
Analysis of Traveller in Jack London's *To Build a Fire*

Dating back to Greek myths, the scenario in which a man fights alone against the hostile environment is not uncommon in literature. What makes Jack London's "To Build a Fire" significantly innovative within this narrative subgenre is the author's choice to scientifically observe reality rather than being passionately involved with the character's decisions. London's approach is based on the Naturalistic conception of storytelling, in which the writer's task is to identify the mechanisms of cause and effect that lie at the foundation of society. The protagonist of the story, a solitary man who is travelling across the tundra, lacks the ability of understanding things beyond mere tangible facts, and this absence of imagination condemns him to tragically freeze in the snow of the Yukon Territory. The man's flaws are made even more obvious in comparison to his wolf-dog, who is able to withstand the inhospitable climate thanks to his ancestral instincts. While the traveller cannot be held responsible for his flawed intuition, he is guilty of failing to counterbalance his inferiority towards nature by integrating intellectuality into his journey.

The author introduces the reader to the man's insufficient ability to interpret the reality around him since the beginning of the story, when the cold temperature of fifty below zero "did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty". This simple defect represents the first ring of the chain of events that will determine the outcome of the travel, since, although the man recognizes the harshness of the weather, he doesn't adopt any counter-measure to improve his chances of survival. Although he had been advised by the old-timer about the foolishness of travelling alone, he disregarded the recommendation, not only because of subtle arrogance and pride, but largely because he hadn't been able to visualize a situation that he had never experienced in person.

The man's negligence is made even more evident by the author through the figure of the dog, whose connection with nature runs much deeper than in the case of the traveller. The animal, being perfectly adapted to survive in freezing weather and having trustworthy instincts, doesn't need a fire to warm his feet and is able to foresee the menaces in front of him. The man, on the other hand, is a much more vulnerable creature and, instead of being cautious and in constant apprehension, keeps an impudent attitude and doesn't recognize danger. He is less compatible with the environment, but he also can't conceptualize with his judgment the "true tale" that the dog understands with its sixth sense. Ironically, the only primitive and instinctive response the man displays during the story is his attempt to kill the dog to warm himself up with the animal's carcass, but the dog's intuition proves to be sharper, preventing him to fall into the man's trap.

The traveller, however, has an evolution in his way of thinking when, reached the point of

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

freezing, he starts losing the support of his senses. Since he is incapable of using his fingers to pick up stimuli, he is forced to rely on the “sense of vision in place of that of touch”. This movement away from the corporeal point of view originates the first flashes on creativity in the man’s mind, as he starts to notice the peculiarity of how “he could run at all on feet so frozen that he could not feel them when they struck the earth”. The process of transcending himself from his weakening body is then taken to extreme when the traveller compares his condition to the orbiting of Mercury around the surface of the earth. Finally, as he recognizes that death is only a few moments distant, the man reaches the point of picturing himself in company of his friends looking for his own corpse, acknowledging that “he did not belong with himself anymore”. Even after this psychological metamorphosis, however, it is hard for the reader to consider the man as a hero of the story and to feel saddened for his demise. The reason for this emotional detachment is the fact that the narrator, besides remarking that the traveller admitted some of his faults, also gives us reasons to doubt about his moral improvement. The man’s conceptual reasonings are described as an improvised alternative to “taking an anesthetic” and can be attributed to the physical need of turning his focus away from the pain of hypothermia. He is regretful for disregarding the old-timer’s advice, but he still doesn’t hold himself completely accountable for his negligence, feeling “a great surge of envy” towards his dog, who just needs his fur to be safe from the outside temperature. Even the dignity that the traveller tries to maintain in his last instants is diminished by the image of the man “running around like a chicken with its head cut off” that the author describes in the same paragraph.

In conclusion, whilst it is possible to argue that the turning point of the traveller’s fate is the unpredictable event of stepping onto a too thin layer of ice, it is also true that the man’s ill-suited behavior plays an equally important, if not greater role in the character’s fate. London is exceptional at portraying Nature as vastly superior to the inexperienced traveller, but this should serve the man as an incentive to equip himself with the full potential of his intellectual skills, instead of justifying him to accept the role of the victim.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)