To Build a Fire by Jack London

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Nature, Survival, and Human Vulnerability

“To Build A Fire” by Jack London is a short story of a man’s hardships while he braves the cold wilderness of the Yukon Territory (London, 1908). Two versions of the story have been written over time, one in 1902 and the other in 1908. The two versions are very similar, but the difference is that the 1902 version has a slightly different plot. While the characters may be fictitious, the basic foundations for this story are the things Jack London learned while living in the Yukon. London’s “To Build A Fire” is often observed as an example of the naturalist movement that demonstrates the “man vs. nature” conflict. Because this “man vs. nature” conflict is the centrefold of this work, it is also the main theme of the story, along with the human will and a “survival instinct” that humans have inside of them.

The story deals with the struggle for the survival of humanity in the wilderness. The story demonstrates the man as being overly confident about his survival skills even though he realizes the hardships that the expedition into the wilderness will bring for him. Still, he overestimates his capabilities and experience. Such an attitude on the part of the man can be considered as nothing but ignorant, as he completely disregards the dangers of the situation and therefore, the absence of intuition ultimately results in his death. In line with the majority of literary works on the theme of naturalism, the story ends in the form of a comparable finale. The man, due to living his life in civilization, has no idea how to survive in the wilderness and, therefore, resorts to a number of decisions that prove to be foolish. Ultimately, towards the end, he gracefully accepts death. The story is utilized by London to represent the man as being confident in challenging the cruelty of nature.

Environmental Danger and the Failure of Judgment

At the beginning of the story, the challenges presented by nature are acknowledged by the man. Yet, despite this, he is not anxious. The pride of being a strong human overpowers him, and he thinks of himself as invincible and the cold outside world as weak. Furthermore, London has represented the cruelty of the cold by continuously repeating phrases that exaggerate the cold. His statement is that the man spits in the air again and again, but in every case, the spit turns into ice due to the extremity of the cold. The temperature is stated to be below fifty.

As the story progresses further, the man realizes the severity of the cold. The extremity of the low

temperature is further demonstrated by London by stating that gradually, the toes and the fingers of the man begin to grow numb. However, the man still retains his confidence. The author has placed great emphasis on the cold by using several statements that point towards it. For instance, at one point, the water clinging to the wet feet of the dog freezes into ice.

Also, the aspect of instinct is highlighted in the above-mentioned instance as the dog quickly starts to lick its feet to melt the ice. It is a natural instinct, and the dog naturally knows that if the ice is not removed, it will harm its feet. On the contrary, rather than relying on natural instinct, the man was aware of the consequences of the ice and helped remove the ice from its paws. This instance demonstrates the concept of instinct versus knowledge. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the relief that the man feels after the act as he realizes that this is the correct decision.

Desperation, Instinct, and the Struggle to Survive

However, as the story moves further, the man's attempt to start a fire proves to be one of the most deadly mistakes he has ever made. It results in making survival impossible. This situation makes him realize the importance of a trail mate. The trail mate could have helped him by starting a fire. The scenario highlights the merciless nature of the cold as the man realizes that he was wrong to consider himself stronger than nature. He begins to regret the mistakes made by him.

Moreover, as the man decides to kill the dog to satisfy his personal needs, the dog, due to its natural instinct, senses the future. The man addresses the dog, and his voice alarms the dog that it is in imminent danger. The fact is further highlighted when the animal does not come near to the man even though the man calls it a number of times. The theme of naturalism and human versus nature comes into play in this regard as the man begins to realize that the dog is not as stupid as he initially thought (Pizer, 1966). He realizes that he has underestimated the dog and has ignored the animal's natural instincts. This natural instinct forms the character of the animal as it was passed down through generations to the dog. This instinct is responsible for the survival of the dog in such a harsh environment.

Finally, towards the end of the story, the man begins to realize that the decision he made to come alone into the cold wilderness was wrong. He thinks of the old man who warned him not to go alone in the harsh environment, but he ignored the warnings of the old fellow just because of his own pride. He begins to think of his decision to challenge nature as being ridiculous and founded purely on his arrogance and pride. He imagines his dead body to be discovered in the next few days by the boys. He pictures himself accompanying the boys, who are searching for him along the trail. He shudders when he imagines discovering himself lying on the cold, snowy ground.

Man, Nature, and the Tragic Meaning of the Story

However, even in his final moments, the man senses the dog following its natural instincts when it comes close to the man. Upon sensing the man in the clutches of death, the dog backs away and begins to loudly whine. Finally, the dog turns away from the dying man and starts running down the trail towards the direction they had come from. The dog knew that the other people might be able to help the man.

The conflict of man versus nature is not the only theme portrayed in the two versions of the story. Another aspect is the concept of pride. The man considered himself to be superior to nature and thought of himself as a strong “man” instead of being womanly. He had disregarded the warnings of the old man who tried his best to convince him to let go of his foolish quest. Furthermore, the conflict between man and nature begins the very moment when man decides to start his journey and seal his fate.

In conclusion, London’s story is concerned with the struggle of man against the brutalities of nature. Although the man was fully aware of the hardships he had to face when travelling through the extremely cold environment, he still considered himself superior to nature. He began his journey; however, his failure to pay attention to what the elders and the experienced said led to his ultimate failure in the form of death. Even though he had a dog to accompany him on his foolish journey, he still chose to follow his own human knowledge rather than trusting the instincts of the dog that had been passed down through the generations. Hence, in the end, he gravely paid for his unjustified pride.

References

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