To Build a Fire Study Guide

To Build a Fire by Jack London

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Jack London had already established himself as a popular writer when his story "To Build a Fire" appeared in the *Century Magazine* in 1908. This tale of an unnamed man's disastrous trek across the Yukon Territory near Alaska was well received at the time by readers and literary critics alike. While other works by London have since been faulted as overly sensational or hastily written, "To Build a Fire" is still regarded by many as an American classic. London based the story on his own travels across the harsh, frozen terrain of Alaska and Canada in 1897-98 during the Klondike gold rush; he is also said to have relied on information from a book by Jeremiah Lynch entitled *Three Years in the Klondike.* Critics have praised London's story for its vivid evocation of the Klondike territory. In particular, they focus on the way in which London uses repetition and precise description to emphasize the brutal coldness and unforgiving landscape of the Northland, against which the inexperienced protagonist, accompanied only by a dog, struggles unsuccessfully to save himself from freezing to death after a series of mishaps. Involving such themes as fear, death, and the individual versus nature, "To Build a Fire" has been categorized as a naturalistic work of fiction in which London depicts human beings as subject to the laws of nature and controlled by their environment and their physical makeup. With its short, matter-of-fact sentences, "To Build a Fire" is representative of London's best work, which influenced such later writers as Ernest Hemingway.

Author Biography

Jack London was born in 1876 in San Francisco, California, to Flora Wellman, whose common-law husband left her upon learning that she was pregnant. London took his surname from his stepfather, John London, whom his mother married shortly after her son's birth. The family settled in Oakland, California, in 1886. London quit school at age fourteen and took a series of jobs along the Oakland waterfront, working in a cannery and as a longshoreman, making money by stealing from the oyster beds in San Francisco Bay, and, later, serving as a seaman on a ship bound for Japan. London traveled across the United States while still in his teens. Throughout his early experiences, he read intensively in both literature and philosophy. London enrolled in Oakland High School at age nineteen and completed his course study within a year.

The following year he joined the Socialist Labor Party and later briefly attended the University of California, until lack of money forced him to withdraw.

In 1897 London took part in the Klondike Gold Rush in northwestern Canada. Although he proved unsuccessful as a miner, his experiences in the grim and frozen North land provided him with a wealth of ideas for fiction. When he returned to Oakland, he began his career as an author, selling his first Klondike story, "To the Man on Trail," in 1898. In 1900 London published *The Son of the Wolf.* This collection of short stories quickly brought him fame. London's readers were captivated by his vivid tales of life in the wilds of Alaska and northwestern Canada, where men and dogs worked with, as well as battled against, each other to survive the harsh and brutally cold environment. London received international fame in 1903 with the publication of *The Call of the Wild,* a novel which is also set in the Klondike territory. Its companion novel, *White Fang,* was published in 1906. In 1908 London published "To Build a Fire," a story which is now considered a classic. In it, a *chechaquo* (cheechako), or newcomer, ignores the advice of an old-timer and travels in the Klondike with only a dog to accompany him even though the temperature is a lethal seventy-five degrees below zero. London's straightforward account of the man's death earned "To Build a Fire" critical acclaim.

During his lifetime, London also wrote novels and stories about his political beliefs and his journeys in the South Seas. In addition, he worked as a journalist and published his autobiography. London became a millionaire as a result of his popularity and his prodigious literary output, which includes more than two hundred short stories, twenty novels, three plays, and numerous nonfiction works. He was married twice and had two daughters by his first wife. London died in 1916 at the age of forty from uremia and an overdose of morphine.

Plot Summary

Part I

"To Build a Fire" begins at nine o'clock on a winter morning as an unnamed man travels across the Yukon Territory in Northwestern Canada. The man is a *chechaquo* (cheechako), a Chinook jargon word meaning "newcomer." This is the man's first winter in the Yukon, but because he is "without imagination" and thus unaccustomed to thinking about life and death, he is not afraid of the cold, which he estimates at fifty degrees below zero. He is on his way to join the rest of his companions at an old mining camp on a distant fork of Henderson Creek, and he estimates his arrival time will be six o'clock in the evening. The man is traveling on foot; all he has by way of supplies is his lunch. It is not long before he realizes that the temperature is colder than fifty below, but this fact does not yet worry him.

Part II

The man is accompanied only by a dog—"a big native husky," wilder than other breeds. Despite its heavy fur, the dog dislikes traveling in brutally cold weather. It knows instinctively that the temperature is actually seventy-five below zero and that no one should be out in such "tremendous cold." The man reaches Henderson Creek, which has frozen and can be used as a trail but is also riddled with dangerous winter springs that never freeze and are hidden beneath a thin layer of river ice. Although he is short on imagination, the man uses human judgment and alertness to avoid these traps. At one suspicious-looking spot on the trail, he forces the dog to go ahead of him. The dog breaks through into the water but scrambles out, saving itself from freezing to death by instinctively biting away the ice that clings to its feet. The man removes a glove to help the dog, and to his surprise, his bare fingers are numbed instantly by the bitter cold.

Part III

When the man stops for lunch he is startled at the speed with which his fingers and toes go numb, and for the first time he becomes frightened at the intensity of the freezing weather, knowing that numbness precedes hypothermia. Suddenly he remembers that he must build a fire "and thaw out" before trying to eat; he does so methodically, carefully building the fire with twigs as kindling before piling on larger pieces of wood. He also remembers that he once laughed at a man from Sulphur Creek who had warned him how cold the weather could get in the Yukon. Warmed and reassured after eating lunch by the fire, the man continues his journey—much to the dog's disappointment, as it longs to remain by the fire.

Part IV

After resuming his trek, the man breaks through the ice himself, getting soaked "half-way to the knees." Heeding the advice he'd been given by the "old-timer" from Sulphur Creek, the man builds another fire to save his frozen feet. He is angered yet unfrightened by this unexpected delay. He feels confident in his ability to save himself and smiles when he remembers the old-timers "womanish" injunction against traveling alone in temperatures colder than minus fifty. Nevertheless, he is disconcerted by the speed at which his extremities are freezing and realizes that his face and toes are frostbitten.

Part V

As the man starts to remove his frozen moccasins to dry them by the fire, disaster strikes:

It was his own fault, or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the spruce-tree. He should have built it in the open. But it had been easier to pull the twigs from the brush and drop them directly on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully freighted. Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation to the tree—an imperceptible agitation, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow.

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. (Excerpt from "To Build a Fire")

Afterwards, the man calmly acknowledges to himself that the old-timer had been right about traveling with someone else who could help him out of danger. Just as calmly, he decides to rebuild the fire. Unfortunately, his hands are now so numb that he cannot make his fingers strike the matches and he drops them in the snow. He retrieves and lights the matches after several tries, burning himself badly in the process, but his damaged hands are too clumsy to prepare a fire that will last. The man thinks of killing the dog and thawing his hands in its carcass, but when he approaches the dog, it instinctively recoils at the fear in his voice and backs away. When the man at last catches the dog, he is unable to kill it; his hands have grown so numb that they are useless.

Part VI

Once the man fully realizes that he will die rather than simply lose his feet or hands to frostbite, he panics. He runs frantically, hoping to regain the feeling in his feet and to reach camp. Then he drops in exhaustion. Realizing that the numbness is creeping up his body, he starts off again in wild terror. The dog remains with him throughout his panic, and the man feels jealous anger at the animal's warm and healthy condition. Finally the man accepts his fate, letting the warmth and sleepiness of death-by freezing overtake him. As he is dying, he has an outof- body experience: first he sees himself walking with his companions and discovering his frozen body; then he hears himself telling the old-timer from Sulphur Creek that he was right about not traveling alone in the brutal cold. Once the dog senses that the man is dead, it leaves him and heads for camp, where it knows it will find "other foodproviders and . . . fire-providers."

Summary

"To Build a Fire" tells the story of a man who struggles to survive during a journey in the remote Yukon in seventy below temperatures. The character is introduced on a cold, grey morning as he turns from the main Yukon trail and begins walking through the high banks. The trail is seldom traveled and leads through the timberland. The man looks at his watch and sees that it is nine in the morning. There are no hints of the sun. There are also no clouds, so it is a clear day. He is used to the lack of sun, as during his trip he has not seen the sun for days. The man looks back at the path he just traveled. The Yukon trail is a mile wide and is underneath three feet of ice.

There is white snow for as far as he can see. Spruce trees and a hairline of the main trail can be seen in the distance. The main trail leads south for five hundred miles to Chilkoot Pass and Dyea. It leads north for seventy miles to Dawson. Past Dawson, the trail leads to Nulato and finally to St. Michael on the Bering Sea, a thousand miles away from Dawson. The strangeness of the surroundings makes no impression on the man, even though he is a newcomer to the land, and this is his first winter here. The man has no imagination. He is alert to things around him but not alert to the meaning of things. He is factual and logical, only recognizing the surface of everything.

As the traveler walks on, he spits and hears a crack that startles him. His spit has frozen and cracked in midair. This makes him realize that is colder than fifty below. At fifty below, his spit would not crack until it hit the ground. The man is headed for a claim at Henderson Creek. There are boys waiting there for him, who traveled across the river from Indian Creek. The man came the longer way to see about getting logs in the spring from the islands in the Yukon. He should be at the camp where the others are waiting by six in the evening. The traveler carries nothing with him but matches, birch bark and some biscuits for lunch, which he has stored inside his shirt to keep them from freezing.

A native husky, which is a grey wolf dog that looks like a wild wolf, travels with the man. The dog's instinct tells him that it is seventy-five below zero. The animal slinks at the man's heels apprehensively. It expects shelter soon. It had learned fire and in the cold it yearns for it. The jowls, eyelashes and muzzle on the dog are covered in frost. Likewise the man's beard and moustache are coated in frost. The man chews tobacco, but the cold prevents him from spiting properly. His spit leaves a tobacco coloured trail along his chin. The man arrives at Henderson's Creek at 10:00. He is ten miles from the forks. He has been walking four miles an hour, which means he will get to the forks at 12:30 and will stop to eat lunch there.

The trail is covered in snow and barely visible. No one has been on the trail for a month. The dog's tail droops in discouragement as he follow behind the man. The man has never experienced the severity of this type of cold he is in. He rubs his cheekbones and nose with his mittens but as soon as he stops, his face goes numb again. He notices changes in the creek--curves and bends that make him more cautious as he walks. He knows the springs in the hillside never freeze. These springs are dangerous traps that are hidden three inches to three feet under thin sheets of ice and snow. It is dangerous

to get wet at this temperature. He would be delayed. He would have to stop to build a fire to dry his shoes and socks. Once he passes the danger of the springs, the man begins to chew fresh tobacco.

Over the next two hours, the man continues to face similar traps. He tries to get the dog to walk in front of him, but the animal doesn't want to. Some ice cracks and the dog gets his forefeet and legs wet. The water turns to ice crystals on his fur almost immediately. The dog tries to lick the ice off his legs and bites in between his toes where the crystals have formed. The man helps remove the ice particles. At noon the day is at its brightest. The man casts no shadow. The man arrives at the forks at 12:30 as planned. He is making good time and will be at the camp by six as expected. He sits down to eat. The man eats fast because, once his hands are out of his mittens, they begin to freeze quickly. His feet, which were stinging before, are now numb. He stomps the ground until he can feel his feet. He starts to lay a fire. He picks up small twigs and grass. Once the fire is going, the dog sits close to warm up. The man lights a pipe, puts his mittens back on, and starts walking on the left fork of the creek trail.

The dog is disappointed. He wants to stay near the warmth. The dog knew about this kind of cold. He had inherited this knowledge as part of his instinct. The dog knows that it is not good to walk abroad in that cold, but he felt no closeness with the man and does not try to warn him. The dog is not concerned with the man's welfare. Ice flakes form on the man and dog again. The man's tobacco spit once again forms on his chin. He walks for thirty minutes with no signs of more springs. But unexpectedly, the man breaks through a patch of ice. His feet and legs get soaked halfway to his knees. He curses his luck out loud. He knows he will not make it to camp by six now. He has to stop and build a fire. He climbs near some underbrush, where small spruce trees are located. He works the fire slowly and carefully, building a base of ash from small twigs first so that he doesn't melt the snow and put the fire out.

He is aware of the danger he is in. Getting wet in these temperatures can cause death. An old timer in Sulphur Creek told him this during the previous fall. Now the man appreciated the advice. He has already lost sensation in his feet, and having to remove his mittens to build the fire turn his fingers numb. The pace he walked at kept his body warm and his blood pumping, but now that he has stopped, he has begun to freeze at a more rapid rate. Nevertheless he feels safe as the fire starts to strengthen. His fire is a success. The old timer warned him that no one should travel alone in weather below fifty. The man thinks that as long as he keeps his head, he will be all right. His fingers are freezing badly. He can barely move them. As he tries to pick up twigs, he has to look at them to see if he actually has hold of them.

His moccasins are coated with ice. He starts to untie them, but they are like rods of steel. His thick German socks are like iron sheaths. He can't get them off with his numb fingers. He made the fire under a spruce tree. It was easier to pull twigs directly from the branch and drop them on the fire. Without warning, the snow that had gathered on the trees branches because of the lack of wind, falls onto his fire and puts it out. For a moment the man stares in shock at the spot where the fire was. He stays calm. He thinks maybe the old timer was right. If he had a travelling companion, the buddy could

relight the fire. But as it is, it's up to the man to rebuild the fire. This time there could be no failure. Even if is successful, he will surely lose some toes. But he doesn't dwell on this. He keeps busy. He gathers dry grass and twigs by the handful because now his hands are to numb to put his fingers together to pull kindling out carefully.

The dog watches the man with yearning in his eyes. He looks upon the man to be the fire provider. The man reaches in his pocket for some birch bark, but he can't feel anything. He is too numb. He fights against his rising panic and tries to keep calm. He pulls his mittens on with his teeth and beats his hands against his legs. The dog sits in the snow with his ear pricked forward. The man feels envy for the dog, which is warm in his natural covering. Finally he gets the first signals of life in his fingers. They sting slightly at first, then he feels excruciating pain. He takes the birch bark out of his pocket. His exposed fingers go numb again, and when he tries to separate his matches, they all fall into the snow.

He places his fingers beside a bunch of matches and tries to will them to close but they don't obey. He pulls his mittens back on and beats his hands against his legs again. Then with mittens on his hands he scoops the matches up along with a pile of snow and places the matches on his lap. He carries piles of matches with his teeth then uses his teeth to separate them. He separates one and drops it on his lap but he isn't able to pick it up with his hands. He picks the match back up with his teeth and strikes it against his leg twenty times before succeeding. As he lights the birch bark, the smoke enters his nose and lungs making him couch and drop the match into the snow. He realizes that the old timer was right; he definitely should have traveled with a partner. Next the man grabs a pile of matches and strikes them against his leg. He smells his hand burning but the bark did not light. Finally the bark is lit. He starts the fire slowly, as his body shivers. He tries to remove the moss that is mixed in with the grass and twigs but he accidentally scatters the twigs and the fire goes out. He realizes he has failed.

He looks at the dog and gets an idea. He remembers a story about a man caught in a blizzard. He can kill the dog and put his hands in its body to warm them up until the numbness goes down, then he could build another fire. He speaks to the dog, but the dog senses danger and won't come to him. The man gets on his hands and knees and crawls toward the dog, but this only makes the animal more suspicious. The man sits in the snow and struggles for calmness. He pulls his mittens back on with his teeth and stands up. He no longer has any sensation in his feet. The dog finally comes to him, but the man can't clutch the animal. He encircles the dog with his arms and sits down in the snow, holding the dog as it struggles to get away. He can't kill the animal because he can't hold onto a knife or throttle it. He releases the dog and it halts forty feet away. Its ears are sharp and pricked forward.

The man tries to thrash his hands around once more to regain feeling but it doesn't work at all this time. The fear of death creeps over him. He starts to panic. He runs up the creek bed, blindly and with no intention. The dog follows him, keeping pace. The running makes him feel better. He stops shivering. He thinks that maybe if he runs to the camp he will survive. After a short time he loses his endurance. He stumbles several

times and finally falls down. He can't rise. He must sit and rest. He decides that when he gets up, he will just walk.

As he regains his breathe he feels warm and comfortable, but notices that his nose and cheeks are still frozen. The frozen parts of his body must be extending. He panics again and starts running. This time he falls down faster. He curses the dog. He is enraged by the animal's warmth and security. The man starts shivering quickly. He is losing the battle against the frost. He panics and runs one final time. This time he only makes it one hundred yards before falling over. He thinks about meeting death with dignity. He doesn't want to make a fool of himself by running "like a chicken with its head cut off." He was sure to freeze either way. He is better off just going to sleep. He rationalizes that freezing is not so bad. There are worse ways to die.

The man pictures the men from the camp finding him the next day. Suddenly he sees himself with them, walking along the trail looking for him. Then he sees himself in the snow. His thoughts move to him back in the States, telling people about the cold. He drifts from that vision to one of the old timer at Sulphur Creek. He sees the old timer clearly, warm and comfortable, smoking a pipe. In his vision he tells the old timer that his warning was right. The man falls into the most comfortable, satisfying sleep he has ever had.

The dog faces the man, waiting. Night falls. No sign of fire being made is present. The dog had never seen a man sit in the snow without making fire. The animal yearns for fire. It whines and flattens its ears. But the man is silent. Later the dog creeps closer to the man and catches the scent of death. The animal backs away. It howls under the stars. It trots up the trail in the direction of the camp the dog knew. At the camp there would be other providers of food and fire.

Analysis

"To Build a Fire" is part of a London's collection of short fiction that is set in the Yukon. London based a number of stories in the collection on his own travels throughout Canada and Alaska during the late eighteen hundreds, when many fellow travelers made this same trip during the Klondike gold rush. London says of the trip, "It was in the Klondike that I found myself. There, nobody talks. Everybody thinks. You get perspective. I got mine."

The author's own experiences are mirrored through the unnamed protagonist in *To Build a Fire*. The fact that the central character is unnamed symbolises the breakdown of ego upon the confrontation of the greater wilderness. The story's courageous traveler meets his death alone in the vast snow-covered wilderness, as a result of the harsh, northern climate. This story is an example of the man vs. nature theme. The nameless protagonist takes on the role of everyman.

The story begins with a vivid description of the desolate setting. The opening pages express the protagonist's isolation among miles of remoteness. His only travelling

companion is a dog that is not his. The author describes that there is no relationship between the dog and the man. The dog does not care about the man's well being. It seems that this relationship is symbolic to the dog's close relation to wild wolves that live in the region. However, it is evident that the wolf dog is domesticated because the animal craves fire. Were there a better relationship between the man and the dog, the animal would have tried to warn the traveler. Likewise, the protagonist would have picked up the physical cues displayed by the animal and understood that danger is close.

As the reader meets the traveler in the morning, the reader discovers that there is no sunlight in this area of the Yukon. For this reason, the man casts no shadow. Alike to the author's early uses of symbolic imagery, the lack of a shadow implies the deconstruction of ego. It is as though this man ceases to exist away from the civilized world. Also, the absence of a shadow infers the man's disconnection with his self. He is not in tune with his instincts to the degree he has to be in order to survive. It becomes evident that the man lacks experience because he had been warned about the right and wrong ways to travel in cold temperatures, but the man doesn't listen.

The characterization of the man reveals a symbolic juxtaposition to the dog's character. The protagonist is a simple man. He doesn't over think things. In fact, he is without the ability to give symbolic meaning to what he encounters. Throughout his trip, he attempts to both keep calm, taking one step at a time, and to rely on his instincts, even though he is unsuccessful. These actions give the man an animal-like quality, as though the author is saying that in the wild we return to our most primitive form. This is true for the man in this story. Eventually, his only goal becomes survival. The author uses symbolism to remind readers about dogs' inherit instincts. For instance, when sensing danger the dog's ears are pricked forward. Ironically, where man fails, the animal prevails. After the protagonist dies, the dog continues on his own to the camp. Symbolically, this says that despite greater human intelligence, the increased level of instinctual thinking in animals serves as better protection.

"To Build a Fire" is a tale of survival. The protagonist's inability to defeat the elements leads to tragedy. Fire, a manmade resource, is the primary symbol of survival in the story. Unfortunately the smallest mistakes made by the protagonist lead to his death. In contrast, the dog survives without fire because he has the natural protection of his fur. This is emphasized when the man becomes jealous of the dog's ability to keep warm, as he freezes. The use of fire as the ultimate symbol of survival makes it evident that the prevalent message in this story is that the progress of man does not guarantee our existence.

Characters

Dog

The dog is a "big native husky" and the man's only companion on the trail. While it depends upon the man for food and for warmth from campfires, the dog is "not concerned in the welfare of the man" and obeys him only to avoid being whipped. The dog is motivated by instinct. Critics Earle Labor and Jeanne Campbell Reesman describe the dog as a "foil" to the man. A foil is a character who sets off, or emphasizes, by way of contrast the traits of another character. In this case, the dog's reliable instincts contrast with the man's faulty human judgment. Unlike the man, the dog can sense that the temperature is below minus fifty degrees Fahrenheit, and despite the natural insulation provided by its fur coat, the dog does not travel willingly in such weather. After it falls into the water on the river trail, the dog instinctively knows how to save itself by cleaning the ice from its legs and feet. Later, while the man freezes to death as a result of his unreliable powers of reason, the dog instinctively knows how to survive by curling up in the snow; ultimately, it senses the man's death and saves itself by leaving for camp on its own.

Man

The protagonist in "To Build a Fire" is known simply as "the man." He is a *chechaquo,* or newcomer, who undertakes a nine-hour walk in brutally cold weather to meet his companions at an old mining camp during his first winter in the Klondike.

Accompanied by a dog but lacking both its instincts and its physical adaptation to the cold, the man freezes to death before reaching camp. At the beginning of the story, the man is described as being "without imagination . . . quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances." Thus, when he first sets out, the man notices that it is uncomfortably cold, but he cannot imagine that he is risking death by hypothermia. As critic James I. McClintock points out, the man does not at first think in terms of life versus death, or of the weakness of human beings versus the power of nature, but rather in terms of his own ability to solve any difficulties through the power of reason. He believes that all he has to do to survive is to "keep his head," and he laughs when he remembers the "womanish" warnings spoken by an oldtimer. Critics Earle Labor and Jeanne Campbell Reesman observe that it is in fact the man's pride in his "own rational faculties" that finally results in his demise.

Old-timer

The old-timer from Sulphur Creek is the man's major source of advice in the story. Although he never actually appears in the story, the old-timer and his words of wisdom are frequently remembered by the man. For example, the old-timer once told the man how cold the temperatures could get in the Klondike. He also advised the man about the

absolute necessity of building fires and—most importantly—warned him never to travel alone when the temperature drops below minus fifty degrees Fahrenheit. The old-timer's advice is at first remembered with mild derision by the man, who considers his warnings "womanish" and overcautious. But as the man's condition becomes increasingly perilous, he admits that the old-timer was right about never traveling without a companion "after fifty below." Critic James I. McClintock describes the old-timer as someone whose "experience has given him the imagination to continue living" in extremely cold temperatures but who nevertheless stays indoors rather than risk death on the trail during winter.

Themes

Survival in the Wilderness

Early in the story, it becomes clear that the odds are against the man's chances of surviving in the Klondike wilderness. He is a *chechaquo,* or newcomer to the region, and has never before experienced its extreme winters. Further, he is "traveling light"—on foot rather than by sled and carrying only a bacon sandwich, tobacco, matches, and some birch-bark kindling. What is more, he is outdoors in temperatures well below minus fifty degrees Fahrenheit. Although he has been warned never to travel "after fifty below" without a partner who can help him in emergencies, the man's only companion on this trek is a half-wild husky—a "toil-slave" who has no affection for him. At the best of times the Klondike wilderness would seem alien to the newcomer because of its vast stretches of snow ("as far as his eye could see it was unbroken white" except for the trail). As it is, the man travels with few supplies and without a partner in extreme cold. Under such conditions, it doesn't matter that he is both "quick and alert" to his surroundings, for without someone to help him, his "bad luck" (which is how the man refers to his fall into the icy river) and "mistake" (which is how he describes the blotting out of his second fire by snow falling from a tree) become full-fledged catastrophes and destroy the man's chances of survival.

The Individual versus Nature

Closely related to the issue of survival in the wilderness is "To Build a Fire"'s theme of the individual versus nature. According to the story, the "trouble" with the man is that he is "without imagination" and therefore never speculates about "man's place in the universe," his "frailty in general," or the fact that people are "able only to live within certain narrow limits of temperature." Yet during his trek the man is confronted again and again by his weakness as a lone individual against the formidable power of nature in the form of the brutal cold. Each time he removes his gloves, the man is surprised at how quickly his fingers are numbed. He is also startled at how fast his nose and cheeks freeze, and he is amazed when his spittle freezes in midair before it ever hits the snow. When the man stops for lunch, his feet go numb almost as soon as he sits still, a fact that finally begins to frighten him. Even the dog—who is half-wild and thus closer to nature—feels "depressed" by the cold. Thanks to its natural instincts and its dense winter coat, the dog survives the extreme temperature long enough to head for camp, where it knows it will find food and warmth. Without fur or instinct, the man is too frail on his own to withstand nature- or "the cold of space"—as it presents itself in the Klondike: "The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow."

Death

Once his fire is blotted out by snow and his body is threatened by hypothermia, the man must come to terms with death. His first reaction is to acknowledge calmly that the advice given to him by the old-timer was accurate: "If he had only had a trail-mate he would have been in no danger now." This thought occurs to him again as he fails in his effort to rebuild the fire. From there he moves to "controlled despair"; next, to apathy; and then to panic as he makes a last, futile effort to save his life by frantically running on his frozen feet in hopes of making it to camp. The man's ultimate response to death is to try "meeting [it] with dignity." His final words— "You were right, old hoss; you were right"—are part of a conversation that he imagines having with the old-timer who had warned him not to travel alone. They are also an acknowledgment of nature's power over the individual.

Style

Point of View

Point of view means the perspective from which the story, or narrative, is told. The point of view in "To Build a Fire" is third-person omniscient. In other words, the narrator stands outside of the story and refers to the characters in the third person ("he," "the man," "the dog," "it") and sometimes comments on their behavior and personalities.

The omniscient narrator is by definition all-knowing— able to present not only what the characters are doing and saying but also what they are thinking. Thus the narrator in "To Build a Fire" shows us that the man in the story is observant and careful enough to look for dangerous cracks in the river trail, but he also remarks that the "trouble" with the man is that he is unreflective and "without imagination," so that he never thinks about his own mortality and cannot imagine that the intense cold could be anything worse than uncomfortable. Similarly, the narrator comments on the dog's thoughts, telling us that the animal can sense that the temperature is dangerously below minus fifty degrees Fahrenheit and asserting that the dog feels no affection for the man.

Setting

The setting denotes the time and place of a story as well as the social circumstances of the characters. Although the exact date and country are never given in "To Build a Fire," references to the Klondike, to such rivers as the Yukon, and to such cities as Dawson, as well as the mention of an "old claim" on Henderson Creek, indicate that the story takes place in the Klondike region of Canada near Alaska during the "gold rush" which began in 1897. Of greatest significance is that the story takes place during the winter in the far north, where temperatures can fall to minus seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit and the sun does not rise for days. Into this setting walks the man, who is a *chechaquo,* or newcomer, to the region. His inexperience and lack of imagination do not allow him to prepare for the brutal cold.

Style

The style of a story means the way in which its ideas are expressed—what words have been chosen and how the sentences have been structured to tell the story. One element of style which characterizes "To Build a Fire" is repetition. Certain words and actions are repeated in the story to emphasize the intense coldness of the weather and the seriousness of the man's plight. The word "cold" itself recurs frequently, beginning with the opening sentence: "Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray . . . ," and ending with a mention of the "cold sky" in the story's final paragraph. Elsewhere the man continually expresses his surprise at the coldness of the weather. The repetition of other words and actions also contributes to the sense of bitter coldness: for example,

each time that the man removes his mittens, his fingers instantly go numb, and he has to struggle to warm them up, "threshing his arms back and forth" to regain feeling.

The old-timer's advice against traveling alone is frequently repeated, adding a sense of foreboding to the story. Even more ominous is the use of the phrase "it happened" to introduce the two disasters- first when the man breaks through the ice, and next when his fire is extinguished. Literary critics have noted that the cumulative effect of such repetition is to make the man's death by freezing seem inevitable.

Naturalism

"To Build a Fire" has been called a naturalistic story. Naturalism is a literary movement which developed during the late nineteenth century. Influenced by scientific determinism as well as by Darwin's theory of evolution, naturalism contends that human beings are determined by their heredity and the laws of nature and are thus controlled by their environment and their physical makeup rather than by spirituality or reason. As a naturalistic creature, the man in "To Build a Fire" lacks imagination, and although he tries to survive by using reason, he is overwhelmed by the forces of nature.

Historical Context

Late Nineteenth-, Early Twentieth-Century America

Although Jack London's "To Build a Fire" was first published in 1908, the story was inspired by the Klondike Gold Rush, which began in 1897. America's focus during the early years of the twentieth century was much the same as it had been during the closing years of the nineteenth century.

The country had recently undergone significant expansion across the western plains and along the Pacific coast. In 1898 America expanded offshore as well, with the annexation of Hawaii and—as a result of the Spanish-American War—Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.

The late nineteenth century also saw an influx of immigrants into the United States and, with it, the opening of Ellis Island in 1891 as a processing station for the new Immigration Bureau. Immigrants became an important part of the country's industrialized economy, which produced not only the textiles of earlier years but also focused on mining as well as on the production of steel and heavy machinery. Whole families became involved in the work force. Labor laws were passed and labor unions were formed in response to unsafe working conditions and to the economic depressions which occurred in 1893-97.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought about an increase in the number of public schools and libraries. By 1900 most states had compulsory education laws, and an increasing number of women were graduating from college.

During the early 1900s, when London published "To Build a Fire," the short story as a genre was experiencing enormous popularity.

The Klondike Gold Rush—beginning in 1897 and lasting until 1910—contributed to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century atmosphere of territorial expansion and industrial growth, with their attendant economic cycles of boom and bust.

The Klondike also proved to be a rich source of inspiration for much of London's most successful fiction.

The Klondike Gold Rush

A rich vein of gold was discovered in August 1896 by George Cormack at Rabbit Creek, off the Klondike and Yukon rivers in northwestern Canada. The rush to Canada's Klondike region began a year later, after steamships loaded with prospectors and their gold docked in San Francisco. Reports of the prospectors' success set off a mania for gold. By then the richest claims had already been staked out, but this did not prevent many people, including Jack London, from heading North. This "stampede" of

goldseekers had a profound effect on northwestern Canada. In Dawson, a city created as a result of the rush, Americans outnumbered Canadians by a ratio of five to one. The influx also affected Canada's western neighbor, the American territory of Alaska, through which many of the would-be prospectors traveled on their way to the Klondike. In 1890, there were approximately 4,000 white settlers in Alaska; by 1910, thanks to the Klondike stampede and to later discoveries of gold in Alaska itself, that number had increased to 36,400.

Jack London spent time in both Alaska and Canada. In "To Build a Fire" he writes about the Yukon trail that winds in and out of Alaska and Canada: "[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. . . ." Thousands of goldseekers traveled this and other land and water routes to the Klondike, hoping to strike it rich. They ignored warnings about the harsh winters they would encounter in the Northland, just as the man in "To Build a Fire" ignores the warnings of the experienced old-timer at the Klondike mining camp of Sulphur Creek.

Critical Overview

Since its first publication in 1908, Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire" has been wellreceived. Today, it is regarded as a classic of American literature. In his literary biography, *Jack London: The Man, The Writer, the Rebel* (1976), Robert Barltrop asserts that "To Build a Fire" is one of a group of "outstanding stories" which distinguish London "as one of the masters of that form." Similarly, James Lundquist (*Jack London: Adventures, Ideas, and Fiction,* 1987) describes the story as "starkly elegant, a masterpiece of quiet tone and subdued color . . ." and points out that it is the most frequently anthologized of all of London's works. Earle Labor and Jeanne Campbell Reesman (*Jack London,* 1994) likewise praise "To Build a Fire" as a "masterpiece," while in *Jack London: An American Myth* (1981), John Perry credits the story with being "fine-textured."

Indeed, stories like "To Build a Fire" helped establish Jack London's reputation as a gifted author, inspiring some critics who were London's contemporaries to applaud him as the "successor to Poe" and the "equal of Kipling" (see Charles Child Walcutt's discussion of early criticism in his *Jack London,* 1966). However, not all of the Klondike stories were considered at the time to be of the same high quality as "To Build a Fire." London freely admitted that his principal aim in writing was to make money; thus many of his stories of men and dogs at odds with each other in the frozen north were published in adventure magazines and were written to satisfy a reading public that was fascinated by tales of daring exploits. The result was that many of the Klondike stories were criticized as lurid and hastily written potboilers. It has been pointed out that when London published collections of these magazine stories, he did not distinguish between those of good and bad quality. Hence his 1910 collection, *Lost Face,* contains a mixture of both good and bad stories, including "To Build a Fire." In consequence, a 1910 review in the *Nation* acknowledged London's talent but condemned the blood and violence in his stories, declaring that London "seems to us the victim of a disease of the fancy from which, and from the effects of which, it is impossible not to shrink" (as quoted by John Perry in his *Jack London: An American Myth).*

The variable quality of London's writing causes difficulties for critics today as well. In a 1967 article for *Studies in Short Fiction,* for example, Earle Labor and King Hendricks reprint a 1902 version of "To Build a Fire" which London wrote for a boy's magazine and compare it with the author's later, more famous 1908 version in order to prove that " Jack London was not merely a prolific hack, but, contrary to modern critical opinion, an astute craftsman who understood the difference between juvenile fiction and serious literary art." In his 1986 article for the *Journal of Modern Literature,* Lee Clark Mitchell observes that London's "flat prose," "childish plots," and reputation for hasty writing has caused "embarrassment" for some critics, but argues that in the case of "To Build a Fire," London wrote carefully rather than sloppily, trying to achieve a particular effect in the story. Finally, Robert Barltrop has asserted that because his books continue to be popular, London "cannot be dismissed" by critics but should instead be ranked as an important writer (in Barltrop's *Jack London: The Man, the Writer, the Rebel).*

A sinister aspect of London's work is his championing of white supremacy. Although this attitude does not appear in "To Build a Fire," it does manifest itself in a number of his Klondike stories, where Anglo-Saxons are represented as superior to the indigenous people they encounter in Alaska and Canada. In *Jack London: An American Myth,* John Perry notes that London's belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority was "a reflection of the time," and was thus overlooked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the magazines who published his stories as well as by people who read them. Perry also remarks that "London's faith in Anglo-Saxon superiority seems at odds with itself, considering his best-drawn and most convincing characters are half-breed Indians, who live simple lives of honor and respect in the wilds, while his brutal whites, the chosen race, are limned as savage elementals."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6

Critical Essay #1

Widdicombe is a freelance editor of college textbooks who lives in Alaska. In the essay below, she examines the mysterious effect of the merciless cold in "To Build a Fire" and in everyday Alaskan life.

The third paragraph of Jack London's "To Build a Fire" offers a concise assessment of the personality and motivation of the story's unnamed central character as he embarks across the vast and snowy winter landscape of the Klondike:

But all this—the mysterious, far-reaching hair-line 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 new-comer in the land, a *chechaquo,* 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 a 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 temperature; 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. (Excerpt from "To Build a Fire")

Referring to the above passage, James I. McClintock asserts that this "quick and alert" man tries to use reason instead of imagination to get him past his difficulties and safely to camp but that human rationality proves to be helpless against the Klondike's "killing landscape." In the same vein, Earle Labor and Jeanne Campbell Reesman refer to the frozen landscape as a powerful enemy or "antagonist," asserting that the man "falls into misfortune because of . . . an overweening confidence in the efficacy of his own rational faculties and a corresponding blindness to the dark, nonrational powers of nature, chance, and fate."

In the context of "To Build a Fire," then, "imagination" is the ability to recognize one's limitations. As it happens, the man does not possess this ability until it is too late. From the beginning, he is aware of and responds to the intensity of the cold.

At first, he greets this ruthless cold matter-of-factly and with relatively mild surprise: "It certainly was cold, he concluded, as he rubbed his numb nose and cheek-bones with his mittened hand." This reaction seems especially low-key when compared with the dog's response in the paragraph immediately afterward: "The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew it was no time for traveling." As the story progresses, the man becomes more keenly aware of the magnitude of the cold. Nevertheless, this awareness does not fundamentally alter his mundane response to the unearthly "cold of

space": he feels only a "pang of regret" after realizing that he should have covered his nose and cheeks against frostbite; he is only "a bit frightened" at the speed with which his fingers go numb when he removes his mittens; he is merely "angry" at his bad luck when he plunges knee-deep through the ice on the river-trail. It is not until snow falls from a tree and extinguishes his poorly placed fire that the man becomes "shocked" rather than merely surprised and at last acknowledges "his own sentence of death" as a result of this calamity.

Readers of "To Build a Fire" have judged the man's casual response to the cold to be at best naively reckless and at worst downright stupid. They have argued that the man was not being reasonable by relying on his own ability "to keep his head" and arrogantly ignoring the old-timer's advice to travel with a partner. Some have pointed out that at the very least, he should have dispensed with "traveling light" and instead used his dog as a pack animal for hauling extra supplies—a practice that was not only customary in the Klondike but logical as well. Most obviously, the man never should have been so foolish as to build his second fire underneath a snow-laden tree.

Rational or not, the man's behavior is what makes "To Build a Fire" such a powerful story. His inability to imagine himself in danger from the cold and his fruitless attempts at "keeping his head" once he recognizes that death is near constitute behavior most of us can understand. Such disasters as fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods bring with them enough eye-popping or ear-splitting devastation to make them clearly life-threatening. However, the extreme cold of frosty landscapes or "the White Silence," as London describes it, is so quiet and abstract that it does not immediately appear to be lethal. Besides for most people, cold is easily rendered harmless by well-insulated houses and central heating, so that like the man in "To Build a Fire" (who has come from and is going to a warm cabin) we tend to forget that human beings are "able only to live within certain narrow limits of temperature."

Critic James I. McClintock emphasizes this point when he remarks that, even had the man been capable of imagining his own mortality before he set out on his journey—that is, even if he had traveled with a partner—there is no guarantee that he would have survived nature at its most extreme during a Klondike winter. Ultimately, McClintock argues, imagination is proof against unimaginably cold temperatures only if it keeps us indoors when they occur.

Indeed, the cold itself functions as an invisible antagonist in "To Build a Fire." It meets the man as soon as he goes outside into the brutal Klondike winter, stays close by him throughout the story, and finally kills him through the effects of hypothermia— the lowering of body temperature to subnormal levels at which frostbite and eventually death occur. Hypothermia does not happen exclusively to newcomers or *chechaquos,* however. James H. Barker's book *Always Getting Ready/Upterrlainarluta* consists of photographs and interviews with Yup'ik Eskimos living on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska. The Yup'ik word *upterrlainarluta* means "being ever prepared," and for the Yup'ik culture on the Delta this means "that one must be wise in knowing what to prepare for and equally wise in being prepared for the unknowable." This concept is

similar to the "imagination" in "To Build a Fire." One interview in particular in the book provides a grim example of the importance of *upterrlainarluta:*

Morrie told us how he lost his arm. During the winter of 1974 he was traveling downriver by himself on a snowmachine. The track became caked with ice. Attempting to clear it, he reached into the track and accidentally hit the throttle. His arm was caught. He couldn't reach his tools to release the tension on the track so he sat there for some time trying to work his arm loose. Knowing he would die without help, he lay there long enough for his arm to freeze, cut it off and walked the couple of miles downriver to a nearby cabin for help. (Excerpt from *Always Getting Ready/Upterrlainarluta*)

Some may think that in "To Build a Fire" London exaggerates the dangers of extreme cold in order to tell a good story, but this is not the case. In January 1996, a Yup'ik couple and their grandchild were traveling by car in Interior Alaska when they got stuck in a snowbank far from the main highway. Unable to free their car, they stamped out the word "HELP" in the snow and set off on foot for the nearest dwelling—a roadhouse about ten miles away. Although not traveling alone, they suffered a fate similar to London's character in "To Build a Fire." With the temperature dropping below minus sixty degrees Fahrenheit, they tried unsuccessfully to build a fire. As hypothermia set in, they became disoriented. In a classic response to the last stages of hypothermia, they began to hallucinate and overheat. They wandered around in circles and threw off their parkas and mittens. Then all three died from the "tremendous cold."

In "To Build a Fire," London's *chechaquo* is confident that to survive the harsh Klondike winter "all a man had to do was to keep his head." That confidence is, however, misplaced. As Peter Stark puts it in his article on hypothermia, "The cold remains a mystery, more prone to fell men than women, more lethal to the thin and well-muscled than to those with avoirdupois, and least forgiving to the arrogant and unaware."

Critical Essay #2

Lee Clark Mitchell is affiliated with Princeton University. In the following excerpt, she discusses how London's repetitious writing style in "To Build a Fire" ultimately undermines the meaning of his language.

Even enthusiasts cringe at naturalism's style. Given excesses so plain and a motion so plodding, sensible critics have simply dropped the subject. And perhaps the greatest embarrassment has been caused by Jack London, whose flat prose seems especially open to criticism. His very methods of composition prompt a certain skepticism; the speed with which he wrote, his suspiciously childish plots, perhaps even his self-advertising pronouncements have all convinced readers to ignore the technical aspects of his fiction.

Yet good manners seem misplaced once we grant that literature need not appear a certain way, since it is difficult to see then what it might mean to reject a work's style as inappropriate. Indeed, the very strangeness of naturalism's vision emerges so vividly in its prose that wrenched stylistic maneuvers soon seem to the point. As we have come to acknowledge with cubist perspectives, metaphysics shapes style, not maladroitness. Once admit certain large claims about time and character, and naturalism appears less inadequate to conventional criteria than at last merely inaccessible to them. Or viceversa, allow the contorted styles of naturalism to achieve their effect, and customary assumptions about time and character all of a sudden begin to erode. Such writing clearly testifies to what is for most an alien vision of experience and, therefore, almost by definition veers from realist standards. But it is far from inept.

Still, all of this risks too much too soon by linking the varied styles of naturalism to individual author's control. What we need to do here is merely to loosen our critical categories and to agree that while metaphysics may not disprove maladroitness, at least maladroitness can be approached as a kind of after-the-fact metaphysic. Postponing for the moment, that is, the question of London's ultimate purpose, we can simply describe what happens in one seemingly rough-hewn work—his short story, "To Build a Fire" (1906).

Critical Essay #3

As good a place as any to begin is with the story's concluding paragraph, where the style's very strengths appear most dramatically to be little more than flaws. The unnamed man who has repeatedly failed to ward off the Arctic cold at last slips into frozen sleep, watched over by a gradually bewildered dog:

Later the dog whined loudly. And still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the cold sky. Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp it knew, where were the other food providers and fire providers.

These lines seem a bit abrupt and lend a halting rhythm to the story's "sense of an ending," but we cannot merely ascribe their oddity to London's personal quirkiness. For whatever his intentions, there is no denying that this is a self-consciously structured prose, evident specifically in the paragraph's minor transgressions. London refuses to subordinate clauses, for instance, though the more natural form of description invites such a pattern. And as if even greater formality were desired, phrases are self-consciously inverted ("a little longer it delayed," for example, and "the camp it knew, where were the other food providers").

Yet the more convincing evidence of stylistic control appears in the paragraph's most striking feature: its multiple repetitions. Just as alliteration echoes a series of "l"s, "c"s, "b"s, and "t"s through to the final clause's "f-p"s, so syntax compounds that phonic stutter by trusting almost exclusively to the copulative—seven times in five relatively short sentences. Prepositional phrases emerge additively instead of in the usual subordinated pattern (as when the dog trots " *up* the trail *in* the direction *of* the camp"); one phrase merely rewords, that is, rather than extends another. Even the shifters repeat, crosshatching the whole through identical words and sounds ("Later" "later"; "still" "little later"). And although it may first seem that this gives events a certain progressive sequence, that effect is countered by the passage's reliance on the simple past tense, as if it were avoiding the very temporal elaborations that might otherwise reflect a controlling narrative consciousness. Throughout, each sentence and sometimes each clause offers itself autonomously—as units only loosely interconnected. Phonemic and syntactic repetitions, in other words, reveal not an interdependent world larger than the sum of its grammatical parts, but the very absence of an organizing grammar to the text.

The paragraph's verbal echoes remind us that the plot itself reiterates a few basic events. On a single day, an unnamed man walks in seventy-fivebelow- zero temperature, stops to build a fire and eat lunch, resumes walking, falls into an icy spring, builds another fire that is obliterated by snow from a tree, then fails to build a third fire before finally freezing to death. Banal as these events are one by one, they repeat themselves into an eerie signifi- cance, as the man attempts over and over to enact the story's titular infinitive. In turn, everything that somehow contributes to those

attempts is doubled and redoubled, iterated and reiterated, leaving nothing to occur only once. Just as verbal repetition disrupts a normal grammatical progression by breaking phrases into autonomous units, so the recurrence of things themselves has a curiously disruptive narrative effect. By disconnecting things from each other, repetition instills a certain static quality to the story's motion. Moreover, the reiterated concentration on the material lends a paralyzing quality to the story's events, which gradually draws into question the very notion of plot as onward narrative progress.

Its unsettling effect in "To Build a Fire" is nicely illustrated in the repetitions of this passage:

Once, coming around a bend, he shied abruptly, like a startled horse. . . . The creek he knew was frozen clear to the bottom—no creek could contain water in that arctic winter—but he knew also that there were springs that bubbled out from the hillsides and ran along under the snow and on top the ice of the creek. He knew that the coldest snaps never froze these springs, and he knew likewise their danger. They were traps. They hid pools of water under the snow that might be three inches deep, or three feet. Sometimes a skin of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by the snow. Sometimes there were alternate layers of water and ice skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while, sometimes wetting himself to the waist.

That was why he had shied in such a panic. . . .

Whatever it lacks as exposition, the passage clearly shows that what might have seemed one paragraph's idiosyncrasies actually integrates the story. The subject—some form of H2O—is repeated over and over, whether "creek," "water," "snow," and "ice" three times apiece, or "springs" and "skin" twice, or the implied referent of "froze," "frozen," "bubbled," and "wetting." For both man and dog, that alternating substance forms a series of fatal "traps" that are themselves phonemically reiterated in the cold "snaps" which never quite freeze the springs. Other internal sentence rhymes reverberate through the text, as does an alliteration that extends from the hard "c"s in the second sentence. Sentence structures themselves repeat, whether resuming from similar subjects and adverbs ("They were . . ." "They hid . . ."; "Sometimes . . ." "Sometimes . . ."); or dividing in the middle ("Three inches deep, or three feet"; "he knew . . . but he knew"; "He knew . . . and he knew"); or turning on chiasmus ("Sometimes a skin of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by the snow"). Finally, the grammatical whole binds together with the repeated claim that the man "shied" away.

As in the earlier paragraph, multiple repetitions return us back to where we began and tend in the process to drain whatever suspense we might otherwise have felt in the action. Narrative progression seems denied through the very stylistic recurrences that integrate the passage. Or rather, to be more precise, the text's very doubleness belies the singularity asserted at the opening— "Once, coming around a bend. . . ." Through multiform repetitions of phoneme and syntax, the implied danger of the scene is

rendered commonplace. And that effect is compounded by the passage's overarching shift in preterite, from the simple opening tense of "he shied abruptly" to the closing perfect of "he had shied," all of which is subtly divided by a series of past participial constructions. Instead of spurring expectation onward, repetition and tense forestall action in a tableau of ever-recurring, never-changing elements.

Critical Essay #4

Repetition establishes a compelling pattern in London's Arctic for reasons that are neither simple nor straightforward. Most obviously, however, its effect is entropic, reducing the man to the purely physical by depriving him initially of a will, then of desires, and at last of life itself. The process of repetition, moreover, again first appears at a verbal level—and notably with the word most often repeated. "Cold" occurs in the first half of this short story more than twenty-five times, with an effect that is altogether predictable. For as the narrative's focus on the physically immediate contributes to a paralyzing "tyranny of things," so the repetition of a thermal absence gradually seems to lower the textual temperature. Or rather, it is the emphasis on intense cold—no more, after all, than molecular inactivity—that exposes an irreducible corporeality to the very air itself.

The "tyranny of things" that develops from a repetitive concentration on the material world tends, as we have seen, to break down characteristic connections between both objects and events. Yet repetition itself implies a more ontological stasis in terms of the story's hero, exercising its power most fully by isolating not event from event, but event from actor. The repetition of things and events creates an environment that seems to resist human intention—one in which desires fail over and over to be able to shape results. Consequence ever falls short of anticipation, and the narrative gradually separates the man from his world by exposing the ineffectiveness of his will—not merely to reach camp by six o'clock, but to avoid various "traps," then to build a fire, and finally to forestall the Arctic's numbing effects. The "tyranny of things" prevails over the man first by depleting his physical resources, and then more importantly by separating him as agent from an environment in which deliberate actions might have determinate consequences.

As repetition of things makes the conditions they form seem somehow fixed and determined, its effect on ephemeral states of being similarly drops them to lower levels of possibility. And as plot recurrences seem to diminish the capacity for personal control, so verbal reiterations more generally foreclose the prospects we normally assume in experience. When the man carefully builds a second fire, for instance, the warning implied by the repetitions offsets the description's calm understatement.

This served for a foundation and prevented the young flame from drowning itself in the snow it otherwise would melt. The flame he got by touching a match to a small shred of birch bark that he took from his pocket. This burned more readily than paper. Placing it on the foundation, he fed the young flame with wisps of dry grass and with the tiniest dry twigs.

He worked slowly and carefully, keenly aware of his danger. Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed it. He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding directly to the flame . He knew there must be no failure. (emphases added)

The very invocation of "flame" five times in seven sentences ensures not the prospect of fiery success, but rather ephemeral hope—an effect that seems even more fully confirmed by the fricatives that proliferate through the passage. Likewise, the reiteration shortly thereafter of the confident claim that "he was safe" establishes instead a mood of imminent peril. By translating the singular into a set, doubled language subverts linguistic authority, in the process replacing routine assurance with a series of lingering doubts.

This verbal effect is especially clear with words that unlike "flame" refer to capacities, not conditions. And it is hardly surprising in a story devoted to the consequences of low temperature that the privileged capacity should be a knowledge of how to forestall them—or that the word "know" should occur nearly as often as does "cold." Keep in mind that "know" is a special kind of word, invoking possibilities of certainty as well as consciousness, and thereby suggesting capacities for deliberation and choice. By extension, it implies control of contingency, since knowledge of the past can help mediate the present and in turn directly shape the future. Huck and Jim "knowed" all sorts of signs, just as Lord Mark knows why Kate Croy rejects him, and the terms of knowledge in both cases dictate how consequent action is to be understood. That possibility is jeopardized in "To Build a Fire" and finally precluded by repetition, as the man's alleged knowledge, increasingly invoked, comes to seem first inadequate, then simply irrelevant. Having thoroughly subverted the effectiveness of knowledge, repetition at last lapses into silence.

Compounding the effect of these verbal echoes is the repetitive syntactic pattern of the story. Indeed, its paratactic flatness creates a world where everything appears somehow already ordered, constraining a single fixed character in a narratively static, seemingly timeless world. The implications of London's simple, disconnected sentences can be appreciated only through illustrative contrast, and perhaps no more obvious one could be found than Henry James's late style. That style, it hardly needs stating, reflects a wholly different conception of character, since James valued individuals less for adapting to the unalterable than for imaginatively altering experience itself. The way clauses tumble out of grammatical thickets, or characters complete (only to distort) each other's claims, or shifting perspectives illumine prospects for action: these narrative patterns seem to confirm James's philosophical pragmatism. Instead of perspectives *on* the world, his late novels elaborate perspectives that *create* the different worlds in which his characters as well as his readers live.

The pattern of London's prose itself suggests a vision radically at odds with this epistemological model. Avoiding narrative contingency, his syntax denies what James everywhere celebrates: the authority of individual perspective. Clauses rest on an equal footing instead of linking in dependent structures, with the effect that experience seems already fixed and thoroughly unalterable. James's flexible grammar and tentative tone reveal experience as ever open-ended, ever to be reshaped by the power of language. London's regular, flat sentences have the contrary effect of denying any shaping power: "everything must happen as it does happen, it could not be otherwise, and there is no need for explanatory connectives." Erich Auerbach does not mean in this famous definition that parataxis defies rules of causation or consequence; rather, it is the

absence of clausal subordination that encourages us to read plots as if they lacked alternatives. While James's hypotactic texts seem to encourage characters to order life idiosyncratically, London's prose instead enforces a single causal order and instills a sense of certitude by returning again and again to the same stylistic place.

Yet the syntactic repetitions of parataxis have a further effect worthy of attention—one much like that of repeated words, but best illustrated in spatial terms. Just as the close doubling of physical objects blurs distinctions between this and that, here and there (or rather, this and this, here and here), so the repetition of something in time dissolves the edges between then and now. Something that happens once—a jar placed in Tennessee, say—not only enables, but seems to encourage a mapping of fixed coordinates. By contrast, something exactly repeated tends to confuse a single determinate order.

Seeing double, like hearing exact echoes, disorients precisely by not allowing a fixed priority, and until sequence can be asserted, that unsettling effect remains. One of the results of the momentary disorientation produced by this kind of repetition is that time itself seems suspended. In the same way, paratactical repetitions structure a narrative that more generally denies its own temporality and, in the process, creates an aura of timelessness. Such an effect seems unlikely in a story that opens at 9 o'clock, pauses at 10, stops for lunch at 12:30, and ends at dusk, and in which a variety of shifters abound (such as "when," "before," "after," "at last," and "once in a while"). But this very specificity, when coupled with an absence of singular events, effectively elides the passage of time that it pretends to demarcate.

In the central sequence, for example, the man starts a fire to thaw his freezing legs and is just about to cut free his moccasin lacings:

But before he could cut the strings, it happened. It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake. He should not have built the fire under the spruce tree. He should have built it in the open. But it had been easier to pull the twigs from the bush and drop them directly on the fire. Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow on its boughs. No wind had blown for weeks, and each bough was fully freighted. Each time he had pulled a twig he had communicated a slight agitation to the tree—an imperceptible agitation, so far as he was concerned, but an agitation sufficient to bring about the disaster. High up in the tree one bough capsized its load of snow. This fell on the boughs beneath, capsizing them. This process continued, spreading out and involving the whole tree. It grew like an avalanche, and it descended without warning upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out! Where it had burned was a mantle of fresh and disordered snow. . . .

Without plotting multiple repetitions once again, we should not fail to notice that "it happened" echoes the earlier disaster when the man fell into the spring water ("And then it happened"). As there, the two words contain the experience. Yet more to the point, we never confuse the versatile "it" that floats through the passage and that bobs up so variously in each of the first four and last two sentences. The very shifting of

referents under the pronoun paradoxically clarifies the scene, as one completed, timeless event unfolds from a basic paratactic structure.

The real clincher, however, is the curiously immediate "Now": "Now the tree under which he had done this carried a weight of snow. . . ." While the word seems at first to recover us to time by breaking the text's completed pattern, the "Now" serves here not as adverb but expletive. Indeed, by merely marking time, it reinforces the narrative's pervasive timelessness. As well, the overly simple syntax, the pronounced lack of subordinate clauses, the subject references and verbs that each atomize the scene—all work as do repetition and tense. The whole resists normal sequence from the initial "it" onwards and simply elaborates an experience that seems already completed. Here as elsewhere, the text links sections by stylistic rather than narrative causality—by a pattern of grammatical signifieds, not narrative signifiers. Actions prompt not other actions, sentences contingent sentences, so much as each turns back on itself, in the process fostering the impression of temporal collapse.

Perhaps the best way to understand this effect is by turning to London's earlier, one-page version of the story. There the man has a name, builds a fire, and survives, toeless but with the hard-learned moral, *" Never travel alone !"* Clearly, the stories define different experiences, a difference nowhere better exemplified than in their central paragraphs:

But at the moment he was adding the first thick twigs to the fire a grievous thing happened. The pine boughs above his head were burdened with a four months' snowfall, and so finely adjusted were the burdens that his slight movements in collecting the twigs had been sufficient to disturb the balance.

The snow from the topmost bough was the first to fall, striking and dislodging the snow on the boughs beneath. And all this snow, accumulating as it fell, smote Tom Vincent's head and shoulders and blotted out his fire.

Exactly half as many words (92 vs. 183) appear in only a third as many sentences (4 vs. 13). Though brief, in other words, the passage links compound sentences with a leisured ease that assumes narrative contingency. Events can be anticipated and intentionally avoided, and therefore responsibility can be affirmed. By contrast, the later version avoids participial constructions. Simple repeated sentences only serve to confirm the response presaged by the ominous "it happened": all has been already enacted, and the human will can have no effect. As explanatory connectives help to authorize the didactic force of the early version, so the repetitive, tableau-like style of the latter shapes a narrative world free of contingency—as free in the future as in the past, and therefore as inevitable as determinism requires.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Hedrick discusses London's depictions of "aloneness," comradeship, and death in "The White Silence," "In a Far Country," and "To Build a Fire."

His purse exhausted after a year at the University of California, in 1897 London joined the second wave of fortune-hunters in the Klondike. He returned with little more than a case of scurvy to show for his efforts, but the stories he wrote from his Alaskan experience established his literary career. In them we can see the lineaments of a hero who would never appear in London's "civilized" fictions. He represents the most fully mature and human character London was to imagine. The aloneness of this Alaskan hero is different from the aloneness of London's romantic heroes. Martin Eden's aloneness grows out of a syndrome of self-abasement and self-exaltation like that which was operating in London's consciousness as he entered the middle class. The Alaskan hero's aloneness is based on a more realistic assessment of his strengths and weaknesses. He understands that there is something stronger than he—Death. Death is the ultimate equalizer, and in this awareness London wrote a handful of stories that imply the need for human solidarity.

In *Jack London and the Klondike,* Franklin Walker provides a carefully researched account of London's day-by-day adventures, against which he parallels his use of similar experiences in his fictions. Walker contributes significantly to our knowledge of London's sources and artistic techniques, but he does not analyze the more subtle movements that occurred in London's inner life, as he internalized the white landscapes of Alaska. For this, one must turn to James McClintock's *White Logic.* McClintock traces the movement of London's consciousness from the affirmation, in the early Malemute Kid stories, of the individual's ability to master the universe, to an awareness of "a more complex view of reality" in which "limited protagonists . . . [reach] an accommodation with a hostile, chaotic cosmos by living by an imposed code," to a loss of faith in the ability of the code to order the universe. Then the cycle begins over again, as London "turns to race identification" to provide the illusion of mastery that the individual hero could not sustain.

McClintock's ground-breaking analysis of London's Northland stories [*White Logic,* 1975] is the starting point for this chapter, and his work makes it unnecessary to dwell in detail on London's Alaskan fictions. It is sufficient to point out the pattern that emerges from a comparison of three stories: "The White Silence," "In a Far Country," and "To Build a Fire."

The first story is about three people (plus one unborn) traveling in mutual comradeship; the second is about two men who are together but who are not bound by comradely ties; in the third story "the man," as he is designated, insists on defying sourdough wisdom and traveling alone. Death enters each story. "In a Far Country" and "To Build a Fire" deal with unnecessary death—death that could have been avoided had the protagonists the imagination to perceive their finitude and their need to rely on others for

mutual support and protection. The relationship between Cuthfert and Weatherbee in "In a Far Country" hinges on mutual fear and suspicion. Together in a cabin for the duration of the Alaskan winter, their distrust of each other encourages waste of food and fuel rather than the economy that is necessary for mutual survival. In the end they kill each other over a cache of sugar. The man in "To Build a Fire" believes that "a man who is a man" travels alone. He reads no message in the vast Alaskan landscape, nor does he understand, in human, mortal terms, the significance of sixty-five degrees below zero. When he breaks through the ice and wets himself to his knees, his limbs begin to freeze before he can get a fire started to dry himself out. Only when death is upon him does he realize his own mortality.

These deaths were avoidable, and the way to avoid them is clearly through human solidarity. But if solidarity can prevent some unnecessary deaths, it cannot, of course, undo the inevitability of death. That is the reality London faces in "The White Silence." The Malemute Kid is traveling with Mason, his close companion of five years, and Mason's Indian wife, Ruth. London establishes the odds early in the story. They have two hundred miles to travel and only enough food for six days. The reader may expect a tale of struggle and sacrifice in which— perhaps—the trio united can cope with nature's odds against them. But this is not, London hints in the following passage, simply a tale of heroic struggle. It is a tale of human finitude:

The afternoon wore on, and with the awe, born of the White Silence, the voiceless travellers bent to their work. Nature has many tricks wherewith she convinces man of his finity,—the ceaseless flow of the tides, the fury of the storm, the shock of the earthquake, the long roll of heaven's artillery, —but the most tremendous, the most stupefying of all, is the passive phase of the White Silence. All movement ceases, the sky clears, the heavens are as brass; the slightest whisper seems sacrilege, and man becomes timid, affrighted at the sound of his own voice. Sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world, he trembles at his audacity, realizes that his is a maggot's life, nothing more. Strange thoughts arise unsummoned, and the mystery of all things strives for utterance. And the fear of death, of God, of the universe, comes over him, —the hope of the Resurrection and the Life, the yearning for immortality, the vain striving of the imprisoned essence, —it is then, if ever, man walks alone with God.

Death comes unexpectedly, from an unexpected quarter. There is still food, and in the three travelers, warmth and energy. But an old pine, "burdened with its weight of years and of snow," falls and crushes Mason. He is half-paralyzed but not dead. He urges the Malemute Kid to go on with his wife and the unborn child she carries—urges him to save his family and leave him to his inevitable death. He only asks that he not have to face death alone. "'Just a shot, one pull on the trigger,'" he asks of the Kid before they leave. The Kid is reluctant to part with his traveling companion of five years with whom, "shoulder to shoulder, on the rivers and trails, in the camps and mines, facing death by field and flood and famine," he had "knitted the bonds of . . . comradeship." He asks that they wait with Mason for three days, hoping for a change of luck. Mason agrees to a one-day wait. The Kid's request for a delay turns out to be costly. He is unable to kill a moose, and, when he returns to camp, he finds the dogs have broken into their food cache. They now have "perhaps five pounds of flour to tide them over two hundred

miles of wilderness." But fear of death is not, in this story, as great as the fear of aloneness.

The Kid sends Ruth on ahead, and then sits by Mason's side, hoping that he will die so that he will not be obliged to shoot him. Mason is in pain and knows he is dying, but his torment is not as acute as the Kid's. Mason places his hopes in the continuation of life through his wife and the child ("flesh of my flesh") she will bear. During his last day his mind wanders euphorically back to scenes of his early manhood in Tennessee. Although Mason bears some resemblance to London's description of his ideal Man-Comrade, who, he wrote, should be both "delicate and tender, brave and game," and "who, knowing the frailties and weaknesses of life, could look with frank and fearless eyes upon them," he also has traces of the "smallness or meanness" that was explicitly not a part of London's conception.

For, earlier in the story, Mason—over the Kid's gentle protest—brutally whipped a dog who was unfortunate enough to fall in the traces. The weakened dog is subsequently devoured by her teammates. Mason is very much an ordinary man, loving his wife, loving life, having no grand philosophy but only a realistic practicality that says life must go on. He does not appear an idealized Man-Comrade but only a garrulous traveling companion, full of stories and gab. Indeed, the extent to which his rambling monologues fill up the story makes all the more awesome his death—marked by a sharp report, followed by silence.

In this story London portrays death as an event with a human character that quickly yields to a nonhuman force—the White Silence, which "seem[s] to sneer" in the moment before the Kid performs his last act of comradeship. Death is clearly harder for the survivor than for the dying. It is easier for Mason to die than for the Kid to live with the knowledge of death. He has been forced to participate in a ritual confirmation of death's power and man's finitude. Worse, he has had, in the name of comradeship, to break the bond that makes death human, that made death bearable for Mason. He is now alone. In terror, he lashes the dogs across the waste of land. Unlike the man in "To Build a Fire," the Malemute Kid has the imagination to perceive in the vast silences of the Northland the message of his finitude. He knows the value of comradeship. But neither his imagination nor his sensitivity can protect him from the pain of loss, the pain of experiencing death before death through the death of another to whom he is bound. Written within months after London learned of John London's death (he died while Jack was in Alaska), this story probably draws on the emotions of that loss. In one stroke London lost a father, a comrade, and a model of male working-class identity. In "The White Silence" the Kid is almost in the role of a redeemer: he takes the suffering of Mason on himself; by acquiescing in Mason's request that he not be left to die alone, the Kid takes that aloneness on himself. He redeems Mason's death and renders it human. But the unspoken question hanging in the silence, the question that fills the Kid with fear, is this: Who will redeem his own death?

As McClintock writes, this story ends in an ambiguous balance between human significance and human futility. The Kid has shown himself to be a true comrade. It remains to be seen whether or not someone will yet be a true comrade to him. This

future, which is beyond the scope of the story, depends on whether or not the Kid can be open and trusting of others, whether or not he can be passively receptive to the significance that others might invest in his life; whether or not, in religious terms, he can leave his salvation up to others. If he cannot, then it is hard to escape the conclusion that, by severing the bond between himself and Mason, he has condemned himself to a living death.

"In a Far Country," written probably a few months after "The White Silence," suggests that death may also come in nonredemptive ways. Cuthfert and Weatherbee are bound together by their situations, but, not being bound emotionally, they engage in a ghastly inversion of comradely rituals. They are united not in life-giving rituals like washing and eating, but in their mutual disregard for cleanliness, order, and economy. London suggests that the reasons for their mutual suspicion are their class differences. Weatherbee is a lower-class clerk, Cuthfert a Master of Arts who writes and paints. Both think of themselves as gentlemen but, London pointedly remarks, "a man can be a gentleman without possessing the first instinct of true comradeship." Master of Arts Cuthfert "deemed the clerk a filthy, uncultured brute, whose place was in the muck with the swine, and told him so." The sensuous, adventure-loving clerk calls the Master of Arts "a milk-and-water sissy and a cad." They perceive each other through class stereotypes, and the mechanical nature of their togetherness is like the articulation of classes and occupations in a capitalist society in which a physical interdependence of parts is accompanied by emotional anomie. Having killed each other, they die in each other's arms. Like the "devil dog" and his cruel master, LeClerc, in London's story "Batard," like Hawthorne's Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, they are bound not by love but by a dark necessity.

The stories in which London writes of such false comradeship tend to dwell on a materialistic, positivistic view of man. The inevitable degeneration of the characters in these stories is rendered in laboratory detail as if all that were at stake were a piece of flesh. Thus in "Love of Life," which looks at the struggle of a man who has been abandoned by his traveling mate, although the protagonist survives, he is described as an "it," a squirming mass of cells. This is the positivistic view of man that Wolf Larsen propounds to Van Weyden in *The Sea- Wolf.* The loss of human significance in these stories of comradeship betrayed make survival a sorry boon.

In "To Build a Fire," written after that period of disillusionment he called the "long sickness," London takes the next logical step. If comradeship inevitably will be betrayed, one might as well travel alone. When the man in this story finally realizes that he is going to die, he "entertained in his mind the conception of meeting death with dignity." But what sort of dignity is available to him? It was possible for Mason in "The White Silence" to meet death with dignity without cutting his emotional ties to life—because of his comradeship with the Kid and his biological link through Ruth to the next generation. But when one travels alone, death holds all the cards. The only way to meet it with dignity is to surrender oneself totally to it. The man in "To Build a Fire" gives himself drowsily to these thoughts. "Well, he was bound to freeze anyway, and he might as well take it decently. With this newfound peace of mind came the first glimmerings of drowsiness. A good idea, he thought, to sleep off to death. It was like taking an

anaesthetic. Freezing was not so bad as people thought. There were lots worse ways to die." Several years later London described Martin Eden's attempt to drown himself: "He breathed in the water deeply, deliberately, after the manner of a man taking an anaesthetic". Unable to take charge of the life-forces, the characters who travel alone maintain a modicum of dignity by giving themselves willingly to their deaths.

"To Build a Fire" and "In a Far Country" plot a retreat from the comradeship of "The White Silence." The solace of comradeship is supplanted in "To Build a Fire" by the whispers of a dreamless sleep. The fire has gone out, and along with it, all hope of campfire fellowship. If we are to judge from "The White Silence," London's reason for retreating from the bonds of comradeship is not simply that his comrade failed him. Mason may have differed with the Kid, but as he lay dying he apologized for his mistreatment of the dog. The only way in which Mason betrayed his comradeship was in the very act of death itself, when of mortal necessity he left the Kid behind. Perhaps this "betrayal" was more than the Kid could bear. It brought him up against the irrefragable aloneness of each human being. He was afraid. The delicate ecological balance London achieves in "The White Silence" between the forces of life and the forces of death is perhaps all that human beings should hope for in their living and dying. For London, it was not enough.

Like so many American writers, Jack London early in his career realized a vision that he could not sustain. The decline of artistry in his later fictions paralleled his retreat from the knowledge apprehended in "The White Silence." It was a retreat from death, from limitation, from aloneness. In his search for a way out of the human condition, London did, in a measure, deny himself humanity. By retreating from all that life has to offer in the way of human solidarity, London exiled himself. Like Hawthorne's Wakefield, he was an "outcast of the universe." Just as Wakefield, by leaving his marriage partner, lost his "place" in human society, so London, by leaving the lower class, found himself with no niche, no place to rest himself. The decline of London's writing career in many ways parallels that of Nathaniel Hawthorne's. Both men began their careers with short stories of superior quality, followed by a novel that became a classic. For London this was not his first novel, *A Daughter of the Snows,* but his second, *The Call of the Wild.*

London followed with novels of mixed quality, like *The Sea-Wolf,* just as Hawthorne followed *The Scarlet Letter* with the less forceful *The House of the Seven Gables,* and then succumbed to the repressed sexuality of *The Blithedale Romance* and the tortured symbolism of *The Marble Faun.* But the real similarities are in their choices of theme and in their modes of retreat from the primary truth of their earlier work. Both write about characters who suffer from their aloneness. Hawthorne was able to distinguish between an aloneness that is human and necessary, indeed, inescapable, and an aloneness that is inflicted on oneself out of overweening pride, that is to say, between the aloneness of the modern hero, Hester Prynne, and that of the romantic hero, Arthur Dimmesdale. Both London and Hawthorne attempted to retreat from aloneness through the sentimental Victorian strategy of love and marriage. What neither of them fully understood was that, in using a platitudinous domesticity to shield them from the terror of aloneness, what they were seeking was not a comrade, a mate, a wife, but something altogether different: a mother.

The fire of the Victorian hearth did not burn as brightly as the Alaskan campfire. It replaced intimacy with sentiment and comradeship with courtship. For a relationship between equals, struggling against mutual dangers, it substituted a relationship between a boy-man and a girl-woman who played at being grown-ups. This ploy enabled London to come out of the long sickness and to resume life, but it vitiated his art and provided only a stay of execution for his life.

Source: Joan D. Hedrick, "Journeying across the Ghostly Wastes of a Dead World," in *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and His Work,* The University of North Carolina Press, 1982, pp. 48-55.

Critical Essay #6

In the following excerpt, McClintock attempts to illustrate his assertion that "To Build a Fire" is London's "most mature expression of his pessimism."

"To Build a Fire" is London's most mature expression of his pessimism. The nameless "chechaquo" or tenderfoot who confronts the white silence in this short story possesses neither the imagination that gives man an intuitive grasp of the laws of nature and allows him to exercise his reason to accommodate himself to them, nor the "thrice cursed" imagination that convinces man of the absurdity of confronting the unknown with ridiculously finite human powers:

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.

He does not recognize that man is so finite that the bitterly cold Alaskan landscape inevitably destroys the individual. The rest of the story suggests that man is totally unequipped to face the unknown and inherently too limited to explore life's mysteries and live. If the individual is to survive, he must avoid truth-seeking and "spirit-groping." Only two other living beings are mentioned in "To Build a Fire": the "old timer" and the dog who accompanies the tender-foot along the "hairline trail" into the "unbroken white" of the mysterious land. The old timer offers one way to survive, and as it turns out, the only way. In the autumn before the young man takes his fatal journey, "the old timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below." His experience has given him the imagination to continue living; but, significantly, he adjusts to the unknown by refusing to venture into it. He remains with other men, away from the trail during the heart of winter. The lesson he attempts to teach the young wanderer is that if one hopes to survive, he must retreat from a solitary confrontation with cosmic power, "the full force of the blow" delivered by "the cold of space" at the "unprotected tip of the planet." The kind of accommodation the Kid makes, practicing the code in order to adjust, is impossible. The dog, however, accompanies the reckless young man into the cold and does survive. Instinct protects him. Nevertheless, instinct gives no comfort to man, since it is unavailable to him. The dog has "inherited the knowledge" from his savage ancestors who, like he, had never been separated from the brutal landscape by civilization. In fact, the dog is part of the inhuman Alaskan wilderness and, like it, "was not concerned in the welfare of the man." The old timer's imagination, then, warns that man cannot confront the depths of experience and live; the dog's instinct for survival is unavailable to man. Having been divorced from nature by civilization, no man is fit to undertake the most arduous journey.

In addition to imagination, the quality that permitted the Malemute kid and other protagonists to survive in the Northland had been their knowledge of the concrete and their mastery of facts. Suspicious of abstractions, London had given his characters control over the factual. For example, Sitka Charlie may not understand the reasons for the bizarre occurrences in "The Sun-Dog Trail," but he sees the details in the "picture" and knows how to respond to them effectively. The Kid, too, is able to master situations because he knows Northland lore, knows facts and can order them rationally. But by the time London had written "To Build a Fire" he had lost his faith in the potency of reason.

The chechaquo in this story has a command of facts and is "quick and alert in the things of life." Clell Peterson argues perceptively and convincingly [in "The Theme of Jack London's 'To Build a Fire,'" *American Book Collector, XVII,* November, 1966] that the young man is not, as many readers assume, merely "a fool who dies for his folly"; he is "not a fool" but the "modern, sensual, rational man." Rather than a deficient character, he is another of London's limited protagonists; and his death denies the efficacy of reason. The plot presents the mythic journey of the limited man into the unknown where his reason, his only support, no longer can sustain him:

The "dark hairline" of the main trail in the "pure snow" on the broad frozen Yukon suggests the narrow limits of man's rational world compared with the universe beyond his comprehension . . . The events of the story take place in a world devoid of sunlight, of day-light, which is also the light of reason and common sense. Thus the absent sun, "that cheerful orb," represents the dominant qualities of the man which are useless in a sunless world where reason fails and common sense proves unavailing.

The power of reason has collapsed. London has even lost his faith in "facts": symbolically, the man falls through the snow into the water, the accident which begins his desperate struggle to live, because there are "no signs" indicating where the snow is soft. The man's tragic flaw has been his masculine pride in his rationality.

Neither the abstract nor the concrete, imagination nor reason, sustain life. The romantic and the realistic impulses both lead nowhere. Without their protection, the unknown becomes a destructive agent whose white logic is the "antithesis of life, cruel and bleak as interstellar space, pulseless and frozen as absolute zero." The landscape in "To Build a Fire" has become killer. What remains for London to do in this story, which everyone agrees he does masterfully, is to record the grotesque details which describe the nightmare of impaired physical activity that is the prelude to the modern man's death. In "To Build a Fire" London has employed a controlled artistry to present the theme that was struggling to life in "In a Far Country."

Now that London's everyman has become merely a helpless victim of the killing landscape, the mystical light goes out of the Alaskan sky. Rather than, as some would have it, portraying man's insignificance but unsystematically depicting affirmations of the American Dream, the reverse had happened: London tried to dramatize a new version of human dignity but unintentionally drifted towards the pessimism which undeniably informs these Northland stories. Throughout the best of his Alaskan stories, London had made a series of adjustments in order to stave off a darkening vision and to preserve

some reason for "spirit-groping." Although his temperament and reading called upon him to affirm life, he exhausted the positive as he found himself forced to move from themes of mastery, to themes of accommodation, to themes of failure. His honesty compelled him to deny affirmations. Even the archetypal quest motif and the evocative imagery of the wasteland, artistic elements which distinguish his stories from those of lesser writers, disappear from his fiction as he discovered that it is not undertaking the dangerous and desperate quest that determines the quality of life but, instead, inexorable, external forces of nature and man's irrationality, his link with that nature. The Alaskan nightmare had reached its conclusion, and London retreated from the "Unknown."

Source: James I. McClintock, "Alaskan Nightmare and Artistic Success: 1898-1908," in *White Logic: Jack London's Short Stories,* Wolf House Books, 1975, pp. 79-119.

Adaptations

"To Build a Fire" was adapted as a 56-minute film with actor-director Orson Welles providing the story's narration. The film is in VHS format and is distributed by Educational Video Network.

The story was also adapted as a recording, read by Robert Donly and distributed by Miller-Brody.

Topics for Further Study

Research the symptoms of and treatments for frostbite and hypothermia. Use your findings to discuss the deterioration of the man's condition in "To Build a Fire."

Investigate the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897: the types of people who participated in it; the "sourdoughs" versus the "cheechakos"; the routes they took and the supplies they carried with them; and the dangers they encountered. Compare what you learn about these people with what you know about the man in "To Build a Fire."

As mentioned in "To Build a Fire," the Yukon River formed the main route for prospectors on their way to Dawson to search for gold. Research the indigenous people living near the Yukon River and the effects of the Klondike Gold Rush upon their way of life.

Compare and Contrast

1890s: In 1895, Guglielmo Marconi transmits a message using radio waves recently discovered by Heinrich Rudolph Hertz in 1887. This is the beginning of the "wireless telegraph." News of the gold discoveries, made in the Klondike region of Canada's Yukon Territory since August of 1896, reach the U.S. in January, 1897, and start another gold rush.

1990s: The network of telecommunication lines, radio and television transmitters, cellular phones, and orbitting satellites makes it possible to transmit news even from remote locations to most urban places in the world in a matter of minutes.

1897: English physicist J.J. Thomson formulates the idea of an atomic nucleus orbited by one or more electrons. This number of electrons characterizes the atom, giving it its atomic number.

1905: Swiss theoretical physicist Albert Einstein introduces the concept of the equivalence of matter and energy with his equation E=mc2, and raises the possibility of new sources of power and heat.

1911: Ernest Rutherford at the University of Manchester in England proposes that an atom is composed of a positively charged nucleus with electrons orbiting this nucleus.

1938: German chemist Otto Hahn and his assistants Fritz Strassman and Lise Meitner produce the first recorded fission of uranium atoms with the consequent release of a large quantity of energy and heat.

1952: The U.S. Atomic energy commission explodes a nuclear fusion bomb on their testing grounds in the Pacific.

1979: An accident at the nuclear power plant on Three Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, results in the shutting down of the plant and in lack of confidence in nuclear power plants by the public in the U.S.

1985: An accident at the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl near Kiev in the Ukraine renders a vast amount of land uninhabitable for thousands of years. Public opinion becomes very pessimistic in regard to the safety and value of nuclear power.

What Do I Read Next?

The Call of the Wild (1903) is one of Jack London's most famous Klondike novels. The novel's hero is a dog named Buck, a family pet that is stolen and sold as a sled-dog for use in the Klondike Gold Rush. The novel depicts Buck's experiences as he is brutalized by his captors, grows increasingly wild, and fights to become lead dog.

Published in 1906, Jack London's novel *White Fang* is often considered the counterpart to *The Call of the Wild.* It recounts the adventures of White Fang, a dog that is also part wolf, living half-wild in the Klondike and subject to both the savagery and kindness of humans. The novel portrays White Fang's eventual domestication.

The Library of America edition of Jack London's *Novels and Stories* (1982) contains not only the texts of *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* but also includes maps of the areas featured in London's Klondike fiction as well as a "Historical and Geographical Note" by the volume's editor, Donald Pizer.

Pierre Berton's *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899* (rev. ed., 1987) examines the rush for gold in Canada's Klondike territory from the Canadian point of view, discussing the clash of cultures that occurred between orderloving Canadians and libertarian Americans as they hunted for gold.

Alaska: Reflections on Land and Spirit (1989) is a collection of essays written over the last hundred years edited by Robert Hedin and Gary Holthaus. The editors describe their collection as a gathering of "travelogues, diaries, meditations, and narratives by homesteaders, missionaries, anthropologists, psychologists, ornithologists, poets, teachers, and conservationists, all of whom go beyond the typical cliches and advertising slogans about Alaska to provide an authentic record of a given time and place." Included is a report by Jack London about housekeeping in the Klondike.

Always Getting Ready/Upterrlainarluta: Yup'ik Eskimo Subsistence in Southwest Alaska (1993) by James H. Barker contains interviews and photographs of Yup'ik Eskimos who still make their living on the delta of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. (The Yukon River was wellknown to Jack London and is featured in "To Build a Fire.") One interview is from a man who got his arm caught in his snow machine while traveling alone in winter. To survive, he had to amputate his own arm after allowing it to freeze.

Further Study

Barker, James H. Always Getting Ready/Upterrlainarluta: Yup'ik Eskimo Subsistence in Southwest Alaska, University of Washington Press, 1993.

A collection of contemporary interviews and photographs of Yup'ik Eskimos who make their living on the delta of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. According to Jack London, the Yukon River was part of the main route for prospectors during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897.

Barltrop, Robert. "The Materials of Fame," in his *Jack London: The Man, the Writer, the Rebel,* Pluto Press, 1976, pp. 179-91.

Acknowledging that London has produced many badly written "pot-boilers," Barltrop asserts that "To Build a Fire" is one of London's "outstanding" stories. On the basis of such excellent stories and considering his popularity with readers, Barltrop concludes that London's reputation as a writer cannot be dismissed by literary critics.

Berton, Pierre. *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896- 1899,* McClelland and Stewart Inc., rev. ed., 1987.

Writing from a Canadian point of view, Berton traces the history of the Klondike Gold Rush, distinguishing between the behaviors of Canadian and American prospectors and their reactions to Canadian law enforcement in the territory.

Elliott, Emory, Linda K. Kerber, A. Walton Litz, and Terence Martin. "Expansion and National Redefinition: The Late 19th Century," and "Jack London," in their *American Literature,* Vol. 2, Prentice-Hall, 1990, pp. 1-9, 894.

The authors place the literature of the nineteenth century in the context of land acquisition and the boom and bust cycle of the period. They also provide a short biography of London.

Hedin, Robert, and Gary Holthaus. *Alaska: Reflections on the Land and Spirit,* The University of Arizona Press, 1989.

A collection of essays on Alaska, including one by Pierre Berton about the Alaskan connection to the Klondike Gold Rush and another by Jack London about housekeeping in the Klondike.

Johnston, Carolyn. "Boy Socialist," in her *Jack London— An American Radical?,* Greenwood Press, 1984, pp. 27-61.

Johnston examines London's brand of socialism and discusses how his experiences in the Klondike brought out his racism, especially when he encountered Alaska's indigenous people.

Kingman, Russ. *A Pictorial Life of Jack London,* Crown Publishers, Inc., 1979.

Kingman presents photographs of London and of his family and friends, maps of his travels, relevant cartoons and newspaper clippings of the period, and a textual biography of London's life.

Komarnitsky, S. J. "Grandparents, Child Freeze to Death," in *Anchorage Daily News,* Vol. 51, January 19, 1996, A1, A12.

Newspaper account of death by hypothermia of a Yup'ik Eskimo couple and their grandchild after their car became stuck in the snow on a rural road in Alaska.

Labor, Earle, and King Hendricks. "Jack London's Twice- Told Tale," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 4, Summer, 1967, pp. 334-41.

Labor and Hendricks reprint London's 1902 version of "To Build a Fire" that was directed towards an adolescent audience and compare it with his 1908 version of the story to prove that the later, adult version demonstrates London's genuine ability to write serious fiction.

Labor, Earle, and Jeanne Campbell Reesman. "The Literary Frontiersman," in *Jack London,* edited by Nancy A. Walker, rev. ed., New York: Twayne, 1994, pp. 18-48.

Labor and Reesman examine the tragic imagery and symbolism in "To Build a Fire" and argue that London's harsh winter setting functions as an antagonistic and mythical character in the story.

London, Joan. "Introduction," in her *Jack London and His Times: An Unconventional Biography,* University of Washington Press, 1968, pp. xi-xvii.

In this new introduction to her 1939 biography of her father, Joan London assesses the changing critical attitudes to Jack London's writings.

Lundquist, James. "Meditations on Man and Beast," in his *Jack London: Adventures, Ideas, and Fiction,* The Ungar Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 77-113.

In this chapter, Lundquist focuses on the mood and setting of "To Build a Fire," calling the story "starkly elegant."

O'Connor, Richard. "Self-Discovery in the Klondike," in his *Jack London: A Biography,* Little, Brown, and Company, 1964, pp. 80-103.

O'Connor discusses "Klondicitis," or America's mad rush for gold in 1897, and describes London's own trek into the Klondike territory and his attitudes towards the people he met there.

Perry, John. *Jack London: An American Myth,* Nelson- Hall, 1981.

In this biography, Perry devotes several chapters to London's Klondike fiction and observes that "To Build a Fire" elicits "moods of impotence and loneliness through images of cold."

Pizer, Donald. "Historical and Geographical Note," in *Jack London: Novels and Stories,* The Library of America, 1982, pp. 1001-04.

In this selection of London's novels and stories, Pizer provides maps and a history of the "Klondike stampede" to Canada's principal mining town of Dawson.

Sinclair, Andrew. "The Beauty Ranch," in his *Jack: A Biography of Jack London,* Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 159-69.

In this chapter, Sinclair observes that London was unable to distinguish between his good stories, among them "To Build a Fire," and his poorly written stories, and thus included both types in his collections *Lost Face* and *When God Laughs.*

Stark, Peter. "Death by Degree," in We Alaskans: *The Anchorage Daily News Magazine,* February 2, 1997, G4-G11.

Stark uses scientific data and anecdotal accounts to define hypothermia.

Walcutt, Charles Child. *Jack London,* University of Minnesota Press, 1966.

In this overview of London's work, Walcutt remarks that the early critical reception to London's stories was positive.

Bibliography

Barker, James H. *Always Getting Ready/Upterrlainarluta: Yup'ik Eskimo Subsistence in Southwest Alaska,* Seattle:

University of Washington Press, 1993, pp. 13, 118. Barltrop, Robert. "The Materials of Fame," in his *Jack London: The Man, the Writer, the Rebel,* Pluto Press, 1976, pp. 179-91.

Komarnitsky, S. J. "Grandparents, Child Freeze to Death." *Anchorage Daily News,* Vol. 51, January 19, 1996, A1, A12.

Labor, Earle, and King Hendricks. "Jack London's Twice- Told Tale," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 4, Summer, 1967, pp. 334-41.

Labor, Earle, and Jeanne Campbell Reesman. "The Literary Frontiersman," in *Jack London,* edited by Nancy A. Walker, rev. ed., New York: Twayne, 1994, pp. 18-48.

Lundquist, James. "Meditations on Man and Beast," in his *Jack London: Adventures, Ideas, and Fiction,* The Ungar Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 77-113.

Perry, John. *Jack London: An American Myth,* Nelson- Hall, 1981.

Sinclair, Andrew. "The Beauty Ranch," in his *Jack: A Biography of Jack London,* Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 159-69.

Stark, Peter. "Death by Degree," *We Alaskans: The Anchorage Daily News Magazine,* February 2, 1997, G4-G11.

Walcutt, Charles Child. *Jack London,* University of Minnesota Press, 1966.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535