

The Interpretation of the Sea Image in “The Open Boat”

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Abstract: The ocean, in its incalculable temperament, speaks to the epistemological crisis reflected in naturalist fiction. Stephen Crane's “The Open Boat” contribute to the sea narrative productions by dramatizing the existential battle between the individual and the overpowering forces of the sea. The archetypal study claims that the sea journey has a meaning which refers to religious journey towards spiritual rebirth. But Crane feels the need to establish a new paradigm, in which the suffering endured on the archetypal sea journey must lead to an enhanced individual physical consciousness. The four crew members in “The Open Boat” go through severe spiritual and physical struggle and gradually come to understand the importance of survival and the necessity of human brotherhood. This thesis will analyze the sea image as a trail in natural condition. This trail is aimed to wake the consciousness of the respect of nature and the importance of human brotherhood.

Keywords: “The Open Boat”; Sea image; Naturalism; Stephen Crane; Brotherhood

Having the life-giving, sustaining qualities, the water figure is often considered as the symbol for the unconscious. The mysterious quality of the sea gives sea-going narratives of literature psychological and mythical meanings involving suffering or death on the sea. This often becomes a process of rebirth of body. Also, many cultures across the world have used water in birth and death rituals as a way to symbolize the ocean's healing nature in the circle of life and death. So the discover of sea becomes a journey of rebirth and redemption in literary works. In this process, the hero discovers moral truth or higher meanings as a result of his sufferings and tribulations.

In his naturalistic tale “The Open Boat”, Crane constantly quest the meaning of the individual in the outside world and the relationship between people and nature. “The Open Boat” is one of his representative work that portrays a group of people facing the dangerous natural conditions. The four individuals' spiritual rebirth in this sea-going experience indicates the special meaning of sea as a testing field in this novel. The following chapter will analyze the naturalistic meaning of sea imagine in this short story in detail.

1. “The Open Boat” and Crane's Naturalistic View

“The Open Boat”, which is written around the turn of the century, fictionalize a version of truth incurred through Crane's own difficult experiences at sea. Influenced by the negative possibilities of the Darwinian worldview, Crane depicts the processes of death and sufferings that effectively mute pretensions to mythical resonance.

Crane is routinely cited as examples of the Naturalistic literary movement. So it is important to analyze the connection between naturalism and the sea image. The Naturalistic worldview seeks to explain the human condition through natural and scientific means. The individual is a product of nature and any suffering that he endures comes through natural processes and without supernatural direction. The universe and nature become indifferent forces, thus the survival of individual deeply depends on social conditions and physical self-reliance.

Crane's “The Open Boat” depicts the naturalist theme of man's existential struggle against an indifferent nature. In the naturalistic view, human are impossible to conquer natural forces and are doomed to be defeated if trying to battle without nature. But in this sort story, the natural forces prefer to test the limits of the four individuals rather than to destroy them with invincible force. Like the archetypal sea narrative, the suffering or the death represent the rebirth after severe trail. But here, death becomes a physical breakdown of bodily components. Just as the oiler who fights with all his strength but eventually dies. The four individuals take the trial and test their spiritual and physical limits. Unlike the negative Darwinian existential thinking, people in this short story become the model

of redemptive figures. And the image of sea become the trail of natural forces. Fighting for their lives in this sea journey means renegotiating their relationship with nature. Suffering becomes a means for affirming life, a way to measure and define the parameters of death and a means to assert a self-reliance existence.

2. The Indifference of the Sea

The open lines of this short story reveal that the four men are not familiar with the sea and all lack the ability to survive in such condition. "None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them (Crane 132)." This sentence emphasizes the men's lack of orientation and knowledge. Their ignorance indicates they will have to adapt the natural condition and try to be friends with the sea, or none of them will survive. That none of the crew members "knew the color of the sky" hints the perceptual failure. What is even more remarkable, however, is that none of them knew it, not even the captain is equipped with the skills and experience. But why do none of them know the color of the sky? Is it only because, as the second sentence suggests, they do not look at the sky since their "eyes glanced level" or is the color of the sky itself impossible to grasp? Actually, even it is possible to discern the particular colors of the sea, it seems impossible to see beyond the objects around them, mainly for two reasons. First, the horizon is hard to see as it is swaying back and forth like a boat. The men in the boat see, smell, feel, taste, and hear the water, taking in what Crane calls "the resources of the sea" as it continually moves and changes shape (Crane 133). The individuals are caught in their own impressions and perspectives. The passivity of the crew members is reflected in the narrative. Only little by little, if at all, does the narrative reveal the coordinates of its own journey. Without any contextual knowledge as to the exact reasons for or the location of the shipwreck and the original purpose of the journey, the reader is hard to put the massive information into a whole picture. The second reason for the crew members' incapacity to see the bigger picture is concerned with their physical location. In order to see the color of the sky or the lighthouse and to obtain a sense of direction, they need to have a larger scale of perspective which is impossible for the crew members from the contemporary viewpoint.

3. The Rebirth After Trial

In "The Open Boat", there are many tightly focused statement of the value of suffering and man's relationship to nature. So the sea survival is as a quest for greater understanding of nature and the relationship with nature. The following chapter will analyze the representative statements that have rebirth and redemptive meaning.

3.1 The Rebirth of the Correspondent

As the short story aims, the four men in the small boat will result in some kind of new moral understanding and revised relationship with nature, in which they can be certain color of the sky. The correspondent, in the beginning of the story, characterizes the sea as a sinister force. "There was a terrible grace in the move of the waves, and they came in silence, save for the snarling of the crest. (Crane 133)." Tortured by the unstoping wave, the correspondent describes the sea as an unkind force. But they still have an optimistic outlook as they cannot believe they would be drown after "all this work" (Crane 144) When the correspondent later characterizes nature and the sea as "flatly indifferent" (Crane 155), the phrasing indicates a change in the perception of the relationship between individual and nature. This change is effected by the correspondent's new found ability to survive in the harshly indifferent sea through the bonds of humanistic brotherhood. That is to say, the correspondent's physical ordeal brings about a rebirth of consciousness.

This new understanding of the essential indifference of nature comes only after painful struggle. The correspondent's rebirth of consciousness imbues him with a renewed understanding of the value of life and the value of man's duty to other men. He remembers a soldier who lay dying in Algiers. He has known him since his childhood, but "he had never regarded the fact as important". "Now, however, it quaintly came to him as a living thing" (Crane 153). He comes up a new understanding of human suffering by enduring his own physical pains. As a result, his reformed moral consciousness is directly toward the bonds of human brotherhood.

3.2 The Death of The Oiler

The concluding section of "The Open Boat" also has a strong sense of redemptive meaning. The death of Billie the oiler after the wreck remains the singularly most powerful image in the story. With the correspondent, the oiler works harder than anyone in the crew, but his suffering does not bring him salvation or redemption. Furthermore, his death does not carry the romantic meaning of a death result from the battle with the monsters or the wave in the sea, for he dies at the shore. Through the description of Crane, the oiler lies face down, forehead "touching sand that was periodically, between each wave, clear of the sea" (Crane 188) The eyes of the oiler do not look to the heaven as in popular conceptions of death. His face remains pointed to the earth, which affirms that death is the "final phenomenon of nature" (Crane 187). He does not die trying to save others, but rather trying to save himself. However, nature saves the correspondent by pushing him to the boat but takes the oiler's life away despite of his strong physical condition. So the saintly, "haloed" human rescuer manage to save others in the crew but fails to save the oiler.

The dying image of the oiler underlines nature's indifference, for while the saintly personage appears on cue to save the crew from their watery grave, he can only save the men whom nature has not already taken. The oiler's death has its own finality and inevitability; by the time the haloed figure and correspondent move to save him, he is already face down in the sand.

4. Conclusion

In Crane's versions of the sea quest, he abandons the literary romantic tendency to sentimentalize or over-mythicize suffering and death at sea. The individual must assert himself, securing his place in nature and the universe through physical survival, and his suffering can have meaning only if it leads to a greater ability to survive and consciously be aware of the limits of life and death. In Crane's work, the sea journey re-configures itself to meet the individualistic demands of the American mindset. The redemptive myth survives, but it is always tempered by the versions of Crane: rebirth of spirit comes not automatically through the forces of nature and the sublimity of suffering. It must come as a result of physical survival, so that suffering becomes the means by which the hero can discover his own capacity for physical connection and thereby establish a new consciousness of the implications of human mortality.

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