantime the oiler and the correspondent rowed. And also they rowed. They sat together in the same seat, and each rowed an oar. Then the oiler took both oars; then the correspondent took both oars; then the oiler; then the correspondent. They rowed and they rowed.**
8. The brown mats of seaweed that appeared from time to time were like islands, bits of earth.
9. Meanwhile the lighthouse had been growing slowly larger. It had now almost assumed color, and appeared like a little grey shadow on the sky. The man at the oars could not be prevented from turning his head rather often to try for a glimpse of this little grey shadow.
10. Slowly and beautifully the land loomed out of the sea. The wind came again. It had veered from the north-east to the south-east. Finally, a new sound struck the ears of the men in the boat. It was the low thunder of the surf on the shore.
11. A broad stretch of lowly coast lay before the eyes of the men. It was of dunes topped with dark vegetation. The roar of the surf was plain, and sometimes they could see the white lip of a wave as it spun up the beach.

- 12. But the thing did not then leave the vicinity of the boat. Ahead or astern, on one side or the other, at intervals long or short, fled the long sparkling streak, and there was to be heard the whirroo of the dark fin. The speed and power of the thing was greatly to be admired. It cut the water like a gigantic and keen projectile.**
13. The thing which had followed the boat and waited, had evidently grown bored at the delay. There was no longer to be heard the slash of the cut-water, and there was no longer the flame of the long trail. The light in the north still glimmered, but it was apparently no nearer to the boat. Sometimes the boom of the surf rang in the correspondent's ears, and he turned the craft seaward then and rowed harder. Southward, someone had evidently built a watch-fire on the beach. It was too low and too far to be seen, but it made a shimmering, roseate reflection upon the bluff back of it, and this could be discerned from the boat. The wind came stronger, and sometimes a wave suddenly raged out like a mountain-cat, and there was to be seen the sheen and sparkle of a broken crest.
14. In the meantime the oiler rowed, and then the correspondent rowed, and then the oiler rowed. Grey-faced and bowed forward, they mechanically, turn by turn, plied the leaden oars. The form of the lighthouse had vanished from the southern horizon, but finally a pale star appeared, just lifting from the sea. The streaked saffron in the west passed before the all-merging darkness, and the sea to the east was black. The land had vanished, and was expressed only by the low and drear thunder of the surf.
15. There were no hurried words, no pallor, no plain agitation. The men simply looked at the shore. "Now, remember to get well clear of the boat when you jump," said the captain.
16. But the next crest crashed also. The tumbling, boiling flood of white water caught the boat and whirled it almost perpendicular. Water swarmed in from all sides. The correspondent had his hands on the gunwale at this time, and when the water entered at that place he swiftly withdrew his fingers, as if he objected to wetting them.
17. The little boat, drunken with this weight of water, reeled and snuggled deeper into the sea.
- 18. The January water was icy, and he reflected immediately that it was colder than he had expected to find it on the coast of Florida. This appeared to his dazed mind as a fact important enough to be noted at the time. The coldness of the water was sad; it was tragic. This fact was somehow so mixed and confused with his opinion of his own situation that it seemed almost a proper reason for tears. The water was cold.**
19. Then he saw the man who had been running and undressing, and undressing and running, come bounding into the water. He dragged ashore the cook, and then waded towards the captain, but the captain waved him away, and sent him to the correspondent. He was naked, naked as a tree in winter, but a halo was about his head, and he shone like a saint.
20. The third wave moved forward, huge, furious, implacable. It fairly swallowed the dinghy, and almost simultaneously the men tumbled into the sea. A piece of lifebelt had lain in the bottom of the boat, and as the correspondent went overboard he held this to his chest with his left hand.

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Thematic Quotations

DIRECTIONS: Match the theme(s) with the quotation. Some quotations will illustrate multiple themes.

- A. Humans have no free will or the *illusion* they do have free will
- B. The individual is dwarfed
- C. Nature is indifferent
- D. Darwinism: survival of the fittest; law of the jungle
- E. An individual is controlled by outside forces:
 - environment
 - heredity
 - chance

1. The little boat, lifted by each towering sea, and splashed viciously by the crests, made progress that in the absence of seaweed was not apparent to those in her. She seemed just a wee thing wallowing, miraculously top-up, at the mercy of five oceans. Occasionally, a great spread of water, like white flames, swarmed into her.
2. "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? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life? It is preposterous. If this old ninny-woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. She is an old hen who knows not her intention. If she has decided to drown me, why did she not do it in the beginning and save me all this trouble? The whole affair is absurd.... But no, she cannot mean to drown me. She dare not drown me. She cannot drown me. Not after all this work." Afterward the man might have had an impulse to shake his fist at the clouds: "Just you drown me, now, and then hear what I call you!"
3. 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 the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers.
4. The correspondent wondered if none ever ascended the tall wind-tower, and if then they never looked seaward. This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, 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 then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent. It is, perhaps, plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws of his life, and have them taste wickedly in his mind and wish for another chance.
5. In his struggle to reach the captain and the boat, he reflected that when one gets properly wearied, drowning must really be a comfortable arrangement, a cessation of hostilities accompanied by a large degree of relief, and he was glad of it, for the main thing in his mind for some months had been horror of the temporary agony. He did not wish to be hurt.
6. He thought: "I am going to drown? Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?" Perhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature.
7. "All right, captain." As the correspondent paddled, he saw the captain let himself down to bottom and leave the boat. Then the correspondent performed his one little marvel of the voyage. A large wave caught him and flung him with ease and supreme speed completely over the boat and far beyond it. It struck him even then as an event in gymnastics, and a true miracle of the sea. An over-turned boat in the surf is not a plaything to a swimming man.
8. The correspondent arrived in water that reached only to his waist, but his condition did not enable him to stand for more than a moment. Each wave knocked him into a heap, and the under-tow pulled at him.