人本主義凌駕自然主義：
史蒂芬•克萊恩作品中的道德觀

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摘 要

每位文學家的特質，均無法一言以蔽之，且文學家所欲表達的思想，也常不限
宥於單一哲學。在文學評論中，我們習慣將文學家分門別類，或歸類為某某思潮，
或某某社會運動，但常常無法含括這些文學家的思想全貌，作家史蒂芬•克萊恩
(Stephen Crane)便是一例。

近年來，不少有關於史蒂芬•克萊恩(Stephen Crane)的形上哲學相關評論，大部
份側重於自然主義的看法。這些評論者們，對史蒂芬•克萊恩小說中的自然主義議
題，多有探討，惟鮮能對其作品的人文特質，提出完整看法；結果常是以管窺天，
以蠡測海，未見全豹，至為可惜。

史蒂芬•克萊恩的作品雖以自然主義為框架，但在大自然架構的人文社會中，作
者亦主張提倡人本主義之生活態度。大自然對人之態度或許漠然，人類卻應該勇敢
表達悲天憫人的胸懷。縱使我們同處一舟，若能同舟共濟，不僅能倖存於世，更能
臻於幸福之境，而這也是史蒂芬•克萊恩一生的懸念。

關鍵詞：自然主義、人本主義、寫實主義、道德倫理、哲學、環境

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Humanism Trumps Naturalism: Morality at Play in the Works of Stephen Crane

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Abstract

No one quality defines a writer, just as no metaphysical theory can encompass all that a writer wishes to communicate. All too often in the field of literary analysis authors are pigeon-holed into one movement or another, but the result is that some of what they have to say is lost in the din of categorizations and movements. Stephen Crane is one such example. Over the years a large body of scholarly work has been accumulated on Stephen Crane, and for the most part, this scholarship has focused on Naturalism. Many scholars have discussed the Naturalistic qualities of Crane’s fiction, while a much fewer number of critics have highlighted the Humanistic qualities present in the works of Crane. Consequently, statements that allude to Crane as simply being a Naturalist tend to belittle the Humanistic qualities of his writing.

While it is nothing new to state that elements of Humanism are present in Crane’s stories, these elements have been underestimated and undervalued, and there is a strong argument to suggest that these Humanistic elements of the fiction are in fact a main focus of Crane. That is to say, Humanism can be argued to trump Naturalism in the works of Stephen Crane. This dominance of Humanism can be seen in a number of Crane’s stories, including *Maggie A Girl of the Streets*, *The Monster*, *The Blue Hotel* and *The Open Boat*.

Crane writes within the paradigm of Naturalist fiction, yet within those boundaries advocates a Humanist approach to the societies that inhabit this natural world, and this is the main focus of many of his stories. The universe may indeed be indifferent, but humanity can still dare to show compassion, and Crane seems to suggest this very point in his stories.

**Keywords:** Naturalism, Humanism, Realism, morality, metaphysics, environment.

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Naturalism, Humanism and the Works of Stephen Crane

The question of what forces are at play in a person’s life has always been of interest to writers of great literature. Are the forces that shape our lives derived completely from natural elements such as the environment and hereditary factors or does life also contain elements of destiny and/or spirituality? Moreover, if life is composed of more than the physical aspect, what does this imply in terms of morality? While the answers to this question vary greatly, opinions on these issues tend to mold our ideas of philosophy and identity to a great extent, and in turn help to construct the way we interact with the world. In the world of literature stances on issues such as these predispose writers towards certain paradigms such as: Romanticism, Realism, Existentialism, Humanism and Naturalism just to name a few. However, as is most often the case, labeling an author is not so simple as while we all may have opinions on various subjects, life is not black and white, and categorizing people and things usually leads to generalizations and oversimplifications, as is the case with Steven Crane.

In the canon of American literature Stephen Crane is most often ranked with the Naturalists. Naturalism is closely related to Realism and seeks to portray reality as it really is, not as a romanticized or abstract concept. The period of Naturalism in American literature is generally considered to have been between the Civil War and World War I. While the period of Naturalism is not questioned, critics tend to disagree on a fundamental definition. According to Becker, Naturalism and Realism were used interchangeably in Europe in the late nineteenth century; however, the separation in American literary spheres led to a distortion of their application (3-38). Pizar notes, that a general consensus that has emerged is that:

whatever was being produced in fiction during the 1870s and 1880s that was new, interesting, and roughly similar in a number of ways can be designated as realism, and that an equally new, interesting, and roughly similar body of writing produced at the turn of the century can be designated as naturalism (5)

These scholar’s observations help to posit Naturalism in American literature, but not define it. Other critics such as Howell, believe that American Naturalism in literature was seen as “the truthful treatment of material” (133), showing a rejection of subjectivity. Critics like Rudd also attribute the influence of Darwin to the overall philosophy of the movement. As he notes of the American Naturalists:

They tried to discipline themselves to a stricter level of objectivity, even that of the scientist poised to consider any reasonable idea - such as that the ancestors of Homo sapiens may include simians but not angels, that Homo may act far less from sapience than from instinct, that physical needs may override the conscience, that life is a chancy process rather than a path toward redemption, that nurture within an inescapably specific environment shapes organisms in fascinating but sometimes
In this critic’s opinion, Naturalism goes even further than Realism in the fact that it denies any aspects of spirituality or morality as truly existing in life. Reality, and the people that inhabit it, are shaped by nature only, and that means environment and hereditary factors are the only forces which mold our world. The theory was heavily based on Darwinian Theory, and while it may seem simple and logical, it is imbedded with far reaching implications; significantly the absence of free will.

Humanism, on the other hand, implies a sense of morality that is present in the psyche of human beings, and that people should strive to do good rather than evil. The intellectual and social movement that we call Humanism has been through many phases in its journey from ancient times to the present, but one overriding principle may be said to be, as the Latin grammarian Aulus Gellius stated in the 2nd century CE, “a kind of friendly spirit and good-feeling towards all men without distinction” (17). While perceptions of this idea varied through the ages; for examples, the Christian approach of the Renaissance, the 19th-century, philosophers such as the German Ludwig Feuerbach emphasizing an understanding of life over a search for freedom as the key to human realization and attainment (Davies, 27). Whatever the variations in definition, morality was and is the cornerstone of Humanism. As Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century humanist wrote in his *Life of Milton*:

>The truth is, that the knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind. . . . We are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance.... Socrates was rather of opinion that what we had to learn was, how to do good, and avoid evil (qtd. in Abrahms, 117)

At first glance the two theories of Humanism and Naturalism appear to be incompatible; however, when life is seen from an existentialist viewpoint—in that the only meaning to be found is that which we ourselves create—elements of each seem able to stand side by side and co-exist without hypocrisy. That is to say, it is possible to be a Humanist in a Naturalistic world.

In the works of Steven Crane the issue of what forces shape the lives of people is particularly apparent and worthy of discussion as many of his stories seem to contain an interplay of both Naturalism and Humanism. While most critics focus on the Naturalistic elements of Crane’s work; Becker (1963), Howells (1993), Pizar (1995) and Rudd (1995) to name a few. Other critics such as Dooley (1996) and Wertheim (1998) highlight the Humanism present in Crane’s fiction. This paper strives to expand on the idea that elements of Humanism are present in Crane’s stories by demonstrating how it is the Humanistic elements of the fiction that are in fact the main focus of Crane. That is to say that Humanism trumps Naturalism in the works of Stephen Crane. As evidence this paper will cite examples from a number of Crane’s stories including: *Maggie A Girl of the Streets*, *The Monster*, *The Blue Hotel* and *The Open Boat*.

In *Maggie A Girl of the Streets* the structure of Naturalism is used; however, elements of
Humanism can also be found stemming from the fact that Maggie herself seems to defy certain Naturalistic forces in that she is a victim of Rum Alley’s perceptions of morality rather than the physical forces of a Darwinian universe at play. Also, in the short story *The Monster* we can also see how elements of Humanism have not only crept into the Naturalistic setting, but dominate the main themes of the story. In this story Dr. Trescoff performed a miracle, out of kindness and appreciation, in bringing back Henry Johnson from the dead, and this act can be likened to Christ’s raising of Lazarus of Bethany. Moreover, the monster he thus creates represents something that is beyond people’s comprehension and therefore something to be feared, and this issue confronts society as to the fact of how far it is willing to go in its ideas of benevolence and charity. Again in *The Blue Hotel*, Crane once again creates a Naturalistic setting using the novel approach of geometry to show how morality and natural cycles interact and are interwoven with each other, and as such this story also combines both Naturalistic and Humanistic elements. In this short story a Swede entering the west encounters the environmental forces present there, and tests himself to see whether or not he has the ability to survive. However, in this story the other characters muse as to whether or not they should also take some responsibility for the lives of others as the other characters all have their own circles of trust and family, and the Swede is excluded from all these circles. In *The Blue Hotel* when confronted with the demise of the Swede, it the question of morality more than the environmental factorsthat Crane leaves the reader to ponder. Finally, in Crane’s story *The Open Boat* the setting is one of nature, the ocean; however, the struggle that the protagonists go through is undertaken for the collective good, and thus brings questions of social responsibility and morality to the plot.

From the above examples we can see Crane’s stories are an interplay of Naturalism and Humanism, but a question that to this critic begs analysis is, ‘Which ‘ism’—Naturalism or Humanism—features more prominently in Crane’s metaphysics?’ In this paper this question is investigated, and the conclusion drawn is that Crane is first and most foremost a Humanist.

**Maggie’s Downfall: Environment or Inhumanity**

When it comes to Steven Crane, many scholars are predisposed to highlighting the Naturalistic elements present in his works. For example, according to Gullason, during the time that Crane wrote *Maggie A Girl of the Streets* many American writers were still preoccupied with romantic fiction such as: *Black Beauty, Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde, The Prince of India* etc. (88). Crane on the other hand, wrote about a family living in the slums, and filled his story with disturbing images, profanity, violence and chaos. The differences in style can be most easily attributed to the differences between Romanticism and Naturalism, Crane obviously being part of the latter group. The European Romantics emphasized emotive qualities: an awe of beauty in nature, a movement beyond the rational as a way of reacting against the problems associated with the industrial revolution and the inevitable urban sprawl that followed. As Wordsworth stated in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: poetry should be “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” which the poet then “recollect[s] in tranquility,” evoking a new but corresponding emotion the poet can then mold into art (151). Their American
counterparts are not so easy to pigeonhole as the Transcendental movement—with its emphasis on intuition and spiritualism—differed substantially from the questions of guilt and sin that Hawthorne and Poe were preoccupied with. However, whether European or American, the Romantic literature focused on human emotion as the source of aesthetic experience as the primary goal for fiction. On the other hand, he Naturalists believed more in realism, and sought to depict stark reality in their literary works. However, Naturalism and Realism are not exactly the same. As Abrams points out, “Naturalism is sometimes claimed to give an even more accurate depiction of reality of life than is Realism” as according to the Naturalists human beings exist entirely within the order of nature and do not have a soul and therefore cannot be part of any spiritual or religious world beyond nature (261). In this sense humans are animals: all be it advanced and higher-order animals, yet animals all the same. The philosophy is clearly born out of Darwinism as it holds many of the same aspects of that philosophy to be true. Within the literary sphere the Naturalists try to depict a world that fits within this paradigm as that is how they see the real world as functioning. In such a view of the world only two elements serve to shape people and society, and they derive from hereditary and environmental factors, and any other possible causes that may influence society are denied. Famous American authors such as Crane, Dressier, and even to some critics, Hemmingway are seen as belonging to the Naturalists; however, we must be wary of oversimplifying such categories. As we will see Crane’s Maggie A Girl of the Streets is a story based on Naturalist’s lines, yet in many ways it goes beyond that paradigm, and moves toward a more Humanistic approach to life.

In Maggie A Girl of the Streets the major protagonists are all characters that attempt to depict life as it really was in the slums of New York in the late 1900s, and shows how their entire lives are shaped by that setting. In this sense, the story adheres to the criteria of Naturalist fiction as it is set in a slum and contains the theme of the overpowering effect of environment. In Rum Alley it is a dog eat dog world, and only the strong survive. Moreover, Jimmy and Maggie appear to have little or no chance of changing things for themselves, and in a world without hope, in the end simply become products of their environments. Clearly this is a major theme of the novel, yet perhaps not the major theme. If we dig deeper, we can find elements of the story that do not fall so neatly into the Naturalist’s way of thinking. For example, why is Maggie described as a having “blossomed in a puddle” and as having “none of the dirt of Rum Alley … in her veins” (18)? If the novel is an example of naturalist literature, then the environment of the slums must have a huge effect on Maggie. We would expect her to become a product of her environment, pure and simple, yet she does not. She grows up pure and untouched and unchanged by her environment.

In fact Maggie’s demise comes not from her physical environment, but from the social morals enforced on her by Rum Alley, particularly her mother and brother. Maggie’s crime then appears to be one of responding to perceived kindness, at the hands of Pete, and actually just wanting to have a nice time. While it may assumed that Pete and Maggie have sex, the novel gives no proof, and that puts the reader in the same situation as the mother, and for that matter all the others in Rum Alley; that is assuming they must have had sex. This brings us to one of the most fascinating and key aspects of the
novel, that is the response to Maggie's apparent indiscretion. The response to this supposition is both harsh and cruel, and it is the response that leads to the tragedy of Maggie’s downfall. This dynamic creates a most interesting scenario as Maggie remains pure and untouched throughout the whole story, and can be seen to be physically beyond her environment, yet when it comes to the subject of morality, Maggie is completely at the mercy of the moral forces of Rum Alley, and in a more abstract sense to those of the reader as well.

The conclusion that seems apparent is that Crane is not only trying to depict an example of Naturalist fiction, but is also going further by commenting on American morality, particularly criticizing the morality present within the New York slums of the late 1800s. Within this context a sort of middle-class morality pervades the lives of the slum dwellers, and Crane seeks to show how the people of those slums simultaneously judge others and divorce themselves from any responsibility from those they judge (a very middle-class morality indeed). Ironically this middle-class morality is also used by the greater society to judge all those who live in the slums as being inferior and lacking in nearly all accepted forms of morality. Instead of banding together to fight these unfair categorizations they remain divided and use the very same notions of morality to attack each other. In the case of Maggie, it was the judgment by Rum Alley that forced her out and led to her death. However, the ultimate irony and hypocrisy comes in the final scene when the women of the building beg the mother to forgive her daughter. By highlighting this false morality Crane’s novel is not simply about showing how the physical environment of the slums effect and shape its population; rather it in fact tries to highlight the difference between reality and the moral appearances that people try to create. In this sense Crane’s is attacking the very nature of American middle-class morality, and accusing it of being not only hypocritical, but also an imagined creation; thus not at all part of the ‘natural’ world.

This view of Maggie A Girl of the Streets however is not shared by all critics. The critic Gibson sees the novel as an attempt by Crane to rally against the Darwinian universe, where everything is decided by genetics and environment, much as one might try to rage against the rising of the sun in the morning (212-213). Gibson goes on to describe how in his opinion no one is actually free in this novel as in a Darwinian universe everything is predisposed by hereditary and environment, and that if Maggie is a victim of her circumstances, than so is every other character in the book. In this sense, no one is to blame for Maggie’s demise, and as readers we need feel no anger toward Jimmy, the mother, Pete or even Rum Alley for that matter as there is no free will at all involved.

Gibson’s criticism of Crane assumes that Maggie A Girl of the Streets is a piece of purely Naturalist fiction, and I have already demonstrated, I do not believe this to be true. Gibson’s (and like-minded critics) perspective, therefore, appears to be an oversimplification of the novel, and as thus incomplete. Crane appears to this critic to be more interested in the morality of the society of his time than he did in the purely Naturalistic elements of it, and this is what creates the rich tapestry of the plot that so subtly and expertly interweaves elements of environment, morality and free will. Crane does not overtly state if his characters do in fact have enough free will to make alternative choices in the novel, but rather leaves such speculations up to the readers themselves. In doing so, Crane is in
fact asking us to question our own notions of free will and expectations of morality, and as such is encouraging those very qualities in the reader and society in general. Perhaps the inhabitants of Rum Alley are not in control of their own destinies. Perhaps they are simply reacting to the stimuli they encounter and not exhibiting any signs of free will. However, Crane is not suggesting that this is because of some Darwinian design. It is due to their ignorance that these people do what they do, and Crane hopes for better. Why do we feel sad for Maggie if morality is just an illusion? Why does the author want to promote feelings of sadness, shame and outrage in the readers if morality is just a construct? The answer could be that Crane is an advocate of morality. Thus, Crane is in fact advocating a Humanistic perspective to his readers, and asking them to act differently, better than the characters of Rum Alley.

The Benevolent Monster

Such Humanistic qualities are not only to be found in Maggie A Girl of the Streets, but also in other works of Crane. Stephen Crane’s short story The Monster can also be read as exploration into the subject of morality as it has many biblical qualities, and can easily be interpreted as a Bible story. However, a superficial reading of the plot can too easily oversimplify the implications of the tale. On a surface level we can see how Dr. Trescott performs an act of kindness toward Henry Johnson to repay him for the great act of courage and kindness he performed in saving his son. In this regard, both characters perform selfless acts that contain Christ like aspects to them. Henry Johnson gave everything he could, even his life, for his fellow man, and this act could be seen to resemble Christ’s gift to man ending with his crucifixion. Dr. Trescott also performed a miracle, out of kindness and appreciation, in bringing back Henry Johnson from the dead, and this act can be likened to Christ’s raising of Lazarus of Bethany. While both these aspects of the plot are undoubtedly important, the reader must ask the question, to what end does the author highlight these biblical events? An interesting answer to this question comes in the form of the name of one of the minor characters, John 12.

The name John 12 is a most interesting and unusual choice of name for Crane to use and this must have been done for a reason. The critic Anderson points out, that an obvious answer to this question can be found in the Bible itself in the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of John in the New Testament (24). In this section of the Bible we find the story of the raising of Lazarus by Jesus, but we also find out how Lazarus got on afterwards. At this time many people came to see Jesus after he performed the miracle, but many also came to see Lazarus, the man who returned from the dead, with their own eyes. The Jewish priests of the time therefore planned to put Lazarus to death as well as Jesus because many of the people were going away from the church and starting to believe in Jesus, and Lazarus was also a perceived threat to the established order. The parallels between Dr. Trescott’s actions and those of Christ in this regard are quite revealing, and they tell us much about how society can react to great acts of benevolence.

The first point to consider in relation to these similarities is the title; The Monster. In the eyes of
the authorities Jesus created a monster by raising Lazarus from the dead just as Dr. Trescott did with Henry Johnson. In this sense a monster represents something that is beyond people’s comprehension and therefore something to be feared. As Anderson notes, in such a situation the hypocrisy of people’s actions are unmasked, and the people must then take some form of action to solve the dilemma, and putting the dilemma to death has always been a popular option (24). A second point raised by this dynamic is that the threat posed to society by Jesus and Dr. Trescott is borne out of an altruistic action that is beyond the scope of society’s understanding, and that is particularly problematic for society to deal with. At the end of the story Dr. Trescott’s only guest is Mrs. Twelve assumedly visiting only to tell him that he is no longer welcome in the social life of the town, and that leaves the Trescotts and Henry as outcasts and no longer welcome to participate in society. Finally, through highlighting these two considerations Crane shows how hostile society can become when confronted with something it does not understand, and even more frightening is the fact that this hostility can be born equally from acts of compassion as from acts violence and malice.

We have now discussed the comparison between The Monster and the Biblical tale of the raising of Lazarus, and how this raises interesting questions of how society can perceive and react to acts of benevolence. The purpose of this discussion is to bring into question ideas of charity, and how society deals with what it perceives is expected of it with regard to compassion for others. This subject highlights another allusion that can be seen in this story, and this relates to the idea of how can society help the needy, and if indeed society in fact has a moral obligation to do so. This question in The Monster can also be seen to relate very closely to an issue that Tolstoy raised in his polemic What to Do? This argument, or doctrine, was first translated into English in 1887 and, according to Pizar, had quite an impact on American writers in the 1890s (127). In this treatise Tolstoy describes the shame he felt on first encountering urban poverty. The remainder of the article is then devoted to the question of what each man should do in response to this poverty, and it appears that each man, in Tolstoy’s view, was mainly directed at the middle-class and gentry class as they were the ones with the means to actually do something about it. During the treatise he quotes phrases from the Bible, particularly from John the Baptist:

And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise (Luke iii. 10. 11.)

Stephen Crane wrote his novels and short stories in the 1890s, and it would be reasonable to assume that he was aware of Tolstoy’s article, and if we look at parts of The Monster we can see great similarities between the two works. As Pizar points out, in The Monster when judge Hagenthorpe goes to visit Dr. Trescott, he suggests that the doctor should have let Henry die as from now on Henry has become “a perfect monster” (128).

To this the doctor simply replies “what am I to do?” (99). Moreover, to reinforce the importance of this response, or question, Crane has the doctor ask it twice in the same sentence. The doctor’s
response is a clear echo of Tolstoy's thoughts, and as readers of *The Monster* we too are expected to respond to this question. When middle-class citizens encounter poverty or those in need, how should they respond? Should we be benevolent as the doctor suggests or would it be better to ignore the problem and hope it goes away, as the town suggests, because the problem seems too big and insoluble. In the midst of this dilemma the judge appears to sit on the fence as the chapter ends with him stating “it is hard for a man to know what to do” (101). Of course the answer to this question is by no means an easy one, and Crane deliberately sets up a scenario that has no easy answer, and this echoes Tolstoy’s question of a decade earlier, *What to do?*

A final point that is worth noting on the comparison between these two works is the choice of Henry Johnson as a black man. It does first appear a puzzling choice as in the beginning of the book Henry did not receive a great deal of racism from the town, and after the accident it would be difficult to tell what color his skin was anyway. In this regard it appears to this critic that the character of Henry is in many ways beyond race. However, if we look at this scenario in terms of Tolstoy’s question on the plight of the urban poor, Henry takes on many facets of that metaphor, and being black is one of them. If the middle-class is to adopt an attitude of benevolence and charity toward the poor, it must be toward all in poverty and that includes black and white alike, and by making Henry black this challenges the reader’s ideas of just how far they will be prepared to go in terms of their levels of compassion and benevolence. Of course, we must remember we are living in a time of greater racial acceptance, and that at the time of *The Monster* racism was much more widely accepted, and the idea of charity to non-whites would have been much harder for many to accept and that makes Crane’s question to the reader much more challenging and profound.

Crane’s question of ‘What to do?’ is asked again and again in his stories and this theme can be seen to be of major importance to him. Moreover, ‘what to do?’ is not a question one would expect a Naturalist to ask. This contradiction brings to the surface the Humanistic qualities of Crane’s writing, and while noting Humanism in Crane is not new, it raises a question that is not asked, and that is why isn’t Crane grouped more with Humanistic fiction rather than Naturalistic writers, as his Naturalistic concerns seem to be secondary to his investigations of morality.

**Unnecessary Alienation in *The Blue Hotel***

In the story *The Blue Hotel* this idea of how society should react in a moral sense surfaces again as we see the problematic journey of a Swede entering the west for the first time. As the Swede enters the west, he cannot find acceptance and is shut out by all he meets, and this creates the dilemma of how society should handle the Swede; an outcast of types. Interestingly, in this short story, Crane employs a novel approach to his exploration of humanity. In this tale he tells the story of the struggle for acceptance and compassion in terms of geometry. In *The Blue Hotel* the Swede is a square that is trying to enter a circle, and this is mathematically impossible. The following section will elaborate on this idea with reference to an article written by the critic Sue Kimball to familiarize the reader with the framework of the concept, so this paper can expand the idea to frame it reference of the Humanistic
themes it imparts.

According to Kimball, in 1882 a German mathematician named Lindemann proved beyond doubt that it was impossible to square a circle (425). This was a significant achievement as the debate as to whether or not it was possible goes back thousands of years. Stephen Crane was only eleven at the time, and it is not clear whether he was aware of this momentous occasion; however, interestingly enough in his short story *The Blue Hotel* he uses geometrical circle and square dynamics to highlight major themes within the story.

The idea of squares is very prevalent in the story and is alluded to often. The first reference comes when the son Johnny and the farmer are playing cards and “they square their knees under a wide board” (142). The playing board is also a square, and this image is repeated frequently in the story. Moreover, when the men play cards, they must form a square as four people play the game, and there are numerous card games that go on as the story unfolds. Also, in the saloon there is a gambler, but one of the honest and fair kind, and this kind of gambler was known as a ‘square’. Another allusion to squares are the two little square windows of the hotel that are the only visions of the outside world, and the outside world is a blizzard suggesting a bleak view for the protagonists. Additionally, at the end of the story the Easterner declares to the cowboy that if things had been ‘square’ (fair and honest), the Swede would not have been killed when he reveals to the cowboy that Johnny actually was cheating (169). The cowboy disagrees as his idea of ‘square’ is different to the Easterner as he states “the game was only for fun” (169), indicating that Johnny’s cheating did not significantly affect the ‘squareness’ of the situation. Again, we see another image of squares as Skully tells the guests that the town is shortly going to expand, and that the building of four churches is being planned. Finally, we can view this story unfolding in four parts, just like the right angles of a square: first the three men arrive to meet the owner (the fourth man) at the train station, next the Swede demonstrates his fear of the wild west, then the Swede tries to conquer his fear by getting drunk and behaving in a way he imagines cowboys to behave, and finally the Swede goes to the saloon (a major symbol of the wild west) to attempt to complete his transformation and actually become the cowboy of his fantasies.

What Kimball points out, with reference to the square imagery, is that all these squares serve to exclude the Swede both literally and figuratively (427). The Swede has obviously dreamed of coming to the wild-west and living out his fantasies of becoming a cowboy, yet the reality is not as he imagines. Moreover, as he enters this new world he is very afraid of the possible violence that may be inflicted upon him. As he later develops more courage, he is still not accepted by the west as all those he encounters have their own circles of relationships, and it is at this point we are confronted with the imagery of circles.

The circle imagery of the story in many ways juxtaposes and opposes the square imagery of the plot. Skully, Johnny and the women of the house have their own family circle. Also, the Easterner and the cowboy form a loose sort of a circle and as they seem to know how to behave appropriately are somewhat accepted into the larger circle of the hotel. Skully and his family are also part of the larger
community of the town, and this can also be alluded to as a circle of sorts. Also they become friends and form their own circle, and this is alluded to in the end of the story as months later they are still together in a little ranch near Dakota (168). The point is, that no matter what the Swede does he cannot find his way into any of the circles and is therefore left alone and adrift. This is highlighted most prevalently when the Swede defeats Johnny in the fight and Skully tells him “stranger” … “it’s all up with our side” (160). The term stranger is not used once in the story to describe the cowboy or the Easterner, and this sets up the Swede as the protagonist of the story as the square trying to enter the circle.

A final point worth noting on the geometry of the story is that of lines. The three men are brought to the hotel by train which travels on parallel lines. Also the Swede is brought to the saloon by the tree lined street. What this tells us is that lines, and parallel lines, act as connectors for the protagonists and most significantly that the Swede travels every connecting line yet is unable to join mankind. With all these geometrical facets to the story the reader is left wondering what the point of all this is. According to Kimball, all the squares, circles and lines create the image of a kind of a horror house that the Swede must travel through alone (430). His quest was to find the real west, but instead he finds order and must create his own chaos out of that order to live out his fantasies to head toward an inevitable conclusion. According to Kimball, in doing this “he causes circles to become squared” (430), something that Lindemann had proven to be impossible.

With relation to Crane’s metaphysics in this story, who does the Swede then represent? Is he supposed to represent everyman? And is his journey the journey we all inevitably take, whether we realize it or not? It appears to this critic that Crane is trying to suggest that people who achieve a sense of community get to feel safety and security in this world, and for those that are not so fortunate (or clever) the world appears as a horror house. Moreover, the key to Crane’s answer to this conundrum appears to lie in the final conversation between the Easterner and the cowboy. How do we define our sense of ‘square’? What is fair and honest? If we follow the cowboy’s philosophy, we are lead to a conclusion that every individual is responsible for their own actions. As he says at the end of the story: “well I didn’t do anything, did I?” (169). However, if we sway more toward the Easterner’s point of view we find a code of moral responsibility to our fellow man. The Easterner implies that they are all collectively guilty for the death of the Swede because they didn’t do anything to stop it. In this sense, all of humanity is in fact one great circle of family, and no one should be excluded. The story ends with no definitive point of view, yet as a reader the Easterner seems to be more logical and persuasive, and seems to come across as the voice of reason in the story. Therefore, we may assume that Crane has more sympathy for this point of view. Once again Crane creates a Naturalistic setting where the protagonist is pitted against the natural forces of environment and hereditary (this time in the form of a hostile society), and once again the individual fails. However, as in previous stories, Crane asks us whether or not we could do more to help the unfortunate ones, and thus again challenges the reader.

One should ask oneself, “What is the author trying to communicate here”? Is Crane simply trying to express that there is nothing to be done or are his stories in fact a rallying cry to society to do more?
Crane highlights the plights of the unfortunate, and then asks the reader whether more could have been done for them, surely this is a strong indication that Crane is more interested in being good (moralistic and Humanistic tendencies) than he is in simply describing the natural state of humanity.

A Message for All in *The Open Boat*

The story that perhaps most highlights Crane’s yearning for altruism is *The Open Boat*. This story, more than any other seems to epitomize humanity’s struggle with the question of ‘what to do?’, and it is perhaps all the more powerful because it is based on the direct experience of Crane. While Crane’s setting in *The Open Boat* is a natural one, the ocean, the struggle that the protagonists go through is done collectively for the good of all. The setting of the boat makes an ideal metaphor for this struggle to play out as it is both simple and powerful; we are the boat and the ocean is the universe. This thought is echoed by the critic Dooley who points out that the solidarity shown by all in the boat is a good test of survival as it seems neither impossible nor routine. As such, this test equips the four participants to genuinely interpret the true reality of nature; and thus “appreciate both the limits and possibilities of human effort and human community” (16-17).

In *The Open Boat* the protagonist directly comes face to face with the existential nature of life; the disinterest of nature as it were, and the cold harsh reality of the realization that we face life alone without the help of any God like figure to aid, protect and to guide us. Significantly, this struggle for survival climaxes near the end of their ordeal when they attempt to get to the shore through the large breaking waves and are unable to do so. In this regard, their ordeal resembles the process of life in the fact that we struggle toward an unknown future, and only comprehend the fact that we are completely dispensable as we approach our death. At this point in the story the correspondent, seemingly the character of Crane himself, realizes that the universe is “flatly indifferent” (210) to his plight and the plight of all beings. According to the correspondent:

> 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. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers. Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands supplicant, saying: ‘Yes, but I love myself’ (207)

Through this ordeal the survivors must confront the indifferent universe, and through this confrontation they learn some of the limits and possibilities of human existence. The two most striking revelations are surely that nature does not seem to care whether you live or if you die, and the other polar realization is that as people we can care about each other, and work together to give ourselves a better chance of survival. In this sense humans are not indifferent to the plight of each other, and that
makes their nature different from that of the perception of the universe. Although not overtly stated in the text, one may infer or even assume that each man in the boat wants not only survival, but happiness for the others, as happiness can be seen to be the fulfillment of the eradication of suffering, the condition that they all share in the boat.

It is this ‘human’ perception of man’s plight that separates them from a purely Darwinian existence; an existence that all other creatures on Earth probably inhabit. Man may ultimately face this universe alone; however, we have the choice to attempt to face it collectively—as much as possible—and help and comfort each other in that process. Simply put, life is more palatable when people work together for each other’s benefit, and that is what Crane tries to communicate in *The Open Boat*. Moreover, it is this working toward the greater good that is the essence of Humanism and altruism, and is; thus, in a sense more powerful than the message of universal indifference that Naturalism tries to persuade us to accept. It is what Crane appears to believe, and it seems to supersede his natural setting as the crucial point of communication.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, in the works of Steven Crane, the issue of what forces shape the lives of people may be seen as the overriding metaphysical point of discussion. While he is often seen to be a Naturalist, he can also be viewed as more of a Humanist as his stories not only depict how the forces of nature influence our lives, but also seek answers on how to be better people and make a better society. In short his stories ask us “What to do”? As previously mentioned, Humanist can best be defined as a moral philosophy that advocates that people should try to work toward the betterment of all humanity; do good and not evil. With regards to Crane, stories such as: *Maggie A Girl of the Streets*, *The Blue Hotel*, *The Monster* and *The Open Boat* all seem to adhere to Humanistic principles even more than they do to Naturalistic ones.

With regard to *Maggie A Girl of the Streets*, it is true that this novel is often seen to be a prime example of Naturalistic fiction, and indeed in many ways it is written according to that paradigm. It is set in a slum; Rum Alley, and shows the harsh reality of life as it really was at the time. That is to say, it doesn’t romanticize any aspects of poverty or try to gloss over any of the unsavory subjects that are associated with slum living. Moreover, the protagonists of the story are all shaped by their environment, and Jimmy and Maggie appear to have little or no chance of changing their lives or identities, and in a world without hope in the end simply become products of their environments. However, as previously mentioned this story also attacks the inconsistency and falseness of American middle-class morality, and implies the possibilities of choice. Was it Naturalistic forces that prevented the women of Rum Alley from having compassion for Maggie? Or could they have made different choices if they had wanted to? The answer is not clear, and that in itself puts the very paradigm of Naturalism into question. As readers we are saddened by the plight of slum-dwellers, but more importantly we are disappointed with their moral decisions, and this seems to be of greater importance in extracting meaning from the novel.
Progressing to the next logical question in *The Monster* Crane tries to show the worth of benevolence within a society as the actions of Dr. Trescott are clearly in keeping with Humanistic ideals. Dr. Trescott wants to do good, not evil, much in the same way Henry Johnson gave himself away so that he might help his fellow man. However, the people of the town have great difficulty in reconciling themselves with such a philosophy, and would prefer to adopt an indifferent approach. Thus, the story in a sense pits the philosophies of Naturalism and Humanism against each other. The reader clearly sides with the doctor on this issue, and we may therefore assume that this is Crane’s point of view as well. Surely a society would be a better one if we all tried to help each other, and while the universe may not care what happens to us, that does not mean that we have to mirror those sentiments, it does not have to mean that we must be indifferent.

In the short story *The Blue Hotel* we can also see elements of Crane’s Humanism. In this story the plight of the protagonist, the Swede, is tragic because the universe he enters is indifferent to his presence. He comes to the west, presumably, to live out his fantasies of the wild-west and all that is associated with it; however, upon arrival he is excluded from being part of it almost from the very first instance. Admittedly, his exclusion seems to be the result of his strange and anti-social behavior, yet as the Easterner points out in the end his death could have been avoided if only he and the others had done something to prevent it. Crane can then be seen to be highlighting the pitfalls of an indifferent form of society, and at the same time advocating a society that helps each other, even when the behavior of some in that society is not desirable, as with the case of the Swede.

Finally, in *The Open Boat* Crane moves on to investigate what the face of nature and the universe itself really looks like, and how as people we must face it. Nature may not care if we live or die, but as human beings we do, and we can care about the plight of our fellow man. It is true that it is a natural instinct to want to survive, and in the boat they work together to achieve that goal. However, it should be remembered that all those present in the boat genuinely hope that the others will survive too, and this is where humanity and nature differ; hope. Crane advocates hope!

In the final analysis Crane paints the picture of Naturalist fiction, yet within those parameters advocates a Humanist approach to the societies that inhabit this natural world. Naturalism is the clothing, the appearance, the form if you will, but it is Humanism that Crane really wishes to discuss. It is true environmental and hereditary factors play a major role in shaping our lives. It is also true that society often lacks empathy to that which it struggles to understand, but this does not mean we have absolutely no free will, and this does not mean we cannot commit acts of kindness and charity. The universe may be indifferent, but humanity can dare to show compassion, and Crane seems to suggest this very point in his stories. We are all this boat together, and we have a much greater chance of survival and happiness if we work together, and this is the hope of Stephen Crane.

**Works Cited**


