Jack London's To Build a Fire And Stephen Crane's The Open Boat: Annotated Bibliography And Short Analysis

Haque, Salma. “Nature’s Paradoxicality in Stephen Crane’s ‘The Open Boat.’” ASA University Review, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 121–126. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=126542536&site=ehost-live&authtype=sso&custid=s8415227.

Haque exposes the paradoxical and unpredictable personality of nature in Crane’s “The Open Boat” by using several examples of the actions of nature. The unpredictability of nature can be seen in the waves; nature can be nice with calm waves or cruel with giant waves. Haque notes that the men “row for collective survival” against this unpredictable force (3). Haque presents nature as both the impartial punisher and helpful benefactor of the crew through the survival of all but the oiler, who seems to be the most likely candidate for survival. The facts that nature provides relief from the waves and directs the crew to shore prove the paradoxicality of nature; nature is helping man in the man versus nature conflict. Haque provides a sound analysis of the unpredictability of nature. She firmly supports each point with several concrete examples.

Metress, Christopher. “From Indifference to Anxiety: Knowledge and the Reader in ‘The Open Boat.’” Studies in Short Fiction, vol. 28, no. 1, 1991, pp. 47–53. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=1991062155&site=ehost-live&authtype=sso&custid=s8415227.

Metress analyzes the importance of knowledge in Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat” by evaluating a few examples where knowledge is withheld from the reader and the people on the boat. The fact that neither the reader nor the characters know the color of the sky builds the collective tension of surviving the waves. Metress notes that the reader gains knowledge the men do not know when the reader is informed that there is not a life-saving station anywhere near the raft. The men in the boat regain the knowledge advantage in the final sentence by leaving the reader wondering what the men can interpret from the voice of the sea. Metress concludes that by withholding or granting knowledge at important junctures, Crane intended to convey the message that “experience itself, and not the mitigated experience achieved by reading, is our true source of knowledge” (5). This source provides a well-balanced, sound evaluation of the usefulness of information in “The Open Boat.” Metress focuses mainly on the reader’s knowledge, but he also points out several useful examples where the story withholds knowledge from the men in the boat.

Reeseman, Jeanne Campbell. Jack London: A Study of the Short Fiction, Twayne, 1999, pp. 39-48, 232-236.

Reeseman analyzes London's overall usage of naturalism in "To Build a Fire" through the themes of justice, imagination, and community. The man certainly has the knowledge he needs in the wild, yet he lacks the imagination to apply that knowledge. The man rejects all forms of community and the aid that community provides, despite having the useful physical company of the dog. Reeseman notes that because of the man's pride, "nature exhibits a sense of justice" in the man's death (43). The article concludes with an analysis of the main symbol, fire, and how it demonstrates "man's inability to see nature in all its dimensions" (47). Reeseman uses vivid details and sound logic to present London's naturalism. She does use several excerpts from some of London's other works to demonstrate his use of naturalism.

Outline

Thesis:

The parallel elements between Jack London's "To Build a Fire" and Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" support the naturalistic themes of both stories.

1. The extreme situations accent the more hostile disposition of nature.
    1. Nature appears to hide the water pockets under a white skin of snow to trap the man in "To Build a Fire."
    2. The snow from the tree falls directly on the fire, removing the hiker's source of warmth.
    3. The massive waves endlessly attempt to capsize the raft in "The Open Boat."
2. The use of knowledge in both stories presents the trap of social circumstances.
    1. The hiker has a head knowledge of survival facts, but no imagination to interpret the meaning of those facts.
    2. The man in the snow is prideful and rejects community with others, despising the wise knowledge they supply.
    3. The men in the raft rely and act on the knowledge and experience of the captain.
    4. The men grow a sense of community and reliability through their shared knowledge and experience.
3. The deaths in both stories depict the uncaring persona of nature.
    1. The hiker's death suggests that nature is innocent, and the man brought his fate on himself.
    2. The oiler's death implies that survival is random.