

POWERLESSNESS AND HUMAN INSIGNIFICANCE IN STEPHEN CRANE'S *THE OPEN BOAT*: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper has discussed the role of Stephen Crane in The Open Boat in helping people feel insignificant and powerless through the application of a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The research using the three dimensional model of Fairclough examines textual, discursive and social practices to bring out the vulnerability, dependence on chance and shared human experience that are created through use of narrative strategies, lexico-grammatical choices and stylistic devices. The analysis shows that Crane does locate the men in the boat as passive observers of nature pointing at the human frailty and little agency but also anticipates cooperation as the required answer to an uncreative universe. The research also determines the presence of ideological meanings in the story, which is the interaction of existential vulnerability, social solidarity, and the overall naturalistic worldview. The study can benefit methodologically and substantially by combining CDA and the traditional literary analysis in that the language actively creates perceptions of human insignificance and social interdependence. The results highlight the importance of discourse-analytic methods in literary analysis to explain how narrative produces ideology, relations of power and subjectivity of people.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, human powerlessness, human insignificance, naturalism, ideology

Introduction

Background of the Study

The short story, *The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane is a widely read work of literature that is often considered an exemplar of naturalism and the technique of impressionism in American fiction of the late-19th century. It is inspired by Crane, a witness of being shipwrecked and revolves around four men in a little dingy and relies on a closely managed, observational narrative voice to levy moments of physical jeopardy, personality bargaining, and soul searching (Crane, 1897). At the surface events level the story is one of survival; at the discursive stage it plays out a prolonged struggle of human agency versus impersonal forces of nature. Due to the intentional forward-looking of the collective action (the cooperation of the men) and the subjective interiority (the moments of fear, hope and fatalism), *The Open*

Boat is especially fruitful when a question is formulated that connects the linguistic selection with ideology, power relations, and the formation of human meaning.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides methodologies of exploring how texts create social reality using language and ways that the constructions are reflected and reproduced in larger ideological formations (Fairclough, 1995). CDA transcends close reading to reveal overtly the relationship between lexico-grammatical options, narrative patterns and socio-cultural sense. The analysis of narrative voice, reported speech, modality, and evaluative lexis as stances to authority, marginalization or solidarity has been explored using CDA in literary studies (van Dijk, 1998). The use of CDA to *The Open Boat*, therefore, enables the researcher to question how linguistic and narrative practices used by Crane create certain images of powerlessness, solidarity, and human insignificance as applied to nature and fate.

The themes and themes as of the crusading determinism and precariousness of contemporary life have led to a focus on the formal (point of view, free indirect discourse, narrative irony) and thematic concerns in existing literary scholarship on Crane. But comparatively anew few studies have mapped with the systematic mapping of those formal properties onto a discourse-analytic grid that explicates the working of how language is a way of encoding power relations and human subjectivity. A CDA strategy bridges this gap by the operationalisation of such concepts as modality, transitivity, nominalization, and narrative framing to demonstrate how the text builds epistemic authority, agency and marginalization (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). This would also allow focusing on the interpersonal metafunctions of the text, including the way Crane takes the readers in, places them in the same space as the characters or out of it and how he/she negotiates authority, making the ideological implication of a narrative technique visible.

This research, *Powerlessness and Human Insignificance in Stephen Crane the Open Boat: A Critical Discourse Analysis* thus falls within the borders of literary criticism and discourse studies. The study will be based on the Fairclough three-dimensional model (textual analysis, discursive practice and social practice) as the primary model of analysis through which the research will (1) examine critical passages in terms of their lexico-grammatical and narrative characteristics that encode powerlessness and insignificance; (2) analyze how these characteristics are used to construct collective identity and interpersonal relationships among the boatmen; and (3) comparatively contextualize the textual results with priority on larger social and ideological themes- particularly, ideas of nature, human agency and modernity prevalent in the *The Open Boat*. The expected contribution is double: empirically, the study will create a narrow-grained description of how *The Open Boat* linguistically constructs human vulnerability and smallness; methodologically, it will reveal how CDA can add to the literary understanding of text, that is, to draw formal evidence in the text and social-ideological assertions.

Statement of the Problem

Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat* has been widely examined within American naturalism, impressionism, and realism, with critics often focusing on themes such as man's struggle against nature, determinism, and existential uncertainty. Although these analyses are valuable to inform us of the philosophical and aesthetic aspects of the story, they have mostly been based on themes or impressionistic interpretations of the work, as opposed to systematic examinations of the language upon which these meanings are created. Thus, very little is known about how the particular linguistic and discursive tactics in *The Open Boat* contribute to and propagate the ideas of human powerlessness and insignificance. Moreover, the relationship between language, power, and ideology as a focus of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), has hardly been used in the available literary criticism of the work by Crane. Narrative elements including voice, modality, transitivity and evaluative language that create

representations of human agency and vulnerability have not been well studied. This paper will seek to fill this gap by utilizing the three-dimensional model of CDA suggested by Fairclough in analyzing the ways in which the textual choices of Crane do not only reflect but actively produce ideological meanings concerning human limitation, collective identity as well as the indifferent forces of nature.

Objectives of the Study

The current research study focuses on the following research objectives:

- To examine how language constructs powerlessness and human insignificance in Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat*.
- To identify the ideological meanings conveyed through these discursive constructions.

Research Questions

Following are the research questions:

- How does the language of *The Open Boat* represent powerlessness and the insignificance of human?
- What ideological meanings are conveyed through this representation?

Significance of the Research

The study is important because it explores the literary research by using Critical Discourse Analysis in *The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane, which has been subject to thematic and naturalistic approaches. The emphasis on linguistic and discursive aspects helps the study offer a more systematic and textual interpretation of the construction of powerlessness and human insignificance using the language instead of considering them as an abstract theme.

The research also has a methodological value because it shows the practicality of the Fairclough CDA model in the analysis of literature. It demonstrates that discourse-analytic instruments can help to fill the gap between linguistic analysis, on the one hand, and literary interpretation, on the other, providing a replicable model of examining ideology and power dynamics in fictional texts.

Lastly, the study can contribute to the students and scholars of English literature, linguistics, and discourse studies because it can enhance critical consciousness on the role of language in influencing the perception of human agency, collective identity, and human nature relationship. The findings may encourage further CDA-based studies of literary texts, particularly within the tradition of American naturalism.

Literature Review

The Open Boat by Stephen Crane has received continued critical attention since its publication, mostly as a part of American literary naturalism. The initial critics refer to the story as a canonical naturalist work of determinism, environmental pressures, and constrained control of human beings (Pizer, 1993). The description of nature as non-hostile that Crane gives is often noted to be a repudiation of the romantic belief in the existence of a significant and moral universe, which strengthens the vision of the unimportance of man before the impersonal forces of nature (Nagel, 1980).

One of the main streams of criticism is the human powerlessness and determinism in *The Open Boat*. According to scholars, the men in the dingy are denied the traditional heroic agency; they need not rely on their personal prowess but on luck, collaboration and the forces that they cannot control (Gullason, 1960). The repetition of the themes of fate, irony and randomness of the story has been viewed as Crane criticising the anthropocentric visions of the world where human beings do not have any purpose or divine defence (Mitchell, 1986).

The other significant field of study is on collective identity and brotherhood in the story. On the one hand, Crane emphasizes the insignificance of the human being, but, on the other hand, he predetermines the unity between the four men, introducing cooperation as the only

human way to respond to an indifferent world (Walcott, 1966). The collective suffering in the open boat creates a momentary collective consciousness that cuts across social hierarchy hence, questioning the principles of power and authority. This conflict of collective power and the existential impotence is still one of the major issues of the Crane criticism.

Stylistically, the scholars have examined the use of narrative voice, irony and impressionism in Crane. It has been argued that this is made possible by the detached, observational narrator, which adds to the feeling of objectivity and emotional detachment that ramps up the theme of powerlessness (Nagel, 1980). The constant changes between the outward explanation and inner contemplation enable the reader to indulge in physical weakness and mental ambiguity thus supporting the meaninglessness of personal vision amidst the enormous forces of nature. Although such thematic and stylistic analyses are so rich, not many studies have used the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze *The Open Boat*. According to Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (1998), CDA focuses on the role of language in creating power relations and ideological meanings. As a literary technique, CDA has been effective in disclosing how the narrative discourse codes authority, marginalization and resistance with the use of language options of modality, transitivity and evaluative language (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Nevertheless, such systematic linguistic approach to the text by Crane has been seldom studied.

According to the current CDA based literature studies, fictional narratives may recreate or challenge the prevailing ideologies through the creation of an impression of agency and power in readers (Fairclough, 1995). The transfer of this framework onto *The Open Boat* allows a more definite interpretation of how the language Crane uses creates the meaning of human insignificance not only as a topic but also as a discursive impact which the specific textual strategies create. Thus, this work fills a definite gap in literature that combines the classical Crane research with CDA to deliver the linguistically-based examination of powerlessness and the human insignificance.

The Open Boat by Stephen Crane has been reviewed by many critics and the feature that has been highlighted is its philosophical pessimism and its denial of romantic beliefs on the human ability to master nature. According to scholars like Berryman (1954), the realism of Crane is distinguished by the intense deprivation of any moral conviction, where human beings are minimal and to a great extent vulnerable beings in an indifferent cosmos. This opinion places *The Open Boat* in the position of a text that disrupts the classic discourses of heroism and divine protection.

Some of the critics have concentrated on the existential aspect of the story. According to Colvert (1963), the story is a pre-modern articulation of the existentialism in modern times where meaning cannot be secured by some external forces but has to be provisionally made by the solidarity of man. On the same note, Solomon (1966) observes that Crane is depicting nature as uncaring, but not hostile, hence, enhancing the feeling of human insignificance as well as lack of cosmic justice.

Narrative structure and narrative perspective are other aspects that other scholars examine as important in building powerlessness. According to Baym (2003), the changes in the narrative voice and ironic distance of Crane does not allow readers to find a consistent centre of authority, which strengthens uncertainty and helplessness. The abundance of the impersonalization of descriptions and collective pronouns plays down the agency of the individual and portrays human action as constrained and temporary.

Socio-cultural viewpoint on the theme of brotherhood and communal survival has also been discussed. Donaldson (1997) claims that the short-term equality between the four men is the failure of social hierarchies in the most extreme situation when traditional forms of power are

no longer applicable. Nonetheless, this solidarity does not neutralize powerlessness; it only emphasizes human reliance on each other in the world that does not have the upper assurance. Regarding the language and symbolism, Hochman (1967) also focuses on repetitive imagery of waves, birds and the horizon that Crane applies and proposes that discursive patterns reinforce human marginality in a subtler manner. The repetition of natural imagery serves as a reminder as a language of scale and superiority, juxtaposing human plight in oppressive comparison with overwhelming and powerful forces that are impersonal.

Although these works are valuable thematic, philosophical, and stylistic analysis, they distinctly depend on interpretation literary criticism as opposed to systematic analysis of language. Not many scholars specifically consider the linguistic expression of powerlessness through grammatical decisions, modality, agency suppression or narrative framing. The importance of this gap is and can be demonstrated by the fact that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perceives literary text as a place where the ideology and the power relations are being created using the means of a language.

Recent CDA-oriented literary studies argue that fiction participates in ideological meaning-making by shaping readers' perceptions of agency, authority, and resistance (Toolan, 1998). Applying this framework to *The Open Boat* allows for a deeper understanding of how Crane's linguistic patterns actively produce meanings of human insignificance rather than merely reflecting them. Thus, the present study extends existing scholarship by combining traditional Crane criticism with CDA to provide a more explicit, language-centered account of powerlessness in the text.

Research Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative research design, which focuses on the way in which *The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane constructs powerlessness and human insignificance using the language. The study uses the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the main tool of analysis, specifically the three-dimensional model by Fairclough (1995), which considers the text at three interrelated levels: the textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. By doing so, it is possible to conduct a systematic research on the relationship between language, ideology, and the power relations in the story.

The exploration of how the narrative choices of Crane linguistically encode the themes of human vulnerability, agency, and insignificance is described and interpreted. The research is qualitative as it examines textual and linguistic characteristics as opposed to statistical information in an attempt to reveal the patterns of meaning and ideological importance. The short story *The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane (1897) is the primary data of this study. Passages that reflect the human struggle, people action, and relations to nature are chosen and analyzed in detail. The sources listed as secondary are literary criticism, scholarly articles about the works of Crane, and literature of CDA that offer theoretical and methodological advice.

The sampling of data is done through the text of the story and the particular sections which give emphasis on human powerlessness, vulnerability and insignificance. Passages are classified according to thematic topicality and language characteristics modality, the use of the pronouns, the transitivity, and the evaluative adjectives. The paper uses the three-dimensional CDA model by Fairclough using vocabulary, grammar, and narrative structure as the main means of identifying linguistic constructions of powerlessness and insignificance. Among them there are transitivity, modality, pronouns, and evaluative language. It also examines the production, circulation and interpretation of the narrative in the text, narrative perspective, voice, and stylistic decision making. Lastly, discursive and textual aspects are associated with wider ideological and socio-cultural dimensions, including the attitudes towards human agency, nature indifference and collective identity.

Analysis and Discussion

Language, Powerlessness, and Human Insignificance

Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat* presents human beings as small and vulnerable in the face of an indifferent natural world. The language, narrative voice, and grammatical structures work together to produce this effect. From the outset, Crane emphasizes human vulnerability through diction, imagery, and syntax. For example:

“None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes were darted at the same level, and were fixed to the waves sweeping their way toward them (Crane, 1897).

Individual heroism is immediately prefigured by the collective pronouns such as none of them which alludes to common vulnerability. The words the eyes glanced level imply confinement of vision, which means that the knowledge and understanding of the men are limited by the sea immensity. The transitivity focuses on human beings as the experiences and not agents; they are affected by the environment and not acting on it. Such grammatical decision prefigures powerlessness as the destiny of the men is determined by nature.

The picture of the sea created by Crane also emphasizes the role of a human being:

The thirty-five-mile-an-hour wind and waves did not feel hard however the combination of both the wind and the waves made the small boat run hard (Crane, 1897).

In this case, the modifying adjectives did not appear strong and was not very high are in contrast with the powerful verbs labor in underlining the fact that human ability is outnumbered by the forces of nature. Even the apparently insignificant waves are hard to overcome, which supports the motif that people are small and unchanged in the vast and indifferent world. The narrative voice is observational and detached that creates the feeling of objective inevitability which is a reflection of the fact that the men have no control.

Uncertainty and reliance on chance, which Crane also focuses on, adds to the powerlessness:

It befalls man when he discovers that nature does not consider him significant, and that she does not believe she would be mutilating the universe by getting rid of him, to first desire to slap the building with bricks, and he imagines that somehow he would intervene with fate (Crane, 1897).

The line talking about nature not considering him to be important literally inscribes human insignificance. It is syntactically framed in such a way that nature is the subject and the man is the object, and humans are attached to the first, thus making them subordinate. The fact that one interferes with destiny adds the stress of the fact that there is no agency, but only useless resistance. According to CDA, this is a power imbalance in the language construction where the power is held entirely on the side of the natural forces.

Crane also generates the collective pronouns and the collective experience in order to emphasize the collective human frailty:

It was an every man to himself place and they had to do what they could (Crane, 1897).

The paradoxical expression of each man to him self and the collective situation of the boat emphasizes the contrast of the helplessness of individuals to groups by demonstrating that human importance is relative to collaboration and not overpowering nature. The lexical selection of must do what they could means limitation where human effort is overemphasized as restricted and inadequate.

Lastly, the repetitiveness of the description of the horizon and the sea by Crane supports the theme of insignificance:

The waves continued and it was a procession of water, endless, and indifferent (Crane, 1897).

The words of eternity, endlessness, and indifference make nature a depiction of an impersonal thing, which makes the human beings appear tiny. The patterns of lexicon and syntactics such

as impersonal tone, lack of agency, descriptive repetition, etc., in the narrative culminate to place humans in a powerless, peripheral, and insignificant position in the universe.

Overall, Crane uses pronouns, transitivity, modality, lexical and imagery to language construct human powerlessness and insignificance. The men are constantly shown as passive participants of the forces of nature, reliant upon chance and group activity, bringing forth the existential theme of human life being frail and insignificant in the huge, indifferent world.

Ideological Meanings in *The Open Boat*

The Open Boat by Stephen Crane does not only portray the vulnerability of man, but also ciphers the ideological presumptions regarding the nature of human being in the world, the characteristics of fate, and group identity. These ideologies are represented by the language and narrative devices, which are rather subtle and powerful.

The first of these ideological constructions is that humans are not important in the universe. For instance, Crane writes:

When it comes to a man as to why nature will not think of him as a person, and that she faces no feeling of mutilating the universe by get rid of him...

It is the clear indication that nature does not view him as significant, which builds an ideology where human life is periphery and secondary to impersonal forces. The syntactic arrangement puts nature as the agent and the human as the patient, which is found to represent a worldview where humans are passive subject of external power and individual agency is constrained. This ideologically concurs with naturalistic and existentialist philosophy where no guarantee or centre to human meaning is guaranteed.

Collective human resilience and cooperation is also another ideological theme. Although human beings are helpless singly, Crane focuses on momentary unity:

It was every man to himself and they had to do what they could (Crane, 1897).

Through this building, there is the expression of an ideology where social ties and cooperation are needed to survive. The comparison drawn between each man for himself and they must do what they could brings out the conflict between individual restriction and group action. The modal verb must linguistically reflects the necessity, which implies that one is supposed to survive through cooperation, which implicitly market an ideology that places a more premium on collective action over the heroics.

The ideology of the apathy of nature and human reliance on luck is another code that Crane plays:

The waves continued coming it was a never ending procession of water, infinite and indifferent (Crane, 1897).

The words eternal, endless, and indifferent create a world reality where nature functions without any attention to the human affairs which strengthens the perception that people are controlled by forces outside their control. The monotonous plot and unemotional style and tone legitimize the idea that man is doomed to fight with nature, and this ideology of human submission and predestination advocacy is encouraged.

Lastly, Crane also uses the narrative point of view to place the reader into the realm of being vulnerable as the men, meaning, there is an ideological connection between the readers and the marginal or powerless. The use of collective pronouns, evaluative adjectives and narrative commentary conveys the message of human life being fragile, dependent and contextually constructed that indicates the social and philosophical ideologies of human limitations, mortality and interdependence.

Overall, the discursive constructions in *The Open Boat* have ideological connotations that highlight the insignificance of humans, their reliance on nature and the significance of social cooperation. Crane codes a worldview through syntax, modality, narrative perspective and

evaluative language, which gives the reader a tool to understand being as contingent, interdependent, and subservient.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Conclusion

The Open Boat by Stephen Crane is a remarkable story of human insignificance and vulnerability using both thematic and linguistic techniques. The naturalistic structure of the story together with the impersonal tone of the narration, the pluralization of the pronouns and description creates a picture of human beings as insignificant, helpless and the victims of the cold nature. Transitivity, modality, and evaluative language analysis will show that the men in the boat are placed in passive experiential roles, and not agents, and that the human life is contingent and precarious, which is an existential point.

Meanwhile, significant ideological meanings are coded in the text. Crane points to the need to work together and to collaborate, and indicates that human solidarity is the only response that can be made to a cold universe. The monotony of the portrayal of waves and the horizon, of the impersonal tone of the narrative, makes the notion of the indifference of nature seem natural, and puts human struggle in a wider existential context. Together, these discursive formations convey the worldview where humans are vulnerable to power, but morally and socially united.

Through the Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper has demonstrated that it is not the human insignificance as a theme but actively constructed with the help of particular linguistic and narrative decisions in The Open Boat. These results highlight the extent to which the language used by Crane mirrors and constructs ideological insights into the human defenselessness, the boundaries of agency, and the worth of living collectively, which provides the reader with a sensitive tool in understanding human life within a large and unconcerned natural environment.

Suggestions

According to the results of the current research, some recommendations can be offered regarding the future research and implementation. To begin with, the researchers are advised to use Critical Discourse Analysis to other publications of the American naturalism or literary modernism in order to analyze how language shapes human vulnerability, powerlessness, and ideological connotations. In the case of human insignificance, the comparison between the portrayal of Crane and the works of other naturalist authors like Jack London or Frank Norris could be made, in order to see the similarities and differences in the stylistic and narrative techniques used. Moreover, further studies may be done to explore how language constructs powerlessness and agency in texts with varying gender, racial, or social points of view to diversify the concept of vulnerability to the male experiences of situations of extreme circumstances.

Moreover, the narrative voice, the point of view, and the stylistic devices are worth more in-depth examination because the changes in the focalization and the irony influence the understanding of the human agency and insignificance in the readers considerably. Scholars to explore how these themes are expressed in the various modes of discourse can also investigate the multimodal analyses, i.e. cinematic or visual versions of the naturalist texts. Pedagogically, integrating CDA methods in literature classes can contribute to the critical awareness of students regarding the role of linguistic decisions in forming themes, ideology, and power relations and promote the connection between the study of literature and the study of language. All these approaches provide the possibilities to enlarge the area of the literary and discourse study and offer effective instruments to teaching and interpretation.

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