

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Open Boat

by

Stephen Crane

Book Information

Stephen Crane, The Open Boat

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Book Level: 7.2

Interest Level: UG

After a shipwreck, four men struggle to survive in a tiny rowboat on the vast ocean.

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Classics, Classics (All); Series, Creative Short Stories; Short Stories, Short Stories (All); Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

Main Characters

captain the injured master of the vessel that sank; he helps keep the crew alive

cook the most optimistic member of the surviving crew

correspondent the writer, who helps Billie row the boat

oiler (Billie) the expert oarsman of the crew, who drowns at the end of the story

Vocabulary

apropos appropriate; at the right time

cessation ending

obstreperous unruly

pathos a quality that moves one to pity

roseate rose-colored

throes hard or painful struggles

Synopsis

The Open Boat begins with four men in a ten-foot dinghy who have survived the sinking of their ship off the Florida coast. The captain has suffered an injury that prevents him from helping to row the boat, but the men look to his guidance in their struggle to get to shore. The cook is apparently also incapacitated because he cannot row either, but he does contribute by bailing water out of the boat. The

rowing is then left to Billie the oiler, who is an expert oarsman, and to the correspondent, who relieves Billie periodically.

While the men steer the boat towards the lighthouse at Mosquito Inlet, they speculate about when they will be spotted by people on shore and picked up by boat. When they are within sight of the lighthouse, they light cigars in celebration of their impending rescue, but no rescuers appear. The captain decides that since no help is coming, they must head towards shore. Billie begins rowing through the treacherous surf but then informs the men that the boat will capsize quickly and that they will not be able to swim the rest of the way. The captain agrees, so they head back out to sea.

Late that afternoon, they spot a man on the shore. The stranger sees them and waves his jacket, but the men are not sure whether the man is giving them a signal or just giving them a friendly greeting. The man is soon joined by others. The men in the boat become upset because the people on shore do not send out a rescue boat.

Darkness sets in and the men begin a long night on the water. Billie and the correspondent continue to take turns manning the oars throughout the night. While the correspondent is rowing, he is unnerved when a shark approaches. Then he notices the shark has left, and he feels somewhat relieved. During the night the boat drifts too close to shore, so they row back out again, and finally dawn arrives.

At this point, the men confer and agree that they must try to reach shore before they are too exhausted. They head into the surf and, before long, the boat is swamped with water. All four men go overboard. Three of the men head for shore, while the captain clings to the boat for some time. Then a man on shore spots them and heads into the water to help them. All the men survive, except for Billie, who is found drowned on the beach.

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

At the end of *The Open Boat*, "when the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, they felt that they could be interpreters." What happens during the course of the story to make them feel they can interpret the voice of the sea?

The men have gained insight into their relationship to the sea, nature, and the universe. They have felt the indifference of nature and realize that nature has no kindness or feeling for mankind.

Literary Analysis

Why are the oiler and the correspondent so kind to each other when they must "spell" each other for the rowing assignment?

They develop a deep bond that comes from sharing suffering and danger. They express this bond by helping each other and the rest of the crew stay alive, even though they must do this by rowing until exhaustion.

Inferential Comprehension

How does the correspondent grow and change in the story?

His outlook on suffering changes. For example, he feels compassion for the soldier dying in Algiers. He had been indifferent to the soldier, but he now feels sympathy toward him.

Constructing Meaning

The author of this story, Stephen Crane, illustrates that nature is indifferent and uncaring to man. Explain examples from the book that support this statement.

The men's frustration and rage at the unconcerned forces of nature is very evident. Nature's indifference is illustrated by the waves, the gulls, the shark, and the passing of day and night with no concern for the men's exhaustion and pain. The death of Billie at the end of the story is a final indictment of nature's indifference to man.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors *The Open Boat* is a story about man's survival during a disaster, in this case, the sinking of a ship. Have students imagine they are reporters assigned to write a newspaper story about the aftermath of a national disaster in their area. This could be a tornado, a hurricane, a flood, a plane crash, a shipwreck, a fire, or other emergency. Explain journalistic style to the students and have them incorporate this style in their story.

Understanding Sequence After having read *The Open Boat*, students should realize that certain skills are needed to survive a disaster. Have the students choose a situation in which they could find themselves, such as being lost in the woods, having capsized in a lake or river, being confronted by a dangerous animal, or being the victim of a car accident. The students should research proper procedures for handling the emergency they choose and write a survival handbook explaining their recommendations. Have them publish their books and distribute them to the class.

Understanding Characterization Have students prepare and present a live interview of the characters who survived the ordeal in *The Open Boat*. The students can role-play a reporter and each character who survived. The interview could be presented live or in the form of an audio tape or videotape.

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Responding to Literature The narrator of *The Open Boat* mentions both lifesaving stations and houses of refuge. Have students research the function, location, and operation of these facilities. Do any still exist? Then have students give an oral report on their findings.