

Model Analysis Essay

Strength and Humility in Jack London's "To Build a Fire"

Jack London's short story, "To Build a Fire," takes place in the frozen expanse of the Yukon. Written in the third-person omniscient point of view, the tale follows the thoughts and actions of a man and his dog as they make their way through the snow, ice, and bone-chilling cold of a harsh Yukon winter. At the end of the trail lies a camp, work, and "a hot supper" with the boys already sitting by the fire (London 463). When faced with the daunting journey before him, the man exudes toughness and determination. It is as though he is telling the reader that this challenge is simply a walk in the park. A classic adventure tale, the story's linear plot moves forward rapidly, the man's actions taking him further and further into the wilderness. But, as the story reveals, the man's toughness comes with a great fault that, despite his strength, leads to his eventual downfall.

title, author, and literary point of view

The story begins with a man turning from the main trail and climbing into the pine forest. The "day had broken cold and gray," and despite the cold and the darkness, the man is unafraid—even as he stares across an "unbroken white" landscape, he is unmoved and simply goes about the tasks at hand (London 462). The protagonist is a simple man; his actions are slow and deliberate; his mind rarely dwells on the past, nor does it think ahead toward the future. "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" (London 463). He is at home in the wilderness, chuckling when his hands and face freeze, and yet, he is also woefully unprepared for its potential dangers. London writes that "he carried nothing but the lunch wrapped in the handkerchief" (463-64). The man moves through the landscape, observes it, and reacts to it, but he lacks fear, respect, or humility. He reacts with surprise at how quickly his fingers go numb, but does not waste time with worry or preparations (London 467). He frequently reflects on the warnings from the man at Sulphur Creek, who told him that traveling alone in temperatures below minus fifty was dangerous. The man believes the old-timer to be weak and "rather womanish" (London 470). He presses onward, regardless of and unconcerned with the dangers, convinced that his strength and tenacity will see him through.

setting and character.

Accompanying the man is a wolf dog. Granted access to the dog's thoughts, we learn that the dog "was depressed by the tremendous cold" and "had its instinct" about the danger that the man is unaware of or unconcerned by (London 464). This foreshadowing warns of the conflict and dangers ahead. The dog wonders why the man has not built a fire, why the man continues to press on. The dog seems perplexed by the man's actions, wondering of the man if "all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, or real cold" (London 468). The dog knows that walking in this weather is a death sentence and that it "was the time to lie snug in a hole in the snow" until at last the terrible cold had passed (London 468).

secondary character

The man's situation quickly deteriorates. A series of missteps and mistakes, to which the man had responded calmly and without worry, cascade, quickly becoming a life or death situation. The man's feet get wet; even he knows that he must light a fire—or perish. His first fire is put out by falling snow. "It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death...Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right" (London 471). His hands frozen, he is forced to use his wrists, concentrating all the effort in his being on striking a match. Even this effort leads to near disaster as his pack catches on fire, destroying his remaining matches while leaving his flesh "burning" (London 473). The fire extinguished and unable to make another to warm his frozen limbs, he attempts to kill his dog, hoping to warm his hands with the dog's dead body. Unable to use his hands, however, to even grasp the dog's fur, "a certain fear of death, dull and oppressive, came to him" and the man begins running down the trail—his final act of desperation (London 475). His strength eventually fails him, and he collapses into the snow, resigned to his fate, muttering his final words to the man at Sulphur Creek who had warned him: "You were right, old hoss; you were right" (London 477).

plot and conflict.

London's language is, like the man and the wilderness that defeats him, simple and direct. There are no wasted adjectives or lavish descriptions. Still, the imagery is compelling. The landscape's harshness, its unforgiving nature, and its dangers are revealed through simple statements and phrases, ensuring that readers experience the deathly cold and the harsh environment of the Yukon. The tone, likewise, is dispassionate and disconnected—even judgmental. The narrator expresses little sympathy for the man and his fate. The man's death, though tragic, is treated as inevitable, directly caused by the man's actions. There is little emotion wasted as the man meets his end; even the man's companion, the dog, accepts the man's death without emotion and continues onward toward camp.

literary elements

The strength, determination, and perseverance of the man wasn't enough. In the harsh environment of the Yukon, there was no room for mistakes. And the man's mistakes, while seemingly small, were rooted in his lack of respect for and humility in the face of the Yukon, its dangers, and the journey before him. The man's fate is foreshadowed by the dog who is confused by the man's actions, by his resistance to building a fire, to moving forward. While the dog is connected to his animal nature and instincts, the man has silenced his better judgement. Unable to sense the impending danger, he forged on toward a fate that the dog had seen coming and that the old man at Sulphur Creek had warned him about. In this moment, London reveals the theme of his story: the man, while strong and determined, was ignorant about the wild; he was disconnected from his animal instincts. His lack of humility and awareness eventually lead to his downfall. The dog, however, is both strong and aware; connected to and listening to its instincts, it not only survives, but thrives.

themes

Works Cited

London, Jack. *Jack London: Novels and Stories*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982. Print.

] works cited, with
properly formatted
entries.