

To Build a Fire

by Jack London, 1908

Story is set in the Klondike Gold Rush in the Yukon region of northern Alaska between 1896 and 1899
The conflict explored in this classic short story is that of man versus nature.
The central idea is that man can sometimes lose in a direct conflict with the forces of nature. Nothing the protagonist does can save him from the harsh environment.

Theme

The story's central theme is one portrayed by many existentialist writers – that man lives a solitary existence which is subject to the relentless, unforgiving forces of nature; an ever so subtle part of this theme is that **it is man's goal to find meaning in his existence.**

Moral of the Story: to take advice from those who are more experienced and not to succumb to arrogance or hubris. the story also suggests that nature is an all-powerful, and completely indifferent force. London seems to be saying that it doesn't matter to nature whether the man lives or dies

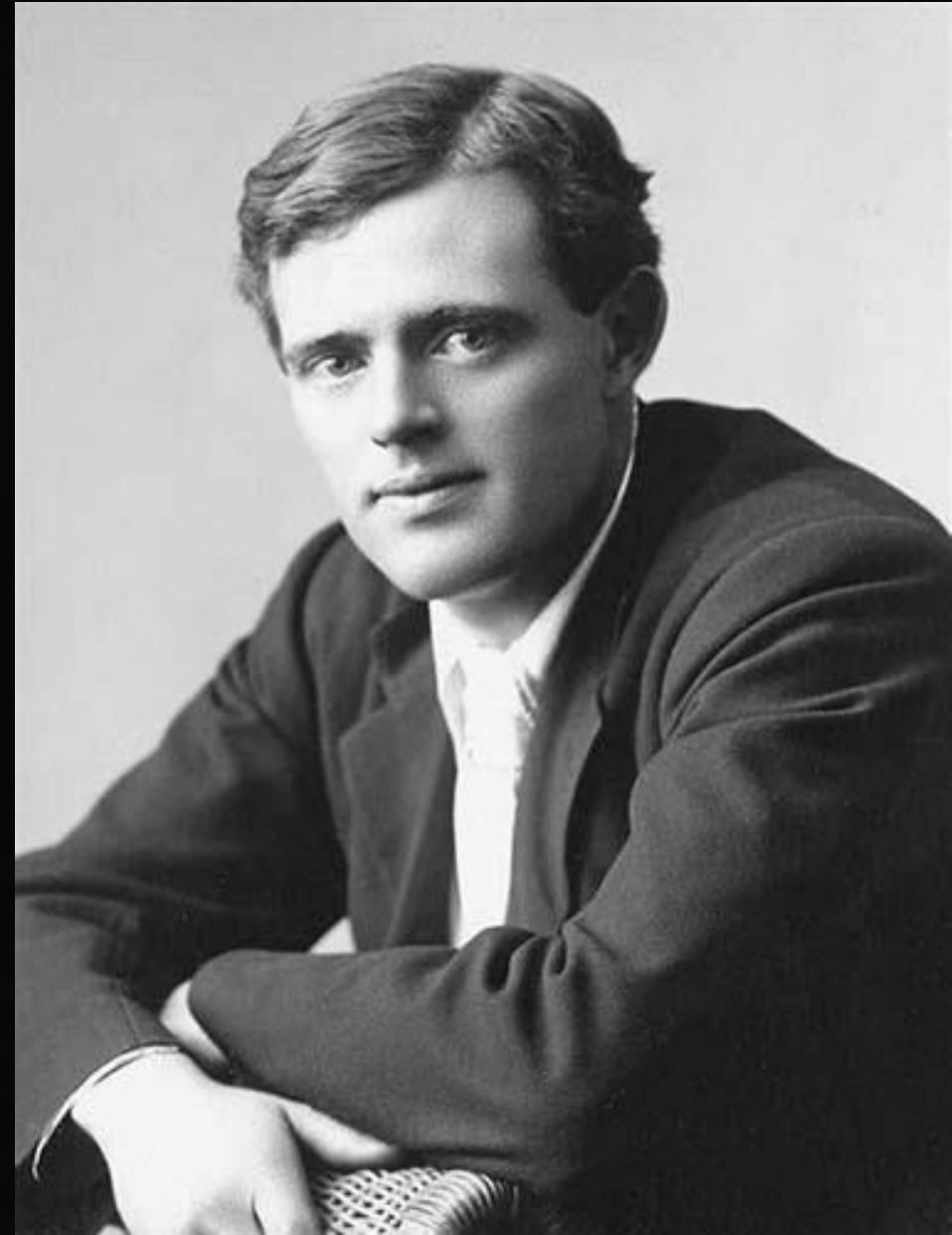


Jack London (John Chaney)

Born 1876 San Francisco

Passed 1916 in California (age 40)

- Early figure in establishing science fiction as a literary discipline
- Advocate for animal rights, worker rights, the environment and socialism.
- Notable works: “Call of the Wild” (1903)



- Descendant of Puritan settlers in the Massachusetts bay Colony
- Grandfather was a builder of the Pennsylvania canal.
- Mom was a music teacher and spiritualist (claiming to channel the spirit of a Native American chief)
- Father was unknown, but suspected to be William Chaney (astrologer who mom lived with in San Francisco). Unclear if they were married.
- Parents pregnant. Dad insists on abortion, mom refuses. Dad disavows mom. Mom tries suicide, declared clinically insane for a time. Jack London is born, raised former slave (and neighbor) Jennie.
- A year later mom remarried to John London, a disabled civil war veteran.
- Family – with Jenni’s family – moved to Oakland. Working at age 14 for 10-cents an hour chipping ice
- He attends UC Berkeley.
- Age 21, finds newspaper accounts of mom’s suicide attempt and biological dad’s name.
- He writes to biological dad, who disavows any possibility. Selfish, saying he deserves more pity than Jack London!
- Troubled by this, Jack London drops out of Berkeley and goes to Alaska during the gold rush. 1897
ALASKA HEAVILY INFLUENCES WRITING
- War correspondent in 1904 during the Russian-Japanese War. Arrested four times. Personal intervention of Theodore Roosevelt needed to free him.
- 1911, he took a four-horse wagon on a 1500 mile trip through Oregon, including Crater Lake and Wolf Creek and Rogue River
- A lifelong atheist and socialist. Supported eugenics
- Racism: prejudiced against increased Asian immigration to US. (but empathetic and support of people of Mexican, Japanese, Hawaiian and other ethnicities). Writings were antiRacism and antiColonial
- In spite of being strong and active in his life, long term health issues caught up with him (scurvy, alcoholism, dysentery, and some tropical diseases). He used morphine and opium for relief.
- Death due to accidental morphine overdose

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What is the psychology applicable to this story? Please list as many psychological themes/traits/behaviors which are relevant to this story.
- Here we have a man facing his own mortality. (A) At what points does he realize he is in trouble...like, not just inconvenienced but really worried? (B) At what point does he realize he is at significant risk of death?
- ‘The man’s behavior is largely governed by logic, while the dog’s behavior is influenced by instinct. This scientific understanding (dresses for cold, know how to make a fire, follow maps) gives the man confidence but distances him from nature and his survival instincts.’ Offer an example from the story to bring truth to this statement.
- Some literary critics try to advance the perspective that the man was obsessed with proving his masculinity, and the pursuit of that goal made him vulnerable to the fate which befell him. To what extent do you agree (or not) with this view? Explain your answer.

- There is a 1902 version of this story and a 1908 version (you read the 1908 version). Similarities and significant differences between the two are as follows:
- 1902 –the man is named Tom Vincent; we know more about him: he is young and proud of his strength. There is no “old timer” to offer advice. There is no dog. His second fire is successful. The man survived, albeit with frostbite.
 - 1908 – the man is unnamed. There is a dog. His second fire fails. The man dies of hypothermia.
 - In both versions, the fire is extinguished by falling snow, forcing him to attempt a second fire.
 - The stories are different in their tones as well as their plots. The 1902 version is more invigorating in its tone, sharing Tom's resolve in getting back on his feet after his failures. This optimism in the face of defeat is what allows Tom to survive the cold. Contrast that to the 1908 version, which is more bleak in its depiction of the man's journey.

How do the changes made in the 1908 enhance the psychological drama of the story (for the characters *and* the reader)?

- The narrator says: “The trouble with him [the man] 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.” What does this mean? How would you describe his personality? Is it a problem?

- Consider the following groups of questions relating to the man's motives and purpose
 - What moves the man to act as he does?
 - Trace his changing attitude toward the old-timer from Sulphur Creek. Why does he resist the old man's advice?
Is it hubris? Overconfidence? Why does he devalue the old man? Does he ever acknowledge that the old man was right?
 - Had he lived, given the opportunity to make this journey again, under similar circumstances, do you think he would take it? What did you learn from his experience?

- Do you regard the man as an admirable hero (independent, resourceful, rugged, and resilient) or do you regard him as reckless (proud, overconfident, unimaginative, and blind to risk), or perhaps as somewhere in between? Explain. Had he successfully made it back to camp and lived, would your judgment of him differ?

- Are there limits to our efforts to tame nature? If so, what are they? Does our reliance on science blind us to certain deeper truths about nature and our relation to it? (Consider, in this regard, the strengths and weaknesses of living in the world guided by – as in the story – watches and thermometers.)

- What is, and what should be, our attitude toward the natural world, especially if nature is indifferent to human beings and often hostile to our purposes?
- What does the story teach us about death? The man realizes that he wants to “meet death with dignity” (as opposed to “running around like a chicken with its head cut off”). What do we mean when we talk of meeting death with dignity? How might personality type affect this approach to death?