In Stephen Crane’s short story, "The Open Boat," there exists an implicit psychological need to create order in the midst of a cold, indifferent world. Without a stable belief in the worth of their existence, the correspondent and his fellow shipmates vacillate between feelings of hope and worthlessness, wherein they ultimately surrender to the pathos of their sad desolation. Thus, the text focuses on the juxtaposition of the death drive over nature’s indifference towards man, offering an examination of the shipmates’ attempts to come to grip with an irreligious world apathetic to their existence. These men, in finding no order to life on the sea, dwell only on death. Life not only dies on the high seas, then, but also the collective foundation of the men’s religious ideology.

The story begins with the correspondent and his shipmates stranded in an open lifeboat after their freighter went down, threatened by the indifferent waves. In their desperation to survive and fend off the currents of the sea, “[n] one of them knew the color of the sky” (48). This opening marks first the importance of survival and alert vigilance over the sea, but also verifies the men’s implicit trust in heaven and its implication of order. Their faith starts with such magnitude that they do not need to look skyward to know they are being guarded and watched over. Intrinsically, the men do not concern themselves with thoughts of death, for their unconditional faith in Christianity suspends any reflection over their own mortality.

As a result, the men’s religion, which grounds them, acts to counter feelings of bleakness and despair. Indeed, Crane writes that “[t]o express any particular optimism at this time they felt to be childish and stupid, but they all doubtless possessed this sense of the situation in their minds,” for “the ethics of their condition was decidedly against any open suggestion of hopelessness” (51). Their ethos argues against the world being an indifferent world, and this philosophy governs how they view their perilous circumstances. With a firm belief in Christianity, the men have no need to fear the sea or suffer the loss of their optimism. Rather, the structure of faith balances their esteem and spirit, smoothing away thoughts of death and decline.

All the same, the realization that this circumstance may not end well begins to seep into the men’s minds. When the captain soothes the correspondent and his crew to believe in their rescue, there comes to be “that in his tone which made them think” (51). Whether they are conscious of it or not, the men now begin to see their faith wane and deteriorate. The first thoughts of doubt and hesitation become deadly, then, for they reveal to the men that Christianity cannot protect them from the cold indifference of nature. Rather, each will suffer regardless of his faith, and this knowledge begins to gnaw away at the very outline of their conviction. Accordingly, the death drive in them rises to prominence, for without faith protecting them, the men are naked and spiritually alone.

This nakedness highlights the battle of the death drive against their dying faith. Although they attempt to repress and reject thoughts of fatality, struggling to hold onto any thread of order or Christianity, once the men become consciously aware of it, the death drive becomes the center of the narrative. Their denial that the sea “cannot mean to drown me. She dare not drown me. She cannot drown me” only further acts to heighten the point, for
at no time before their faithlessness would they have even considered the possibility of death (57). As a result, being consciously aware of death shatters the illusion of a protective faith. No more can they erect constructs of faith against death successfully; rather, they can only contain death by suppressing their knowledge of its very existence.

There should be no surprise, then, that the men's enthusiasm surges when there comes talk of a lighthouse in close proximity to their location. By having a tangible rebuke to death, by voicing that they are closing in on safety and the shore, the shipmates think they can effectively silence the death drive in themselves. They do not realize that the building has long been abandoned. Once they become acquainted with this reality, though, their recognition of their own futility grows as "[t]he wind slowly died away" (54). Crane uses this metaphor to symbolize the demise of the shipmates' hope. Nature proves indifferent to the struggles of man, offering no respite to the tired crew. Rather, the crew's dwindling belief in their rescue becomes envisioned through the decline of the wind, and they begin to surrender to both the indifferent waves and the death drive.

This spiritual breaking leads to the motif of the story, where both the transient nature of faith and the men's fear of the death drive manifest themselves. Without belief in the significance of their lives, they are left to wonder, "if I am going to be drowned, why [...] was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees" (57). Thus, although there remain signs of the men repressing feelings of death and trying to erect reasons why they should not suffer death, their faith in the sacredness of life becomes fleeting. Estranged from land and barred from hope, despair consumes their faith in Christianity.

Indeed, their faith becomes fractured, influenced by the inner struggles that now consume them. The men no longer find it "preposterous" that they should perish out on these waters (57). Rather, they become numb to the utterly indifferent with which fate dictates their lives. The correspondent mans the oars late in the night when he hears the melancholy breeze, and he notes that "[t]he wind had a voice as it came over the waves, and it was sadder than the end" (64). He begins to identify with the death drive, at last understanding it, thinking that all their deaths are not so bleak as the mournful wail of the wind. Postig this reflection over Crane's narrative, once aware of his unimportance in comparison to existence, the correspondent begins to lose his fervor and belief in a higher order. Thus, faith and meaning become irrevocably lost, surrendered to the despair of the sea.

At last the men spot land and a wind-tower, but no such renunciation of death will occur, unlike before with the lighthouse. Rather, the weariness of the seafarers continues to overwhelm any sense of euphoria. The correspondent thinks: This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of ants. It represented in a degree [...] the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the visions of the men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent. (68)

The allegorical dimensions of this passage must be considered, for the allusion of the men being but ants negates any and all Christian thoughts and, instead, leads the text into an irreligious philosophy of life. No more can the men pretend selective perception or memory, regressing to a time when Christianity and order protected them, but rather they must come to terms with an indifferent society. Thereby, the men must understand that none of them are safe from nature's indifferent touch.

Through this understanding, Crane starts to examine the men's acquiescence to their desolation. Late in the narrative, when the men decide to swim for the shore, the correspondent fears death no more. Rather, "[i]t merely occurred to him that if he should drown it would be a shame" (69). In essence, nature's indifference to man juxtaposes to birth in the men their own conscious indifference to life. Repression and denial of death disappears and gives rise to a general apathy to existence. This conscious resignation to fate exemplifies the struggle of the men, for the death drive shatters in the men all order and leaves behind only cold indifference to their own fate.

Even so, the correspondent has an awakening, realizing perhaps the closest thing to order in the story. During the swim to shore he gets caught in a current and, struggling in its vicious throes, thinks, "[p]erhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature" (71). Life becomes a cycle of nature then, and death, rather than something to be feared, is merely the final stage of that cycle. Soon after this realization he breaks free of the current and it can be insinuated that he
also breaks free of the death drive, for thoughts of death too wane and deteriorate. Nonetheless, when he reaches the shore he discovers that Billie Higgins, the oiler of the boat, lies facedown in the surf, drowned by the indifferent waves.

This death comes to symbolize their understanding towards the indifference of nature, then, for it verifies that the strongest of men can fall while the weakest live on. By understanding nature, then, they see a reconstruction of faith and meaning, albeit in a dissimilar form. The remaining men, Crane writes, find that “[w]hen it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters” to the apathy of the world (72). This crisis they suffered through makes them learned, and the resulting trauma leads them to feel that they can be prophets, not to Christianity but rather to the indifference of life. Indeed, they erect a new edifice from the old, ready to be interpreters, or apostles, of a new religion. Thus, from the chaos and indifference of the world, the men again create order.

Work Cited