



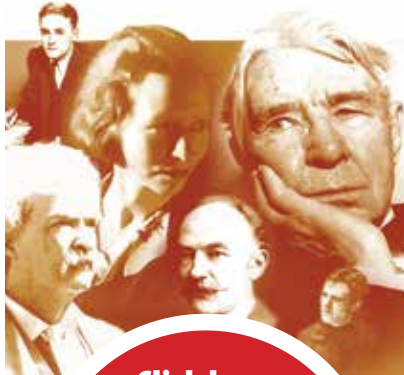
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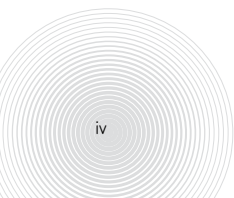
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Stephen Crane

The Open Boat



INTRODUCTION

The Open Boat

This harrowing, suspenseful story of a shipwreck and its survivors' ordeal is based on reality: Stephen Crane was on *The Commodore*, a cargo ship headed for Cuba, when it sank on January 2, 1897. Crane, the captain, the cook, and the oiler left the ship safely in one of the ten-foot dinghies, but faced almost impossible odds against staying alive. In a newspaper account published soon afterward and available on several websites, Crane writes, "The history of life in an open boat for thirty hours would no doubt be instructive for the young...." The short story was a central part of his collected works called *The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure* (1898).

Stephen Crane

A painstaking craftsman and pioneer in Naturalism, Stephen Crane produced some of the most vivid, vibrant fiction ever created—especially in his masterpiece, *The Red Badge of Courage*, a Civil War novel published in 1895—but his life and career were very short. He was born on November 1, 1871, in Newark, New Jersey, the son of a Methodist minister, who encouraged his son to write. Later, he attended various colleges, but Crane was never an enthusiastic or highly successful student and dropped out of Syracuse University in 1891 to become a writer.

Crane had spent time hunting and camping in Sullivan County, New York, a rural area about a hundred miles northwest of New York City. While there, he wrote a series of short stories that were published in the *New York Tribune* in 1892, and he became a regular contributor to the newspaper. In the fall of that year, he moved to a rooming house in Manhattan and spent some time in the Bowery, a neighborhood in the southern part of New York City. Based on his experiences there, he wrote his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893). He published it privately, and received a good critical notice from Howells, but sold few copies.

Crane continued to earn a small amount as a freelance writer for various New York publications. Pulling together recollections of his childhood conversations with Civil War veterans and his reading of a series of articles recalling the conflict's battles, he began writing *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1893. The novel was first published in serial form in several newspapers, and by the time it came out as a book in 1895, it had become well known and much anticipated. Although he published poetry, stories, and many newspaper articles, nothing would ever approach the enormous success and popularity of his most important work, which has never been out of print.

Crane's lifestyle and unconventional views did not go over well in the strict, religious, business-oriented American culture near the turn of the century. In 1897, he moved to England, where he socialized with such well-known writers as H. G. Wells and Joseph Conrad. He had developed tuberculosis during his travels, however, and died on June 5, 1900, while undergoing treatment in the Black Forest in Germany.

The oiler's name on Crane's actual boat, the *Commodore*, was William "Billy" Higgins.

Surmounting: rising above

Dinghy: a small boat

down. The mind of the master of a vessel is rooted deep in the timbers of her, though he command for a day or a decade, and this captain had on him the stern impression of a scene in the grays of dawn of seven turned faces, and later a stump of a top-mast with a white ball on it that slashed to and fro at the waves, went low and lower, and down. Thereafter there was something strange in his voice. Although steady, it was deep with mourning, and of a quality beyond oration or tears.

"Keep 'er a little more south, Billie," said he.

" 'A little more south,' sir," said the oiler in the stern.

A seat in this boat was not unlike a seat upon a bucking bronco, and, by the same token, a bronco is not much smaller. The craft pranced and reared, and plunged like an animal. As each wave came, and she rose for it, she seemed like a horse making at a fence outrageously high. The manner of her scramble over these walls of water is a mystic thing, and, moreover, at the top of them were ordinarily these problems in white water, the foam racing down from the summit of each wave, requiring a new leap, and a leap from the air. Then, after scornfully bumping a crest, she would slide, and race, and splash down a long incline and arrive bobbing and nodding in front of the next menace.

10 A singular disadvantage of the sea lies in the fact that after successfully **surmounting** one wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats. In a ten-foot **dinghy** one can get an idea of the resources of the sea in the line of waves that is not probable to the average experience, which is never at sea in a dinghy. As each salty wall of water approached, it shut all else from the view of the men in the boat, and it was not difficult to imagine that this particular wave was the final outburst of the ocean, the last effort of the grim water. There was a terrible grace in the move of the waves, and they came in silence, save for the snarling of the crests.

In the **wan** light, the faces of the men must have been gray. Their eyes must have glinted in strange ways as they gazed steadily **astern**. Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtlessly have been weirdly picturesque. But the men in the boat had no time to see it, and if they had had leisure there were other things to occupy their minds. 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. The process of the breaking day was unknown to them. They were aware only of this effect upon the color of the waves that rolled toward them.

In disjointed sentences the cook and the correspondent argued as to the difference between a life-saving station and a house of refuge. The cook had said: "There's a house of refuge just north of the Mosquito Inlet Light, and as soon as they see us, they'll come off in their boat and pick us up."

"As soon as who see us?" said the correspondent.

"The crew," said the cook.

15 "Houses of refuge don't have crews," said the correspondent. "As I understand them, they are only places where clothes and grub are stored for the benefit of shipwrecked people. They don't carry crews."

"Oh, yes, they do," said the cook.

"No, they don't," said the correspondent.

"Well, we're not there yet, anyhow," said the oiler, in the stern.

"Well," said the cook, "perhaps it's not a house of refuge that I'm thinking of as being near Mosquito Inlet Light. Perhaps it's a life-saving station."

20 "We're not there yet," said the oiler, in the stern.

Wan: pale

Astern: toward the back of a boat

Amber: a transparent yellowish brown color

II

AS THE BOAT bounced from the top of each wave, the wind tore through the hair of the hatless men, and as the craft plopped her stern down again the spray slashed past them. The crest of each of these waves was a hill, from the top of which the men surveyed, for a moment, a broad tumultuous expanse; shining



QUESTIONS

1. How does the author's choice to name only one of the characters contribute to the story's meaning and impact?

2. Analyze the effects of the following sentences that describe the perils of the boat and its passengers: "A seat in this boat was not unlike a seat upon a bucking bronco....The craft pranced and reared and plunged like an animal....Then, after scornfully bumping a crest, she would slide and race and splash down a long incline and arrive bobbing and nodding in front of the next menace" (part I, paragraph 9).

3. In part II, the captain says he sees a distant lighthouse. What meanings and inferences can be drawn from the following passage: "The correspondent was at the oars, then, and for some reason he too wished to look at the lighthouse...." At first, he fails to see it. Then, "his eyes chanced on a small, still thing...precisely like the point of a pin. It took an anxious eye to find a lighthouse so tiny." What does the author leave us uncertain about? Why?

16. How does the structure of the story contribute to its overall impact?
17. The author often uses personification. List at least three examples and explain what they add to the effectiveness of “The Open Boat.”
18. “The Open Boat” and “To Build a Fire” were both published close to 1900, and both are examples of Naturalism. In an objective essay, compare the stories by focusing on how they treat the “man versus nature” conflict.



INTRODUCTION

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

Bierce's colorful and richly detailed story of the hanging of a quickly convicted Confederate saboteur during the Civil War was originally published on July 13, 1890, in the *San Francisco Examiner*, a newspaper, for which Bierce was a staff writer. Soon, he included it in what many critics consider his best book, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891). Bierce had served with distinction in the Union army, participating in several well-known battles, such as Shiloh in Tennessee, which occurred near the actual Owl Creek. During one battle, he was seriously wounded in the head. After being hospitalized for a few months, he returned to duty, but suffered from blackouts, which led him to accept a medical discharge from the army in early 1865. These periods of blacking out might have furnished some of the basis and imagery for "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."

Ambrose Bierce

Although Bierce is now known primarily for his Civil War stories and his biting satirical and often hilarious *Devil's Dictionary* (1906), he also had a successful writing career as a contributor of essays and humorous articles to various California publications and worked as a staffer at the San Francisco-based *News-Letter and California Advertiser*. There he wrote popular pieces that were collected in his first book, *The Fiend's Delight* (1872), and a second book, *Nuggets and Dust* (1873). These collections made him a national celebrity and earned him laudatory comparisons to Mark Twain, who had become an acquaintance. Bierce would go on to write for other papers, publish several more books, and become one of the leading American humorists and short story writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Bierce was born June 24, 1842, near Horse Cave Creek in Ohio, about a hundred miles southeast of the capital city of Columbus. He was one of thirteen children, and his father had a large library where Bierce supplemented his education. Not much, however, is known about his early childhood and schooling. During the Civil War, he worked as a mapmaker and engineer, though he also took part in some heavy combat, rising steadily up the ranks to first lieutenant. After his discharge, he was given an honorary promotion to major.

Like many young men of his time, Bierce went to California seeking a new life and soon started his writing career in San Francisco. After marrying in 1871, and spending a few years in London, he and his family returned to San Francisco.

gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed that it was a gray eye and remembered having read that gray eyes were keenest, and that all famous marksmen had them. Nevertheless, this one had missed.

A counter-swirl had caught Farquhar and turned him half round; he was again looking at the forest on the bank opposite the fort. The sound of a clear, high voice in a monotonous singsong now rang out behind him and came across the water with a distinctness that pierced and subdued all other sounds, even the beating of the ripples in his ears. Although no soldier, he had frequented camps enough to know the dread significance of that deliberate, drawling, **aspirated** chant; the lieutenant on shore was taking a part in the morning's work. How coldly and pitilessly—with what an even, calm intonation, presaging, and enforcing tranquility in the men—with what accurately measured interval fell those cruel words:

“Company!...Attention!...Shoulder arms!...Ready!...Aim!...Fire!”

Farquhar dived—dived as deeply as he could. The water roared in his ears like the voice of Niagara, yet he heard the dull thunder of the volley and, rising again toward the surface, met shining bits of metal, singularly flattened, **oscillating** slowly downward. Some of them touched him on the face and hands, then fell away, continuing their descent. One lodged between his collar and neck; it was uncomfortably warm and he snatched it out.

As he rose to the surface, gasping for breath, he saw that he had been a long time under water; he was perceptibly farther downstream—nearer to safety. The soldiers had almost finished reloading; the metal ramrods flashed all at once in the sunshine as they were drawn from the barrels, turned in the air, and thrust into their sockets. The two sentinels fired again, independently and ineffectually.

10 The hunted man saw all this over his shoulder; he was now swimming vigorously with the current.

Aspirated: stated with a strong exhalation of breath

Oscillating: moving back and forth at a steady speed

which it did not resemble. The trees upon the bank were giant garden plants; he noted a definite order in their arrangement, inhaled the fragrance of their blooms. A strange roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind made in their branches the music of Aeolian harps. He had not wish to perfect his escape—he was content to remain in that enchanting spot until retaken.

15 A whiz and a rattle of grapeshot among the branches high above his head roused him from his dream. The baffled cannoneer had fired him a random farewell. He sprang to his feet, rushed up the sloping bank, and plunged into the forest.

All that day he traveled, laying his course by the rounding sun. The forest seemed interminable; nowhere did he discover a break in it, not even a woodman's road. He had not known that he lived in so wild a region. There was something uncanny in the revelation.

By nightfall he was fatigued, footsore, famished. The thought of his wife and children urged him on. At last he found a road which led him in what he knew to be the right direction. It was as wide and straight as a city street, yet it seemed untraveled. No fields bordered it, no dwelling anywhere. Not so much as the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson in perspective. Overhead, as he looked up through this rift in the wood, shone great golden stars looking unfamiliar and grouped in strange constellations. He was sure they were arranged in some order which had a secret and malign significance. The wood on either side was full of singular noises, among which—once, twice, and again—he distinctly heard whispers in an unknown tongue.

His neck was in pain and lifting his hand to it found it horribly swollen. He knew that it had a circle of black where the rope had bruised it. His eyes felt congested; he could no longer close them.

An Aeolian harp is an instrument usually made of wood that is played by the force of the wind and is named after Aeolus, the mythological Greek god of wind.