



“To Build a Fire”: An Environmentalist Interpretation

Advisor: Jennifer Fleissner, Associate Professor of English, Indiana University; National Humanities Center Fellow
©2016 National Humanities Center

Framing Question

How can we read “To Build a Fire” as a cautionary tale about the exploitation of nature?

Understanding

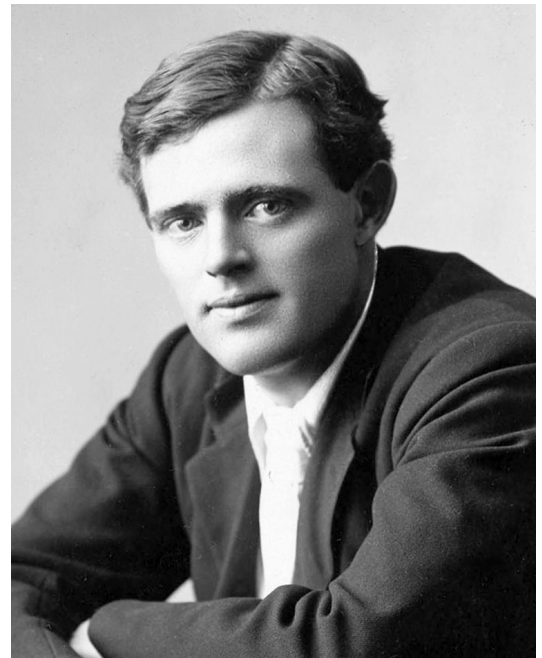
Jack London’s story “To Build a Fire” warns not only against trekking through a wilderness at seventy-five below but also against seeing nature simply as a resource to be exploited and controlled.

Text

[Jack London, “To Build a Fire,” 1908](#)

Background

The word “pedestrian” has two meanings. As a noun, it denotes a person who is walking; as an adjective it means unimaginative. The protagonist of Jack London’s short story “To Build a Fire” dies because both meanings apply to him. A pedestrian accident—he steps into a spring when the temperature is seventy-five below—is the immediate cause of his death. His pedestrian intellect—he cannot grasp the “significances” of things—is the ultimate cause of his death. Focusing on the latter, this lesson explores how his lack of imagination leads to his demise.



Jack London (1876–1916)

Jack London (1876–1916) based “To Build a Fire” on his experience in the Klondike region of northwestern Canada. The discovery of gold there in 1896 set off a frenzy that led thousands of prospectors to challenge its harsh climate and terrain. In the late 1890s London’s efforts to launch a writing career had stalled, and he yearned for an adventurous and possibly lucrative escape from publishers and rejection letters. His brother-in-law also dreamed of striking it rich and agreed to finance an expedition that would take both of them to the gold fields. They left San Francisco on July 25, 1897. On the trip north they befriended three other prospectors, and the five decided to pool their talents. They arrived in Juneau, Alaska, on August 2 and set out for the Klondike. After climbing mountains, shooting treacherous rapids, and enduring miserable living conditions, London and his companions set up camp near Dawson City in October. While there he spent much of his time in saloons listening to prospectors’ tall tales

about living in the wilderness. A winter in close quarters with four other men and a steady diet lacking fresh vegetables left him emotionally exhausted and suffering from scurvy. In June 1898 he started his journey back to San Francisco, arriving there the following month. He stepped off the boat with only \$4.50 worth of gold dust¹ but with a treasure of material that would fuel his imagination for years to come.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

That treasure would have seemed like a paltry thing to the protagonist of “To Build a Fire.” As the narrator points out, the “trouble” with “the man” is that his thinking has remained resolutely earthbound. He has never launched himself into “the conjectural field” to contemplate such matters as human frailty, death, or his place in the universe. Why does the narrator tell us that? After all, how useful are deep thoughts when you are plodding through deep snow? Practical knowledge rather than philosophic speculation sustains the man through much of the story: he can, for example, navigate overland with impressive accuracy, and he can start a fire in a fuel-starved environment with a single match. Had he avoided the accident, those skills, not musings about immortality, might have gotten him to the old claim, frostbitten, to be sure, but alive.

Mention of the old claim reminds us that the protagonist is a prospector, and, as we learn, he hopes to become a logger as well. His perception of nature is as utilitarian as the knowledge that almost gets him to that warm camp and dinner with the boys. He does not make it, however, and with his death the story argues that a utilitarian conception of nature is not enough. The natural world, as we see, exacts a terrible toll on those who cannot recognize its power and mystery and who try to reduce it to nothing more than an economic resource.

¹ Andrew Sinclair, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 51.

Text Analysis

Part 1: The Yukon

1. Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little-travelled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. It was a steep bank, and he paused for breath at the top, excusing the act to himself by looking at his watch. It was nine o'clock. There was no sun nor hint of sun, though there was not a cloud in the sky. It was a clear day, and yet there seemed an [intangible pall](#) over the face of things, a subtle gloom that made the day dark, and that was due to the absence of sun. This fact did not worry the man. He was used to the lack of sun. It had been days since he had seen the sun, and he knew that a few more days must pass before that cheerful orb, due south, would just peep above the sky-line and dip immediately from view.

2. The man flung a look back along the way he had come. The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle [undulations](#) where the ice-jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hair-line that curved and twisted from around the spruce-covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island. This dark hair-line was the trail — the main trail — that led south five hundred miles to the Chilcoot Pass, Dyea, and salt water; and that led north seventy miles to Dawson, and still on to the north a thousand miles to Nulato, and finally to St. Michael on Bering Sea, a thousand miles and half a thousand more.

1. What are the chief characteristics of the landscape in which the protagonist finds himself?

2. What foreshadowings does excerpt 1 include?

3. Excerpt 1 is written from the point of view of the omniscient narrator, excerpt 2 from that of the protagonist. As such it records what he focuses on as he looks back over the path he has travelled. What he picks out of the landscape is significant and, as we shall see, offers insight into his perception of nature. What features does he note?

Part 2: The Man's Response to the Yukon

3. But all this — the mysterious, far-reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all — made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. He was a newcomer in the land, a cheechako, and this was his first winter. The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear-flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head.

...

4. In the story's opening paragraphs the narrator describes a landscape meant to impress, and he seems to think that it *should* impress the protagonist. Why does he think that?

5. The landscape does not impress the protagonist. What does, and how does it impress him?

6. What does the narrator mean when he says that the protagonist is "without imagination" and that he is not alert to the "significances" of things?

7. Clearly, the narrator thinks that the protagonist's response to the landscape is inadequate: "But all this... made no impression." In what ways is it inadequate?

8. The protagonist interprets the cold as merely something that causes discomfort, something to be guarded against by bundling up. Had he been alert to "significances," how might he have interpreted the cold?

Part 3: The Man's Attitude Toward Nature

4. But the temperature did not matter. He was bound for the old claim on the left fork of Henderson Creek, where the boys were already. They had come over across the divide from the Indian Creek country, while he had come the roundabout way to take a look at the possibilities of getting out logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon.

...

5. Usually the snow above the hidden pools had a sunken, candied appearance that advertised the danger. Once again, however, he had a close call; and once, suspecting danger, he compelled the dog to go on in front. The dog did not want to go. It hung back until the man shoved it forward, and then it went quickly across the white, unbroken surface. Suddenly it broke through, floundered to one side, and got away to firmer footing.

...

6. [The dog knew] it was the time to lie snug in a hole in the snow and wait for a curtain of cloud to be drawn across the face of outer space whence this cold came. On the other hand, there was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil-slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whip-lash and of harsh and menacing throat-sounds that threatened the whip-lash.

9. In excerpt 4 we discover why the protagonist is trekking across the frigid Yukon: he is heading for an old mining claim, but he has taken a roundabout way — a fatal choice, as it turns out — to determine how he might move logs, cut in the area, to market. How does this fact explain the landscape details he notes in excerpt 2?

10. Excerpt 2, which is the second paragraph in the story, suggests how the protagonist perceives nature. Excerpts 4, 5, and 6 tell us explicitly. In excerpt 4 we learn that he is a prospector and a would-be logger. In 5 we learn that the dog is no pet: the man imperils the dog's life by sending him across dangerous ice. The description of the dog as a "toil-slave," mastered through the "whip-lash," in excerpt 6 defines the relationship between the protagonist and the dog and, by extension, between the protagonist and the natural world. Based on these passages, how would you characterize the protagonist's attitude toward nature?

Part 4: The Man and the Old-Timer

7. He was safe. He remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought. All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right. Any man who was a man could travel alone.

...

8. Then the thought came to him that the frozen portions of his body must be extending. He tried to keep this thought down, to forget it, to think of something else; he was aware of the panicky feeling that it caused, and he was afraid of the panic. But the thought asserted itself, and persisted, until it produced a vision of his body totally frozen. This was too much, and he made another wild run along the trail. Once he slowed down to a walk, but the thought of the freezing extending itself made him run again.

...

9. He pictured the boys finding his body next day. Suddenly he found himself with them, coming along the trail and looking for himself. And, still with them, he came around a turn in the trail and found himself lying in the snow. He did not belong with himself any more, for even then he was out of himself, standing with the boys and looking at himself in the snow. It certainly was cold, was his thought. When he got back to the States he could tell the folks what real cold was. He drifted on from this to a vision of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek. He could see him quite clearly, warm and comfortable, and smoking a pipe.

11. How is the protagonist's attitude toward nature reflected in excerpt 7, and how does his attitude help to explain his dismissal of the old-timer's advice?

12. From the advice he offers, what can we infer about the old-timer's attitude toward nature? Compare it to the protagonist's.

13. We began this analysis by noting that the protagonist lacked self-awareness. How might we say that, through his ordeal, nature has brought him to self-awareness, has led him to see his place in the universe?

14. The story ends with the juxtaposition of two images: the protagonist lying dead in the snow and the old-timer comfortable in his cabin. How does the story judge the two attitudes toward nature represented by these men?

[Activity: Recognizing Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism](#)

Examine where various authors set their works and how they present the natural world.



Glossary

intangible: incapable of being touched, not solid

pall: gloomy atmosphere

undulations: hills

conjectural: interpretative