

Contemplating Sand and Trees in “The Open Boat” and the *Odyssey*

BY MEREDITH MEACHAM

THE CORRESPONDENT IN “The Open Boat,” a short story published by Stephen Crane in 1898, poses the following question as he and three companions are adrift at sea after a shipwreck: “If I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?” A similar question could have been asked by Odysseus in the *Odyssey* as he traversed the seas for ten years, though it would have elicited a quite different response. In Homer’s world the outcomes of Odysseus’ situation are determined by responsive and involved gods, whereas in “The Open Boat” the four companions must face an impersonal and indifferent nature as the greatest determining force.

The opening line of the Crane’s story—“None of them knew the color of the sky”—reflects the uncertainty and loneliness of the situation as his four “poor waifs” are set adrift in a tiny rowboat amid turbulent, frigid, and shark-infested waters. At first the four men feel that the forces of nature around them have conscious intentions, both helpful and hostile. Sometimes these forces give the impression of aiding the men by blowing them towards the shore and providing stationary mats of seaweed to mark their progress; at other times the sea appears like a wild animal, consciously trying to overturn the boat and send its crew to a watery ending. Are the seven gods really mad or merely disinterested? The men are faced with a frightening possibility—even worse than the existence of a higher power intent on their destruction—the higher power has no intentions for them at all.

The fact that these men may drown is described as “preposterous” and “an abominable injustice,” but who is the source of this injustice? No one, and that lack of responsible agent is what makes it so abominable. For Odysseus, however, he knows the source of his circumstances, which, though he may consider it unjust, is really the justice handed down from the gods. After countless hours at sea the men in the open boat have lost nearly all hope of survival and are becoming increasingly frustrated with the seeming helplessness of their situation. The likelihood of drowning

is increasing, though that outcome feels like it would be a “crime most unnatural.” Most frustrating of all, there appears to be little they can do in protest: “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 bricks and no temples.”

Yet in the world of Odysseus there are temples at which to throw bricks; there are tangible ways to express dissatisfaction with his situation. Well-known for his cunning in tough situations, Odysseus is occasionally left alone to “contemplate sand and trees,” but the gods ultimately intervene to ensure his safety while hardening his voyage. He knows that the gods or other superhuman beings are behind the

On the Origin of Gods

by R.B. Stewart, jr.

Since the beginning of consciousness, Man’s fear of the unknown has given rise to the invention of mythical, omnipotent deities to shield him from all real or imagined pestilence and suffering. Man refers to these omnipresent and all encompassing guardians as gods. They are all-powerful protectors, who recognize fidelity, and reward the faithful with everlasting life. This book chronicles Man’s obsession with gods even before cave dwelling days, and how gods have been an essential element in the evolution of mankind.

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forces of nature that cast him and his ship about. There are multiple gods involved but only one mad god who rules the sea, Poseidon, whom Odysseus has knowingly angered.

So who is more free in these two worlds, Odysseus and his crew or the correspondent and his companions? Odysseus can bargain and communicate with the gods, and he can tell to some degree what they have in store for him. He knows that if he angers them he'll be punished and if he pleases them he'll be rewarded. By learning how to appease the gods, particularly by avoiding offending Poseidon and staying in the good graces of Athena, he can ensure his safe return to Ithaca in time to remove the usurpers of his home. But his life and its meaning have already been decided based on the wishes of the gods.

By contrast, the men in the open boat have no one with whom to bargain for their lives. Their sense of injustice has no effect on their survival because nature is "indifferent, flatly indifferent." However, it is they who decide the meaning of their lives. And one of the ways they can affect their own survival and derive their own meaning is by understanding the laws of nature, which are unchanging. For example, the men apply their understanding of wind when they use an overcoat as a sail and apply their understanding of currents when they try to row the boat toward land. They have learned these laws of nature by careful observation of the world around them. Worrying about whether or not the "seven mad gods who rule the sea" want to drown them serves no purpose.

In addition to using their intellect and knowledge, the men can control their fate through hope and cooperation with each other. They survive by teamwork—alternating shifts of rowing and providing mutual encouragement and companionship. And at the end of the story, when the unlikely survivors hear the voice of the sea from the safety of shore, they feel "that they could then be interpreters," free to contemplate and make sense of their experiences together or on their own.

As becomes clear by reading these two pieces of literature, without the ability to personify nature or appeal to a higher power, we are left frighteningly on our own. The world of "The Open Boat," as unwelcoming as it may seem, is far closer to today's reality than the world of the *Odyssey*. In this naturalistic and humanized world, our intellect, hope, and cooperation must prove themselves to be our best tools for understanding and enduring long enough to become "interpreters." ■

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one of a society whose concept of God evolves from a combative tribal deity into a humane one. The same thesis has been argued by Humanist Erich Fromm in his book *Ye Shall Be As Gods*. The overall approach to the text is similar to a long-standing school of thought known formally as "narrative criticism"

As such it is misleading for the reviewer to state that Spong "denounces biblical passages that appear to support the interpretations of his conservative foils, then selects and exalts other verses to buttress his own exegesis." Spong is not at all engaging in proof texting in the way that fundamentalists do. Since he clearly states in the opening sections that he doesn't regard the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, it should be clear that he is doing no such thing. Spong's citations are meant more as illustrations of his thesis than as evidence. His approach is one that should seem more sensible than fundamentalism to almost anyone with a background in world literature who has studied other epics such as the *Aeneid* or the plays of Shakespeare. There is nothing "inexplicable" or arbitrary to his proclamation that this is a proper way to engage the Bible, although it won't be convincing to all readers.

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