

Analysis of the Naturalism in *The Open Boat*

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Abstract

American writer Stephen Crane has the reputation of the pioneer of naturalist. In his short story *The Open Boat*, naturalism occurs through the whole story, symbolism and impressionism still play an important part in creating the work.

Running into three parts, this thesis analyzes the naturalism in *The Open Boat* in detail, the first part mainly introduces to public naturalism and the naturalism of Emile Zola and Darwinism. The second part introduces Stephen Crane and *The Open Boat* in order to analyze the naturalism in all-sided ways. The three part is very important, the thesis analyzes the naturalism from two angles, the one is writing technique, including symbolism, impressionism and psychological realism. The other is character, the naturalism is highlighted from the description of character's eulogization, alienation and struggle.

In *The Open Boat*, we recognize human nature from an objective perspective and reveal a much more realistic world.

Keywords: StephenCrane, Naturalism, *The Open Boat*.

1 Introduction

In literature, naturalism refers to the theory that literary composition should aim at a detached, scientific objectivity in the treatment of natural man.

1.1 Introduction to Naturalism

It developed on the basis of realism but went a step further than it in portraying social reality. Naturalism was a new and harsher realism. Basic Ideas of naturalism are bellows: Our human desires are strong, but always are diminished by the crude, godless, hostile and indifferent universe,

so life is never an easy thing, but a struggle for survival. Individual must learn to adapt to environment and struggle for our responsibility, because our humans lack of free will and are determined by principle of heredity and environment, all of our human behaviors are controlled by brutish impulses. Naturalists attempt to achieve extreme objectivity and frankness and involve literary factors in a mechanical record of society, they never make comments on the characters and their behaviors. Naturalist writers pay much attention on some healthy and lofty characters who are physically strong but weak-willed figures and have miserable ending, most of time these characters are from low social and economic classes with animal desires.

Many American writers adopt this pessimistic form of realism, this so-called naturalistic view of man. Stephen Crane is a case in point. Crane believes, as he says of Maggie, that environment counts for a great deal in determining human fate. Nature is not hostile, he observes in *The Open Boat*, only indifferent, flatly indifferent. Indeed, the earth, in *The Blue Hotel*, is described in one of the most famous passages in naturalistic fiction as whirling, fire-smote, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb. In Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Henry Fleming responds to the very end to the world of chaos and violence that surrounds him with alternating surges of panic and self congratulation, not as a man who has understood himself and his place in a world which reveals order below its confused surface. In naturalistic writings we can see the shattering of the optimistic idealism of the Enlightenment and its belief in the dignity of man, the faith in the democratic system, its hope for human growth and progress.

1.2 Introduction to Naturalism of Emile Zola and Darwinism

Emile Zola is the most proficient figure of naturalism. In his theory, the purpose of a novelist was to be a scientist, to place his characters in a situation and then to watch the influences of heredity and environment destroy them, or, if they were to watch them overcome the inimical force of heredity and environment. Besides, the weak were diminished and their cultures delimited, while the strong grew in power and in cultural influence over the weak. Therefore, the weak and stupid would fall victim in the natural course of events to economic forces.

In the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, industrialism produced financial giants as well as an industrial proletariat. Slums appeared in great numbers and the city poor lived a life of insecurity, suffering, and violence. Self-reliance disappeared in the fast development of economy. What's more, Darwinism became popular in literature, the principle was the struggle for existence survival of the fittest and natural selection.

2 Stephen Crane and *The Open Boat*

Stephen Crane is the representative of naturalism, he thinks the universe does not care about man, who is submerged by forces like environment and heredity. Environment is a tremendous thing for an insignificant human being to battle against. What's more, Crane shows his unique thoughts to naturalism in *The Open Boat*. So it is necessary to do a research about Stephen Crane and *The Open Boat*, which is helpful to analyze naturalism in *The Open Boat*.

2.1 Brief Introduction of Stephen Crane

Stephen Crane is a great mind, he is not only a poet, novelist, but a famous short story writer. He is the ninth child of Protestant Methodist parents. When he was just four years old, Stephen Crane began writing and made some progress in his later years. *Maggie: A girl of the streets* is Stephen Crane's first novel and universally regarded by critics to be the first work of American literature naturalism. His civil war novel *The Red Badge of Courage* gave him the reputation of international acclaim in 1895, which was marvelous thus because he did not have any battle experience. Then, owing to being a witness in the trial of a suspected prostitution, Stephen Crane was involved with a highly publicized scandal. Late that year he decided to visit Cuba as a war correspondent. At the same time, he kept a lasting relationship with Cora Taylor. During the route to Cuba, the vessel SS Commodore Stephen Crane took met accident and sank off the coast of Florida, leaving him and other passengers adrift for 30 hours in a small open boat. According to this alarmingly dangerous experience, he created the work *The Open Boat*, a famous naturalistic representative work.

Troubled by ill health and poverty, Crane died of tuberculosis at the age of 28 in Germany. Though living a very short life, he was a prolific writer. His writing style was diverse, covering color of Realistic traditions, Impressionism as well as naturalism. At the time of his death, Stephen Crane was considered as an proficient figure in American literature. He was forgotten by the public and critics for nearly two decades, after that, his life and works began to arouse their interest and attention and then was regarded as one of the most innovative writers of his generation. In his works, Crane wanted to teach the public to think about themes of his works, such as: fear, alienation, spiritual crises and human nature. What's more, his writing made a deep and profound impact on the 20th century writers, Earnest Hemingway was the most prominent among them. At the same time, Stephen Crane inspired the modernist and the imagist. All in all, Stephen Crane made much contribution to American literature.

2.2 Brief Introduction of *The Open Boat*

The Open Boat is a short story written by Stephen Crane, which is based on his real experience. The story begins with four characters who were abandoned on the boundless sea, although they were hopeless about rescue, the four people never gave up the desire to survive. They formed a team which had a clear division of responsibilities, the captain who had rich life experience is a leading figure, three the other people were under the command of the captain. The cook was responsible for paddling. These four men were equal in status, they worked together for the hope of survival. At the beginning, they expected to be aided by a maritime rescue capsule or life saving station, they wandered between the expectation and disappointment again and again. Firstly the captain saw a life of refuge near Mosquito Inlet Light, they saw the hope of survival, however when their ship were close to the so-called life of refuge, there is not anyone in it, their hope in the heart suddenly became disillusioned. Then hope came again, this time they even saw a figure flashing on the beach, so they thought he would save them, but to their surprise that people could

not understand their dilemma and did not call the rescue, on the contrary he left. Tired and exhausted they got into disappointment again and again., in the face of relentless nature, but hopeless people were still reluctant to yield, though human's strength is limited, survival of the human spirit never wipe out, after disappointing many times it was precisely this spirit that make them stick to it, until they went to the shore.

3 Naturalism in *The Open Boat*

Though *The Red Badge of Courage* is Stephen Crane's peak of works, many critics consider his short story as his most significant work, among those, *The Open Boat* is the most worth reading. Stephen Crane presents the relation among God, nature and human by symbolism in a calm tone. Based on *The Open Boat*, we can analyze naturalism from various perspectives.

3.1 The Embodiment of Naturalism by Writing Techniques

3.1.1 The Embodiment of Naturalism by Symbolism

In *The Open Boat*, Stephen Crane explained the meaning of life and human nature from the point of view of naturalism by using symbolism. In *The Open Boat*, the main characters, except the oiler, they did not have accurate names, so this short story had some allegorical factors and much more reflective efforts, we readers can slip away this story and ponder the real life.

Firstly, on the one hand, the sea is a symbol for nature and society, crude and indifferent. Facing with people's desperation and struggle, the sea keeps her usual statement, no help or mock, just indifference. Sometimes she is crazy, sometimes quiet, like our society, so real but merciless. We can find such sentences in the text: "As each wave came, and she rose for it, she seemed like a horse making at a fence outrageously high", "the color of the sea changed from slate to emerald-green, streaked with amber lights, and the foam was like tumbling snow".[1] On the other hand, when describing sea, Stephen Crane uses the word 'she' to substitute the sea, we all know that she is a synonym for mild, maternal and merciful, so we have complex feelings towards the sea, we not only rely on her, but also face the fact that can be destroyed by her. The small open boat in the boundless sea means that we human adrift in society.

Besides, the main four characters have their own unique personalities and different symbols. They differ from each other. Captain symbolizes leadership and paternal love. He instructs oiler and correspondent how to paddle and keep boat balanced and comforts the other three partners. He is even willing to sacrifice himself to save the others in the end. The oiler stands for masculinity and energy, he is the strongest and shoulders much hard-work when struggling with the sea. He tried his best to paddle. The cook is innocent and optimistic and symbolizes children who are curious and friendly to society. Correspondent thinks much, he stands for our romance and inner world. Therefore, the four characters stand for most of our human, thus this short story. And, sea gull and lighthouse symbolize despair and hope. "Sometimes they sat down on the sea, near patches of brown seaweed that rolled on the waves with a movement like carpets on a line in a gale. The birds sat comfortably in groups, and they were envied by some in the dingey".[i] When people are in danger and spare no

effort to struggle. The sea gull fly back and forth, they can easily slip away from the sea's blow, on the contrary, lighthouse gives people much hope, they have some aim and become energetic when seeing the so-called lighthouse. Correspondent thinks: "This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual--nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men".[1]

3.1.2 The Embodiment of Naturalism by Impressionism

What's known to us is that Impressionism is characterized by relatively small, thin yet visible brush strokes, emphasis on accurate depiction of light in its changing qualities, daily matters, unique visual scenes and human perception and experience. Meanwhile, colors are applied side by side with as little mixing as possible, it is necessary to break the principle of simultaneous contrast in order to make the color appear more vivid and real to the reader. When describing the surroundings, StephenCrane wrote many different and vivid colors to reveal horrific power of sea, such as "The sun swung steadily up the sky, and they knew it was broad day because the color of the sea changed from slate to emerald-green, streaked with amber lights, and the foam was like tumbling snow".[1] Stephen Crane described the surroundings in order not to representing the four characters' psychological desperation and helpless, but to depict the real circumstances in an objective view. In our common's view, the scenes must be horrible and ghastly when we are in this small open boat, but StephenCrane is just be objective, the scene he wrote is fascinating, not influenced by outside threats. Naturalism focuses on accurate description in order to shape an authentic and realistic feelings for readers.

3.1.3 The embodiment of naturalism by psychological realism

StephenCrane is considered as a pioneer of psychological realism, he usually portrays characters' psychological statements when they are in danger in his novels. In *The Open Boat*, the four characters experienced a series of changes in their minds: from fear to boldness, from desperation to hope, from strangeness to intimacy. Especially the correspondent, before the accident he never imagined that he would struggle with these people he ever had prejudice against, but as time marches on and they struggle together. He feels a sense of brotherhood. The captain also has complicated and paradox feelings, he was filled with deep sorrow for the dead, but he has to control himself and keeps his leadership manners. As a matter of fact, he is pessimistic about the surviving route, but in order to sooth the others, he pretends to be hopeful and confident. The oiler is very strong, StephenCrane depicts little about him, in my personal opinion, the oiler is like Hemingway'hero, he talks less but does more, in the end, he is dead because of weariness, which definitely reflects his calm and studious personality. The cook has fancy dreams about adventure route all the time. Above all, StephenCrane is unique comparing with other naturalistic writers who are devoted to prove the principle of survival of the fittest, while StephenCrane emphasizes on randomness of selection in nature and the ridiculousness of morality in the face of poverty and trouble. In *The Open Boat*, brotherhood and sympathy between man and man are highlighted by

depicting characters' psychological action under harsh reality, people begin to ponder the meaning of life and human nature. And Stephen Crane tries his best to be objective and refuses to appeal emotions in his writing, he claims that the short story should have logic and be faithful to its characters. The greatest artist must be the simplest which deriving from the truth, it is the biggest challenge for a short story.

3.2 The Embodiment of Naturalism by Characters

Stephen Crane sets the four characters under the boundless sea and made a detailed depiction about their actions towards the sea's roar and surge 's blow, which is the embodiment of naturalism.

3.2.1 The Embodiment of Naturalism by Characters' Eulogization

In this small boat, the four characters are bonded together for a same goal because of shared plight and similar experience to unite, cooperate and struggle. From the text, we can find their relations become much closer. The other three characters are willing to under the command of captain, the reason is not only they recognize that it the most beneficial for their common safety, but their subtle relation. On this completely isolated situation, there is less hope and death can arrive at any time. Only the holiness and grace of human nature can give human beings innumerable reflections and courage. Meanwhile any unusual optimism will appear foolish and naive, no one can bear public desperation either. So most of time, they prefer to silence in order to stay benighted mood. At the last, when the four characters jump into the sea and swim towards coast, correspondent is stuck into whirlpool and at the surge of death. Captain is ready to give his surviving boat to correspondent and dive into the sea on his own. Besides when somebody in the beach comes to save captain, the captain refuses him and asks to save correspondent first. Comparing with the crude and indifferent nature, the four characters' warm brotherhood highlights the greatness and holiness of human nature. The boundless sea symbolizes our whole world and the four characters are the epitome of human beings. Currently, plenty of worldwide problems rely on human beings' united courage to solve, we human beings are ourselves' God.

3.2.2 The Embodiment of Naturalism by the Characters' Alienation

The four characters in this small boat are isolated, away from coastline and blocked by billows, alienated from society, just like the situation when we are in trouble, we can't ask for help, but rely on ourselves. Correspondent is pitiful for lack of belief and he cannot blame God for his own plight, because "When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no brick and no temples". [1]But even on this circumstance, the four characters still build close relations, "It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas". However, when correspondent paddle the boat on his own in the late of night, he still feels thoroughly alienated and alone. There

are some depictions in this short story: “Nevertheless, it is true that he did not wish to be alone. He wished one of his companions to awaken by chance and keep him company with it”. [1] Most of critics hold the view that *The Open Boat* focuses on man's role in this society, but there are still disputes about how does man exist by nature.

Stephen Crane wants to affirm man's ability and valuable role by alienation of man. In boundless sea, no material, no desire, no contend and no hostility, the four characters unites together for the same goal, they are helpless and alienated, which motivates the realest human nature and re fixes man's role in society. In this short story, the characters are doubtful about themselves and nature, for example, correspondent used to say such words: 'look like', 'appears ', the real truth cannot be discovered. Meanwhile, the first sentence in this short story has underlying meaning and lots of reflections.

No one knows the color of sky, this sentence sets some uncertain and bleak tone. Besides, in the first part of this story, when correspondent is paddling boat, he is cautious why he is there, which arouses much thought, even the most knowledgeable and professional philosopher cannot define why we are in this world. Naturalists claim environmental determinism, thus Stephen Crane pursues truth and prove his view towards this principle in a very objective way.

3.2.3 The Embodiment of Naturalism by Characters' Struggle

This route is a struggle of spirit and physic. The four characters closely cooperate and spare no effect struggling for survival. Captain believes he never can find more obedient and swifter sailor than the three characters. In the evening, oiler and correspondent paddle this small boat in turn, they would wake the other to take work over unless they feel fatigued to the extreme and cannot insist any longer. Every time they both feel sorry for the other. For them, they are mutual companies, comfort and hope, they even exchange their addresses to be prepared for accidents. During the long-hour struggle, oiler and correspondent shoulder much heavy physical labor, on the one hand, they must keep heightened alertness, not stopping paddling in order not to lose orientation, on the other hand, it is really difficult to adjust position, a little careless can cause this small boat drifting into the sea. When they talk about whether can they safely reach shoreline, they just keep silent and all act in concert without previous arrangements, in their perspective, on this hard occasion, any kind of optimism appears naive and foolish, but they are all hopeful to their states beyond doubts. What's more, the circumstance they live in does not bear any public desperation, so they have to keep silent. In the end of story, the strongest oiler doesn't survive, which appears contradictory to Darwin's principle, survival of the fittest, the only one who is dead is the only one who has the biggest hope to survive. Stephen Crane wrote: “The welcome of the land to the men from the sea was warm and generous, but a still and dripping shape was carried slowly up the beach, and the land's welcome for it could only be the different and sinister hospitality of the grave”. [1] Undoubtedly, though they survive in the perils of the sea, they still cannot escape death, no matter how struggle with all their mighty, grave is the inevitability of their courses. However, after such experience, correspondent has a deeper reflection on the meaning of

life and he makes a much more penetrating interpretation. As a matter of fact, all of these are the usual situations when man struggles for life, they have to work day by day, not because they love it, but just need it. Correspondent doubts that why a reasonable man would consider paddling a boat is fascinating and relaxing, in his personal feelings, when it comes to our body's extreme, it is not a hobby, but a horrible punishment. From the process of struggling, significance of life is clearly understood, a much realer human nature comes in sight.

Conclusion

In *The Open Boat*, social circumstances have little influence on the characters, moral power and belief can not control their destiny any more. The four characters symbolize human beings, they lose free will and can not do anything about their life and death, they are afflicted by nature's uncontrollable power which can arrange life and death, this is exactly the embodiment of naturalism. Facing the terror of death, they expose their human nature. Though they cannot control their destiny in the face of terrible conditions, they still insist and struggle in battle with an instinct for survival and a firm will. *The Open Boat* is a masterpiece of naturalism, no matter in theme or writing style, but the most fascinating is its humanistic value, in the last sentence of this story, they felt that they could then be interpreters, the meaning is very vague, which arouse much argument among critics. In my personal opinion, the four characters understand the limitlessness of our human power, learn the foolishness of conceited human and experience the purest friendship in the world and mightiness of collective spirit through the test of life and death, therefore they become the new explanatory of human destiny. British writer Joseph Conrad makes comments:" the story of the four characters are in a small boat portrays the deep and pure human nature and explains the meaning of life". [2]Actually, *The Open Boat* appears very easy in plot, in fact, indicates profound life philosophy. Beside the compliment of collective spirit of survivors and brotherhood of mutual aid, this work still reveals a truth: as long as human beings struggle constantly under the guidance of belief, we can turn from blackness to light, from here to there and from one point to another new one, no matter how difficult it is, we also can get access to lifesaving.

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