

## **Naturalism: Man vs. Nature in Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat***

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### **Abstract**

This abstract endeavors to articulate nature's indifference towards human beings, who are struggling to find their way into survival. Stephen Crane's literary productions have always found themselves embedded with the concepts of realism, impressionism and naturalism. His short story *The Open Boat* is acknowledged as the forerunner of the naturalistic works. It depicts four men in their struggle against sea, battling for a second chance at life. Naturalism is a literary concept and a belief that the world is operated by the forces of nature and the characters of the human beings and their actions, in the given situations, are all shaped by the surrounding environment only. This present research study elucidates the above using the literary theory of naturalism. It also helps to articulate the relationship between the natural world and human beings, the highest in the pole of living organisms. Is it really greedy of the mankind to ask fate for a second chance for life? And is the world really governed by the rules of the formidable power of nature?

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The short story *The Open Boat* which is supposedly the real life experience of Stephen Crane from an importunate moment in his life when he was part of a shipwreck, follows four men in the same predicament struggling against the harsh waves of the sea in a rapidly sinking boat.

The article tries to inculcate the various aspects of naturalism employed in the short story. Vernon Louis Parrington's classified aspects of naturalism is borrowed to understand the relationship between the mankind and the natural world. As is the matter in the naturalistic

works, it is safe to address that the narrator although a third person sports a detached tone realistically.

Parrington defines naturalism as “a pessimistic realism, with a philosophy that sets man in a mechanical world. And conceives of him as victimized by that world” (325). William Graham Sumner also comments: “Nature’s forces know no pity” (135).

One of the most important aspects of naturalism is that of objectivity which proposes the idea that human beings are taken as victims of either destiny or fate. They lose their lives to the harshness of nature. “A particular danger of the sea is the fact that after successfully getting through one wave, you discover that there is another behind it. The next wave is just as nervously anxious and purposeful to overturn boats” (2).

Crane uses the same motif in *The Open Boat* when the four men are found struggling against the harsh waves to find their way back to the safety of the seashore. The damaged boat is not making it easy for them either. The lightless dark sea background does not help matters either. The constant nagging thoughts while struggling their way to survival does not entail them giving in at the last minute to the nature’s whims predominate the characters thoughts. Not to mention that the constant portrayal of nature’s indifference towards the human beings play a major part of the philosophy of naturalism.

The pessimistic attitude is one of the other key concepts evident in the naturalistic works. Even though the narrator often seems to be detached from the course of action taking place in the story, it does not flee the reader that the plot does have an underlying tone of pessimism seeping throughout. “He thought: “I’m going to die. Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?” Perhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final act of Nature” (14).

Despite their struggle for survival seems to have been borne fruitful for a moment at the sight of the lighthouse, the lighthouse playing hide and seek with them is a hard reminder to the fact that they still have a long way to go. “The form of the lighthouse was gone from their view, but finally a pale star appeared, just lifting from the sea” (9). The injured captain is another one of the ploys to raise the intensity of pessimism. “The patient captain, leaning against the water jar, was sometimes obliged to speak to the oarsman” (9). From the above lines, it is understood how much the attention and direction of the captain is needed yet ironically how the man is found to be unable to perform anything even what might be the simple act of speaking seems obliged so.

The employment of the characters in the naturalistic works are more often than not belong to lower middle class or lower class. The captain, the correspondent, the cook and the oiler belong to the same socio-economic background more or less. The comment on the physic of the cook's is proof enough that his work is such that entails his physical strength than that of

intellectual activity. "Off to the correspondent's left, cook's great back appeared out of the water" (13).

The portrayal of the dark forces of the nature by Crane does well to showcase the relationship between the human beings and the natural forces which are interpreted as either destiny or fate in the language of everyday life. The humans feel victimized by the forces of nature that their efforts are often found to be standing a no chance against their fate which is often advocated as something beyond human control. The constant thwarting of their efforts and the never-ending obstacles brought in one after the other force the humans to feel despair and ask for a second chance at life reliving their faults and try not to commit the same mistakes and do better in the future if they get to survive the present.

If I am going to lose my life to the sea—if I am going to lose my life to the sea—why was I allowed to come this far and see sand and trees?... But it was certainly not justice to kill a man who had worked so hard, so hard. The man felt it would be a crime. Other people had died at sea since the beginning of ships, but still—. (11)

The common belief of the mankind learnt from the past experiences and incidents not to mention the history about those who borne fruit from the result of their working hard is put to test here when the strugglers are brought to doubt when their hardworking is not met with immediate yet rightful rewards. The human emotions of anger and despair take turns at their go against the nature here:

It represented to the correspondent the calm of Nature against the struggles of the individual....she was not interested, completely not interested.... It is, perhaps, probable that a man in this situation, impressed with the lack of concern of the world, should see the many faults in his own life.... he understands that if he were given another opportunity, he would improve his conduct and his words. (12)

At last the death of the oiler seems to have knocked down the wind from all of their sails. The other survivors are torn between the contradicting emotions of relief and guilt, the former for surviving the dark forces of nature and the latter for them surviving while one of their own didn't make it. "In the low water, face down, lay the oiler. His forehead touched sand that was sometimes, between each wave, above the sea" (15).

The fact that despite the horrible waves and the damaged boat, all four of them made it to the shore only to see the oiler meet his death there:

If I am going to lose my life to the sea—if I am going to lose my life to the sea—why was I allowed to come this far and see sand and trees? Was I brought here

merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to taste the holy food of life?  
(9)

The death of the oiler is an acute example of the employment of the philosophy of determinism which propounds that human life is controlled by various external forces and no matter their efforts to stay alive, there will definitely be tragedy at the end. Though these various aspects of naturalism help to understand the world and the places of mankind and nature within our realm, it never eludes that the world and its machinations might harbor far more mysteries within and around itself than anyone can decipher.

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