The Open Boat

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN CRANE

Born November 1, 1871, Stephen Crane was the youngest of fourteen children. Despite the influence of his Methodist minister father, Crane rejected religion. (His atheistic worldview can be seen clearly in his most famous work, "The Open Boat," with its discussion of fate's randomness and references to mythology.) Crane lived most of his life as a starving artist, working as a journalist and author and living in run-down apartments with his friends. He dropped out of Syracuse University after only one semester, deciding instead to follow his passion for journalism to New York City. In 1893, he used his own meager finances to publish his first book, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York)*, but it didn't sell many copies. He had more success in 1895 with his second work, *The Red Badge of Courage*. After publishing this book, Crane was hired as a reporter, which also allowed him to collect material for his own stories. Crane left New York City in the winter of 1896, after an incident with the New York police involving a prostitute. He went to Jacksonville, Florida, where he boarded a ship called The Commodore with intention of going to Cuba to cover the Spanish-American War. The ship sank the following day, on January 2, 1897, but Crane made it back to shore in a small lifeboat with three others. A few days later, the *New York Press* published Crane's account of the ship's sinking, but only two paragraphs touched on his experience in the lifeboat. Five months later, however, Crane published "The Open Boat"—a fictional short story based on his experience as a shipwreck survivor on the open sea. Crane went on to live in England with his partner, Cora Crane (Cora Howorth Taylor), where he penned an extraordinary number of poems, short stories, articles, and novels. In deep debt and rapidly deteriorating health due to tuberculosis, Crane died on June 5, 1900 at the age of twenty-eight.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Open Boat" is based on the sinking of a steamer called the Commodore on January 2, 1897 off the coast of Florida. Stephen Crane himself was aboard the Commodore with intentions of going to Cuba to cover the Spanish-American War as a journalist. He eventually did make it to Cuba (leaving two days prior to the United States' declaration of war), where he wrote articles and conducted interviews. Despite Crane's intention to cover the Spanish-American war at the time of the Commodore's sinking, there are only subtle references to war in "The Open Boat"—like the shark, which is likened to a "projectile," the clouds, which are described as resembling smoke pouring out from a burning building, and the Commodore's sinking, compared to when "the army loses."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Now one of the most widely reprinted American short stories, Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" sits squarely in the camp of American naturalism, not unlike Jack London's "To Build a Fire," which also deals with the idea of nature's indifference to humankind. Despite its clear alignment with naturalism, "The Open Boat" is also peppered with moments of Romanticism reminiscent of William Wordsworth's poetry, imitating the rich and sublime descriptions of nature in poems such as "The World is Too Much with Us" and "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." Written in the years directly following "The Open Boat," Kate Chopin's naturalist novel, *The Awakening*, also deals with drowning and the sea. Stephen Crane's distinguishing irony later influenced Ernest Hemingway. This influence can be seen in *Farewell to Arms*, which has frequently been compared to Crane's work, *The Red Badge of Courage*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Open Boat
- **When Written:** 1897
- **Where Written:** Florida
- **When Published:** June 1897
- **Literary Period:** American naturalism
- **Genre:** Short story; American naturalism
- **Setting:** The open sea just off the coast of Florida
- **Climax:** The men jump overboard and swim for shore
- **Antagonist:** Fate; the sea
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous friends. Stephen Crane built several friendships with famous writers throughout his lifetime, including Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and H.G. Wells.

Frivolity and finances. Stephen Crane and his common-law wife, Cora, squandered their finances, pulling themselves deeper into debt by living in an expensive manor house and lavishly entertaining literary celebrities.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Open Boat" opens with four men crammed into a bathtub-

sized lifeboat on the violent, steel-grey sea off of the coast of Florida. The four shipwreck survivors are the captain of the now-sunken Commodore, the cook, the correspondent, and the oiler. As the cook bails out the boat, the injured captain gives orders, and the correspondent and the oiler, named Billie, take turns rowing. The tiny lifeboat struggles to climb the massive waves, and each crest feels like it will be the one to capsize the boat.

As the sun rises (visible only in the sea's changing colors, not in the grey skies), the correspondent and the cook argue. The cook asserts that they are nearing the Mosquito Inlet lighthouse, which also has a house of refuge, so the men will surely be seen and saved quickly. The correspondent corrects him, noting that houses of refuge don't have crews—just emergency supplies. Life-saving stations, however, have both. After arguing back-and-forth, the cook supposes that it could be a life-saving station after all, but regardless, there is a crew who will see and save them. The oiler grumbles that they aren't there yet, so it's not worth arguing about.

The men are glad for the onshore wind that pushes them closer to shore. They are hesitant to voice their optimism, but most of them feel hopeful that they will be rescued soon. However, it's uncomfortable being packed into such a small lifeboat. When a sea gull lands on the captain's head, the captain can't even swat it away for fear of tipping the boat. Likewise, when the correspondent and the oiler take turns rowing, they must take care not to rock the boat as they switch places.

The captain notices the Mosquito Inlet lighthouse in the distance. The correspondent, busy at the oars, longs to turn his head to search the horizon for the lighthouse but can't take his eyes off of the approaching waves. When he finally sees the lighthouse, it's no bigger than a needle's point. The captain says the men are bound to make it to shore as long as the wind stays in their favor and the boat doesn't collect too much water.

The four men are like brothers, bound together by the extraordinary experience of being lost at sea. All the men feel unwavering respect for the captain, whose orders they obey without question. Even the correspondent, who is skeptical of others, feels deeply connected to these men.

On the captain's orders, the cook and the correspondent fasten the captain's coat to the mast as a makeshift sail, and the boat picks up speed. The lighthouse in the distance gradually gets larger, and eventually the men can see a small sliver of land.

As the wind calms and the makeshift sail deflates, the exhausted oiler and correspondent are forced to continue their laborious rowing. The narrator notes that for the two days prior to the Commodore's sinking, all the men had been too excited to eat or sleep, making them feel extra drained now. The oiler is even more exhausted than the others, having worked back-to-back shifts in the ship's engine room right before the ship sank. The captain grimly warns the men to preserve their strength in case they need to swim to shore.

The small sliver of land comes into clearer view and the captain recognizes a house of refuge. With the lighthouse towering above them, the captain says someone is bound to see them and send help. The oiler softly says that none of the other lifeboats must have made it to shore, or else there would be a search team scouring the waters for other survivors already. Despite this, the men feel hopeful for a speedy rescue. The correspondent finds eight long-forgotten **cigars** in his coat pocket. Four are soaked, but the other four are entirely dry. Someone finds three dry matches among their supplies, so the men relax by smoking and drinking from their water supply as they wait to be rescued.

After a while, the captain notices that the house of refuge looks empty. The cook finds it strange that the life-saving people haven't yet noticed them. The narrator interjects, explaining that there is in fact no life-saving station anywhere nearby. However, the four men are oblivious to this fact and instead take to criticizing the life-saving people's poor eyesight and lack of courage. In the midst of the men's grumbling, the captain tells them that they will have to save themselves while they still have the energy. He recommends that the men exchange addresses of loved ones in case they don't all make it to shore.

The men feel angry at the possibility of drowning, wondering why the "seven mad gods who rule the sea" would let them come so close to shore only to drown. The waves near the shore grow too large for the lifeboat to linger safely, so the oiler rows the boat out to sea. One of the men assures the others that they're bound to have been seen by now. Someone else ventures the idea that the life-saving people already saw the men but assumed they're just fishermen.

That afternoon, the lifeboat is pushed one way by the tides and another by the wind and waves. The oiler and the correspondent continue to take turns rowing. As one of the men takes the oars, the other lies in the bottom of the boat, soaked by the thin layer of seawater by grateful for a break from rowing. The correspondent thinks drowning sounds peaceful, like going to sleep on a large bed.

Excitedly, someone notices a person on the shore who is waving at them, and the men rejoice that they're finally going to be saved. They happen to find a bath towel in the lifeboat and a large stick floating in the water beside them, so they craft a flag to wave back to the man. A large vehicle also appears on the shore, which they realize is an omnibus. They notice the waving man has produced a black flag but then realize the flag is just his coat that he's leisurely waving above his head. They argue as to whether the waving man is trying to signal them to go a certain direction—perhaps to where the nearest life-saving station is—but ultimately decide the man is just waving a friendly hello at what he thinks is a group of fishermen.

In the evening, the shore can no longer be seen. The men

periodically get soaked by sea spray, but they still sleep soundly. The correspondent rows through the darkness as everyone sleeps. Having spotted a giant shark swimming alongside the boat, he soon aches for the other men's company.

The narrator interjects that when a man realizes that he is entirely insignificant in the face of the massive universe, that man is likely to be overcome by anger, followed by a sense of helplessness. The men on the lifeboat have not discussed nature's indifference, but they all have contemplated it privately.

The correspondent remembers a poem he read during his childhood about a dying **soldier** who, crying out that he would never again see his homeland, tried to keep from bleeding to death by clutching his chest with his left hand. When the correspondent was a boy, he felt no compassion for the soldier, but now the correspondent is filled with sympathy.

In the morning, the correspondent sees a giant **wind tower** perched on the beach and wonders if anyone climbs it and looks out at the sea. He thinks the wind tower is an illustration of nature's indifference to humankind. The captain cuts off the correspondent's thoughts, confirming that their boat is bound to sink soon. The men jump out into the sea. Before he leaps, the correspondent grabs a lifebelt with his left hand and clutches it to his chest.

The correspondent is startled by how cold the water is and wants to cry. Looking around for his friends, he sees the oiler far ahead of the others, swimming quickly to shore. Swept up by a current, the correspondent's own progress toward shore ceases. He wonders if it's possible that he really is going to drown but is soon pulled out from the current's grasp by a large wave.

The correspondent notices what looks to be a life-saving man, running across the beach and undressing quickly. As the captain yells for the correspondent to swim to the boat, the correspondent thinks of how drowning sounds like a peaceful end. Suddenly, a large wave catches the correspondent and hoists him over the boat and drops him into waist-high waters. In his exhaustion, he can't manage to stand, so he lets himself be trampled by the waves.

The life-saving man, now completely naked, pulls the cook to shore and hurries to the captain, who insists the correspondent be saved first. As the man begins to drag the correspondent out from the water, he is shocked to see the motionless oiler lying face down in the shallow waters. When the correspondent finally reaches the shore, the beach swarms with people providing blankets, coffee, and clothing. The oiler is dead.

That night, the winds pick up, carrying the sound of the ocean to shore. The three men—the captain, the cook, and the correspondent—feel that they can now be "interpreters" of the sea's voice.

CHARACTERS

Correspondent – The unnamed correspondent is a journalist who survives a shipwreck and is forced to battle the open seas on a ten-foot lifeboat with three other men—the captain, the oiler, and the cook. As the captain gives orders and the cook bails out the boat, the correspondent is responsible for taking turns rowing with the oiler. He feels deeply connected to his companions, counteracting the skepticism he typically feels toward other men. The narrator describes his inner thoughts and feelings more closely than any of the other characters, suggesting that the narrator and the correspondent may even be one and the same (even though the narration is third-person). Throughout the story, the correspondent is frequently consumed by existentialist thoughts and is fixated on fate and nature's indifference to humans. In addition, his occupation as a correspondent coupled with his experience of being a shipwreck survivor who must ride on a small lifeboat with three others echoes the author's life story, suggesting that the correspondent may be Stephen Crane himself. Like the captain and the cook, the correspondent ultimately survives his time at sea and is rescued by the life-saving man. His experience leaves him feeling that he can now interpret the voice of the sea, which, in its indifference toward human life, makes "absurdly clear" the difference between right and wrong.

Captain – The unnamed captain of the now-sunken Commodore also captains the lifeboat, instructing his makeshift crew (which is comprised of the correspondent, the oiler, and the cook). Though injured in the hand, the captain is dedicated to his companions and does whatever he can to help them, including staying awake all day and night. He remains emotionally strong throughout the story even though he is visibly grieving over his sunken Commodore and his failed responsibility of keeping its passengers safe. The captain is a quick and innovative thinker, which is demonstrated when he makes a sail out of his coat and a flag out of a bath towel and a branch, as well as when he instructs the cook to float on his back and row himself to shore like a boat rather than struggle to swim against the waves. The captain embraces uncertainty, making him a model for the other men and a counterpoint to the cook's self-assuredness. The captain survives his time on the open sea despite his self-sacrificing behavior. He even insists to the life-saving man that the other men be rescued first.

Oiler – The oiler (that is, someone who oils machinery in a ship's engine room) is a quiet, tired man named Billie who rides on the lifeboat with his fellow survivors: the captain, the correspondent, and the cook. Throughout the story, the oiler takes turns rowing with the correspondent and speaks very little, save for echoing the captain's instructions or making the occasional short comment. He is the most exhausted of the four men, having worked a double shift of challenging physical

labor in the ship's engine room just before the Commodore sank. Despite his fatigue, he is strong, empathetic, and always willing to relieve the correspondent from his rowing shift. In the end, the oiler is the only one who drowns. He is found face-down in shallow waters by the life-saving man. The oiler is also the only character with a name, further differentiating him from the others.

Cook – The cook is a cheerful, chubby man who rides the ten-foot lifeboat alongside the captain, the correspondent, and the oiler. He is responsible for bailing the water out of the boat while the captain gives orders and the correspondent and the oiler row. Throughout the story, the cook clings tightly to optimism for comfort and frequently voices his certainty of their impending rescue—but he is always wrong. The cook serves as a foil to the captain's more practical acceptance of uncertainty. Although eventually pulled from the water by the life-saving man, the cook survived in the sea thanks to the captain, who instructed him to float on his back and use an oar to row himself to shore.

Life-saving man – The life-saving man is the person who notices the four shipwreck survivors swimming toward the shore. After saving the cook, he tries to help the captain, who points him toward the correspondent first. He is also the first person to discover that the oiler drowned. The only time he speaks is to exclaim "What's that?" at the sight of the oiler lying face-down in the shallow water. The life-saving man is completely naked and shines "like a saint" with a "halo" above his head—praised by the narrator and characters for how he goes out of his way to help other people.

Waving man – The waving man is a tourist who mistakes the four shipwreck survivors for a group of fishermen. He cheerfully waves hello to the men with his coat, unaware of the men's desperation. His waving is a cause for a debate among the men, as they try to glean meaning from his movements, hoping that he is signaling them to wherever the nearest life-saving station is. When the men finally realize his waving is meaningless, they are angry at him for being so oblivious to their suffering.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HUMANS VS. NATURE

"The Open Boat" primarily centers on the dynamic between humankind and nature. Humankind is represented by the four men in the boat: the correspondent, the captain, the cook, and the oiler. The men try to prevail over nature, but nature clearly has full control over them. The story is careful to point out the way that nature's control is not due to any particular concern or contempt for the men. Instead, nature is completely indifferent to humankind, placing "The Open Boat" squarely within a literary movement known as American naturalism. Somewhat of an offshoot of realism, American naturalism is marked by themes of survival, determinism (the idea that humans can't change their fate), and, most notably, nature's indifference to humans.

"The Open Boat" demonstrates repeatedly that humans have no control over nature, despite their best efforts to overcome it. Throughout the story, the four men must fight against nature for their survival by navigating their tiny lifeboat through rough waters—a fight they are clearly not winning. This process drains them of their energy and spirit, leaving them like "mummies." The men are at the mercy of nature. Whereas on land humans demonstrate their power over the natural world by branding animals, at sea these helpless men are themselves "branded" by nature: "The spray, when it dashed uproariously over the side, made the voyagers shrink and swear like men who were being branded." Thus, at sea, the illusion of man's control over nature is shown to be false, as nature violently asserts its dominance over the voyagers like a man branding a cow.

This man-versus-nature dynamic is also reflected in a reference to Caroline E. S. Norton's poem, "Bingers on the Rhine." As the correspondent rows against the violent sea, he remembers the poem, which he heard in his youth, about a dying **soldier** who tries in vain to keep from bleeding to death by holding his hand over his heart. The soldier's attempt to fight against his imminent death is fruitless. Similarly, the narrator notes that nature (and consequently fate) has the power to drown humans, and all a person can do in the face of this very real threat is "shake his fist at the clouds" and curse his fate (which is as ineffective a response as the soldier clutching his chest to keep from dying).

The narrator writes that the four men in the tiny, ten-foot boat are "at the mercy of five oceans," further emphasizing the staggering difference in size and power between nature and mankind. When the correspondent catches sight of a shark next to the boat one night, the narrator likens it to deathly weaponry with a mix of horror and fascination: "The speed and power of the thing was greatly to be admired. It cut through the water like a gigantic and keen projectile." Even nature in its seemingly most harmless form has complete control over man; when a seagull lands on the captain, he can't shoo it away for fear of capsizing the boat with his vigorous movements. Instead, the captain must reluctantly sit and bear it, allowing the bird to sit on his head for as long as it likes.

Though nature has complete control over humankind, it is ultimately indifferent to them—neither in favor of or against them. For example, elements of nature both help and hinder the

men's progress toward shore: "A changed tide tried to force them southward, but the wind and wave said northward." Likewise, waves growl like menacing wild animals and then are subdued. The waves' temperament shifts constantly, without any regard for the words and actions of the four men on the tiny lifeboat. In the ultimate show of indifference, a large wave capsizes the boat (setting in motion the events leading up to the oiler's death), but another large wave propels the correspondent safely to shore. Nature's indifference toward the men continues after they've reached land, as the "indifferent shore" has two different "welcomes" for them. For the correspondent, the cook, and the captain, the shore means safety and survival while for the oiler the shore offers only the "sinister hospitality of the grave." Nature didn't specifically target the oiler or try to save the other three men. Ultimately, the correspondent realizes that nature is not "cruel," "beneficent," "treacherous," or "wise." Instead, the story affirms that nature is "indifferent, flatly indifferent," and that humans are insignificant and small in comparison to nature's vastness. In this way, Crane encourages his readers to let go of their human pride and feel humbled by nature's vastness and power.

SUFFERING, SURVIVAL, EMPATHY, AND COMMUNITY

"The Open Boat" chronicles four men's experience of being shipwrecked and forced to take to the open sea on a ten-foot lifeboat. Between battling massive waves, enduring crippling exhaustion, and contemplating the possibility of death, the men suffer greatly. The short story considers what comes out of such suffering, ultimately claiming that working hard and persevering through suffering does not guarantee survival (case in point: the oiler). However, suffering can increase empathy among people and bring them closer together. Such feelings of fellowship, solidarity, and community can be a much-needed source of physical and emotional comfort in trying—and even life-threatening—times.

The short story shows that, though admirable, hard work and endurance do not guarantee survival. The oiler proves this rule. He worked two back-to-back shifts of hard labor in the engine room before the ship sank, and is one of two men to row the lifeboat and battle the waves, but despite being the hardest-working, he is ultimately the only man who drowns. Underscoring the lack of any correlation between suffering and survival, three times throughout the narrative the men ask, "if I am going to be drowned, why […] was I allowed to come thus far?" Once the lifeboat capsizes, the correspondent realizes the possibility of his death despite how far they've come and how much they have endured, changing his question to "I am going to drown? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?" A similar realization is illustrated in the poem that the correspondent remembers from his youth, Caroline E. S. Norton's "Bingers on the Rhine," which details a **soldier**'s slow death. Though the soldier suffers greatly, he cannot "thwart the going of his life" by holding his chest to keep the blood from leaving his body.

Although suffering doesn't guarantee survival, the story shows that it can increase empathy. As a boy, the correspondent cared nothing for the dying soldier in the poem "Bingers on the Rhine," as the soldier's outcome "was less to him than the breaking of a pencil's point." After the correspondent endures his own share of suffering at sea, however, the soldier "quaintly came to him as a human, living thing." In addition, although the correspondent "had been taught to be cynical of men," his experience being shipwrecked with three other men leads him to feel deeply connected to them, like a "subtle brotherhood," implying that he feels a sense of responsibility and care for them as if they were family. This increase in empathy is not experienced by the correspondent alone. When the correspondent complains about rowing, "the weary-faced oiler smile[s] in full sympathy." Since the oiler and the correspondent share the burden of their suffering by taking turns rowing, they are able to empathize with one another.

Besides increasing empathy, suffering also brings people together, which can help ease the pain by providing physical or emotional comfort. When the correspondent is seemingly the only one awake when a giant shark takes interest in the boat, the correspondent feels "bereft of sympathy." The next day, upon learning the captain was awake when the shark was nearby, the correspondent says, "Wish I had known you were awake," pointing to the way that the captain's company would have been a source of emotional comfort. Community also provides physical comfort. Though the men are soaking wet, they manage to keep their feet warm by huddling together. Likewise, being crammed together on the boat means that they can take turns rowing so that they can balance sleep and safety as they make progress toward shore. By highlighting the positive things that can grow out of hardship, Crane encourages his audience to cultivate community and treat one another with a greater degree of empathy. From Crane's perspective, life is full of suffering, but the good news is that humans have one another to turn to for support.

FATE AND MORTALITY

Stuck in a ten-foot lifeboat in the middle of the open sea, four shipwreck survivors—the captain, the cook, the correspondent, and the oiler—are forced to grapple with the concepts of fate and death, which now feel suddenly and alarmingly real to them. "The Open Boat" ultimately suggests that humans cannot change their fate, no matter how much they argue, curse, or shake their fists at the sky. In addition, the story cautions against trying to find a deeper meaning in one's fate, suggesting that fate is arbitrary and must be accepted as such.

"The Open Boat" stresses that humans cannot change their fate, regardless of attempts to argue, threaten, or reason with

the universe. For example, the men try to use logic against fate, arguing they have come too close to the shore to die now. Their argument against Fate (which they personify as a female) is childish and flimsy: "she cannot mean to drown me. She dare not drown me. She cannot drown me. Not after all this work." If and when using logic doesn't work, all the men can do is shake an angry first at the sky and threaten to name-call fate for potentially killing them: "Just you drown me, now, and then hear what I call you." In addition, while arguing about whether the mysterious object on the shore is a lifeboat or an omnibus, one of the men exclaims, "By thunder, you're right. It's an omnibus, sure as fate." Though "sure as fate" is meant here as an exclamation to end the argument, it points to the way that fate is undeniable and set in stone.

Besides accepting the permanence of fate, the story suggests that humans should also avoid assigning meaning to fate. Fate is determined arbitrarily and the things that happen to people don't necessarily have a meaningful explanation. At the opening of the short story, the correspondent "watched the waves and wondered why he was there," demonstrating the human impulse to make sense of the world and why things happen. However, fate is personified as an "old ninny-woman" and an "old hen" who is incompetent at her job and puts no thought into deciding people's outcomes. Besides illustrating fate as an old woman, the men also consider the influence of the "seven mad gods who rule the sea." The gods are "mad," implying that there is no coherent logic behind their actions. The men consider their potential fate of drowning after they've almost reached shore to be "preposterous" and "absurd," showing that any attempt to make sense of their situation is fruitless. Another example of fate's arbitrary nature comes at the very moment the men need to make a flag to signal to the people on the shore, when they find both a bath towel in their lifeboat and a long stick floating in the water beside them "by some weird chance." Overall, the arbitrary nature of fate is illustrated best in the oiler. Among the four men, the oiler was the strongest, the hardest working (having worked back-to-back shifts in the engine room before the ship sunk), and the best swimmer, and yet he is the only one who ultimately drowns.

"The Open Boat" asserts that despite the impulse to attempt to control and make sense of one's fate, these efforts are in vain. Fate remains solidly out of the control of humankind, and one's fate has no deeper meaning hidden in it. This worldview aligns with that of the story's author, Crane, who openly rejected religion and consequently the concepts of an afterlife, as well as a benevolent god who intervenes in human affairs in response to prayer. Crane's personal worldview explains the lack of overt religiosity in the text, save for the "seven mad gods of the sea," which seems more like an exasperated exclamation than a genuine assertion of divinity. The idea that humans cannot control their fate is called determinism and is a key part of literary naturalism, the movement of which Stephen Crane was a proponent. Thus, in "The Open Boat," Crane suggests that humans can only reconcile themselves to their fates and to the fact of their mortality, and try to live their best lives without harboring any illusions that they are in control.

CERTAINTY AND UNCERTAINTY

Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" is deeply critical of the attitude of certainty. Using the experience of four shipwrecked men who are forced to endure the open sea on a ten-foot lifeboat, the short story asserts that very little in life—and in the narrative—is certain. In the story, the cook and the captain embody certainty and uncertainty, respectively. Together, the two characters illustrate how claiming certainty is unproductive and foolish, as well as why accepting uncertainty is the more realistic and practical approach to life.

"The Open Boat" highlights how very little is certain in life. The first line of the story begins with the characters' uncertainty about their immediate surroundings: "None of them knew the color of the sky." The story also begins *in medias res*—in the middle of the action—so the reader is uncertain as to who the characters are and what is happening. Even the narrator is not always sure as to what's going on in the narrative. The third-person narrator has insight into the correspondent's inner life but can't tell what the other men are thinking or feeling. Similarly, the narrator notes that when the men in the boat ride particularly large waves, the experience is "probably splendid" and "probably glorious." The narrator is even uncertain of the men's facial expressions, stating their faces "must have been grey" while "their eyes must have glinted." Like the narrator, the correspondent can't tell what his companions are feeling: "The correspondent, observing the others, knew that they were not afraid, but the full meaning of their glances was shrouded." Despite being wedged between three other men on a ten-foot lifeboat, the correspondent still can't be certain of what thoughts and emotions are behind the other men's eyes. At one point, the correspondent is sure that the four men on the lifeboat have become a band of brothers who all feel the same closeness and responsibility for one another. However, the oiler's quickness in swimming ahead of the group after the men abandon the lifeboat implies otherwise.

Claiming to be certain about something is misleading and unproductive, as seen through the words and actions of the cook. The cook relentlessly asserts that there is a house of refuge not far from them (a place that has emergency supplies but doesn't have a crew that could help them). He then asserts, just as confidently, that it is actually a life-saving station (a place that has emergency supplies and *does* have a crew that could help them). Moments later, he affirms "That's the house of refuge, sure." The cook is clearly uncertain but instead makes unfounded assertions that only serve to give the other men false hope. Similarly, when the men finally see people on the

shore, one of the men expresses certainty that someone on the shore is signaling them to go north to a life-saving station. In reality, however, the waving man is just saying hello with his coat, thinking that the cook and his companions are fishermen. Even after the men have gotten their hopes up several times, each time to no avail, one of the men spreads false hope: "somebody in gloom spoke. 'Well, anyhow, they must have seen us from the shore by now." This assertion is unproductive, because it doesn't help the men decide how they will save themselves.

In contrast, accepting uncertainty is shown to be the much more practical and realistic attitude, as evidenced by the words and actions of the captain. The captain's consistent uncertainty that the boat will reach shore means that the men are able to prepare for the worst-case scenario (death) by exchanging addresses of loved ones in case not everyone survives. Likewise, the captain is doubtful that a lifeboat is coming to save them, regardless of the cook's constant claims. The captain's uncertainty prepares the men to swim to shore rather than wait for help: "'If we stay out here much longer we will be too weak to do anything for ourselves at all.' The others silently acquiesced in this reasoning." While the captain's words clearly aren't comforting, they are realistic, which is why the other men agree reluctantly. Instead of giving into blind optimism like the cook, the captain speaks with "humor, contempt, [and] tragedy," which feels descriptive of the tone of "The Open Boat" as a whole and is realistic considering the men's dire situation.

Underpinning Crane's implicit praise for the captain's acceptance of uncertainty seems to be a deep appreciation for the way the captain uses his doubt as fuel to take practical action, whether that means making the other men exchange addresses or prepare to swim. Crane encourages his readers to emulate the captain (and ignore their inner cook) by taking action in their lives rather than foolishly indulging in false hope. The recognition of life's uncertainty and the importance of taking action also underscores that "The Open Boat" is a masterwork of literary naturalism—a literary movement whose foundational belief is humankind's insignificance in the scheme of the natural universe. Since nature doesn't care about man and fate can't be bargained with, humans must fend for themselves to survive in the world. "The Open Boat" reminds readers that survival often depends on having a realistic outlook—which in turn almost always involves acknowledging uncertainty.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CIGARS

The eight cigars that the correspondent finds in his pocket symbolize the random and inexplicable nature of fate. Four of the eight cigars are, inexplicably, completely dry, coincidentally leaving one for each man. There is also no discussion as to why the correspondent suddenly stumbles upon the eight cigars without having known they were in his pocket all along. In the same way, fate is random and often resists simple explanations. In addition, the combination of the four dry cigars with the four wet cigars may also point to the way the men's outlooks fluctuate between optimism and pessimism throughout the story, as they cycle through feeling exhausted, joyous, relaxed, angry, hopeful, and tenacious.

SOLDIER

The soldier from the poem that the correspondent remembers from his youth (Caroline E. S. Norton's "Bingers on the Rhine") symbolizes mankind's helplessness and mortality. Clutching his bleeding chest with his left hand, the soldier tries in vain to keep from dying, even though his death is already fast approaching and he has no access to a nurse. By recalling the soldier from this poem, the correspondent recognizes his own powerlessness in the face of the violent ocean. When the correspondent is flung into the ocean after the lifeboat capsizes, he clutches a piece of a lifebelt across his chest with his left hand, mirroring the soldier clutching his bleeding heart.

WIND TOWER

The wind tower symbolizes nature's power over—and indifference toward—humankind. The correspondent says so directly, calling the tower a "giant standing with its back to the plight of the ants." By emphasizing the wind tower's size in comparison to humans, the correspondent draws attention to humankind's insignificance in the face of nature's vastness and power. In addition, the wind tower also symbolizes desperation. The correspondent wonders if anyone ever climbs the tall wind tower as if it were a lighthouse and looks out at the sea. The correspondent hopes that this might be the case despite its unlikeliness, wanting to believe that the men have a greater chance of being seen and saved. In this way, the wind tower also symbolizes the resilience (and the naivety) of human hope—which often endures against all odds in the face of nature's overwhelming power and indifference.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *The Open Boat and Other Stories*

published in 1993.

Part III Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Correspondent, Oiler, Cook, Captain

Related Themes:  

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator is discussing the emotional bond that has formed between the four men on the lifeboat. Although the narrator is third-person limited—and thus only has insight into the correspondent's inner life—the narrator somehow knows that all of the men feel connected to one another even though no one vocalizes it. This may suggest that the narrative style momentarily shifts from third-person limited to simply third-person omniscient, briefly giving the narrator insight into all of the men's thoughts and feelings. However, it is likely that the narrator is instead giving into one of the same tendencies that plagues many of the other characters: asserting certainty about something when it is impossible to genuinely be certain.

The passage also points to the way that suffering increases empathy. The men feel deeply connected to one another and are "friends in a more curiously iron-bound degree" because they suffer together and support one another. In addition, the men are responsible for one another and depend on one another for their lives, strengthening their bond. All of the men must trust the captain to give correct directions, the cook to bail out the boat quickly, and the oiler and the correspondent to have the strength and perseverance to continue rowing the boat to shore.

The correspondent thought that he had been drenched to the skin, but happening to feel in the top pocket of his coat, he found therein eight cigars. Four of them were soaked with sea-water; four were perfectly scathless.

Related Characters: Correspondent

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator is explaining the correspondent's chance discovery of eight cigars in his coat pocket as the men wait to be rescued. The cigars are an interesting symbol that lends itself to several interpretations. Most likely, because of the randomness of their discovery and the seeming impossibility of their dryness, the cigars are meant to represent the way fate is arbitrary and can't be sufficiently explained even in hindsight. However, the combination of the four wet cigars and four dry cigars for four men may point to the way the men experience extreme ups and downs while at sea. Like the dry cigars, the men have moments of optimism, leisure, and relaxation as they wait for what they think is a certain rescue. Like the soaking wet cigars, the men have moments where their hope is sodden, and they feel like surrendering to nature. This instance of complex symbolism is emblematic of Stephen Crane's writing, as "The Open Boat" and many of Crane's other works are saturated with rich symbols with several possible interpretations.

Part IV Quotes

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 way about to nibble the sacred cheese of life?

Related Characters: Correspondent, Oiler, Cook, Captain

Related Themes:  

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is recounting the thrice-repeated exclamation that the men say, regarding their disbelief and being allowed to come so close to shore only to potentially drown. The passage is rich with religious language and references. The men call upon the "seven mad gods who rule the sea," which feels like a nod toward Greek or Roman mythology. Despite having a devout Methodist father, Stephen Crane rejected religion, so it makes sense that the men call up "seven mad gods" rather than a monotheistic God. The idea that the

gods are "mad" also points to Crane's difficulty with religion. While it is unknown if Crane was a complete atheist, he was certainly antireligious. The "mad[ness]" of the gods also underscores the way that one's fate isn't always attached to any particular or profound meaning. "The Open Boat" argues that one's fate is decided upon randomly, so trying to argue with fate using logic is like arguing with "seven mad gods." By comparing themselves to mice being dragged away from cheese, the men recognize that they are insignificant in the face of vast and powerful forces like nature and fate. However, they still consider life to be "sacred," even if their lives are insignificant to the universe. This also points back to Crane's naturalism and his skepticism surrounding religion, as the divine gods are crazy, but it is earthly life that is holy and "sacred."

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 at 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.

Related Characters: Correspondent, Oiler, Cook, Captain

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is explaining what the four men in the lifeboat feel about fate—that fate may as well be an elderly, out-of-touch woman who haphazardly decides the outcomes of mortals' lives. One of the primary tenets of American naturalism is determinism—the belief that humans have no control over their fate. This is similar to the concept of predestination in Christian theology, particularly Calvinism, which argues that each person's outcome (that is, whether they are destined for heaven or hell) is decided upon by God ahead of time. Given his own antireligious worldview, Crane keeps the idea of predestination but makes a mythical old lady named Fate—not the monotheistic Christian God—in charge of deciding each person's destiny. Like predestination, one's fate can't be argued, even though in this passage the men try, with the flimsy argument that old-woman Fate "cannot mean to drown," "dare not drown," and "cannot drown" the men. Clearly, she can.

Like the Christian God, the narrator betrays no reverence for old-lady Fate, as the men call her an "old ninny-woman" and "an old hen" and demand she be fired from her post. Her incompetence at her job underscores that fate, while set in stone, is seemingly random.

Part VI Quotes

For it was certainly an abominable injustice to drown a man who had worked so hard, so hard. The man felt it would be a crime most unnatural. Other people had drowned at sea since galleys swarmed with painted sails, but still—

Related Characters: Correspondent, Oiler, Cook, Captain

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator explains the way the four men on the lifeboat feel that it is unjust for the universe to allow them to drown after they've worked so hard and can now see the shore. This passage shows the way that the men still try to use logic against the forces of fate and the universe by assuming that their hard work and suffering should earn their survival. The men try to project their own ideas about justice upon nature and fate, accusing the universe of planning to commit "a crime most unnatural" and "an abominable injustice." The men must recognize, however, that trying to build a logical argument against the universe is futile. The flimsiness of the men's argument culminates in the way that they trail off with the weak last words, "but still—." The men are unwilling to admit that drowning could happen to them, assuming that bad things happen only to other people. The irony, of course, is that a shipwreck *did* happen to them.

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important...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.

Related Characters: Correspondent, Oiler, Cook, Captain

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator explains how a man feels once he comes to terms with nature's indifference to him. On the surface, the passage affirms that humans are entirely insignificant to nature—one of the foundational ideas of American naturalism and an important idea throughout the course of "The Open Boat." The narrator asserts that humans are so insignificant in nature's eyes, that even humankind's most pointed criticism and sharpest anger toward nature is meaningless. Plus, humans have no real way to express their frustrations to anger, since there is no "visible expression of nature" like a "temple" for humans to throw bricks at.

❝ He has never considered it his affair that a soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers, nor had it appeared to him as a matter for sorrow. It was less to him than the breaking of a pencil's point. Now, however, it quaintly came to him as a human, living thing.

Related Characters: Correspondent

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator is describing the correspondent's evolving understanding of Caroline E. S. Norton's poem "Bingers on the Rhine." The poem marks a major shift in the correspondent's capacity for empathy. Before finding himself in a grim situation of his own, the correspondent considered the soldier's death even less significant than "the breaking of a pencil's point," which is at worst a minor, temporary annoyance. The passage suggests that in his youth, the correspondent didn't even see the soldier as human. It is the correspondent's own suffering and experience of adversity that develops his empathy for the soldier. The soldier in the poem is something of an everyman figure—standing in for any man from any place and time. In this way, the correspondent gains empathy not just for the soldier but for other people in general. "The Open Boat" points out that deepening one's sense of empathy for others is one of the upsides of enduring great suffering.

Part VII Quotes

❝ Later, carmine and gold was painted upon the waters. The morning appeared finally, in its splendor, with a sky of pure blue, and the sunlight flamed on the tips of the waves.

Related Characters: Correspondent

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator illustrates the changing colors of the water and the sky as dawn breaks. This passage feels poetic and lyrical, as if it could be seamlessly embedded into a nature poem. The rich language used to describe nature—like the "carmine and gold…painted upon the waters"—feels reminiscent of Romanticism, as if it were an entry in Dorothy Wordsworth's journals or a detail from her brother William's poetry. Considering that literary Realism and Romanticism are somewhat of opposites, and that American naturalism is an offshoot of Realism, it is strange to find Romantic moments sprinkled throughout "The Open Boat." However, such Romantic moments serve as a reminder of nature's indifference to mankind. Just as nature can seem cruel, dark, and powerful to mankind, nature can also seem beautiful, pure and harmless.

❝ A man in this situation […] should see the innumerable flaws of his life, and have them taste wickedly in his mind and wish for another chance. A distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him […] and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and his words, and be better and brighter during an introduction or at a tea.

Related Characters: Correspondent

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is explaining that, when a man finally comes to understand that nature is indifferent to him, he may feel the urge to relive his entire life. This passage is curious because the tone and content seem to be in conflict with one

another. The tone of the passage is serious, even grave, as it recounts the way a newfound understanding of the universe's lack of concern for humankind may make a man "see the innumerable flaws of his life," "taste [them] wickedly," and wish for a second chance at life. However, rather than using this second chance at life to right those wrongs, the narrator reflects on the opportunity it would present to "be better and brighter during an introduction or at a tea." This passage presents a clearly frivolous and insignificant use of a second chance at life, perhaps cynically implying that life itself is meaningless. However, the passage may also suggest that when given a chance to redo his life, a man may not even have the capacity to change much except for how polite he is at tea. Since fate can't be changed or argued against, the man only has control over being a more pleasant person while interacting with others—not the bigger moments that are under fate's control.

> Afterward he saw his companions in the sea. The oiler was ahead in the race. He was swimming strongly and rapidly.

Related Characters: Oiler, Correspondent

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator is explaining what the correspondent sees once he comes up for air after jumping off the lifeboat. This moment clearly separates the oiler from the rest of the "companions." The oiler is spatially separated, as his strong swimming has put him "ahead" of the others. However, implied in the passage is the sense that the oiler's swimming ahead of the other men means that he is splintering off from the group and thus severing their brotherhood, since survival is suddenly a "race" and no longer a team effort. The oiler, Billie, is also the only named character in "The Open Boat," which further differentiates him from the other men, who are named only by their professions (the captain, the correspondent, and the cook). Since Billie was the most stoic of the four men throughout the story, this passage calls into question his loyalty toward the others. This moment also subtly foreshadows the oiler's death at the end of the story, which sets him apart from the others in an even more drastic way.

> He was naked, naked as a tree in winter, but a halo was about his head and he shone like a saint.

Related Characters: Correspondent, Life-saving man

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes the man who wades into the water to save the men. The man is compared to an angel and a saint—the first and only significant references to Christianity in the story. Given Stephen Crane's Christian upbringing and subsequent rejection of religion, along with all the references to mythology throughout "The Open Boat," this reference to angels and saints feels out of place. However, upon closer look, the passage doesn't suggest that the man is a divine savior. Instead, the man is a fully human savior, as emphasized by his nakedness. The man's halo may imply his pure intentions in saving the men, while his comparison to a saint may suggest that like a saint, he is morally upright and is a person that others should emulate but who is ultimately fully human. In this way, "The Open Boat" encourages its readers to be like the life-saving man by selflessly helping others.

> When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.

Related Characters: Captain, Cook, Correspondent

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

In this closing passage, the narrator explains that the remaining three shipwreck survivors—the captain, the cook, and the correspondent—feel that they can interpret their experiences at sea. Throughout "The Open Boat," the men begin to internalize the reality of nature's unconcern for them and the way that fate is unexplainable and random. However, once the men are saved and safe on the shore, they seem to forget their learnings, trying to "be interpreters" of their experience by making sense of nature and fate. They wrongly understand the sound of the wind and waves to be "the great sea's voice" that was specifically "brought" to them, forgetting nature's indifference to them.

The men seem to lose their perspective and humility once they are safe, as they assume that they now have the power to interpret vast, powerful forces like nature and fate. By ending the story in this way, Crane encourages the reader to develop and preserve a sense of humility by recognizing his or her own insignificance in the scheme of the universe.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART I

The story is prefaced by a note that states that the following story is based on the real-life sinking of a steamer called the Commodore.

On January 2, 1897, the Commodore sank, just off the coast of Florida and only one day after its departure. One of the shipwreck survivors was the author, a journalist named Stephen Crane, who was forced to fight for his survival for thirty hours on a ten-foot lifeboat with three others.

The story opens with a group of people crammed together on a bathtub-sized lifeboat on the open sea. The passengers can't tell what color the sky is, but the violent, frothy sea is grey and white.

The story begins in medias res *(that is, in the middle of the action) which makes the reader immediately unsure as to what is happening. The abrupt opening paired with the characters' uncertainty about the color of the sky shows that uncertainty is a key theme in the story.*

The first passenger is the cook, who is in charge of bailing water out of the lifeboat. The oiler (that is, a person who oils machinery in a ship's engine room) steers the boat with a single, thin oar. The correspondent, who wonders why he's in this situation in the first place, uses the other oar to propel them forward. The fourth and final passenger is the injured captain who gives the other men orders. He is in "mourning" over his now-sunken ship since he was responsible for its passengers and was emotionally attached to his vessel.

The four-person group of the cook, oiler, correspondent, and captain mirrors the group that survived the real-life Commodore shipwreck: the captain, Edward Murphy; the cook, Charles Montgomery; the oiler, Billy Higgins; and the correspondent, Stephen Crane. This suggests that the correspondent is based on Crane himself. This passage also reveals that the narrator has special insight into the correspondent's thoughts and feelings but no one else's—establishing that the narrator is third-person limited.

The captain tells Billie, the oiler, to keep the lifeboat headed south. The lifeboat is compared to a "bucking bronco" for its size and the way the boat rears on the waves like an agitated, wild horse.

Crane slightly alters the spelling of the real-life oiler's name, changing Billy to Billie, and makes him the only named character in the story, suggesting that he is somehow differentiated from the other characters. This is perhaps because, as it is later revealed, Billie is the only character not to survive the voyage. The comparison of the lifeboat to a "bucking bronco," one of many comparisons between the sea and the land, emphasizes the wildness of the waves.

The narrator says that one of the downsides of the sea is the way the waves seem endless. After the boat manages to ride one giant wave and come out unscathed, another giant wave approaches. Each "snarling" wave feels like it will be the one to capsize the boat.

The description of the waves as "snarling" extends the comparison between wild animals and the waves, reminding readers that nature is not just powerful but is also dangerous, like an animal preparing to fight.


The narrator notes that in the dim light the men's faces "must have been grey," and "their eyes must have glinted." If someone watched this scene from above, as if from a balcony, the whole thing would look strangely beautiful. The waves change color from grey to green, signaling the sunrise, but the men are too focused on the approaching waves to notice.

Even the narrator is uncertain as to what is going on, underscoring the limitations of the narrator's perspective. The narrator's comment about someone watching the scene from above seems like a vague reference to God. Considering Crane's own anti-religious views, however, this comment probably points to the way the narrator and the reader hover over the story, looking down into it.

The cook says that there is a "house of refuge" close by, near Mosquito Inlet, so the men are likely to be seen and saved soon. The correspondent tells the cook that a "house of refuge" doesn't have a crew, just emergency supplies. As the cook and correspondent argue, the oiler says it doesn't matter, considering that they aren't even there yet. The cook says maybe it's not a "house of refuge" but a "life-saving station"—regardless, something is there and someone will see them. The oiler repeats that they aren't there yet.

The arguments about these two places—"houses of refuge" and "life-saving stations"—linger throughout the entire story. This moment also serves to develop the cook's character. He is self-assured and quick to voice his optimism. The correspondent is quick to question and point out facts, perhaps pointing to his background as a journalist. Meanwhile, the oiler is quiet yet firm, intent on diffusing conflict.

PART II

Each wave that the lifeboat must cross is like a hill. The narrator supposes that the view from the top of the wave must have been glorious: "a broad and tumultuous expanse; shining and wind-riven."

The narrator is clearly uncertain about the finer details in the story, noting that the view from the top of the waves was "probably glorious." This reinforces uncertainty as a theme in the story.

The cook expresses relief that there is an on-shore wind, stating that without it, the men wouldn't have chance. The correspondent and oiler agree, but the captain laughs and says with "humor, contempt, and tragedy," "Do you think we've got much of a [chance] now, boys?"

The "humor, contempt, and tragedy" with which the captain speaks seem reflective of the tone of "The Open Boat" as a whole, as well as the literary movement it belongs to, American naturalism, which focuses on cynicism, suffering, survival, and nature's indifference to humans.


The oiler, the cook, and the correspondent feel optimistic but don't voice it, because they feel that voicing their optimism would sound "childish and stupid." The captain, as if "soothing his children," says that they will make it to shore all right. The captain's tone of voice makes the other three men think. The oiler adds that they will get to shore if the wind stays in their favor. The cook adds that they will get to shore if they "don't catch hell in the surf."

In this passage, the captain speaks with uncharacteristic optimism for the sake of teaching the other men, likened to "his children," that their optimism is impractical. The other men quickly amend their previous optimistic statements to make them more realistic.

A group of seagulls fly in a line like rugs flapping in the wind on a clothesline. The gulls are as unbothered by the violent ocean as "a covey of prairie chickens a thousand miles inland." A bird lands on the captain's head, but the captain can't wave it away for fear of capsizing the boat in the process. The oiler tells the bird that it looks like it was carved crudely by hand, and all of the men think the bird is "somehow [gruesome] and ominous."

The comparison between seagulls, rugs, and chickens is yet another land reference, orienting the non-sea-faring reader as to what life on the open sea looks like. Although the bird is seemingly harmless, it is an example of nature's complete control over the men—as even just swatting the bird away could capsize the boat and drown the men. The appearance of an ominous bird on a boat is perhaps an allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

The oiler and the correspondent continue taking turns rowing. Switching places on the tiny lifeboat without capsizing it is more difficult than attempting to take eggs from a hen. However, the men manage to switch places at regular intervals, sharing the burden. Thus, "the oiler and the correspondent rowed. […] They rowed and they rowed."

The narrator's description of the rowing is repetitive, mimicking the monotonous, repetitive motion of rowing. However, the oiler and the correspondent are able to share the burden of their suffering by switching off frequently.

The captain says that he sees the lighthouse at Mosquito Inlet, and the cook sees it too. The correspondent is too busy rowing and keeping his eyes glued on the approaching waves to turn around and look, but when he can finally steal a glance, he doesn't see a lighthouse anywhere. After the captain tells him to look again, the correspondent finally sees it. The narrator likens the lighthouse to the point of a pin in size and notes that it would take "an anxious eye to find a lighthouse so tiny."

The correspondent's urge to turn around and search the horizon for the lighthouse shows the human impulse to latch onto glimmers of hope and optimism, even if that hope takes "an anxious eye" to find.

The men ask the captain if they will make it to shore, to which he replies by saying that they will be fine if the wind continues and the boat doesn't flood. The lifeboat is "just a wee thing wallowing […] at the mercy of five oceans." The captain orders the cook to bail the small boat.

The size comparison between the lifeboat and the ocean shows how tiny and insignificant the boat, and consequently its passengers, are in the face of nature. The men are not just up against the Atlantic Ocean but all five of the world's oceans.

PART III

The men have become a "subtle brotherhood," though no one talks about it. Even the correspondent, who was "taught to be cynical of men," feels this sense of closeness and mutual responsibility among the other men.

The experience of being on the lifeboat develops the correspondent's empathy, as he evolves from being "cynical of men" to forging deep connections with the three of them.

The cook and the correspondent attach the captain's coat to the mast as a makeshift sail, which helps the men's progress toward shore. The lighthouse in the distance appears larger and larger, and the oiler turns his head frequently to look at it. Land finally comes into view, though it seems like a shadow that is "thinner than paper" resting on the edge of the sea. The cook says they're now nearing New Smyrna but says the life-saving station there has been inactive for a year.

The oiler's frequent glances toward the lighthouse echo the correspondent's earlier overwhelming urge to turn around and look for the lighthouse. The men have optimistically latched onto the hope of survival even though the land is "thinner than paper," and thus not all that promising.

The wind dies down and the makeshift sail no longer helps the boat speed through the water. The small lifeboat struggles over the "impetuous" waves as the oiler or the correspondent take the oars again.

"Impetuous" means careless, pointing to one of the most central themes in the work: nature's complete indifference to humankind. In addition, the narrator seems unsure as to who is rowing, reaffirming the limitations of the narrator's perspective and deepening the sense of uncertainty throughout the story.

The narrator says that shipwrecks happen out of the blue, and if men could practice being shipwrecked, there would be fewer shipwreck-related deaths. All the men are starved—for food and for sleep. The day before the Commodore sank, none of the men made time to sleep or eat out of excitement. The narrator notes that "for these reasons, and for others" the correspondent and the oiler dislike their task of rowing. The correspondent thinks it's absurd that people row boats for pleasure. When the correspondent shares this thought with the oiler, he "smile[s] in full sympathy."

The randomness of shipwrecks is like the randomness of fate, as neither can be planned for or explained. This passage also contains a brief moment of dark humor when the narrator comments on the men's collectively poor physical state and notes that "for these reasons, and for others," the correspondent and the oiler aren't fond of rowing. Because the oiler suffers alongside the correspondent, he is able to empathize with the correspondent's hatred of rowing.

The captain reminds the correspondent and the oiler to preserve their strength in case they are forced to swim. The captain sees a house on the shore and realizes that it could be a house of refuge, after all. He says that the keeper of the lighthouse is bound to see them and get help from "the life-saving people." Quietly, the oiler states that none of the other lifeboats must have made it to shore, or else there would be life-saving people out looking for them already.

The captain seems to confuse houses of refuge with life-saving stations—something he should be well versed in considering his occupation. This moment echoes the earlier argument between the cook and the correspondent. The constant confusion about houses of refuge and life-saving stations reveal the thread of uncertainty that runs throughout the story.

The men feel a "quiet cheerfulness" creeping over them, knowing that help is coming soon and that they are likely to be on land within an hour. As they ride the "wild colt of a dingey like circus men," the correspondent finds eight **cigars** in his pocket. Four of the cigars are soaked, but four are completely dry. Someone else finds three dry matches, so the men have a leisurely smoke. Each of the men drinks from the water supply as they "impudently" ride the waves.

The boat is again compared to a wild horse, while the men are "like circus men," emphasizing to the reader how difficult it is to simply stay aboard the dinghy. The correspondently randomly finds eight cigars in his coat pocket, four of which are inexplicably dry even though the correspondent is soaking wet. The cigars symbolize the random, unexplainable nature of fate. The men smoke their cigars and ride the waves "impudently," showing that because of their optimism, they've lost their respect for nature's power.

PART IV

The captain realizes the house of refuge is empty, telling the cook, "there don't seem to be any signs of life about your house of refuge," to which the cook says, "Funny they don't see us!" The other men echo the cook's statement. The narrator interjects, saying that, unbeknownst to the four men, there was not a life-saving station anywhere remotely close to them. Instead, the men repeat once more, "Funny they don't see us," becoming increasingly angry with the life-savers for their poor eyesight or crippling fear.

The captain's comment that "there don't seem to be any signs of life about your house of refuge" seems like the captain blaming the cook for getting the men's hopes up for a speedy rescue, showing the downside of the cook's optimism in his certainty of a quick rescue. The repeated phrase, "Funny they don't see us," shows that even still, some of the men are unwilling to admit that there may not be life-saving people coming to rescue them.

The captain prepares the men to handle the situation without relying on help from life-saving people. He has all the men exchange addresses of loved ones in case not everyone makes it to shore successfully.

Although the captain's comment seems pessimistic, even morbid, in this moment, his suggestion that the men exchange addresses of loved ones is practical because it prepares the men for the worst-case scenario.

The men are angry, repeatedly asking why, "in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea," were they allowed to come this close to shore if they are going to drown now. They consider fate to be an "old ninny-woman" and an "old hen" who doesn't know what she's doing. All the men can do is shake an angry fist at the sky and threaten to call her bad names if she drowns them.

Instead of calling upon a monotheistic god, the men call upon the "seven mad gods who rule the sea" and fate, an "old ninny-woman," pointing to Stephen Crane's own rejection of religion. The personification of fate as an elderly, out-of-touch woman underscores the way fate is arbitrary and its decrees can't be argued with.

The waves near shore are too powerful for the boat, so the oiler rows back to deeper waters. The waves make a "preparatory and long growl" as one of the men says gloomily that the life-saving people must have seen them by now. The sky is filled with brown and red clouds, like smoke billowing out of a burning building.

The waves sound like a wild animal about to pounce on its prey, showing that nature has the upper hand. Someone—likely the cook—"gloomily" repeats the optimistic statement that the men are sure to be seen and saved soon, which feels like a perpetuation of false hope.

Someone repeats, "Funny they haven't seen us," while someone else suggests that the life-saving people must think they are fishermen, not shipwreck survivors. Meanwhile, the tides push the boat southward, but the wind and the waves push them northward. Someone asks if they are nearing St. Augustine, but the captain says no.

This is the fourth repetition of "Funny they don't see us," only this time, it's slightly altered so that it reads, "Funny they haven't seen us." The men are unable to come to terms with the possibility that there are no people around to see them. Meanwhile, different forces of nature help and hinder the men's progress, revealing nature's lack of concern for the men.

The narrator repeats the rowing pattern: "the oiler rowed, and then the correspondent rowed. Then the oiler rowed." All the men's backs ache, and the oiler and the correspondent groan about how much they hate rowing. The correspondent feels so miserable, he almost wishes to "tumble comfortably out upon the oceans," likening it to "a great soft mattress."

The narrator repeats the already-repetitive phrase about the oiler and the correspondent taking turns rowing, showing that not only is rowing monotonous, it also seems like never-ending suffering. Fighting against nature is so draining that the correspondent almost wishes to give up the fight, "tumble comfortably out upon the oceans," and surrender to nature's power.

Someone notices a man standing on the shore, waving. Someone else exclaims that they are certain to be saved within a half hour now that they've been noticed. "By some weird chance," the captain finds a stick floating in the water beside them and a bath towel in the lifeboat, so they make a flag to wave back to the man.

Even minor instances of what seems like fate (such as the captain finding a bath towel in the lifeboat and a long stick conveniently floating alongside the boat) are considered just a "weird chance," underscoring that fate is random and unexplainable. The bath-towel flag is a real detail from Stephen Crane's experience at sea.

A large vehicle appears on the shore, and the men in the lifeboat argue as to what it is. One man says it's a lifeboat being pulled along shore on wheels, while another says it's an omnibus. After arguing back-and-forth a few times, it is decided that "It's an omnibus, sure as fate." Someone thinks it's for the life-saving crew, but someone else thinks it's a hotel omnibus for tourists.

The phrase "sure as fate" is meant as an exclamation but points to the way fate can't be argued with. Rather, it is the only thing that is certain and final. A clearer picture of the shore also emerges, as the men come to terms with the fact that the shore is populated by ignorant tourists staying at a winter resort, and not the life-saving people they had hoped for.

The men think the waving man on the shore is now waving a flag. After further argumentation, they realize he is simply waving his coat around. The men on the lifeboat argue as to whether the man is signaling them to row north to a life-saving station or just playfully saying hello. One of the men on the lifeboat calls the waving man an "ass," wishing he would signal for them to "go north, or go south, or go to hell," for at least then "there would be some reason in it." One of the men on the lifeboat asserts that they will be saved momentarily. Another says they can't afford to "keep on monkeying out here." Someone reasserts that they will be saved in no time.

The men are desperate to discern some sort of meaning in the man's gestures, revealing the human impulse to make meaning out of meaningless things—something the story strongly cautions against. The men take out their anger on the waving man, calling him an "ass," but the fault is equally their own for trying to assign meaning to his innocent, friendly gestures.

As night falls, the gloom of dusk engulfs the shore, making it impossible to see the group of people or the omnibus any longer. The ocean grows agitated, and splashes of water make the men "shrink and swear like men who were being branded." One of the men says he wants to beat up the man who was waving his coat on the shore because "he seemed so damned cheerful." Meanwhile, the narrator repeats the rowing pattern: "the oiler rowed, and then the correspondent rowed, and then the oiler rowed." A single star appears in the sky, but everything else is drenched in blackness.

The men are compared to livestock being branded by their master, nature, which again demonstrates both nature's complete dominance and the men's helplessness. Despite the unmatched fight, the men continue to struggle for their survival. The passage also contains the third repetition of the rowing pattern, building on the overwhelming monotony of rowing and the men's incessant suffering at sea.

Once again, the men lament the cruel fate that they have been able to come this far to shore if they're just going to be drowned. Besides the men's complaints and the infrequent "subdued growl of a crest," the night is quiet. Half-awake, the cook sleepily asks the oiler what his favorite flavor of pie is.

This is not the first (or the last) time that the men complain that the sea gods have allowed them to come this far if they are just meant to drown. Clearly, the men are still trying to argue with fate using logic, which the story shows as being futile. Meanwhile, the cook's sleep-talk of pie shows that his optimism and cheerfulness extend even to his dream state.

PART V

The oiler and the correspondent chastise the cook for tempting them with the thought of food, while the cook dreamily mumbles about ham sandwiches. Meanwhile, another light appears in the sky. Along with the star, these two lights are "the furniture of the world."

The curious comparison between stars and furniture may suggest that as "the furniture of the world," the stars provide comfort for everyone, regardless of location. Or perhaps the association between furniture and home points to the way sailors follow certain stars to guide their way home.

The men are able to keep their feet somewhat warm by tucking them under one another's. During the night, intermittent, freezing-cold waves soak the passengers, but after some brief grumbling, the men fall back into their "dead sleep." Mostly, though, the sea is calm, and the waves lap "without snarling." Since it's so dark, the correspondent can't see the waves until they are "almost upon the boat." He asks the captain if the boat should still be headed north but is unsure the captain is still awake. In a clear, strong voice, the captain answers yes.

This passage highlights the comforting power of community, as the men keep themselves physically warm by keeping their feet close together. Although the waves are no longer "snarling" like wild animals, this doesn't mean the men have tamed nature—the waves churn and then fall silent on their own. The men are also quiet, deep in "dead sleep," suggesting that they are so exhausted and drained that they might as well be dead.

The correspondent looks at the oiler and the cook huddled together in the bottom of the boat as they sleep, and he likens them to "babes of the sea, a grotesque rendering of the old babes in the wood." Eventually, even the captain seems to be asleep, and the correspondent feels like "the one man afloat on all the oceans." He thinks the phosphorescence that glows on the ruffled waters looks like it was made by a giant knife.

The "babes of the wood" is a folktale about children who are abandoned in the woods and die, but as a phrase it has come to mean those who are entering a dangerous situation without knowing it. By referring to the cook and the oiler as "babes of the sea," the correspondent highlights how innocent the men look while they sleep while unknowingly foreshadowing the end of the story.

The correspondent notices another trail of "bluish" phosphorescent light in the water and realizes that their boat is floating alongside a massive shark. Since everyone else is asleep, the correspondent has no one to share the experience with, so he just swears quietly. The correspondent likens the shark to a "gigantic and keen projectile" but ultimately feels that it is no different than if a "picnicker" had been alongside him. Even then, he wishes some of the other men were awake so that he didn't have to be left alone with the shark.

The shark's conflation with deadly weaponry is one of the only moments in the text that gestures to the Spanish-American War—the very war that Stephen Crane was meant to cover, and the very reason he boarded the Commodore. The comparison between the shark and a "gigantic and keen projectile" also underscores nature's extreme power and dominance.

PART VI

The men repeat their question as to why they have come so far on their journey if they are just going to drown now. The narrator notes that any of the men could reasonably conclude that the "seven mad gods" were trying to drown them on purpose. The men feel this is unfair since they have struggled so greatly. Drowning is something that happens to other people—not them.

Although the men assume that their hard work and suffering should earn them their survival, the story is careful to point out that this is not the case. The men's complaints show the human impulse to assume that bad things happen to other people, but that we are somehow safe or immune to such things ourselves.

Stepping back from the story, the narrator says than when a man realizes that nature is indifferent to him, and that he is an insignificant part of the universe, his first reaction is to "throw bricks at the temple." His second reaction is to become angry, because "there are no bricks and no temples." All a man can really do in the face of nature's indifference is affirm that he loves himself. The narrator returns to the story, noting that although none of the men in the lifeboat have discussed nature's indifference, they all are thinking about it.

Although "The Open Boat" is mainly naturalistic, there are aspects of Romanticism peppered throughout the text. In this passage, the narrator affirms that all a man can do to soothe the sting of nature's indifference to him is to assert that he loves himself. Nature's indifference is clearly part of naturalism, but self-love and the importance of the individual is emblematic of Romanticism, bringing to mind Romantic works like Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself."

The correspondent thinks of a verse from a poem he knew in his childhood about a dying **soldier**. The soldier has no access to a nurse, but his fellow soldier holds his hand for comfort. As he dies, the soldier declares that he will never again see his homeland. When the correspondent was a boy, he didn't care about the soldier's death, thinking the soldier was just the creation of a pretentious poet who sips tea by the fireside. Now, the correspondent thinks of the soldier as a real human being, who, trying desperately to hold onto life, clutches his chest with his left hand to keep from bleeding to death.

The poem that the correspondent thinks of—and incorrectly quotes—is Caroline E. S. Norton's 1883 poem, "Bingers on the Rhine." The poem acts as a measuring stick for the correspondent's empathy, as the correspondent cared little for the soldier and his suffering until the correspondent came face-to-face with the possibility of death himself. The detail about the soldier holding his chest to keep from bleeding to death shows how futile it is to fight against fate or nature (signified, in this case, by the soldier's impending death).

When the captain finally sits up, the correspondent asks if he saw the shark in the middle of the night. The captain says he did, and the correspondent admits that he wishes he knew the captain had been awake, too. The oiler takes over the rowing, and the correspondent immediately falls asleep—only to be woken up, seemingly moments later, by the oiler wanting to switch again.

This passage illustrates the way that community can provide emotional comfort in the midst of suffering. For the correspondent, knowing the captain was awake wouldn't have changed the source of the suffering (the shark dangerously following the boat), but it would have provided emotional comfort.

Later that evening, the captain instructs the oiler and the correspondent to sleep while the cook watches over the boat. He tells the cook to yell out if the boat floats too close to the big waves near the shore. The oiler and correspondent go right to sleep, not knowing that the cook is now left alone with the shark. Although oiler and correspondent occasionally get drenched by the icy cold water, it has no effect on them, and they sleep like "mummies."

In comparison to the captain giving orders and the cook watching over the boat, the oiler and the correspondent are the ones expending the most energy by rowing against the violent sea. This struggle leaves them more like "mummies" than men, illustrating how unmatched the fight is between the vast, powerful ocean and the two men with thin oars.

The cook eventually calls out that the boat has floated near shore, so the correspondent takes the oars once more. Warmed by some whiskey and water from the captain, the correspondent jokingly threatens anyone who ever so much as shows him a picture of oars. Soon after, he switches again with the oiler.

The correspondent's comment is a moment of dark humor that reveals the seriousness of the men's suffering while also making light of it.

PART VII

The correspondent awakens to a grey sky blending in with grey water. Eventually, the water turns gold, and the sky turns blue, and "sunlight flame[s] on the tips of the waves."

This rich description of nature is another instance of the story's occasional nod to Romanticism, as it feels reminiscent of Romantic nature poets like William Wordsworth or Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The captain says that if they linger for too much longer, they will waste all their strength. The correspondent looks at a **wind tower** on the shore and wonders whether anyone ever climbs it and looks out at the sea as if it were a lighthouse. He thinks the wind tower is an expression of nature's indifference to humans. The narrator interjects, noting that once a man internalizes his insignificance, he may yearn for a second chance at life having finally understood the difference between right and wrong. Given a second chance, he would change the way he acts and speaks "and be better and brighter during an introduction or at a tea."

The symbolism of the wind tower points to one of the core tenets of American naturalism: the idea that nature is entirely indifferent to small, insignificant humans. The narrator's comment about how coming to terms with nature's indifference may make a man want to redo his life and behave better "at a tea" may be sarcastic and cynical, since being "better and brighter…at a tea" feels like a poor use of a second chance at life.

The captain affirms that the boat is bound to sink, and that they need to row close to shore and swim the rest of the way. However, the waves are too violent for the men to row much nearer to shore. The correspondent knows the men aren't afraid but can't make sense of what they're feeling. The correspondent himself is too tired to feel much of anything. He only feels that "if he should drown it would be a shame."

The correspondent's apathetic attitude toward drowning is a sharp change from his previous, passionate lamentations to the sea gods. Fighting against nature has drained the correspondent of his energy, vitality, and now, his will to live.

The men calmly and quietly prepare to abandon their lifeboat, and the captain reminds them to jump as far out from the boat as possible. The boat struggles amidst the violent waves, filling with water faster than the cook can bail it out. The oiler prepares the men to jump at the next wave. The correspondent grabs a lifebelt from the bottom of the boat, and as the next wave crashes, the men fall out into the sea. With his left hand, the correspondent holds the lifebelt across his chest. The cold water feels "tragic" to the correspondent, and he wants to cry.

By holding the lifebelt across his chest with his left hand as he jumps out into the sea, the correspondent mirrors the way the soldier from the poem clutched his chest with his left hand to (unsuccessfully) keep from bleeding to death. In doing this, the correspondent accepts that his death is just as inevitable as that of the soldier.

The correspondent looks around for the other men. Nearby, the cook bobs up and down in the water, while the captain holds onto the overturned boat with his uninjured hand. The oiler is "ahead in the race," quickly and powerfully swimming to shore.

The oiler, used to doing hard labor in the ship's engine room, is physically fit and can swim ahead of the group. Just as being the only named character sets the oiler apart from the men, so does the way he swims ahead of the others.

The correspondent gets trapped in a current, and his progress to shore ceases. In the midst of the confusion, he hears the captain yelling to the cook to turn over on his back and use an oar to row himself to shore rather than to swim. The correspondent catches sight of the captain still clinging to the boat despite its "extraordinary gymnastics" as it gets tossed around by the waves. The correspondent looks to shore, which looks like the scene in a painting. He thinks to himself, "I am going to drown? Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?"

The captain's commitment to holding onto the overturned boat despite its "extraordinary gymnastics" echoes the statement from the opening of the story about how it is natural for a captain to form a close emotional bond to his ship, whether he captained the ship for a single day or for many years. In addition, the correspondent's thrice-repeated question about the possibility of his death shows that he is internalizing the fact that his hard work and extreme suffering do not guarantee his survival.

An incoming wave yanks the correspondent out from the tide, allowing him to continue his journey toward the shore. The captain, still clutching the boat, yells for the correspondent to swim to the boat. In his exhaustion, the correspondent thinks about how drowning must be "a comfortable arrangement."

Trapped in a current and then subsequently released from it, the correspondent is at the mercy of a force he can't control—just like the randomness of fate and the indifference of nature. By seeing drowning as "a comfortable arrangement," the correspondent shows his willingness to surrender to nature's power.

The correspondent notices what looks to be a life-saving man running across the shore and stripping off his clothes. Just then, a massive wave sweeps up the correspondent and propels him over the boat and closer to shore. The correspondent is in awe of this "miracle of the sea," since a stray boat in the ocean "is not a plaything to a swimming man." Although the correspondent is now in waist-high waters, he doesn't have the strength to stand, so the waves repeatedly jostle him around.

In his characteristic dark humor, the correspondent refers to the boat as "not a plaything to a swimming man," knowing that crashing into the boat could have killed him. The fact that the wave saved him from the danger of the boat when it could have just as easily caused his death is like a "miracle of the sea" because it's unexpected and unexplainable.

The life-saving man on the shore who had been running and undressing lugs the cook to shore and plods through the waves to the captain, who gestures for the man to save the correspondent first. The naked man, who has seems to have a halo around his head. Shining like a saint, he pulls the correspondent through the waves.

The life-saving man is likened to a saint, momentarily calling into question the text's attitude toward religion. With Stephen Crane's own rejection of religion in mind, however, the characterization of the life-saving man as a saint doesn't suggest a divine savior. Since saints are upright, holy humans, not divine entities, the life-saving man is reflective of the way humans can be one another's saviors.

The life-saving man suddenly cries out, "What's that?" and points, and the correspondent tells him, "Go." In the shallow water of the shore, the oiler is face down, as waves periodically crash over his body and then retreat.

The narrator does not reveal exactly how the oiler drowns. Perhaps he used up too much energy by swimming quickly to shore instead of floating on his back like the cook or hanging onto the boat like the captain. It also may be that swimming ahead of the others meant that he didn't have their support when he began to lose energy.

The correspondent doesn't remember how he finally reached shore, save for falling onto the sand, which felt like falling off a roof, but he is grateful for the land regardless. The shore greets the correspondent, the cook, and the captain in a "warm and generous" way, as the shore swarms with people bearing blankets, coffee, clothing, "and all the remedies sacred to their minds." For the oiler, whose body is carried onto dry land, the shore offers nothing more than "the sinister hospitality of the grave."

Even the shore is indifferent to the men, seen by its two opposite welcomes. For the captain, the cook, and the correspondent, the shore offers a "warm and generous" hospitality, but for the dead oiler, the shore offers only "the sinister hospitality of the grave." In addition, even though the oiler seemed to work the hardest out of the men, he wasn't guaranteed survival.

When night falls, the wind picks up, carrying the sound of the "sea's voice" to the three men, who feel that after all they have been through they can now be "interpreters."

The men now try to be "interpreters" of their experience by assigning meaning to it—something the rest of "The Open Boat" cautions against. By closing the story on this note, Stephen Crane encourages his readers to see the character's mistakes in trying to apply meaning to the natural world. On the other hand, perhaps the narrator is suggesting that the characters have learned precisely this, and are prepared to "interpret" nature in the sense that they now understand its indifference toward them.

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